7: An Evolving Spirituality: Mysticism

“The Christian of the future will either be a mystic, one who has experienced something, or she will cease to be anything at all.”
—Karl Rahner

“Before Abraham was, I am.”
—Jesus, the Christ, The Gospel of John 8:58

“Voice of the Nova, Smile of the Dew, All of our yearning, only comes home to you.”
Love, love that fires the sun, Keep me burning.”
—Bruce Cockburn, Lord of the Starfields

The essential spiritual practice of evolutionary spirituality is to be able to tell the story of the universe as one’s own story: a primordial explosion of light and radiation; the emergence of time and space; galaxies form and supernova explosions in which all the heavy elements necessary for life on Earth are forged; our solar system; from matter life emerges on a tiny, blue planet, and evolves in staggering diversity and increasingly complexity; out of life conscious self-awareness arises in the human ones; existence is transformed into experience, as these upright creatures ponder beauty, death, meaning and purpose, possibility, and the mystery of life itself; worldviews complexify in an attempt to solve problems and in the process create new ones to solve; we begin to ask ourselves what is this Life that is living us, this yearning for transcendence seeking deeper, more beautiful and more elegant expressions of itself? In very recent history, a human being awakened to the fact that we are the interior dimension of this evolutionary process itself, consciously evolving in, through, and as us. We feel this urge to transcendence, this fire of becoming as our most real and animating quality. For those who follow Jesus of Nazareth, the anointed one, this fire has the unmistakable quality of love. As Teilhard de Chardin put it, in so doing, we have discovered fire for the second time in history of our species.
To own this story is to own a dimension of our mystic Self. It is to recognize that we are not separate from the creative process that birthed us into being. We are That in human form consciously evolving. We are not separate from the power of allurement that drew helium and hydrogen together, nor from the power of emergence that gave birth to starfields from the fire of that communion event. We are not separate from the power that initiated a sequence of irreversible transformations that eventuated in you reading these words. We are not separate from the bacteria that led this planetary parade of life through the streets of life, nor from our animal kin and our human ancestors—all our relations. This great adventure of becoming has gathered itself up in the likes of you. To ponder this story and integrate the very process that has eventuated in us and the world is to experience meaning and purpose in a direct and immediate way.

To be Christian in the 21st century is to embrace this story of radical belonging to, and identification with, a sacred narrative that bestows our deepest, empirically grounded identity. More than this, it is to ecstatically embrace and re-orient our lives as occasions of radical belonging, and then to re-orient our mode of presence upon Earth in such a way as to honor all of life as kin. It is to realize Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God, now imagined as a Kin-dom.

Our Christian identity involves an interpretative framing of this creative life impulse. As Word (or creative principle) made flesh, Christ is the center that holds all things together (Colossians 1:17), and the allurement of Love that is drawing all creation toward its completion and perfection in the divine heart. This is the cosmic Christ that animated Jesus of Nazareth, but who is also present in every atom, molecule, and cell. We interpret this evolutionary impulse, this fire of Love that is awakening in us and through us, as the heart of the Christ for the world. The Absolute Divine Being and Personhood of God explodes into the relative world of becoming as this sacred impulse to evolve and incarnate a universe of increasing beauty, truth, and goodness. To be aware of and animated by this yearning is to experience in a direct way, the yearning of the Absolute Personhood of God in the relative realm of becoming. God is becoming in, through, and as us—and in, through, and as this beautiful planet of life that is our home.

Another core practice of evolutionary spirituality, therefore, is to be able to discern the subtleties and nuances of our yearning. It is to learn the art of tracking each of our longings to its Source. As Bruce Cockburn puts it: “All of our yearning only comes home to you.” This holy longing for unity with All That Is, for deeper expressions of Love, and for our lives to be expressions of the Christ alive in us, can be temporarily realized through drugs, alcohol, and manner of addictive substances and processes. Each provides us with a taste of the promise that our souls long for, but until our small, local selves (ego) stand down, that promise inherent in the heady buzz of the first couple of drinks, will
be broken and serve merely to reinforce the belief in separation and nightmare of isolation. What is required is a community that supports us as we allow the fire of our longing to dissolve the local self, and lead us home to the heart of the divine. The community of faithful—conscious evolutionaries—know the terrain of desire intimately, and will do everything in their power to prevent this holy longing deteriorate into addictive idols. “O Love that fires the sun, keep me burning.”

This practice is a fulfillment of Jesus’ teaching that unless a seed falls into the ground and dies it cannot bear fruit. The seed that needs to fall into the ground and dies is the separate self, the part of us that feels alone and isolated. This is our local self that forgot its true story of unity with God, the universe, this planet, and each other. Science has given us back our deep identity as being literally cosmic in scope. We are the presence of the universe, in human form, evolving. Evolutionary Christian faith interprets this evidential understanding of the evolutionary process as being a divine strategy for growing a world, for manifesting the one divine heart and wisdom in glorious diversity. We claim that this holy longing for a world that our hearts know is possible (Charles Eisenstein) is a direct participation in Christ. As Paul put it, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). We become manifestations of the Christ for the world—the body, heart, and mind of Christ surrendered to and animated by the desire to complete what was started in Jesus of Nazareth.

If mysticism is essentially the felt sense of being one with All That Is, evolutionary spirituality, grounded in science, (but not limited to its core concern with the physical world), creates the space for all of us to realize our inner mystic. You could also call this expanded identity your Cosmic Self. The Christ is the unifying, creative principle, whereby the entire universe is converging, in all its diversity, toward Love. To know, in our bones, that we are one is to desire to create a future that reflects this unity. It is to consciously cultivate attitudes, beliefs, relationships, modes of governance, cultures, and social and economic systems that increasingly reflect the uniting love of God. The beauty and the grace of the whole arrangement is that the vitality or “zest” that fuels this sacred mission is primordial, unceasing, unrelenting. This evolutionary impulse comes as standard equipment in the cosmos. To use Christian language, the Christ is always, already present in every breath we take and in every step we take. And every time we imagine a better world and a better life for ourselves, the desire to translate that thought into action is fueled and sustained by the Word wanting to be made flesh. It’s less a matter of trying than it is a matter of surrendering to an irrepressible, infinite, and natural grace.

-- Bruce Sanguin
Discussion Questions (pause DVD at each appearance of the LtQ logo for conversation in small groups)

Segment 1
Rossing speaks of the transcendence of a “boundary-less space,” a “thin place” shared only with a sense of the mystery of the divine. Where is one likely to encounter such an experience? Share a personal example.

Megan McKenna quotes Roman Catholic Karl Rahner as saying: “If you are talking about God and you’re talking about anything that has to do with God, whether it’s ritual or sacraments or scriptures or morality or anything and you are sure you know what you are talking about, you are a heretic.” Discuss.

Jan Phillips answers Clayton’s question about the characteristics of an evolutionary spirituality with an appeal to oneness, unity, and a sense of interconnectedness with the whole cosmos. What are some real world implications of this suggestion?

What does Vosper’s inclusive language exercise say about people’s notion of the divine?

What is prayer, then?

Share a life experience that has been “grist” for your spiritual mill.

Segment 2
Why might an evolutionary spirituality or mysticism be a threat to the institutional church?
How do the three “i’s” (Immensity, Intensity, and intimacy) work for you as a definition of the mystical experience? How might the church cultivate the awareness of our mystic Self?

Discuss the difference between Jesus of Nazareth and the Cosmic Christ. How does imagining that Christ is present as light dispersed throughout the entire universe, showing up in both humans and other-than-human expressions of the universe, inform your spiritual journey?

Segment 3
An acknowledgement that there are many voices and that no religion has all the answers is simply part of a long history of religious evolution. Discuss.

How does Rilke’s idea of “Living the Questions” help in not getting bogged down in the unknown or in certainty?

Silence. Awe. Swirling change. Cosmic work not yet complete. We are agents of a creative world who occasionally get a glimpse of mystery. Where is your growing edge of developing your capacity for experiencing the mystical?

Additional Questions:
Phillip Clayton talks about the spiritual practice of adoration—of falling deeply in love with Mystery, creation, each other, and the unity that is inherent in evolutionary spirituality. What might the practice of adoration look like in your own spiritual life? In your faith community?
Spiritual intelligence develops like any other line of intelligence—moral, cognitive, aesthetic, kinesthetic, etc. Congregations could see themselves as having a distinctive function to act as a conveyer belt (Wilber) helping to usher people who are ready, willing, and able to explore a higher, broader or deeper expression of spiritual development. What would a curricula and spiritual practice look like that consciously seeks to move adults along a path of spiritual evolution?

**Spiritual Practice**

1. Light a candle, take some deep breaths, and repeat this sacred phrase silently: “I am the presence of the universe, in human form, evolving.” What happens for you as you identify with the process of the universe becoming, in, through, and as you?

2. Take some time to back over your life. On a sheet of paper divide your life into decades. Identify what you remember as the core desires in each decade. It doesn’t matter how many you come up with. The important thing is to be able to tell the story of your yearning as a sacred narrative. Can you imagine these as holy longings, the very presence of Christ, showing up as the impulse to become? How do you distinguish a holy longing from a destructive longing?

**The Holy Longing**

Tell a wise person, or else keep silent,
Because the mass man will mock it right away.
I praise what is truly alive,
What longs to be burned to death.

In the calm water of love nights,
Where you were begotten, where you have begotten,
A strange feeling comes over you
When you see the silent candle burning.

Now you are no longer caught
In the obsession with darkness,
And a desire for higher lovemaking
Sweeps you forward.

Distance does not make you falter
Now, arriving in magic, flying
And finally insane for the light,  
You are the butterfly, and you are gone.

And so long as you haven't experienced this:  
To die, and so to grow,  
You are only a troubled guest  
On the dark Earth.

—Goethe

Praying what we see, hear and read...

Key words and phrases in Session Seven:  
Commitment to oneness, to unity.

EVOLVING SPIRITUALITY: MYSTICISM by Michael Morwood

We celebrate  
our common origin  
with everything that exists.  
We celebrate  
the Divine Presence,  
the Ground and Sustainer  
of everything that exists,  
in whom we live and move and have our being.

We acknowledge  
this awesome mystery  
embodied  
in every human person,  
aware that  
each gives the Divine Presence  
unique and personal expression.

Here,  
now,  
the Divine Energizing Presence is everywhere present,  
visible in every human person  
who loves.

Here,  
now,  
this Presence comes to visible expression  
in each of us.
We give thanks for men and women throughout human history who sought to articulate human connectedness with the Divine and with all of creation.

We give thanks especially for Jesus of Nazareth. He inspires us to name ourselves as “temples” of the Divine Spirit and challenges us to live and act accordingly.

Jesus challenges us to look into our hearts, to examine the way we are neighbor, to overcome our prejudices, to put an end to divisions, to stretch our generosity, to overcome our fear of the mystery, to see the Divine present in our everyday loving, and to make the “reign” of love visible throughout our world.

We believe the same Spirit of Divinity that came to visibility in Jesus yearns for visible expression in us.

This is our common dignity whatever our race or creed, whatever our place or time.

We long to see our common dignity proclaimed honored and celebrated by all religions.

We pray that the one Spirit all people share may be given free and generous expression for the betterment of humanity and our world.

Amen.

(Adapted from Praying a New Story. Michael Morwood. Orbis Books. Maryknoll. NY.)