

## Tom Thresher

### “Reverent Irreverence and Integral Faith”

Episode 14 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com

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**Tom Thresher** is the pastor of a UCC church in western Washington state, USA, with a central focus on exploring how to manifest an Integral approach in all that they do. He is the author of *Reverent Irreverence: Integral Church for the 21st Century, From Cradle to Christ-Consciousness*, where the practical benefits of applying an Integral perspective in Christian settings are explored.

#### HIGHLIGHTS

“Reverent irreverence” is a central focus of Tom Thresher’s **evolutionary** and **Integral** ministry. He finds that **innovation is easiest to evoke in “safe” environments** — and that a **playful** and humble approach in **church ministry and process** helps participants feel safe enough to risk making mistakes when trying something new. Specific examples of how **the “transcend and include” framework of an Integral stage of Christianity manifests in an actual church** setting are highlights of this dialogue. One such Integral Christian practice is attempting to see **how Jesus saw**—that is, **nondual awareness**. Another Integral practice has made it possible for this liberal congregation to **reinstate the singing of traditional hymns** that other progressive churches typically shun (because of literalistic language or warrior-God imagery). The **Integral** perspective is also explored in **how it can serve individuals in their everyday lives**: fostering **gratitude, hope, and trust**—as well as helping them welcome rather than resist phases of regression to earlier developmental stages when the **challenges of life** call forth those stages.

#### SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

This episode is especially recommended for audiences in which Integral philosophy and Integral church are central concerns. It is also superb for church leaders in liberal Christian contexts who might be surprised to learn that reincorporating more tradition may actually be a progressive way forward. Because this dialogue steers clear of academic theology and is very conversational (even playful), it could easily be assimilated by moderate-to-liberal Christian

youth. Note: For groups unacquainted with Integral theory, it might be best to first use episode 4 in this series, with Ross Hostetter, which is titled “Integral Christian Spirituality.” Because Hostetter was the first guest to focus on Integral forms of Christianity, the host ensured that this new worldview was adequately introduced.

## BLOG COMMENTS

### Kevin Reid says:

I feel like a kid on Christmas morning anxious to unwrap more of these “conversational gifts” to see what other delightful surprises await. Tom's dialogue was indeed a “big” one. I especially enjoyed hearing how he and his church now include notations for hymns to honor and embrace their place within the evolutionary development of the Christian tradition.

### Peggy Dunn says:

Tom Thresher is one of the new voices for me in this series. I have ordered his book, *Irreverent Reverence* and look forward to using it, along with Bruce Sanguin's *If Darwin Prayed*, as I pastor a small congregation in a small community I think is ready for the insights of an evolutionary theological view—and I am so ready to come out of the closet and preach this stuff, to get it out into the life of the community, rather than just studying it as part of my own journey.

## KEYWORD TOPICS

**Integral philosophy, Integral Christianity, Integral Church, psychology, philosophy, economics, Ken Wilber, levels of development, “1-2-3 of God”, map of reality, evolving church, Brian Swimme, Ian Lawton, Bruce Sanguin, safety** (in spiritual growth), **playfulness** (importance of in congregational innovation), **Robert Kegan, shadow work, personal transformation, nondual awareness** (as “mind of Christ”), **mystical traditions** (of all faiths), **divinity** (at the core of our being), **Francis of Assisi, Meister Eckhart, Jesus** (nondual awareness of), **evil** (as seen through the “mind of Christ”), **emergence, Spiral Dynamics** (as a system for classifying the developmental sequence of human values), **stages of faith development** (magical, traditional, modern, postmodern, integral, numinous), **evolutionary emergence, trust, evolutionary perspective** (for building trust), **deep time, Buddha, Barbara Marx Hubbard, Jesus as an archetype** (of what humanity is growing into)

## BIOGRAPHY

**Tom Thresher** is the pastor of a UCC church in western Washington state with a central focus on exploring how to manifest an Integral approach in all aspects of the church experience. Long a student of consciousness and spirituality, his exploration was inspired by eight years of

intensive transformational work in a small group setting nearly 40 years ago. Ironically, that experience led him into economics. After completing a Masters in Economics and a Doctorate in Education at Stanford University, he taught economics for a decade.

Following a personal crisis, Thresher left college teaching and worked for twelve years as an artist/craftsman. Over the years he studied and worked with a Native American shaman, explored Zen and Yoga, and developed his own westernized spiritual practices. A series of extraordinary events led him to seminary in 1998. He is now an ordained minister and spiritual teacher in the emerging field of Evolutionary Christianity. He has studied and taught Integral Theory for fifteen years.

In addition to pastoring, Thresher teaches Leadership and Personal Development at Bainbridge Graduate Institute, an MBA program in sustainable business. For the past eight years he has led groups exploring the interface of religion, spirituality, and science. He continues to develop and lead workshops in Transformational Inquiry and Integral philosophy. He is the author of *Reverent Irreverence: Integral Church for the 21st Century—From Cradle to Christ-Consciousness*. Here, the practical applications of applying the distinguishing feature of an Integral perspective—“transcend and include”—in Christian settings are explored.

Tom Thresher’s website is: <http://www.reverentirreverence.org/>

## SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

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

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/tom-thresher-integral-pastoral-ministry/>

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **“Reverent irreverence” and the importance of play.** Tom Thresher talks about the role of “play” in the congregation he leads and also how he himself uses play for nurturing the courage and humility to try out new approaches to doing church — without having fear of failure get in the way. Tom says,

I titled my book *“Reverent Irreverence”* because of the importance of **playfulness**. One of the things that we really pay attention to—and **I’m the lead clown**—is trying not to take ourselves very seriously. With a culture that is comfortable making fun of itself and playing, **there’s tremendous permission to try on new things**, to take on a little bit of an adventure. As this permeates a culture, and as individuals see other folks **taking risks and being loved and held**, it really does create a dynamic culture.

**Question 1:** *This dialogue is unique in this series in stressing the importance of play for exploring new ideas in a safe, congregational setting. Where (if at all) have you experienced the **benefits of play in an adult group setting**? And where, if at all, have you experienced situations in which group innovation with play seemed out of place, made you feel*

**uncomfortable**, or in any other way diminished your experience? Overall, do you lean more toward welcoming play or preferring more serious forms of group experience? And why?

2. **The Internet and a return to orality.** Anyone born before 1980 or so has significant learning and leisure experiences on both sides of the great technological divide: the birth and blossoming of the Internet. In a very real sense, the **Internet** has made it possible for modern cultures to rejuvenate forms of teaching and learning that are actually more compatible with our **Stone Age minds and emotions** than is the written word. **Orality** as a mode for teaching and learning has been revitalized (in audio and video formats), thanks to the Internet.

**Question 2A:** How important was it for you to **listen to the tone** of this conversation, in contrast to simply reading the transcript? Overall, what are the circumstances for which you prefer pre-recorded orality rather than written text? Alternatively, under what circumstances is the written mode of communication still your preferred way of learning?

**Question 2B:** In general, what has been your experience passing into this digital era? What aspects are you most **grateful** for? And where, if at all, did or do you experience **confusion, frustration**, or any other uncomfortable emotion?

**Question 2C:** Reports abound about youth raised in this era of the Internet who find it difficult to muster the **focus and the patience** to read, in full, even a single book. What is gained and what is lost by this large-scale shift to the Internet, which might be likened to a shift from rigorous literacy to globe-spanning orality and communications multitasking?

3. **Tolerance of “magical” thinking in and beyond Christianity.** Tom Thresher rejected the supernatural claims of Christianity as a child and continuing into his career in academia. He now swims in what is called the **Integral perspective**. Yet he credits what Integralists would call “magical” thinking as playing a central role in his unusual call to ministry.

**Question 3A:** How did you respond to hearing Tom’s story of his call to ministry? Did your initial judgment or assessment shift once you moved further into the interview? How so, or why not?

**Question 3B:** What has been your experience of **divergent levels of tolerance among theologically liberal Christians**, when it comes to magical / supernatural / otherworldly interpretations of past events and theology? Specifically, have the magical elements of the Christian story (e.g., virgin birth, bodily resurrection, transubstantiation, heaven & hell) been jettisoned from conversation and church practice, while magical elements of non-Christian traditions and experience are tolerated, even respected? Some find this problematic. Do you? Why or why not?

**Question 3C:** Overall, **what is your response** to supernatural interpretations of Christianity? And what is your response to the supernatural interpretations of other-than-Christian worldviews?

**Question 3D:** *How would a congregation steeped in **Integral philosophy** likely deal with the presence of **mythic-magical Christian or other-than-Christian thinking** within its church membership?*

4. **The Integral perspective as a map of reality.** Michael Dowd interviews a half-dozen Christian leaders in this series who are nourished by the Integral perspective, for which popular philosopher and author **Ken Wilber** is widely cited. This particular conversation pauses only briefly to provide some background on it. Tom Thresher remarks, “The Integral perspective is a **great map of reality, but it really doesn’t have any substance to it**” —to which Michael Dowd appends,

It should be noted, for those who aren’t familiar with the Integral map, with Integral philosophy, that this is **both a developmental and an evolutionary map**. That is, it is an attempt to take in all of human knowledge and various paths, and to make sense of it, by having a map so you can see how different disciplines, different states of consciousness, or different developmental trajectories relate to each other.

**Question 4A:** *Where (if at all) are you confused by what is meant by “Integral” thinking and philosophy?*

**Question 4B:** *What do you think Tom Thresher means when he says that Integral philosophy is “a great map of reality, but it really doesn’t have any substance to it”?*

5. **“Something greater than you is in charge.”** Tom Thresher talks about his journey into ministry as presenting him with the understanding that “Tom, something greater than you is in charge.” **Michael Dowd** agrees, saying,

Having pastored three churches myself over the course of a decade, the sense that there is some larger reality to which I am accountable—that it’s not all up to me. I think that is an important mindset for ministers—whether they use religious or secular language to talk about that larger reality, whether they’re comfortable using traditional God understandings, or other more contemporary metaphors and language for ultimate reality.

**Question 5A:** *What terminology do you personally prefer when speaking of this sense of humility in the presence of immense challenges or the incomprehensible vastness of space and time?*

**Question 5B:** *What circumstances (if any) most typically call forth this sense of “something greater than you” being in charge? Also, recall a time when you tried and failed to fix a major life problem, or when no acceptable solutions came to mind: Did you ever find that **letting go** and trusting ‘reality-as-it-really-is’ was helpful—even salvific? Please share your experience.*

6. **The expansiveness of a faith turn toward evolution.** Tom Thresher talks about how a decidedly *evolutionary* form of Christian faith has been growing in his congregation. He says,

For a substantial portion of the congregation, this evolutionary orientation is a pivotal part of their theology. What I've watched over the years, with a lot of individuals, is this expansiveness, this **willingness to move beyond their traditional worldview without having to jettison it.**

*Michael Dowd recalls that his transition from a non-evolutionary to an evolutionary form of Christianity was "expansive." He recalls:*

I often get asked the question, how did you go from being an anti-evolutionary fundamentalist to being an evolutionary evangelist? Was it a hard break? Was it a difficult thing? My honest response is, "No, it wasn't difficult at all." It was a step-by-step emergence. It was an emerging of a more expansive way of holding my Christian faith. **I never felt I was giving up something.** I never felt like I needed to let go of or surrender or say goodbye to or grieve the death of, or any of those metaphors that are often used. None of that was my experience. It was just an emerging into a **more expansive** way, a more evolutionary and ecological way, of holding my Christian faith.

**Question 6:** *To the extent that you have integrated a scientific and evolutionary understanding of nature into your faith or worldview, have you felt more **the sadness of loss or the exhilaration of expansion** (or both)? Please elaborate.*

7. **Creating a "safe" church environment integrating evolution.** Tom Thresher characterizes his and his congregation's commitment to providing a safe environment for people to shift toward an integration of faith and reason. He says,

We have a hundred or so folks here saying, How do we create a **culture safe enough** and accepting enough and open enough **so that individuals can make the transition** you're talking about? How can we include this broader perspective in a way that is profoundly safe and that is willing to hold the space for as long as individuals need to integrate these different views?

**Question 7A:** *Have you experienced this kind of safe environment for making faith transitions at your own pace? How so, or how not?*

**Question 7B:** *In your own experience, is it possible to **invite growth and at the same time provide safe harbor** for those who choose to remain where they are?*

**Question 7C:** *What action, small or large, might you personally take to invite others you care about into a more expansive, yet "safe", integration of faith and reason, religion and science, or spirituality and evolution?*

8. **Safe to make mistakes.** Tom Thresher tells a story to illustrate how his congregation encourages members to stretch, to risk—all the while being held in safety. He tells this **story**:

This last Sunday, a woman sang, "I Wonder as I Wander." She has a fabulous voice, but she was having difficulty that day. She'd get to the high note, and her voice would crack; it would just break. She'd giggle a bit. She'd go back to the song. And each time she'd get to that high note, it would crack. **The congregation held her in comfort and in love**, and she felt free to finish this entire song—laughing with herself and the congregation. She just put herself out there and said, "Here I am, fully me, with this mistake and all," and was held.

**Question 8A:** *How would you have felt if this kind of imperfection and response happened in a worship service in which you were sitting as a **long-time member**? What about if you happened to be a **visitor** to that church on that day?*

**Question 8B:** *More commonly, church worship services are “interrupted” by a **crying infant** or child, which lasts until the parent leaves the sanctuary with the child. Do you tend to get irritated when this happens, or do you feel compassion for the adult involved—and perhaps reflect on the importance of nurturing the next generations at all stages of life? What about sanctuary designs that include special rooms with glass partitions or live video feed for parents with infants?*

**Question 8C:** *Might there be **different capabilities for tolerance of worship glitches** in a large congregation, versus the smaller congregation that Tom Thresher pastors?*

9. **Seeing how Jesus saw.** Tom Thresher uses a term often used in Eastern meditation and Integral settings—“**nondual awareness**”—to speak of the mind of Jesus. He continues,

Can we know and see the world through the eyes that Jesus saw the world? It’s referred to as “nondual” because, in keeping with **the mystical traditions** of all faiths, what one sees that way is that **there is no separation, there is no duality**. There is wholeness, fullness, oneness. The reason we use “nondual” as the language is that “wholeness” suggests “unwholeness,” and we get caught up in this horrible bind of language trying to express that which is inexpressible. And so “nondual” says there’s not just two; it’s fully whole all the time. There are no boundaries in the universe; there are only edges in an infinite continuum. So the question is: **Can we actually practice seeing through those eyes?** There are some practices we’ll do. For the most part, it’s “let’s see if we can have a taste of seeing how Jesus saw.”

**Question 9A:** *Would this activity of practicing “**seeing through the eyes of Jesus**” and thinking like Jesus be attractive to you? Would you want your church (or secular service organization) to offer this kind of practicum? What would be the possible benefits?*

**Question 9B:** Tom continues, saying, “If a church isn’t doing something like this on a pretty substantial basis, it’s missing both its opportunity and its mission. **No other institution really has the authority to do this.**” *Would it make a difference to your sense of “what church should be doing” if you and your friends seriously entertained the question, “What does our society need that churches are best positioned to fulfill?” (Please elaborate.)*

10. **A broader perspective on the problem of evil.** Tom Thresher and Michael Dowd engage in a somewhat detailed conversation on “the problem of evil.” Tom suggests that an Integral approach would be to attempt to **look at evil “through the mind of Christ.”** Michael suggests the value of **looking at evil “within the frame of a nested, emergent understanding of the universe.”** Here is a clip of their conversation:

**Tom:** What an Integral, or developmental, map tells us or suggests is that we see through lenses partially; we see through a glass darkly. **Looking through the eyes of the Christ, there is no evil.**



It is seen in wholeness in a way that is dramatically different. But everything prior to that is partial. And within our partial seeing, we encounter evil—actually, we don't encounter it, it emerges. **It is part of living in the world of duality.**

This is a hard comment to make, but evil is to a great extent in the eye of the beholder. If we enter it as understood as evil, we engage it as evil and live within that world. **If we see it from the mind of Christ, we love that which we would formerly call evil, and only within that context of unconditional love is it transformed.**

**Host:** At some level, my gut tells me that's profound. At another level, I'm not sure I'd language it that way, but I want to push into it a bit. **The way I think of evil is within the frame of a nested, emergent understanding of the universe**—that is, we see greater complexity consistently emerging out of lesser complexity. The universe as a whole has gone from simple atoms to more complex atoms to molecules to more complex molecules to creatures to more complex creatures to societies and more complex societies. So, given the nested, emergent nature of divine creativity, I see **evil as that which is pursuing its own self-interest—whether an individual or corporation, whatever—at the expense of the larger or smaller holons of its existence**, the larger or smaller wholes that make it up and that it's a part of.

One of the things that is common to our tradition is the understanding that God (which is that reality which includes all other realities, yet also transcends all other realities) could take anything—no matter how wicked or evil—and there can be **tremendous creativity that emerges out of that**. This is one of the fundamental patterns we learn from the history of the universe: that **chaos**, destruction, breakdowns, violence—extinctions, even—are the primary things that have catalyzed creativity for billions of years.

From that largest perspective, **what is evil if the divine uses that, if reality is able to use that, for new creative emergence?**

So I language it somewhat differently, but I think we're coming to a similar place.

**Question 10A:** *Is the traditional theological question of “How could an all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God allow evil in the world?” important to you? Is your faith ever tested by our global communications technology that now showers us with bad news 24/7 gathered throughout the entire world? Have you ever wondered if the evolved human brain is capable of handling this amount (and scale) of bad news? Please expound on whatever those questions bring up for you.*

**Question 10B:** *What explanations for the existence of evil in the world do you find most helpful? And did the answers given by Tom or Michael (or both) assist you in your own thinking in any way?*

11. **Transcend and include.** A signature aspect of an “**integral**” **stage of development** is that, while it transcends previous developmental levels, it does not exclude or deny them. Rather, it includes them—thereby **celebrating what Tom Thresher calls “the fullness” of the Christian tradition** and heritage. For example, in his church's worship services the full spectrum of **hymns** are sung, including those whose lyrics describe a literalistic view of the Christian story and scripture. Tom (following Ken Wilber) calls this the “**magical**” **stage** of faith development. Later **stages**, in order of typical development, are “**modern, postmodern,**



**integral, and numinous.**” Importantly, each hymn is marked by a spiral + cross symbol that identifies which stage of faith development the hymn represents. Tom remarks,

One of the fun things that has come out of making that model visible is that we can now **sing**, in a very liberal, progressive church, “Battle Hymn of the Republic”—without wincing.”

**Question 11A:** *What do you think of Tom Thresher’s approach **of helping his liberal congregation be able to sing with gusto** traditional hymns whose lyrics are out of sync with the stage of faith development of most of the church members?*

**Question 11B:** *What do you do when confronted in a worship setting with a traditional hymn whose **melody you may love** (and perhaps imprinted on as a child) but whose **lyrics you now reject**, or find distasteful? Do you sing the hymn with passion? Do you go silent during the offending words? Do you refuse to sing it altogether? Or has this issue never been a problem for you?*

12. **Finding gratitude for each developmental stage.** Michael Dowd **connects the Integral approach of “transcend and include” with personal therapy**, in which one is encouraged to “re-story their past”—taking episodes and events that one feels **guilty and resentful** about and seeing them in a new way in which **gratitude** is evoked. As Dowd puts it, one is then able to view the dark places in one’s life as “compost or soil out of which one could grow in a healthy way.” Similarly, **Michael Dowd wants the Christian tradition . . .**

. . . to be able to look back on our own developmental trajectory, our own evolutionary past, and find a way of being **grateful for the various developmental stages**, the various ways of thinking at each stage, the practices and doctrines or whatever in a religious context that emerged at that time.

**Question 12A:** *Have you experienced **the psychological benefits** of re-interpreting your own past in ways that transform resentment or guilt into gratitude? If not, can you see a possibility for doing so? Do you perhaps know someone who has done that? Please elaborate to whatever degree you are comfortable.*

**Question 12B:** *Is this vision of “**transcend and include**”—**with gratitude!**—something that you would find attractive applying to your practice of Christianity today, or to any other venerable tradition or institution with which you are associated? Please elaborate.*

13. **All developmental stages are still within us.** Tom Thresher gives an example from his own life of how **challenging life conditions can call forth earlier developmental stages**—and that is a good thing. He recalls,

We had ice here recently, and I hit a patch of it, and I’m spinning down the road. I don’t want some numinous, distant God. I’m going to relate to God, “Please, bail me out of this! I need a personal miracle right now.” I don’t want to have to *not* be able to go there. All of that is important. For me, this is what church is about.

**Question 13:** *Can you relate to Tom’s experience? **Have there been challenges in your own life when you reverted to psychological or faith stages** that served you when you were*

*younger but that you thought you had left behind? And does Tom's story, with its Integral underpinnings, encourage you to be more accepting of those periods of developmental reversal in yourself or others? If yes, how so? If no, why not?*

14. **Evolutionary and Integral thinking for building hope and trust.** Tom Thresher caps off this dialogue in a way that brings together the evolutionary and Integral perspectives for building hope and trust. He says,

My sense of the **Christian world** is that we have a common mission of trying to find some way to save humanity. To do that evolutionarily **requires the full spectrum**. From any one perspective, everybody else looks like idiots. But when we stand back and look at the whole, it may be this chaotic cauldron that we're enmeshed in from which **a new idea will emerge**. And the wonderful thing of an **evolutionary perspective and deep time** is that we're at the beginning of it. We're really just brand-new, and there is **hope** that something quite spectacular will emerge out of this. I have a deep confidence in that.

**Question 14A:** *Tom Thresher derives **hope and trust** by bringing together the evolutionary and Integral perspectives. Where and how does the epic of evolution give you hope or trust—or nourish you in some way spiritually?*

**Question 14B:** *Tom continues talking about how an evolutionary perspective builds hope. Do you find his statement helpful? He says,*

**I love taking that evolutionary perspective** because, as you know very well, evolution is not smooth. It has these leaps, and there is **a crisis that precedes every evolutionary leap** that we consider beneficial. My suspicion is we are at such a moment. My perspective—and I don't know how universal this is—is that we *do* have something unique to bring to this: it is **our symbolic consciousness** and, for me, the mentality of "I don't know." My primary job is to listen and to respond with the kind of authenticity you're talking about. We have a fairly simple practice that's being demanded of us. It's simple, but it's not easy. And in that, I think there is **great hope**.

15. **Supplementary Q&A from the blogpage on this dialogue.** On 12 December 2010, Carolyn V Brown posed this question on the blogpage pertaining to the Tom Thresher dialogue. She wrote:

I will appreciate your enlargement on "**integral faith**." **Does that mean than "anything goes"?** How do you integrate all of the integrals (and there appear to be a bunch of them) so that **Jesus** comes out ahead? I would welcome your description of "**what is a mature humanity**". Are Christians the only ones capable of this? If so – why? If not – why? Many thanks.

**Tom Thresher then responds:**

Carolyn, You highlight **an important challenge of an integral approach**: it could end up with 'anything goes' without care and attention. However, **integral is intended to be a way past the "anything goes" issue** that is an ongoing dilemma for many progressive/postmodern churches. Integral does this by taking the stance that **every view has some truth, but never all the truth**. It also makes the claim that **some views are "better" in the sense that they are more**

**expansive and inclusive.** Thus, traditional Christianity embodies more truth than literal or fundamentalist Christianity when it acknowledges the great insights of fundamentalism and builds upon them to articulate a faith that is more encompassing, wiser and more compassionate.

I would describe **a mature human as anyone who is capable of authoring their own life**, what the developmental literature calls modern or formal operational thought. Our religious, political, and economic systems are all predicated upon people being able to make choices from their own values and desires. The complexity of our world even demands more, what I would call **integral awareness**. Certainly **Christians are not the only ones capable of this, but churches appear to be well placed** to help individuals evolve into more expansive forms of consciousness. I also think Christianity offers westerners a path of evolution that fits our culture. Blessings... tom

**Question 15:** *Did you find this supplementary material from the blogpage helpful? If so, in what way or ways? Overall, what do you see as the gifts and strengths of an **Integral approach to faith**? Do you see any shortcomings?*

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