

Paul Smith

“Expanding the Trinity: God in 3D”

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Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 37 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith](#).” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I’m your host for this series, which can be accessed via [EvolutionaryChristianity.com](#), where you too can add your voice to the conversation.

Today, [Paul Smith](#) is our featured guest. [Paul](#) is co-pastor of [Broadway Church](#) in Kansas City, Missouri, where he has served for forty-seven years. Author [of *Integral Christianity: The Spirit’s Call to Evolve*](#) and [Is It Okay To Call God ‘Mother’? Considering the Feminine Face of God](#), Paul and his congregation were kicked out of the [Southern Baptist Convention](#) in 2003 for blessing gay and lesbian unions. Here we discuss, “Expanding the Trinity: God in 3D.”

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

Paul: Hello Michael, good to be here.

Host: Well Paul, you are the last of thirty-seven thought leaders that I have had a conversation with over the course of the last month and a half. And I must say, it’s been an extraordinary experience to talk with so many diverse people—all of whom share some really important values, such as a global heart, a valuing of evidence, a commitment to a healthy future for all of us, an evolutionary perspective, a deep-time perspective. And I’d like to begin by asking you to share first your story—your testimonial, your faith pilgrimage. Basically, how did you come to where you are now intellectually and spiritually and also professionally?

Paul: Well, I was born and raised in St. Louis, and I was enrolled in the [Southern Baptist Church](#) before I was born, and grew up in that church. Even as a teenager, my primary belief was that there was always *more*. There was more to the spiritual life, more to life, more to Christianity than I was experiencing. As a teenager, I was the one who asked the embarrassing questions in Sunday school classes. So, I was always after the *more*. Later on, I found out that Jesus said the same thing in [John](#). He said, “I’ve got more to tell you, but you can’t take it all in now.”

I went to college at [Washington University](#), then pursued a master of divinity degree at [Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary](#) in Kansas City—all the time looking for that *more* spiritually, both in understanding and experiencing God. I had a wonderful experience of God when I was twenty-three. I was reading an [Agatha Christie](#) novel in bed and suddenly I was transported to a place of love and oneness with everything: I loved my parents; I loved the Catholics. (Back then, Southern Baptist pastors didn't love Catholics.) *[laughter]* But I loved everybody and everything and Agatha Christie and the murder mystery I was reading. And that lasted for several hours. The effects have lasted all my life.

I understand what that oneness and that mystical, transcendent experience was. I had been praying for that kind of experience. I knew *about* God and I was a Christian, but I'm a very heady person and I always lead with my head. So I ride with my 'experiential brakes' on. So that was a real breakthrough in my experience.

When I graduated from seminary, I kept pursuing the spiritual path. My deal was to learn to understand God and experience God, and pass it on—I'm a teacher. I came to my first church—first and only church—to pastor in 1963, a church called [Broadway Baptist Church](#), and back then it was a Southern Baptist church. Fortunately, they were the kind of church that was willing to grow with me. When I would change my mind about something or learn something else about the Christian path or some deeper, wider, broader, higher place, at least the majority of the congregants were willing to grow with me. So it has been an adventure for these last forty-seven years to be with a group of people who have been willing to travel this journey with me.

My other belief is that we need models. I think that's what Jesus was. *Jesus was a model of what it meant to be fully human and fully divine*—just like we are, only we don't do a very good job of letting that light shine. He showed us how. So my energy has been devoted to creating a local community, a model, of what it looks like to be a constantly evolving church. I believe Jesus had something in mind *more* than what we have traditionally now. And so we've tried to model the always evolving, learning, growing church.

Now we're inclusive and [theologically progressive](#). We're a healing community, and we're very focused on the transformation that comes from following Jesus. I'm very Jesus-centered—not religion-centered, but Jesus-centered. And so I'm still learning and growing. I've had my biggest growth spurt in the last ten years. It's just been an incredible ten years.

Host: That's great Paul. In fact, could you say a little bit more about what you mean by "Jesus-centered," because that is language that's obviously at the heart of Christianity—but different people in different traditions mean it in a different way. What do you mean when you say that you're Jesus-centered?

Paul: Well, I'm very interested in the *person* [Jesus](#), historically. I read hundreds of theological books every year and am very much interested in what the Jesus scholars are discovering. I'm fascinated by him as a person. I believe he came to show us what it really meant to be fully

human and fully divine. He was a model. He came to show us what we are like. He said, “I’m the light of the world.” He said *we’re* the light of the world, too.

I believe, then, that learning about Jesus—how he lived and how he taught and what he modeled—is crucial. And I have a personal relationship with Jesus. I talk to him most every day, and I believe he’s still present *with* me. He still continues to lead and guide me and teach me. I very much believe he is still teaching us more things than he had back two thousand years ago, because we couldn’t understand it then. We were in a different level of consciousness, a different stage of evolution. Now we’ve grown, and his spirit is continuing to teach us. So, he’s my hero—he’s my model.

Host: I’m finding myself a bit confused; I don’t quite yet know how to interpret what you’re saying. Do you believe that there is a supernatural person, Jesus, somewhere outside the universe or somewhere? When you say that he is communicating with us, I know what that means to me *personally* when I use that language, but I interpret that sort of in an archetypal sense, in a spiritual but not a literal way—a more metaphorical way. But I’m curious how you use that language. I don’t know what you mean by that.

Paul: Well, that gets into “the three faces of God.”

Host: Cool! Why don’t we go there, then? That was one of the things that attracted me in your book. It was your discussion of God in 3D—the three faces of God. So, let’s go there.

Paul: Well, Jesus spoke about God in three distinct ways. Jesus spoke *about* God, Jesus spoke *to* God, and Jesus spoke *as* God. And he invites us to speak of God in those three ways ourselves.

Jesus spoke *about* God as the infinite face of God that is the awesome God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God that was beyond everything and in everything. The Bible talks about this God and describes this God as being both *right here* and *out there*. Theologians call it [*panentheism*](#), which is that God is *in* everything and *beyond* everything. The Bible says, “Do I not fill heaven and earth?” Jesus said, “Split a piece of wood, I’m there. Lift up a stone, you’ll find me there.” Paul talks about “God in whom we live and move and have our being,” a God who’s all in all. That’s the *infinite* God that is beyond our understanding. That is a God who encompasses, and lives in, and goes beyond the infinite cosmos. So in that sense, I believe Jesus talked about this infinite face of God.

And then, Jesus talked *to* God. I believe that this God of the cosmos comes down to us in some personal way. He-or-she-or-it comes to us to hug us and kiss us. Ultimate reality stands before us while we look into each other’s eyes. The infinite God could be called “the evolutionary impulse” and comes and sits across the table from us and breaks bread and drinks wine with us. That’s a divine intelligence who can appear on a sofa next to us—the creator of heaven and earth who listens to who we are. I call this “the intimate face of God.”

And so Jesus' expression of it was to talk to God as a Father—as Abba, the same name he used for Joseph. So it's very personal—very intimate.

Jesus sensed this intimate God being with him in a personal, intimate way. This is the [I-Thou](#) of [Martin Buber](#). This is the face of God that we worship and adore and to whom we surrender. For Christians, this is also the face of Jesus. God comes to us in the person of Jesus, whom I believe still is with us in a spiritual sense. But there are many expressions of that. The first book I wrote was called, [Is It Okay To Call God 'Mother'?](#) because I believe this God may come to us in intimate terms in the sense of a mother—not just a father—or as a brother or a sister or a grandmother.

This God may come to us if you're Buddhist. I know Buddha didn't talk about God, because he didn't think it was helpful. But many, many Buddhists understand Buddha as the intimate face of God. That's the God that comes and speaks close to them. If you're Hindu, that may be Krishna, who is that intimate face of God whom you commune with and talk to and is very close to you. For others, it may be Spirit or Presence. But that's the intimate face of God, which takes many, many forms—actually, it's whatever way is most meaningful to us. But it's real. It's real. Just like the *infinite* God is a face of God that is real but partial, this *intimate* face of God also is real, but it is partial too.

Jesus not only modeled talking about the *infinite* face of God and the *intimate* face of God in his own prayer times, in his own life, and in his own relationship with Abba; he spoke as God. At some point in his life, he evidently came to take very seriously the words of *Genesis*, that we are made in the image of God, and that he (along with all of us) carries that divine image. He was able to access it and express it in a dazzling way that I think is incredible. This *inner face* of God—I call this, the *inner* face of God—was Jesus' true divine self. That was his Christ-consciousness; that was his own image of God that *he* was and that was being expressed in human flesh.

Jesus was a spiritual being on a human journey, and he invited us to know that we too are spiritual beings on a human journey. So I think he invites us to those three kinds of relationship with God. I think that the goal of the Christian life is to have the same kind of relationship that Jesus had with God, and we can have that too.

So these three faces of God: they're each partial but each is true. Various realms of thought and understanding in Christianity emphasize one and leave out the other two. For instance, academia is very comfortable with the infinite face of God more and more, and they may call it "[the evolutionary impulse](#)" or "creative love" or "veiled reality" or something. But it's that infinite sense of God that gets us beyond the big guy in the sky. Traditional Christianity has ended up with God being the big man upstairs. And that God isn't big enough for us. That God doesn't make it in a world of atoms and quarks and billions and billions of galaxies and stars; that God isn't big enough.

I think Jesus then invites us to speak to God as he did, in whatever way is meaningful to us. Different religious traditions, spiritual traditions find the presence of God meaningful in different ways. I find God's presence most easily accessible in the form of Jesus—and Jesus as a spiritual being as he appeared to his followers after his body was gone; he had a spiritual

body. I also experience God as, when I get close to Jesus, he emanates a kind of father-like quality—God as his father—and it’s this palpable sense that I feel from him. And so I also relate to God as *Father*, even though I wrote a book on calling God “Mother.” That doesn’t do it for me. *[laughter]* I wrote that book for other people.

So I experience God as father, and then I experience God *in other people*. I experience God in spiritual guides. Jesus talked to Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration; evidently, he did it more than once—because it was no one-time affair. I believe what he experienced in them was their divine presence, and he got guidance and help from them. I mean, he was going to face the cross. And so it says there that they talked about his upcoming death (in the Greek, the word is *exodus*) because he needed some guidance from them—from them as images of God that he could access because of his tradition.

So in that sense, Jesus is present with me—and that’s a face of God that is very real. But it’s not the only face of God, because we’ve got to have the *infinite* face in there and then we need to have the *inner* face of God. The inner face of God is that I too am made in God’s image. I believe Jesus is the light of the world, and the Light of the World said to us, *we are the light of the world, too*. So I believe we are *each* divine. Every person, every conscious being contains divinity and the image of God. I believe the Bible teaches that. Jesus said before Abraham, “I am,” and I think we can say that, too. We are eternal spiritual beings who are now on a human journey. And so I experience God as my deepest, truest self—and not my ego, which would love to *be* God. Our ego *thinks* it is God. Our true self *knows* it is God. Our deepest, truest, highest, purest self, I think is divine—it’s a piece of God. And Jesus knew that and modeled it. I want to follow his model; I want to express God in that way.

So those are the three faces of God.

Host: How does this map on or challenge or offer another way of thinking about [the Trinity](#)?

Paul: Well, the traditional Trinity has been a solid, accessible way to think about God for centuries, and it was the way the early Christians experienced God. They experienced this God of the Old Testament—the awesome God that Jesus called Father. They thought of that as God. And then they came to be overwhelmed with Jesus and the presence of God *in* Jesus. As Marcus Borg said, Jesus was a person so full of God that the early Christians began to see *him* as God, too—that is, as an expression of God in human flesh. And then they experienced God as a *spirit* that touched them in a very intimate way, that filled them and was with them as a presence. So they experienced God as a Father in a very intimate way that Jesus taught them. They experienced God as Jesus, another intimate reality: Jesus said, “I’ll be with you always.” And then they experienced God as spirit, another intimate face of God. So those three forms have kind of defined God for traditional Christianity.

When people think of God—a Christian God—they think of Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit. That was a good first step. The early Christians tried to move that into some sort of understanding because they were monotheists and they believed in only one God—so they

had to wrestle with this. And then the Council of Nicea (in 325 C.E.) came up with the idea of Trinity; they invented a word that is not in the Bible. That was their best understanding. And so that's embedded in us nowadays. If you're Catholic, you do the sign of the cross—Father, Son, Spirit. In Baptist churches, most churches, the Trinity is embedded in our thinking, and that defines God.

I find that I appreciate it, I value it, but it is now very limiting. Father, Son and Spirit are part of the *intimate* face of God. I put them in that second category. But they're very limiting, in the sense that to restrict God to Father, nowadays, means something that Jesus had never intended. When Jesus called God "Abba," he wasn't trying to say that God was a male being. But today, when we call God "Father" and speak of God exclusively in male terms, that *is* what we're saying—that God is masculine and male.

So I think it's very important to recognize the *feminine* aspect of God, which actually Jesus revealed very well, and to expand that intimate face of God—make it wider. It's more than Father, Son, and Spirit. It's also important to welcome other religious traditions and their experience of the intimate face of God—be it Krishna or Buddha—that takes the presence of God and brings it to them in a personal way.

The Trinity, then, I think is a first step towards the *intimate* face of God, but it fails miserably as the *infinite* face of God. What we have in traditional Christianity today is sort of the 'man upstairs', the 'sky God' that gets laughed away. That's an obstacle to recognizing that when scientists are exploring the universe and exploring the molecules and atomic structures, they're exploring a part of the divine—that that's a part of the *infinite* face of God, that God is *in* all those things and *beyond* all those things. The infinite face of God is not a personal image of God, because that is a God who's an *it*. So science studies this infinite face of God, this panentheistic face, the God "in whom we live and move and have our being." And then that God becomes personal to us in whatever way that fits. For Christians, it's God as Father or Mother or Jesus or any number of other ways. And other traditions have other names for that God.

So that is why I say that the Trinity is not enough. The Trinity is not wide enough. The Trinity is not high enough—that is, it doesn't encompass the infinite God. And the Trinity is not deep enough. The early Christians were so excited about Jesus being this divine spiritual being in the flesh that they forgot that he was modeling that we are *all* that. And so the Trinity leaves divinity with Father, Son, and Spirit—and leaves us out of it. The opening chapters of the Bible say, we're all made in the image of God. That image of God is *us*. At one point in *John* 10, Jesus says that we're all gods. He's speaking to the Pharisees when they're talking about his divinity, and they say, How do you claim to be God, one with God? That's claiming to *be* God. And he quotes from the *Psalms* and says, "Well, the psalmist says that *you're* gods." He was talking about the corrupt judges in those days, so Jesus was essentially saying to the Pharisees, "As corrupt as you are, you are *also* divine—you are also gods." Of course they missed that, because they didn't want to see Jesus as divine. So they certainly weren't going

to be able to see themselves as divine. But those were Jesus' words. I just take them at face value.

If we don't want to *be* God, we've missed the whole point of Jesus' message. His message is for us to act like God—to be God. When he said, "I am the light of the world, and you are the light of the world," I believe he meant it just exactly the same way. We're the light of the world—just like Jesus. The difference is, of course, he didn't say, "You're going to *become* the light of the world," that you've got to work to be it. You are *already* it. But you've got this basket you keep putting over the light—it's a basket of ego. And what Jesus did is he worked to keep his ego at bay. In the garden at Gethsemane and then the temptations: that was all ego work that he was working on. His ego was trying to take over, but he pushed it back and kept it at bay. So the light of the world that *he* was, shown so brilliantly that he is now my model. And he's my model to say that I have the same light in me—that I am the light of the world, too. The goal of the Christian life is to *own* that light—to *own* my own divinity, my God-likeness, and my truest original face, my deepest self, and to express that in the world, according to my gifts. That we are the arms and the face and the hands and the feet of God in the world today: that is what that means. We are God in the world today. That's the *inner* face of God.

So when I put all three of those together, I have got an incredible picture of God. I've got God in three dimensions. If I leave out one of those faces, I'm missing a part of God. So traditional Christianity says that they like the intimate God—the second person relationship with God. That's the God they focus on. Sometimes they get a little uncomfortable if we talk about God in [panentheistic](#) terms. They get just bent out of shape all over the place when we talk about *us* being gods here: divine beings, our truest deepest self. But you have academia and more progressive churches, which are very comfortable thinking about the infinite God, though they're not sure sometimes what to do with me calling Jesus "God." Most of them are not comfortable with seeing ourselves as divine. And yet the Eastern religions and the mystics down through the ages from [Meister Eckhart](#) to [Teresa of Avila](#), all throughout Christianity (as well as other [mystics](#)): they are very comfortable with seeing that we are divine in our essence. Deep within us, our true self, our highest self, our original face, is the face of God. I embrace all three faces. They're all real and all true and all partial. Embracing them has just revolutionized my understanding and experience of God in the last ten years.

Host: Yes. I hear it in your voice. I want to follow up on what you just said and have you share with our listeners, How has this 3D understanding of God impacted your life? And as a pastor, are there any stories you can share, in terms of how this understanding has made a practical difference in the life of a young person—or, for that matter, a person of any age? Help us see how this fleshes out in actual daily life.

Paul: Well, one of the first things this perspective helps is my own understanding. I no longer have to look with suspicion upon science as it explores space and astronomy and quantum physics. Science is a part of the exploration of the *infinite* God. Actually, I solved the faith

problem of evolution when I was sixteen. I said to my pastor, “Look, it sounds to me that *Genesis* 1 is poetry, and science has given us the *how*.” He said, “That’s good enough for me, too.” So I stayed with that. *[laughter]* Now when I read a science book, I’m reading a book that’s exploring God’s Creation—God’s inhabiting the created world. And it’s very exciting to me. It just removes any barriers between the physical world, the objective world, the world that science explores and discovers. It’s all God. God is in and beyond all of that.

The *intimate* face of God has meant a lot to me because, as we explore the *infinite* face of God and we get rid of the ‘man upstairs’ version, suddenly we think, “Well, am I just fooling myself that God comes to me personally, in a personal way?” Many times, progressive Christians get very uncomfortable with thinking of Jesus as divine. They get uncomfortable with any kind of personal worship or personal prayer. I know you had Bishop Spong on this series, and he and I have personally had our arguments. Prayer for the bishop is more like thinking good thoughts. He just doesn’t have a place for the intimate face of God that comes to us personally in the form of Jesus or a father or a mother or something. So, that has released me, though, to feel very much at home with my own relationship with Jesus *personally*, whose presence I experience, and with spiritual guides that I experience personally.

For my friend Gita in India, who’s Hindu, her beloved is Krishna. We have had the most wonderful conversations about her beloved, Krishna, and my beloved, Jesus. That is so meaningful to both of us. It is the second-person, intimate face of God that has come to us. So I’m at home with everybody’s spirituality. I love to explore wherever anybody is, because I believe they’re already exploring God by whatever name they want to call her or it or him. It has made me a very ecumenical, inclusive person.

The *inner* face of God is the one that has most changed me. Ten years ago, I began thinking of this—actually it was by reading the work of the Buddhist Ken Wilber, *Integral Theory*. Wilber posits this as part of what he calls “the AQAL”: the first-person perspective, the second-person perspective, and the third-person perspective, through which every event and situation and thing can be looked at. And that’s what translates into “the three faces of God.” I began to see the New Testament and Jesus in a different way. Jesus was no longer an exception—someone who came to be the good cop to rescue us from the bad cop (God) and to save us from God’s wrath so that we wouldn’t go to hell. That’s just a very low understanding of God. Rather, Jesus came to show us who we are really like. How wonderful we are—that we’re the light of the world. As Hafiz, the Sufi poet says, “When you are lonely or in darkness, I wish you could see the astonishing light of your own being.” That’s what Jesus said: You’re the light of the world.

So when I look in the mirror now, I try to look for that astonishing light of my own being. I’m aware of all my faults and all of my pathology. But now I believe that somewhere down in there, there’s this astonishing light of the world—that is *me*. And what’s more, it’s you, too! And now, I’m standing in a line at the grocery store and there’s this homeless street person who smells and I don’t want to get close to, and I say to myself, “That person is the light of the world. Somewhere underneath all that outward appearance, somewhere in there is the image of God, is the divine spiritual being on a human journey, like Jesus.” And how I treat this

homeless person is the way I treat Jesus. Why? It's because they're both God! They're both God!

So when I see my gay church members, to whom I used to benignly say, "You know, you just need to change your lifestyle," I have begun to see them as divine creatures—that they are the light of the world too. I had to change my mind about homosexuality.

I had to change my mind about women. Women are no longer second-class citizens. When I came to the church at Broadway, there were male pastors and male deacons—and it was a men's club. So that has to go! We're all divine creatures. It makes an incredible difference in how I see myself and how I see others and how at home I am with others. And I've been teaching this now, this three faces of God, for the last ten years.

Being a part of an always-evolving church is like remodeling your house. It takes longer than you think, it costs more than you thought, and it makes a bigger mess than you ever thought possible. *[laughter]* So when I introduce something new, I'm learning. At first it causes consternation. Then we teach about it, and talk about it, and so on. Eventually, people come around.

Back forty years ago, our congregation pioneered small groups—before small groups became popular. It seemed to me that when Jesus wanted to change the world, the first thing he did was start a small group. So we got into small groups, and that was bothersome to some people.

When I began to see women as equal to and partners with men, and when I said that we need to have women deacons and eventually women pastors, that was a big deal. We had a lot of conversations about it, and finally we had our first woman deacon. Next I said, you know if women were made in God's image, then what about God's image? What would happen if I called God 'She' on some Sunday morning, instead of 'He'? And so I wrote that book about the feminine language for God: I wrote it for my church members, so that they would understand my arguments. Then we debated it, and lost some church members, but finally, I can remember the first time one of our men got up and referred to God as 'She' and nobody fainted, nobody fell out of their seat. And now we regularly do. As a matter fact, I no longer call God anything else but 'God' or 'she'. I figure we have had enough masculine language for God to last us for awhile. In our hymns and our songs, we call God 'he' and 'she', and all sorts of things.

All those changes have brought a great liberation. And in the last ten years, I've been teaching about the three faces of God. From what I hear from the people that actually *get* it, it takes a while—especially the idea that we're divine. That just sounds like blasphemy. It sounds like I'm going to get struck by lightning. But gradually, we're moving into that. We've already been kicked out of the Southern Baptist Convention, so we can't be kicked out of anything else. *[laughter]*

Host: How did that happen?

Paul: Well, as we began recognizing the feminine face of God, we began recognizing that men and women are made with various varieties of masculine and feminine and sexuality. And the gay members in our church, who had to be in the closet, said to me, “Paul, you change your mind about so many things. You change your mind about women; you change your mind about God language. Could you read the Bible again and change your mind about gays?” You see, I held the traditional theology—benign: I didn’t persecute them, but I did see them as sick or damaged. So I did take another look, and I realized I was totally wrong. I had misinterpreted every single passage about that. So I told the congregation I had changed my mind about that, and we held some classes. We took two years to make the change. We had speakers come in to represent the traditional viewpoint and others for a progressive viewpoint. And we had lots of discussion. Ultimately, we lost a lot of members in making that change. Actually, we lost over half of our members. But, you know, if we’re going to be faithful to Jesus, we will always want the *more*. We will always be evolving. We will always be seeking. We will ask, what is it that you’re still teaching us? And so God had to teach us that gays and all sexual orientations are gifts from God.

So we voted to welcome and affirm all sexual orientations as gifts from God and for them to be a part of our fellowship in every way possible. That eventually meant, of course, we started doing gay unions—and that made the headlines. The local Baptist Association had been trying to get rid of me for years, but they never could quite get the votes. So when we started gay unions, that was the end of it. They officially voted us out of the Southern Baptist Convention, which we had expected. Actually, we would periodically ask ourselves if we should just leave, and I said, “No, we need to have them ask us to leave, because it will make the headlines.” And it did. It made the newspapers and the TV interviews. So that was in 2003. We’ve since aligned with the Alliance of Baptists, which is a progressive group of Baptists, but basically we’re just *us*. We’re Broadway Church.

Host: That’s great, Paul. Now let me try to reflect what I think I heard you say, and I’m going to use language that’s native to how I would normally speak—which is as universal as I can. Let me start by saying that, bottom-line, I’m an *evidentialist* ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)). I believe that *how* God is communicating (and even what we mean by the word ‘God’) is best understood through our best evidence and what that evidence is revealing. And of course over time, there’s greater evidence and it’s coming from a lot of different sources. So, when I look at the religious traditions all over the world and I ask the question, Why are there all these different religions and all these different competing stories about what God is like and what God or the Goddess said or did or wants? All those differences make sense from an evidential perspective, if I understand the brain and how human brains inherently develop relationship. *We relationalize reality*. [We personify Reality](#), and then we enter into that personal relationship. And then in that, we experience, as you say, three faces of reality. One is the “face” that is beyond anything we can know, think, or imagine and yet that is also *revealed in* everything we can know, think, or

imagine. That infinite face of God, as you call it, the infinite face of reality, the awesome dimension could be called *ultimate reality*.

However, to be *related* to that, we need—or typically, we naturally instinctually do—enter relationship by using personal metaphors: the *beloved*, relating to reality in a devotional way, in a lover-like way, in an intimate way: father, mother, lover, friend, the ‘I-Thou’ relationship that’s more intimate. And in doing that—by having that stance towards reality—we actually have a different experience of reality. Reality shows up for us differently because we’re interpreting through the lenses, through the eyes of intimacy of relationship.

And then there’s also the sense that we are each an *expression* of reality. We’re each a dimension of reality. We’re part of reality. We’re not separate from reality. Our larger self—our larger body—is the body of life, the planet, the galaxy, and fundamentally the universe. [Ultimate Reality is that which contains it all](#), whatever our names for that.

So, there’s the dimension of reality, or the face of reality, that is ultimate reality. There’s also the Great Beloved—that is, the various intimate metaphors that we use to [relate to Reality](#) and communicate and speak and feel our way into that. And there’s also the “Great Self”—that our larger body, our larger self is this. So that’s the language that I would use. Does that seem to reflect what it is that you’re saying?

Paul: Beautifully said! Well said in that larger expression. Yes, indeed! I would add one thing. I think the various traditions also vary because of various stages of consciousness and development we’re in. So there is an awareness of God at a tribal level, at a warrior level, at a traditional level, at a modern level, at a postmodern level, and at an Integral level, which may be what is coming to be called “a new emerging consciousness.” The understanding of God is increasingly complex and inclusive as we move up through those levels. I believe that today religions are at various levels of the stages of consciousness.

A tribal stage of consciousness will produce a God who is magical, and the religion itself is fear-based. We see that today in Christianity in terms of sects. The Jonestown and the Waco, and so on. A warrior mentality stage will produce fundamentalism, which is angry, and a warrior God—and those churches exist today and those cultures exist today. Afghanistan is a warrior culture. Warrior cultures produce a different kind of religion, and a different understanding of Christianity.

Then there is the traditional level of religious consciousness, which we entered into about two thousand years ago. This is the law-and-order stage, and is still with us. That’s when most religions got established.

Then we move into the modern level, which helps us see through some of these myths in a more scientific, evidential way. I like the word *evidential*. (It does not *all* need to be evidential.)

And then we move into the postmodern stage of religious consciousness, which has (once again) gifts and challenges. Its gifts are the inclusiveness and pluralism and honoring of all traditions.

I think the Integral level is the most evidential. The evidence comes in different ways. For instance, if we’re looking at scientific evidence, then the astronomer says, “If you want to know

what I know, you've got to look through a telescope. That's the only way you can see what I see. Then you'll find the evidence." Or you've got to look through the electron microscope to see these things. And we agree, and if enough people look through those instruments and find the same things, we find evidence for this astounding infinite universe and the universe that science explores.

I believe the second-person face of God is also based upon evidence. But it's not evidence that uses the same tools as science. The second-person evidence is based upon the history of relationships that people have had with whatever they call ultimate reality. This is also true of the first-person experience of God that the mystics have. And what the experience of mystics has been is, if you will take time apart and move into nonordinary states of consciousness and move deeply into yourself, you will experience yourself as something *more* than just this material world, this human being. I think there's evidence for this. What I tell people is, "If you will take an hour a day to move into altered states of what the Bible called trances, the evidence that you come up with by looking through that lens is transcendent. It is transpersonal. And so I see that as evidentiary, too. So if you take the mystics of all the traditions, they have something in common. For those people who have gone inside to search for their own inner, true, original face, I believe there is evidence that says, there is this experience of *something*—whether it goes by the name of God or, as Ken Wilber calls it, "our original face"—I call it "our divine self." I think that's evidentiary, too. So I would add *that* to what you were saying so beautifully. I love the way you said that, and I would add that all three faces of 'God' are based upon evidence. There are different vehicles for finding the evidence, but all three are based upon evidence.

Host: Yes, and what *counts* as evidence isn't identical in all three.

Paul: That's right.

Host: That's helpful. And that leads me to want to push a little deeper into this understanding, which is really the title of your book, this understanding of Integral faith, integral Christianity. What distinguishes [Integral Christianity](#) from other forms of Christianity?

Paul: First of all, I owe my understanding of 'Integral' to [Ken Wilber](#) and his articulation of [Integral philosophy](#). I have taken five elements of Integral philosophy that I think are particularly applicable to the spiritual life.

What Integral is about is our evolving consciousness. Integral philosophy recognizes that we have been evolving through levels of consciousness for at least fifty thousand years, tracing back to the beginning of our tribal consciousness. Integral looks at these different levels of consciousness that you could see in cultures, in history—and that you can see in cultures today; you can see in churches today; you can see in all groups today. And it tries to understand these levels as appropriate expressions of the Spirit's work at that particular time.

So somebody who's at the traditional level, I'm grateful for them. I see that the spirit has worked to bring them up to that level. I would hope they would take what is important and valuable in that level, and transcend what is not working and what is not based upon evidence, and move to the next level, which would be a modern level or a more rational thinking level. So what Integral does is it understands these evolving stages of consciousness, and treasures and values the strengths in them, and invites people to transcend the weaknesses—but sees them all as the work of the Spirit.

I think the primary work of the spirit for the last two thousand years has been to bring us into the rational stage. This simply gets us to start thinking—so that we have science, and that's wonderful! But then, you know, the rational stage tends to want to say, “Well, if I can't see it and observe it and measure it, it isn't real.” And so we need to transcend that stage and say, “Well there's another part of reality that you can experience—the transcendent, the mystical.”

So Integral, I think, has an appreciation for all the other levels that the other levels don't have for one another. Postmodernists have a terrible time with people in the traditional level. Every level is mad at the other levels. They're threatened by the new ones that are emerging. People at the modern stage are often mad at their traditional religious upbringing. Well, in the Integral stage, you get over all that. And you see that the spirit is at work in all those stages, in all those levels. And it's a valuing of the spirit's work at every stage and every level. So that's the *stages* part of Integral philosophy.

There are also *states* of consciousness. Integral says, we have various *states* of consciousness and they are all important. There's ordinary (gross) awareness, which is what we're having right now. And then there is a more subtle, non-ordinary state of awareness, which some may call 'subtle state of awareness' or 'the dream state'—or the mystics call it the 'connecting with God state.' I call it the 'connecting state.' This is where you have visions and dreams and where you see—maybe see angels. I see Jesus; I see my spiritual guides. Actually, I leave my body and see things all over the world. That's the *state* of consciousness that Jesus prayed in, and that the early Church and the New Testament people prayed in. That's a very important state. I call it, 'zone prayer,' where we move into an altered state of consciousness. That's what I do in my daily prayer times. The very deepest part of those states is called the 'causal' or the 'nondual' state, where we actually experience our oneness with God. That's what I experienced when I was twenty-three. It was the 'causal' state of trance awareness that just zapped me, and now I experience it many times during the week during my own meditation times.

So Integral philosophy has a place for more than one *stage* of consciousness and more than one *state* of awareness. Integral also integrates the three basic perspectives that we've been talking about. For instance, let's look at this event that's happening right now: you and I are talking. How can we see it most fully? How can we integrate all three perspectives? Well, the objective perspective would say, you have this wonderful conference call system and you've utilized the Internet and we're talking over this marvelous telephone. We've both arranged our times together. There's a lot of objective things that went into making this

conversation that we could look at scientifically and we can have great appreciation for. That's the third-person perspective on what's going on now.

The second-person perspective is what's happening *between* you and me. I feel this connection to you. When you just summarized in two minutes what I took a half-hour to say, that was beautiful. I just felt this connection between us—and that is that intersubjective I-Thou. That was me recognizing this, I think, divine thinking that you have and its movement in your life. So that's the intimate part of our experience—the intersubjective.

Then, that isn't all of it. If we're going to really see our experience here in 3D, the first-person perspective is what you're experiencing internally right now, and what I am experiencing, too—what I'm feeling and what I'm thinking: what's going on *within* me—what's going on *within* you.

It takes all three perspectives to see a complete picture of this moment right now. Integral is the first level of consciousness that recognizes that and deliberately aims for it. It says, scientists need to see all three perspectives. Psychologists need to see all three perspectives. Mystics need to see all three perspectives. *We all* need to appreciate these various aspects of our existence in the big three: of first-, second- and third-person, which is reflected in our language.

Host: How do you personally go about looking at different forms of the Christian faith and practice in the world today, without becoming arrogant about your own perspective or condescending towards others?

Paul: Well, to be arrogant is to discount the Spirit's work in bringing people to wherever they are. Now, the postmodern stage (and we're all afflicted with postmodernism), its weakness is it cannot stand hierarchies. It cannot stand levels of development, because that sounds like elitism. It sounds like, "Oh, this is somebody who is going to be arrogant about where they are." I understand that, because postmodernism has rejected all hierarchies, when they should have just rejected dominator hierarchies.

Dominator hierarchies *are* arrogant and overpowering and controlling. But there are *natural hierarchies*. For example, a molecule is more complex and more evolved than an atom. It's just part of the natural hierarchy. It doesn't mean it's better; it's just different. Age twelve is more evolved and more complex than age five. There's nothing wrong with age five. As a matter of fact, age five is a crucial age for getting to age twelve. So if I look at my granddaughter who bought a Ripstik from a guy who's just a brand new Christian, and he's in a very conservative church, all excited about Jesus and believes a bunch of things I don't believe. But I was so excited about him getting out of his warrior stage of sort of a gang, and coming into traditional Christianity: it was the spirit at work in his life. And I wouldn't want to upset that. I was thankful for it. You know my approach to spirituality probably couldn't have affected him; it would require somebody from a traditional level to do that.

So I think *discernment* is different from feeling superior or arrogant. And postmodernism doesn't like discernment. They want to say all paths are equal; everything's the same; this is as good as that. Integral says, "Ooh, lets transcend that and say *some* good is more good than other goods. Some things are truer than other things. And it's okay to recognize that. And we don't need to feel superior or arrogant about it, because God isn't superior or arrogant about it. Jesus wasn't superior or arrogant about his beliefs.

Host: So much of what you say, I find resonance with. Some of it I have to first interpret, and I use different language, a little more secular language, a little more universal language. But I'm finding resonance with the heart of what you're saying. Certainly, this Integral stance towards reality, which recognizes that we're all on developmental trajectories—individually and collectively—and that wherever we are now, we couldn't have gotten to that point without first having passed through earlier developmental stages and different places in our own evolution.

In pre-Integral understanding, what in Spiral Dynamics is called 'first tier', meaning all stages before the Integral stage, one would basically think, "I'm right, and you're wrong," or "We're right, and they're wrong," or "Everybody ought to think like us." As I'm hearing you say, and according to my own understanding of Integral philosophy, the Integral stance is that our differences aren't the problem to be solved; our differences are a solution to our problems. The fact that we're all at different places, the fact that cultures are at different places, isn't necessarily a bad thing—as long as we don't kill ourselves over those differences. In fact, we can value those differences, but not in a completely postmodernist sense—which basically says, "Well, hey. We're all different, so let's just all meet in some kind of happy place in the middle." No. There are some worldviews that are not as healthy for the planet as others.

Every stage of consciousness, every developmental perspective has its strengths and its limitations—its gifts and its shortcomings, or growing edges. And we can support each other in moving into a more intimate (again, this is my language)—into an ever more intimate relationship to reality as a whole, so that our expression of reality has more integrity—that we relate to reality in terms of all the different aspects of reality with greater integrity—and that we in some very real sense help to further this evolutionary enterprise so that future generations can look back and have gratitude for the role that we have played to ensure that the world that they inherit from us is a vibrant one, a healthy one, a thriving one—not just for humans, but for all of life. I think that the Integral frame—this inclusive evolutionary frame—is a vital one in the evolution of consciousness and culture.

Paul: Well said again. My language is more religious because my role is to translate [Spiral Dynamics](#) and [Integral philosophy](#) for helping people see that Jesus, in the metaphors of his time, was an amazingly Integral person, and to help Christians who have already said, "We want to follow Jesus," to move into this larger stance and to see Jesus in a more Integral way. And so, that's why my language is more religious and why I want my book to make a difference.

Host: Yes. I've got two last questions that I want to ask you, Paul. First, from an Integral perspective, could you give some examples of how important Christian doctrines can be reinterpreted at different stages of spiritual development?

Paul: Oh, sure! So let's say someone at the tribal level in a very sect-like, snake-charmer church has an experience of the presence of Jesus. They may really be experiencing the presence of God and the spirit in Jesus, but they will interpret that at the *tribal* level. They will see this as the *magical Jesus* who performs miracles and probably strikes a little bit of fear into their hearts.

If they're at the *warrior* stage, if they're in a fundamentalist church, and they have a spiritual experience of Jesus' presence—Jesus appears to them—it will be interpreted as a *warrior Jesus*—a warrior Christ. Now, I'm not saying their experience of God is not real and true, but their *understanding* of their experience would be the warrior Christ. So this will be the fearsome Jesus, who's come to separate the good from the bad and send the evil to hell and help people fight against sin and be warriors for Christ. That will be the kind of interpretation they give to that spiritual experience of Jesus' presence.

If they're at the *traditional* level (or mythic level) and they have experience of Jesus' presence, perhaps they will interpret this as “this is the one and only savior of the world.” This is the Jesus that everybody needs to know by name—or else they're going to go to hell. Everybody needs to say yes to this Jesus, and this Jesus has appeared to *me*, so I must be right. I must understand this in the right way.

If you're at the *modern* level and Jesus appears, you may think you're having indigestion [*laughter*]—because you don't put much store in spiritual experience because your main focus is now rational thinking. And rational thinking has produced such wonderful things—like medicine, and science, and so on. And so you may have temporarily abandoned the spiritual. But if not, you will see Jesus as someone who's come to bring reason into the Judaism of his day, and to bring a reasonable quality about that.

If you're at the *postmodern* level and you have an experience of Jesus' presence, you're all excited about it because you think spiritual experiences are really wonderful. And you will see this as a Jesus who includes everyone and who appears in different forms to different people. This Jesus is not exclusive at all, but you'll be excited about it.

So there really is a different *interpretation* of our spiritual experiences at these different stages of consciousness.

Host: That's great. Well, Paul, I have one last question—which is, do you have any particular ideas or stories to offer of how an evidential evolutionary view of world can be articulated, can be shared with others, in a way that allures Christians out of a scriptural literalism, instead of confronting them?

Paul: Oh yes, yes! You have just stated very well why I wrote my last book, [*Integral Christianity: The Spirit's Call to Evolve*](#). What I've tried to do there is use the language of Christianity (somewhat traditional language), and particularly the figure of Jesus, to help move people out of a biblical literalism—because Jesus wasn't a biblical literalist. So what I share with Christians is *Jesus*. And so what I do in my book is show how Jesus, for instance, advocated stages of growth. He said, "You have heard it said: love your neighbor, hate your enemy." Well, where had they heard that? They heard it on every page of the Old Testament. That was the previous stage. So Jesus said, "But I say to you: love your neighbor *and* love your enemy." That was the new stage, the next stage. And then he said, "And I've got more things to teach you, but you could not possibly understand it now—not at your current level of consciousness, and so the Spirit's going to come and teach you those things." Well, there's all the rest of the stages.

So Jesus had a sense of levels and stages of development. In my book I kind of open up the Bible in a new way, I think. Because to understand the Bible in Integral or evolutionary terms is to turn it from a book of silly stories into a fascinating story of the evolution of human consciousness—from a tribal level, at the beginning of Genesis, onward to the traditional level and beyond. That's why I wrote this book. I wrote it so people could say, "You know, there's another way to look at this whole Christian life and following Jesus—and this guy wrote about it here in this book. What do you think about this?" And I hope people get to talking about it. "Here's another way to understand the Trinity." I don't bash the Trinity. I think it's been incredibly important and a stable, wonderful stand, and I include the Trinity in the intimate face of God; I just want to expand it. And so I value the good things that understanding the Trinity has brought, but I want us to go beyond that. So that's what I try to do throughout my book.

Host: That's great! Well, Paul Smith, thank you so much for your progressive Christian ministry, for articulating this Integral vision of the Christian faith, and for sharing your ideas and perspectives with our listeners here on the leading edge of faith.

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