



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

“The Religion of Tomorrow”

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Ken Wilber (1949-) is a contemporary American philosopher who has written a host of books related to what he calls **Integral Theory**. Wilber has a gift for synthesizing information across diverse fields of studies, and then designing helpful charts and graphs depicting how various intersecting systems can mutually inform one another. I find his frameworks helpful for reflecting on the promise and potential of Unitarian Universalism in the twenty-first century.

Similar to the way that Wilber seeks to integrate various fields of study, we as UUs have—not one source, or even two or three sources—but six broad sources. Underneath the big tent of Unitarian Universalism, we have the **freedom to explore across traditional boundaries and challenge one another to account for perspectives we might otherwise neglect—for example:** mystics, social justice advocates, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Daoists, Humanists, scientists, Pagans, adherents of indigenous spiritualities and more, are all welcome to join together here in building a single beloved community.

Consider, for example, the rainbow mobile hanging from the ceiling of our atrium, the room that most of you passed through to enter the sanctuary. Symbols from the world’s religious and spiritual traditions hang alongside symbols of humanism, atheism, and science. As UUs, we seek to explore what it means to be a religious movement that takes seriously the paradigm-shifting discoveries of Copernicus, Darwin, Freud, Einstein, Hubble, and so many others. As a line from one of our hymns says, we seek a **“freedom that reveres the past, but trusts the dawning future more.”** In that spirit, what might a religion of the future look like?

I have been reflecting on this question over the past few weeks as I have made my way through Ken Wilber's latest book **The Religion of Tomorrow: A Vision for the Future of the Great Traditions**. Unless you are feeling particularly ambitious, I would not recommend starting with this latest volume from Wilber because it's a bit of a doorstop of a book, weighing in at more than 800 pages. In comparison, **The Integral Vision** is a short, accessible introduction to Wilber. **Integral Spirituality** is Wilber's earlier, much briefer (only 336 pages) book on religion. And **Integral Life Practice** is an accessible guide to putting Wilber's theory into practice.

To give you a few highlights from Wilber's latest book, he has four touchstones of what a "Religion of Tomorrow" might look like: **waking up, growing up, cleaning up, and showing up**. Today I will be focusing primarily on the first two: Waking up and Growing up. We've previously explored "Cleaning up," Wilber's term for shadow work, which includes practices like therapy that help address the unconscious and repressed aspects of ourselves. And "showing up," for Wilber, refers to the flourishing that can happen when we focus on the first three aspects of ourselves: Waking up, Growing up, and Cleaning up.

But let's start with "Waking up." Many of you have heard me say previously that Buddha is not anyone's name. Rather, it's a *title* meaning "Awakened One" a title given to a historical figure named Siddhartha Gautama. Similar to a Buddhist "Awakening" or "Enlightenment" experience, Wilber's term **"Waking up" refers to practices that help us progress through different "states" of consciousness.**

The easiest state of consciousness to access is the **"waking state."** That's the one that presumably most of us find ourselves in right now, in which some combination of the five senses (hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch) help us perceive the physical world. Hopefully no more than a few of us have drifted off in the last few moments into the more subtle **"dream state"** of consciousness. Through spiritual practices like meditation, one can access further states of consciousness. To the extent that language can adequately describe such advanced states, some traditional descriptions include **"pure empty Witness," "unqualified pure Awareness," and "unity consciousness"** (86-88).

In an effort to describe the shifts in consciousness that can happen through practices like meditation, Robert Kegan of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, says, **"I know of no**

better way to summarize development than that the *subject* of one stage becomes the *object...of the next stage*” (105). Let me say more about what that means. If you have experimented some with meditation, I suspect you have experienced—even if you didn’t know the name for it—what is sometimes called the “Witness.” Part of what one is doing during the early stages of learning to meditate is cultivating a capacity to *witness* the flow of various sensations—continually “arising and passing away”—that we have come to think of as our “self.”

A common part of the human condition is to become caught up in a cycle of unreflective stimulus-response. For instance, someone says something, and I react immediately with anger, sadness, joy, fear, or shame. In contrast, meditation can help you cultivate the ability to reflectively *notice* what is going on. As my meditation teacher says, we’re seeking to “**Notice what we notice while we’re noticing it.**”

When someone continually does or says something we don’t like, we can cultivate a capacity to *notice* what is happening—witnessing the situation and ourselves in it with curiosity and sometimes even equanimity. So instead of reacting immediately, for instance, I can become aware that I’m noticing anger rising up. I can feel my chest constricting. And underneath that, I can perhaps begin to sense some *sadness* at the loss of connection between us. **This more reflective response has the potential to radically shift our way of being and becoming in the world.**

There’s a lot more to say about cultivating a Witness stance, but for now, let me push one step farther. Regarding how one moves beyond the Witness to the full potential of “Awakening” that Wilber calls “Waking up,” there is a famous saying by the late Katagiri Roshi (1928-1990), the founding Abbot of the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center, that “**The Witness is the last stand of the ego.**” While the Witness stance can retain aspects of subject-object dualism, “Awakening” experiences transcend duality, in what is sometimes called a *nondual state*: “pure empty Witness,” “unqualified pure Awareness,” or “unity consciousness.”

So, depending on your religious or spiritual path of choice, “Waking up” is all about practices that help shift you through *states* of conscious toward:

- Christian illumination, union, Christ-consciousness, or *gnosis* (“secret knowledge”);

- Buddhist *nibbana*, *satori*, *kensho* (various words about Enlightenment/Awakening);
- Jains *kevala jnana* (“absolute knowledge”);
- Hindu *moksha* (“ultimate freedom”);
- Islamic Sufis *ma’arifat* (“ultimate knowledge”) or *fana fi Allah* (“annihilation”);
- Jewish Kabbalistic *Ein Sof* (“oneness”);
- secularized “Big Mind / Big Heart.”

Despite the differences between these many traditions, all of these terms refer to “Waking up” into advanced *states* of consciousness.

To widen our focus further, the second of Wilber’s four touchstones is “**Growing up.**” Whereas, we have been talking about “waking up” into different *states* of consciousness, “growing up” is about progressing through *stages* of development (56). One related dictum about the importance of different stages of development is that, “**We do not see the world simply as it is; rather, we see the world as we are.**”

In other words, as we “grow up,” both individuals and societies have the potential to pass through various stages of development. To oversimplify for the sake of time, here’s a brief overview:

1. As infants, we are in a fairly **undifferentiated** stage of basic “sensorimotor drives.” (That’s fancy psychology-speak for spending a great deal of time eating, sleeping, peeing, and pooping.)
2. Approximately age 1 to 4 is an “**impulsive-fantasy**” stage. On the individual level, this might manifest as a child hiding her head under a pillow and literally thinking no one can see her because she can’t see anyone. On a societal level, the equivalent might be hunter-gatherers.
3. During the elementary age of childhood comes the “**Magic-Mythic**” stage, corresponding to the agricultural revolution societally. One trait of this stage is believing myths *literally*: “Moses really did part the Red Sea, Elijah really did go straight up to heaven while still alive, Lao Tzu really was nine hundred years old when he was born, and so on” (74).
4. In adolescence, we become increasingly capable of **rational** thought, corresponding to the Enlightenment and modernity in Western civilization.

5. Middle age corresponds to **postmodernity**: an increased openness to paradox, and to the realization that, “There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”
6. Wilber’s **Integral** Theory is one among many systems trying to account for the *interplay* between all these stages (43-44).

I know that the above list is only a cursory summary. The point is not to memorize the details. Instead, the larger point is that **instead of merely getting older each year, we have the opportunity to increasingly experience the world in a fuller, wiser, more integrated way.**

Even more importantly, here’s one of the real twists of Integral Theory: we can now begin to **explore how “Growing up” and “Waking up” interrelate.** Remember that dictum I quoted earlier from developmental theory that, “We do not see the world simply as it is; rather, we see the world as we are.” Along those lines, Wilber invites us to consider that human beings in various different religious traditions have been having authentic experiences of “Waking up” for thousands of years (83). The nondual experience of “Awakening” remains the same, then and now. In Wilber’s words, **“A sage who, two thousands years ago, directly realized Emptiness would discover and ‘possess’ the same, identical Freedom as a sage who experience Emptiness today, even though the world has evolved considerably in the meantime.”**

Waking up is the same, but that's about *states*, not the stages of “growing up.”

So what difference does it make that we now have access to new *stages* (Modernity, Postmodernity, Integral) that were not available even a few hundred years ago, much less a few thousand years ago. For Wilber, **what’s new is the potential to become “more and more conscious, more complex, more caring, more loving, more creative, more self-organized, containing higher and high Wholes”** than has been possible ever before in known history (33). The **Wilber-Combs Lattice** is a visualization of how states (“Waking up”) relate to stages (“Growing up.”)

One of the “Aha!” moments that I had when I first started studying Integral Theory was that it **helped me understand how someone could be an authentic spiritual teacher (with a real experience of “Waking Up”), yet still be sexist, homophobic, or abusive.** (For only the most recent example, see [allegations of abuse by a renowned Tibetan Buddhist teacher.](#)) The

reason is that one can be “Awake” spiritually without being “Grown up” developmentally—as was the case with all spiritual awakening prior to the Scientific Revolution only a few centuries ago. Conversely, one can be “Grown up” developmentally—that is, a citizen of the modern, globalized world—without ever having had a spiritual experience of awakening (508-509). Similarly, a failure to do shadow work (what Wilber calls “cleaning up”) can cause pathologies at any stage or state. An Integral perspective (“Showing up”) of course challenges us to evolve on all lines and levels: Waking up, Growing up, and Cleaning up!

To give another example of how these dynamics can play out, imagine that a person in an almost exclusively Christian setting has a powerful “dream of a radiantly-luminous being of light and love.” A natural response would be to interpret this dream as about Jesus Christ:

1. If that person is in an **ego-centric (“first-person”)** stage of development, he might interpret the dream as meaning that he himself—and only himself—is a reincarnation of Jesus. (There are multiple examples in history of people having experiences that lead them to think that they are Jesus.) A first-person singular (“I”) perspective is narcissistic and primarily experiences things only as they relate to oneself.
2. However, from a more **ethno-centric, tribalistic (“second-person”)** stage of development, this same dream might be interpreted as affirming that *one’s group* is the only, exclusive, chosen group. A second-person singular (“you”) perspective begins to be able to empathically relate to others (especially others who are perceived as “like” oneself). As the proverb goes, one begins to be able to “see the world” as if in another person’s shoes.
3. Next, from a more **rational, globo-centric (“third-person”)** stage, this same dream might be interpreted not literally, but *metaphorically*: as a reminder of Jesus as one among many wisdom figures. A third-person singular (“it”) perspective is similar to the scientific methods attempts to study the material world as objectively as possible.
4. Finally, from an **Integral** perspective we can begin to understand how we might “have the same phenomenon—a [dream about a] being of radiant light and love—and yet *three completely different interpretations and experiences of the same phenomenon, depending on the subject’s stage and worldview* (113-114). At this point in the grammatical metaphor we have been following, we transition to the **first-person plural (“we”)** in which we

experience fewer rigid boundaries between the various worldviews. Wilber calls this shift the call to “transcend and include.”

Regarding the above stages, recall as well that “the *subject* of one stage becomes the *object*...of the next stage.” Thus, from the “second-person” perspective, one can now see the “I” (oneself) as other people might see you. And from a third-person, scientific perspective (“it”), both the “I” and the “you” can be studied more objectively than was previously thought possible. And from the integral (“we”) stage, there is the possibility of transcending duality and experiencing nondual unity.

To further tie all this together, the following is a quote from Wilber about how these dynamics play out over time:

During the Renaissance, as...the sciences, medicine, law, art, education, and politics began their moves into modern Rational, then postmodern Pluralistic, then unifying Integral Theory, **religion remained frozen at Mythic-literal level—ethnocentric, racist, sexist, patriarchal, homophobic, authoritarian, absolutist, dogmatic, unquestionable.** [*Note: Given the state of the world, Wilber may actually be speaking a little too hastily about politics. But my focus is on religion.*] The Western world, in effect, ceased its spiritual growth. Spiritual intelligence (that is, of *stages*), the way we spiritually *grow up*, was frozen at Mythic, or that of today’s typical seven-year-old. Higher spiritual *states*, the way we *wake up*, were banned in general. This is, in essence, the anemic state of Western spirituality today, a double catastrophe (i.e., low stages, no states).
(528-529)

Most major religions are deeply shaped by scriptures, rituals, and worldviews that arose *before* the Scientific Revolution (pre-Copernicus, pre-Darwin, pre-Einstein), while religious hierarchies often discourage first-hand religion experiences—instead encouraging adherents to simply believe the traditional dogmas.

This dynamic of religious institutions failing to help people wake up, grow up, clean up, and show up is part of what has contributed to burgeoning numbers of people identifying as “Spiritual, But Not Religious.” **Many people want authentic first-hand spiritual experiences**

of “waking up”—while also being able to be a “grown up” who doesn’t have to “check their brain at the door” and stop believing in science when they enter a religious community. My hope is that Unitarian Universalism is a religious movement in which one can be both spiritual *and* religious. We seek to be an institution invested in supporting individuals and groups seeking to wake up, grow up, clean up, and show up.

So much is possible within Unitarian Universalism and other progressive movements that give us the freedom to explore the possibilities of encouraging spiritual growth, building beloved community, and acting for peace and justice in the globalized, pluralistic, postmodern world in which we find ourselves—without having to repress or deny any part of ourselves. None of us knows with any certainty what a “Religion of Tomorrow” might hold, but I am grateful to be with you on this journey.