

Ross Hostetter

“Integral Christian Spirituality”

Episode 4 (transcript of audio) of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity
EvolutionaryChristianity.com

Note: *The 38 interviews in this series were recorded in December 2010 and January 2011.*

Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 4 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith](#).” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I am your host for this series, which can be accessed via EvolutionaryChristianity.com, where you too can add your voice to the conversation.

[Ross Hostetter](#) is my guest today. [Ross](#) is a leader in the emerging field of what’s called [integral Christianity](#). He’s the cofounder of the [Boulder Integral Center](#) and has a distinguished career as an attorney, mediator, and professional trainer going back thirty years. We spoke on the topic of Integral Christian spirituality. One of the things I found particularly insightful was Ross’ understanding of “[Americanism](#)” (also [here](#) and [here](#)) and what it *is* that religion hooks up with—and what a difference that makes. Also, the fact that evolution really does change everything. I think you’ll enjoy this conversation.

Host: Hello, Ross, and thank you for joining this conversation on evolutionary Christianity.

Ross: Thank you, Michael. I appreciate your inviting me.

Host: Ross, I was excited to invite you into this conversation because of the way you blend [Christianity](#), [evolution](#), and [Integral philosophy](#). How did you come to this integrating of faith and science, head and heart?

Ross: Well, I suppose I can start, Michael, by quoting *you* for a minute to talk about what [Integral](#) is, since we’re using that term a lot and some of the people on the call might not know what that is. I am reading from the paperback version of your book, [Thank God for Evolution](#)—anybody that knows you knows about the book. On page 252, you say,

“Another truth about the nature of reality, which was first noted scientifically a century ago, is that there is a direction to cosmic creativity. Religiously, we might speak of this direction as the universe expanding within the heart of God and becoming [more complex, self-aware, and compassionate over time](#). An arrow of progress has been moving through creation since the beginning. This

emergent creativity sometimes works at a very slow pace and is not without chaos and setbacks, which are in fact drivers of transformation. This is all grace, if we have but the eyes to see and the heart to trust. I like to think of this directional feature of evolution as Creation *itself* maturing — expressing [greater cooperation, interdependence, and awareness at ever-increasing scale and evolvability](#). Humanity and our supportive technologies are now integral to this evolutionary process, bringing rapidly evolving consciousness and social systems into the Great Story."

So, in a paragraph, you summed up a lot of what “Integral” means, or “Integral philosophy” means, which is an *evolving* consciousness. We look at evolving consciousness and social systems as part of [the Great Story of evolution](#). I think that’s one of our unique contributions. I also believe that [the direction of evolution](#) does have [an arrow of progress](#)—an arrow that's moving toward something that's better.

I thought your paragraph was a great little summary of what the word “Integral” might mean, so I wanted to quote you.

Host: I'm honored. Thanks. As you were reading, I thought, “Wow, that's pretty good!” *[laughter]* I've got to go back and read my own book.

Ross: You'd be surprised! It's a pretty good book. *[laughter]*

So, I wanted to just note that we are brothers and on the same page in this regard. We are indeed talking about a confluence of some amazing things—of evolution, of science, of Integral philosophy, and of Christianity. This is the age of the great confluence. I think people know a little bit about what evolution is and a little bit about what Christianity is, so I wanted to start with a little bit about what Integral is—and maybe tell you a little bit about how I got to where I am, just a brief life story.

I was born in what you might call *traditionalist* culture, in a very small town in Illinois—an agricultural community—a very safe and loving and protective small town. It had all the features of what you might call *traditional consciousness*. We went to church every Sunday. We were [Presbyterians](#). The particular brand of religion that we had was not evangelical; it was really a *social* religion. All the people who were running the town went there, because they wanted to be around good people. They wanted to be around people they could trust—and all of the outlying things that traditionalist consciousness does. The rotary clubs, the Boy Scout troops, the men's groups, the women's groups: all revolved around this church, which was the biggest in town at that point in time.

I mention that because it was really [a syncretic type of religion](#)—I may be using that word more than once. I don't mean anything like a synchronicity or something like that, but something that is a combination of things that make it benign and wholesome and that make it work. And in that particular type of religion, it was a combination of folks getting together who really wanted to create a place that was a good place to live. They believed in progress. It was a fusion of [mainline Protestantism](#) and [Americanism](#), which is still a syncretic religion that works for a lot of people today. So, I grew up in that kind of environment.

Host: That's interesting: Americanism, a syncretic religion. Say a little more about that.

Ross: Christianity has teamed up with a lot of different things over time, as you know. When it teamed up with monarchy and an idea of an absolute ruler that was an absolute authority, and did things like suppress the truth and root out heresies, it wasn't a particularly good version of Christianity. It produced all kinds of historical horrors: [the Inquisition](#), all of the problems that we associate with [medieval Christianity](#), a lot of the things that the [New Atheists](#) look at and look back at: the [trial of Galileo](#), the [burning of the library at Alexandria](#), and the suppression of truth. These are all examples of what a religion that's not working well does.

However, Christianity, just like other forms of religion, can sync up with things that make it more benign and more useful. In my particular upbringing, they were syncing up with a type of [American religion](#) which had to do with the idea of progress, the idea that America was a city on the hill, that it was a beacon to the world, that wars were always just, that its people had the best idea in the world: It was our idea to spread democracy and freedom in the world. I was born in 1954, and so the generation that was raising me was the generation that won World War II. Basically, twelve million men and women went out there and conquered the world. And they really felt that they *had* something.

You see that same religion now in the [Tea Party](#) movement, where [Sarah Palin](#) is holding up a sign, "Let's party like it's 1773." They want to recapture Americanism, the idea of free enterprise, the idea of independence—that there is a sacred text to Americanism, which is [the Constitution](#). I don't know if you've ever been to Washington, D.C., where the Constitution is on display, but on any given day you can walk in and see people praying in front of the Constitution. I went to law school there. That's a routine event: people down on their knees, praying in front of the Constitution as a sacred text.

Americanism actually teams up with a lot of religions. It teams up with secular Judaism, it teams up with Evangelicalism, it teams up with mainstream Protestantism and with Catholicism. In a lot of ways, I think it's a meta-religion in the United States that makes other religions that might have negative effects more benign. It's the big tent where everybody meets.

Host: Interesting. Thanks for going into that. So, I interrupted you. You were sharing your testimonial.

Ross: One of the things that particular environment could not provide was any sort of authentic religious experience. It was not really about a spiritual experience; everything was secondhand. Folks weren't looking for spiritual experience and wouldn't really know what to do with it. The pastor didn't have one. It was all just about trying to find some way to be better people and it was also pretty social.

I went to college in 1972, which was still part of the 1960s—it certainly had some of the hedonistic elements of that time period. [The Vietnam War](#) still was going on. And I had a

craving for authentic spiritual experience. College at that particular time, this institutional form, did not provide was that. I was a psychology major and, at that time, behaviorism was ruling the roost. [Behaviorism](#), essentially, was a type of inquiry into the human being which bracketed off all interior experience and said, “We really don't know what to do with it; we can't *look* at it. So if you want to learn about humans, you need to take a look at rats in mazes. We can't talk about things like purpose or things that don't have any specific location.”

So, it was an approach to psychology which really didn't want to look at [phenomenology](#), anything that was happening in the mind, any kind of inter-subjective agreement between people. It was all just external behavior.

I think that most of the folks were [atheistic](#) in psychology. They did not want to deal with any kind of religion at all. They saw it in its negative form as something which was weak, superstitious—which didn't have any validity. So, that was on one side. On the other side was essentially old traditionalism or Bible-believing [Evangelicalism](#) or old [Catholicism](#), which was offering an experience that was entirely mediated—either through a text or through a ritual or through a church.

So, if you were looking for authentic religious experience, guess where you had to look? *[laughter]* You know, it was, well... “Let's just start looking around and see what happens!” So I began an experimental religion. I can remember deciding that I was going to try *everything*. I was going to get curious. I was going to find out—and I was going to be the experimental vehicle. So in 1972, essentially what I entered into was an experimental religion. It was the beginning of this great confluence that's continued for the last forty years.

I can remember the first religious thing I tried was [Scientology](#). *[laughter]* Talk about just stepping off! And then there was all this stuff with hallucinogens going on. There was all that type of experimentation. There were all kinds of “state” experiences—[Transcendental Meditation](#) was happening, [astral projection](#). We were trying everything to have authentic religious or spiritual experience. It was a big heart-opening time, when people were very trusting—really, *way* too trusting. In terms of the polarity between *directing* and *allowing*, we were *allowing* all kinds of stuff. There were not a whole lot of filters.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: In Integral philosophy “state” experiences are those that take the individual into some form of spiritual experience that distinctly differs from everyday modes of consciousness. The same kind of “state” experience may be understood and interpreted in vastly different ways—depending upon one’s religious beliefs and “stage” of development.]

One of the things that did happen was I fell in love. I had a deep experience with that. And I also had the privilege of being a professional wilderness guide through the [Boy Scouts](#). I'm [an Eagle Scout](#)—that was part of that whole traditionalist thing: trustworthy, loyal, helpful, the whole bit. And I had a chance to get trained to be a guide at a canoe base up in Canada. There, I had a great mentor—Billy Fanukan, who I'm going to mention for the record. He was a beautiful mentor to me, who really cared about me in a way that allowed me to transform from a weak, whiny little kid into somebody that was powerful and independent—not only in

physical strength but in mental strength. I could go out on my own in long canoe trips into the wilderness—which I did.

On those long vision quests—on the order of three weeks out in the deep Canadian wilderness by yourself—things happen out there! It's interesting: we kind of get what we ask for. I had a spiritual experience that was very profound, where the field that is sitting underneath everything became revealed. I felt like I was in this field of love that was penetrating everything. It was like, "Hello, God! *This* is who you are!" *[laughter]* "You're interconnecting everything—the trees and me and the [Aurora Borealis](#) in the sky and the spiral arm of the galaxy up in the night sky." There's just this pulsating openness, this field of love.

That stayed with me for quite awhile. It was about a five-day spiritual experience—which is long for that sort of thing. Usually, they last half a day or a couple days or maybe an hour or two. So, that was a formative experience. One of the things that an experience like that does is you realize that there are other ways to see the world and that you are seeing the world through filters. You begin to realize that you could see something differently in the world depending on your state of consciousness. That got me interested in "state" work, in meditation and ways to try to stabilize the experience that I'd had. It also teed me up for the next big level of spiritual awareness, which is the postmodern level, where you realize that your reality really *is* constructed and you're seeing through a social system, a pre-constructed way of seeing, and that there are other ways of seeing.

Host: So, you had this more traditional Christian upbringing and then went through a '70s experience, like many of us did. How did you come to re-embrace an evolutionary form, or an Integral form, of Christianity?

Ross: Mary and I were part of a deliberate spiritual community in Texas that was Christian-based and was led by an Episcopal priest. It was an opportunity for me to get deep into the contemplative tradition of Christianity—what you might call the "red thread of love" that runs through all its various forms. I think it was *that* experience that reignited my interest in Christianity as a religion. I saw that there was something at the core of Christianity that was of tremendous value for the human species.

You can think about Christianity in terms of a genome: There's the tradition of love, of individualism—that the individual matters, that our experience and how we treat others *matter*. The way I see Christianity *now*, I see it almost in genetic terms, like we're an allele and we're a connective point. *What* we connect to—and how we connect to people—is really important to humanity as a whole. It makes a difference over time. I think Christianity has a beautiful thread of that. I also think it has a lot of changes it has to make in the exterior, and we can talk about that, too.

Host: Actually, I'd love to go there now, because if everything in the universe is evolving, I'm curious how *you* see the Christian tradition evolving?

Ross: Well, I think most of us start off with the Christian tradition in what might be called a traditional way of seeing it. There are a number of different forms of it. There's a Catholic traditionalism that essentially states a fixed truth. We also have Bible-believing Evangelicalism —*you* came out of that—and that tradition says the Bible is the inerrant word of God, that everything it speaks about is infallible and has a fixed true source. And you're off to the races from there.

Host: Actually, I was a Catholic before that; I grew up Roman Catholic.

Ross: [laughter] So, you've gotten the whole thing!

Once you come into a scientific level, or rational stage, of understanding, a lot of literalism becomes impossible to believe. The fact that the Earth was created in seven days: *impossible to believe*. The idea that there is a propitiating God who needs to send down his son to create a human sacrifice so that we can be freed of our sins: *very difficult to believe*. Virgin births: *difficult to believe*. An awful lot of things become very difficult to believe or are contrary to the evidence.

Host: You mean, in terms of believing in the literal way, the scientific way...

Ross: Yes, exactly. Now, I do want to point out, from an Integral standpoint—as an [Integralist](#)—that there is something in the *core* of traditionalism that is worth keeping and which is essential (again, to use this metaphor of the genome), which is an essential part of our makeup. We see in the science versus religion debate that science is asking, “How you can continue to believe this in the light of all this evidence? Look at this evidence! There are mountains of it! Everywhere you look there's evidence!” [laughter]

There are dinosaurs. There are transitional creatures. There's the genome. We can sequence it. We can see we have half the same genome as a fish, 98.5 percent the genome of a great ape. We can show you how, through the changes in the genome and the switches, a limb can become a fin and a fin can become a limb, and we can do these big changes. There's lots and lots of evidence.

I think it's hard for people who are in the rational or scientific [stage] to understand how somebody that believes in the Bible can continue to believe it. The important thing, I think, is to realize that believing in difficult things is really important. It's an important part of our spiritual heritage. So, Christians *don't* want to believe in something that's easy to believe. They want to believe in something that's *difficult* to believe. [laughter]

Host: This is an interesting thought. I hadn't thought about it that way before.

Ross: Yes! They want to believe in things that are difficult to believe. And what makes them a better Christian is, “I believe in something in the face of a lot of other proof that is really difficult to believe—and that makes me a good Christian.”

So, I think that one of the things that we need to keep in mind is that believing in something that is difficult to believe is really a very good characteristic. The problem with it is with the *object* of that belief. If you have to believe in something, like, the world was made in seven days, in spite of all the evidence, that’s the wrong object for Christian belief. If, however, you are believing in something that is difficult to believe, like that all humanity could come together in a single brotherhood and sisterhood, that the reality of love can change the world, that my individual actions can make a difference—those are things that are very difficult to believe. [laughter] In light of all of the wars, the problems, the horrors that go on, the genocide, what’s easy to believe is Nietzsche’s idea—that it’s all just about *power* and getting what’s yours. And all the rest of this stuff about religion and spirituality is just a bunch of poison that’s going to make you weak.

So these things about the power of love—this, kind of, tsunami of love—that Christ demonstrated: it’s hard to believe. It’s hard to believe that you can be a big-wave surfer. It’s hard to get up on that surfboard. It’s hard to get out there, to get towed out to the big wave, because you crash and crash until one day you’re up and you’re riding a wave. Something has happened! And it’s all wrong until the day that it’s right.

And so believing in something that we can actually begin to accomplish or that we can effect through our actions or the way we interact in the world is, in my view, the right thing to believe in—and it’s the thread that needs to be followed for Christianity to continue to *mean* anything. And that is, really, the definition of what a paradigm is—it’s not just a way of *thinking*. It’s a way of thinking that’s coupled with a way of *enacting* that brings something into existence that was not there before.

You can see that in evolution. Something is being brought into existence that was not there before. So, *cultural* evolution is this capacity to bring forth some new form of culture that was not there before. And it takes *believing*; it takes *that* version of faith.

Host: I see faith and trust as synonyms. Beliefs can be the antithesis of faith. It’s an attachment of the mind to something being a particular way, rather than this openhearted, openhanded trust in reality.

Ross: Exactly—and the willingness to take the next step in that trust: to *do* something. You’ve got to *do* something! [laughter]

You asked the question about how Christianity needs to evolve. The church needs to get out of the propositional believing business and into the enactment business. That would be one thing I think that needs to happen.

Host: The way I think about it, prior to the last couple hundred years—and, in some cases, simply prior to the last sixty years—it wasn't possible to have anything other than a belief-based understanding of the nature of reality. For example, if you asked somebody 200 years ago, How did the Atlantic Ocean come to be?, you would've gotten some mythic story about how that ocean was created by God or the Goddess or whatever. There would have been some story that explained it in a way that was emotionally satisfying.

It's the same thing personally: Why are we the way that we are? Why is it that we say we're going to do something, but we don't do it? We promise that we'll never do something, but we do it. We break people's hearts. We break people's trust. What's that all about? Well, stories that explain the human condition—that made sense of our experience, that made sense of our inner temptations, our inner struggles, our inner challenges, and helped us to walk a path of integrity, of joy—every religious tradition *has* that. Every religious tradition has some mythic way of understanding, and they were all belief-based. It's only just recently, since 1964 for example, that we've come to know that the Atlantic Ocean was created because of the shifting of tectonic plates around the crust. Now we can measure it very precisely. We know exactly that the Atlantic Ocean is growing at the same rate our fingernails grow.

The way I'm thinking about *all* the religious traditions of the world evolving—not just Christianity, my own tradition, but other traditions as well—is integrating [our best evidential understanding of reality](#) and then reinterpreting [the night language](#) (the poetry, the myth, the symbols) of the particular tradition, in a *this-world* realistic way. So, it's not about merely supernatural, otherworldly things; it's about *this* world. It's about the *real* quality of our lives and our relationships. For me, [that's where this evolutionary understanding has made the biggest difference](#) (also [here](#) and [here](#))—both for me personally and also in the tens of thousands of people that Connie and I have interacted with while we've been [living on the road for the last ten years](#).

Ross: Yes. Evolution really does change everything! It's been said to be the best idea anybody's ever had. It is a *big* idea. I'm just beginning to come to grips with the implication of that idea—not only for Christianity, but in my own life.

I do think that it fundamentally changes spirituality. In [the last Axial Age](#)—we might call it the pre-evolutionary age—almost all the great traditions had what's called an [ascending spirituality](#), where the idea was we're going to get higher and higher, purer and purer. We're going to leave more and more of the world behind. And at some point in time we're going to merge with the Godhead, which is up above us or out beyond us. An ascending religion is thus really a religion of *getting out of here*. All the religions have a great story about getting out of here. Christianity's great story is the whole idea of the [Second Coming](#)—that there's going to be this [rapture](#); a certain group of people are going to leave and get to the destination. The other ones are going to be left behind; there's going to be all this chaos and organizing violence. Buddhism has the same idea of getting out of here: [nirvana](#).

What evolution, I think, does is it changes that ascending path to what might be called a path of [Eros](#), an erotic path. We're seeing that it's not a bunch of paths that are all going to get to some mountaintop. If you get to that mountaintop, what you're going to realize is that God is in the ocean and has always been there. *[laughter]* That's what the hero's journey is really all about: this idea that you go up to the mountaintop and you realize, "Wow! It's just me that's here, and God has been down in the ocean all the time!" So instead of one mountain and many paths up to this lofty peak, there is one ocean with a lot of different shores. The ocean we're living in is the evolving cosmos. That's the ocean! And the mountains we're making for ourselves. *[laughter]*

So it's a different type of spirituality. It embraces the evolutionary impulse. It sees that things are emerging, that they're combining syncretically with other things. There's also this pull towards greater complexity—towards doing something that's *better*. My personal belief is that there's a *pull* and a *push* to evolution, but I do think it changes everything. Christianity is going to become much more of a bottom-up religion, a religion of the flesh, which I think it *could* have been from the very beginning, because Jesus of Nazareth was a very fleshy man. It's the whole embodiment—using blood and spit and mud and sleeping outside. I think this is a fair reading of the New Testament. Jesus wasn't into this whole ascending spirituality, where we're going to climb all these steps to the temple, and then we're going to get inside a little room, and then inside the little room there's going to be a Holy of Holies. No. That's the ascending path. He was turning that upside down. So I think there's going to be a recovery of that, a different sort of Jesus.

Host: What you're saying is fresh thinking for me. I've never heard you speak this, and I don't think I've heard others say it quite the way you do. So I'm finding it quite interesting and provocative. It leads me to want to ask you, How has an evolutionary understanding, an evidential understanding of the world: how has it shifted or transformed your own faith journey, your own spiritual experiences?

Ross: Well, first of all, why should religion or any type of spirituality be running from evidence in the first place? All evidence is useful. Everything is the answer. So, a flight away from evidence is not a particularly wholesome thing. What I think that the evidence-based spirituality does, however, it does deconstruct the mythic understanding. And it certainly says that you can't declare truth anymore.

Host: At least not a capital "T" that applies to everybody.

Ross: Nor can you just declare it from some sort of a truth source. You can go back to those declared truth sources and look at how they were made. They're manmade things, things that are useful. But, to take a text or a wafer or whatever, and say, "This is where God is located;

this is where God is in a special location” and “God doesn't exist in any other locations”—I think it blows all that apart.

I can tell you a personal story about the [Eucharist](#). I was a lay Eucharistic minister. I haven't had many clear audience experiences with God—I had one in my lifetime. I'll tell you about it here. I don't know if it was an experience of God or just my own consciousness. But here's the story.

So I was a lay Eucharistic minister, and what you do is give out the Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ. In this particular church, it was a beautiful ceremony. People were coming up, and they had their palms out and their eyes largely closed. Especially in the early service, people would come up and just put their tongue out, and you'd have to put the wafer on their tongue. And they were up *receiving*: the body of Christ, the blood of Christ, the Cup of Salvation, all of that. And clear as a bell one Sunday morning, I had this inner voice say, “You know, I'm also equally present in shit on a stick.” *[laughter]*

Now, *that* is a deconstructive experience! So, what am I supposed to do? Say, “shit on a stick, shit on a stick?” *[laughter]* That's probably just the way that my mind works. *[laughter]* It's *not* that the [consciousness] state change [brought about by the Eucharist experience] isn't important, and it's *not* that that way of bringing people together isn't important. To treat each other well, and to create beauty, and to have beautiful music is all really good. The idea, however, that you're creating God in a special location by how you're waving your hands or what you're saying over it—I think that's something that the evolutionary worldview blows out of the water.

Those are big sticks that are being placed in tradition. Those are big landmines when you're blowing apart Biblical inerrancy, or the idea of God in a specific location. Those are big things that tend to blow the religion up. The question is, What are you going to have *after* that happens?

Host: For me, it was a *naturalizing*: I began interpreting the tradition, [not in an unnatural way](#) ([audio here](#))—what sometimes gets called *supernatural*—but in a natural way, in a this-world realistic way. Just the other night I was doing a talk at a church, and one of the questions that I got was around this whole supernatural/natural matter. A lot of people, I don't think, have thought through the fact that anything that's *supernatural* is, by definition, *unnatural*. Supernatural and unnatural are synonyms. [For most people, when they think about it deeply, unnatural is pretty uninspiring](#). So, is *this* the gospel? Is *this* God's great news for humanity?:

An unnatural king who occasionally engages in unnatural acts, supernatural interventions, sends his unnatural son to the Earth in an unnatural way. He's born in an unnatural birth, lives an unnatural life, is killed naturally, and then unnaturally rises from the dead and appears in unnatural ways to his followers—to some of his followers—for 40 days, and then unnaturally zooms off to heaven to be back with his unnatural father, to sit on an unnatural throne, and to unnaturally judge the living and the dead. And if you profess to *believe* in all this unnatural activity literally, you and your fellow believers get to go to an

unnaturally boring place for an unnaturally long time while everybody else suffers an unnatural torturous hell forever.

Now, if *that's* the good news, is it really any wonder that the [New Atheists](#) are riding bestseller lists, and that young people are leaving the church by the millions? Our traditions shouldn't be trivialized that way—to think that it's all about the unnatural realm.

So for me, part of what an evolutionary worldview has done is it's helped REALize, or naturalize, heaven and hell—just *everything*. I mean, I don't have to *die* to go to hell. When I'm in the place of arrogance, self-righteousness, judgment, hatred, bitterness, violence, oppression: I'm in hell now, and so are you. It's true for everybody. It's universal. But I also don't have to die to go to heaven. When I'm in the place of deepest integrity, love, compassion, generosity, care, consideration: I'm in heaven now. I experience it. I taste it in this life—here.

So that's what I mean by the *naturalizing* or REALizing of concepts like heaven and hell, and the Kingdom of God, and sin and salvation, and these sorts of things.

Ross: Yes! Nature is an incredibly big place. I will say that the one mystical experience that I had does blow open the mind, in a way. It sure feels like there's a field interpenetrating everything. That's just a rock-solid reality in that experience. You can *feel* the fundamental interconnectedness—and it feels like love. That's what it feels like. It feels like there's this field of potential.

Host: When someone shifts from thinking of God as designer and engineer to truly as creator, then they realize that the creative process itself, personified, is what all cultures have done.

I'm an evidentialist, and [the evidence suggests that God is not a person](#). There's hundreds, thousands of stories of God, and they sound like God's a person—but very different people. It's not like God has a multiple personality disorder; they're [personifications of reality](#), or some significant aspect of reality. This is not to *reduce* God to a personification. Rather, whatever we mean by the word “[God](#)” is going to transcend whatever we can know, think, or imagine. But that reality can't possibly be *less* than [a personification of what is fundamentally, ultimately, inescapably real](#) (also [here](#) and [here](#)).

It's kind of like the six blind men and the elephant: Each person is experiencing and reflecting on a different aspect of reality, and so for each of them reality *is* different. Naturally, they're going to personify, because that's what our brains do naturally. They instinctually personify.

Ross: And it's part of our *relating* ability.

Host: That's the key word. *Personify* maybe isn't even the right word. [We enter relationship with reality](#). That's one of the things that we instinctually do: we enter relationship to reality. The problem became, in the West, once we began having *mechanistic* understandings of reality—that is, we began thinking of nature as a complex clock and God was the clockmaker outside

—then, all of the sudden, you no longer have the *immanence* and the *omnipresence* of the divine. You don't have God revealed in every drop of experience, in every piece of reality. God is now the *being* who set it all to start at the beginning.

Ultimately, that not only de-sacralizes nature; [it trivializes God](#). It allows somebody to write a book, like [Richard Dawkins](#) writing [The God Delusion](#), and the God that Richard Dawkins says is a delusion *is* a delusion. That vision of God never existed. It's a belittling of the very concept of divinity, in my estimation.

Ross: One of the things that is a problem with Christianity—my personal problem, let's put it that way—is that it's been so linked up to a dominator mindset. One of the ways that it expresses its horrors is when it dominates the truth; for example, [the trial of Galileo](#). A dominator mentality says, “You can't look at something that's against the truth that I proclaim.” [Modernism](#) also has its own dominator system: the idea that we're going to have the Earth separate from us, and it's a mechanical thing—that we're completely separate from the Earth.

Even [postmodernism](#) has its own type of dominator memetic. It requires everything to get put onto the same level. It destroys hierarchies. It requires everybody to get *weaker*. One of the things that is happening to Christianity in the postmodern world is that it actually is getting weaker. Jesus now is just another spiritual teacher. He doesn't have anything particularly better or worse to offer than the Buddha or some other spiritual teacher. Postmodernism weakens Christianity.

One of the things that I think we're trying to work on from an [Integral](#) standpoint is how to reclaim Christianity's power. That's a real challenge, because you are not going to do it on the basis of textual inerrancy. You're not going to do it on the basis of ritual, anymore. I think what's left is *direct experience*, Michael.

Host: Let me ask you to go deeper on that. Imagining it is 20 or 50 years from now, and there's a really healthy, vibrant form of [evolutionary Christianity](#), and millions of people have fully embraced a deeply ecological and evolutionary form of Christianity, and they're educating their children in such a way that the kids really *get* it. They *get* it young, and they *get* it deep, and it *is* transformative, and they have this *personal* experience. What does that look like to you? What would be *your* picture of a really healthy 21st-century evolutionary Christianity?

Ross: I think that it's going to do a couple things. First of all, Christianity *is* going to embrace the reality of evolution—not only biological evolution, but also cultural evolution, and that everything is evolving. We're going to [expect to] see Christianity in different ways at different times in our lives. Let's walk through it, for example. So, in a Christian life, 21st century, it might go something like this: As a four- or five-year-old, you're going to have a Christianity that's not that much different than the belief in Santa Claus. Remember, this four- or five-year-old is the most highly developed creature that we're aware of in the universe, except for an adult of its own species. This is a person that's able to have complex language and to have deep

emotional interconnections with people. This is a person that's able to manipulate their world. A four- or five-year-old human being is pretty advanced—more advanced than a great ape. It's a very advanced being.

One of the things that happens to that four- or five-year-old when they're having an experience, like of Santa Claus, is that there's no reason why he or she shouldn't trust what all the adults are saying is happening. *Of course* it's appropriate to trust what all the adults are saying! The presents arrive. Little Johnny has the actual experience of hearing the sleigh. *[laughter]* I can remember having that: the actual experience of hearing it! I heard it! It happened! And here's the evidence of it! *[laughter]* I can still remember that I was in this zippered suit—a little white suit and it had little rubber things on the floor. I can remember how it sounded, while walking out there when my parents were still asleep in the first light of morning, and here's all these presents! It was like, “Wow! I am in this universe where somebody loves me, somebody cares about me!” Somebody has gotten the memo, and I am just ecstatic! I'm in this big, openhearted experience of somebody that loves me.

I think that experience is perfectly right for a four- or five-year-old. I think that that *has* to happen. If you don't *have* that experience, you're going to go back and try to find it in some way. You're going to try to find it in drugs, or some sort of tribe, or some other kind of way. That's an important experience.

However, by about the eighth grade, rational consciousness needs to be introduced. The adults need to be able to say, “We did all that for you so that you could have that experience of belonging. *We do* love and care about you.”

And so, at about that age, we take a look at the way the world works, and we take a look at evolution. I think that is the right time for that understanding to be introduced. The youth are still believing their mentors, and so we can give them a basic introduction [to the way the world works] in church. After that, what church can do is about finished in that regard, so the youth need to go to the academy and find out more about evolution. The church, with little pictures of Noah around, is never going to have the microscopes and the teaching abilities and the peer-reviewed papers that the youth need in their education. They need to go off and embrace that in another way. So, I think that's an experience that needs to happen at about the eighth-grade level.

Then, as a young person, if you're lucky, you have a postmodern experience. You might have a religious experience in your early 20s. A lot of people have religious experiences. I was looking at the [Pew Forum research](#); something like 49 percent of the American population said they've had a religious experience of some kind, up from 22 percent in 1962. That experience is then going to reveal that there's something other than the way that I've been seeing the world—that I can see the world in multiple realities. There are multiple things that are happening here. There may be multiple species of time—there's the now; there's the deep time of evolution. This world is a really interesting and complex place.

And then a moral decision has to be made about, “What kind of world am I going to experience? What kind of world am I going to try to create?” So, there needs to be then an involvement in the co-creation of the world. That's going to involve, maybe, that old habit of

believing in some things that are hard to believe—like believing that I can make a difference, believing in the power of love and emergence in the world, believing that I'm an allele in a big genetic system and that *how* I combine and *where* I combine can make a big difference. I think it's a beautiful metaphor.

Then there's a lifetime of *practice* about how that happens—and a lifetime of *failure*. And that failure isn't *sin* anymore; [at that stage of development] I don't think you think about it in that way. You just think about it as how we're rigged. We're rigged to have *so many* different possibilities! And we have so many capacities that are brought forth in different situations and at different times—and they are *all* potentially useful. But the way that we would like them to intend the world can begin to make the cultural world happen. And that's going to change the physical world in profound ways. We are masters of this planet, Michael, and we're not giving that up. We are going to be the masters of this planet until we are kicked off of it by something—and we have a real responsibility about how we proceed forward.

How, then [at this phase of individual development] are the traditions, the Bible, and the rituals going to be used? Those still are in place, but they will need to be reinterpreted. The Bible will be reinterpreted more metaphorically.

[For most of us] we're still back in the Moses story; we're not in the Jesus story. We're back in this idea that we are going from someplace bad to someplace better. We're out in the wilderness; we're lost, and there may be some promised land at some end. That's the Moses story, the Exodus story—and it is still the dominant spiritual motif in most of Christianity.

The Jesus story is something really different. The Jesus story [tells each of us]: “I am a carrier of this field of love, this field of possibility, and I'm creating inside of it. I am *here*, I am creating inside of it. Now, watch me create inside of it. Do you believe what just got created? Watch me create inside of it!” And we're still not fully in that [stage of spiritual development]: I'm not in it.

So, that would be the religion, the *cool* Christianity of the 21st century. It would get more people to be living *inside* that creativity.

Host: I've just begun to think that we are in a time that's *larger*. In terms of the Christian tradition, the transformation that we're in the early stages of is actually much larger than the [Protestant Reformation](#). It's more akin to the kind of transformation of Christianity emerging out of Judaism in the 1st and 2nd centuries. The [Roman Catholic](#) tradition primarily valued the *tradition itself* as the source of authority. The source of authority was the Church hierarchy and the tradition. And then the Protestants come along and start speaking about [solo scriptura](#): it's *only* the Bible. So the Bible is seen as the most authoritative thing. I mean, that's where you go to hear God's voice and will.

Ross: The center of the religion, exactly.

Host: Right. And I think the shift we're in now is the shift to seeing [evidence as the main way that God—reality—is communicating](#) (also [here](#) and [here](#)). Not tradition, not the Bible, but *evidence*. And then going back and reforming—undertaking [a new reformation](#)—but on a much larger scale.

The task is to reinterpret all the core elements of tradition—and to reinterpret how we even think about the nature of divine revelation. So we would no longer think about divine revelation merely in terms of books or papal pronouncements. We would think about it in terms of what's being revealed to humanity *collectively* through the entire worldwide self-correcting scientific enterprise—and how do we relate to that as divine revelation?

I think that *that* piece is going to be the biggest thing that shifts not just Christianity but all the world's traditions: when we start seeing [evidence as divine communication](#).

Ross: I agree with you, Michael. I do think that we *are* in that kind of time. Which aspects of the [Christianity](#) we now know are actually going to survive is an interesting question, and I don't have the answer to that. We're going to live in an environment where every religion and every tradition is going to be available. We're going to see that the [Sufis](#) do things better than we do, in some instances; the [Buddhists](#) do things better than we do, in some instances; the scientists have a truth that we have to look at and absorb—just like you're talking about. Everything is going to be on the table.

You're absolutely right; it's going to turn into *evidence*-based. One of the things that I want to emphasize about evidence is that evidence is not just looking at the *past*, although the past *is* a place to go for evidence—all those -isms or “wasms.” *[laughter]* There is also the evidence of what's actually happening right here and now—this idea of *emergence*, this edge of something that is emerging, these emerging possibilities as what God *is*. It's like there's this system that's *pulsing*, that is *trying*. And when it gets something that works, it does repeat it. You know, there are [more than 200,000 different species of beetles](#). God does love those beetles! Beetles are very successful: They've got hard shells, they can fly, they can live on vegetation, and they can live in all kinds of different places around the world. It's a very successful adaption. It does get copied, but there's also always this emergence toward more complexity and more species and more possibilities. And that's happening not only with the physical world, but happening with culture, our ideas, and all that.

So, the future of Christianity is going to be evidence-based. I think the challenge for Christianity is that it's going to have to become *real*. If we're talking about the experience of Christ, or having some portion of the experience that the founder had—and, by the way, I don't think we can really *have* his experience. I think we're three or four levels of consciousness above where humans were 2,000 years ago, so Christ couldn't operate a computer or drive a car or probably have a conversation with the linguistic complexity of the one that we're having. Those words weren't even there. Those concepts weren't there. The idea of evolution wasn't there. But this *state* experience of this oneness, this love —folks are going to *have* to have that.

And not second-hand, because people aren't going to settle for the second-hand thing anymore.

Host: Yes. To my mind, it gives us a larger view, a more reality-based view of divinity, of God. [What God is revealing today through the full range of sciences dwarfs anything that the biblical writers could have possibly dreamed or imagined](#) (also [here](#)). And I see such an expanded view of revelation, not as a lessening of scripture: it's a lifting up of God. How would Reality reveal itself if not uniquely to each generation, depending upon where that generation is at in terms of their *own* consciousness and their own tools and techniques?

Ross: Exactly! That's the idea of this evolution through different stages. You can't do anything other than where you *are*, and you have a perfect right to *be* where you are. That doesn't mean we have to continue to stay there.

I think one thing that the [Integral worldview](#) *does* offer is it says that everything matters, that everything is *right*, in a certain context. The Integral worldview is so much like the genetic understanding. There's really not a *wrong* gene, a wrong combination. There are things that work for certain situations and things that don't. There are instincts, as you talked about, that are mismatched for a given situation, but in other situations may be perfectly matched.

So there's all this capacity sitting in there. And what we *don't* want to do is we don't want to reduce the capacity. But we want to be able to have some way to direct the emergence, or direct our emergence in ways that are more benign than destructive. That's going to be an important part [of Christianity in the future]. And I think that syncretism is going to be an important part: If Christianity or any -ism—atheism, communism, rationalism—gets its way entirely, it's a disaster.

Host: Good point. I think about it in terms of liberals and conservatives. Liberals who trash conservatives and conservatives who trash liberals: neither one of them *get* evolution. Evolution requires both a conserving element, a preserving, a holding onto that which worked in the past—DNA, if it's anything, is a conservative reality—and yet evolution also requires this expanding beyond what was before, expanding one's circles of compassion and inclusion and that sort of thing. Both the progressive, or liberal, impulse and the conservative impulse are essential to life.

Ross: Liberal and conservative are really just polarities between the conserving and innovative poles of a given situation. If you stay in the conservative pole too long, you're going to have all the problems of conservatism: You're going to get inbred, you're going to get violent, you're going to get fearful. If you stay in the innovative pole constantly, you're never going to get anything done; you're never going to get any traction. You're just going to have ideas after ideas that never get enacted. But a combination of those two, a way that we can ride those

polarities and be able to see them as two sides of a single unity, is going to be a really important skill. That's a syncretic skill. And if either side wins, it's a disaster.

Look at atheism, for example. When atheism gets teamed up with ethical humanism, when it gets teamed up with good science, when it has a healthy skepticism—it's a pretty good thing. *[laughter]*

Host: I wrote a sermon called "[Thank God for the New Atheists](#)."

Ross: Okay. It's a pretty good thing, and it keeps its watchful eye out on all those scientific claims that cannot possibly be true, and says, "You know, we aren't going back there. We're not going to try Galileo over again. We're not going to have all these faith statements in order to be a professor in a college." So it's a pretty good thing. But if atheism teams up with a system like the [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics](#)—where it's a totalitarian system—where it teams up with communism and it's the only religion—all the other churches are closed down, all the other ways of thinking are closed down—there's no amount of good, wholesome American atheism that's going to shut down a gulag.

So a lot of it has to do with *how* you team up, *what* you team up with, and whether the thing you're teaming up with is something that's moving in a progressive and evolutionary direction. And the same thing is true with Christianity—or any capacity—in my view.

Host: That's very insightful. So Ross, in bringing this conversation, winding it down, is there anything that you'd particularly like our listeners to know about: a book, or projects, a website, how can they learn more?

Ross: Well, thank you for that. I'm just coming out in this business of being a teacher. As you know, I was a lawyer for many years and have just stopped that within the last four years and have been finding my footing. How I spent that time is I have worked with the Integral Institute and am also was the cofounder of this center. [Jeff Salzman](#), [Nomali Perera](#), Jason Lange, and I founded an organization called Boulder Integral—which is where I'm sitting right now—the purpose of which is to spread Integral consciousness and culture. And I wrote a novel called *Keepers of the Field*. It's not published yet; I'm seeking a publisher. Essentially, it's about the spiritual experience. It's a novel about this guy, Charlie Smithson, who goes on the hero's journey. He starts out as a weak little kid and turns into a powerful man at the end of the story. It's a retelling of the hero's journey. And I worked really hard on it. It takes a couple years to write a novel. So, that's been a big project.

And then, Mary and I were just thinking about today what's going to be next, now that the book is done. There's going to be a teaching. One of my expertises is in communication. We're thinking about something called "Move the Moment," where we can learn an evolutionary communication: how to take a situation and look at it, and see it its evolutionary potential, and then use our words, actions, and way of relating to turn the spiral—to turn the situation into something that leads upward instead of a lot of the conversations that you hear now, which are

just people talking past each other. So I'm really interested in how to help people evolve. I think that now, at this stage, that becomes the question of what's the most important thing. That's what religion asks, right? It asks, what's of ultimate value to you? And you're going to answer that in different ways. Now, I think the answer of what's most important is assisting evolution.

Host: Amen. Well, thank you, Ross. Thank you for your work in the world, for sharing your ideas and perspectives on this call, and sharing your passion for an evolutionary Christian experience with our listeners today, here on the leading edge of faith.

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