

Book Review

Peter Schogol

Dowd, Michael. *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World*. New York: Viking, 2008.

It feels presumptuous to say anything negative about a book that contains six pages of its own advance rave reviews—have all those Nobel laureates actually read it?—but for me this book is only middling. I have four main problems with it.

First, it is written for Christians, and those of us who are not—in spite of the author's encouragement to read on anyway—have to unwrap a lot of terms which need not have been wrapped up in the first place. Calling the urges of the reptilian brain "Original Sin" is helpful to exactly whom? Fundamental Christians (who aren't likely to read this book anyway) won't buy this slippery retrofit. And non-Christians are just going to feel like we've been bounced back into the Dark Ages, albeit on a way cool bungee cord. Likewise with other Christian terms like Christ, salvation, and speaking in tongues. What Dowd has done with these is what Christian music has done with heavy metal.

Second is the single ambivalent reference to homosexuality in the context of the sex scandal involving then National Association of Evangelicals president Ted Haggard. Dowd characterizes homosexual behavior as an involuntary drive of the reptilian complex of the human brain. While Dowd doesn't make this connection, it's worthwhile noting that evolutionary theorists also posit the R-complex as the source for rage, xenophobia, and fight-or-flight responses. In other words, Dowd leaves the door open to an understanding of homosexuality as a blind urge capable of overriding rational instincts.

Third is the cutesy language of the book as a whole. I understand and appreciate that Dowd wanted to make the material accessible to as broad a (Christian) brow as possible, but "Higher Porpoise?" What is this, summer camp?

Last, Dowd treats evolution as the long-sought Theory of Everything. Any overarching metaphysics, however cosmologically correct, eventually takes on the magisterium of orthodoxy. And coupled with Dowd's overweening grooviness, what we have is a new pop religion centered around what Food Network star Rachael Ray might call EVOL.

To give *Thank God for Evolution* its props, it is a well-organized, smoothly written book, and as much as I despised summer camp, Dowd's spirit is infectious and his humor reasonably adult. And the premise that The Great Story can, even should, relexify religious symbols, while not original to Dowd, is presented with authentic conviction.

If you are willing and able to get past the author's nostalgia for evangelical Christianity, and can suspend your annoyance at some of his sophomoric wordplay, there really is value here, particularly in Dowd's popularizing of evolutionary psychology (if that's your thing). But I still think Dowd's attempt to kiss and make up (literally—check out his bumper sticker of Jesus and Darwin fishes smooching) detracts from the book's overall usefulness.