

EVANGELISM AND SPIRAL DYNAMICS

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Question: does Spiral Dynamics theory explain why we are instinctively changing our approaches to evangelism?

THE THEORY

In the 1970s Clare Graves developed a social theory that just might explain the varied mission fields we find ourselves in and the communication mismatch that frequently occurs when we try to proclaim the gospel.

The Anglican Ordinal asks ministers to proclaim the good news of Jesus 'afresh to every generation', and Graves' theory suggests several reasons why this is getting more complex. Graves was developed and popularised by Beck, Cowan and more recently integrated with Ken Wilbur's theory of everything.

Essentially it is a developmental model of society showing that at various points in history whole sections of the population undergo transitions in the way they perceive and interpret the reality surrounding them. As we cannot understand everything that we see and sense, we filter them through our prevailing values or worldview. These filters determine our response to arguments and events as surely as our genes determine our biological traits. They are called 'memes' and collectively 'v-memes' where 'v' is for value.

TRANSITIONS

You will have gone through a number of these transitions in your lifetime. The first v-meme represents primitive

humanity which most of us leave behind in infancy. This gives way to a purple v-meme – a mystical/magical way of interpreting the world – the stuff of the tooth fairy, shaman, and Frank Peretti novels.

We then develop through the red v-meme in packs or groups where there is a clear leader (think: play ground pecking order or tribal society) to a stable blue level of civilisation and order where ideas and truth claims are settled and reassuringly absolute.

The blue v-meme works with hierarchical institutions and religion very well. Some of the nicest churches to be in are blue. With reassuring confident worship, and clarity of teaching to anchor you from the storms of life, many people will happily rest in blue, and live out good and productive Christian lives. With 'faith like a child' and acceptance of authority there is much to be gained from this v-meme... but!

FROM BLUE TO ORANGE

...But as happened with the enlightenment, and tends to happen earlier and earlier with our schooling, the rational mind at some point wants to ask lots of questions about purpose and truth. A quite strident v-meme emerges beyond this of exploration and achievement, asking unsettling questions and trying to maximise your impact and significance in the world.

This orange v-meme can be fuel for missionary enterprise and zeal for atheists, evangelicals and liberals alike



– each following their quest for truth and trying to influence those around them with and through rational argument.

In the light of this modernistic fervour a new v-meme emerged, the green v-meme. This is the colour of the ‘tree-hugger’, environmentalist, pluralist, post-evangelical, and all those ‘wishy-washy’ older church leaders that red-blue student movements are fond of maligning. It trumpets the language of tolerance, and is the trajectory of most educational/media programmes today. Our children are enculturated in this v-meme from infancy.

It is a post-orange worldview where diversity and personal experience are values in and of themselves, and doctrinaire orange absolutists (be they Richard Dawkins or John Piper) are viewed with considerable suspicion.

So far, so familiar, yes? But this is where Spiral Dynamics gets interesting for us.

HOW WE ENGAGE WITH SPIRAL DYNAMICS

Firstly, it shows that not all the population goes through all these transitions. Some are more than happy to stay red – doing what they’re told by an authority figure in a small pack/group/gang. It takes red to reach red as a uniformed Brixton Street Pastor might reach out to a gang.

Secondly, like a set of Russian dolls, all of us retain the previous v-memes in us, even after adding on another v-meme. Hence you can easily return to the magical/mystical v-meme when faced with certain death which leaves you wanting a miraculous cure. Faced with a sudden threat from an attacker a primitive beige survival response is better for the individual than a green attempt to see the attack from their point of view.

Thirdly, there is the Justin Welby factor.

Later versions of Spiral Dynamics (Spiral Dynamics Integral – SDi) suggest that all of the v-memes described are about ‘first tier levels of consciousness’. What comes beyond that is a ‘second tier level of consciousness’ that has the ability to integrate all that is good from the preceding v-memes.

In the second tier you can purposefully select what level you wish to engage at with the people you are seeking to influence. ‘To the red I became like a red, to the orange I became like an orange’. These second tier levels are the yellow and aqua v-memes. Apparently they constitute only 1.0% and 0.1% of the current population, and, according to the recent Church of England leadership training, where this theory has been presented, our Archbishop happily sits in the yellow v-meme.

You might investigate SDi, and be horrified because of the influence of Ken Wilbur’s Buddhist philosophy, or the gnostic sounding nature of this special second tier revelation. You might be reassured or dismayed by Richard Rohr or Rob Bell’s fascination with it. But if you care about reaching souls in this nation you shouldn’t dismiss its empirically based descriptive power too readily.

We have churches dominated by the blue v-meme, where individual pastors/leaders are wrestling with orange issues. We have a sub-culture of Christian young people hiding away in a purple mystical v-meme hoping that the world is actually a different place. We have a schooling system allegedly about an orange engagement with truth, but more often than not pushing for a green universalism. And we have a whole society no longer capable of ‘turning back’ and believing the good news, because they have nowhere to turn back to.

Much of our strategy with green level 21st Century intelligentsia has been to say return with me to my orange level, or come and enjoy the community safety of my blue level, or let me meet your purple level mystical/magical need through my prayer ministry.

But what if we tried to lead such people not backwards, but forwards? What if there is a Welby level – where you can truly appreciate all of the preceding v-memes for the health and good each brings?

Most non-churchgoers I interact with instinctively see the advantages of the green over the orange. But does the yellow/aqua level allow us to say to them: ‘Yes. It is good that you can see the good of transcending petty fights over religious theory. Yes, it’s good to care deeply about the environment. Yes, it is good to see what is healthy and right in all cultures and not think too highly of ourselves... But come with me also to this further place where you learn to see the world not just through the more helpful aspects of pluralism, but also reengage with a quest for truth and even learn to have faith like a child.’

If we transcend culture in this way perhaps a truly enlightened society will once again find that there are some things to be learnt that can only be learnt from a place of trust.

Maybe it’s time to transcend post-modernity not trip over it.

TO FIND OUT MORE

A fascinating podcast on this issue can be found on The Liturgist Podcast (episode 5) with Michael Gungor <http://www.theliturgists.com/podcast/2014/9/23/episode-5-spiral-dynamic>.