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Ken Wilber's Transpersonal Psychology: An Introduction and Preliminary Critique

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Ken Wilber is unquestionably the leading figure in the developing field of Transpersonal Psychology, and his work deserves serious engagement by pastoral theologians and pastoral counselors who seek to find their place in today's postmodern, post-Christian culture. This article summarizes the key concepts of Wilber's model of Transpersonal Psychology, provides an elementary pastoral and theological critique of his ideas, and suggests contributions that Wilber's thought can make to the field of pastoral theology and pastoral counseling.

INTRODUCTION

Ken Wilber is unquestionably the leading figure in the developing field of Transpersonal Psychology, a science possible only in the late twentieth-century as ancient religious traditions began to meet and mingle with modern psychologies and psychotherapies in an unprecedented way. Heralded by Kelly (1991) as "the first of modern sciences to take human spirituality seriously", Transpersonal Psychology attempts a synthesis that rethinks both spirituality and psychology. And as the dust begins to settle about the newly constructed foundation of a postmodern, post-Christian culture at the heart of the global village, Wilber's thought deserves serious engagement by today's pastoral theologians and pastoral counselors.

Transpersonal Psychology grows from a certainty that "behind the happenstance drama [of life] is a deeper or higher or wider pattern, or order, or intelligence" (Wilber, 1995, p. vii) that can be apprehended by human beings. Wilber (1997) posits a "spectrum of consciousness" in which, "at the upper reaches of the

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spectrum of consciousness—in the higher states of consciousness—individuals consistently report an awareness of being one with the all, or identical with spirit, or whole in spirit, and so on" (p. 124). These levels of consciousness (which Wilber contends are pathologized by "shallower psychologies, such as psychoanalysis" (p. 124.)) are open to "experiential disclosure" and can be rationally reconstructed but not rationally experienced. Wilber (1984) describes this experience as follows: "in the mystical consciousness, Reality is apprehended directly and immediately, meaning without any mediation, any symbolic elaboration, any conceptualization, or any abstractions; subject and object become one in a timeless and spaceless act that is beyond any and all forms of mediation" (Wilber, 1984, p. 7).

Reclusive and prolific, Wilber exhaustively documents his work and seeks not to narrow the field but to achieve "vision logic," the goal of which is to "not just reasonably decide the individual issues, but hold them all together at once in mind, and judge how they fit together as a truth vision" (Wilber, 1995, p. 185). Stating (1997) that the "contemplative sciences" (meditation, prayer, etc.) are the "only domain of direct data", Wilber argues that contemplative introspection and the communal verification of such experience prove that "higher domains of awareness, embrace, love, identity, reality, self and truth" (p. 265) exist and can be experienced by others.

Wilber (1997) writes poetically of the human quest for God, wrestling with essential questions and looking for answers with passionate hope in the future unfolding around us.

> We are yet the bastard sons and daughters of an evolution not yet done with us, caught always between the fragments of yesterday and the unions of tomorrow, unions apparently destined to carry us far beyond anything we can possibly recognize today, and unions that, like all such births, are exquisitely painful and unbearably ecstatic (p. 254).

This paper summarizes the key concepts of Wilber's model of Transpersonal Psychology, provides an elementary pastoral and theological critique of his ideas, and suggests contributions Wilber's thought can make to the field of pastoral counseling.

KEY CONCEPTS OF WILBER'S INTEGRATIVE MODEL

The essence of Wilber's integrative model of Transpersonal Psychology is this: "psychological growth or development in humans is simply a microcosmic reflection of universal growth on the whole and has the same goal: the unfolding of ever higher-order unities and integrations" (Wilber, 1983a, p. 83). Thus, his thought transcends *psych*ology to become a *cosm*ology (Wilber, 1995, p. viii.) organized by "orienting generalizations." These generalizations are principles that "show us, with a great deal of agreement, where the important forests are located, even if we can't agree on how many trees they contain" (p. ix.). There are five major approaches to Transpersonal Psychology (systems theory, altered states

of consciousness, Grof's holotropic model, Jungian psychology, and Wilber's "spectrum" or "integral" approach) (Wilber, 1997, p. 139), and Wilber contends that the key concepts of his model include and transcend the other approaches.

The Great Chain of Being

Transpersonal psychology understands *consciousness* to be the stuff of the universe, the field in which all else manifests. The Great Chain of Being—ranging from matter (the furthest from pure consciousness) to life, life to mind, mind to soul, and soul to spirit (the closest to pure consciousness and the stuff of which consciousness is made)—dictates the manifestation of reality, overflowing in a fecundity that hides each stage from the ones below it.

> At every stage of development, in fact, the next higher stage appears to be a completely 'other world,' an 'invisible world'—it has literally no existence for the individual, even though the individual is in fact *saturated* with a reality that contains the 'other' world. The individual's 'this worldly' existence simply cannot comprehend the 'other worldly' characteristics lying all around it (Wilber, 1997, p. 267).

The Human Self

Human selfhood emanates from the Great Chain of Being, developing from a pre-personal subconscious (characterized by an awareness of nature and body) to self-consciousness (an awareness of mind and psychic realities) and finally to transpersonal superconsciousness (an awareness of subtle, causal and ultimate realities) (Wilber, 1981, p. 9). The evolving self has three components: a basic structure (enduring characteristics such as linguistics, cognition, spatial coordination, etc.); transitional structures (characteristics that develop and dissolve such as world-views, self needs, moral stages, etc.); and the self and its fulcrums (characteristics that unite and integrate the other two components, such as identification, organization, will, defense, and "digestion of experience") (Wilber, 1997, p. 142–144).

Developmental Model

The human being is marked by quasi-independent development of "at least a dozen developmental lines" (p. 215) through all levels of consciousness. These developmental lines include the affective, cognitive, moral, spiritual, interpersonal, and object-relations components of the human creature. The "self" juggles these developmental lines, which are interdependent but advance at their own paces. "Translation" is the process of integrating, stabilizing and equilibrating the different developmental lines on a horizontal level. "Transformation" is the

process of transcending one consciousness and advancing vertically to the next. "Development" occurs in the tension between these horizontal and vertical dimensions of human being.

In Wilber's understanding, the spiritual growth line (levels of consciousness called psychic, or the experience of the universal Self; subtle, or interior marriage with spirit; and causal, or non-dual experience beyond self and God) (Wilber, 1995, p. 279–316) is the goal of human life and the heart of Transpersonal Psychology. Wilber (1997) joins Tillich in "defining the spiritual line as that line of development in which the subject holds its *ultimate concern*" (p. 221) regardless of content (which itself ranges from pre-personal concerns [survival] to personal concerns [belongingness] to transpersonal concerns). Spiritual growth (based on the esoteric "perennial philosophy" at the core of the world religions) is measured in the individual's ability to transcend a subjective point-of-view and move on to higher perspectives. This transcendence is a hallmark of the "integrated self" at the core of Wilber's psychological model.

Advancing from personal to transpersonal concerns, Wilber (1995) writes, is "the Kosmic evolutionary process, which is 'self development through self-transcendence,' the same process at work in atoms and molecules and cells, a process that, in human domains, continues naturally into the superconscious, with precisely nothing occult or mysterious about it" (p. 258). Because awareness has "*differentiated* from (or disidentified from, or transcended) an *exclusive* identification with body, persona, ego, and mind, it can now *integrate* them in a unified fashion, in a new and higher holon with each of them as junior partners" (p 262). Behold the Integrated Self.

Model of Pathology

Pathologies can occur, as well documented by traditional sciences, in all of the developmental lines running through an individual and at all levels of consciousness. Wilber contends that new and potential pathologies will be discovered as evolution continues (p 197). The primary spiritual pathology, however, is existential anxiety born of the realization that "personal life is a brief spark in the cosmic void" (p. 263). The separate self, Wilber (1983b) says, is "a contraction of angst" (p. 51). "No matter how wonderful it all might be now, we are still going to die: *dread*... is the authentic response... a dread that calls us back from self-forgetting to self-presence, a dread that seizes not this or that part of me (body or persona or ego or mind), but rather the totality of my being-in-the-world" (p. 263). Transcendence is the only cure, but complete transcendence is unlikely: "the great liberation finally takes place only at the sagely level of casual/ultimate adaptation. All lesser stages, no matter how occasionally ecstatic or visionary, are still beset with the primal mood of ego, which is sickness unto death" (p. 50).

PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC APPLICATION

Wilber calls for an "integrative therapy" that takes a holistic approach—investigating and addressing each of the developmental lines, prescribing treatments that range from nutrition and exercise to cognitive restructuring or Jungian individuation to specific spiritual disciplines, depending on the client's developmental stage and pathologies. The transpersonal therapist must be ready to draw from all traditions, both Eastern and Western. "A truly integrative and encompassing psychology can and should make use of the complementary insights offered by each school of psychology" (Wilber, 1977, p. 15), each of which, Wilber says, is directed to a different level of his Spectrum of Consciousness. Thus, the therapist must be an expert guiding the client through the maze of developmental possibilities.

Elsewhere, Wilber presents psychotherapy as a task of hermeneutics. Psychological symptoms are hidden texts and subtexts that indicate that some aspects of consciousness have been split off during the developmental process. His approach seems similar to that of the narrative therapists, being more explicit about what the therapist brings to the encounter: a knowledge of structural development used to determine what aspects of consciousness need to be restructured. "The therapist helps the client to re-own those facets of self by re-authoring them and thus re-authorizing them, that is, consciously assuming responsibility for their existence. . . . Overall therapy involves a critical self-reflection on past translations and possible mistranslations (hidden texts)" (Wilber, 1983b, p. 129–132).

No matter what traditions are drawn on for treatment, transpersonal therapy will always seek to send the client inward. "The more one can introspect and reflect on one's self, then the more detached from that self one can become, the more one can rise above that self's limited perspective, and so the less narcissistic or less egocentric one becomes (or the more *decentered* one becomes)" (Wilber, 1995, p. 256). Therapy helps the client develop the "requisite cognitive tools" (p. 267) (through meditation and contemplation) to experience and perceive the transpersonal levels of consciousness. Doing so requires the therapist to assess the deep-structure of the client's self to know what developmental level has been reached and thus what spiritual practice is most appropriate. For example, "a pre-rational, borderline individual, who needs desperately to create rational structures and ego strength, should not be introduced to the more strenuous transrational meditative-yogic disciplines, because they are designed to *loosen* the rational structure temporarily and thus will dismantle what little structure the borderline has left" (Wilber, 1983b, p. 124).

Wilber recognizes that few individuals are ready to work at the transpersonal levels he advocates. He (1997) writes that in America "a disproportionately large number of people who are drawn to transpersonal spirituality are often at a preconventional level of self development. This means that much of what American [spiritual] teachers have to do is actually engage in supportive psychotherapy,

not transformative and transpersonal spirituality" (p. 227). One also wonders how many therapists are equipped to work at these transpersonal levels of care.

Finally, Wilber (1995) emphasizes that successful transpersonal therapy will, after turning the client inward, send the client out into the world.

> Spirit (at any level) manifests as a self in a community with social and cultural foundations and objective correlates, and thus any *higher* Self will inextricably involve a *wider* community existing in a *deeper* objective state of affairs. Contacting the higher Self is not the end of all problems but the beginning of the immense and difficult new work to be done. . . . The more you contact the Higher Self, the *more* you worry about the world, as a component of your Very Self, the Self of each and all (496–497).

PASTORAL AND THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

Pastoral theology and pastoral counseling have all but ignored Transpersonal Psychology, despite several calls in the literature to engage Wilber's work. "It seems odd," Eades (1992) wrote, "that pastoral counseling . . . would need a call to take seriously the transpersonal dimensions of existence. . . . The possibilities of development beyond the ego must be acknowledged more intentionally by those who claim to be making 'psycho-spiritual interventions' with persons in pain" (p. 33). I believe there are several reasons for the reluctance to address Wilber's work.

First, Wilber's psychological model is both postmodern and post-Christian. "Despite a distinct family resemblance, transpersonal psychology is distinct from confessional theology in that its account (*logos*) of Spirit (*theos*) does not subordinate the disciplinary spectrum (i.e., the natural and human sciences) to the mythos and central symbols of a particular creed or revealed tradition" (Kelly, 1991, p. 439). Thus, institutional Christianity does not take a central role in Transpersonal Psychology. While Wilber respects Christ and sees "Christ consciousness" as a goal of human development, he believes the church made a mistake by developing *beliefs* about Christ and God that replaced an *experience* of Christ and God (Kornmann, 1995). This refusal to make Christ central may be a large hurdle separating Transpersonal Psychology from Christian pastoral theology and pastoral counseling, but it certainly does not keep us from taking Wilber's thoughts seriously.

Second, Wilber (who sees himself as Buddhist) makes liberal use of the English words "Emptiness" and "Void." These are technical terms in Buddhism, but readers unfamiliar with that tradition may not grasp the meaning he attempts to convey. Further, these meanings are not consistent with the terms "Abyss" and "Meaninglessness" as used in existential psychotherapy, which may cause additional confusion. Wilber's terms may also carry negative connotations for many Christian theologians, making it difficult to engage in dialogue with Transpersonal Psychology.

Third, Wilber (1995) rejects the Christian doctrine of eternal life. The teachings of world religions, he claims, are "about the *release* from individuality,

and not about its everlasting perpetuation, a grotesque notion that was equated flat-out with hell" (p. 265). While some Christians would agree with Wilber, his position may alienate many (if not most) others.

Finally, Wilber approaches his subject with a gleeful irreverence. (He once published an article titled "God Is So Damn Boring".) His iconoclastic attitude may offend those who take themselves (or their religious tradition) too seriously and thus prevent their serious engagement of his ideas.

Nonetheless, Wilber's emphasis on community, concern for others, and radical transformation echo primary concerns of the Christian tradition. The transpersonal consciousness he writes about is authentic to Christian experience and well-documented in the writings of Christian mystics. His work provides common ground for dialogue with pastoral theology. In particular, Wilber's anthropology, doctrine of vocation, eschatology, doctrine of creation, and inherent emphasis on the sovereignty of God deserve further attention.

Sovereignty of God and Doctrine of Creation

Wilber (1983b, p. 135) understands God as both Self (demanding identity) and Other (demanding relationship and participation). Human beings meet this God in the midst of an evolutionary process, and God is experienced as an order or intelligence of which we are not fully aware. We approach this God in contemplative introspection, and God infuses all aspects of reality (both higher and lower consciousness). We cannot escape! Thus, God is sovereign over all that manifests in the Great Chain of Being; God is both the Chain and the ground in which the chain unfolds.

Wilber's understanding of God resonates with Christian experience of God as larger than any human conception, unlimited by the structure and boundaries humans attempt to impose on Divine Reality. He (1997) describes God as:

> Spirit that damages none, embraces all, and announces itself with the simplest of clarity, which leaves no places left untouched by care nor cuts its embrace for a chosen few; neither does it hide its face in the shadows of true believers, nor take up residence on a chosen piece of real estate, but rather looks out from the very person now reading these lines, too obvious to ignore, too simple to describe, too easy to believe (p. xix).

Some may be concerned that Wilber falls into pantheism, but I believe he speaks of a panentheism that is consistent with Christian tradition. This is the belief, particularly evident in process theology, that the "universe exists in God without being identical with God or exhausting the infinitude of his [sic] being" (Hickey). In other words, while the universe is part of God's reality, God's identity is greater than the universe (Beck). MacQuarrie (1972) understands the relationships between God and creation this way:

> As a creative source, God is prior to the world and transcendent of it; yet because he loves the world and it is his own work, in a sense of which the human work of art affords some distant analogy, God is also immanent in the world. It is very important that both aspects of

> God's relation to the world should be made clear in any statement of the doctrine of creation (p. 84).

I am uncomfortable, however, with Wilber's merging the finite and infinite realms at the highest levels of consciousness. The created world emanating from the Great Chain of Being is vastly different than the infinity of God, and this chasm cannot be bridged by our finite being; the "world is God's work and therefore not itself divine", according to MacQuarrie (1972). One might characterize Wilber's position as one that understands the higher levels of consciousness to bring about the deification of creation, but "deification", as defined by Moltmann's (1996) understanding of the Eastern Orthodox churches, "does not mean that human beings are transformed into gods. It means that they partake of the characteristics and rights of the divine nature through their community with Christ, the God-human being" (p. 272).

Anthropology and Vocation

Wilber understands human beings as creatures evolving in a special relationship to God. As such, we are called into the transformation that takes place at the causal and subtle levels of consciousness. The three-part anthropology (pre-conscious, self-conscious, and superconscious) Wilber sets forth is similar to the Christian notion of body, mind, and spirit; however, he fails to address the issue of human sin. This failure weakens his appeal to Christian theologians.

It seems reasonable, however, to assume that sin for Wilber is that action or state of being that strengthens belief in the finite self and blocks one from ascending into higher consciousness. This conception of sin is similar to that set forth by Keenan (1995): "Sin is not simply a private affair between a human person and god, subject to consequent divine punishment. Rather, it is a closing of one's consciousness to God by clinging to set realities and ideas. It is the action . . . of opting for self and exercising that option through habitual attachments to false realities in protecting that false self" (p. 86).

Eschatology

While Wilber rejects the notion of salvation by Jesus Christ, he (1983b) draws on the metaphor of crucifixion and resurrection to describe the human experience of growth across the Spectrum of Consciousness. "Each transformation is a process of death and rebirth: death to the old level, and transformation to and rebirth on the newly emergent level. And, according to the sages, when all layers of self have been transcended—when all deaths have been died—the result is only God in final Truth, and a new Destiny beyond destiny is resurrected from the stream of consciousness" (p. 54). This process of transcendent evolution leads, for Wilber,

to a new reality not unlike the "new heaven and new earth" described in Christian scripture, a reality resting in the splendor of God. When that time comes, Wilber (1995) says that

> the loveless, beaten, battered self will let go the torment and the torture of its self-embracing ways, tire of that marriage to a special misery that it had chosen over loneliness, to nurse it through the long brutality of a life that doesn't care, surrender the murderous love affair with its own perplexed reflection, which had itself pretended to the throne of the Divine, and find instead its soul in Grace and drenched throughout with a luminous God that is its own true Being—its always and only Original Face, smiling now from the radiant Abyss, unreasonably happy in the face of every sight, set helplessly afloat on the Sea of Intimacy, adrift in currents of Compassion and caressed in unrelenting Care, one with each and one with all in mutual Self—recognition, dancing in the dawn that heralds now the Self of all that truly is, and the Community of all that well might be, and the State of all that is to come (p. 495).

Contributions to Pastoral Counseling

As implied above, Wilber's work has had little impact on pastoral counseling to date. However, several contributions are possible: a new understanding of human development beyond psychodynamic understandings of health and wholeness; a new vocabulary and perspective for dialogue with other faiths and for addressing the question of authentically Christian care in a postmodern, post-Christian world; a new category of pathology that could be understood as resistance to transpersonal elements; and a clearer notion of what psychotherapies are appropriate to a specific level of development on the Spectrum of Consciousness. Finally, Wilber's work provides a new emphasis on meditative and contemplative dicipline as resources for counseling.

I believe Transpersonal Psychology has much to offer the field of pastoral theology and pastoral counseling, particularly when it comes to understanding the goal of pastoral work. As Thornton (1985) asked: "Could it be . . . that a stable state of consciousness lies beyond ego maturity in the realm of religious experience is the priceless treasure we are seeking for our pastoral ministries?" (p. 16) Or, as Wilber (1995) himself has asked, "How do we fit into that which is forever moving beyond us? Does liberation mean being whole ourselves, or being a part of something Larger—or something else altogether?" (p. x.).

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