

The Rise of Evolutionary Spirituality

January 24, 2010

Presented by Loren Bergeson

This is the original presentation, before much of it had to be cut to get the length down to under 30 minutes. This presentation is based on *The Death of the Mythic God, The Rise of Evolutionary Spirituality*, by Jim Marion, rather than *Thank God for Evolution*, by Michael Dowd.

STAGES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

	Ken Wilber	<i>Spiral Dynamics</i>	Fowler/ Marion
1	Archaic	Beige	
2	Magical	Purple	
3	Mythic	Red Blue	
4	Rational	Orange	Synthetic/ Conventional Individuative/ Reflective
5	Vision-Logic	Green Yellow Turquoise	
6	Psychic		Dark Night of the Senses
7	Subtle		
8	Causal		Dark Night of the Soul
9	Nondual		

Each stage of spiritual awareness is a holon: “a part that is also a whole”. If I was a better graphical artist, I would’ve down them as concentric circles rather than showing them in a simple spreadsheet.

For example: Quarks, leptons, bosons, and gluons are individual wholes that make up a whole electron/proton/neutron, which make up whole atoms, which make up whole molecules, which make up whole cells, which make up whole organs, which make up whole people, which make up whole civilizations, etc. Therefore, you can’t skip a stage, any more than an ocean could exist without hydrogen and oxygen.

The whole concept of “evolutionary spirituality” is that our awareness **EVOLVES** from the earlier stages to the later. It is a long, drawn-out process, but it has its moments of sudden transformation (much like biological evolution). It is currently my understanding that the underlying original good news of authentic religious movements is that for us humans it is possible to accelerate the rate of evolution of spiritual growth. I’ll get back to this concept near the end of this presentation.

Jim Marion says, “As our awareness evolves, we become less egocentric and more and more universally compassionate. An infant (archaic stage) has what Freud called

“primary narcissism.” It’s not that the infant is selfish in the moral sense, it is just that the infant can recognize only himself, at first not even distinguishing himself from his mother. The infant’s first spiritual task is to realize that, much as he may wish to be the center of the universe (so the world will respond automatically to his every cry), he is distinct from other beings and objects.”

Everyone has to evolve beyond the archaic level in most ways to function in the world. However, not everyone completely grows out of the archaic stage. There are adults who fail to establish clear emotional boundaries, and can end up with a couple of different psychiatric disorders. The first is narcissism (a severe emotional disorder in which the person projects his or her own feelings outward onto everyone else, not realizing that other people have their own feelings). The second is called borderline personality disorder (in which the person constantly sees himself or herself as victimized by others and takes little or no responsibility for his or her own problems).

So do we say that such people are completely at a archaic stage of spiritual growth.? No, obviously they are able to make some distinctions in the world.

Jim Marion says there are many aspects of ourselves which go through these stages of spiritual development. Here’s a few: cognitive, psychological, psychosexual, intellectual, artistic, mathematical, moral, values, faith, emotional, etc. There are probably 20 or 30 lines of development in all.

So it’s quite likely that each of us is in multiple stages of development at any one time, with a certain stage predominant. Ken Wilber has said that one can be at level 4 in moral development and level 2 in emotional development and level 6 in cognitive development.

However, I think it’s important to note that one can completely grow out of a certain stage. Scott Peck has said that he estimates that 1 person in 5 has some level of development stuck in level one, but the good news is that 4 out of 5 of us manage get all of our levels of development past stage 1 – usually sometime in childhood.

Next important point: As well as individual rates of spiritual growth, there are also collective rates of spiritual growth. That is, at the holon level of a human culture, the whole culture tends to be predominately at a certain stage of development.

So what level might the whole of human culture currently be at? Let’s keep going through the stages.

Stage 2 is magical. Most children age 2 to 7 are at this stage. The child often cannot distinguish between her inner symbolic world and the world of external reality. The child’s inner world is a polytheistic Disneyland, full of angels, bogeymen, Santa Claus, and talking animals.

At the cultural level, magical awareness is the predominant stage of most tribal cultures. Such cultures are based upon physical (blood) relationship. Nonrelated tribes are usually seen as enemies. Tribes tend to be polytheistic.

As individuals grow from archaic to magical, we see 3 principles which will govern the spiritual path from level 1 through level 9:

- 1) All spiritual growth is a process of inner awareness,
- 2) All inner realizations are the result of personal experience “meditated upon” in some fashion.
- 3) All growth is a lessening of self-centeredness, a “death” to the old self-centered way of looking at the world and a simultaneous “rebirth” into a less self-centered way of seeing things.

Most children today cognitively and emotionally move from magical to mythical around age 7, which is why many religious groups call age 7 the “age of reason”, or “age of accountability”, at which time you’d better get yourself saved or you’ll end up in hell-fire.

At the mythic stage the child realizes that “dog” refers to the abstract class of dogs, not just the family pet. This is the conformist “law and order” stage of development. What Daddy and Mommy say is right or wrong REALLY IS right or wrong. Not only that, but Daddy and Mommy are the greatest and wisest parents in the world. If Daddy and Mommy belong to a certain religious denomination, ethnic group, income level, political party, etc., these become the “correct” and “true” ones, often the ONLY true ones, all others being inferior or false. The child’s nation is seen as the greatest in the world, blessed by God beyond all others, a nation that should always, like one’s parents, be honored and obeyed. (My country right or wrong). It doesn’t do much good to preach “tolerance” and “diversity” to someone at this stage. The person usually has no way of understanding what we are talking about. It’s not that the person has a different opinion that we do, the person actually has a different understanding of reality – if we had the same understanding we’d have similar opinions too.

Having left the world of magic behind, the person no longer believes that he can make the world do what he wants by uttering a magic word. But the person believes that his projection of the perfect parent, the mythic Sky-god, can miraculously rearrange the world to meet his every need and want. The person’s prayers petition the great God in the Sky to work miracles on his behalf, to get what he needs, and to relieve him of anything that is bothering him. God exists primarily to fulfill narcissistic wants.

Reason is beginning to emerge, and this calls for reinterpretation of the previous magical world. Religious myths and symbols, therefore, are now understood in a concrete and literal way. God actually did create the world in six days, 3 wise men did follow a star to Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to Jesus, not as other mothers do, but in some sort of miraculous fashion.

At the mythic level, the person is good if he follows the rules, and bad if he breaks them. One’s intrinsic self-worth is defined in terms of these external rules and roles, and in terms of pleasing the external Sky god.

Note that the person does not have to be told that he belongs to the one true religion. He simply assumes that everything in his immediate culture is the only true way to do things and the only true way to think. The person cannot think otherwise at this stage of spiritual development. Tolerance and understanding for other points of view and

behaviors, and compassion for people who hold these views, is not possible for a person with mythic awareness. Nor can they see any good reason for attempting such tolerance, because, for them, this would be a betrayal of their external sky-God, the very God whose rules and roles define their own self-worth.

People at the mythic level are psychologically incapable of thinking “globally”. They usually neither think about, nor care about, such matters as the global environment, health, financial condition, or population. They are normally centered upon their own financial, family, ethnic, sectarian, and nationalistic concerns. If they do think about the United Nations or another “universal” religion, they are likely to see it as a threat to themselves, their values, and their group.

Human culture began moving to the mythic level about 3000 years ago, and by the 1400’s it completely dominated Western culture, but has been slowly replaced by higher levels since then. However, very large portions of humanity are still at the mythic level. Those at the red level tend to engage in Holy Jihad against the infidels, or form street gangs, the Mafia, or white supremacist groups, etc. Those at the blue level have higher religious values, which include trying to convert the non-believers by means other than force.

Mythic cultural awareness was a big leap forward from magical awareness because you didn’t need to be a blood relative of the same tribe to belong to the group. Anyone could be converted and belong. Of course, this was far below the level of spiritual growth that Jesus and his disciples preached. But most Christians, even in the early church, were incapable of understanding Jesus except in a mythic way. They thought mythically and saw the world mythically. So Christianity, despite what Jesus and his disciples said and wrote, was soon reduced to the level of mythic consciousness, and, for the most part, has stayed that way, for most of these last 2000 years.

Let’s move on to level 4: Rational. Rational consciousness is the dominant stage of spiritual awareness in the present age. In today’s world, passage from mythic to rational is the primary spiritual task of adolescence. Teenagers encounter severe difficulty when their religious group do not understand this passage and try to keep them at the mythic level.

The rational level is so familiar to our current culture there’s hardly any need to describe it in detail. This level of awareness dominates our society and its institutions – science, government, finance, media, etc.

The cultural transition from the mythic to rational has been quite difficult. The first 4 chapters of Jim Marion’s book goes into detail. I wish I had time to recount some of the highlights, but I don’t. At the end of chapter 4, Jim Marion says “The Church’s role as a credible spokesperson for the mythic Sky God has fallen along with the Sky God himself.” A very recent example is Pat Robertson’s comments about the earthquake in Haiti being the result of making a “deal with the Devil” in the late 1700’s.

Jim Marion spends a lot of time differentiating between mythic and rational. It’s important because so many genuinely religious people, people who are sincerely seeking God, are stuck somewhere between the two levels, one foot in the mythic and

one foot in the rational. President George W. Bush seems to be a good example of this. When he calls the “war on terrorism” a contest of good vs. evil, he is thinking at the mythic level where the world is divided into the good guys (people like us) and the bad guys (people like them). But when he says we are in a struggle to preserve civilization, he is thinking at the rational level. Civilization is a rational concept that goes beyond ethnocentric or sociocentric concerns.

In 1982 James Fowler wrote a book that broke the rational level into two sub-levels. Those at the “synthetic/conventional” level are deeply concerned with what others think about them. They are still very other-directed rather than inner-directed. If they attend church, it is done as a social ritual, affirming their value as a “good person”.

At the “individuating/reflective” level, people begin to think for themselves and cease to engage in group-think. They now want to belong to a group or church only if they believe the group or church authentically reflects their values. They may even become UUs.

Despite all these advances, people at this level can still be rigid and ideological in their thinking. They have definite opinions about a host of matters and their identities are wrapped up in these beliefs and opinions.

Meaning is still sought in individual terms, as in personal achievement versus going along with the crowd. The laws of science and economics can be manipulated for personal gain. The world is a pool of resources to be exploited, and so are other people, which is why all medium and large corporations have a “Human Resources” department.

People are seen primarily in terms of economic winners and losers. Competition is seen as an important value. Everything becomes a question of competing and fighting – fighting our economic competitors, fighting for a political agenda, fighting cancer, fighting AIDS, fighting heart disease, fighting drugs, fighting racism and sexism, fighting for family values, fighting terrorism, fighting traffic, fighting for the American way of life, endless fighting.

The planet is now suffering from the excesses of the rational level. Rain forests have been destroyed. Billions of tons of toxic chemicals have been dumped. We are in period where species are going extinct at unprecedented levels.

Economics overshadows everything from Internet pop-up ads, to the length of the college sports season, to the naming of sports stadiums.

The problem is that very few people on this planet have a global perspective. They are not nearly developed enough in spiritual growth to have one. They are ruled by their own narrow needs.

The development of the separate individualized ego and the “thinking for oneself” that goes with it was a colossal achievement for human spiritual growth. But that ego has now become the principal obstacle to further human progress. We’ve come to believe that the self is the individual mind. The mind has taken us over.

On to level 5: Vision-Logic. The rational ego is still supreme. The person still identifies the “self” with the mind. But the mind now has a wider worldview. Forsaking ideologies and other “isms”, the person can now understand things from many different perspectives. The same is seen of all the sciences. It is not enough to just be an expert in one narrow field. Wholes must be studied – whole organisms, whole ecosystems, whole societies, whole historical eras, and whole institutions. Life needs to be seen and appreciated in all its pluralism and diversity. All persons, cultures, and religions need to be treated with respect.

This sounds a lot like the current state of UUism, if you ask me.

This level of spiritual awareness will be readily understood by anyone attending a major American University in the last 20 years, because the Vision-Logic level is now the dominant level of spiritual awareness in these institutions.

Since this level constitutes the leading edge of spiritual awareness in human culture, it’s important to understand it in detail. Cowan and Beck (authors of *Spiritual Dynamics*) have divided this level into three sub-levels: green, yellow, and turquoise.

Green: The Sensitive Self. Communitarian, human bonding, ecological sensitivity, networking. The human spirit must be freed from greed and dogma; feelings and caring supersede cold rationality ... Emphasis on dialogue, relationships ... Reaches decisions through reconciliation and consensus ... Strongly egalitarian, anti-hierarchy, pluralistic values, social construction of reality, diversity, multi-culturalism, relativistic value systems ... Shows a greater degree of affective warmth, sensitivity and caring, for each and all its inhabitants.

The 1960’s marked the beginning of the huge cultural shift from orange rational to green vision-logic in human culture. That shift is still gaining momentum. Obviously, the orange level still dominates, as evidenced by the political difficulty in coming up with an effective response to climate change.

However, the greens have some weak points. Jim Marion says that even though greens emphasize sensitivity to others, it would be a mistake to think that all those with green consciousness have love and compassion for all. They often have love and compassion only for those who agree with them or for those they label as victims. They often despise rednecks, Christian evangelicals, NASCAR races, hunting, professional wrestling, and rap. They are often pleased when blue institutions such as the ministry of a TV evangelist, the Boy Scouts, or the Catholic Church are scandalized and exposed.

Greens tend to move in groups and think and vote and have lifestyles like their fellow greens. Their values – as typified by supporting Ben and Jerry’s ice cream, voting Democratic, participating in an AIDS walk – are still more cultural than spiritual. Like those at orange and blue, they still seek to impose their values upon others through the political process (though their values are more expansive, tolerant, and nuanced). They see themselves in a constant battle with the worldviews of orange and blue. For this and the reasons just given, green is not at peace. It feels as besieged as orange and blue.

While the mythic-level blues and vision-logic greens are fighting, however, the so-called “center” of both Republican and Democratic parties is held firmly by orange, the rational level. That is why both parties, however ideological their blue and green core memberships, are behold to corporate interests most of all. After all, the campaign money for both parties comes primarily from corporations and large financial institutions. From corporations and their lobbyists also originate many if not most government policies.

Even the rise of green has so far not been able to displace rational consciousness as the most powerful consciousness operating in the political arena. Part of the reason is green’s own limitations. What then is beyond green? Can we look there for salvation?

At the yellow level, a person for the first time can actually see the whole spiral of spiritual growth and can appreciate contributions made at each level. Yellow persons can operate at any of the levels of spiritual growth described so far – depending on what is appropriate to the situation.

The CUA, founded in large part by UU’s in 2007, seems to be a case in point. What they’re doing for the mythic level is fascinating to me.

Yellows also begin to appreciate all the wonderful nuances of life, its great complexity, and the contributions of all people, even those with whom one disagrees.

Yellows tend to “go with the flow”, letting go of expectations that people be a certain way. They become more comfortable with uncertainty and mystery. They begin to trust in life itself, as opposed to the mythic sky god long since left behind. They trust in life as opposed to personal achievements, or rank in society, or even the purity of their own good intentions.

People at yellow tend to be able to get along with people on all the lower levels because they can “see” where these other people are coming from and act accordingly. As their own egos have shrunk, they tend not to get into partisan bickering of any kind. They love to solve complex problems and care very little whether they get the credit or not. It is solving the problems that energizes them. Yellow people learn from anybody at any level. They understand that all people have gifts and talents that can be of service to all. They do not like to waste time, to overconsume, or to create clutter and baggage.

For me, 2009 was the year I transitioned from being “mostly green” to “mostly yellow”. (Of course, when stressed, my behavior can revert down many levels – mastering stress doesn’t come until the later stages of spiritual growth, unfortunately). For me, Michael Dowd’s book TGFE was the biggest part of the transition from green to yellow. I also believe that TGFE has tremendous potential for helping those devout people who are stuck at the blue level and don’t know what to do. Maybe I can go into that some other day, but time is now running short for this talk.

I’m now 50 years old. Looking back, I can see that I transitioned through these stages of spiritual growth pretty much on the schedule that Jim Marion says most people adhere to these days.

Magical: Age 2 to 6 (I actually don't remember the transition from archaic to magical – but it must've happened since I don't think I've ever suffered from primary narcissism or borderline personality disorder).

Mythic: Age 7 to adolescence (I had a very intense mythical religious experience at a Bible camp when I was 12 years old).

Rational: adolescence to 20-something.

Green: 20-something.

And there I stayed stuck until 2009, when I finally moved on to the Yellow level. It's been very exciting and fulfilling for me.

I don't have time to go into any of the later levels in detail, nor do I have the ability since I'm not there yet. I have some ability to intellectually comprehend some of the main points of the Turquoise and Psychic levels, which means I might be ready to move on if I truly put some effort into it. Levels 7, 8, and 9, however, sound like ridiculous mumbo-jumbo to me, just as I imagine Darwinian evolution sounds like ridiculous mumbo-jumbo to a mythic level person. However, I can't dismiss the higher levels out-of-hand because Jim Marion describes so accurately the levels I've already been through. It would be very odd if his description of the higher levels turns out to be nothing but sheer delusion.

I hope those levels aren't sheer delusion, because moving on is what I want to do. I really need to continue the process I started as an infant, that is, lessening my own self-centeredness, dying to the old self-centered way of looking at the world and simultaneously being reborn into a less self-centered way of looking at things.

I'm currently disappointed that my transition from green to yellow hasn't yet had more of a positive impact on my family, on my work place, this Fellowship, and on the world in general. I want to make more of a positive impact by reaching higher levels of human potential. As Jesus said, "By their fruits you will recognize them."

Recognize who, I've wondered? I've recently come to the conclusion that Jesus was probably talking about recognizing people at level 8 or 9. That's discouraging, because at the rate I've been growing spiritually for the last 25 years I'll never get there in this lifetime.

Levels 6 thru 9 are sometimes collectively called the "mystic" levels of spiritual awareness. Much to my amazement, mystics of all religions (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Shaman, Hindu, and more) basically agree with one another on how to make progress through the mystical levels. (I'm amazed because that's quite the contrast to when I was 20 years old. I visited with about a dozen mythic level clergy people – their extreme and irreconcilable differences quickly pushed me into the orange rational level, with no going back).

So now I think I have a grasp on what is the "Good News" of all true religions. With a genuine conversion experience, the rate of spiritual growth can be accelerated. One of

the best ways to accelerate growth is to join a religious group that knows something about it.

Note that in our Fellowship's mission statement it says we "nurture" personal and spiritual growth. And indeed we do. But I'm not sure that's going to be good enough for the future. Lots of institutions nurture growth. Going to school, holding down a job, raising a family, belonging to any of a variety of groups nurtures personal and spiritual growth. For a religious community to distinguish itself, it needs to be able to demonstrate that it can accelerate spiritual growth.

Could our Fellowship do that? Could we transition from simply nurturing to accelerating growth of its members and of the community of which it is a part? Only if we understand the process of spiritual growth in the first place – and only if we engage daily the engine of growth: spiritual practices.

This is why I'm so excited about the Spiritual Practices class that our Minister, Elizabeth Greene, is going to be offering starting on February 23. This seems like a huge step in the right direction to me.

So far as I can tell, Elizabeth has worked at summarizing the wisdom of various mystical traditions, and will be sharing with us what she's learned in her Spiritual Practices class.

Currently, there is room for 7 more to sign up – I really hope we have a full class. If we overflow, hopefully we can convince Elizabeth to offer more classes later.

Let me conclude this presentation by reading the Afterwords of Jim Marion's books: *Where Do We Go As a Church?*

What millions of churchgoers will be demanding is that the Church offer them something real: real spiritual healing, real spiritual power, real mystical experience, real contact with the Communion of Saints, and real practical and knowledgeable assistance in getting to inner God realization. Those churches that respond will survive.

A service organization must provide what its customers want and need or the customers will go elsewhere. Nor can an organization supply a service, in this case spiritual and mystical experience, if it lacks the ability to perform that service, i.e., if it lacks spiritual realization itself.

Alan Watts said "Of course, there is a good argument for just letting obsolete institutions fall apart, since 'no man putteth new wine into old wineskins'" (Matt. 9:17). That too may happen, and in today's accelerating global change, it could happen faster than people think.

Where Do We Go As Individuals?

There are five main points to consider.

First, before we “go” anywhere, we should first assess where we are. In the spiritual path we cannot jump steps. We must start exactly where we are now. Where we are now is perfect. It is perfect for the lessons the Holy Spirit wants us to learn.

Second, many people ask for recommendations on meditation techniques or other spiritual practices.

There are hundreds of different spiritual practices I could recommend. I could tell you about my own favorite practices and techniques, which have varied considerably over the years. But I do not know what would be best for you. Remember, one of the things you are doing at the higher levels of the spiritual life is becoming an individuated human, a unique flower in God’s beautiful garden. No one is alike, especially at the higher levels of consciousness. So to a large extent each of us has to follow our own path.

However, I would definitely recommend meditation, for, as Ken Wilber notes, meditation is the only technique that has been scientifically proven to raise the consciousness levels of adults. All of the major spiritual traditions, East and West, are highly reliant upon meditation. So I would say meditation is an absolute must if one expects to realize higher consciousness.

But more important than anything else in realizing higher consciousness is one’s *intent*, which is the third point to consider.

One of my favorite stories is about the spiritual master who waded with his disciple into a lake. The master then had his disciple take a deep breath and put his head under water. Then the master held the disciple’s head under the water. Eventually, the disciple, who felt he couldn’t hold his breath any longer, began to squirm. The master still held his head under the water. Finally, the disciple began thrashing about wildly and broke free, grasping for air. The master said, “When you want God as much as you just wanted air, then you will have a chance at enlightenment.”

(Loren’s side note: If we want to progress beyond level 5 Vision-Logic, it is certainly going to take a ferocious intent to get there since the culture we surround ourselves with is at the green level at best – the culture can no longer carry us – we have to carry it).

Fourth, we must be patient. The spiritual path takes years. Heaven can’t be stormed overnight, nor can we completely change ourselves overnight.

Fifth, we should find a community of people who think as we do, who are as serious about the spiritual path as we are, and who can pray with us and support us. As Jesus said, two or three gathered in his name are far more effective than going it alone (Matt. 18:20).

I conclude with the last sentence of Jim Marion’s first book, *Putting on the Mind of Christ*:

I pray we all become perfect vehicles for expressing God’s Love so that, through us, the Kingdom of Heaven will come on Earth just as it already is in Heaven.