

FOREWORD

OUR religions, our Gods, and our selves may not be quite what we thought. That of course is nothing new. Indeed history can be read as an expression of their progressive evolution, as Ken Wilber has elegantly done in *Up from Eden*. For religion has been the driving force behind a vast range of behavior, calling forth the highest expressions of human nature and providing excuses for the lowest. Whole cultures have lived, killed, and died for their beliefs. Small wonder then that religion has been one of the central interests of psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

Throughout most of Western history religion was pre-eminent in defining our reality, and woe to the individual who suggested other views or even other methods of discovering truth (e.g., Galileo). Yet recent history, as if in recompense, has not been kind to religion; it has steadily lost ground to science and rationalism as the major purveyors of reality. Indeed, from the rational perspective, religion is frequently seen as a relic of prescientific thinking, an unfortunate carryover from less sophisticated times. God, if not dead, is at least moribund, surviving only through the unrequited longings of the psychologically immature.

Yet in recent years God has been staging a dramatic comeback, not only in traditional guise but in a full range of diverse forms, Eastern and Western, exoteric and esoteric, fundamentalist and gnostic. Christianity has seen both a fundamentalist revival and the reappearance of contemplative-mystical approaches. In addition, there has been an unprecedented influx of non-Western religions and disciplines—yoga, Zen, TM, and all. Some of these differ so fundamentally from our traditional be-

liefs and practices as to call into question some of our most basic assumptions about the very nature of religion itself. Buddhism, for example, posits no supreme being or God and centers around a rigorous program of mental training explicitly aimed at controlled psychological processes and states of consciousness. On the morbid side, there is also no end of religious pathology; cults, Jonestown, and Moonies have become household terms.

Small wonder then that the study of religion, in any of its forms, has assumed new importance for both psychology and sociology. Sociologists have been particularly active in studying "the new religions" and in attempting to connect their emergence with larger social patterns and possible pathologies. They have therefore tended to link religious motivation to inadequacies at the social level, and immaturities at the psychological. And of course they are often correct since there is no shortage of evidence that religious immaturity and pathology reflect their psychological counterparts.

And yet the nagging question remains, Could we be missing something? Is this really all there is to religion? After all, the great saints and sages, Buddha, Christ, Lao Tzu, Shankara, Aurobindo, and others have been said to represent some of the highest levels of human development and to have had the greatest impact on human history. So at least said Toynbee, Tolstoy, Bergson, James, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Maslow, among others. Thus we may ask, Are our guiding sociological assumptions, theories, and methodologies adequate to identify not just immaturity and pathology but also the heights of human experience and development that certain of the great religions claim are both possible and achievable through training?

It is the goal of this book to ensure that these heights are indeed identifiable, and it takes its psychological framework from recent developments in what has come to be known as transpersonal psychology.

The last two decades of psychological research have seen a dramatic surge of interest in areas such as the nature of consciousness and consciousness-modifying technologies, self-regulation of psychophysiological processes, and non-Western psychologies. The general trend has been toward the recognition that there exist states of consciousness, levels of psychological maturity, and degrees of voluntary control beyond those formerly thought to define the human potential. Humanistic psychology first emerged in an effort to focus attention on these areas; transpersonal psychology followed when even the humanistic model proved inadequate to encompass the full range of phenomena being studied. The term "transpersonal" was chosen to encompass those experiences and states in which the sense of awareness and identity apparently went beyond (*trans*) traditional personality and ego.

In the West they were commonly called peak experiences and were initially assumed to occur only rarely and involuntarily. However, certain Eastern psychologies and religious disciplines were subsequently found to contain not only detailed descriptions of such states but also instructions and technologies for attaining them at will. Suddenly, and with no small surprise to Western psychologists, it began to become apparent that the esoteric core of certain of the great religions, Eastern and Western, which had formerly seemed nonsensical or even pathological, could be understood as technologies for the voluntary control of psychological processes and consciousness. To take but one specific example, meditation could now be seen as an attentional training strategy rather than as a regressive and autistic escape from the world, and this new interpretation now has significant support from empirical research.

Thus it was not that the great religions were necessarily pathological but rather that, prior to an understanding of the nature of such phenomena as state dependency, our

own Western psychological framework had not been readily able to encompass such phenomena.

Of course this is not to say that all things Eastern or religious are of this ilk. There are clearly distortions, dogma, pathology, misunderstanding, and misuse around all religions. Indeed, the pragmatic core of rigorous mental training is often buried under exoteric trappings and dogma, or else reserved as an esoteric core for the few deemed able to meet its exacting demands. But where this core of mental training is found, it tends to display marked similarities among apparently quite diverse systems and to point to common psychological principles, world views, and transcendental states: the so-called "transcendent unity of religions," "perennial philosophy," and "perennial psychology."

The addition of a transpersonal dimension to traditional psychological models has thus allowed the meaningful reinterpretation of a major sphere of human activity. However, sociological theory has tended to lack a corresponding dimension and has thus sometimes been susceptible to an overly reductionistic approach in its studies of religion. This book therefore aims at adding a transpersonal dimension to sociological theory.

No one is more qualified to do this than Ken Wilber, who is recognized as the preeminent theoretician of transpersonal psychology. In his numerous books and papers he has provided an unparalleled integration of the world's major psychological and religious systems. In *The Spectrum of Consciousness* he suggested that the apparent conflict between different psychological and religious systems could be resolved by seeing them as addressing different and partly complementary structures of consciousness and levels of the unconscious. In *The Atman Project* he suggested a model for developmental psychology that extended through not only childhood and adolescence but also the various levels of enlightenment. In *Up from Eden* he applied this model to human evolution at

x large.

Now in *A Sociable God* he takes this same model and uses it as a developmental framework against which the various levels of social interaction can be assessed. This therefore provides a corrective addition to current methods of sociological analysis such as phenomenological-hermeneutics that have lacked critical criteria for hierarchical evaluation. It also provides a means for avoiding the trap of taking one level of social interaction and making it paradigmatic for all. For example, Marx interpreted all behavior in terms of economics, and Freud in terms of sexuality. Art, philosophy, religion, and all "higher" activities thus became expressions of economic oppression or sexual repression.

To this developmental framework Wilber also adds an analysis of the various epistemological modes, the ways in which we obtain knowledge. The fact that sensory, intellectual, and contemplative modes yield different realms or categories of knowledge that are not wholly equivalent or reducible one to another is often forgotten. Conceptual symbolic knowledge cannot wholly be reduced to the objective sensory dimension, nor the contemplative to the conceptual, without resulting in what is called category error. Thus the method for establishing the validity of each realm's knowledge is specific: analytic-empirical for objective data, hermeneutics for symbolic communication, and direct gnostic apprehension for the contemplative.

After delineating these general schemata, Wilber then applies them to specific, especially religious, issues confronting sociology today. First he performs the much needed task of differentiating among the many and varied ways in which the term religion has been used, suggesting that much current confusion stems from imprecise or even mixed usage.

Next he turns to the evolution of religion and interprets its current status and directions against his developmental framework. Our current progression away from mythic belief toward increasing rationalization has been widely

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interpreted as evidence of an anti- or post-religious evolution. But Wilber reframes this whole movement by noting that this type of progression is an appropriate phase-specific shift as the pre-rational yields to the rational *on its way to the trans-rational*. From this evolutionary perspective our current phase is seen as anti-religious only if religion is equated, as it often is, with the pre-rational rather than with any of several levels on the pre-rational-rational-trans-rational developmental hierarchy. This remarkable perspective also allows a method of determining what Wilber calls the authenticity of a religion: the degree to which it fosters development to the trans-rational levels. This he differentiates from "legitimacy," which he defines as the degree to which a religion fills the psychological and social needs of a population at its current developmental level. And all this leads directly to one of the more seminal parts of the book.

The current religious ferments and the new religions can be examined precisely in light of their responses to the current developmental phase of increasing rationality. Wilber suggests that three major types of sociological responses are now occurring: first, attempting to cling to the now outmoded mythic levels (e.g., "moral majority"); second, embracing the ongoing rational-secularization process (such as the liberal intelligentsia tend to do); and third, in a minority of cases, attempting actual trans-rational transformation, not by denying rationality but by embracing it *and* going beyond it via intensive yogic-gnostic practice. It is this latter group that Wilber suggests may provide effective catalysts for a broader-scale evolutionary advance, if indeed such is to occur. The importance of such widespread maturation to full development of the rational level, and then beyond, is difficult to overestimate. Our willingness and ability to correct the vast amounts of worldwide suffering from preventable causes such as malnutrition, poverty, over-

population, sociogenic pathology, and oppression, as well as to avoid massive, if not total, self-destruction, may depend on it. The importance of Ken Wilber's contribution of a testable, critical, comprehensive, sociological model capable of guiding assessments of these evolutionary shifts is likewise not to be underestimated.

This could have been a very lengthy book. The number of novel ideas and suggested syntheses it contains within its few pages is remarkable. The author has chosen to give us an heuristic framework rather than a detailed text. Nonetheless, this outline may well be sufficient to keep both sociologists and psychologists busy researching and filling it out for many years to come, for it has suggested a way to move the psychology and sociology of religion to a new watershed.

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