

On Ken Wilber's Integration of Science and Religion

by José Segura

Introduction

Ken Wilber has been much acclaimed by those who believe that he has constructed an ideological system in which science, religion, politics, and the arts are harmonized meaningfully for contemporary man. Seen through the lens of the “perennial philosophy,” however, Wilber’s system does not hold together since its material is the result of mixing traditional with secular knowledge. For obvious reasons, we cannot undertake a critical analysis of the totality of Wilber’s system within the limits of an article. We have confined our task to show the false nature of the alleged integration of science and religion as articulated by Wilber, particularly in his book, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (henceforth *MSS*).

The Confusion of Categories

A preliminary problem arises when we consider the full title of *MSS*. It is titled: “*The Marriage of Sense and Soul. Integrating Science and Religion*.” If we turn to chapter 1, page 3, the heading reads: “The Challenge of our Times: Integrating Science and Religion.” In that same page, though, “science” and “religion” have become “modern science” and “premodern religion.” It is in fact on page 10 that Wilber first clearly sets forth his goal when he writes: “if we are to integrate both *premodern* religion and *modern* science, the truths of both parties must be brought to the union” (*emphasis added*).

We are now in a better position to define our task, for we have discovered that what Wilber really wants to integrate is “*premodern* religion” and “*modern* science.”. The reader must proceed with caution because

the terms “science” and “religion” are distinguished by Wilber in a very limited and particular way—“premodern religion” is one thing; “modern science” quite another.

Wilber’s real agenda—the integration of “premodern religion” and “modern science”—is from the traditional perspective a pseudo-integration in that it entails an impossible operation: the mixing of metaphysics-based traditional postulates with reason-founded secular knowledge. It is not so much then that science and religion are two different fields, but rather that the traditional doctrine in which premodern religion is located is incompatible with the secular premises of modern science. This is not integration, but aggregation. And it does not matter that Wilber divides and subdivides a great deal of fields and categories of being and cognition.

At this point, we can well imagine that a logical question has been put by the reader: on what ground do we suppose that Wilber’s mixing of different fields is questionable? To properly answer that question we shall produce an illustration of Wilber’s confusion of categories, an illustration which, without further delay, will place us in the very heart of our discussion. In dealing with the “Big Three,” a fundamental notion of modernity which includes Morals, Science and the Arts, Wilber states:

Science—empirical science—deals with objects, with “its,” with empirical patterns. Morals and ethics concern “we” and our intersubjective world. Art concerns the beauty in the eye of the beholder, the “I.”

Such a statement, dealing with categories and classifications, is within the realm of the rationalist,¹ and in this sense we could say that it belongs to the sphere of secular knowledge. Things, however, start to be different when Wilber adds:

And yes, this is essentially Plato’s the Good (morals, the “we”), the True (in the sense of propositional truth, objective truths or “its”), and the Beautiful (the aesthetic dimension as perceived by each “I”).

The Big Three are also Sir Karl Popper’s three worlds—objective (it), subjective (I), and cultural (we). And the Big Three are Habermas’ three validity claims: objective truth, subjective sincerity, and intersubjective justness.²

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1. In the perennial philosophy a “rationalist” is an individual who does not recognize in actuality a higher faculty of cognition higher than human reason. In Wilber we observe that he includes such a higher faculty in his classifications, but he does not seem to apply it to grasp the substance of the “premodern religion” he wants to integrate with “modern science.”
 2. Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything*, Boston, Shambhala, 1996, p122.

The problem with such an addition is that in it Wilber has equated each element of the secular Big Three with their Platonic counterparts. But this is something that a traditionalist would never do, for he knows that “the Good,” “the True,” and “the Beautiful” in Plato are Ideas or principles in the metaphysical plane. In fact the Good is the Idea of the Ideas. This means that these three elements belong to metaphysics. Consequently to think, as Wilber does, that the normal sphere of the Good is morals or ethics; that the sphere of the True is “the sense of propositional truth, objective truths or ‘its’”; and that the proper or immediate province of the Beautiful is “the aesthetic dimension as perceived by each ‘I’” is the grossest distortion of Platonic metaphysics one can entertain; a distortion which is exactly the product of humanizing the divine, of ignoring that metaphysics is the proper realm of the Divinity.

Now the humanization of metaphysical things, which is one of the main characteristics of the rationalist, is a sign that the individual has misunderstood those things. That Wilber has an erroneous notion of “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful” is corroborated by the following statement he makes about them:

These terms were first introduced on a large scale by the Greeks, who were, in this regard, one of the precursors of modernity.³

The mechanics of the mistake made here by Wilber can be expressed in this sequence: Having found convenient to use something which pertains to a metaphysical system of the past, he decides now to view it as a precursor of the rationalistic deformation he has caused it to be. He has thus rendered his “source” rationalistic by implication. To portray the Greeks as the forerunners of modernity by citing their metaphysical designation of what Wilber terms the “big Three” should be proof enough of his basic misunderstanding of metaphysics and of his confusion of categories.

With respect to the Platonic “Good,” Wilber’s mistake consists in equating it with the concept of ethical good; he thus declares:

The Good refers to morals, to justness, to ethics, to how you and I interact in a fair and decent fashion.⁴

This is “the Good” reduced to the level of convention and common sense behavior. Wilber does not deem it necessary to found “justness” on

3. Ken Wilber, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, New York, Random House, 1998, p49.

4. Wilber, *ibid.*

something suprahuman. For this reason his “justness” is a mere humanistic or rationalistic concept. If one refers to Plato, one finds that in his affirmation of “the Good” as the ultimate metaphysical foundation of everything, he comments:

the objects of knowledge [i.e. the Archetypes] not only receive from the presence of the Good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the Good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power.⁵

The traditional view on morality, incidentally, is expressed by Frithjof Schuon in this compact formula:

Morality, in the widest sense of the term, is in its own order a reflection of true spirituality.⁶

With regard to “the True,” Wilber’s error is, from the traditional perspective, catastrophic, since he assumes that its field is secular science. We must remember that the sole science that in the Platonic system is related to “the True” is *episteme*, the knowledge of the realities of the metaphysical plane. The counterpart of *episteme* in the visible, impermanent sphere is an approximate knowledge of physical things, for “true” knowledge is only possible of that which is invisible and permanent. There is no *science* of the *physical* world in Platonism. There simply cannot be anything but “opinion.” Which means that the real value of any secular science is similar to that which can be granted to a temporary sort of knowledge, one which must always be reshaped and corrected as more rational and empirical information regarding the physical plane becomes available. How can anyone, then, presume to equate “the True” with “modern science.”!

As for “the Beautiful,” which Wilber rashly consigns to subjective art, the reader is cautioned that there does not exist any Platonic conception of art as something which might or might not be found beautiful in accordance to the particular taste of the spectator. Beauty is not subjective, since it is not ultimately founded on the physical. The physical objects represented in the traditional work of art are to be taken symbolically. Art, *true* art, both in Plato and in any Tradition, is intellectual⁷ and hence a transcendental reality. It might—and indeed it can—begin with the

5. Plato, *Republic*, London, Heinemann, 1980, Vol. II, p107.

6. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Wheaton, The Theosophical Publishing House, 1984, p51.

physical perception of the eye; yet that perception is to be used as a springboard for reaching the invisible beauty of archetypal reality. Beauty, as well as the True and the Good, is an attribute of God. Only as a result of its reflection in this world could we consider it to be present in our physical plane. In the theology of Dionysius the Areopagite, “the Beautiful” is “the Good;”⁸ in fact, we find that this metaphysical identification is already included in the traditional structure of the Greek language, for in Greek, *kalos* means both “beautiful” and “good.” In the Christian revealed texts, we have confirmation that the ultimate Good is God in these words of Jesus:

Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, *that is, God.*⁹

Before concluding this preliminary view of Wilber’s use of concepts let us pause to enquire: What have we learned thus far? We have found that Wilber mixes some traditional concepts (the Platonic Good, the True, and the Beautiful) with secular ideas, a confusion that is rendered possible once he has secularized and humanized those particular traditional concepts. We might wonder why Wilber humanizes traditional things? Perhaps not because he intends to, but maybe because he assumes that all that is required to understand a traditional author is one’s own mere rational faculty. To underscore this error we can refer to *MSS* where Wilber writes that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is to be interpreted dialogically,¹⁰ that is to say, by means of the “eye of mind.” Wilber fails to see that because Shakespeare is a traditional author, his works will only be properly understood in their traditional sense by those who are familiar with the principles he employed to write them.

Wilber’s Concept of Science

Wilber gives us a general definition of science in the following lines of *MSS*:

Science is clearly one of the most profound methods that humans have yet devised for discovering *truth*.¹¹

7. In the traditional vocabulary, the term “intellectual” refers to the “intellect,” which is the faculty whereby the metaphysical principles are apprehend in an immediate fashion.
8. Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, Surrey, The Shrine of Wisdom, 1957, p34.
9. Matthew 19:17. The New King James Version.
10. Wilber, *ibid.* 159-160
11. Wilber, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, *ibid.* p3.

A few pages earlier he writes:

Truth, not wisdom or value or worth, is the province of science.¹²

We do not have to resort to Tradition to know that, as R. G. H. Siu puts it:

despite its aspiration for truth, science is not organized around it. It is organized around concepts.

And Siu adds that the path of science does not necessarily lead to “reality” but to “utility.”¹³ This is a significant observation, since it points to a basic characteristic of modern science and underlines its close ties with technology, which, according to D. S. L. Cardwell, contributes to science as much as it draws from it.¹⁴

The fundamental point of modern sciences is that their validity must ultimately be found in a measurable or quantifiable proof; whereas traditional sciences obtain their validity from an all-encompassing science, which could thus be called “total science”, and therefore coincides with metaphysics. This is why Titus Burckhardt can state:

traditional science contemplates qualities independently of their quantitative associations.¹⁵

To be fair to Wilber, however, one has to take into account the fact that he is presenting a global system, which means that we have to include in his definitions the expanded view which later appears in a wider context. We learn more as Wilber unfolds his system. Let us then examine this unfolding as it relates to science.

A key—if not the key—for understanding Wilber is that he takes from the perennial philosophy what he considers its fundamental claim, namely, the Great Chain of Being, to which he adds epistemological pluralism¹⁶ and its correlative fields: the sensorial, the mental, and the spiritual. Furthermore, from Weber and Habermas, Wilber takes what they consider to be the central achievement of modernity, namely the differentiation of the Big Three (Art, Morals, and Science; or their coun-

12. Wilber, *ibid.* p.x.

13. R. G. H. Siu, *The Tao of Science*, Cambridge, MA, M. T. I. P, 1957, p23.

14. D. S. L. Cardwell, *Turning Points in Western Technology*, New York, Neale Watson Academic Publications, 1974, p.ix.

15. Titus Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West*, Bedford, Perennial Books, 1976, p56.

16. Wilber shortens the Great Chain to three modalities of being: body, mind, and spirit, to which he assigns their correlative levels of knowing: the eye of flesh, the eye of mind, and the eye of contemplation. See *MSS*, pp. 7-8;35.

terparts in a variety of domains: Self, Culture, and Nature/“I,” “we,” and “it,” for example). The point being that, as these authors and Wilber believe in the “mythological worldview,” the Big Three are not regarded as integrated but as “indiscriminately fused.”¹⁷

Now, according to Wilber, the problem with the “indiscriminately fused” state in which the Big Three are found to exist in premodern societies lies in the interference of a domain in the free development of another. Thus he adduces the historical case of Galileo who, as a scientist, was unable to pursue his work on account of the limitations imposed on his research by religion. This unacceptable situation, Wilber insists, arises only because science and morals were not differentiated but fused or pre-differentiated; the same may be said of art, where artistic freedom could be regarded as hampered by the constraints of religion. In Wilber’s system, differentiation is a prerequisite of integration.¹⁸

For Wilber, differentiation, introduced by the modernists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, resulted in dissociation around the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. He calls dissociation (the malady of modernity) the separation of art, morals and science, which is followed by the invasion of the artistic and moral spheres by the scientific conception of things.¹⁹ Wilber’s main point of contention is that critics have only seen in modernity its negative aspect, namely, dissociation; and that they are unable to see that modernity is not negative if we permit differentiation to be the occasion for integration without falling into the trap of dissociation.

Now, let us emphasize this point in Wilber’s system: integration is only possible by introducing into the differentiated state of the Big Three (Morals, Art, and Science) the basic world-view of religion (i.e., the Great Chain of Being coupled with epistemological pluralism and its three correlative fields of reality). What one achieves through integration, then, is a common threefold structure (sensorial, mental and spiritual) of each of the three domains of Science, Morals, and Art. This common structure, according to Wilber, is what permits him to marry modern science to premodern religion.²⁰

17. See *A Brief History of Everything*, *ibid.* p124.

18. *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, *ibid.* pp 48, 52.

19. Wilber, *ibid.* p55.

20. Wilber, *ibid.* pp24-25.

What could be possibly wrong in this apparently integrated view, in such a harmonious whole, the reader may ask. On the surface nothing; under the traditional lens everything. Let us substantiate our claim.

In the first part of his thesis Wilber commits the error of believing that, because in premodern societies religion interfered unwisely in matters of science and art, the three spheres had to be differentiated. The fact is that any given traditional system is a perfect living totality; it is man who makes it appear to be imperfect by failing to conform to it. We should not seek to replace Tradition by a secular doctrine merely because we might have discovered an imperfectly functioning traditional society.

The traditional concept of science as a totality was still taught by Enrique de Villena, a fifteenth-century Spanish traditionalist, who in this was following Walter Burley, a fourteenth-century English traditional author; “science,” affirms Villena, “is the perfect order of immutable and true things.”²¹ What that definition shows is that Tradition conceives knowledge as a totality called properly *scientia* (Plato’s *episteme*); and it is from this *totum* taken as a tree that each particular science branches out. Now, thus understood, *scientia* coincides with (traditional) metaphysics, so that each branch rests on a totality, which by definition embraces not only what we call “sciences” but religion, art, politics and every possible field of knowledge. The coherence of such a wholeness is remarked in the following definition of Tradition offered by Seyyed Hossein Nasr:

...truths or principles of a divine origin revealed or unveiled to mankind and, in fact a whole cosmic sector through various figures envisaged as messengers, prophets, *avatars*, the Logos or other transmitting agencies, along with all the ramifications and applications of these principles in different realms including law and social structure, art, symbolism, the sciences, and embracing of course Supreme Knowledge along with the means for its attainment.²²

We may suggest, then, that to say, as Wilber does, that (modern) science is a method to discover truth is to miss the real meaning of both (modern) *science* and (real) *truth*. We can see now how Wilber makes

21. Enrique de Villena, *Arte de trovar*, in *Obras completas Vol. II*, Madrid, Turner, 1994, p359.

22. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Albany, State U of New York P, 1989, p68. On the subject of traditional science the reader will find in the works of Nasr the best all-around exposition available in the West. See also Titus Burckhardt’s *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*.

the mistake of attributing to science what in the eyes of Tradition belongs to religion, i.e. truth. Let us recall in conclusion the following assertion of Jesus:

I am the way, the truth, and the life.²³

Wilber's Concept of Religion

On page 5 of *MSS*, Wilber declares:

Defining "religion" is itself an almost impossible task,

though he has already told us that:

religion remains the single greatest force for generating *meaning*.²⁴

Thus a definition was possible after all; it is, however, a startling definition, to say the least, since for a rationalist, for example, the only meaning he will recognize in religion is that which makes sense to his reason, implying that religious faith is subordinate to reason or its various substitutes such as modern psychology or modern science. The fact is that anyone who approaches religion in the traditional way learns very soon that meaning in revealed matters is facilitated by understanding, which in turn is made possible by faith.

To better see the rationalist basis of Wilber's definition of religion we should examine it in light of the following definition found in the New Testament:

Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world.²⁵

Now, keeping in mind that traditional texts are written in a special language, we shall approach the above passage mindful of the fact that the clarity of its literal meaning (which refers to the sphere of the *vita activa*) is a cover for its metaphysical (dark) content which relates to matters of the *vita contemplativa*. The darkness in question disappears when we understand the symbols involved. Thus if we analyse the words "orphans" and "widows" we can see that the former is an individual who has lost one of his parents or both; while "widow" is that person

23. John14:6, The New King James Version.

24. Wilber, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, *ibid.* p3.

25. James 1: 27, The New King James Version.

who has been bereft of her husband. If we now take the “orphan” as that part of the individual which has separated itself from its “worldly” parent or source, what we actually have is an articulation of the need to reconnect with one’s rightful parent, in this case God. The loss of the “worldly” parent thus opens the possibility for being accepted again by God, our “spiritual” and true parent. In this sense, the act of visiting orphans translates into those actions which lead to the liberation of ourselves from any connection with the impure things of this “world.” Such a liberation will prompt our heavenly father to look upon us as his deserving children. A similar analysis applies to the use of the term “widow”, with the analogous symbolism of the husband and wife. In the context of this interpretation, the last portion of this verse carries the same meaning in a direct language to guide the interpreter and to make sure that the less fortunate minds may understand the essence of the revealed message.

Let us mention another instance where Wilber mishandles the topic of religion. In *MSS* he writes:

By and large, classical religions *never* denied science—first, because science was not a threat [only with modernity does science become powerful enough to kill God]; and second, because science was always held to be one of several valid modes of knowing, subservient to spiritual modes but valid nonetheless, and hence there was no reason to deny its importance.²⁶

The mishandling in these lines is fundamental. To state that “classical religions *never* denied science” because the latter posed no threat to the former amounts to an explanation of something by way of nothing. A traditionalist would rather say that in a traditional civilization religion has no reason to disagree with science simply because both are founded on the same principles. On the other hand, a rationalist can certainly state that in modernity science is strong enough to “kill God”—once he has accepted a rationalistic version of both science and God. For secular science can neither kill God nor traditional religion; it cannot even start doing those things, since rationalism is not qualified to judge what lies beyond its ken. There is nothing more groundless for the believer than the rationalist’s attempt to “kill God.”

In light of everything we have said about Wilber’s misunderstanding of traditional matters, the second part of the above quotation is a sound

26. Wilber, *ibid.* p16.

statement in the hand of somebody who once more shows how it is possible to conflate wisdom and rationalism, once of course one has unwittingly humanized that wisdom.

Again, we can close this section by calling the reader's attention to the fact that Wilber refers to religion without making proper reference to its metaphysical foundation, suggesting that he regards it as a man-made rationalistic construct, and therefore valid for those who like to view religion as merely another element within a system.

Some Characteristics of Wilber's Methodology

In order for the reader to better comprehend our traditional objections to Wilber's positions, it would not be out of order to give here some of his most salient methodological features. The first is his penchant for eclecticism, which is evidently connected with his tendency to mix traditional with secular ideas. In talking about the perennial philosophy Wilber declares:

it forms the esoteric core of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, and Christian mysticism, as well as being embraced, in whole or part by individual intellects ranging from Spinoza to Albert Einstein, Schopenhauer to Jung, William James to Plato.

And he goes on to say that the perennial philosophy, precisely because "in its purest form" is not against science, has been accepted by scientists such as Isaac Newton, Einstein, Schrodinger, Eddington, David Bohm and Sir James Jeans.²⁷ This is perhaps the statement which best illustrates the fact that Wilber does not actually understand the perennial philosophy, even though he sometimes appears to use it correctly. In this particular instance, one simply has to ask: Since when are those scientists well known for having accepted the perennial philosophy? Had these scientists embraced the basic traditional principles, we would today have a more traditional cultural environment.

The second relevant feature in Wilber is his belief that Jurgen Habermas is "the world's greatest living philosopher," a belief which leads him to draw "heavily, and gratefully, on Habermas' unending genius." This he does even though he admits that Habermas is "essentially a German rationalist" who "did not (and still does not) understand any God higher than Reason."²⁸

27. Wilber, *Up from Eden*, Wheaton, Quest Books, 1996, pp5-6.

28. Wilber, *The Eye of Spirit*, Boston, Shambhala, 1998, p71.

A third feature in Wilber (which is directly related to his eclecticism) is to borrow from the best he finds in a variety of authors in order to construct a universal system which is apparently intended to satisfy as many people as possible. This is essential, since Wilber's integration of science and religion rests on such a method. We see that he draws liberally on ancients and moderns, Eastern and Western thinkers, without paying much attention to the fact that traditional wisdom is not something of the order of mere human reason.

The fourth and last feature in our list is the fact that Wilber has chosen the Great Chain of Being as the backbone of his presentation of the perennial philosophy, i.e., Tradition, for his eclectic system. This is an arbitrary choice, since Tradition is founded on the metaphysical unity of that which in the physical plane is diversified. In order to avoid arbitrariness in selecting the backbone of Tradition one would have to look for an all-inclusive definition of it, such as the one proposed by Nasr in the quotation previously used in this article. It is only within a concise global articulation of Tradition that one may emphasize its central core, namely that the essence of traditional religion—which is then an esoteric doctrine—is to lead humanity to union with its creator.

Conclusion

If we were now to point to the most obvious flaw in Wilber's proposed integration of science and religion, we would have to say that it lies in the contradiction inherent in his method: the mixing of traditional and secular knowledge. In his desire to marry modern science to premodern religion, Wilber has deemed it necessary to separate religion, science, and art so as to avoid a twofold dilemma: (a) the premodern tendency of religion to dictate its own rules for science and art; and (b) the modern tendency of science to rule over religion and art. Having thus separated these three elements so as to eliminate the interference of any usurper in the affairs of the others, what does Wilber do next? He colors, say, religion with the two modalities of being which characterizes modern science, namely, the sensorial and the mental, producing thus a sensorial and a mental religion; he then proceeds to introduce into science and religion the third modality of being, the spiritual. Wilber calls this "integration;" we prefer to call it by another name: "regression," since he has reverted to the position he was so desperately trying to correct. He

separates things in order to regroup them in his particular way. We can only wonder what might be the advantage of having obtained by this *integration* a “spiritual science” and a “spiritual religion” when in fact both of them have always been united by Tradition from the very beginning, a union which has caused no internal theoretical problem. The problems are only caused by humanity’s inadequacy to adhere to traditional systems and precepts; but this inadequacy does not warrant the correction or reshaping of Tradition.

To summarize: a preliminary traditional examination of the integration of modern science and traditional religion, as proposed by Wilber in *MSS*, shows that he is a secular author engaged in the construction of a secular solution for a problem created by his particular secular handling of some fragments of traditional knowledge, fragments which he goes on to insert in a wider rationalistic construct. The problem that Wilber seeks to resolve is the very one he creates as a result of misunderstanding the traditional material he employs in his misguided attempt to marry modern science to traditional religion, two mismatched elements which belong to totally different spheres and are therefore wholly incompatible, absent a proper metaphysical matrix.