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Science and Religion Reconciled: A Close Look at God of Evolution

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Abstract: The article is based on the book, *Thank God for Evolution*, penned by Michael Dowd. The article explores how science and religion are interdependent. Unlike the former times when religion totally rejected science and later science rejected religion, now is the high time for science and religion to reconcile. They are indispensable and are complementary to one another. This book is not exclusively about Science neither Religion. However, it is a blending of both and also it transcends both.

The article excerpts the idea from the book that evolution is not a one-time event but rather a process through natural selection. In short, the world we live in was not created just in six days but it has a story of 13.7 billion years. The article tries to extend the same idea. However, looking through the lens of Dowd's present book, the article contends that this evolution is caused by God that we worship and thus, there is nothing contrary to religion. Science in this way comes to meet religion and they reconcile.

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Keywords: Science meets religion, Big History is a creation story, Evolution is not a one-time event, God as personification of reality, Evolution as blessing, Humans as evolution.

“We didn’t come into the world we grew out of it.”
-Michael Dowd (2016)

Introduction

The book, *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World*, “is intended for the broadest of audiences,” (Dowd, 2007). The book starts with the “Author’s Promise.” He has been “as a once traditionally religious and now exuberantly born-again evolutionary evangelist. From gothic cathedrals to cosy living rooms, from gatherings of evangelical students to meetings of campus freethinkers, from university departments of religion and the social sciences to high school classrooms and home-schooling events, from rousing praise worship to quiet prayer circles, from local talk radio to National Public Radio: in all these venues and more, I have found diverse peoples hungering for the ideas you will encounter here. No matter who you are, and no matter what your beliefs or background, I promise that reading this book will expand the horizon of what you see as possible for yourself, for your relationships, and for our world” (Dowd, 2007). It is very interesting to note that the author assures that the book is for both Creationists and Rationalists, Scientists and Religious, believers and non-believers alike. This book puts an end to the debate between science and religion. The depiction of ‘Jesus fish’ and ‘Darwin fish’ meeting, on Dowd’s view would usher different opinions. While some could nod their head in agreement others would find it disappointing. Those who are open-minded will find this book to be not only thought-provoking but life-changing.

Dowd's Promises

In the beginning of the book itself, Dowd makes some encouraging promises (Dowd, 2016:1ff). To those of you who have rejected evolution... I promise that the secular version of evolution you have rejected is not the version of evolution presented on these pages.

To those who accept evolution begrudgingly (like death and taxes) ... I promise that this book will provide you with an experience of science, and evolution specifically, that will fire your imagination, touch your heart, and lead you to a place of deep gratitude, awe, and reverence.

To devoutly committed Christians... Whether you are Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Evangelical, Anabaptist, or New Thought, and whether you consider yourself conservative, moderate, or liberal, my promise to you is that the God-glorifying evolutionary perspective offered here will enrich your faith and inspire you in ways that believers in the past could only dream of.

To Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and other non-Christians... I promise that it will be easy to apply most of what you find here to your own life and faith.

To agnostics, humanists, atheists, and freethinkers... I promise that you will find nothing here that you cannot wholeheartedly embrace as being grounded in a rationally sound, mainstream scientific understanding of the Universe.

To those who embrace an eclectic spirituality... I promise that this perspective will enrich your appreciation of the traditions and practices that nourish you most deeply while helping you find new excitement in each.

To those who aren't sure what they believe... I promise that this holy evolutionary understanding will not only help you make sense of the world; it will also provide a rock-solid moral and ethical foundation for a life of passion and deep meaning during inevitable difficulties.

To those who struggle with addiction or co-dependence... I promise that if you say "Yes!" to the path of evolutionary integrity offered in this book, you will gain a profound understanding of yourself and others.

Finally, he addresses those with loved ones who have been unable to embrace science because of their religious faith, and those with loved ones who have been unable to embrace religion because of their scientific worldview, I promise that sharing this book will make a difference in your relationship.

Highlights of the Book, *Thank God for Evolution*

Through this book, Dowd has convincingly demonstrated how science and religion truly are interdependent. The fact of evolution does not negate the reality of God but gives a much broader understanding of God, or Ultimate reality. Religion, on the other hand, though necessarily reinterpreted through the new worldview provided by science provides the necessary moral framework that will enable us to fulfil our role as an integral part of reality. (Carlson 2020)

This book merges religion with science and claims that religious traditions and spirituality are fully compatible with the scientific evidence for evolution. Dowd opines that “Many devout religious believers have rejected evolution because the process has been depicted as random, meaningless, mechanistic and godless,” however he feels that many scientists are moving away from this earlier approach into what he calls “an emergent, developmental worldview.” (Dowd, 2008). He further writes that evolution is meaningful. By meaningful he does not mean teleological. He means that the story is inspirational and can be used much like a book of fables to teach morality. Although he talks about God a lot, what he means by God is quite different from the meaning used by a theistic evolutionist or even a personal-god pantheist. He says, “God is not a person; God is a mythic personification of reality. If we miss this, we miss everything.” (Dowd, 2008: 4) A personification is a metaphor created by an author. In other words, although God, the non-personal real universe created humanity (not teleologically out of clay but through a natural process of evolution via natural selection), it is humanity created God, the person. This usage of the word God is useful because it allows us to create a relationship with something rather than someone. A relationship we desperately need if we are to motivate ourselves to solve problems in our relationships with things like the climate.

Though the book is singly penned by Dowd himself, his wife Connie Barlow certainly deserves a special mention for the best-supporting editor. Their marriage with its ups and downs are part of the story told in the book and thus the sub-titled of the book runs, “*How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our*

World.” Michael Dowd is himself a big presence in the book, frequently referring to his own life and struggles.

The genre of the book is rather a blender – mixing all of the inspirational science writings, theological reflections, Biblical interpretations and self-improvement. Originally based on “the Greatest Story ever told,” lacks a strong narrative structure, which frankly makes the book easier to pick up, skip-around, put-down and pick-up again. But that is how this book is the best-read and used. It is a very useful book for adult religious education, youth ministries, and even for intellectual enhancement. Of course, there is no adoption at the university level, but frankly, in the pews, this book may be of greater need. However, it does not mean that the others like scientists and nonbelievers might benefit from reading something completely out-of-the-box.

Dowd has succeeded in attracting glowing endorsements for the book from a huge variety of scientists, religious leaders, and authors. “This is accomplished in part by the many generous citations included from various authors. The book is valuable simply as a collection of quotes on evolution, science, and religion (though regrettably full citations are not included). Dowd makes abundant use of Thomas Berry, both in his prose and in his citations. Second, to Berry is the work of David Sloan Wilson. He has wrapped himself in the words and wisdom of many, many others, and provided a who-is-who directory in the back, which I found myself frequently consulting. Seven chapters into the book, I had read so many quotes from so many authors that I was beginning to feel a little left out and overlooked, but then was pleased to discover my own words and name staring back at me on page 127. Thanks, Michael!” While Dowd affirms multiple religious traditions, he engages the Christian idiom in depth, offering creative evolutionary reinterpretations of concepts like Original Sin,

Resurrection, and Personal Salvation. He refers to these as “REALizing” religion, moving religious doctrines of the “Night Language” of dreams to the “Day Language” of science, from the “Private Revelations” of scriptures to the “Public Revelations” of science” (Grassie, 2008).

In Part III of the book: “The Gospel According to Evolution,” he uses evolutionary brain science and evolutionary psychology to reconstruct the doctrine of “Original Sin”. He notes the evolution of the human brain with its “Lizard Legacy” in the cerebellum and brainstem, its “Furry Li'l Mammal” in the limbic systems, its “Monkey Mind” in the neo-cortex, and its “Higher Porpoise!” in the prefrontal cortex. It is the interplay of these evolved structures of our brain that inevitably lead to sin. Here he does not redefine sin and he is not conspicuous when he speaks of what really is a “sin”. Dowd dwells on the story of Rev. Ted Haggard, President of the National Association of Evangelicals, who was ousted as a closet homosexual in November 2006, as well as several other religious and political leaders who had been tempted by their Lizard Legacy and Furry Li'l Mammal. Dowd writes:

So long as religious and political leaders continue to ignore our evolutionary heritage, and thus do not put in place structures of internal and external support that can withstand the high dosages of testosterone that high status and power necessarily confer, then there will be no hope for a less calamitous future.

Understanding the unwanted drives within us as having served our ancestors for millions of years is far more empowering than imagining that we are the way we are because of inner demons, or because the world's first woman and man ate a forbidden apple a few thousand years ago. The path to freedom lies in appreciating one's

instincts while taking steps to channel these powerful energies in ways that will serve our higher purposes (Dowd, 2007, 148).

What follows in the next few chapters is the self-improvement section of the book, as Dowd develops his “Evolutionary Spirituality”. There are sections on “Taming Our Monkey Mind” and “Evolving Our Most Intimate Relationships” (Grassie, 2008).

Points to Take Home

The first thing to keep in mind is the author Michael Dowd – a Christian scientist and is at his best as an Evolutionist rather than as a Creationist. He is a Christian Reverend who believes in evolution as something that took place over a billion years (13.7byrs) and not made just in six days (as recorded in the Christian Religious scripture) and has just five thousand years of its existence. He believes that creation is not one event but through a process of evolution. Married to a staunch atheist they both travel across North America. “Since April 2002, Connie and I have been full-time “evolutionary evangelists.” We live permanently on the road, offering a spiritually nourishing view of evolution throughout North America. In the tradition of travelling preachers, we gave up our worldly possessions, left our home, and now carry everything we need in our van.” (Dowd, 2008: XVIII)

On their van are a Jesus fish and Darwin fish kissing. “When we launched our ministry, we chose to display on our van both a Jesus fish and a Darwin fish—kissing. Many passers-by flash a smile when they see it, although disapproving responses are not uncommon. A retired biology professor Lawrence, in Kansas, took one look at the decals and laughed, “Oh great! Now you piss everyone off!” (Dowd, 2008: XVIII) It is

symbolic of Religion and Science embracing. Like in the middle age they are no longer watertight compartment but they are both complementary and supplementary in his own words, “science and religion can be mutually enriching” (Dowd, 2008: 6). But according to him, many devout religious believers have rejected evolution because the process has been depicted as random, meaningless, mechanistic, and Godless. However, this is something to rethink about for “Evolution does not diminish religion; it expands its meaning and value globally.” (Dowd, 2004: 4)

He claims himself to be the ‘Evolutionary Theologian’ or a ‘Big History Evangelist’ and his message to the world is to have a right relationship with reality. The path that he is particularly passionate about is as he says, “Sacred Realism” or “Factual Faith.” His creed is simple:

Reality is my God,
Evidence is my Scripture,
Big History is my creation story,
Ecology is my Theology,
Integrity is my Salvation and
Ensuring a just healthy future is my mission (Dowd, 2018)

When Dowd talks about God he does not talk of God as the Christians would understand Him. He talks of God as Something rather than Someone. God, for Dowd, is not a person; but God is a mythic personification of reality (Dowd, 2008) Just like Poseidon was a personification of the mighty powerful ocean and Gaia is not a spirit of the earth but the personification of the earth by the Greeks likewise the Holy Spirit of the Hebrew Bible is the personification of breath and wind. When we die the spirit leaves and that is – the breath stops.

The book, *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World* seems more like a collection of quotes on Science and Religion. He has given five pages of references from where he collected ideas to bring this book alive. One can be informative while reading this book but when one reads the primary sources he has relied on; the book would seem like a selected quote compiled into another book form.

Conclusion

This book starts with the author's promises and I do not see one promise without fulfilling it. The book is a good read for people from all walks of life it is meant for all audiences across the theological and philosophical spectrum. Scientists, religious (from all religions), believers, non-believers, atheists, humanists and sceptics every one could enjoy reading the book both for pleasure and information. It's very important to note that science and religion are not rivals, neither separated like different compartments of a train but they are complementary. This book celebrates this coming together of science and religion – more like a marriage between science and religion. Just like the marriage of Michael Dowd a Christian-evolutionist with Connie a staunch atheist.

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