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Sense & Soul
Ken Wilber

Why Do Religions Teach Love and Yet Cause So Much War?

Transcending the trauma to get to the truth of the world's faiths.

Throughout history, religion has been the single greatest source of human-caused wars, suffering, and misery. In the name of God, more suffering has been inflicted than by any other manmade cause. Does that strike you as odd? And if that statement is true, does it not follow that "peace on earth, good will toward men" demands the death of God?

An integral approach to spirituality takes that assertion very seriously. Yet it also accepts the idea that religion in some sense contains deep and abiding truths about reality, possibly about Ultimate Reality itself. It is one of the distinctive aspects of the integral approach that it claims to be able to reconcile those two astonishingly contradictory items.

Item #1: Religion causes more human war and misery than any other manmade cause.

Item #2: Religion is about Ultimate Reality.

The only way to reconcile those two items is to recognize that, at the very least, religion contains two very different aspects. One clearly divides humans; the other might be able to unite them. "Peace on earth, good will toward men" obviously rests upon differentiating those two aspects and placing each of them in a larger context. Exactly how to do so is one of the goals of the integral approach. But one thing is certain and historically undeniable: if we cannot do so, religion will continue to be the death of humans until humans have the death of God.

It is common, of course, to say that all religions—or certainly most of them—teach some sort of brotherly/sisterly love, that all major religions have some version of the Golden Rule, and that religions therefore have acted to introduce love and compassion into the world. Once again, however, that flies in the face of historical fact: for every year of peace in humankind's history there have been fourteen years of war, 90% of which have been fought either because of, or under the banner of, God by whatever name. (More on this at [Ken Wilber Online](#).)

Again, it seems as if there are almost two different kinds of religion, one of which brutally divides, and one of which unites (or can unite). How do we tell them apart, and how might we begin to switch allegiance from the former to the latter? If you believe in God and yet don't have an answer to that question, you are inadvertently contributing to the wars of tomorrow, yes? And it won't quite do to say that the world would be peaceful if everybody accepted my personal savior or my path to Spirit. Surely that is the cause, not the cure, of the problem, yes?

In my previous Beliefnet column ("[What All Religions Have in Common](#)"), I introduced the idea of an "integral approach" to spirituality. Most Beliefnet columns are self-contained pieces; few of them require any familiarity with earlier or later columns. The integral approach has about a half-dozen major components, however, each of which needs to be understood in order for the approach itself to make sense. This means that my column will be a series of installments, each of which builds upon its predecessors.

Does this sound interesting to you? If so, then let's begin.

In my previous column I didn't spell out, or really indicate what an "integral approach" to spirituality would include. Many readers naturally assumed that this was simply another version of "universalism"—the belief that there are certain truths contained in *all* the world's religions. But the integral approach emphatically does not make that suggestion. Other readers maintained that I was offering a version of the "perennial philosophy" espoused by Aldous Huxley or Huston Smith. Does the integral approach believe that all religions are saying essentially the same thing from a different perspective? No, almost the opposite.

Yet the integral approach does claim to be able to "unite," in some sense, the world's great spiritual traditions, which is what has caused much of the interest in this approach. If humanity is ever to cease its swarming hostilities and be united in one family, without squashing the significant and important differences among us, then something like an integral approach seems the only way. Until that time, religions will continue to brutally divide humanity, as they have throughout history, and not unite, as they must if they are to be a help, not a hindrance, to tomorrow's existence.

So how can we describe the integral approach in simple terms? It's clearly going to be a bit of a new idea, so bear with me. We might start by calling it a "content-free cross-culturalism." Gulp. That's *simple*?

"Content-free" refers to the fact that virtually all previous approaches at unification have attempted to find some sort of unity on the level of actual content (whereas the integral approach does not). For example, most of the world's great religions have some version of the Golden Rule, and most universalists use those types of *common elements* to find their unity in the world's religions.

The integral approach does none of that. Or rather, all such similarities in content are looked upon as quite secondary, even trivial. This is why we call the core of the integral approach "content-free." It finds its similarities in certain *patterns* of content, not in the content itself.

Here's a simple example. Notice that all the world's mature languages contain first-, second-, and third-person pronouns. *First person* means the person who is speaking (I, me, we); *second person* means the person spoken to (you, thou); and *third person* means the person or thing being spoken about (him, her, it). So if you are talking to me about your new car, you are the first person, I am the second person, and the car is the third person.

These pronouns actually represent *three perspectives* that human beings can take when they talk about the world or attempt to know the world. For example, I have my first-person impressions of my new car ("I like it!"). I can ask you, a second person, what you think about it ("I like it, too!"). You and I are now a "we" (a first-person plural) and we both agree, the car ("it") is great!

Although there are obviously countless combinations here, it's sometimes useful to summarize these three major perspectives as I/me, you/we, and he/her/it—or simply "I," "we," and "it." So what? Well, the fact that every major language contains these three types of pronouns means that we have a set of "meta-universals" here, or something that we find in all major cultures.

Notice that these universals—I, we, and it—do not themselves have any content. To say that all languages have a first-person pronoun ("I" or "me") is *not* to say anything about that person at all. It is not to say that this person is named Martha, or this person is spiritual, or this person is made of carbon and water molecules, or this person contains Jungian archetypes, or anything like that at all.

It's much, much deeper than that. To say that all human beings recognize a first-, second-, and third-person perspective is to say that those perspectives—but not necessarily any of their contents—are universally available to all normal humans. It's sort of like saying that all human beings contain two kidneys, two lungs, and one liver. But it says nothing about what

you actually do with your kidneys or lungs or liver. In other words, to say that you have a first-person perspective on what you are reading right now—you are a first-person "I" who is reading this column—is to say nothing about what you actually think about what you are reading. Maybe you like it, maybe you don't. All I am saying is that you definitely have available to you a first-person perspective, and you know that you do.

Now this begins to get interesting, because we have started to find a series of things that are universal, but that themselves have no particular content. They are "meta-universals." Or, as we were saying, "content-free cross-cultural" patterns. Notice that we never find a perspective running around all by itself, dangling in midair, completely divorced from some sort of content, only that the perspectives themselves are not merely culture-bound or merely relative, appearing in some cultures but not in others. So I am not saying that "content-free" means culture-free; rather, perspectives—such as I, we, and it—are wedded to particular cultures but not reducible to them.

The fascinating part is that these three perspectives might actually give rise to *art, morals, and science*. Or the Beautiful, the Good, and the True: the *Beauty* that is in the eye (or the "I") of the beholder; the *Good* or moral actions that can exist between you and me as a "we"; and the objective *Truth* about third-person objects (or "its") that you and I might discover: hence, art ("I"), morals ("we"), and science ("it").

The Good, the True, and the Beautiful. And that might lead us to.... Well, I am definitely getting ahead of the story. Please tune in again next month for the continuing tale of a spirituality gone integral, a God found whole in the midst of the fractured postmodern world....

Will We Ever Stop Killing Each Other in the Name of Religion?

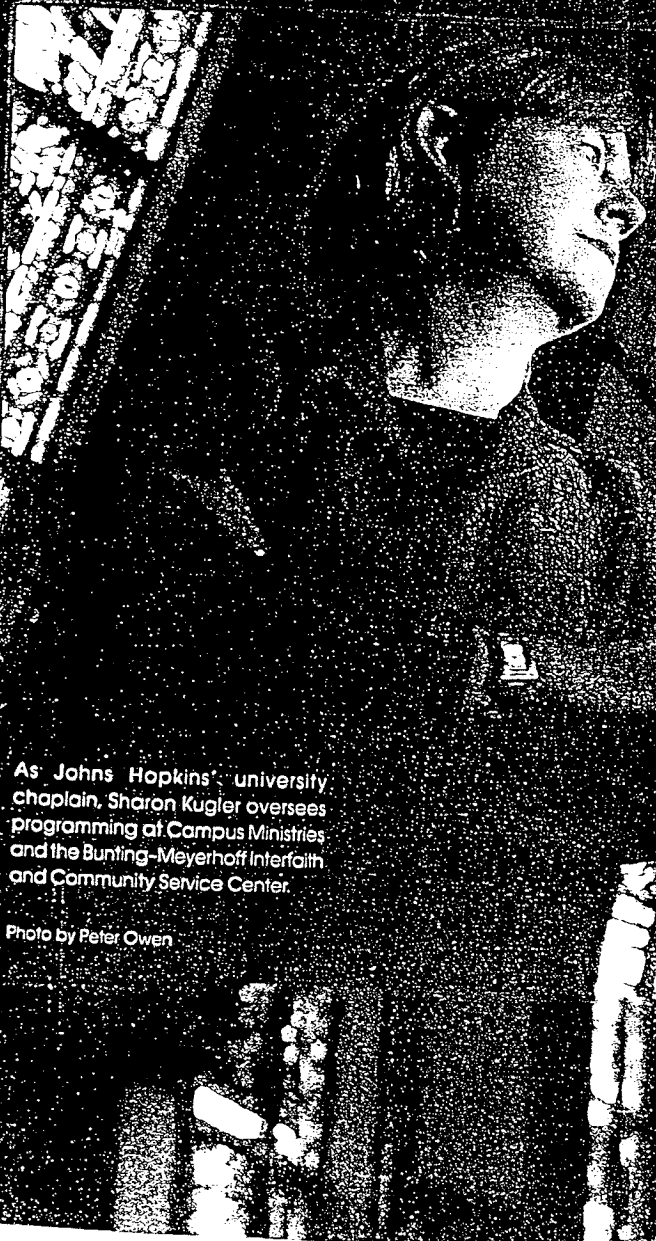
"I have an abiding hope that we will and reason to believe that it is possible. Here is why:

"As members of one human family, the best and worst of us are often revealed through our 'religious' urges. At our worst, we feed a corrupt belief that we alone have the corner on truth. We cling to the conviction that no other community of believers can enlighten 'our way.' 'Difference' becomes threatening, leading to a compulsion to defend 'our way' with a severity that defies reason and gives way to fanaticism. Sadly, such behavior fractures creation. It can breed alienation, senseless violence, and destruction.

"At our best, we nurture a genuine spirit of love and compassion. Each major religion has some form of the 'Golden Rule' at the core of its self-understanding. Seeking truth and promoting justice by embracing all of creation is the only road to true human flourishing. It is not an easy road. It involves a daring commitment to take each other as seriously as we take ourselves. Only in doing so can we transcend our differences and affirm our best urges and inclinations.

"Through our students, I have been blessed to witness this daring commitment in action. During their interreligious encounters, they explore together the tenets and practices of their individual faiths. At times they struggle with some of the most vexing questions of the ages, and they are often astounded by what they share. With respect and appreciation, they engage each other and take each other seriously. They embody what is possible when a deliberate embrace of difference is met with a steadfast sense of humility about the process itself and the awesome potential of the encounter.

"Our students fill me with an abiding sense of hope. Their souls are deep in dreams of a world transformed, where religious quests open channels of peace and understanding. Through their holy engagement with each other in dialogue and in service to those in need, they affirm that there is reason to believe in possibility. Their daring acts illuminate what our God of many names asks of us—to love in the name of religion."



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Photo by Peter Owen