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Evolutionary Theology: How to Love God *and* Science

By Brandon Keim  December 04, 2007 | 10:57:42 AM Categories: [Evolution](#), [Religion](#)

Jesus, meet Darwin.

In the aftermath of a [Texas education official's dismissal](#) for promoting evolution, I spoke yesterday to Michael Dowd, a leading proponent of evolutionary theology.



According to Dowd, science and religious faith are not mutually exclusive. Instead, the scientific process is a tool for understanding reality -- and at the heart of that reality is evolution, operating at multiple levels, from the sub-atomic to the human to the cosmic.

Dowd, who professed sympathy for intelligent design supporters but criticized their reactionary, circle-the-wagons approach to modernity, doesn't think evolution is mechanistic or pointless. He sees a universal evolutionary trajectory from disorder to order, simplicity to complexity and brutality to cooperation -- and that, he believes, is the grand narrative that will sustain the science-friendly religions of the 21st century.

"Evolutionary theology offers a third way. Rightly understood, evolution is as sacred and meaningful as any of the creation myths," said Dowd, who quoted biology titan E.O. Wilson, sometimes called Darwin's heir: "The evolutionary epic is probably the best myth we'll ever have."

A formal Wired News Q&A should be coming out soon. In the meantime, here's some outtakes from our conversation.

On the nature of God: "Evolution theology offers an undeniable God. Nobody would ask, 'Do you believe in water? In life? In the universe?' Those are absurd questions." Instead, said Dowd, "God is another word for universe, and the divine imperative is evident in the properties of emergent and symbiotic systems."

On the current cultural landscape: "Up until now, there's been this big gulf. On the one side are creationists. On the other are the new atheists, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris and Dan Dennett, who say that you have to reject religion completely in order to accept evolution."

On Dawkins and the New Atheists: "I'm grateful that they're doing what they're doing. They're plowing the field. There's a hunger in Americans for a meaningful, inspiring way of thinking about what science is revealing to us. Dawkins let me reprint [in *Thank God for Evolution*, Dowd's new book] a letter he wrote to his 10-year-old daughter."

On the New Atheists' potential alienation of religious believers: "It's probably true, but it's understandable. They're trying to combat otherworldly, supernatural, mythic understandings of religion. They're accurate in some of those assessments. But they're not critiquing a sacred view of evolution. Many have publicly supported us. Richard and my wife [acclaimed science journalist Connie Barlow] have known each other for years."

On his reception by religious believers: "There's an interest in this. People are finding that it opens up new ways of thinking. Studying evolution is like following cosmic bread crumbs back to God. The details of evolution, understood in an inspiring way, reconnect us to the whole, to ultimate reality."

On apocalypse: "Dinosaurs are here to teach us things, not test our faith. And contrary to popular belief, these aren't the end times for humanity. They're just the beginning. Dinosaurs were here for 175 million years; humans have only been here for three million. And when we look over the course of evolutionary history, one of the patterns we see is that breakdowns, chaos and bad news keep catalyzing creative transformations. Throughout the history of the universe, the primary driver of evolutionary theory is chaos and breakdowns. The chaos in our time, the challenge in our personal lives, the challenges of species in the next decades -- these will be evolutionary catalysts that call us to greatness, that call us to make changes that could have taken hundreds of years. I find that more inspiring than the literal interpretation of any creation story. I don't think there's anything more exciting than the time we're living in now."

On Joel de Rosnay's postulation of man's future as cybiont, or an amalgamation of humanity, technology and nature as one synergistic organism: "It's one of the more inspiring visions. Life keeps finding ways to cooperate in larger symbiotic wholes. It's like we're creating a new cell at the scale of a planet. That seems to me an inspiring vision that many people can understand both theologically and religiously. There's an illustration in my book -- more complex forms of life going up a staircase. The neanderthal's standing behind a guy in a suit, saying 'I was wondering when you were going to notice that there were more steps.'"

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