

# Preachers of a New Pentecost

Two evangelists of evolutionary spirituality are carrying the message of science and spirit to grassroots Christianity and beyond

by Carter Phipps

**"HUMANITY IS THE FRUIT OF FOURTEEN BILLION YEARS** of unbroken evolution, now becoming conscious of itself," declares the middle-aged speaker as he walks back and forth in front of the audience, punctuating his points with a dramatic gesture or a momentary pause. The reverend is in his element, and today he can feel that the crowd is in the palm of his hand.

"When the Bible speaks about God forming us from the dust of the Earth, it's actually true," he exclaims, articulating his words like a verbal challenge. "We did not come into this world—we grew out of it, just like an apple grows from an apple tree. That statement from Genesis is a traditional way of saying the same thing. We are not separate beings on Earth, living in a universe. We are a mode of being of Earth, an *expression* of the universe."

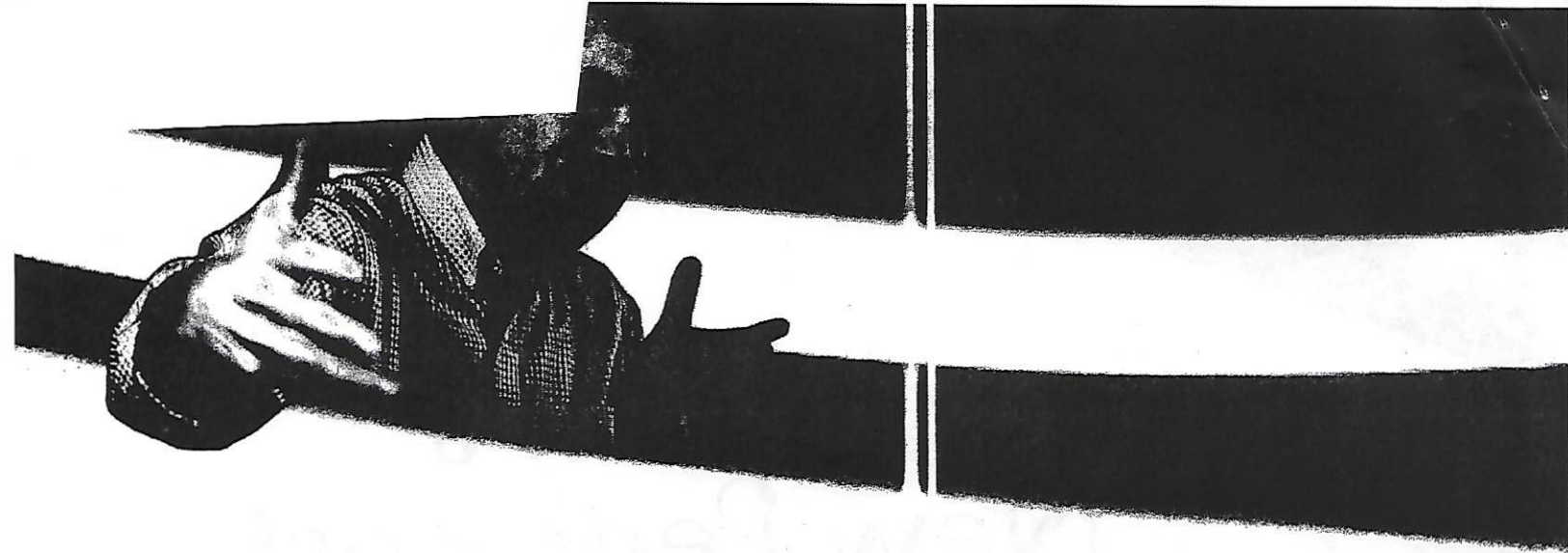
Dressed in nondescript slacks and a conservative button-down shirt, Michael Dowd actually looks like the Christian ministers I remember from my youth: the wholesome, boyish looks; the clean-cut aura; the warm, inviting smile that whispers of faith and conviction; the natural sense of connection with his audience, be it one person or several hundred. And of course, there's the passion.

"Do you get this?" he asks the audience, eyes bright, searching around the room for response. "I mean, do you *really* get this? We are the universe becoming conscious of itself. We are stardust that has begun to contemplate the stars. We have arisen out of the dynamics of the Earth. Four billion years ago, our planet was molten rock, and now it sings opera. Let me tell you, this is *good news!* And I love talking about it!" The last words come out as a shout, and he jumps up to add emphasis, overcome by his own ministerial spirit. The crowd at this mid-sized venue in Cambridge, Massachusetts, laughs, enjoying this unusual preacher of an unusual gospel, although old-time Pentecostal-style passion wasn't what they expected when they signed up for an evening lecture on the "Epic of Evolution." And the evening is just getting going.

"We are the first culture that has access to the most esoteric

piece of wisdom in human history: When you look at the night sky, you are not looking at the present moment." The speaker now is a woman, Connie Barlow, Michael's partner in the evening's presentation. "Our grandparents did not know this. Telescopes are time machines. All that scientists can see in the night sky is deeper and deeper back into time. And if you connect the events back in time in a meaningful way"—Connie pauses, readying the punch line—"you get what is perhaps the best description of the universe: *story*. It's a great story." Connie is the science writer and Michael is the former Christian pastor, and over the course of the next two hours, this husband and wife tag team of spirit and science takes turns awakening this attentive audience to our cosmic evolutionary heritage, a story that they say can and will help save this world. "As we integrate the great story of cosmogenesis, the epic of evolution, into our lives," Michael declares, "we will see a worldwide spiritual revival."

There have been tougher crowds for Connie and Michael, venues where they were lucky if they could convince the audience that the dinosaurs *didn't* die out five thousand years ago in Noah's flood. Today's audience—liberal, open-minded, Boston intellectuals—is a little more the norm, if there is such a thing for these two apostles of evolution. It's been two years since Michael and Connie quit their day jobs, gave notice on their apartment, set up a bed in the back of their van, and set off on the road—self-styled itinerant missionaries evangelizing evolution on the highways and byways of America. Over that time, they have seen their share of places and people—school assemblies, Native American reservations, universities, Montessori schools, Quaker meeting groups, alternative spiritual communities, ecological conferences, fundamentalists, liberals, conservatives, all ages and all faiths. But whatever new and interesting audiences they find themselves in front of, their basic message is the same: the universe story—the great story of evolution from the Big Bang to human beings, from



stardust to us—is the foundational *spiritual* myth of our time. It is the gospel of the universe, and Connie and Michael are shouting the good news to anyone who is willing to lend an ear. They are convinced that evolutionary spirituality is going to change not only Christianity but every other religion as well and, in fact, every field of human endeavor. Why? “It is a story,” as Michael puts it, “that includes all of us. In this great story, there is no human story that is left out.”

### **“You can be certain that at least three to five atoms you just breathed in were once a part of the body of the Buddha or the body of Jesus.”**

It is said that those who are most passionate about religion, or for that matter about almost anything, are those who convert to the movement, not those who are born and raised already involved. The most passionate teetotaler is the former alcoholic, the most passionate Christian is the converted sinner, and in this case, the most passionate advocate of evolutionary spirituality is the former anti-evolution fundamentalist. Believe it or not, there was a time when Michael would more likely have been the heckler in the audience warning of the satanic evils of evolutionary theory. “I was once one of those people that you see passing out those anti-evolution tracts,” he admits. “I would argue with anyone who thought the world was more than six thousand years old.” He pauses, then smiles. “So whatever your name for Ultimate Reality is, he, she, or it obviously has a sense of humor.”

It’s been many years since the days when Michael was a newly converted born-again Christian saving the souls of wayward scientists, and he has traveled a long road to his new Damascus. But just don’t try to tell him that his evolutionary faith somehow means he’s not a Christian anymore, or for that matter, not a fundamentalist. “I do not consider myself an ex-Christian or an ex-fundamentalist. I’m not an ex-anything,” he says with a wry

smile. “I’m still a fundamentalist; it’s just that my fundamentals have shifted.”

Indeed, both Michael’s and Connie’s fundamentals have shifted a great deal in the last two decades, and both have been able to parlay their strengths into a message that reaches audiences across the science and spirit spectrum, from Silicon Valley to the Bible Belt. Connie, who refers to herself as a “religious naturalist,” has spent fifteen years writing about the evolutionary sciences. But much of her worldview was forged in the deep ecology movement, and her spiritual sensibilities are gleaned almost entirely from the natural world. She easily speaks the language of science and draws her inspiration from the powerful insights of great humanists and naturalists like Julian Huxley, Carl Sagan, E.O. Wilson, and Loren Eiseley, at least three of whom have a reputation

of being avowed atheists. Michael, on the other hand, came to his evolutionary faith as a theist, with a deep connection to the Christian notion of transcendence, and he easily speaks the language of religion. Connie approaches this work from the bottom up, a naturalist reaching for the ways of the spirit; Michael from the top down, a God-inspired leader who has come to recognize the inherent divinity of the evolving cosmos. And in that meeting place between transcendence and immanence, they have long shared a common passion—a love for the work of Thomas Berry.

For a small but growing community of ecologically oriented Christians, the life and work of Catholic monk Thomas Berry have been a beacon of light in an otherwise dark theological landscape. With the help of cosmologist Brian Swimme, Berry has promoted a new creation myth for a global culture on the brink of ecological disaster. He calls it “The Great Story,” a revised Genesis based on our unfolding knowledge of the universe. For both Connie and Michael, coming across Berry’s work was a dramatic event that eventually set their feet on the missionary road they travel today. “The first night I heard Thomas Berry’s vision, about an hour into the evening, I began to tremble,” Michael recalls. “Goosebumps broke out all over my arms and legs, and I realized that *this* was

my destiny. I was going to popularize this message for the rest of my life. I had received my calling as an evolutionary evangelist."

For those who harbor romantic ideas of life on the road as a traveling missionary, a closer look at Connie and Michael's van/office/bedroom/living quarters might quickly disabuse one of such notions. No, it's not painted with Day-Glo colors, and "furthur" is not tattooed above the front windshield—there is nothing retro about the work of these two traveling preachers. It does, however, have a Jesus fish painted on the outside, kissing a Darwin fish, with a small red heart presiding over them both, a testament to the nature of their divinely, and scientifically, inspired mission. But however divine the outside may be, the inside is decidedly not God's gift to comfort. With an improvised bed covering all but a few inches of available space, a clothesline draped from side to side functioning as a pseudo-closet, and hundreds of books and other bits and pieces of traveling gear jammed in, among, between, and around all other available space, Connie and Michael's living quarters look most like a sort of mobile homeless shelter—that is, if the homeless were passionate about evolution. (Don't send donations for an upgrade—soon after the interview, they purchased a new and much nicer vehicle.) However, for anyone whose spiritual longings have ever included the desire to walk out the front door with nothing but the clothes on your back and hit the road in the name of God, the life that Connie and Michael have taken up certainly strikes all the right chords. Imagine the freedom: you, a car, the open road, the vast cosmos, and three hundred million human beings—dry tinder just waiting for that evolutionary spark.

"I want you to take a deep breath," Connie pauses to let the audience respond. "Okay. You can be certain that at least three to five atoms you just breathed in were once a part of the body of the Buddha or the body of Jesus. You see, we inter-exist; we are deeply interconnected at all levels."

The Unitarian church is crowded this evening, and the average age is probably about fifty or so—a collection of free-thinking boomers that I imagine run the gamut from peace activists to yuppie executives. Connie, a longtime Unitarian, is in her element

here, dispensing scientific wisdom with the grace of one who knows just what buttons to push in her students' consciousness. Call it the Sagan gene, that unique ability to communicate the nature of the scientific world with a religious depth of feeling, but by whatever name, Connie has it. And in this audience, her presentation goes over a little easier than Michael's, who is giving the congregation all they can handle.

"When I speak in Unitarian Universalist circles," Michael confides afterward, "for the first ten minutes, I can always count on a certain percentage of the church having a *tilt* experience because of the way I'm communicating. They may love *what* I'm saying, but they balk at my style. It's the Pentecostal passion, the Pentecostal enthusiasm for life and celebration of life." This passion is a key element of Connie and Michael's ministry. In a postmodern, ironic world that often seems to have associated all deeply felt spiritual conviction with Billy Graham-style fundamentalism, Michael is something of an anomaly. He's not apologetic about his spirituality on any level; his body language, his words, and his tone of voice all convey an unspoken challenge to a culture long wary of anyone expressing too much confidence when it comes to matters of truth. Indeed, one can almost sense from both Connie and Michael the emergence of a new form of spiritual expression, one that may seem to mimic the metaphysical certainty of a much earlier time but that is now informed by an infinitely richer scientific and philosophical worldview. If Nietzsche's existential doubt helped set the tone for our spiritual lives at the dawn of the twentieth century, perhaps a new kind of faith, and a new kind of certainty, is destined to emerge as the prevailing mood in the twenty-first. And that seems to be at least one of the underlying messages—that it's time to venture back into the waters of passion and conviction, fully supported this time with the open-minded curiosity of science and the inspired idealism that comes from appreciating the position in which fourteen billion years of evolution has placed human consciousness. "What Pentecostal offers is a confidence, a groundedness in truth, that the liberal churches have lost," Michael explains. "Liberal Christians so often lack the passion. They don't speak from that base of certainty. And



now, with this Great Story perspective, we can all begin to speak again with that level of passion and confidence. You see, I am a Pentecostal still. I have the same exuberant, expressive, passionate relationship to God, to life, and to the risen Christ that I know in my heart.”

While that message may be just what the doctor ordered for liberal Christian churches adrift in a sea of theological uncertainty, Michael and Connie hardly see their mission as destined only for the more tolerant, more receptive, ecumenical edges of the Christian community, or even only for Christians. Michael acknowledges that this vision of evolutionary spirituality may be alive in only a small minority today, but as he puts it, “That’s how evolution happens. It happens on the fringes.” And he is simply undaunted by the formidable challenge their mission represents for much of the religious status quo. “I will be forty-five soon,” he declares. “I believe that in my lifetime, we will see the majority of Christians—I don’t know whether it will be fifty-five percent or eighty percent—embracing

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a deeply ecological evolutionary cosmology, and seeing their traditions through that lens, interpreting heaven and hell, grace and forgiveness, the Trinity, the virgin birth, and all the Christian teachings through that lens.”

Now, if that vision is to be anything more than a good idea, then someone besides the Unitarians, the New Agers, and a few pioneering theologians is going to have to get on the evolutionary train. And that means *really* get on it, not just tacitly accept, as the Pope did not that long ago, that evolution plays a role in life’s development. It means appreciating and embracing the profound spiritual significance of placing human life in a universal, cosmological, and developmental context. And for scientists, it means

finally giving up the irrational fear that if they allow spirituality into their picture of evolution, they are suddenly going to be overwhelmed by the minions of Oral Roberts, taking the country back to the theological dark ages. “Evolutionists don’t realize that they have won the war,” Connie tells me, explaining that there are actually very few people these days who still argue against the big picture of our evolutionary legacy. Too many scientists are stuck in the past, fighting the ghosts of long-discredited creationists. “They are still fighting skirmishes,” she says, “missing the fact that the main argument today is about *how* evolution has happened—not *that* it has happened.”

Given their unique talent for conveying the message of evolutionary spirituality, and their unusual melding of science and spirit in a world where precisely that mixture is becoming the hot ticket of the day, it’s hard to imagine that the mission of these two modern-day troubadours is not destined for great things. No doubt the bigger venues will come, and the reputation of these relatively

unknown wanderers in the religious back roads of a sleepy but slowly awakening America will grow. Until then, if you pass by the local Church of Christ next Sunday morning, or the Rotary Club next Wednesday night, or perhaps the school assembly on Thursday afternoon, and you hear a preacher’s cadence sounding out with all the fire-

and-brimstone passion of a world in crisis desperately needing spiritual salvation, maybe you’re hearing the early warning signs of a new religious vision, hidden now, but slowly building to what promises to be one of the most interesting cultural crescendos of the new millennium. And maybe, just maybe, that voice you hear is not just a call from the future, but the sound of Connie or Michael out on that missionary road, preaching the good news of a coming revelation, an evolution revolution, a new kind of Lord for a new kind of world. ■

You can follow Connie and Michael’s evolutionary tour at their website: [www.thegreatstory.com](http://www.thegreatstory.com)