



“Evolutionary Christianity: Part 3 A Spirituality of Ascent”

This morning I continue the series on the meaning of “evolutionary Christianity”. After a comprehensive congregational visioning process, the congregation will be presented with a Purpose statement at the end of June that reads:

We are an open hearted, open minded community, teaching and practicing evolutionary Christianity.

I begin with a very practical application of this orientation. This week I wrote letter to the editor in the Globe and Mail. It was in response to an ethicist who wrote a column about the recent images that are circulating of early galaxies in the universe, taken by the Hubble telescope. Everybody agrees that they evoke awe, but according to the author, they present us with a terrible conundrum. Given the vastness of the universe that the telescope is uncovering, it makes humans feel like insignificant specks. In such a vast universe, how can we make the claim that our tiny lives have any significance?

This is typical of a certain kind of materialistic view of the universe. The evolutionary process is regarded as a meaningless series of adaptations to changing life conditions. In such a universe, it is very easy to confuse size

with significance. With no interior sacred dimension, span becomes meaningful in itself. (I am grateful to Ken Wilber for this insight).

The more vast, the more significant, the argument goes. How can this tiny planet and our own tiny lives have any real meaning? It drives me crazy. For one thing, those images are beautiful, but friends, we’re looking at the simplest form of life in the universe – balls of gas and relatively inert matter in a relatively disorganized state. If you want to see a miracle, look beside you. There is unspeakable beauty and elegance in his or her eyes. A galaxy pales in comparison. When we look into each others eyes, we’re looking at the very image of significance refined in evolution’s 14 billion year old fire. It’s time to wake up to the radiance of the human presence.

Secondly, the size of the universe is merely a precondition for the emergence of conscious beings that are able to make moral choices – not to simply be, but to ask themselves what they “ought to be”. Bumblebees are amazingly complex creatures, but as far as we know they aren’t flying around asking themselves how they should be pollinating red flowers rather than yellow ones. Life on this

planet, especially conscious life, is like the living, breathing diamond of the universe. It took all that size, all the compression of 14 billion years bearing down on us to arrive at the radiance of this one earth community. How can that be insignificant? It suggests to me sacred intelligence and a sacred heart.

Ok, if you pick up a printed copy of this sermon, you'll find a section on some of the underlying assertions of this evolutionary model. But, as a perk for those who have been listening to all the sermons in this series, I'll spare you the details of this section and get right to the reflection on the reading this morning. If you are reading this sermon as I'm preaching it, as some of you I know are doing, skip now to page 4 under the heading Ascension – or you'll be terribly confused.

The primary reason that this purpose of teaching and practicing evolutionary Christianity works as an end in itself, rather than a means to some other end is that to my knowledge we will be the first congregation to have this as a core identity. We become like an experimental lab for the Christian church. Many congregations in North America are describing themselves as “progressive”, but to my mind “evolutionary” is a more accurate descriptor. It actually describes *what* is progressive about progressive Christianity. This description of reality includes, but is not limited to the following assertions:

- All of reality, at every level evolves from relative simplicity to increasing complexity, by intelligently adapting to new life conditions.
- This evolutionary process is the way God or Spirit works in the created realm – thus rendering reality at all levels a sacred manifestation.
- Every thing and every body is connected. All simpler forms of life are transcended, yet included, in more complex forms. Humans, then, are concentrated amalgams of every thing, every body, and every form of consciousness that has preceded us. We are bio-spiritually kin with creation.
- This evolutionary unfolding then can be understood as the sacred myth or story of our time, grounded in science, yet infused with divine Mystery.
- Religion itself, (including Christianity), is an expression of this the evolutionary impulse, and therefore is always in the process of transcending, yet including, previous expressions of itself.
- This means that it is a built-in feature of Christian spirituality that followers of Christ are future oriented – we keep an eye-out for the “new thing” Spirit is doing *in* our midst, and

through us. Spirit's primary role, then, is not to convict us of the truth of something that God did 2000 years ago, but rather to convict us that we are what God is doing today as we adapt to changing life conditions by drawing upon the sacred evolutionary intelligence of Spirit.

- If the Christian religion refuses to adapt changing life conditions and *become* the new thing God is doing through conscious consent, then this refusal will result in its demise. Positively stated, as we consciously adapt to the challenges before us, we manifest increasing degrees of the fullness and freedom of Spirit – and we manifest the abundant life of Christ.

Ascension

This morning is Ascension Sunday, a festival of the church that celebrates the Ascension of the risen Christ to the right hand of the Father in heaven – to put it in very orthodox language. I want to explore the nature of Christ in an evolutionary model through the lens of this Ascension story. What does it mean, not simply to “believe in Christ”, but to be *in* this ascendant Christ?

To begin, we don't take this story literally. This being the year 2009, an era when science has some important things to tell us about the nature of physical reality: grown men

don't defy the law of gravity and simply lift off the ground and float off into heaven.

In another Ascension reading, which we didn't use this morning, the author of Ephesians talks about Christ being raised up and “seated at the right hand in heavenly places far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come. God has put all thing under his feet and has made him the head over all things”...(Ephesians 1:20-22).

That's quite a vision of Christ – but if it's not to be understood literally, what is the author getting at?

Here's one way to think about it: To be in Christ is to ascend with Christ to a higher, more encompassing perspective from which to see reality. It is to see and imagine reality from the highest possible perspective in order to be able to live more wisely and closer to the heart of God. To be in Christ is to see our own lives and reality itself from 30,000 feet –again, not literally. Think of Christ consciousness as the most comprehensive and always evolving perspective on reality.

Ascension is about the spiritual journey of ascending with Christ to attain ever-more encompassing perspectives that give us the evolutionary intelligence to *see what's next* – for ourselves, for humanity, and for the planet and to *be with* those who have a perspective different from our own. In an evolutionary spirituality,

reality arises *in, through, and as* perspective. The only reality we know is the one that comes into being through the perspectives. Christ, then, can be imagined to be the divine perspective that transcends and includes all perspectives. This was the divine consciousness that was in Jesus of Nazareth.

When I look at the world, I look at it from the eyes of Bruce Sanguin, a middle class, white, heterosexual, male, with graduate level education, raised in a family of six to prairie farmers, working as a minister in the Christian tradition, from an integral level of consciousness. This means that the world I bring into view will always be framed by these perspectives. When I am unaware that my take on reality is informed and limited by these perspectives, then I am likely to confuse this partial take on reality with the one, true, way to see the world. Evolutionary spirituality has a fundamental commitment to become conscious of the primacy of perspective in constructing what we call reality. To become aware of our perspective as a partial take, and not the whole of reality, is to evolve – it is the first step in the divine ascent.

To be in Christ then, is to be open to the highest possible perspective available to us, and then to orient ourselves to the reality that is brought forth by this perspective. Christ, being metaphorically seated at the right hand of God, is the divine consciousness that invites us to see reality always, always, always, through more comprehensive perspectives.

The writer of Ephesians has ascended with Christ, and has gained a perspective on the powers of the world – namely the Roman Empire. If you were alive in the 1st century you would have been embedded in a perspective or worldview which saw Caesar and the Roman Empire as the ultimate authority. The world was *his* footstool. His exercise of power – control of others through military domination – would have been considered as the divine way. But from the perspective of the ascendant Christ – the view from 30,000 feet – Caesar was Christ's subject, not the other way around. Caesar's ways were not God's ways. Caesar's evolution comes to a grinding halt when he confuses his take on reality with God's take. Whenever evolution grinds to a halt in the human realm there is violence of one form or another.

From Position to Perspective

It is a miracle that I can see reality through your eyes, and you can see it through mine. I can see you seeing me and imagine what you are seeing. I can imagine a third person seeing the both of us and then take the perspective of that third person. I can even evolve in my capacity to get your reality from a feeling level – it's called empathy. When we say that God became human in Jesus of Nazareth, we are affirming that Ultimate Reality knows what it means from the inside out to share the human condition – to know joy and sorrow and desire. God emerged in human form to see and experience reality from the perspective

of humans. But in an evolutionary paradigm we extend this to all levels of creation. Creation is God experiencing Godself through the eyes of a frog, the flow of a river, the howl of the wolf, and through each of you. You are a lens on reality for God. You bring a perspective for God that nobody else can bring. Yet God invites you to evolve your perspective.

But why do all this perspective taking as a spiritual practice? Because when we confuse our perspective with the whole of reality things can get nasty. When I refuse to evolve, perspectives freeze into positions. I take my position, and you take your position. Position taking is the confusion of partial reality with the totality of reality. Perspective taking collapses into position taking when this happens.

When I take a position, and I am stronger than you, I impose my will on you and try to prevail. If I am weaker than you, I will try to impose my position on you through more passive strategies. It will always end up in a win-lose predicament. At an interpersonal level, say a marriage, this is bad enough. A leading marital therapist Terrance Real puts it in more colloquial language. He says: "You can be married, or you can be right, but you can't be both." But expand this to the level of nations, religions, or ethnic rivalries and its disastrous. To be in Christ is to transmute positions into perspectives – to reverse our fascination with and attachment to our own position. It's also called humility.

To be in Christ is to ascend with Christ as a *spiritual discipline* until you have gained enough perspective to detach from your position. In the human realm, to increase the number of perspectives you can take is to evolve. To be an evolutionary Christian is to cultivate perspective and to appreciate different perspectives. The more perspectives the closer we are to the divine heart and mind. It is not to assume that all perspectives are equal – in fact, some are more helpful and some are less helpful than others. But it is to assume that all are valid.

Another name for this practice is reflection. I experience my life, and then I draw back from it (or take an ascendant position and rise above it) and reflect on it objectively. The moment I take an objective look at my life, I have already evolved. Can you see that? By reflecting upon my experience, I gain perspective, and this perspective-taking renders who I thought I was partial. The moment you gain perspective, your identity expands. By reflecting on my life, what I call "myself" turns out to be just a temporary station in life. As this becomes a practice, you begin to hold yourself a little more lightly, take yourself a little less seriously, become more curious about rather than committed to your position, because who you are today will be transcended, but included, in who you are tomorrow.

That's when it starts to get interesting. You start to think that maybe who you are essentially is not all the roles you play. You begin to intuit

that social and cultural definitions of “Bruce” or “Mary” are real but partial, important, but limited. Perhaps your deeper identity revolves around the consciousness that enjoys the capacity to take ever-enlarged perspectives. Maybe you are this evolutionary consciousness. And as you begin to make this a life practice, you gain what Genpo Roshi calls Big Mind and Big Heart. In our tradition, we call it the heart and mind of Christ. Whatever you call it, you end up getting glimpses of what it’s like to be seated with Christ at the right hand of God, heart full of love and compassion for all that

is, and passionately willing to descend with Christ back into the world of position taking to do what you can about all the suffering that this is causing.

So whenever you read in Scripture about God or Christ being “high and lifted up” try not to think geography. Try to think in terms of divine perspective. This living Christ who is seated on the right hand of God is at work in every moment lifting us up – like a mother eagle lifts her eaglet – to help us see our lives and our world from new heights.