

Universalist Rob Bell Jumps on Mysticism Bandwagon

Hipster preacher Rob Bell is mashing up quantum physics, Jewish Kabbalah and Catholic mysticism to explain humanity's future evolution.

In his 30-city "Everything Is Spiritual" tour, the former megachurch pastor and short-lived Oprah Winfrey Network talk-show host delivers a two-hour monologue aimed at a millennial generation less interested in sin and judgment and more attuned to science and cosmic connections.

"A bunch of the old stories that we used to rely on just aren't working anymore," Bell told a crowd of almost 500 during a tour stop in Durham. "I want to take a stab at a new story."

Wearing a gray denim jacket, a white collared shirt, chinos and ankle boots, Bell used only one visual aid: a large dry-erase board in the shape of a long, skinny triangle. In the far left corner he drew a small black dot representing the Big Bang. Moving to the right, as the universe expanded over the course of his talk, he sketched milestones of evolution over 13.8 billion years.

Bell maps Christian faith onto modern evolutionary science, quoting New Age healing champion Deepak Chopra, Sufi mystic Rumi and Catholic theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin—an amalgamation sure to rile some in the evangelical crowd who made him famous.

A graduate of Wheaton College and Fuller Theological Seminary, Bell became an evangelical luminary with the success of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan, which he founded at age 28. The church, which once boasted a Sunday attendance of 10,000, became Bell's calling card as he urged young

Christians to embrace their doubts, dig into their Jewish roots and treat the Bible as literary rather than literal.

Then he published "Love Wins," in which he questioned the existence of hell. Evangelicals were swift to part company, describing Bell as a modern-day heretic. "Farewell, Rob Bell," retired megachurch pastor John Piper famously tweeted.

A year later, Bell left Mars Hill and moved to Los Angeles in search of a broadcast audience and a "more forgiving faith." Earlier this year, the partnership with Oprah fizzled, but Bell says he's working on another TV program.

He now talks about warring religions giving way to enlightened secularism giving way to nihilism.

"Let's grow up," he says, summarizing the anti-religious materialism of the modern West.

"That works until you're standing in the hospital room and your first kid is born, and you need something more," he said. "You and I are made of dust and bones, and yet you are also made of something called spirit. You are crammed full of a divine breath of life itself. You are an exotic cocktail of dust and soul, bone and spirit."

Bell casts what we now call "science" not as an enemy of faith but as a source of spiritual insight.

Tony Jones, a theologian, author and blogger, said Bell is at the leading edge of a cultural move toward mysticism.

"People are getting frustrated with the pure, cold rationality of science," said Jones. "Rob holds science in high esteem, but Rob is really a lot about mystery. You can be a thinking person who appreciates reason and science, but there are things we can't explain."

In "Everything Is Spiritual," Bell explores the religious mystery within science. Drawing on the evolutionary theology

of the early 20th-century Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard, Bell argues that ever since the Big Bang, matter has been developing more complexity, depth and unity. Particles bonded to form atoms. Atoms bonded to form molecules. Molecules bonded to form cells. Cells bonded to form organisms. Humans developed language to form social bonds.

“You say, ‘I just want to be part of something bigger than myself.’ Congratulations. Everything in the freaking universe has been saying the same thing for 13.8 billion years,” said Bell. “The universe moves forward when people of similar essence and substance bond together. Loneliness is going the wrong direction. Racism is the failure to bond with another of similar essence and substance.

“Progress,” he said, in a nod to Teilhard, “is the soul of the universe.”

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