THE STAGES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

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. But I first came to an awareness of these stages through my own personal experience.

The first of these experiences occurred when 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 days 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 noncomputing 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 neatly into any 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
STAGE II: Formal, institutional
STAGE III: Skeptic, individual
STAGE IV: Mystic, Communal
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 service of expediency and their own ambition and so may rise to 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 him, 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 tightly 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 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 for 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—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.

"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
spoken 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.

The mystery, in 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 for 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 Godfearing life until one day he is 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, the clouds are so beautiful that obviously no human intelligence could have created 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 whiskey 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.(2) 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 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 ever 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 characterize 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 translations, 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. There may, however, be destructive forces in the home environment which cause 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. (3)

It is also important to remember that no matter how far we develop spiritually, 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 encaged, 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 EST, 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 deal 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."
NOTES


2. See the early "Don Juan" books by Carlos Castenada (Simon and Schuster) for a description of the role of psychoactive drugs in his Stage III to Stage IV conversion. The first of these was *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, 1973.