

Beyond enacted experiences

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Abstract: Ken Wilber’s Integral Theory insists that valid knowledge must be derived from paradigms: sets of injunctions and social practices that lead to replicable experiences. Wilber claims that the theory still includes the essentials of premodern traditions, because the essentials of those traditions consist of a phenomenological core of practices leading to mystical experience. Drawing on the works of Robert Sharf and Wilhelm Halbfass and on close readings of primary texts, this article argues that mystical paradigms of replicable experience are not in fact the essentials of these traditions—neither for the majority of practitioners, nor even for their revered teachers or masters. Its conclusion discusses the implications of this point for constructive integral work.

Key words: Ken Wilber, Integral Theory, mystical experience, tradition

The ambitious and important project of Ken Wilber’s Integral Theory puts together ideas from a wide array of traditions, modern and premodern. Wilber speaks of an “integral wave” that “includes the essentials of the first-tier waves (traditional to modern to postmodern)...” (Wilber, nd) This promise to include the essentials of the major streams of human consciousness in different times and places contributes a great deal to the appeal of Wilber’s thought. To include the essentials of so many different worldviews is not an easy task, when they at least appear to disagree with each other on so much. In any attempt to do so, the key question must be: *what are the essentials?*

Wilber has identified the essentials, or core, of premodern traditions with their mystical paradigms—the parts of the traditions that contain practices leading

to verifiable spiritual experiences. These paradigms are the elements of the traditions which can be included through Wilber's Integral Methodological Pluralism, according to which only paradigms of injunction and experience count as valid knowledge and what remains is meaningless metaphysics. It is because the core of the traditions is in paradigms of experience that Wilber claims that his theory, in which only paradigms leading to experience are included, has included them. My argument in this article will be that these mystical paradigms are *not* at the core of any major premodern tradition, and that this fact has significant implications for Wilber's methodological approach.

Wilber's approach to integrating paradigms

I will start by summarizing the approach Wilber takes to traditional, modern and premodern worldviews in the most recent phase of his writing, known as "wilber-5." Wilber first described four phases of his intellectual development in *The Eye of Spirit* (Wilber, 1997), calling them "wilber-1" through "wilber-4"; readers later identified a fifth, which Wilber has agreed exists (Wilber, nd, for example). I aim here to derive my interpretation of Wilber from wilber-5 sources when possible, turning to wilber-4 writings only when they provide a level of detail that wilber-5 does not, and when I do not think that they disagree with the wilber-5 writings—as Wilber himself does, for example when he says in *Integral Spirituality* that "I won't elaborate further on these 4 meanings. They are pursued at length in *Integral Psychology*." (Wilber, 2006a, 102) In wilber-5 writings, consisting primarily of the printed *Integral Spirituality* (Wilber, 2006a) and a series of online excerpts from an upcoming work, Wilber adopts an approach called Integral Methodological Pluralism. Here, modern and postmodern standards of knowledge and verification get priority and pride of place:

the verification methods for the existence of these structures of consciousness can no longer involve merely asserting their existence because tradition says so; nor basing their existence merely on introspection or meditation (or other allegedly culture-transcending claims and assertions). They will, at the least, involve some version of both *modernity's* demand **for objective evidence** and *postmodernity's*

demand **for intersubjective grounding**—without which you are presenting, in the first instance, merely *a given myth* (or given mythology; myths are truth claims without adequate evidence—which are the types of claims modernity fought valiantly to overcome, because they are all-too-often empirical falsehoods housing imperialistic power) or, in the second instance, *the myth of the given...* (Wilber, 2006a, 234, emphasizes Wilber’s)

What provides an adequate combination of objective evidence and intersubjective grounding, in Wilber’s eyes? According to Wilber’s guiding principle of *enactment*, what properly satisfies epistemological demands is a *paradigm*, “a practice to bring forth a set of experiences”; for Wilber, “phenomena are enacted and brought forth by injunctions, paradigms, or social practices (‘if you want to know this, you must do this’).” (Wilber, nd) This concept of a paradigm is central to Integral Methodological Pluralism; it not only helps identify which theories are considered higher and more integral than others, but also defines what gets included in his theory at all.

According to Wilber’s principle of *unfoldment*, which is closely related to the principle of enactment, what makes Copernicus’s astronomical theory superior to, and more integral than, Ptolemy’s—and relativity theory in turn superior to Copernicus’s—is that Copernicus’s theory can explain Ptolemy’s observations as well as Copernicus’s own, and relativity theory in turn can explain Ptolemy’s, Copernicus’s and more besides. Much of the *theories* of Copernicus and Ptolemy are discarded, but the *experiences* that gave rise to them, and the social practices or injunctions that gave rise to those experiences, are preserved. Wilber honors the fact that “if you are standing on the earth and watching the planets move, the Ptolemaic map is phenomenologically 100% accurate: you will see exactly what Ptolemy said you will see; he had a legitimate paradigm--or a practice to bring forth a series of experiences--and an accurate map to match it.” (Wilber, nd)

What about theories that *aren’t* based on paradigms? Those, Wilber refers to as “metaphysics”, and he regularly uses the term as a pejorative. Metaphysics is “assertions without evidence,” “assertions without meaning” (Wilber, 2006a, 258). And we would be better off not incorporating any of this meaningless metaphysics into any mature theory. “No injunction, no meaning, no reality. Just metaphysical power plays in an age that is no longer capable of being impressed by such...”

(Wilber, 2006a, 269)

Now many moderns accept an epistemological demand similar to these: what does not come out of replicable experience may be discarded. But such a view has posed a problem. As Wilber (Wilber, 2006a, 181-90) notes with regret, modern epistemological demands have often led quickly to the rejection of the premodern great wisdom traditions—of anything that could be classed as “religion”. For, to many, it has seemed that these traditions just cannot meet these demands; religion is “metaphysics” in just this sense.¹ They have therefore dismissed the traditions in their entirety. Wilber views this dismissal as a disaster:

in correctly spotting the immaturity of the notion of a mythic God—or the *mythic level* of the spiritual line—they threw out not just the *mythic level* of spiritual intelligence *but the entire line* of spiritual intelligence. So upset were they with the mythic level, they tossed the baby of the spiritual line with the bathwater of its mythic level of development. (Wilber, 2006a, 183, emphases Wilber’s)

What did those who rejected “religion” get wrong? Two things. First, they neglected the crucial role that *myth* plays in human development. Myth is required for the early stages of human development, more generally but around the spiritual line of development in particular, and it needs to be honored and respected for playing this crucial role. (Wilber, 2006a, 192-3) Human beings, both as individuals and in their social history, have proceeded through stages color-coded on the rainbow: most relevant to our purposes here are the “amber” mythical stage, where conservative religious tradition lies; the “orange” stage of scientism and capitalism; the “green” stage of postmodernism and ecology; and the “turquoise” stage that integrates those which came before it. (Wilber, 2006a, 66-9) The early stages are not going away, and myth is needed for healthy human development through those stages. (Wilber, 2006a, 192-3) Still, myth is ultimately itself just metaphysics, for “myths are truth claims without adequate evidence...” (Wilber, 2006a, 234) Myths will continue to play a critical *role* in the modern and postmodern world, and they must be honored and cherished for that role. But, *qua* metaphysics, they are not actually to be *included* in an integral theory.

Leaving out myth from the theory (while honoring it) is an acceptable result for Wilber at least partially because, in his view, myth and metaphysics are not at the *core* of premodern traditions. He can still include their *essentials*, because, he

argues, the essentials of the traditions are *not* their myths and metaphysical systems, but are in fact themselves based on paradigms, on replicable experiences derived from injunctions. For that reason, their essentials are fully compatible with the post/modern epistemology expressed in the enactment principle:

Modernist epistemologies subjected them to the demand for evidence, and because the premodern traditions were ill-prepared for this onslaught, they did not meet this challenge with a direct elucidation of the one area of their teachings that could have met the challenge: *the phenomenological core* of their contemplative traditions, which offered all the verifiable evidence one could want within a remarkably modern paradigm (contemplation was always a modern epistemology ahead of its time in a premodern world). (Wilber, 2006a, 43, emphasis Wilber's)

By *phenomenological*, Wilber means relating to or deriving from the inner felt experience of an individual subject:

I can experience my own 'I' *from the inside*, in this moment, as the felt experience of being a subject of my present experience, a 1st person having a 1st-person experience. If I do so, the results include such things as introspection, meditation, phenomenology, contemplation, and so on (all simply summarized as **phenomenology** in fig. 1.3). (Wilber, 2006a, 36, emphases Wilber's)

The "phenomenological core" of the traditions, in turn, refers to the kinds of interior spiritual experiences described by William James and Evelyn Underhill. Underhill, in particular, "focused on **the phenomenological stages of the spiritual path...**" (Wilber, 2006a, 96, emphasis Wilber's) Wilber notes that the variety of experiences described by Underhill was somewhat narrower than that described by James, because Underhill was interested particularly in experiences that can be achieved by *training*, as in the methods described in the previous paragraph (like meditation). These trained experiences typically occur in stages:

the stages of felt experiences and *conscious events in the "I" space*, as apprehended and seen from within, as it unfolds over time under the discipline of spiritual practice (or *meditative states training*). These are things that you can see from your prayer cushion or your meditation mat over time. (Wilber, 2006a, 96, emphases Wilber's)

It is these experiences described by Underhill, *trained* experiences like those

provided by meditation, that stand up best to the modern and postmodern demands. What makes mystical traditions modern, in Wilber's eyes, is that the phenomena they enact are *replicable*. Like physics and other natural sciences, these traditions propose a set of social practices and injunctions, and promise that anyone who takes up those practices will experience the phenomena they describe. (Wilber, nd) So Wilber has no problem including the core of the premodern traditions because their core is a paradigm: that set of injunctions and social practices designed to result in spiritual or mystical experiences. And it is my objective in this article to argue that this paradigm is *not*, in fact, at the traditions' core.

Let me be clear: I do not intend to challenge Wilber's comparative *description* of mystical experience. We may assume, for the sake of argument at least, that the injunctions of certain practices, such as Dzogchen meditation and hesychastic prayer, produce replicable experiences of the sort that Wilber describes.² We may assume further the comparative conclusion, found in Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986 and regularly cited in Wilber's later work, that there are strong phenomenological similarities across the states of experience described in South Asian (Buddhist and "Hindu") and Orthodox Christian traditions.

What I am questioning is something else: the assertion that those phenomenological inner experiences constitute the *core* of those traditions, let alone of other premodern traditions. This, I think, is demonstrably false. (If we do not wish to use the language of true and false, we could say that when it comes to an understanding of the history of wisdom traditions, the idea that they have phenomenology at their core is at a relatively low level or stage of understanding.)

The claim I am advancing here, that inner experience is not at the core of the traditions, is not my own discovery or invention. It comes from prominent secondary work in the field of religious studies, which has been confirmed by my own study of various primary sources. But this existing research is not well reflected in Integral Theory as it currently stands. The idea that mystical experience stood as a common core to traditions was widely believed among religious-studies scholars in the early and mid-20th centuries, and has since been widely criticized. Wilber is well aware of one strand of this critique, the epistemological critique of Steven Katz (1978), and has offered a thoughtful refutation of it (Wilber, 2000, 627-32n16). I am writing here not about Katz's critique but about another, more historical, strand of criticism which points to the relative marginality of phenomenological experience to the great

traditions—certainly among the majority of practitioners, but even among their exemplars and revered masters.

Historical method

The claims of this article are primarily historical—although, given the nature of Wilber’s approach as described above, they have major constructive theoretical implications, which the conclusion will spell out. Therefore questions of historiography, of method in historical study, are essential to it.

Wilber’s most recent and extended discussion of historiography comes from a 2006 online “sidebar” to the novel *Boomeritis*, entitled “Who ate Captain Cook?” (Wilber, 2006b) The discussion is not placed in his own voice but that of Carla Fuentes, one of the “Integral Center” speakers who give the lectures that make up most of *Boomeritis* (Wilber, 2002, 44-5). The sidebar similarly consists mostly of a long lecture with which the characters generally nod their head and agree, and the content of the lectures in the book and sidebar is generally consistent with Wilber’s own outlook at that time, so I think it is safe to discuss the views of “Fuentes” as if they are Wilber’s own.

The sidebar discusses the recent debate between the anthropologists Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere over the encounter of Captain James Cook with native inhabitants of Hawai’i. Wilber characterizes their approaches as “green” and “orange” respectively—Sahlins privileging interpretation over fact, Obeyesekere privileging fact over interpretation. An integral (turquoise) approach would give proper respect to both. For Wilber the problem with an orange approach, which attempts to be based purely on the facts of the matter, is that it neglects the necessary interpretive element in history, so that “orange simply *smuggles* its formal-rational interpretations into its presentation of the facts.” (Wilber, 2006b, emphasis in original)

I agree with the general method Wilber takes here: facts and interpretations are both important. As Wilber also notes, they are not independent of each other; they must inform each other. For what *makes* a good interpretation? When he talks about the green focus on interpretation, Wilber makes a distinction between pluralism and genealogy, preferring the latter but noting that there can also be good

and bad kinds of genealogy. And what makes a good genealogy? He offers a helpful direct definition: “Good’ genealogy, rather, consists of an attempt to hermeneutically understand the worldview of any group of people in terms that *they themselves would agree with.*” (Wilber, 2006b, emphasis in original)

The question then becomes: how can one establish what this group would agree with? In anthropology of a contemporary society, one can often simply go in and ask them. In pre-20th-century history, however, all the people involved are dead. So how can we tell what they would agree with? Our best way of telling that is usually going to be inferring from what they actually *said*, as best we can reconstruct that. We are often unable to reconstruct it very well, but interpretation requires that we taking our best shot—and that means paying close attention to the sources we have available.

I discuss these points because my own approach in the substantive sections of this article is based on a close attention to details of historical fact: of what was said in the relevant texts and sources that a responsible historian may take to represent major figures in the premodern traditions. I don’t mean to say that “the facts speak for themselves”, but rather to agree with Wilber that our own hermeneutic process of interpretation needs to be based on the facts.

There are some points where the textual records do not explicitly tell us what was going on inside people’s heads one way or another—for example, did Jesus have a peak experience?—but there are better and worse ways to approach these silences in the texts, given Wilber’s own injunction to try to reconstruct worldviews as those who held them would likely agree with. Especially, we need to recognize that their interiors are not ours. Indeed, in the Obeyesekere-Sahlins debate, the specific difficulty Wilber finds with Obeyesekere’s approach—the one that focuses on facts and neglects interpretations—is that it thereby reads Obeyesekere’s own orange worldview onto the red Hawai’an natives. (Wilber, 2006b) On the interpretive side, projecting our own worldview onto others is exactly the historiographical mistake we want to avoid.

This point has at least two important implications. First, our own mystical practices and experiences, whatever their role in our own lives, must take a back seat when we are talking about history. The fact that *you* had an experience provoked by meditative techniques—even if you were taught those techniques by a teacher who claims to be in the lineage of the Buddha!—does not necessarily mean

that *the Buddha himself* had that experience, not as long as we treat the Buddha as a historical person, a man who existed as a physical human being in the way that you and I do. Our decision whether to interpret the Buddha as having had that experience is a decision that needs to be grounded in proper historical evidence, which is to say evidence about him, not about us.

Similarly, we should be wary of taking members of the living tradition as a historical source. A living Tibetan Buddhist master may well help your understanding of ancient Buddhism by giving you ways of thinking about the tradition's ideas that you hadn't thought of before (to say nothing of teaching you valuable meditative practices that will help you here and now). But the Tibetan Buddhism of today is not the Tibetan Buddhism of a thousand years ago, let alone the Indian Buddhism of a thousand years before that. Things change a lot over the centuries. For one example, it's a commonplace among many Mahāyāna Buddhists today that the historical Buddha preached the Mahāyāna *sūtras*; but examination of the *sūtras*' language and context makes it pretty clear that he didn't.³ To understand what historical people thought, we have to turn to what we know of what *they* said themselves, and our best source for that is the texts preserved in some manner from as close to their own time as possible, whether through oral recitation (like the Pali Canon) or writing.⁴

Experiences, injunctions, and the core of Christianity

With these methodological points in mind, let us now assess the claim that phenomenological experience is at the core of the premodern traditions. This claim would clearly be false if "core" meant that it was something central to the lives of a majority of the traditions' adherents, or to their understanding of their own tradition. Robert Sharf points out that even in Buddhist tradition—which, as we will see, is considerably more amenable to a mystical interpretation than most—historical and ethnographic reports show that most practitioners do not meditate or seek mystical experiences, and have not done so for most of the tradition's history. In most non-modernized Buddhist temples, meditation texts are taken less as guides to be followed than as sacred talismans full of magical power. (Sharf, 1995, 241-3) Historically it was highly unusual for non-monks to meditate; as far as we

know, the idea of a “meditation center” is so recent that the term used for such centers in Sri Lanka (*bhāvanā madhyasthāna*) is a literal Sanskrit translation of the English term “meditation center”. (Gombrich, 1983; Sharf, 1995, 257)

It goes further: in Asian Buddhist societies, meditation was and is rare not only among laypeople but among monks as well. The vast majority of Theravāda monks consider their vocation to be *ganthadura* (teaching) rather than *vipassanādhura* (meditation). And even *vipassanādhura* monks typically insist that the practices of moral restraint (*sīla*), as expressed in the monastic rule (*vinaya*), is *more* essential to the Buddhist path than is meditation. (Sharf, 1995, 241-3) The same is largely true of Zen monks in Japan. (Sharf, 1995, 249) Even in Tibet, whose tradition has put somewhat more emphasis on meditation than others, still “virtually all Tibetan Buddhists... occupy the greater part of their time in ritual assemblies, monastic administration, academic study, the production of religious texts and implements, and various kinds of menial labor.” (Gyatso, 1999) For the majority of Buddhists, in short, meditation is peripheral to their experience of Buddhism.

It would not be hard to make a similar case about most other traditions; mysticism has always been a minority approach. But I think Wilber has anticipated this part of the critique, or something like it. He notes that “70% of the world’s population has not yet stably made it to worldcentric, postconventional levels of development” (Wilber, 2006a, 179); and at the lower levels of development inhabited by this 70%, the non-mystical elements of tradition, especially myth, are vitally important. (Wilber, 2006a, 191-4) He can understand the non-mystical majority as being at these lower levels. As I understand it, when Wilber claims mystical paradigms are at the core of the traditions, he is not making the clearly false claim that *most* Christians or Buddhists themselves practised hesychastic prayer or vipassanā meditation, or that they derived their understanding of tradition from the experiences which resulted. The claim that they are the core must mean something else.

Before we explore what that something else is, however, we should pause for a moment and consider the significance of the claim Wilber makes that by including the mystical paradigms that lead to inner experience, one has included the essentials of the premodern traditions. When one makes such a claim, one is issuing a challenge, throwing down a gauntlet, to the majority of the tradition’s members,

who have *not* been involved in those mystical paradigms, and in many cases not even considered them very important. One is saying that the majority of practitioners in a given tradition have missed the essentials—which is surely to say, missed the point—of *their own tradition*. That’s a very strong claim to be making. I see nothing inherently *wrong* with making such a claim, and have indeed defended that approach before; it is the time-honoured strategy of Martin Luther or the author of the Lotus Sūtra. (see Lele, 2010.) All the same, when one *does* make such a dramatic argumentative move, I think, it places the burden of proof squarely on oneself. If you are prepared to claim that you know what the essentials of a tradition really are and the vast majority of its own practitioners do not, then you had best be well prepared to defend that claim against all comers.

With that point in mind, let us examine Wilber’s reasons for identifying mystical paradigms as the traditions’ essentials. I think his clearest statement on the subject comes from his longest and most detailed work to date, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*.⁵ He explains the experiential element of the traditions in more detail as follows:

[A]lthough all of the contemplative traditions aim at going within and beyond reason, they all *start* with reason, start with the notion that truth is to be established by *evidence*, that truth is the result of *experimental* methods, that truth is to be *tested* in the laboratory of personal *experience*, that these truths are open to all who wish to *try the experiment* and thus disclose for *themselves* the truth or falsity of the spiritual claims—and that dogmas or given beliefs are precisely what hinder the emergence of deeper truths and wider visions. (Wilber, 2000, 273, emphasizes his)

The mystical element of the traditions, in Wilber’s view, is experientially based, and it is this element which he proceeds to identify with “the world’s greatest yogis, saints and sages”; he gives examples when he refers to “their teachings (such as those of Buddha, Christ, Padmasambhava, Rumi, and Chih-i)...” (Wilber, 2000, 273) This, it seems, is the way in which phenomenological experience constitute the traditions’ core: their founders and great masters derived their spiritual claims from experiences which they pursued through an experimental method, and they claimed this method to be replicable and available to anyone who wished to try it. So even if most people who are *part* of the traditions have nothing to do with mystical

paradigms themselves, the people whom they *revere* did so. As far as I can tell, it is in this respect that, for Wilber, the mystical paradigms are at the core of the traditions.

So we may then ask: how appropriate is this interpretation of the great teachers? Is it a characterization that they themselves would agree with, as Wilber's methodological injunctions require? As noted in the methods section, we should bear in mind that, just as we learn more about our own interiors from inner contemplation than from historical records, so we learn more about historical figures from historical records than from inner contemplation; and what we are concerned with here are the historical figures.

Let us first note that there are significant numbers of esteemed sages, such as Confucius, to whom even mystical experiences have rarely been attributed, and others for whom any relevant experiences were said to arise only spontaneously, not through a paradigm. In the Hebrew Bible, God is said to have spoken to Abraham and Moses; one could perhaps count this as a mystical experience (though not an experience of any sort of oneness; God remains wholly other to them). There is nothing in these texts, however, to indicate that this experience derived from any paradigm or injunctions whatsoever. God's voice comes to Abraham and Moses all of a sudden (Genesis 12:1, Exodus 3). The sacred text provides no way to replicate this experience, to get God to talk to you the way he talked to Abraham and Moses.

So we should remember that there are many important teachers in the wisdom teachers who were pretty clearly not following mystical paradigms. Let us turn next to those esteemed teachers who are more commonly interpreted in mystical ways—especially, to teachers that Wilber himself lists as examples. Of these, a particularly illustrative example is Christ, or Jesus of Nazareth. In what sense does Jesus Christ fit the description above, of a man claiming truth is to be established by the evidence of experience? Wilber claims that Jesus had a “causal-level realization (I and the Father are One)” (Wilber, 2000, 362). To the best of our knowledge, is this an interpretation Jesus would agree with? And if so, did he believe this realization to be replicable by others?

The Jesus quote “I and the Father are One” is found in the New Testament at John 10:34. We may note first that the book of John is the last of the four Gospels to be written, more than forty years after Jesus's death (Rensberger, 1993). In comparison to the other Gospels, its concerns are more theological than historical,

raising many questions about its accuracy as an account of Jesus's actual life. So there may be some doubt as to whether Jesus really said this.

But let us suppose for the sake of argument that John represents an accurate record of Jesus's life (as Wilber appears to take it), so that Jesus actually did say this. On what grounds then are we to believe that Jesus derived this claim from a mystical experience of the sort that could be achieved through a replicable practice? I have found no reference claiming Jesus had such experiences or states in the Gospels, in secondary scholarship explaining them, or in works on the historical Jesus; and Wilber hasn't provided any either. It is Paul, not Christ, who is described as deriving his worldview from a vision on the road to Damascus. The facts do not tell us that Jesus had such an experience.

Now to be fair, the facts alone also do not tell us that he *didn't*. So one could *try* to build an interpretation that reads Jesus's claim as coming from such an experience. But one would need to justify that interpretation against the many other potential interpretations that allow themselves here. As the historical criticism points out, Jesus may not have preached that he was one with God at all. If he did preach this idea, it's at least possible that he simply didn't believe it, as is the case with some charismatic cult leaders today. If he did believe it, he may have absorbed the idea from earlier Jewish sources and believed it because he acknowledged their authority. Or—and I suggest that if we really hope to include the essentials of Christianity then we need to at least *listen* to this idea, even if we ultimately rule it out—he could have actually *been* the only begotten son of God, and known that he was uniquely one with the Father because he was omniscient, and therefore knew that sort of thing along with everything else under the sun. None of these ideas are necessarily true—indeed several of them are mutually exclusive—but without more historical *evidence*, of the sort on which Wilber agreed interpretation should be based, we can't give *a priori* credence to the idea that Jesus claimed to be one with the Father because he experienced mystical states.

Could such evidence be provided? On this point it is instructive to turn to the writings of Raimon Panikkar, a 20th-century Catholic mystic whose work Wilber cites as a good example of a highly developed Christian thinker (Wilber, 2006a, 199). Panikkar, with references to the New Testament, writes of “the mysticism of Jesus the Christ” and “the mystical experience of Jesus the Christ”, with particular emphasis on the “I and the Father are One” quote (Panikkar, 2004). But even

Panikkar does not speak of Jesus as deriving this idea from meditation, prayer, or any similar replicable practice. And beyond that, he makes it clear that he intends his interpretation as a work of theology, not of history:

My comments may still be valid even if the historical Jesus did not pronounce the words cited literally, or were not the second person of the Trinity. In any case, I maintain that he is a prototype of the human condition. It should be clear, at this point, that if I speak of an experience and meeting with Christ, it is not a question of evoking or imagining the past but rather of a meeting with someone alive. (Panikkar, 2004, 83)

Such a method, I think, is a fine way to approach one's own Christian spirituality. It is not a sufficient way to approach the historical Jesus, which is fine, for that was not Panikkar's main intent. But if we are to speak of the essentials of Christianity in a way that privileges elements of Christianity not believed or practised by the majority of Christians, and if we are to base such a claim about the essentials on claims about Jesus himself, and especially if we are trying to understand the historical Jesus in terms he would himself agree with, then we cannot use Panikkar's claims for that purpose.

Even if we did somehow find a way to claim that Jesus derived his claim about oneness from a mystical experience, we would remain on shaky ground if we were to claim he believed the experience replicable, "open to all who wish to *try the experiment*." The claim would be absurd if—as the vast majority of Christian theology has had it⁶—Jesus were God's *only* son. If Jesus was the son of God and we're not, then there is not even the remote possibility of our replicating his divine realizations.

In *SES*, Wilber attempts to refute that mainstream ("amber") theological view by implying that Jesus himself did not believe he was God's only son in this way. He does so continuing to refer to the Gospel of John. According to Wilber, when authorities stoned Jesus for claiming to be God, his reply, lost on a primitive crowd, was that "we are *all* sons (and daughters) of God..." (Wilber, 2000, 362, emphasis Wilber's) But that isn't quite what Jesus says in the text. His opponents, from a conservative Jewish sect, have just told him it is blasphemy for him, as a man, to claim to be God. In response:

Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you

are “gods”? If he called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be set aside—what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’?...” (John 10:34-36, New International Version)

Jesus is referring in the first quote to the Hebrew Psalm 82:6, and there is significant debate over whom the word translated as “gods” (*elohim*) refers to there, but it does not appear to be the whole human race. Mark Smith (2008, 130) claims that it “presents a scene of the gods meeting together in divine council”—noting that early Hebrew traditions were in fact polytheistic. Jesus, for his part, uses the quote to demonstrate that in his opponents’ own worldview, multiple beings—and given the context here, he’s probably thinking of this as meaning the Hebrew prophets—can be referred to as gods. But what Jesus doesn’t say is that every human being is the child of God, and indeed in this passage he specifically refers to his own status as one “set apart” from everyone else.

So Wilber’s next comment, that “Jesus never made a single remark suggesting that he alone had or could have this Realization...” (Wilber, 2000, 363), is a little strange. It’s even stranger in the light of John 3:16 and John 3:18, where Jesus specifically describes himself as the “only begotten” (*monogenous* in Greek) son of God. We can of course question the historical accuracy of John, as I have just done above; it may well be that he didn’t claim to be the son of God at all. But then we have just as much reason to question the idea that Jesus claimed he was one with the Father in the first place. Based on the scripture that Wilber himself takes as his source of historical evidence, if Jesus had had any sort of realization, he indeed believed it to be reserved for him alone; and moreover we have no reason to believe that such a realization came out of an enacted experience in the first place.

The role of meditative practice for Asian masters

But perhaps we are dealing here with the particular context of Western or Christian monotheism? Surely at least the Asian traditions, with their long history of meditation, are based on experiences derived from replicable meditative practice? Recent scholarship, especially the works of Robert Sharf and Wilhelm Halbfass, has

seriously disputed this claim as well.

The idea that phenomenological “experience” is central to Asian traditions turns out in many respects to be a modern one, far removed from the writings of most revered yogis and saints and sages. Robert Sharf notes:

the key Japanese terms for ‘experience’—*keiken* and *taiken*—are rarely attested in premodern Japanese texts. Their contemporary currency dates to the early Meiji [i.e. the late 19th century], when they were adopted to render Western philosophical terms for which there was no ready Japanese equivalent. One searches in vain for a premodern Chinese or Japanese equivalent to the phenomenological notion of experience. (Sharf, 1995, 249)

Sharf adds that even the terms *satori* and *kenshō*—so often understood now as denoting immediate causal or nondual experience—do not have any reference in premodern literature to any phenomenological experience, but merely to “full comprehension and appreciation of central Buddhist tenets such as emptiness, Buddha-nature, or dependent origination”. Indeed, earlier Chinese Ch’an teachers often argue *against* their being reduced to phenomenology. (Sharf, 1995, 249)

South Asian thought has overall been more concerned with psychology and consciousness than has East Asian. But even there, experience has been significantly less important than one might now believe. Śaṅkara, the central figure of Advaita (nondual) Vedānta and one of the world’s most influential nondualist thinkers, never speaks of his own meditative experiences. When he uses the Sanskrit word most frequently translated as “experience”—*anubhava*—he is referring not to special meditative or mystical states, but simply to everyday worldly experience from which one can draw inferences. And the reason he gives to follow his views—beyond exposing the logical flaws in competing views—is not experiment but the authority of the sacred Upaniṣads. In Śaṅkara’s view, even the Upaniṣads *themselves* are not based on “experience”, for he accepts the Mīmāṃsā tradition’s view that the Upaniṣads are *apauruṣeya*, authorless. (Halbfass, 1988, 387)

Even modern Vedānta is not necessarily derived from phenomenological experience. About the works of Ramana Maharṣi, a follower of Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta whom Wilber cites as “India’s greatest modern sage”, Halbfass (Halbfass, 1988, 384) notes that “There are virtually no expressions of personal experiences or feelings in these teachings...” And indeed, even in Wilber’s own section on Ramana

in *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (Wilber, 2000, 313-17), the long quotes from Ramana do not recount his own experiences, nor do they give us injunctions for meditation or contemplative prayer. It would seem more likely that Ramana instead followed Śāṅkara and based his teachings on the authority of scripture and tradition.

Indian Buddhism has many meditation texts that do speak of the experiences available to meditators, such as Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*—but these texts' authors do not claim to have had any such experience themselves, nor do they claim that one is to believe them because meditators can try meditation out and find out for themselves. Rather, Buddhaghosa specifically says his work is based on the teachings of others: "I shall expound the comforting Path of Purification, pure in expositions, relying on the teaching of the dwellers in the Great Monastery [Anurādhapura, where he lived]..." (Sharf, 1995, 239) Far from starting with "the notion... that dogmas or given beliefs are precisely what hinder the emergence of deeper truths and wider visions", Buddhaghosa himself tells us that he starts from those very "dogmas" and "given beliefs" as his source for discussing "deeper truths and wider visions".

In the work of Chih-i⁷, whom Wilber cites above as another example of a yogi or sage writin from personal experience, "we never hear examples drawn from Chih-i's experience as a meditation instructor." (McRae, 1994, 349) And if we were tempted to presume that Chih-i restrained from using his own experience simply because Buddhists were explicitly forbidden from boasting about their accomplishments (Sharf, 1995, 236), we might also note that even *later* Tiantai commentators mentioned by Sharf (1995, 272n1) claim that "Chih-i did not attain a particularly high spiritual rank during his lifetime." It seems likely, then, that Chih-i—like Buddhaghosa—based his legitimacy on his fidelity to past tradition, not on personal experience. Similar things could be said about many other figures in several traditions whom Wilber names as great yogis, saints and sages.

One might perhaps ask why these authors would bother going to such lengths to describe these experiences if they hadn't actually had them themselves. To which we can respond: well, William James did, and he *admits* never having had them. James wrote one of the more influential discussions of religious experience while specifically saying he had not had such experience himself: "Whether my treatment of mystical states will shed more light or darkness, I do not know, for my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of

them only at second hand.” (James, 1929, 299) And if the modern James would go to this great effort to catalogue experiences he’d never had, how much more so the premoderns, who put such great faith in the accomplishments of their scriptures and predecessors?

One more point about whether Indian and Buddhist masters derived their teachings from replicable experience: some of them, such as the great Buddhist thinker Candrakīrti, specifically urge their followers *not* to do this. Unlike premodern Japanese, Sanskrit does have a word (*anubhava*) with a semantic range similar to the English word “experience”. But Candrakīrti tells us this very experience (*anubhava*) may be false just because it is experience (*anubhavatvāt*), like the way that someone with an optical defect perceives things that aren’t there.⁸ The Vaiṣṇava (“Hindu”) teacher Rāmānuja goes further and says that not even ordinary perception, but even yogic perception, cannot provide access to the ultimate *brahman*:

Nor again, perception based on Yoga; for although such perception—which springs from intense imagination—implies a vivid presentation of things, it is, after all, nothing more than a reproduction of objects perceived previously, and does not therefore rank as an instrument of knowledge... (Halbfass, 1988, 393)

When esteemed teachers not only avoid mentions of their personal experience but specifically tell their followers *not* to base their knowledge on such experience, we would seem to have pretty clear evidence that paradigms of replicable experience were not at the core of most premodern wisdom traditions even for the great masters, let alone the majority. And that, in turn, means that if what one includes of the traditions is their replicable paradigms, then one has not included their essentials.

I don’t mean to overstate these points. It is not that premodern mystical sources *never* referred to personal meditative experience. Janet Gyatso (1999), in response to Sharf, has demonstrated that several classical Tibetan texts do just that. However, the rest of this section should make clear that these texts are unusual in Buddhist and “Hindu” tradition, and they are not particularly mainstream in Christianity either, let alone Judaism; they could be taken perhaps as essential to *Tibetan* Buddhism or to a few other subtraditions⁹, but not to much else.

There is one very important master, however, who stands out as an apparent exception to what I have said so far. After all, don't the stories say that the Buddha himself become awakened by meditating under the bo tree? And is he not also recorded as saying that others should replicate his experiment by trying the same practices for themselves?

Before we examine the case of the Buddha in detail, let us note that even if the Buddha turns out to *be* such an exception, what that exception would prove is limited. The Buddha would still only be *one* of the great masters who founded the traditions. Wilber would then have included the essentials of the Buddha's teaching—a very important thing to do!—but not of many significant later Buddhists, let alone of the great masters of other traditions. At the very most, he would have included only the essentials of Buddhism, not of other traditions, and even that only on the assumption that the essentials of Buddhism should be identified with that first historical teacher—an assumption many would dispute.

But with those caveats in mind, let us look at what the Buddha is attested to have said. So far, our best source for the historical Buddha is the early *sutta* texts, collectively known in Pali as the Nikāyas and often referred to as the Āgamas in their Chinese translation. These texts exist in a “remarkably uniform” form in India and China, and are accepted as authoritative by all surviving Buddhist traditions. (Gethin, 1998, 44) Now all that this means is that these texts have been historically accepted as to some extent authoritative across different Buddhist traditions, as the Bible has been for different traditions of Christianity. Some scholars, such as Richard Salomon, are now beginning to examine alternative sources and find traces of the disputes that led to this authoritative set of texts, as biblical scholars have now done for over a century. But this study is still in its infancy; there has not yet been any sort of systematic study to pick the words of the historical Buddha out of the text, as there has been for the historical Jesus. For the moment, at least, if we want to know what the Buddha said or thought, the Nikāya texts are the best we have to go on.¹⁰

One such text is regularly singled out as an example of the Buddha's commitment to experimental science, to the view of Buddhism as privileging experience over dogma. I speak of the Kālāma Sutta, cited many times on the web as “the Buddha's charter of free inquiry”. Here the Buddha is famously quoted as follows:

Kālāmas¹¹, do not go by reports, nor by traditional lineage, nor by rumour, nor by agreement with sacred texts, nor by logical reasoning (*takkahetu*), nor by logical inference (*nayahetu*), nor by reflection on appearances, nor by delighting in speculation, nor by the appearance of plausibility, nor because you think “the monk is our teacher”. Kālāmas, when you yourselves know “these things are unvirtuous, these things are blameworthy, these things are criticized by the wise, these things when taken up and accomplished lead to harm and suffering”, then, Kālāmas, you should give them up. (Aṅguttara Nikāya i.189, my translation)

Soon afterwards in the Sutta, he repeats this passage, changing its last sentence to its converse: “Kālāmas, when you yourselves know ‘these things are virtuous, these things are blameless, these things are praised by the wise, these things when taken up and accomplished lead to benefit and happiness,’ then, Kālāmas, you should take them up.” (Aṅguttara Nikāya i.191)

At first glance, these passages may look just like Wilber’s account of the traditional masters, that they start with the claim that truth is to be tested by evidence against dogmas and given beliefs. But here too there is more than meets the eye, especially when one looks at the context of other, less widely quoted parts of the Sutta. As Bhikkhu Bodhi (1998) has noted, the Kālāmas to whom this speech is addressed have heard many teachers from different traditions who have said widely different things, so they are not sure whom to follow. They approached him as uncommitted people asking for advice about their doubts, not as committed Buddhists who had taken refuge in him. At the *end* of the Sutta, they take refuge in him and accept him as their teacher. Then, it becomes reasonable to place in his authority the *saddhā* (trust, confidence) which is praised throughout Buddhist literature.

And why do they accept him as his teacher? *Not* because of any sort of meditative or mystical practice, which is nowhere mentioned in the text. The Kālāma Sutta consists largely of the Buddha simply *talking* to the Kālāmas. Immediately after the remarks quoted above, he starts asking them Socratic questions (“So what do you think, Kālāmas? When greed arises in a person, is it for benefit or for harm?”), to which they offer answers that would seem obvious to a reader (“harm” in this case). When they have answered these questions, the Buddha

explains: “Thus, Kālāmas, we said:” and repeats the passage. The reason he has told them to rely on what they themselves know is that it turns out these elements of his teaching already make sense to them. After that, he gives them a monologue about what good results that come from his teaching, whether or not there is an afterlife, and they agree with him, repeat back what he says, and take refuge in him. There are no experiments here, just a recognition that they already agree with the Buddha on an intuitive level.

So even in the case of the Buddha, it is not quite right to describe a premodern tradition based on injunctions from which one can learn derive experiences. And the Buddha’s case comes far closer to such a view than does the case of the majority of premodern teachers (including many of the ones Wilber cites). For most such teachers, as for their traditions, truth is not a matter of experiment; it typically has much more to do with the authority of the tradition that has come before.

Future directions

If my argument to this point is correct, then the sort of paradigm Wilber describes—the approach that takes truth to be established by experiment, starts with experience and provides others with the injunctions to replicate the experience for themselves—is simply not the core or essentials of the majority of the great wisdom traditions, Western or Asian. It not only is peripheral to the lives of the majority of believers and practitioners of those traditions, it is peripheral to the writings and sayings of most of the traditions’ masters and teachers, from Christ to Chih-i.

So far this claim has been entirely historical. But like Wilber, I am primarily interested not in history but in building constructive philosophical theory—integral theory with a small i, one could say. What then are the constructive implications of this historical claim?

Recall what it means, for Wilber, to *include* the essentials of a worldview. Copernicus included the essentials of Ptolemy by ditching Ptolemy’s theory while still including Ptolemy’s experiences and the injunctions that allow them to be

replicated. In the same way, Wilber has claimed to include the essentials of the premodern traditions by ditching myth and metaphysical theory while still including mystical experiences and the injunctions that allow them to be replicated. Keep the paradigmatic baby, throw out the mythical bathwater.

But we have seen here that the experiential paradigms of the traditions are *not* their core, neither in terms of being widely practised nor in terms of being advocated or even experienced by many of the great masters. What that means is that Wilber has not actually included the core of the traditions. But more even than that. It means he *cannot* include the core of the traditions, so long as his method requires including only enacted paradigms and leaving out the rest. The majority of the traditions are *not* expressed in terms of injunctions, of “if you want to know this, you must do this”; enacted paradigms are not at their heart.

What *is* at their heart? I would argue that each tradition, and often each part of each tradition, has *different* essentials. One cannot include Jainism in one’s theory in the same way that one includes Confucianism. But there are certain categories beyond Wilberian paradigms into which many of those essentials might be classed. One might find untrained experiences like Moses’s or Paul’s, which come unbidden and cannot be replicated through injunctions. One might find metaphysical arguments like Anselm’s, which allow one to find the existence of God in the same deductive way that one can find that the sum of three consecutive integers is divisible by 3. One might find injunctions that are not part of a paradigm because they are not intended to provide knowledge or experience. (Much of Judaism consists of such injunctions. Some of them can turn out to have happy results—A.J. Jacobs (2008) found several such when he set out to follow all of the Hebrew Bible literally—but he had no inkling that these results would happen when he started; the book and the living tradition certainly didn’t tell him.) Or one might find knowledge passed on by testimony of authorities held to be trustworthy without recourse to experience—what can pejoratively be called “dogma”, but is held in high esteem by many of the masters Wilber cites.

These elements—spontaneous unparadigmatic experiences, metaphysical argument, injunctions not aimed at knowledge, knowledge from authority—may show up in different proportions within a tradition. But each is generally practised by at least some people in every tradition; in every tradition, great masters have held each one to be at least as important as mystical paradigms; and *none* of them

counts as a paradigm in Wilber's sense, except possibly the metaphysical argument, which in Wilber's view would run into its own methodological problems very quickly.

If it takes all these points seriously, I can see two ways Wilber's Integral Theory could proceed productively from here. First, it could "bite the bullet" and simply stop claiming to have included the essentials of the traditions. It would acknowledge that the paradigm which it includes from the traditions is a small part of most of them, historically not that important or influential. It would then continue marching straightforwardly in the direction Wilber's thought has generally taken from Romantic Wilber-1 to post/modernist Wilber-5, now admitting that it leaves out and dismisses the majority of the premodern traditions because it takes within itself only the most advanced part, the mystical paradigms. It would leave the past behind and no longer claim to be integrating it, focusing instead on the worldviews that it expects to matter most in the future, honoring the (non-mystical) bulk of past tradition only for its role as a stage humans must pass through on the way to healthy development.

This would be a consistent and honest route. It would rule out the rhetorical appeal of Integral Theory's current claim to have included the essentials of every worldview or every wave. I will admit that it is also not the route I hope Wilber would take. An alternative approach—an approach that actually did manage to include the essentials of the premodern traditions—would be significantly more complex, and require a major reworking and rethinking of the methodological tenets of Integral Theory. It would not, of course, mean incorporating *every* idea in every tradition—that isn't possible, since many such ideas contradict each other. But the process of deciding what to leave in and what to leave out would need to be based on something more complex than the enactment principle (supersede by leaving in the experiences and leaving out the theories).

There is not space to pursue here in any depth what this complex process would involve. I would suggest two key elements in particular. First, one could not include the traditions as a single group, for their differences matter. If one cannot reduce the essence of the traditions to mystical experience, then it will quickly become clear that the essentials of Jainism, whatever they may be, are dramatically different from the essentials of Confucianism.

As a second key component, I would suggest that the knowledge passed on through received authority and tradition should not be dismissed as meaningless

metaphysics, but taken on as a starting point for future revision. In some respects, the approaches of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1996) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1990) take on this approach in very different ways from each other, ways which are very well informed by the challenges of the modern and postmodern worlds while still leaving a central place for received tradition. Indeed Wilber in Excerpt C (nd) himself draws on Gadamer's understanding of intersubjectivity as grounded in tradition; but in Gadamer's (and MacIntyre's) work at least, that tradition is not necessarily based on paradigms of experience. I note too that at one point Wilber treats "merely asserting their existence because tradition says so" as parallel to "basing their existence merely on introspection or meditation (or other allegedly culture-transcending claims and assertions)" (Wilber, 2006b, 234); here the authority of tradition seems to be integrated into a larger whole, just as meditation is.

I have sketched only the very barest outline of one potential alternative approach here. Such an attempt to provide an alternative approach in two paragraphs will necessarily be full of holes. To do it justice would require another article at the least—more likely many books. But that is as it should be. My intent in this article was never to get to the end of a conversation, but rather its beginning.

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Notes

[1] An example is A.J. Ayer (1970).

[2] For this reason, it is not necessary for me to speak in this paper of my own personal mystical experiences, which I am not comfortable discussing in a public forum. My claims are about the historic traditions and their members. While I do examine the question of the experiences had by exemplars of the traditions, that question must be settled by historical evidence, not by the inner experiences of myself, Wilber or any other modern, for the simple reason that we cannot assume our experiences were theirs.

[3] According to the noted Buddhism scholar Paul Harrison (1987, 67), “As far as most Buddhist scholars nowadays are concerned, the Mahāyāna was a movement which originated in India some 300 or 400 years after the death of Gautama [the presumed historical Buddha].” Over the course of my PhD and later studies in Buddhism, I have yet to encounter a single academic scholar writing in the past

century, using the methods of historiography, who gives any credence to the idea that the Mahāyāna *sūtras* were preached by the historical Buddha himself. The language and style of the earliest Mahāyāna texts are much closer to the Indian literature hundreds of years after the historical Buddha's lifetime than to texts roughly contemporary with him. (Warder, 2000, 4-5) The Mahāyāna *sūtras* also demonstrate a much greater knowledge of south India than the north India where the Buddha lived, strongly suggesting they were composed far away from him. (Warder, 2000, 335-7)

[4] Texts are not the only sources available to us for history, and in some cases it is worth paying attention to alternative sources like archaeology and epigraphy. Much of Gregory Schopen's (Schopen, 1997) work has been devoted to this point. But Schopen aims largely at establishing the general nature of popular practice, and my focus here will be on establishing the worldviews of the great teachers, about which these alternative sources can usually tell us relatively little.

[5] *SES* is an earlier, "wilber-4", work. I have it on good authority, however, that Wilber retains this same approach in the wilber-5 phase.

[6] Since 381 CE, the claim that Jesus is the only son of God has been a standard portion of the Nicene Creed, the most well known and regularly recited profession of faith in the Catholic, Orthodox and some mainline Protestant churches. Since, as noted, the claim also occurs in the Bible, it is widely accepted in evangelical Protestant churches as well. It has therefore been mainstream throughout the vast majority of the Christian tradition. That's not to say it's the *best* interpretation of Christ or Christianity, only that alternative interpretations, whatever their merits, are nevertheless eccentric and marginal.

[7] Scholars now usually refer to this thinker as Zhiyi, according to the now-preferred Pinyin transliteration of Chinese. I will continue to use the older Wade-Giles spelling of Chih-i since Wilber, Sharf and McRae all do so.

[8] For a translation of this passage in context, see Sprung, 1979, 51.

[9] By "subtradition" I mean only "portion of a larger tradition"; I am not implying that Tibetan Buddhism has or should have any lower status than the rest of Buddhism.

[10] I've said it before, but perhaps another reminder is in order: people following in the Buddha's lineage 2500 years after the Buddha himself are *not* the best record of what the Buddha himself thought and taught, for a lot can happen to change

things in those 2500 years.

[11] The Kālāmas, according to the text, were a group of people living in the town of Kesaputta; the speech is addressed to them.