“We must find the difficult course between the precipice of godlessness and the marsh of superstition.”
—Plutarch

“The overlapping domains of science, religion, and philosophy should be regarded as virtual rain forests of cross-pollinating ideas—precious reserves of endless fecund memes that are the raw ingredients of consciousness itself in all its diverse manifestations. The messy science/religion/philosophy interface should be treasured as an incredibly fruitful cornucopia of creative ideas—a constantly coevolving cultural triple helix of interacting ideas and beliefs that is, by far, the most precious of all the manifold treasures yielded by our history of cultural evolution on Earth.”
—James Gardner

Any credible spiritual path, including Christianity, must be in an honest conversation with science if it is to be relevant in the 21st century. The scientific method emerged as the best tool we’ve found so far to help us answer the question, “What is real?” The modernist mindset evolved precisely so that it could make an inquiry into the nature of reality without encumbrance from the church or its priestly authorities. Our species wanted to liberate itself from myth and superstition in order to harness our full potential. This presents all religious lineages with their greatest challenge and their greatest opportunity.

We cannot naively proceed, for example, as though the pre-modern assumptions that informed the biblical writers and editors can be applied today without significant interpretation. They believed, for example, in a static, three-tier cosmology. Heaven waited for the faithful just above the blue dome of the sky; Earth occupied a middle realm, and below there was a region called hell. For many humans, it took a flight into space and the actual empirical evidence of astronauts, to remind us that this worldview is factually wrong. Some Christians, shocked to think that Jesus’ unconscious assumptions about the physical nature
of reality could be incomplete, cling to literal interpretations of scripture. Yet, there is no way that he could have known what an average grade nine student knows about the metabolic processes of a cell. The challenge for those who continue to regard the witness of these pre-scientific scriptures as inspirational, and even foundational, is to find a way to celebrate the depth and profundity of scriptural wisdom, while at the same time celebrating an evidence-based view of reality.

With Charles Darwin’s discovery\(^1\) of biological evolution the modern world was revolutionized. Many scholars regard the discovery of evolutionary processes to be the most important idea of the modern era. Philosopher John Dewey, put it this way:

> In laying hands upon the sacred ark of permanency, in treating the forms that had been regarded as types of fixity and perfection as originating and passing away, the Origin of Species introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion.

—The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy

It is shocking to realize that one hundred and fifty years after the publication of Darwin’s The Origin of Species, a 2012 Angus Reid poll revealed that a mere 40% of Canadians believe in evolution and 51% of American respondents believe that life was created in its current form within the past 10,000 years by God.\(^2\)

To a significant degree this finding correlates with the religious beliefs of those polled—beliefs that have not been updated to take account of an evidence-based view of reality. Nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche captured the dilemma of the religious minded who refuse to allow the weight of evidence to inform their spiritual path succinctly: “Belief means not wanting to know what is true.”

Yet, the problem extends beyond mere belief. Even those who accept evolution as a scientific fact have yet to integrate its pragmatic significance. Evolutionary biologist, David Sloane Wilson writes:

> The most extraordinary fact about public awareness of evolution is not that 50 percent don’t believe it but that nearly 100% haven’t connected it to anything of importance in their lives. The reason we believe so firmly in the physical sciences … is that they are so essential to our everyday lives. We can’t build bridges, drive cars, or fly airplanes without them. In my

---

1 The idea of evolution had been around for decades by the time Darwin wrote The Origin of Species, but had no scientific evidence. As well, it should be noted that Alfred Russell Wallace discovered evolution and was prepared to publish prior to Darwin.

2 Angus Reid, August 2012
opinion, evolutionary theory will prove just as essential to our welfare and we will wonder in retrospect how we lived in ignorance for so long.

To offer a concrete example of the pragmatic usefulness of evolutionary biology, if religious institutions refuse to help their adherents understand the relationship between the doctrine of sin and the evolution of the brain, we will forever be trapped in a pre-modern, pre-scientific understanding of sin as an external power that is tormenting us. “As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me” (Romans 7:17). It is liberating to understand that our brains are an evolutionary gift of reptiles and mammals, and that human behaviors that have historically been associated with “sin” are grounded in natural survival instincts. Knowing factually that the problems lies between our ears, rather than in some mysterious force “out there,” we can assume greater responsibility for our own behavior and the future of our planet.

When most people hear the word “evolution,” they are thinking primarily about biological evolution. But in order to understand evolutionary spirituality or evolutionary Christianity, we need to appreciate that an evolutionary dynamic extends beyond the realm of the physical. What occurs at the biological level also takes place in the domains of consciousness (psyche and spirit), culture (or worldviews), and social and political ways of organizing our lives. For example, Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner has done extensive research on eight different lines of intelligence—linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and natural intelligence. Each of these lines evolves though different stages of development from infancy through childhood and into adulthood. While he doesn’t include a moral or spiritual line of intelligence, other researchers such as Carol Gilligan and Cindy Wigglesworth have established that these too evolve.

Psychologist Claire Graves did his research in the area of the evolution of cultural worldviews. Worldviews, observes New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, are “like the foundations of a house: vital but invisible. They are that through which we look, not at which, a society or an individual normally looks.” These are the invisible and unconscious set of beliefs, values, shared agreements, along with social, political, and economic assumptions about how we should govern ourselves. Roughly speaking these worldviews emerged historically as archaic, pre-modern, traditional, modern, and postmodern. Again, the Bible was written from within a pre-modern and traditional religious worldview—which is why much of it seems anachronistic. This doesn’t make modern and postmodern worldviews “better” than earlier ones. Rather each successive worldview emerged to solve the problems inherent in the previous worldview. Earlier worldviews are ideally transcended, but included, in the emergence of new ones. Unfortunately, culture clashes can occur in which one worldview denigrates the value of another, and refuses to honor its inherent dignities. We see this battle waged by some atheist scientists against any and all forms of religion, and on the
other side hand by fundamentalist Christians against the empirical findings of science. It is time to end this battle and heal the cultural rift that has developed.

We now have two great narratives to inform and enliven our spiritual journey. One is the evolutionary story of the universe, from the Big Bang 13.8 billion years ago to this very moment of you reading these words. This story is science’s gift to our species. It is a sacred story, revealing the nature of God. The other story we have to inform and enliven our spiritual journey is the sacred narrative of scripture, that library of books that was compiled and edited over many centuries. It too reveals the nature of God, as interpreted by spiritual seekers, mystics, and faithful sojourners over the centuries.

We live in an exciting age, when it is possible to bring these two stories into conversation with each other. Both may hold the interpretive keys to unlock deep layers of meaning in the other. Where scripture and science differ on facts, science is privileged. Yet, we affirm that within the traditional narratives and metaphors of scripture a timeless wisdom can help us to interpret and make meaning of an evolutionary universe. Reality as we know it, inside and out, physical and spiritual, is evolving. If whatever we mean by God is involved in reality as we know it to be then religion and spirituality need to enter into a deep inquiry about how this is so.

-- Bruce Sanguin

Discussion Questions (pause DVD at each appearance of the LtQ logo for conversation in small groups)

Segment 1

List some of the areas in life that show how the idea of evolution is a fundamental dynamic at work in the universe.

What do Teilhard de Chardin’s acknowledgement of movement and Jesus’ orientation toward the future have to do with evolution?

Why is the idea of evolving such a scary, vulnerable -- and necessary -- proposition?
Share a time in your life when you updated your internal map of reality -- your GPS system -- to help you navigate your everyday life. What feelings did it evoke?

Morwood suggests that after 13.8 billion years of evolution, the divine is at work in the universe “coming to expression in us.” What does that mean to your understanding of life?

**Segment 2**

How does Thomas Berry’s “telling the story of everything” and the idea of “big history” re-orient the Christian story for you?

Describe a time when an evidence-based, scientific fact or discovery, either shook the foundations of your faith, or caused you to realize that you would need to update a belief, doctrine, or a traditional interpretation of a Bible story.

Dowd believes that scientific, historical, and cross-cultural evidence is divine communication – and science can be understood in sacred, holy, and transformational ways. Discuss.

What might the Biblical narrative and the scientific story have to offer one another?

What do you think about John Haught’s conjecture that God “allures us” from an unformed future—that we’re not only determined by our past biology or our genetic material, but also by our willingness to “feel into” an future that God inspires?
Segment 3

According to Clayton, biologist Arthur Peacocke says that “God doesn’t work by miracles that break natural law, but that God’s purposes are brought about through evolution.” Discuss.

How does the idea of each of us being a manifestation of “the universe reflecting on itself” affect your understanding of the spiritual life?

In your own words, what do you think Sanguin is getting at with his description of God as a “wayless way” that is expressed in a non-coercive, persuasive love?

Can you offer some examples of how randomness and chance leading to beauty might conflict with the conventional wisdom that beauty is found primarily in order and control?

Additional Questions:

Paul writes that when he became an adult he put away childish things (1 Corinthians 13:7). What do you think he was talking about? What childish things might it be time for you to “put away”?

In your experience, where do you see aspects of an evidence-based view of reality conflicting with your or other’s idea of what is “Christian”?
Spiritual Practice

On a clear evening, go out and watch the sunset. Notice how the language is not scientifically accurate. What does it feel like to know that, in truth, rather than the sun going “down,” Earth is spinning away from the sun? In this simple reorientation, the “spell of fixity” is temporarily suspended. We are in constant motion. Does this evidence-based orientation toward reality lessen or deepen the mystery of a sunset for you?

Praying what we see, hear and read...

Key words and phrases in Session One:

HEALING by Michael Morwood

We acknowledge
a Power, a Presence
within us
within all people,
a creative, energizing Presence,
Divine,
bonding everything that exists
through patterns of attraction and co-operation,
in endless movement
toward new possibilities,
creating an interrelational universe
that makes human life possible.

Conscious of this Divine presence
within and among us,
we open ourselves to new possibilities.
We expand our minds,
we embrace change,
we take risks,
we discard what no longer gives meaning to life,
we deepen our awareness and appreciation
of this Presence
emerging in us.
We give thanks for the wonderful human gift of conscious awareness.
We give thanks, that in us, the universe has found a way to reflect upon itself, to sing, to dance, to celebrate the joy of sound and movement, to consciously love, to be enthralled by the creation of new life and new possibilities.

We open ourselves to the challenge of fully co-operating with the energizing, creative, Divine Presence in our own personal development, in our relationships with other people and in our connectedness with and care for planet Earth.

To all that is, and to all that could be through the power of the Presence within all things, we say, Amen.