

My G🌍D, What Have We Done?

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Audio: <https://soundcloud.com/michael-dowd-grace-limits/my-god-what-have-we-done-dowd-2022>

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On August 6, 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan — the first time such a catastrophic weapon was used in conflict. As the city disappeared under a mushroom cloud, Captain Robert Lewis, co-pilot of the Enola Gay, the B-29 bomber that dropped the weapon, “Little Boy”, wrote in his journal “My God, what have we done?”

I had originally planned to title this essay “Honest to G🌍D”, in honor of Bishop John A.T. Robinson’s 1963 book that inspired a generation of progressive Christians. But upon my third watching of the Netflix movie “Don’t Look Up”, I realized that the co-pilot’s now-famous lament would be my lead.

My thesis is simply this: A comet actually *is* heading our way. We ourselves set it in motion millennia ago. But only recently have scientists, echoing longstanding indigenous warnings, charted its course and voiced the alarm. Its name is *Anthropocentrism* and these are the End Times because human-centeredness will prove to be nearly as devastating as the comet in the movie.

By Fate or by Failure

Fate, in human experience, is a future that happens to us regardless of our own actions. As defined by sociologist C. Wright Mills, “Fate is the summary outcome not intended by anyone but resulting from innumerable small decisions about other matters by innumerable people.” ~ William R. Catton, Jr.

The gifts of awareness and understanding brought forth by the scientific endeavor have been trailing a latent and growing shadow. This shadow is now so immense and terrifying that there is much to lament about the course we have taken. Could it have been different?

Let us reflect on just one facet of how the discoveries of science have been applied: access to and deployment of Earth’s reserves of stored energy.

To begin, might the British have said "no" to digging coal in Newcastle? What about using that coal to power steam engines for digging deeper, transporting it across oceans? Could Americans have said "no" in Pennsylvania or Texas to turning a foul-smelling liquid into black gold? What about fracking bedrock to dislodge the remaining natural gas and petroleum liquids in Ohio, Oklahoma, the Dakotas?

What about leases for deep-water drilling in the Gulf of Mexico? (Oops, the *Deepwater Horizon* catastrophe in 2010.) Then selling leases again December 2021?

And what about utilizing the same energy stores to produce plastic and to draw nitrogen fertilizers out of thin air?

How, in sum, could any new technology that offered big and immediate human benefits have been thwarted by the mere possibility of future risks? Indeed, if problems did arise, the thinking went, human ingenuity would once again come to the rescue. We imagined there were no limits to the advance and growth of industrial civilization!

I have come to accept that each step of energy extraction and technological deployment was, in a way, inevitable. No council of wise elders could have assessed the true costs and benefits — and certainly not if charged to consider the consequences seven generations ahead. Equally, for those in power, who could remain in power if they accepted a "no" vote of such counsel?

What aggregation of peoples could survive long saying no to *any* new technology if a yes was eventually put in play somewhere else?

Recent history offers an example. The Chinese found a way to mix chemical elements to produce the marvels of fireworks. But when other peoples on the Eurasian continent began using the same mixture for propelling cannonballs and bullets, "gunpowder" became a necessity everywhere in the world. Dubbed "the parable of the tribes," this kind of evolutionary arms race is regarded by some historians as a matter of fate. Ditto "ecological overshoot" and now also the anthropogenic causes of today's biodiversity and climate crises.

Looking to the future, we come to this: Whether we arrived at our species predicament by fate or failure, the period of industrial exploitation is over. Peak energy, peak consumption, peak globalization, peak soil, peak phosphorus, peak food, peak habitat, peak progress — each is already in the rearview mirror.

Progressive Christianity Today

Fundamentally, it is time for progressive Christians to reckon with the very notion of progress — that anthropocentric "advancement" is even a good thing in the long run.

What may well have presented as a template for human progress a half century ago can no longer be viewed through the same lens.

I offer here a possibility. Let's stop trivializing God.

As modeled in the title of this essay, I propose that "God" be spelled (and more importantly, taken to heart) as G🌍D. The planet in all its manifestations thus becomes the center of what is holy; not the entirety, but what rivets our attention. G🌍D, our *living Creator, Sustainer, and End*, is indeed our "ultimate concern" — that which we respect and revere, that which we serve above all else.

Following on the teachings of Jewish scholar Martin Buber, the living biosphere transforms into a greater "Thou", no longer a lesser "it".

Today's movement for the rights of nature (Earth jurisprudence) is another path toward biocentric valuation. Indigenous peoples are, in this case, leading the way. They and their allies have already secured legal personhood for sacred lands and rivers in Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia, India, Bangladesh, New Zealand, and most recently in the Canadian province of Quebec. Surely, this is an inviting path forward for progressive Christians. A flag we can carry to demonstrate our alliance, our allegiance, our support might well be this: G🌍D.

In a 2017 essay, "The Way Home for the Prodigal Species," and two more recent videos, "G🌍D: Owning Our Error, Accepting Our Fate" and "Sustainability 101: Indigenuity Is Not Optional," I reinterpreted our biblical heritage in ecocentric ways. We are in fact the prodigal species. We have squandered not only our own inheritance but that of nearly every other form of life. Human-centeredness has proved to be the most heinous form of idolatry. The ancients may have dissed God; we are defiling G🌍D.


Human-centeredness in our language, in our portrayal of the divine, in our notion of rights and responsibilities is inherently anti-future. It cannot be sustained. As Edward Goldsmith details in his magnum opus, The Way: An Ecological Worldview, virtually every sustainable culture that we know of held three things in common: (1) they related to the local, living presence of reality (what we dismissively call "the environment") in a humble, reverential, I-Thou way; (2) this *incarnational* presence of the divine (G🌍D) was honored as the source of all benefits and all real wealth for the community; and (3) preservation of the health & wellbeing of the body of life was *the* sacred responsibility.

Human wellbeing is thus a consequence of right relationship to reality — not the focal point for decision-making. Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer encourages us all to regard plants and animals as kin. More, they are "our first teachers." Fruit and flesh are gifts, warranting gratitude and reciprocal action.

Meanwhile, and drawing upon early Greek expressions of ecological wisdom, American scholar William Ophuls presents humility, moderation, and connection as a trinity of virtues worth reviving.

D's Judgment

"Sooner or later we all sit down to a banquet of consequences." ~ Robert Louis Stevenson

"D's Judgment" is of course a mythic phrasing of "our banquet of consequences." Accumulating over generations long before our own, this unwelcome feast can also be understood as "karma." It is the inevitable fruit of anthropocentric institutions, governance — and religions.

Industrial civilization is threatened by a "planet killer" of its own making. Here is where we now stand:

- No matter who is voted into or out of office, no matter how many people take to the streets, become vegan, stop flying or reproducing, no matter how much 'evolution of consciousness' might be cultivated, and no matter how many solar panels and wind turbines are installed...
- The ice of the world will keep melting and weirding out the jet stream. Methane and nitrous oxide (super-potent greenhouse gasses) will continue to belch from permafrost and polar seas. Forests everywhere will continue to incinerate, overwhelming our carbon-mitigation efforts. Acidifying oceans will continue to dissolve the calcium casings of coral, plankton, and shellfish. Hurricanes, tornados, heat domes, floods, droughts: all will grow ever more damaging, deadly.

Our human-centeredness is causing the 6th mass extinction. *Homo colossus* is surely on the list. *Homo sapiens* may be, too.

Redemption

Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance: where are you in the vaunted "stages of grief"? And is doom automatically the end point?

Mid 2019, and building upon Paul Chefurka's notion of finding the gift on the other side of acceptance, I began to explore (with others) the possibility of compassionate “post-doom” forms of awareness. (I see “post-doom” as akin to compost theology, or regenerative grace — a secular name for resurrection.) Sure enough, multiple paths were already recognizable and inviting. Quite a few of my interlocutors (Paul Chefurka, Joanna Macy, among them) call upon Buddhist teachings for their ways forward. Several (notably, Shaun Chamberlain) speak of the emotional and spiritual equanimity he gains from Taoist writings.

Post-doom conversations from a Christian platform were numerous: Richard Rohr, Damaris Zehner, Sid Smith, Robert Jensen, Gail Tverberg, and the Seminary of the Wild Guides (Victoria Loorz, Matt Syrdal, Brian Stafford, and Bryan Smith). I encourage readers of this publication to explore them all, as well as the mind-expanding post-doom resources and soul-nourishing “post doom, no gloom” zoom calls.

But here, I will close with the final prayer of Jesus at his own end time, on the cross. For me, these words are comforting, even redemptive...

”Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

QUESTION: *For the past two decades, you and your wife have traveled North America evangelizing evolution and big history. But recently your focus seems to have taken a more eco-theological and pastoral turn. What brought about this shift, and what would you say is the heart of your message and ministry now?*

REV. DOWD: The shift culminated in 2018, just after *Living the Questions* published my video course, “Pro-Future Faith: The Prodigal Species Comes Home,” but was actually decades in the making. Here’s how it unfolded:

I developed a passion for “evidential revelation” when I began my pastoral career in 1986, while attending Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary (now Palmer Seminary). The following were especially significant. John A.T. Robinson’s book, *Honest to God*, and Gene Marshall’s essay, “What Reality Are We Pointing to with the Word ‘God’?”, helped me integrate the thinking of Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Gaian microbiologist Lynn Margulis, deep ecologists Joanna Macy and Dolores LaChapelle, and eco-feminist Sallie McFague were especially significant mentors. I discuss their influence in my video, “Honest to G🌐D: Progressive Faith 2.0”. In 1988 cultural historian Thomas Berry, cosmologist Brian Swimme, and bioregional educator Sr. Miriam MacGillis inspired a passion for big picture storytelling. Henceforth, interpreting the epic of evolution in spiritually nourishing ways would be my calling.

My ministry took a practical, community organizing, sustainability turn in the late 1990s, and then expanded again soon after I remarried. Connie Barlow was a science writer and also a Thomas Berry enthusiast. From April 2002 until September 2020 she and I lived on the road, addressing some 3,000 religious and secular groups across North America on subjects at the intersection of science, meaning, and "right relationship to reality." (I see "reality" as God's secular name, and "G🌍D" as reality's mythic name.)

In December 2012 I had a profound worldview shift. Watching David Roberts' TEDx talk, "Climate Change is Simple (Remix)," woke me up to the looming climate consequences already unstoppable. Climate learning, advocacy, and activism took center stage, grounded in a passion to also learn the essentials of "ecological overshoot" (as presented by environmental sociologist William R. Catton, Jr.). I also dove deeply into the study abrupt climate change (10,000 years of change in half a human lifetime) and the rise and fall of civilizations. Key differences between unsustainable societies and Indigenous cultures are a current topic for learning and reflection. I find it helpful to regard the latter as having never been expelled from the Garden. Quite simply, Indigenous peoples did not violate what I now consider to be G🌍D's first law: "Limits are sacred; violate them and your society will perish in a hell of your own making."

To freely share what I was learning in all these fields, I began audio recording and posting to Soundcloud classic books and articles that were only available in text format — a "sustainability canon" of sorts.

I also began to create both educational and pastoral videos about how to cope and even thrive in existentially painful circumstances, including the ongoing collapse of both the biosphere and business as usual. "Post-doom" was the term I began using in 2019 to signify that becoming aware of the unstopability of social and ecological downturns need not end in "doom." There are still opportunities for "finding the gift" and applying "love in action."

As I see it, the shift from anthropocentrism (human-centeredness), to eco-theocentrism, (G🌍D-centeredness) points to a distinctly prophetic role for progressive religious and secular folk alike.

Progressive faith leaders now have a once-in-a-millennium opportunity to speak on behalf of G🌍D (Life/Reality) in prophetic, inclusive, and universal (i.e., non human-centered) ways.

This prophetic message is not grounded in old men or old books. Rather, evidential revelation (including the findings of science) is our "scripture"; ecology is the heart of our theology, and our inspiration flows from the wisdom of women and indigenous leaders' calls for environmental and intergenerational justice.

What a time to be alive!

The Reverend Michael Dowd is a bestselling eco-theologian, TEDx speaker, and pro-future advocate whose work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *LA Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *Discover*, and on television throughout the United States and Canada. His book, *Thank God for Evolution*, was endorsed by 6 Nobel Prize-winning scientists, noted skeptics, and religious leaders across the spectrum. Michael and his science writer, evolutionary educator, and fellow climate activist wife, [Connie Barlow](#), have spoken to some 3,000 groups throughout North America since April 2002.

Michael has delivered two TEDx talks ("[Why We Struggle and Suffer](#)" in 2012, and "[Reality Reconciles Science and Religion](#)" in 2014) and a program at the United Nations. He has also conducted three acclaimed online conversation series: "[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity](#)" (2011), "[The Future Is Calling Us to Greatness](#)" (2015) and "[Post-doom: Regenerative conversations exploring overshoot grief, grounding, and gratitude](#)" (2020-21). Dowd's work provides audiences with applications of evolutionary and ecological wisdom that break through the confusions of these rapidly shifting times.

As of September 2020, Michael and Connie live permanently in Ypsilanti, Michigan, from where Michael delivers Zoom homilies and longer programs. Sample sermons can be found [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#).

Michael's main passion these days is sharing the basics of how to stay sane, sober, and on-purpose in crazy times — "[Collapse in a Nutshell](#)" and "[Overshoot in a Nutshell](#)" — and facilitating twice-weekly "[Post Doom, No Gloom](#)" zoom discussions.

Rev. Dowd's websites: [MichaelDowd.org](#) / [TheGreatStory.org](#) / [PostDoom.com](#)