



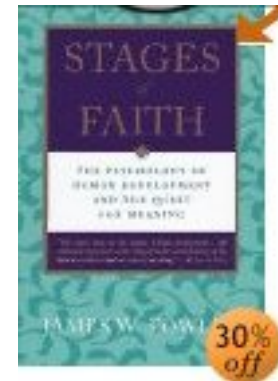
THE STAGES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

By M. Scott Peck, M.D.

Abridged by Richard Schwartz

Note from David: The views here differ from my own in a variety of ways, particularly at the advanced levels where it seems like Peck throws our many aspects of Christianity that I consider important. But there is still much insight in what he says.

Just as there are discernible stages in human physical and psychological growth, so there are stages in human spiritual development. The most widely read scholar of the subject today is [James Fowler](#) of Emory University, the writer of [Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning](#). But I first came to an awareness of these stages through my own personal experience.



The first of these experiences occurred within I was fourteen and began attending Christian churches in the area. I was mainly interested in checking out the girls but also in checking out what this Christianity business seemed to be about. I chose one particular church because it was only a few blocks down the street and because the most famous preacher of the day was preaching there. It was in the day before the "electronic church," but this man's every sermon was broadcast over almost every radio frequency across the country. At fourteen I had no trouble spotting him as a fraud. On the other hand, up the street in the opposite direction was another church with a well-known minister--not nearly as famous as the first but still probably among the top thirty in the Who's Who of

preachers of the day—a Presbyterian named George Buttrick. And at age fourteen I had no trouble spotting George Buttrick as a holy man, a true man of God. What was I to think of this with my young brain? Here was the best known Christian preacher of the day, and as far as I could discern at age fourteen, I was well ahead of him. Yet in the same Christian religion was George Buttrick, who was obviously light years ahead of me. It just didn't compute. So I concluded that this Christianity business didn't make any sense, and I turned my back on it for the next generation.

Another significant non computing experience occurred more gradually. Over the course of a decade of practicing psychotherapy a strange pattern began to emerge. If people who were religious came to me in pain and trouble, and if they became engaged in the therapeutic process, so as to go the whole route, they frequently left therapy as atheists, agnostics, or at least skeptics. On the other hand, if atheists, agnostics, or skeptics came to me in pain or difficulty and became fully engaged, they frequently left therapy as deeply religious people. Same therapy, same therapist, successful but utterly different outcomes from a religious point of view. Again it didn't compute—until I realized that *we are not all in the same place spiritually*.

With that realization came another: there is a pattern of progression through identifiable stages in human spiritual life. I myself have passed through them in my own spiritual journey. But here I will talk about those stages only in general, for individuals are unique and do not always fit nearly into my psychological or spiritual pigeonhole.

With that caveat, let me list my own understanding of these stages and the names I have chosen to give them:

STAGE I:



Chaotic, Antisocial. Frequently pretenders; they pretend they are loving and pious, covering up their lack of principles. Although they may pretend to be loving (and think of themselves that way), their relationships with their fellow human beings are all essentially manipulative and self-serving. They really don't give a hoot about anyone else. I call the stage chaotic because **these people are basically unprincipled.** Being unprincipled, **there is nothing that governs them except their own will.** And since the will from moment to moment can go this way or that, there is a lack of integrity to their being. They often end up, therefore in jails or find themselves in another form of social difficulty. Some, however, may be quite disciplined in the services of expediency and their own ambition and so may rise in positions of considerable prestige and power, even to become presidents or influential preachers.

STAGE II:



Formal, Institutional, Fundamental. Beginning the work of submitting themselves to principle-the law, but they do not yet understand the spirit of the law, consequently they are **legalistic, parochial, and dogmatic.** They are **threatened by anyone who thinks differently from them,** as they have the "truth," and so regard it as **their responsibility to convert or save the other 90 or 99 percent of humanity who are not "true believers."** They are religious for clear cut answers, with the security of a big daddy God and organization, to **escape their fear of living in the mystery of life, the mystery of uncertainty** in the ever moving and expanding unknown. Instead they choose the formulations, the stagnation of prescribed methods and doctrines that spell out life and attempt to escape fear. Yet these theological reasonings simply cover over fear, hide fear and do not transcend it in spite of with acceptance in expanding movement. All those outside of **Stage II** are perceived to be as **Stage I,** as they do not understand **Stage III** and **Stage IV.** Those who do fall, reverting from **Stage II** to **Stage I** are called "backsliders."

There is a Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart, Benny Hinn, Pat Robertson, mentality (one-sided thinking - ignorance that produces hostility) in every religion, the one-sidedness, in every ideology. Christianity cannot be condemned as responsible for the fundamentalists who claim to represent such. One just has to look at Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. to see the opposite of such thinking. You can find

the Falwell in Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism, Mohammedism and of course Christianity. That is the narrow one-sided exclusiveness that limits insight to one set of rules and one objective truth, under the literal logic or rationalism, that fails to apprehend the unseen intuitive essence of existence and ignorantly labels outsiders as misled sinners, while surrounding themselves with interior neurotic and finite walls of security and certainty. All is safe in this illusion, but all is not just, nor fair, and does not transcend prejudice that surpasses tribal identity, an identity that must be scrapped in order to bring higher consciousness of planetary cultural peace and love based on principle with intuitive insight.

There is also a Bin Laden (evil intolerance) in every religious culture and teaching, in every social, political and cultural view. Islam cannot be condemned as responsible for the extreme fundamentalists who incorporate harm and war. One just has to look at the other side within Islam, to the Sufi of compassion and peace, that of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen or Hazrat Inayat Khan. Yet the evil of extreme fundamentalism resides in all facets of society, those who would kill and destroy, torture and humiliate, all in the name of their theological and ideological views. They are of course the extreme fundamentalists, yet all forms of fundamentalism, both moderate to extreme, **Stage II** mentality, fails integration with non-acceptance, that of one-dimensional perception. And yet, in each of these same cultures, although the minority, there exists communal and mystical persons, **Stage IV** persons, those transmitting inclusiveness and compassion, who transcend all divisiveness in oneness.

STAGE III:



Skeptic, Individual, questioner, including atheists, agnostics and those scientifically minded who demand a measurable, well researched and logical explanation. Although frequently "nonbelievers," people in **Stage III** are generally more spiritually developed than many content to remain in **Stage II**. **Although individualistic, they are not the least bit antisocial. To the contrary, they are often deeply involved in and committed to social causes.** They make up their own minds about things and are no more likely to believe everything they read in the papers than to believe it is necessary for someone to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior (as opposed to Buddha or Mao or Socrates) in order to be saved. They make loving, intensely dedicated parents. As skeptics they are often scientists, and as such they are again highly submitted to principle. Indeed, what we call the scientific method is a collection of conventions and procedures that have been designed to combat our extraordinary capacity to deceive ourselves in the interest of submission to something higher than our own immediate emotional or intellectual comfort--namely truth. Advanced **Stage III** men and women are active truth seekers.

Despite being scientifically minded, in many cases even atheists, they are on a higher spiritual level than **Stage II**, being a required stage of growth to enter into **Stage IV**. The churches age old dilemma:

how to bring people from **Stage II** to **Stage IV**, without allowing them to enter **Stage III**.

STAGE IV:



Mystic, communal. Out of love and commitment to the whole, using their ability to transcend their backgrounds, culture and limitations with all others, reaching toward the notion of world community and the possibility of either transcending culture or -- depending on which way you want to use the words -- belonging to a planetary culture. They are religious, not looking for clear cut, proto type answers, but desiring to enter into the mystery of uncertainty, living in the unknown. **The Christian mystic, as with all other mystics, Sufi and Zen alike, through contemplation, meditation, reflection and prayer, see the Christ, Gods indwelling Spirit or the Buddha nature, in all people, including all the Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews and so forth, recognizing the connectedness of all humanity with God, never separating oneself from others with doctrine and scripture, recognizing that all scripture acts as fallible pointers of inspiration, unable to capture the essence of truth outside of both human perception and the linguistic straight jacket of language and articulation, that is, the words of fallible men who experienced the nature of God, that of their inner true self, and attempted to record their experience in human words, words constrained by the era of time they were written in that became compromised the moment they were**

penned and are further removed from objectivity when interpreted by us, fallible men and women who read them. (Words in Blue Font Added)

It is as if the words of each had two different translations. In the Christian example: "Jesus is my savior," **Stage II** often translates this into a Jesus who is a kind of fairy godmother who will rescue us whenever we get in trouble as long as we remember to call upon his name. At **Stage IV**, "Jesus is my savior" is translated as "Jesus, through his life and death, taught the way, not through virgin births, cosmic ascensions, walking on water and blood sacrifice of reconciliation - man with an external daddy Warbucks that lives in the sky - mythological stories interpreted as literal accounts, but rather as one loving the whole, the outcasts, overcoming prejudices, incorporating inclusiveness and unconditional love, this, with the courage to be as oneself - that is what I must follow for my salvation." Two totally different meanings.

The **Stage IV** - the mystic - views the conception of "back sliding" as the movement away from the collective consciousness and true inner nature, returning to the separate self - the ego, as opposed to the **Stage II** - the fundamentalist, whose conception of "back sliding," is the movement away from mapped out security to that of chaos. Two totally different views.

Most all young children and perhaps one in five adults fall into **Stage I**. It is essentially a stage of undeveloped spirituality. I call it antisocial because those adults who are in it (and those I have dared to call "People of the Lie" are at its bottom) seem generally incapable of loving others. Although they may pretend to be loving (and think of themselves that way), their relationships with their fellow human beings are all essentially manipulative and self-serving. They really don't give a hoot about anyone else. I call the stage chaotic because these people are basically unprincipled. Being unprincipled, there is nothing that governs them except their own will. And since the will from moment to moment can go this way or that, there is a lack of integrity to their being. They often end up, therefore in jails or find themselves in another form of social difficulty. Some, however, may be quite disciplined in the services of expediency and their own ambition and so may rise in positions of considerable prestige and power, even to become presidents or influential preachers.

From time to time people in this stage get in touch with the chaos of their own being, and when they do, I think it is the most painful experience a human can have. Usually they just ride it out unchanged. A few, I suspect, may kill themselves, unable to envision change. And some, occasionally, convert to **Stage II**.

Such conversions are usually sudden and dramatic and, I believe, God-given. It is as if God had reached down and grabbed that soul and yanked it up a quantum leap. The process also seems to be an unconscious one. It just seems to happen. But if it could be made conscious, it might be as if the person said to himself. "Anything, anything is preferable to this chaos. I am willing to do anything to liberate myself from this chaos, even to submit myself to an institution for my governance."

For some the institution may be a prison. Most people who have worked in prisons know of a certain type of "model prisoner"--cooperative, obedient, well disciplined, favored by both the inmates and the administrative population. Because he is a model prisoner, he may soon be paroled, and three days later he has robbed seven banks and committed seventeen other felonies, so that he lands right back in jail and

with the walls of the institution to govern hi, he once again becomes a "model prisoner."

For others the institution may be the military, where the chaos of their lives is regulated by the rather gentle paternalistic-and even maternalistic-structure of military society. for still others it might be a corporation or some other rightly structured organization. But for most, the institution to which they submit themselves for governance is the Church.

There are several things that characterize the behavior of men and women in **Stage II** of their spiritual development, which is the stage of the majority of churchgoers and believers (as well as that of most emotionally healthy "latency" period children). One is their attachment to the forms (as opposed to the essence) of their religion, which is why I call this stage "formal" as well as "institutional." They are in fact sometimes so attached to the canons and the liturgy that they become very upset if changes are made in the words or the music or in the traditional order of things. It is for this reason that there has been so much turmoil concerning the adoption of the new Book of Common Prayer by the Episcopal Church or the changes brought about by the Vatican II in the Catholic Church. Similar turmoil occurs for similar reasons in the other denominations and religions. Since it is precisely these forms that are responsible of their liberation from chaos., it is no wonder that people at this stage of their spiritual development become so threatened when someone seems to be playing footloose and fancy-free with the rules.

Another thing characterizing the religious behavior of **Stage II** people is that their vision of God is almost entirely that of an external, transcendent Being. They have very little understanding of the immanent, indwelling God--the God of the Holy Spirit or what Quakers call the Inner Light. And although they often consider Him loving, they also generally feel He possesses--and will use--punitive power. But once again, it is no accident that their vision of God is that of a giant benevolent Cop in the Sky, because that is precisely the kind of God they need--just as they need a legalistic religion for their governance.

Let us suppose now that two adults firmly rooted in **Stage II** marry and have children. They will likely raise their children in a stable home, because stability is a principal value for people in this stage. They will treat their children with dignity as important beings, because the Church tells them that children are important and should be treated with dignity. Although their love may be a bit legalistic and unimaginative at times, they will still generally treat them lovingly, because the Church tells them to be loving and teaches something about how to be loving. What happens to children raised in such a stable, loving home, treated with importance and dignity (and taken to Sunday school as well) is that they absorb the principles of Christianity as if with their mother's milk--or the principles of Buddhism if raised in a Buddhist home, or of Islam if raised in a Muslim home, and so on. The principles of their parents religion are literally engraved on their hearts or come to be what psychotherapists call "internalized."

But once these principles become internalized, such children, now usually late-adolescents, have become self-governing human beings. As such they are no longer dependent on an institution for their governance. Consequently they begin to say to themselves, "Who needs this fuddy-duddy old Church with its silly superstitions?" At this point they begin to convert to **Stage III** - the skeptic, individual. And to their parents great but unnecessary chagrin, they often become atheists or agnostics.

Although frequently "nonbelievers," people in **Stage III** are generally more spiritually developed than many content to remain in **Stage II**. Although individualistic, they are not the least bit antisocial. To the contrary, they are often deeply involved in and committed to social causes. They make up their own minds about things and are no more likely to believe everything they read in the papers than to believe it is necessary for someone to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior (as opposed to Buddha or Mao or Socrates) in order to be saved. They make loving, intensely dedicated parents. As skeptics they are often scientists, and as such they are again highly submitted to principle. Indeed, what we call the scientific method is a collection of conventions and procedures that have been designed to

combat our extraordinary capacity to deceive ourselves in the interest of submission to something higher than our own immediate emotional or intellectual comfort--namely truth. Advanced **Stage III** men and women are active truth seekers.

"Seek and you shall find," it has been said. If people in **Stage III** seek truth deeply and widely enough, they find what they are looking for--enough pieces to begin to be able to fit them together, but never enough to complete the whole puzzle. In fact, the more pieces they find, the larger and more magnificent the puzzle becomes. Yet they are able to get glimpses of the "big picture" and to see that it is very beautiful indeed--and that it strangely resembles those "primitive myths and superstitions" their **Stage II** parents or grandparents believe in. At that point they begin their conversion to **Stage IV**, which is the mystic communal stage of spiritual development.

There are those in **Stage III** who will not progress to **Stage IV** - that is, anything that is beyond the empirical data and observation of analysis. All intuitive knowledge, all experience outside of scientific measurement and factual construction is rejected, as the Greek frame of mind of intellectual analysis is favored and the Hindu frame of mind, that of the essence of inexpressible "being," and "existence," is rejected as fallacious. A perfect example is that of Alfred Jules Ayer in his 1936 book entitled, *Language, Truth & Logic*. Here Ayer concludes:

"We conclude, therefore, that the argument from religious experience is altogether fallacious. The fact that people have religious experiences is interesting from the psychological point of view, but it does not in any way imply that there is such a thing as religious knowledge, any more than our having moral experiences implies that there is such a thing as moral knowledge. The theist, like the moralist, may believe that his experiences are cognitive experiences, but, unless he can formulate his "knowledge" in propositions that are empirically verifiable, we may be sure that he is deceiving himself. It follows that these philosophers who fill their books with assertions that they intuitively "know" this or that moral or religious "truth" are merely providing material for

the psycho-analyst. For no act of intuition can be said to reveal a truth about any matter of fact unless it issues in verifiable propositions. And all such propositions are to be incorporated in the system of empirical propositions which constitutes science." (1)

While it may be truth that any religious or metaphysical experience and intuitive knowledge can never be used to create codes and precepts, it cannot be emphatically true that these insights or perceptual awareness can be rejected as fallacious to ambiguous reality and naked truth, that which rests outside of mental interpretive filters, and most certainly beyond scientific measurement. This must be embraced, that of emptiness, in order to progress to **Stage IV** awareness.

For those of us in professional ministry and studying in seminary, we spend an inordinate amount of time focusing on the rational element in religion- we can't seem to avoid it in the West. But no amount of Aquinas will ever serve to explain the true meaning of religious experience. Reading Aquinas is like studying a technical manual of spirituality- it destroys the very meaning of it. Rudolph Otto, in his book, *The Idea of the Holy*, writes a brief work here outlining the main points of his theory- that religion can't be understood and never can be as an empirical study- it is beyond our sense horizon. Religion is to be savored, felt- not thought about or deconstructed, like, taking an engine apart. What Otto, in other words, tries to do is to, rather than studying how a flower produces a pleasing scent and how we perceive it, says STOP and just smell the rose- and you'll understand in an instant. This is the experience beyond what Ayer requires, the verifiable propositions.

As a Lutheran, Otto understood the Catholic sacramental theology very well-that a sacrament is an outward sign of an inner grace or reality, and that signs and symbols work hand in hand- a sign points to a reality ahead, like a clap of thunder signifies a storm. A symbol conveys within itself the very reality it is expressing- for example, perhaps the greatest being a kiss between husband and wife- the reality is perfectly conveyed in the symbolic action itself, without further clarification. THAT is *experience*, true spirituality, what he means by the numinous, as applied. It is thus

existential. Too much wasted time and energy is spent in Greek thought, that of the West, as much could be spared by understanding Otto's presentation of the "holy, " as years of theology could be distilled to the contents of such books as that of Otto's.

The mystical experience can be described as having various dimensions, the 4th being described by Lex Hixon as

"In the fourth dimension, nothing is excluded from our contemplation. Primal radiance and the infinite expressions of Life are fused. Our ishtadeva or Archetype is everywhere. The holy sacraments of all cultures have become our sacraments, the ways of all beings have become our ways. Every content of consciousness proclaims the fusion of forms and the formless radiance that is their essence. At this moment, with open eyes, each of us is directly perceiving the fusion of all phenomena as primal radiance. It is not simply a contemplative notion. Even our physical senses, functioning in an ordinary manner, record this fusion. All is fusion. The [four dimensions](#) are one." (2)

[THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF CONTEMPLATION:](#) 1) Contemplating a Divine form, 2) loss of self in Divine form or presence itself, 3) Both self and Divine form or presence disappears and finally, 4) The primal radiance reveals itself as all patterns of Being, which reappear in an eternal stream, flowing from the core of the particular ishtadeva or Archetype that we are one.

In addition to other cultural mystical experiences, there are the 10 stages of kensho as described in the [Ox Herding calligraphy in Zen Buddhism.](#)

"Mysticism," a much-maligned word, is not an easy one to define. It takes many forms. yet through the ages, mystics of every shade of religious belief have spoke of unity, of an underlying connectedness between things; between men and women, between us and the other creatures and even inanimate matter as well, a fitting together according to an ordinarily invisible fabric underlying the cosmos. Remember the experience when, during community, I suddenly saw my previously hated neighbor as myself. Smelling his dead cigar butts and hearing his guttural snoring, I was filled with utter distaste for him until that strange mystical moment

when I saw myself sitting in his chair and realized he was the sleeping part of me and I the waking part of him. We were suddenly connected. More than connected, we were integral parts of the same unity.

Mysticism also obviously has to do with *mystery*. Mystics acknowledge the enormity of the unknown, but rather than being frightened by it, they seek to penetrate ever deeper into it that they may understand more--even with the realization that the more they understand, the greater the mystery will become. They love mystery, in dramatic contrast to those in **Stage II**, who need simple, clear-cut dogmatic structures and have little taste for the unknown and unknowable. While **Stage IV** men and women will enter religion in order to approach mystery, people in **Stage II**, to a considerable extent, enter religion in order to escape from it. Thus there is the confusion of people entering not only into religion, but into the same religion--and sometimes the same denomination--not only for different motives, but for totally opposite motives. It makes no sense until we come to understand the roots of religious pluralism in terms of developmental stages.

Finally, mystics throughout the ages have not only spoken of emptiness but extolled its virtues. I have labeled **Stage IV** communal as well as mystical not because all mystics or even a majority of them live in communes but because among human beings they are the ones most aware that the whole world is a community and realize that what divides us into warring camps is precisely the *lack* of this awareness. Having become practiced at emptying themselves of preconceived notions and prejudices and able to perceive the invisible underlying fabric that connects everything, they do not think in terms of factions or blocs or even national boundaries; they *know* this to be one world.

There are of course many gradations within and between the four stages of spiritual development. We actually have a name of the person between **Stage I** and **II**: the backslider. This is the kind of man (we will use men for our example for the sake of simplicity: women also fall in between but tend to have slightly more subtle styles of doing so) who drinks, gambles, and leads a generally dissolute existence until some

good **Stage II** folk come along and have a chat with him and he is saved. For the next two years he leads a sober and righteous and God-fearing life until one day his found back in a bar, a brothel, or at the racetrack. He is saved a second time, but once again he backslides, and continues bouncing back and forth between **Stage I** and **Stage II**.

Similarly, people bounce back and forth between **Stage II** and **Stage III**. There is the kind of man, for example, who says to himself: "it isn't that I don't believe in God anymore, the trees, the flowers and the clouds are so beautiful that obviously no human intelligence could have crated them; some divine intelligence must have set it all in motion billions of years ago, but it's just as beautiful out on the golf course on Sunday morning as it is in church, and I can worship my god just as well there." Which he does for a few years until his business undergoes a mild reversal, and in panic he says to himself, "Oh, my God, I haven't been praying." So back to church he goes for a couple of more years until there is an upturn in the economy (for all I know because he's been praying so hard), and gradually he begins to slip back out onto his **Stage III** golf course again.

Similarly, we see people bouncing back and forth between **Stage III** and **Stage IV**. A neighbor of mine was one such person. By day Michael expressed his highly analytic mind with brilliant accuracy and precision, and he was just about the dullest human being I have ever had to listen to. Occasionally in the evening, however, after he had drunk a bit of whisky or smoked a little marijuana, Michael would begin to talk of life and death and meaning and glory and become "spirit filled," and I would sit listening at his feet enthralled. But the next day he would exclaim apologetically, "God, I don't know what got into me last night; I was saying the stupidest things. I've got to stop smoking grass and drinking." I do not mean to bless the use of drugs for such purposes but simply to state the reality that in his case they loosened him up enough to flow in the direction he was being called, from which in the cold light of day he retreated back in terror to the "rational" safety of **Stage III**.

Perhaps, predictably, there exists a sense of threat among people in the different

stages of religious development. Mostly we are threatened by people in the stages above us. Although they often adopt the pretense of being "cool cats" who have it "all together," underneath their exteriors **Stage I** people are threatened by just about everything and everyone. **Stage II** people are not threatened by **Stage I** people, the "sinners." They are commanded to love sinners, but they are very threatened by the individualists and skeptics of **Stage III**, and even more by the mystics of **Stage IV**, who seem to believe in the same sorts of things they do but believe in them with a freedom they find absolutely terrifying. **Stage III** people, on the other hand, are neither threatened by **Stage I** people nor by **Stage II** people (whom they simply regard as superstitious), but are cowed by **Stage IV** people, who seem to be scientific minded like themselves and know how to write good footnotes, yet somehow still believe in this crazy God business.

It is extremely important for teachers, healers, and ministers (and we are all of us teachers, healers, and ministers whether we like it or not; our only choice is whether to be good teachers, healers, and ministers or bad ones) to be cognizant of this sense of threat between people in the different stages of this sense of threat between people in the different stages of spiritual growth. Much of the art of being a good teacher, healer, or minister consists largely in staying just one step ahead of your patients, clients, or pupils. If you are not ahead, it is unlikely that you will be able to lead them anywhere, but if you are two steps ahead, it is likely that you will lose them. If people are one step ahead of us, we usually admire them. If they are two steps ahead of us, we usually think they are evil. That's why Socrates and Jesus were killed; they were thought to be evil.

Similarly, it is very difficult to reach down two or more steps. For this reason a **Stage IV** person, even though advanced himself or herself, will not be the best therapist for many. Generally speaking, **Stage II** people and programs offer the best therapy for **Stage I** people. Psychiatrists and psychologists in this country - primarily a **Stage III** group - have generally served their culture well as guides for those making the journey out of a dependent **Stage II** mentality. **Stage IV** therapists do best leading highly independent people toward a recognition of the mystical interdependence of

this world. Most all of us are pulling someone up with one hand while we ourselves are being pulled up by the other.

An understanding of the stages of spiritual development is important for building community. A group of only **Stage IV** people or only **Stage III** people or only **Stage II** people is, of course, not so much a community as a clique. A true community will likely include people of all stages. With this understanding, it is possible for people in different stages to transcend the sense of threat that divides them and to become a true community.

In my experience the most dramatic example of this possibility occurred in a relatively small community-building group I led several years ago. To this two-day group of twenty-five there came ten fundamentalist, **Stage II** Christians, five **Stage III** atheists with their own guru - a brilliant, highly rational trial lawyer - and ten **Stage IV** mystical Christians. There were moments I despaired that we would never make it into community. The fundamentalists were furious that I, their supposed leader, smoked and drank and vigorously attempted to heal me of my hypocrisy and addiction. The mystics equally vigorously challenged the fundamentalists sexism intolerance and other forms of rigidity. Both of course were utterly dedicated to converting the atheists. The atheists in turn, sneered at the arrogance of us Christians in even daring to think that we had gotten hold of some kind of truth. Nonetheless, after approximately twelve hours of the most intense struggle together to empty ourselves of our intolerances, we became able to let one another be, each in his or her own stage. And we became a community. But we could not have done so without the cognitive awareness of the different stages of spiritual development and the realization that we were not all "in the same place," and that that was literally all right.

My experience suggests that this progression of spiritual development holds true in all cultures and for all religions. Indeed, one of the things that seems to characterized all the great religions--Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism--is their capacity to speak to people in both **Stage II** and **Stage IV**. In fact, I suspect this

is why they are great religions. It is as if the words of each had two different translations. Let us take a Christian example. "Jesus is my savior." At **Stage II** this is often translated into a Jesus who is a kind of fairy godmother who will rescue me whenever I get in trouble as long as I remember to call upon his name. And that's true. He will do just that. At **Stage IV**, "Jesus is my savior" is translated as "Jesus, through his life and death, taught me the way I must follow for my salvation." Which is also true. Two totally different meanings, but both of them true.

Again in my experience, the four stages of spiritual development also represent a paradigm for healthy psychological development. We tend to be born **Stage I** creatures. If the home into which we are born is stable and secure, by mid childhood we have become law-abiding, rule-following people. If the home at all supports and encourages our uniqueness and independence, in adolescence we routinely question the laws, the rules, and the myths as budding skeptics. And if the natural forces of growth that lead us to question are not excessively resisted by threats of damnation from church or parents, after a while, in adulthood we slowly begin to understand the meaning and spirit that underlie the letter of the myth and the letter of the law. They may, however, be destructive forces in the home environment which causes people to become "fixated" in one stage or another. Conversely there are rare, difficult to explain cases of people who develop further and faster than would be expected. The wonderful and probably accurate book *Mister God, This Is Anna*, for instance, described a seven year-old girl already well into **Stage IV**, despite a presumably chaotic early childhood.

It is also important to remember that no matter how far we develop spiritual, we retain in ourselves vestiges of the previous stages through which we have come, just as we retain our vestigial appendix. I don't suppose I could be writing this were I not basically a kind of **Stage IV** person. But I can assure you that there exists a **Stage I** Scott Peck, who at the first sign of any significant stress is quite tempted to lie and cheat and steal. I keep him well encased, I hope, in a rather comfortable cell, so that he won't be let loose upon the world. And I am able to do this only because I acknowledge his existence, which is what Jungian psychologists mean by the

"integration of the Shadow." Indeed, I do not attempt to kill him, if for no other reason than that I need to go down into the dungeon from time to time and consult him, safely ensconced behind the bars, when I am in need of a particular kind of "street smarts." Similarly, there is a **Stage II** Scott Peck, who in moments of stress and fatigue would very much like to have a Big Brother or Big Daddy around who would give him some clear-cut, black-and-white answers to life's difficult, ambiguous dilemmas and some formulas to tell him how to behave, relieving him of the responsibility of figuring it all out for himself. And there is a **Stage III** Scott Peck, who if invited to address a prestigious scientific assembly, under the stress of such an occasion would want to regress to thinking. Well, I better just talk to them about carefully controlled, measurable studies and not mention any of this God business.

The development of the individual through these spiritual or religious stages is that process to which we most properly give the name conversion. I have mentioned that conversions from **Stage I** to **Stage II** are usually sudden and dramatic conversions from **Stage III** to **Stage IV** are generally gradual. The first time I ever spoke of these stages was at a symposium in conjunction with the psychologist Paul Vitz, author of *Psychology as Religion*. During the question and answer period Paul was asked when he had become a Christian. He scratched his head for a moment and said bemusedly, "Let's see; it was somewhere between 1972 and 1976." Compare this with the more familiar image of the man who will tell you: "It was at eight-thirty in the evening of the seventeenth of August!"

It is during the process of conversion from **Stage III** to **Stage IV** that people generally first become conscious that there is such a thing as spiritual growth. There is a potential pitfall in this consciousness, however, and that is the notion some have at this point that they themselves can *direct* the process. "If I take a bit of Sufi dancing here," they tell themselves, "and visit a Trappist monastery there, and do a bit of Zen meditation as well, along with some zest, I will reach nirvana." But that's not how it operates, as the myth of Icarus tells us. Icarus wanted to reach the sun (which symbolizes God). So out of feathers and wax he built himself a pair of wings. But as soon as he even began to get close to the sun, its heat melted his man-made wings

and he plummeted to his destruction. One meaning of this myth, I believe, is that we cannot get to God under our own steam. We must allow God to do the directing.

In any case, whether sudden or gradual, no matter how different in other respects, **Stages I to II** and **Stages III to IV** conversions do have one thing in common: a sense on the part of the persons converted that their own conversions were not something they themselves achieved but rather gifts from God. Certainly I can say of my own gradual **Stages III to IV** conversion that I was not smart enough to find my way alone.

As a part of the process of spiritual growth, the transition from **Stage II to Stage III** is also a conversion. We can be converted to atheism or agnosticism or, at least, skepticism! Indeed, I have every reason to believe that God has a hand in this part of the conversion process as well. One of the greatest challenges, in fact, facing the Church, is how to facilitate the conversion of its members from **Stage II to Stage IV** without them having to spend a whole adult lifetime in **Stage III**. It is a challenge that the Church has historically avoided rather than begun to face. As far as I am concerned, one of the two greatest sins of our sinful Christian Church has been its discouragement through the ages, of doubt. In so doing, it has consistently driven growing people out of its potential community, often fixating them thereby in a perpetual resistance to spiritual insights. Conversely, the Church is not going to meet this challenge until doubt is properly considered a Christian virtue--indeed a Christian responsibility. We neither can, nor should skip over questioning in our development.

In fact it is only through the process of questioning that we begin to become even dimly aware that the whole point of life is the development of souls. As I said, the notion that we can totally direct this development is a pitfall of such awareness. But the beauty of the consciousness that we are all on an ongoing spiritual journey and that there is no end to our conversion far outshines that one pitfall. For once we become aware that we are on a journey--that we are all pilgrims--for the first time we can actually begin to cooperate consciously with God in the process. This is why Paul

Vitz, at the symposium I mentioned, correctly told the audience: "I think Scott's stages have a good idea of validity, and I suspect that I shall be using them in my practice, but I want you to remember that what Scotty calls **Stage IV** is the beginning.

TRANSCENDING CULTURE

The process of spiritual development I have described is highly analogous to the development of community. **Stage I** people are frequently pretenders: they pretend they are loving and pious, covering up their lack of principles. The first, primitive stage of group formation--pseudocommunity--is similarly characterized to pretense. The group tries to look like a community without doing any of the work involved.

Stage II people have begun the work of submitting themselves to principle--the law, but they do not yet understand the spirit of the law. Consequently they are legalistic, parochial, and dogmatic. They are threatened by anyone who thinks differently from them, and so regard as their responsibility to convert or save the other 99 percent of humanity who are not "true believers." It is this same style of functioning that characterizes the second stage of the community process in which the group members, rather than accepting one another try vehemently to fix on another. The chaos that results is not unlike that existing among the various feuding denominations or sects within or between the world's different religions.

Stage III, a phase of questioning, is analogous to the crucial stage of emptiness in community formation. In reaching for community the members of a group must question themselves, "Is my particular theology so certain--so true and complete--as to justify my conclusion that these other people are not saved?," they may ask. Or, "I wonder to what extent my feelings about homosexuals represent a prejudice bearing little relation to the reality?" Or, "Could I have swallowed the party line in thinking that all religious people are fanatics?" Indeed, such questioning is the required beginning of the emptying process. We cannot succeed in emptying ourselves of preconceptions, prejudices, needs to control or convert, and so forth, without first becoming skeptical of them and without doubting their necessity. Conversely,

individuals remain stuck in **Stage III** precisely because they do not doubt deeply enough. To enter **Stage IV** they must begin to empty themselves of some of the dogmas of skepticism such as: "Anything that can't be measured scientifically can't be known and isn't worth studying." They must begin to doubt even their own doubt.

Does this mean, then, that a true community is a group of all **Stage IV** people? Paradoxically the answer is yes and no. It is no because the individual members are hardly capable of growing so rapidly as to totally discard their customary styles of thinking when they return from the group to their usual worlds. But it is yes because in community the members have learned how to behave in a **Stage IV** manner in relation to one another. Among themselves, they all practice the kind of emptiness, acceptance, and inclusiveness that have characterized the behavior of mystics throughout the ages. They retain their basic identity as **Stages I, II, III, or IV** individuals. Indeed knowledge of these stages is in part so important because it facilitates the acceptance of one another as being in different stages -- different places spiritually. Such acceptance is a prerequisite for community. But wonderfully, once such acceptance is achieved--and it can be achieved only through emptiness--**Stage I, II, and III** men and women routinely possess the capacity to act toward one another as if they were **Stage IV** people. In other words, out of love and community to the whole, virtually all of us are capable of transcending our backgrounds and limitations. So it is genuine community is so much more than the sum of its parts. It is, in truth, a mystical body.

The individual journey through the stages of spiritual development is also a journey in and out of culture. Erich Fromm once defined socialization as the process of "learning to like to do what we have to do." It is what happens when we learn to feel natural about going to the bathroom in the toilet. The conversion from **Stage I** to **Stage II** is essentially a leap of socialization or enculturation. It is that point at which we first adopt the values of our tribal, cultural religion and begin to make them our own. Just as **Stage II** people tend to be threatened, however, by any questioning of their religious dogmas, so they are also "culture-bound"--utterly convinced that the way things are done in their culture is the right and only way. And just as people

entering **Stage III** begin to question the religious doctrines with which they were raised, so they also begin to question all the cultural values of the society into which they were born. Finally, as they begin to reach for **Stage IV**, they also begin to reach toward the notion of world community and the possibility of either transcending culture or -- depending on which way you want to use the words -- belonging to a planetary culture.

Aldous Huxley labeled mysticism "the perennial philosophy" because the mystical way of thinking and being has existed in all cultures and all times since the dawn of recorded history. Although a small minority, mystics of all religions the world over have demonstrated an amazing commonality, unity. Unique though they might be in their individual personhood, they have largely escaped free from -- transcended -- those human differences that are cultural.

FOOTNOTES:

- 1 Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth & Logic*, pp. 119-120
- 2 Lex Hixon, *Coming Home, The Experience of Enlightenment in Sacred Traditions*, pp. 197-198

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