

## Ian Lawton

### “An Inclusive Faith for the ‘Spiritual But Not Religious’”

Episode 11 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

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**Ian Lawton** is executive minister at C3 Exchange in Michigan, a church that made national headlines in 2010 for its controversial decision to remove the cross from their grounds. Ordained as an Anglican Priest, Ian’s work on the inner city streets of Sydney inspired him to take up the mantle of creating a more inclusive and inspirational Christianity. Still evolving in his faith walk, Ian considers himself a “spiritual naturalist.”

#### HIGHLIGHTS

The unique thread of this interview is Ian Lawton’s “**impatient zeal for authenticity.**” Accordingly, the speaker forthrightly **criticizes “supernatural” religious claims**, preferring fully **naturalized and scientifically aligned ways** of obtaining the same **emotional gifts and community bonding** as Christian faith and worship have traditionally produced—including emotional states of **wonder, gratitude, trust, and compassion**, as well as **a drive to serve humanity and the larger body of life.**

Because the congregation he serves is now intentionally “**inclusive,**” Lawton talks about styles of communication that are essential for bringing together a mix of **liberal Christians, humanists, atheists, Buddhists, and “the spiritual but not religious.”** Notably, “direct spiritual experiences” should be communicated to others in terms of the actual experiences themselves (outer events and inner sensations)—without interweaving interpretations and causal assumptions that fellow listeners may not share.

#### SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

Because this dialogue relates a minister’s journey that has taken him personally and professionally beyond narrowly defined Christianity (including removal of the cross on the church grounds), this episode is best suited for discussion or classroom settings that are theologically liberal, spiritually eclectic, secular, or of wide-ranging worldviews. Seminarians and students of theology of any faith perspective, however, may be well served by exposure to this degree of ‘inclusive’ thinking and practice and Lawton’s sense of why “spiritual” young

people are bypassing church altogether. His “impatient zeal for authenticity” makes this dialogue a superb platform for encouraging listeners/readers to risk greater self-expression in the context of your own group’s modes of communication. This is also a bridge-building dialogue for groups that may benefit from Lawton’s own experience in crafting communication styles that permit the universality of depth experiences to be safely conveyed and reflected upon in theologically and philosophically diverse settings.

## **BLOG COMMENTS**

### **Nicole says:**

It was interesting to hear Ian’s perspective on this topic of spirituality after having gone over a similar lesson with my students in a religion class that I teach. It was ironic that even in *Grade 10*, these children were able to refer to themselves also as “spiritual but not religious,” as Lawton describes. When asking the class to elaborate on this notion of spirituality and religion being separate, I got some responses along the following lines: (1) I don’t need a church to form my relationship with God; (2) Spirituality is more important than religion; (3) I don’t like going to mass; (4) Spirituality is not limited to Catholicism.

It is clear that Ian’s reference to churches “building walls” is similar to the perspective that these adolescents have—likely influenced by the media, their experiences, or their families.

It is great to see that diversity and inclusivity can exist in a church—and especially important to remind our youth this!

### **Gary says:**

Ah, it’s great to hear an Aussie voice on here! And having experienced much of the Australian Christian/spiritual landscape, I can totally understand Ian’s pessimism regarding the number of progressives there within the realm of Christianity. I wrote an email to a local minister yesterday lamenting the fact that I have looked broadly to find a spiritual home and the only options I can find are with Buddhists. Not that there’s anything wrong with that; it’s just that I do not want to ground myself too deeply in a non-progressive tradition. As such, I feel very lonely in my convictions—in fact, very lonely in the world.

On the one hand, I am rejoicing over these conversations, which are awakening and inspiring a new vision for my faith; on the other, I am saddened that I have no others to share this with.

## **KEYWORD TOPICS**

**authenticity, Anglican, Calvinism, inclusive faith, the cross, John Shelby Spong, “spiritual but not religious,” trust, *The Truman Show* (film), wonder, gratitude, direct experience,**

**naturalism** (v. supernaturalism), **spiritual naturalism**, **Christian naturalism**, **religious naturalism**, **spiritual atheism**, “**pre-natural**” **beliefs** (before scientific explanations became available), **intellectual integrity**, **facts v. interpretations** (importance of distinguishing), **God language**, **plate tectonics**, **Progressive Christianity**, **secularism** (as growing in America), **greening of faith**, **Earth Day**, **core values**, **ecology** (as a core value), **inquiry** (as a core value), **atheists and freethinkers** (as part of inclusive community), **church calendar** (around core values), **action projects** (undertaken by churches), **social justice**, **God** (not as a being but *becoming*), **death** (naturalistic understanding of)

## BIOGRAPHY

**Ian Lawton** was ordained as an Anglican Priest in Sydney, Australia, in 1994. He worked on Sydney’s inner city streets and saw the reality of human suffering firsthand and sought a spirituality that made a difference in people’s lives. He went on to complete a second degree in sociology.

In 2000 Lawton moved to Auckland, New Zealand, where he became the vicar of St. Matthew in the City. He had four great years at St. Matthews—a never-dull, gothic, white stone building in the shadows of the towering casino. His world opened up during those years, as he was exposed to Maori language and culture and mixed with a stimulating community. Bishop John Shelby Spong then convinced Ian to move his family to Grand Rapids, Michigan, to lead C3Exchange (formerly Christ Community Church), where he now lives with his wife Meg and three children. The years at C3 Exchange have been transformative, as Lawton incorporated Zen training as well as Ken Wilber’s Integral theory into his spiritual path. The C3 community models what a new, inclusive spiritual community could be.

As well as leading C3Exchange, Ian offers spiritual teachings through <http://www.soulseeds.com/about/>, which is intended to inspire and encourage both religious and nonreligious people in all stages of life. His blog: <http://ianwlawton.blogspot.com/>.

## SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEOS

Sermon-length video of 3/21/10, where Lawton speaks to his congregation on why the church will be removing the cross: <http://www.c3exchange.org/archive/the-cross-and-your-true-colors/>

All C3 Exchange sermons are available online in streaming video format:

<http://www.c3exchange.org/learn/sermons/>

## SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found, and new ones posted, at the following url:

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/ian-lawton-inclusive-faith-for-the-spiritual-but-not-religious/>

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **When the cross was taken down.** Ian Lawton tells the story of how, in 2010, he and his congregation, inspired to become more “inclusive,” decided it was time to change their church name from “Christ Community Church” and also to take down the giant cross on the church grounds. Ian recalls,

When I arrived, the community was ready and said to me, **“We want to take the next step. What comes next? We’re now accepting of people of all sexualities; we’re open to lots of different paths to God; we’re willing to embrace science and new discovery. So tell us what’s comes next and help us to take that step in that journey.”**

And that’s exactly what we’ve done. It hasn’t been easy and there have been some hiccups along the way. There have been some mistakes; I’ve made some mistakes; we’ve all made some mistakes, but basically, the seven years has seen us take those steps. What that led to in the last two years: we looked at each other and said, **“We are more diverse than the name Christ Community Church. That just doesn’t capture the spirit of who we’ve become.”** We also discovered that there were people who said to us, “Look, I just couldn’t go to a church with that name. It just sounds so traditional and churchy.” We also have a very large cross at the front of the building, and we had feedback from people saying, **“Look, if you just took that down, I would actually feel a lot more comfortable to attend.”** So in a fairly lengthy community-wide conversation, we decided to change the name and take that cross down, and we did that in May and June of this year, 2010.

**It was the cross that was more controversial than the name**, as it turned out. When the cross came down, we had people waiting there to record it, and there were photos going all around on the Internet. I got the call from Fox News, and went on Fox in Chicago. By the time I had driven home, three hours later, I already had **mail flooding into my email box—a lot of very negative mail from conservative Christians who started accusing me of being the Anti-Christ** and all sorts of awful things. So, definitely, it caused a stir—**but it’s been a really positive move for our community.** We’ve drawn closer together; there’s a greater sense of belonging; we’ve had a lot of new people join who never thought they would go to church. Overall, it’s been really positive.

**Question 1:** *Imagine that you had been living in Ian Lawton’s community in Michigan and going to a different church in town (or none at all, depending on your worldview) when the cross was taken down. Now imagine that someone you cared about told you that they personally were upset by that event: How might you have responded? Alternatively, what if someone you cared about told you that they were thrilled about that event, and might start going to that church: What might your response have been?*

2. **‘Walls’ within a religion.** Ian Lawton talks about the problems of ‘walls’ built up between and within faiths. He says,

It’s one thing to have a tradition or certain familiar stories that ground you in your spiritual path, but it’s another thing to build walls. I think a lot of the harm that has been done in the world, looking

back through history, has been **the walls that have been put up between religions and then for individuals within their religion**: there's this massive wall that they're not allowed to cross.

**Question 2A:** *In your own faith or worldview journey, **have you experienced a “wall”** that you felt was painfully restrictive, yet you knew (or thought) that crossing it risked distancing you from a group of people or a community that was still very important to you? If so, what was that “wall” and how did you negotiate the mismatch between your inner and outer worlds? If not, recall a “wall” that you did, in fact, cross (perhaps in the process of growing up) that you had no hesitations about crossing: what were the consequences of making that crossing?*

**Question 2B:** *Human instincts don't steer us toward living our lives as individuals in a vast sea of other humans, with no distinctions between strangers and degrees of bonded relationships. If not “walls,” what **“circles of identification”** are important in your life for distinguishing with whom you are willing to trust? What role do churches and other faith institutions play in helping individuals establish communities of trust? Under what circumstances might an institution go too far in providing genuine community—that is, becoming too exclusionary?*

**Question 2C:** *Prior to legal contracts, it made sense to prefer **doing business** with whomever one regarded as one's **“in-group.”** When you need to purchase or contract for professional services, is one factor for making that choice what you know (or think you know) about a person's faith or worldview?*

3. **Wonder and gratitude—beyond belief.** Ian Lawton says,

I think what happens is, when we **give people permission to venture beyond the comfort zone**, to venture beyond the self-imposed limitations of many of the traditions, that it leads to a sense of **wonder and gratitude in the nature of life and the beauty of the universe**—that people feared they wouldn't have if they moved away from a particular belief.

**Question 3:** *To what extent (if at all) have you discovered **wonder and gratitude** by moving beyond what you had thought was your comfort zone in matters of faith or worldview?*

4. **Direct experience of ultimacy.** Ian Lawton speaks of the importance of direct experience in this way,

One of my main objectives in community is to give people **the freedom to have a direct, firsthand experience of what they may call God, or the Universe, or beauty**—whatever different language is put on it—to have a direct experience of it. **Science** has opened up so much of that direct experience of beauty and wonder. No matter how you describe the origins of the universe, you can have a direct experience of it—and it's a beautiful thing. So for me, our community, C3, is all about moving those walls. That they're not brick walls, and we don't pretend that it's not safe on the other side. It's safe; there is nothing to be protected, and it's alright to venture outside.

**Question 4A:** *From your own life experience, how important for you is **direct experience of Reality, the Universe, God, beauty** — whatever you wish to call it?*

**Question 4B:** *Where do you typically go for “direct, firsthand experience” of such ultimacy?*

5. **Communicating direct experience to others: dos and don'ts.** Ian Lawton and Michael Dowd talk about how troubles in communication can happen when one person is sharing “direct, first-hand experience” but weaves causative explanations into their stories that may conflict with the worldviews of other listeners. He gives the example of a woman who took a terrible fall but was unhurt, but who told her story in a way in which she mixed the direct experience with her explanatory system. By her saying that “the hand of God reached down” and protected her, she interfered with the ability of others to hear the universal experience of gratitude in her story. Michael Dowd responds by agreeing how important it is to **separate facts from interpretations**. He says,

If we don't distinguish those, we collapse them. We then think that our *story* or our *interpretation* is the *fact*—or is the *experience* itself. **Being able to make those distinctions is actually one of the most empowering things that anyone can do in their life.**

Ian then says,

We put a sign out in front of our church recently. It said, “**You're entitled to your own opinions, but not your own facts.**” I think there's some truth to that. You know, **your experience is your experience. Tell it as it was for you; that's not open to debate. That's your experience. But don't put facts around it as if it has now become the truth**, because once you've done that, then that means everyone else has to have the same experience.

**Question 5:** *To what extent do you take care in communicating with others **the distinction between your own interpretations and the basic facts**? Can you recall, in general, how a difficult situation becomes even more difficult when one or both parties assume that their interpretation or story is a fact — and that someone else's interpretation is simply wrong? What about when there is disagreement about the salient facts? Overall, does your own experience match what Michael and Ian both seem to be saying in this dialogue? Or have you found a perspective or a process that works better for you? Please elaborate.*

6. **Theologians and church leaders should be “accountable to current scientific understanding.”** Ian Lawton says,

We should also expect theologians and our church leaders to be accountable to what is current scientific understanding. In other words, we shouldn't be surprised that in centuries past, religions built worldviews around, let's say, pre-scientific ideas. That's not surprising. But **once science has revealed something to us, you have to take it on board—and it doesn't have to be a negative thing.**

So I want to say to my people again and again to **embrace all that science has given us and incorporate that into your worldview.** When you do that, what you'll discover is there's not *less* mystery, there's not less wonder, and there's not less **gratitude**—there's more! It doesn't have to take away from what in the past has been really significant religious experience. It actually enhances and **increases your religious experience.**

**Question 6:** *What comes up for you in hearing Ian Lawton advocate this perspective?*

7. **The emotional downside of loss of belief.** Ian Lawton talks about counseling a spiritual seeker who longs for the “contentment” that their deeply Christian friends seem to have. Ian recalls,

I had a conversation with a young guy just yesterday, actually. This guy would have been about 21 and he was struggling a bit. His question to me was, when he mixed with his more Christian friends, or more traditional friends, **they have a contentment about who they are and what their worldview is that he envied a little bit**—and he wanted some of that.

**Question 7A:** *Is it fair and responsible for someone (especially someone in a position of authority) to encourage others to shed their “pre-scientific” beliefs, without attending to if and how that shift might actually make them less contented and secure? Why or why not?*

**Question 7B:** *In your own faith/worldview journey, do you recall a time when giving something up left you with **an emotional gap**? How long (if at all) did it take for that gap to be repaired?*

**Question 7C:** *Where (if at all) does a science-based evolutionary worldview give you feeling-states that humans have always needed to thrive, such as **trust, gratitude, and inspiration**?*

**Question 7D:** *Where (if at all) are you holding back from making a shift in your beliefs or worldview, for fear of **losing something important**, perhaps even precious in your life?*

8. **What is a naturalist / spiritual naturalist?** In several places in this dialogue, Ian Lawton identifies himself as a “naturalist.” He says,

I can speak from both camps. I’ve been a religious, conservative person—and I’ve come through that. I’m now a **naturalist**. For me, I have every bit as much **passion and zeal** for life, every bit as much drive to live with **integrity**, every bit as much **wonder** in so much of the beauty of life as I had when I was a supernaturally oriented religious person. In fact, I have more.

So for me, I can give a personal testimony that **being a naturalist doesn’t make me less ethical, it doesn’t make me less curious, it doesn’t make me any less surprised by life**. In fact, it enhances all those things.

Later in the dialogue he says,

When I say I’m a **naturalist**, that’s describing something more intellectual or cognitive about my worldview. In other words, **I no longer need supernatural explanations** to describe most of my experiences of life. **I’m comfortable with mystery, I’m comfortable with wonder, but I don’t need to go that step to supernatural explanations**. That’s clear. But then there’s something I want to add to that, and I am calling that—for me it’s like a **spiritual naturalist**. But I understand also when people use the label **religious naturalist**; it’s like adding an adjective to it. It’s like I want a quality to that cognitive experience that gives depth to my life. In other words, **I want to have intellectual integrity, but I also want to have a depth of experience**.

In the community blog page associated with this dialogue, someone asked Ian “What is a naturalist?” Ian responded on that blogpage, saying,



**Spiritual naturalists and spiritual atheists** are, generally speaking, **people who appreciate the mysterious unity of life without feeling the need to call on supernatural explanations** or “God language” to describe the experience. **Richard Dawkins** hinted at this with his phrase, “appetite for wonder.” We have a **human longing to be part of something larger than ourselves**. Nature offers this. Moments of synchronicity and serendipity offer this. Being part of causes and movements offers this. And so much more. I hope that helps, or at least keeps the conversation going. I’m curious to know if others define spiritual naturalism in other ways or have other experiences to share.

**Question 8A:** *What comes up for you when you hear Reverend Lawton talking about being a ‘naturalist’ or a ‘spiritual naturalist’? Would you be attracted to attend a church or spiritual community led by someone who shares Ian Lawton’s faith perspective? Would a naturalist or spiritual naturalist be **welcome in your own faith** or worldview community?*

**Question 8B:** *Have you encountered anyone in your life who seems to hold **no supernatural beliefs**, yet who self-identifies as being filled with gratitude and wonder, and perhaps other emotional states that are usually associated with supernatural beliefs? What sense do you make of that worldview?*

**Question 8C:** *Can someone be a “**person of faith**” and yet hold no supernatural beliefs? Please elaborate.*

9. **Natural, supernatural, and pre-natural.** What Ian Lawton calls “supernatural,” Michael Dowd calls “pre-natural.” **Dowd** explains,

All religions, all cultures have had maps of *what’s real* and *what’s important*. And they’ve used **language that sounds supernatural** if you interpret it literally. But it’s actually *pre-natural*. I mean, if you asked, say, 100 years ago or 300 years ago or 1000 years ago, “How did the Atlantic Ocean get formed?” you would have gotten some so-called ‘supernatural’ story about how it happened. Of course, all different cultures would have different stories about how that happened, how God did it or the Goddess did it—and if it was spoken into existence or it was carved or whatever. But until we could have a **measurable understanding** that we didn’t have until the mid 1960s, in terms of plate tectonics—until we had that measurable understanding, you would have had **some meaningful story that helped explain it in a way that was emotionally satisfying**. But it wouldn’t have been literally true. Yet those stories get called supernatural, but they’re actually **pre-natural**—before we could have possibly had a natural understanding.

**Question 10A:** *What comes up for you **when you hear the word “supernatural”**? Do you hold any beliefs that you (or others) would consider “supernatural”? If so, please share what they are and why are they important to you.*

**Question 10B:** *Did you find Michael Dowd’s distinction between “supernatural” and “**pre-natural**” to be useful? Why or why not?*

10. **“Christian naturalism.”** Michael Dowd shares with Ian Lawton a commitment to “naturalism.” Michael talks about something he calls “Christian naturalism.” He says,



Within Christianity, one of the things that has amazed me is how many Christians there are who still identify rather strongly with the tradition, in that they really value some of the language, the poetry, they value the scriptures, they value some of the rituals or the creeds or the holidays and that sort of thing, **but they interpret it in a naturalistic way.** In other words, they don't interpret the supernatural-sounding language in a literal way. So they would consider themselves **Christian naturalists**, or in the same way that there's a difference between fundamentalist Jews and cultural Jews, or secular Jews. I wasn't aware of how many there were who perhaps don't use the language of "**cultural Christian**" or "**secular Christian**," but they are Christians in pretty much all ways other than the fact that they don't interpret the supernatural language literally.

**Question 10:** *Is there room in Christianity for self-identified "Christian naturalists"? If these people value the liturgy and the stories and the "poetry" that is traditionally spoken in Christian churches—but not the beliefs expressed in the creeds—would you feel **comfortable considering them Christians**? Or would you prefer that they do as Ian Lawton has done—that they "take down the cross" and cease referring to themselves as Christian?*

11. **The attraction of "spiritual but not religious" for youth.** Ian Lawton talks about the difficulties for liberal Christian churches in attracting and holding onto youth. He says,

I think what's happening with **a lot of young people is that they're bypassing the church** all together. They're growing up with parents who are opening up their perspectives and thinking more broadly, and then the kids are just skipping right past, what we might call, "**Progressive Christianity**," or "Open Christianity." They're heading straight into the open fields of "**spiritual but not religious**" or "**inclusive spiritual**" or **no faith**, but taking a little bit from everywhere. That's the largest trend, as far as I can see.

For the Christian Church, for the progressive branches of the Christian Church, there's going to be a challenge. You have to be very creative to convince that very large group people that it's worth coming back in and checking this out—because it's no longer a literalistic, and it's no longer archaic and pre-scientific and all of those things. So I'm not quite as enthusiastic as you are about the numbers, but I think I agree with you that there is that edge there of the Christian faith that is exploring some new territory that is interesting and timely.

**Question 11:** *If Ian Lawton is correct about his perception of trends among young people, do you think it is a good thing or a bad thing that so many **young people are "by-passing the church"**? Please discuss.*

12. **Inquiry and Ecology as core values.** Ian Lawton talks about how their church community no longer uses the traditional church calendar (Lent, Advent, etc.) but structures the year around "core values." Two core values that he mentions in this conversation are *inquiry* and *ecology*.

**Question 12A:** *Are **inquiry** and **ecology** values that you would like to see emphasized more in church settings?*

**Question 12B:** *What **core values** do you wish that evolving faith communities would give more attention to?*

**Question 12C:** *What core values that are **traditionally** honored in Christian liturgies, sermons, and homilies would you recommend retain a strong presence?*

13. **God as becoming—not being.** Near the end of the dialogue Ian Lawton presents his **naturalistic** perspective on some key theological topics. He says,

**One of the problems in the Christian theology has been that we've taught people that while everything around them changes, there is one thing they can be sure of. And that is: God doesn't change.** God the Creator was the creator, and you have a certain afterlife to look forward to. I think we should be teaching people that **God is not so much a being, but God is becoming.** That brings us right back to an evolutionary perspective: God is always becoming. God is change itself. If we can come to peace with *change*, then we can **come to peace with death.** And if we can accept, and encourage our people to accept, that it's alright to have an open worldview. It's alright to change your mind, and it's alright to grow. **It's alright to evolve**—you should expect that. You should *expect* that your understanding now will be different from your understanding in a year or in five years' time. We should *expect* that the church had a different understanding 100 years ago or 200 years ago.

So for me, the exciting thing about being in an **inclusive community** is that we can help each other to **be prepared for change—and thereby death**, as well. And by coming to terms with change, we also allow our ideas and our worldview to grow, as well. So, I do think there's a challenge there for liberal and **progressive Christianity** to just give a little bit more clarity around some of those ambiguous issues.

**Question 14A:** *Overall, where are you most in alignment with Ian Lawton's theological perspectives? Where are you least in alignment?*

**Question 14B:** *If the ideas in this particular dialogue were a stretch for you, are you grateful for the stretch? How so, or where not?*

14. **“An impatient zeal for authenticity.”** Early in this interview, Ian Lawton speaks of his “impatient zeal for authenticity,” which carries on through his entire interview. He says,

Well, it all began for me in **Sydney, Australia**—which is a very conservative religious climate. From there, I've come a long way, both geographically but also personally. And I guess the common thing for me is that **I have an impatient zeal for authenticity—and I have a very hard time working within the context or settings that don't allow me to be fully myself.**

**Question 14A:** *Was there anywhere in this dialogue where Ian Lawton's “zeal for authenticity” in his spiritual perspective showed up as a statement that **troubled you in some way**? This question is not about where you may genuinely and forthrightly disagree with him, but about where his statements or stories caused you a degree of confusion or distress as to the strength and authenticity of your own beliefs and values. If so, what was it? If not, which idea expressed in this dialogue made the greatest impression on you—positively or negatively?*

**Question 14B:** *In what contexts do you **feel safe**, even encouraged, to be fully who you are and to express what you truly believe and value? To what extent have you experienced an up-side and/or a down-side when you have made the effort to be more authentic?*

**Question 14C:** *Where, if anywhere, do you **feel held back** from authentic self-expression of your beliefs and/or doubts? What about authentic expression of your core values and priorities? And what effect does that have on you and your relationship(s) in those contexts of **limited authenticity**?*

**Question 14D:** *Can you recall an instance in your own life when **an authority figure or mentor** expressed beliefs, doubts, or other opinions to you that were out of step with what you thought they believed—or with what you expected them to believe? And what effect did that have on you? Did it confuse you—or encourage you? Did it cause you to admire them more, or think the lesser of them? Note: If you cannot recall an actual incident in your life, consider whether you encountered an author who’s “authenticity” surprised you or perhaps a public figure you admired.*

**Question 14E:** *In what contexts of your own life might **you choose to make a deliberate effort to show up with a greater degree of authenticity**?*

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