

## “The Religion of Tomorrow” by Ken Wilber – Review Sept 2017

Ken Wilber’s latest book gives an extraordinary and wonderful vision of human development and potential. That I found it excruciatingly repetitive and pedantic at times, is I guess partly because it was written for those who are new to his ideas, but it is partly his style as well. Getting past that however, I think the scope and breadth of the vision is hugely important.

The book’s subtitle is “A vision for the future of the great traditions” by which he means how the world’s great religions could be transformed into real and effective consciousness raising organisations if they were to integrate this “Integral” perspective. But the book also presents a blueprint for psychotherapy, seeing and exploring the ways in which people get stuck in not being able to move from one “stage” or “state” to another on this psycho-spiritual journey that defines our lives.

Using his detailed stage and state model, he usefully elaborates the various points where to carry on developing (as Eros / The Universe wants us to) we need to “include and transcend” where we are, in order to move up a stage or state in our development. He describes how, at each of these transition points we can get caught into being “addicted” or “allergic” to various aspects of the level we are at. We are then stuck and any subsequent developmental is lopsided, complicated and tainted by the repression and projection involved.

I do find a problem with his understanding of therapy here. He does not mention ‘trauma’ once and to me this is clearly the cause of so much of our ‘stuckness’. I mean trauma in its widest sense, where we can’t move on because we are avoiding some pain, hurt, fear or some distress that was too much to bear. It then remains locked and maintained within us causing all sorts of insecurity. It is this that causes so many of our “addictions and allergies”, our emotional development is stunted, and if not dealt we become totally stuck. What the implications of this are for this “map” I have yet to work out.

Wilber describes well though many of the compensatory processes than emanate from these difficulties. How these repressions happen at different stages of our development with different characteristic consequences, is well understood by current psychology models. But Wilber’s Integral map does offer the fascinating possibility of developing a model of psychotherapy that is wonderfully clear, coherent, comprehensive and understandable. It needs work, yes, but the basic structure is there to glimpse the exciting prospect of building an “Integral Psychotherapy” that recognises the full potential of human beings, maps out our developmental journey and describes the possible pitfalls along the way.

This basic structure is about how our development is psycho-spiritual, that is about both “Growing Up” and Waking Up”. “Growing Up” in terms of maturing through recognisable stages. This happens in various “Lines of development”. For example, in the general “self-line”, through increasing our self-awareness, self-knowledge and self-responsibility we expand our selves. Facets of this “self-line” are the heart “line”, where by attending to our wounds, we heal them and so become less and less a ‘victim’. With our mind (head “line”), we can expand our understanding of ourselves (and the world) become less caught in compulsive compensatory thinking which so often arises from our identification with being a victim. In our body “line” we can become increasingly aware, sensitive and connected, i.e. more ‘embodied’.

The process of our development is that of “include and transcend” as Wilber puts it. With each “line”, this is the process of making an object out of what we are subject to. So, through seeing what

we are identified with, or under the influence of, focusing on it, exploring it, embodying it, understanding it, we digest and take responsibility for it, we “include” it and then naturally “transcend” it. We move onto the next aspect of our subjectivity that we start to become aware, again making that into a “figure” before letting it go into the “ground”. Trauma prevents this because we understandably want to avoid the figure. All classic Gestalt Therapy psychology.

This “stage development” does not necessarily change our state though (until the later stages of development anyway when the difference between stages and states start to merge). Changing states is what “Waking Up” is all about, which is our “spiritual” journey, where we develop through the states of ‘being’ that are possible for us as human beings. Thankfully, we can get glimpses of higher states, through meditation and many other types of “peak experience”, to see and feel what is possible. This provides the necessary motivation for the hard work and ruthless honesty we need, it provides us with meaning and a glimpse of the freedom that our hearts so desire.

So, we move through stages, whose sequence is fixed, we can’t miss a stage and it is hard to go back. Also, we can’t sense stages directly, they are the water we swim in, only visible to us cognitively on reflection and in retrospect. There is also a hierarchy of states and we move through them in sequence too, but they are more fluid as I think we all recognise from our daily lives. We can get temporary glimpses of higher states at any time. From any stage, we can move into a new state. People can be “enlightened” at different stages, but this “enlightenment” will be very different from that experienced at a later stage. So, the fullest enlightenment is at the highest state and at the highest stage. This explains why different people and institutions offering ‘spiritual’ development can clearly be seen as offering very different fare. It is dependent on the stage (and state) that they are operating from.

Wilber is excellent at describing how this journey is not towards some far off peak of almost impossible attainment, but how it is into the very heart of our ‘here and now’. What is in the way of our enlightenment is simply what prevents us from entering the infinitely profound depth of our present beingness. Here there is Consciousness and Love, these do not have a plural, my Consciousness and Love are the same as yours. They exist as a singular entity; all sentient being are somehow connected to them and this is extraordinarily so us with our potential to embody them fully.

By “including and transcending” the many layers of ‘fantasy’ that our ego generates, we can increasingly embody Consciousness and Love. These exist outside of space and time, with their direct Awareness (“Suchness”). Rumi was right, we ‘just’ need to remove the obstacles.

So, what I find extraordinary about Wilber’s “Integral map” is that it presents a framework for building a clear, coherent and understandable map of our development. I am not saying that his map is perfect by any means and no map can be, and grand meta-theories do not have a good track record. But the holistic inclusivity at the heart of this map with its profoundly developmental understanding of human nature and Consciousness itself, means that whether your focus is on therapeutic healing, psychological development, spiritual development, or societal/political development, to ignore it is surely to be stuck in blindness and ignorance to some extent. Therapy needs this, religions need this, politicians need this, science needs this. If our culture could move further towards embracing this perspective of both “Growing up” and “Waking up”, what a different world it would be.