Book Review, Reverent Irreverence: integral Church for the 21st Century; From Cradle to Christ Consciousness, by Rev. Tom Thresher, PhD

By

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I am pleased to review this book on the Integral Church written by Tom Thresher, who is the pastor of an Integral Church in Western Washington. In his introduction, Tom makes the earnest statement that the mission of an Integral Church is “ to provide a ‘conveyor belt’ for the evolution of consciousness from infancy to divinity, that is, from cradle to Christ-consciousness” (pxvi), and that the “objective of the integral church is to facilitate human awakening from cradle to Christ-consciousness in one church” (p. xviii). Borrowing from Brian Swimme, he notes that foundational to this mission and objective is the acknowledgement and understanding that the symbolic realm provides a power that makes us a force and shapes human choice. Out of symbolism flows the meanings we make from our changing developmental story and Thresher laces stories throughout this book beginning with his own personal story in the introduction and a developmental Creation story in Chapter one.

This foray into the journey of growing an Integral Church begins with a summary of AQAL elements: quadrants, levels, lines, states and types. It then goes into the manifestations of “churchdom” quadratically at the different levels of development. Thus, he explores a story using perspectives from each developmental level to focus on foundational categories of traditional Christianity while asking the questions from each level: “Who am I? What is the purpose of life? Where are we going?” (52). He supports this developmental approach to perspective taking in the Integral Church with a chapter using scripture (John 3:16, Matthew 4:1-11, Matthew 28:18, and others) to show different developmental interpretations that can be taken of these verses. In addition he uses the Liturgical Year as a metaphor for awakening, from Advent (the dawning of awareness), through Christmas (breakthrough comprehension), Epiphany (exploration of the new awareness) Lent (the process of subtracting and destroying the questioner), Holy week (the cliff), Easter (Ahhhhh, or resurrection) to Pentecost (integration). These chapters, 1-4, provide the foundational thought through which the conveyer belt Thresher proposes is supported.

The rest of the book focuses on the specifics of how to apply Integral Theory to churches in a way that will support a conveyer belt through the developmental perspectives from early through late stages. He begins this application from the ground up, tracing the integral approach to support that might be taken for a couple whose developmental levels have grown apart, producing marriage struggles, divorce and the subsequent issues of family. He declares three areas that an Integral Church can engage for the everyday struggles of the human family. First, he proposes to celebrate each of the varying developmental perspectives and their valuable contribution to awakening by finding ways to nurture each perspective. Second, he suggests that it is important to provide a home for those who are transforming from one level to the next by supporting their growth into an expanded Christian perspective. Third, he advocates for the sustenance of a new vital role of churches into American Culture by supporting this new expanded understanding of Christian faith. He then traces more specifically how lines, states, developmental stages, types, and the quadrants (the 123 of God) might apply specifically to the support roles an Integral Church might provide for their patrons.

Thresher moves from the personal grounded suggestions for church patrons to describe the role and functions of an Integral Church, itself, of which the church he pastors is the exemplar in this book. He advocates a complex systemic approach using these three axioms: attend to the Divine, be present, and do not take yourself seriously. Then he gives specific examples of how the Suquamish Church has used the Integral Map to develop its programs. This includes programs such as TAGS (talking about God stuff); Transformational inquiry using first second and third person inquiry approaches; Call to Care, which supports caring for one another; Many Stories…One Community, which serves the post modern faith community; Medicine Wheel, which supports the cross cultural needs related to the Port Madison Indian Reservation near by; Woman’s book Club; Meditation; Choir; Enlightened Intensive; and Christian Education. Each of these areas is outlined relative to quadrants, levels, lines, states and types.

The concluding chapter summarizes the premises of an Integral Church by using the conceptual umbrella of “the big three”(174): personal and spiritual development (upper left quadrant), worldviews and cultural stories (lower left quadrant) and action in the world (upper and lower right quadrants). Thresher closes his book with the words “…spiritual formation (is) the remaining domain where the church has a comparative advantage. I am glad to see this for I am convinced it is the true heritage and purpose of church. Integral Church reclaims that heritage and carries it into the 21st century. I hope you will join us(175).”

I am heartened by this book as one of the first to outline a live example of the process of implementing an Integral conveyer belt to spirituality in one church. It always takes courage to begin and to experiment with new theoretical ideas; these initial experiments in applying Integral ideas are usually messy, where the theory meets the swampy but rich loam of society’s hypnosis related to how churches structures are supposed to be. Tom seems to have used many of the traditional structures (i.e., rummage sales, choir, etc) but portraying them through entirely different and more Integral lenses. For those of us who have been applying the Integral Frame for a while in various ways, some of these applications may seem obvious. However, I sense that there are very few churches that have actually embarked on a specific journey to bring an Integral focus to every part of their existence AQUALly.

In my reading, there were a few fingernails on the blackboard; to name individual people inhabiting the Unitive (Indigo) level of consciousness without having a specific inventory showing them inhabiting this level feels a bit reckless to me; and if inventories were taken verifying the levels of these people, it seems that a reference to their permission to share their scores would have been in order. Otherwise, making assumptions like this, to me, has a diminishing effect on the verification and vitality for the very notion of Integral, which this book is so much trying to support. Also a few typos were missed, which one would always hope would be caught editorially before a book is published. All in all, however, I applaud the steps Tom Thresher has taken to begin to implement the Integral Frame in his church and his attempts at constructing a developmental conveyer belt. His model is a stepping-stone for the many traditionally based Christian churches that might be interested in an Integral approach, and supports their courage to begin their own Integral applications. We need many such experiments to begin to understand what the term “conveyer belt” means and in Threshers book this work has clearly begun.