

Towards an Integral Vision of Christian Practice

Leslie Hershberger

November 23, 2008

Abstract

Two major obstacles facing Western Christianity are the regressive interpretation of the teachings of Jesus and the tendency to overlook, and even more destructively, demonize second and first person expressions of God/Absolute Reality. The results have been at best, limiting, and at worst, catastrophic. An Integral approach Christianity not only acknowledges first (I), second (WE) and third person (IT/ITS) perspectives, but also recognizes stages of human development. An examination of the three primary perspectives of God through the lens of developmental theory invites an approach to Christianity in which practitioners model the compassion of Jesus, the Christ by understanding and even more crucially, respecting, the ways meaning is constructed at each stage.

Using Robert Kegan's model of development and James Fowler's stages of faith, I offer a brief developmental walk through three primary ways one encounters God in the first, second and third person: conformist, rational and post-modern. Each level both transcends and includes the level before and offers crucial attributes that pave the way to the next level as an individual deepens the capacity to experience the One and the Many through ever expanding perspectives.

Introduction

While Christian translation has been replete with inaccuracies, compounded by the fact that Jesus left no known record of his teachings, there remains in its core an invitation for Christian

practitioners to evolve towards the essential truth of the tradition: Jesus was offering a template for oneness with God. Yet, after years of distortions one wonders if the tradition can be rescued from itself. Still, if consideration is given to the developmental nature of human unfolding and the embedded perspectives of first person (individual subjective), second person (communal inter-subjective) and third person (individual/communal objective/inter-objective), there may hope for a translation in which one returns to, as Ken Wilber says, “nature’s remembrance of God.” (Wilber, 1996, p. 202) The tradition has, built within its core, is an awareness of God through a trinitarian lens; it regularly articulates the doctrine of God in three persons. God in the 3rd person is the transcendent God "out there," whose creativity is expressed in the web of life: the rush of a river, the awe inspiring perch in the Grand Canyon, the magnificence of the stars and the planets ordering themselves in the sky. This is also the face of God that is often ascribed with Father/Mother images in the sacred texts. Wilber and Brother David Steindl-Rast, Benedictine monk explore the notion of God in the second person is the "I-Thou" relationship; God/Spirit is experienced as a living intelligence with whom we interact and dance with in our daily lives. Finally, God as the first person is the actual phenomenological experience of God inside of oneself (Godhead according to Christian mystics) which can be accessed through contemplative prayer and peak experience. (Wilber and Steindl-Rast, 2008) In practice, the second person (God, separate, “out there”) has been privileged with disastrous results for God has been reduced to a radical “other” and whose face has gotten lost in the egoic projections of the illusory self.

An Integral perspective offers transformation and wise/compassionate translation which respect the complexity of each level of development while acknowledging the three perspectives of I,

We, and It (s). It recognizes the inherent value of practice congruent with level of development and recognizes that as human beings evolve, God evolves because as humanity moves towards wider care and greater consciousness, God/Being moves towards great perfection of the universe. God, as Wilber says, represents Absolute unmanifest perfection while simultaneously becoming increasingly more perfect in the relative world. One's conceptions of God/Being become more complex and resound more deeply as one's way of thinking becomes more inclusive and complex. (Wilber/Steindl-Rast, 2008) In this paper, there is not adequate space to fairly discuss skillful means for implementation; this is simply an attempt to reflect upon another way of translating a tradition that has far reaching influence in the cultural imagination of the West. I use the term "Integral Christian" (IC) guide to dance with the notion of practitioners inhabiting sophisticated architectures of thought who embody higher levels while compassionately "taking pains to find him where (others are) and begin there...understand what (they) understands in the way (they) understand it" (Kegan, 1994, p. 278) particularly when guiding practitioners moving out of the mythical stage. To extend the previous quote of Kierkegaard, an IC guide honors each level as a complete holon with its own intrinsic integrity.

The 1-2-3 of God in the 3rd Order of Consciousness/Conformist Stage

Wilber (2006) writes that many college students are faced with a "horrible option" which is to embrace a mythic notion of God or stay on the conveyor belt of development, embrace rationalism and renounce Christ. (p. 183) Integral invites us to consider another option: recognize the interaction between the demands of the culture and the mental complexity of the Christian practitioner and create a holding environment which allows for healthy translation of the teachings of Jesus. Kegan (1994) offers a developmental framework which offers a template

for the evolution of consciousness from the *inside*; he examines “personal unfolding ways of organizing experience which are simply replaced as we grown but subsumed into more complex systems of mind.” (p. 9) Kegan’s 3rd order of consciousness carries many of the characteristics of Jane Loevinger’s *conformist* stage. Someone at the conformist stage, Kegan's 3rd order, has the capacity to construct values, ideals and broad beliefs, and develop a loyalty to the community larger than self by subordinating personal needs and desires in order to coordinate with another's needs and desires. One has an increasing ability to think reflectively, identify themes and notice inferences. (pp. 30-31) James Fowler (1995), who examines meaning making through the perspective of faith, writes that people of this stage have values which carry a deep emotional investment which they ardently defend, but have not yet made these values an object of reflection. The referent for faith is the values of the group. Furthermore, "symbols and ritual representations expressive of their faith are organically and irreplaceably tied to the full realities of their meaning system...the symbols are not separate from what they symbolize." (p. 163) The symbols themselves are not only connected to the sacred, they are bound, inseparable and sacred *themselves* along with the very group who holds them as sacred.

With this in mind, attempts to demythologize symbols threaten the referent of the symbol and is "an assault on the sacred" itself. (Fowler, p. 163) Thus, an Integral approach honors the interior individual and collective values that create meaning for people in this critical stage, recognizing the inherent value of developing loyalty, mutuality and equilibrium. An IC guide provides *experiences* in which the Christian practitioner can participate with the community and encounter God through nature, self and the culture in which it interacts. To broaden notions of God and set the groundwork for smoother transition into the next stage, an effective IC guide focuses not on

claims of exclusive salvation as is often the translation of contemporary Christianity (for reasons far too numerous to elaborate upon in this paper). Rather, the guide offers notions of the three persons of God while allowing recognizing that people in this stage locate authority for beliefs outside the self. Thus, God will be translated through a lens which can only begin to taste notions of "oneness." For example, the first person of Jesus inside of me, might be a rather nebulous construct in which Rather, the guide offers notions of the three persons of God with whom one can be in relationship, who is transcendent "other, and who is "inside of me." Yet, the *content* of one's God view in the consciousness structure of the conformist stage will be largely rooted in the the teachings, beliefs and values of an authority located outside oneself. Consider Linda, a subject of Fowler's research who says:

(My parents) have guided me in the right direction. They brought me to church, taught me about God and love and everything and now I know what it is and will be telling my son or daughter the same thing. (p. 157)

Brian is encouraged to question by his parents who are involved in a progressive church. He is questioned by an interviewer about a previous statement in which he says he is looking for answers.

I don't know how to get answers and no one knows the answers, and I can't turn to anyone except God if there is a God....(Buddhists) are trying to understand each other. They recognized everyone has faults and things of that nature and they try to accept that and accept the world in general, which I think should be done. Certain people go around knocking the world...I'm sort of mixed up about what to do. I guess the reason someone knocks the world is everyone else knocks it. (I'd like to change it), but like everyone is trying to impress everyone in this world; it's a matter of social status...And if we could stop doing that--which is impossible--the world would be a lot better place." (p. 159-160)

Both Brian and Linda locate authority outside of themselves. Yet, their concepts of mutuality, their capacity to think in abstracts, and their ability to see relationships through cross categorical knowing, offer an opportunity to begin understanding God in three persons. For example, while the first person of Jesus "inside of me," might be a rather nebulous construct in which another's notions of Jesus "inside of me" are internalized and reformulated, there is still a ground set for locating Jesus in one's interior. When I taught junior high students, I led guided meditations in which I used the power of imagination and sensory awareness to invite them into scenes of the gospel. Once their awareness was "in and down" through body and breath exercises awareness, I might ask, "What is happening inside of you right now? Where are you? Why are you there?" I might guide them to place self as a character in the story. "What are you wearing? What is the feeling inside of you? Is there someone there with whom you can share your thoughts and feelings?" Many students reported they'd never considered Jesus "inside of me" and that they "liked this meditation thing." We also did ropes courses which challenges students' comfort level and outdoor team exercises in which we practiced phenomenological inquiry through journaling, dyads and group debriefs that followed the exercise.

Shifting to second person, one experiences God/Spirit as a living being with whom we can interact through relationship. God may still be a mythic God in the sky "out there" in the minds of the conformist, but God can also be taught as one who can be experienced through spirit beings like guardian angels. They can converse with these beings in relationship through conversation, expressions of gratitude, and prayers and rituals of devotion. In my classes, we would have times for both group and private prayer and we might even debrief together sharing notions of God; many students would speak in platitudes or parrot teachings from home, some

would have the capacity to engage more deeply in introspection, but the central focus is on the community itself and its belief systems, practices and rituals. Simply invoking the notion of divine presence in relationships is enough to spark the developing consciousness of God/Being in others.

God in the third person can be experienced through communal awareness of care for the Earth. Hiking, canoeing, camping, walking in nature with friends in one's group all lay groundwork in cultivating awe for the web of life. In Genesis there are two creation stories. One emphasizes a domination model of power over the Earth with the other focusing on a stewardship model. Feminist theologians suggest a shift in focus to the stewardship model invites Christian practitioners into an experience of Earth as Mother giving birth to creation. This notion balances the historical skew towards patriarchal, anthropomorphic translation of sacred texts and offers a much needed balance of communion, connectedness and compassionate care.

The 1-2-3 of God in the 4th Order of Consciousness/Rational Stage

Stephen Mitchell, in *The Gospel According to Jesus*, offers a quote from Thomas Jefferson:

The whole history of these books is so defective and doubtful that it seems a vain attempt to minute enquiry into it; and such tricks have been played with their texts of other books relating to them, that we have a right...to entertain much doubt about what part of them are genuine....The truth is that the greatest enemies to the doctrines of Jesus are those calling themselves expositors of them, who have perverted them for the structure of a system of fantasy absolutely incomprehensible....Among the sayings imputed to him by

his biographers, I find many passages of fine imagination, correct morality and the most lovely of benevolence; and others again of so much ignorance, absurdity, untruth, charlatanism..as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should proceed from the same being. (Mitchell, 1993, p. 278)

Furthermore, about Jesus' eloquence, persuasiveness and wisdom, Jefferson writes, "These could not be inventions of the grovelling authors who created them. They are far beyond the power of their feeble minds." (p. 282)

Jefferson's careful deliberation reveals a 4th order capacity for self-authorship, autonomy and awareness of multiple roles. He has stepped beyond the confines of conventional group thinking about Christianity and has examined the competing perspectives that informs the value system. Through rational inquiry, he discerns that the insights of Jesus have been distorted by the lenses of the "biographers." If Jefferson were bound by 3rd order consciousness, the values and belief system of the groupmind would have obfuscated any attempt to make the synoptic gospels an object of inquiry. Jefferson also reveals 4th order capacities to coordinate generalizations and abstractions and invent values and beliefs congruent with his inner structure of meaning making.

Fowler writes of an interior struggle as the individual struggles with what they know about the manifest and the intimations of the absolute. He identifies "demythologizing stage" (Fowler, p. 182) as a stage where many become stalled because of insufficient social structures to support healthy development. The struggle lies in the tension between church leaders who demand loyalty to doctrine and a burgeoning global consciousness that is increasingly inclusive of the truth claims of other religious traditions and cultures. Someone in this stage develops the

complexity of meaning making which is not limited by membership in the intersubjective belief systems of family, culture, country, tribe and religion. Furthermore, an encounter with the universally applied laws of science engenders a capacity to reflect from a larger view. Jim Marion writes that one can distinguish universal truths "from the merely sectarian and cultural 'wineskins' in which those truths have been enclosed," (Marion, 2000, p. 54). Yet, if given inadequate support for reframing the myths through a rational lens, there is a schism in the interior consciousness of the Christian practitioner; one might leave *mythical* Christianity without realizing its hold on the psyche as one is often unclear about what was left behind.

Some practitioners do manage to navigate this stage by recognizing that the mind itself is an expression of God in the first person. Marion calls this "putting on the mind of Christ." Reason, based on evidence, is given primacy and crowds out other perspectives. Spiritual experience is silenced when crushed by scientific materialism. Allowing sufficient room for this essential stage of demythologizing of Christianity while providing ample experiences which stimulate the affective center of intelligence is a ray of hope for translating the insights of the tradition in higher stages. Language choice shifts to the foreground in this stage--practitioners may be less inclined to use God language in the desire to let go of mythical notions of Being and integrate a wider view of the Ground of Being.

The second person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the rationalist is given space to experience the ultimate "I-Thou" in relationship: Wilber offers that Spirit is a living intelligence which interacts in our lives through the divine revealed in family, community and humanity itself. The external "God" authority at this shifts to the authority of one's own heart which is the source and taproot

of our whole being. In this "We" space of second person, we develop the humility that derives from recognizing the far reaches of communal belonging and the inherent differences in individuals and communities. We are not in our own little communal orbit. Rather, this second person I-Thou invites us to radical love of the "Earth Household," as Steindl Rast names it; "humans, animals, plants, whom we used to consider strange." The rationalist recognizes the complexity of interpersonal relationships and the ways in which one grows by recognizing and allowing differences. They might point to Jesus' washing the feet of his disciples in a profound shift of worldview--the "Master" washes the feet of disciple, a symbolic act which invites an upside down view of the world. The assumed external authority becomes servant of all and divine authority rests in one's own heart. Ultimately, recognition of this internal point of reference invites the developing Christian practitioner to empower self and other rather than lording "power over" or meekly cowering as the "po The assumed external authority becomes servant of all and divine authority rests in one's own heart wer under." It is a dance of mutual reciprocity, recognizing one's multiple roles. This second person practice of not only recognizing the divine in self and other, but also *serves* self and other.

In the third person, many rationalists become pantheists, elevating nature to God; nature becomes the ground of reality. Nature, for the rationalist, not only can handle the scrutiny of objective science, but it also evokes spiritual experience. John Glenn, upon his return from space, said, "To look out at this kind of creation and not believe in God is to me, impossible." (Integral Naked) While we do not definitively know Glenn's interior construction of meaning making, Glenn experiences the nature of God through the world of science and nature. Brian Swimme suggests that people at this stage are drawn to Jesuit paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de

Chardin, who brought forth a story of evolution which linked the evolution of the cosmos with spiritual evolution: God is developed out of matter even as God is present in the beginning. This realization lays the groundwork for the complexity of the next stage of unfolding. The universe itself is a single event that is physical, psychic, spiritual. Finally, third person practice in a rationalist worldview usually includes research into the historical Jesus through a critical lens. Marcus Borg (2003) says that because mythical Christianity sees the bible as a divine product (p. 7), it is incumbent upon the rationalist to re-envision this text through the lens of contemporary biblical scholarship. Themes emerge which draw one into the realization that the original teachings have been distilled and literally driven underground out of the hierarchy's desire to define orthodoxy in the second and third century. A third person deconstruction of the mythical Jesus often engenders the interior dissonance that guides transformational shifts in meaning making.

The 1-2-3 of God in the 5th Order of Consciousness/Pluralistic Stage

The 5th order perspective extends notions of multiplicity beyond a contained self-system in which one is an individual within a large system. The self-system is incomplete because moment by moment the system itself contributes to the unfolding of the self-system; systems co-emerge. The individual continually redefines self, informed by participation in the system. Defenses are revealed through interaction in relationships and conflict itself is seen as an integral component of the ongoing creation of the system. as it informs the ongoing creation of the system. This capacity for complex meaning making allows paradox, anomaly, mystery and contradiction as each portends growing completeness.

Fowler writes that a "second naivete" emerges as one reflects on past and present experiences as intimations of the deeper self. It involves a recognition of themes and patterns that manifest in self and the collective unconscious. This sense of increasingly impermeable boundaries between self and other engenders a deeper commitment to justice "that is freed from the confines of tribe, class, religious community and nation." (Fowler, p. 198) Even as one re-creates and re-assesses an internal sense of meaning, there is a recognition of meaning's transitory nature: the nature of God/Reality today is fleeting for one's own prehension is distorted by the limits of one's current mode of understanding. Consider Miss T., a 76 year old woman Fowler interviews:

People are doing the best they can. You blunder your way along. And you keep open to getting more light and to...well, sin surely. A good definition of sin would be thoughts and actions that bear no relation to the light within.

In another passage, she says,

I would say the thing that has come to me is that this Cosmic Flow, which is God, call it what you will, is the life back of every cell in the body. It's a nice metaphor, the river is the flow, because it has come to me more deeply that I am just sort of porous, This is refreshing...this Reality, of this actual life, all spelled with capital letters, Life flows through you at every moment of waking-sleeping experience.

In this stage, the notion of no separation from God begins to take greater hold in the consciousness of the practitioner. Even as we deal with a limited reality, we recognize that everything is in God and God is in everything and as we evolve, God evolves. The interpretation of One determines relationship with the Many and the Many offers itself with deeper care and consciousness back to the One. The world evolves so the perfection of the Absolute made manifest is more complete in the relative world.

In the first person, the Christian practitioner recognizes they are the light of the Christ, of the Buddha, of the creative force of the universe. The "I" is the child in the manger being born to lend healing to the world. It is the Son and Daughter in deep contemplation in the desert who meets the illusory self and the One who experiences the agony in the garden facing abandonment, pain, death. The "I" is the one who lets go in complete self surrender on the cross and forgives, in final moments, other sentient beings whose eyes are blind and whose hearts are hardened. This is the understanding of the mystics who often found themselves in trouble with clerical authority for they insist that we are united with God. We are God. In their own phenomenological experience, they encounter and unite with God-self within. In the second person, one recognizes the experience of the internal One and offers it back in relationship to the Many. Steindl Rast offers that the "One expresses self in the Many and relationship is celebrated in love and gratefulness and flows back to the Source. Eternal Word comes out of the silence and is expressed through understanding and mutuality; it then returns to silence. This is the dance, this is communion--this is ultimate Reality. In this stage, the practitioner sees God-light in encounters with those live on the margins, who have been shamed by the culture who, in its blindness, has called them "less than:" the immigrant, the addict, the prostitute, the destitute.

They recognize the paradox as the boundaries between "us" and "them" dissolve. Finally, the third person of the Trinity is the radical Other who reveals itself in the intelligence of the universe through the magnificence of the natural world, the breathtaking beauty of music's expression of the soul and the transcendent experience of exquisite art. A photograph might offer an intimation of the holy while an ant on the sidewalk carrying a crumb of a corn chip becomes a gorgeous blessing of the cosmos. The practitioner in this stage recognizes the paradoxical nature of the universe as tornadoes wreak wide swaths of destruction even as the silence that follows offers moments of grace.

Conclusion

At first glance, the state of contemporary Christian expression can discourage the practitioner whose developmental of consciousness results in a sort psychic schism born out of the disconnect between the conformist, mythical interpretation of the tradition and the burgeoning rational worldview. Many leave disaffected and discouraged. Yet, the images, symbols and myths of Christianity have a grip on their consciousness. There is a realization that as the world's largest tradition, Christianity has enormous influence on the body politic and culture with a capacity to engender both compassion/understanding and cruelty/ignorance. Integral elegantly offers evolutionary transformation by recognizing human development in the first, second, and third person perspectives while offering translative practices that honor the One and the Many. Integral Christianity remedies the dualistic split of body, mind and spirit because as consciousness develops through sentient beings, their construction of thought and capacity for meaning making becomes more complex and inclusive. The greatest challenge for Integral Christianity is the 70% of the population stalled in the mythical understanding of God and the

hierarchical structures of conformist level hold great sway for practitioners. The Integral Christian is invited to hold an enlightened vision while participating in the greater Reality by recognizing the Rosetta stone in both the Integral model and the radical compassion and wisdom of the Christ, as expressed through the doctrine of the Trinity. This notion of Godhead in the three persons has something to offer the world both in theory and practice. The "I" experience of contemplation and awareness of one's interiors, the "We" experience of humility of compassionate self-giving in relationship and the "It" description and encounter with the web of life invite the practitioners to experience the spiritual realities that connect all three. One is incomplete without the other for God's ever present face tetra-arises in all three. Experience, not belief, is key for it is only through experience of human unfolding that Spirit "continues its play of manifestation as a conscious, felt, vividly present Presence, a ray of infinity hooking out from that holon on the world it created." (Wilber, Excerpt A) While Reality remains ever mysterious, ever elusive, ever unknowable, it gradually, developmentally reveals its radiance through the intimations of three persons, three perspectives, three faces of the trinitarian God.

References

- Borg, M. (2003) *The Heart of Christianity* New York: HarperCollins Publishers
- DeMello A. (1978) *Sadhana, A Way to God: Christian Exercises in Eastern Form*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Publishers
- Fowler, J. (1981) *Stages of Faith*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers
- Kegan, R. (1994) *In Over Our Heads*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Marion, J. (2000) *Putting on the Mind of Christ*. Virginia: Hampton Roads
- Mitchell, S. (1991) *The Gospel According to Jesus*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers
- Pagels, E. (2003) *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. New York: Random House
- Steindl-Rast, D., Wilber, K. *Integral Christianity: Theory and Practice. Part 1. The Relationship of the One and the Many.*, Retrieved November 2008, <http://in.integralinstitute.org/podcast/brdavid1.mp3>
- Steindl-Rast, D., Wilber, K. *Integral Christianity: Theory and Practice. Part 2. The Three Faces of God*, Retrieved November 2008, <http://in.integralinstitute.org/podcast/Wilber-TheThreeFacesofGod.mp3>
- Swimme, B. *The Divinization of the Cosmos*. Retrieved December 2008, <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j19/teillard.asp?page=2>)
- Wilber, K. *Excerpt A: An Integral Age at the Leading Edge*, Retrieved December 2008, <http://wilber.shambhala.com/html/books/kosmos/excerptA/notes-3.cfm>
- Wilber, K. (1996) *The Atman Project*. Illinois: Quest Books
- Wilber, K. (2006) *The One Two Three of God*. Colorado: Sounds True
- Wilber, K. (2006) *Integral Spirituality*. Boston: Shambhala Books