

# Giving God glory in evolution: how science will usher the Church into its greatness

by The Reverend Michael Dowd

Photo submitted



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“A mistake about creation will lead to a mistake about God.”

- St. Thomas Aquinas  
*Summa Contra Gentiles*

Many Christians over the last century and a half have understandably rejected evolution because until recently, evolution has been depicted as a chance, meaningless and mechanistic process. The growing edge of evolutionary thinking today, however, points to a very different understanding of the cosmos.

We now see a universe of nested creativity (atoms within molecules within cells within organisms within planets within galaxies—like Russian nesting dolls) perfectly suited for life and reflective consciousness. Is this just a happy coincidence? Unlikely. Scientists themselves are moving out of a mechanistic way of thinking to an organic, or living systems, worldview. Evolution from this perspective can be embraced as God glorifying, Christ edifying and Scripture honoring.

It was once commonly thought that the history of the Hebrew people was the history of the entire world. We now know that 3,500 years ago, more than 200 years before Moses was born or any part of the Old Testament was written (including the story of Adam and Eve): King Tut III ruled the Egyptian empire's 18th Dynasty; Indo-European charioteers were invading India; China entered the Bronze Age, ruled by the Shang Dynasty; people in southeast Asia were boating to nearby Pacific islands; and indigenous cultures existed throughout the Americas.

All these peoples told inspired and inspiring stories about how the world came into being, how they as a people came into being and why they were special. To interpret the early chapters of Genesis or any of the world's cre-

ation stories as representing the history of the whole world, or to imagine them as competing rather than complementary views of reality, is both to miss the symbolic nature of human language and, ironically, to trivialize these sacred texts. A high view of Scripture demands that we honor Holy Writ for what it is: a sacred story of how the Hebrew people, inspired by God, imagined their beginnings and their destiny.

## Amazing universe, awesome God

While pastoring my first church in Granville, Massachusetts, I went outside one starry night with a parishioner, an 82-year-old farmer and amateur astronomer affectionately known as “Gramps.” Gazing at the Milky Way, Gramps whispered, “You know, Reverend, the more I learn about this amazing universe, the more awesome my God becomes!”

Thomas Aquinas offers us a glorious path to follow: as our understanding of cosmos expands, so does our view of God and our appreciation of the meaning and significance of the Gospel. Seen as a sacred story of nested creativity and emergent complexity (life becoming more complex, more aware and more intimate with itself over time), the epic of evolution can inspire faith in God and revitalize the meaning and magnitude of our faith.

The disciples and early church leaders, reflecting on Jesus' ministry within the context of their own first, second and third century A.D. political, judicial, religious and cosmological understandings; formulated creeds and doctrines about him and the significance of his life and mission. Since then our view of reality has grown enormously.

Whereas those who lived in biblical times (and well into the Middle Ages)



believed the world was flat, stationary and at the center of the universe, and that stars were pinprick holes in the dome of the heavens that allowed God's glory to shine through, we know that planet Earth orbits a star in an outer spiral arm of the Milky Way, a galaxy of some 100 billion stars, that is itself one of 200 billion or more other galaxies in a cosmos 13.7 billion years old. If our tradition is correct—if Jesus truly did incarnate God's great news for humanity—then the meaning, grandeur and this-world relevance of the Gospel today must reach far beyond what any previous generation, including the biblical writers themselves, could have possibly known.

### **21st century Christians as toddlers**

In the words of literary critic and historian Gil Bailie:

"It was not those closest to the historical Jesus who first gave the Gospel its geographical breadth and theological depth. It was Paul, who had never known him. In addition to that, impressive achievements in biblical scholarship have in many ways brought our era closer to the constituent events of the Christian movement than were the Gentile Christians of the second century.

"If the life and death of Jesus is historically central, then people living a 100,000 years from now will be in a better position to appreciate that than we are. Furthermore, when they look back, they will surely think of us as 'early Christians'—living as we do a scant two millennia from the mysterious events in question.

"They will be right, for the Christian movement today is still in the elementary stages of working out for itself and the world the implications of the Gospel. There isn't the slightest

doubt that the greatest and boldest creedal assertions are in the future, not the past."

### **New cosmology renews respect for all life**

As well as strengthening our faith in God, the new cosmology offers a renewed passion for honoring and preserving the sacredness of all life. To think that we can "love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves," without cherishing our environment is to deny the very immanence and omnipresence of God. Who is our neighbor? The Samaritan? The outcast? The enemy? Yes, yes, of course. But it is also the frog, the whale and the forests. Our neighbor is the entire community of life—the entire universe.

As we Christians open our hearts to embrace a sacred, God-glorifying way of understanding evolution, we will, in the decades to come, prove to be an enormously positive force on behalf of all life, human and non-human. Our destiny as a species and as individuals is to further God's evolutionary creativity in Christ-like ways that bless the entire Earth community.

The role of the Church includes spreading the great news of the Great Story—evangelizing the nations—and ushering the entire human family through a process of cultural death and resurrection, to the glory of God. In this way, like Jesus—and thanks to him—the Church becomes a vessel of God's saving grace.

We no longer passively wait for Christ's return. We fully participate in it. This is our mission, our calling, our Great Work. And it is why, I believe, the Scriptures refer to the Church as the both the body of Christ and the bride of Christ.

Gazing at the Milky Way, Gramps whispered, "You know, Reverend, the more I learn about this amazing universe, the more awesome my God becomes!"