

Discourse twelve

The Arrow of Time and the History of Religion

History is a very important topic for our understanding of consciousness, Spirit, and religion. Discussing history should not be left out of a book on this topic. Yet for me to write history in the profound manner which I intend seems presumptuous. I am not a historical scholar, even though I have studied many who are. Nevertheless, I have strong and confident reactions to the historians I read: I celebrate them and/or I disagree with them. I have a certain confidence about my historical overviews even though I am extensively ignorant on every historical topic. How is this possible?

Here is my answer: I am a historical being and so are you. As historical beings each of us has a picture of the whole past and the whole future. Such a picture is not required of a cat or dog or chimpanzee, but it is required of a relatively awake human being. Each of us who has come far enough in our thoughtfulness to be reading this discourse has some sort of picture of the dawn of the cosmos, the dawn of life on this planet, the dawn of human life on this planet, the journey of humanity unto this day, and of the future prospects for humanity, this planet, and the cosmos as a whole. We need such pictures to live our lives.

Many of our historical pictures are taken from our culture without much critical reflection on our part. At other times, we criticize the commonly accepted pictures as naive, prejudiced, or misleading. When we are most honest, we admit that even our best pictures of the past and future are incomplete, fragile, and subject to change. We are ourselves caught in the time-warp of history; thus our contemporary understandings about life make earlier periods of human life seem almost incomprehensible. We often degrade those earlier periods. In other ways, we romanticize them. When we degrade or romanticize, we misunderstand the wise people who might speak to us from those earlier times.

I wish to make some general observations about the study of history before I engage directly in my topic "The Arrow of Time and the History of Religion." What is history and how can we be historians with some measure of confidence? Contemporary philosophers have helped me to see that there are three types of rational activity: **objective (scientific) knowledge**, **existential wisdom**, and **philosophical overviews**. I want to say what I mean by these three categories and then say how these three types of reasoning illuminate the study of history.

Objective or scientific knowledge deals with "facts" that can be publicly tested by a community of observers. Historical facts differ slightly from the facts that characterize the physical and biological sciences. When, as a physicist, I wish to test the theory that lighter objects fall as fast as heavier ones (in a vacuum where air resistance is not a factor), I set up my experiment: let us say that I drop a feather and a bowling ball and watch which one hits the floor first. I find that in a vacuum they both hit at the same time. This experiment can be repeated. It is an experiment in which we are taking note of "repeatable facts." But in the study of history, we are dealing with facts that take place once and only once. When we ask what sort of gun Booth used to shoot Lincoln, we are asking about an event that cannot be repeated. What can be repeated in historical research is going over and over the records that pertain to that unrepeatable event.

Facts, whether repeatable or unrepeatable, are not hard kernels of objective thereness, but formulations of the human mind. In the field of objective knowledge we don't have direct experiences of pure thereness; we have rational interpretations only. Facts (or data) are our simplest rational interpretations of sensory experiences. Theories are our more expansive

interpretations of our simpler facts. Facts are given their veracity by being close to and fully filled with our sensory experiences. If at some level or another we cannot see, hear, taste, touch, or smell what the fact is formulating, this “fact” is not factual. Similarly, our theories are not true if our sense-established facts do not support them. If even one fact contradicts our theory, the universality of that theory is refuted, and we are challenged to create a better theory.

Scientific scholarship directed toward the relationships among historical facts can help us to see the past more accurately, and thus scientific knowledge is an essential dimension in building for ourselves a realistic picture of the past and future. But such objective knowledge is not the whole picture.

Existential wisdom also plays a role in constructing our historical viewpoints. By existential wisdom, I mean the sort of awareness that derives from our ability as human beings to be conscious of our own consciousness, to look inwardly and see there our personal experiences of reality. Our feelings, our inward view of being a thinking being, our sense of centered awareness, our experiences of Awe, our attentiveness, our intentionality (or freedom)--all these inward actualities when talked about with each other become our existential wisdom. Objective science can examine the brains of those who have such inward experiences, but objective thought cannot deal directly with inward processes. The objective scientist is limited to dealing with **reports** made by human beings who are having these inward experiences.

In the study of history, the inward actuality of freedom is especially important. We are aware that our present lives are being determined by the natural and human processes of the past that have led up to this present moment. We can be equally aware that we are being determined by our own freedom in the present moment to participate in deciding what will happen next. Your and my power to make history is severely limited, yet in the broad view of human affairs freedom is a powerful force. An important part of historical thinking is the study of the choices human beings have made in the past and might make in the present. In the existential component of history, “history” means the thinking we do when we face decisions in the present about what movements we want to make toward what visions of the future. Such decisional thoughtfulness is like a loop into the future and a loop into the past in order to make choices in the present. We begin with our anticipations of the future in order to clarify our questions and then loop back into our memories of the past in order to gather wisdom to illuminate the choices we are about to make toward the future. **The existential aspect of historical study has to do with making decisions about the meanings and appropriate actions for our moment-by-moment living.**

Even the most rigorous scientific historian also practices existential history. He or she is doing existential history in the choice of subjects to scientifically explore. History is so vast no one can study everything. We choose to study a specific topic because we have already decided that what we are choosing to study has meaning or importance to us. That decision is not objective science; it is existential choice.

In addition to scientific and existential history, there is also a third approach to the study and writing of history. **Philosophical overviews** are always being made by human beings, and these overviews are overviews of our objective knowledge and our existential wisdom. Without overviews we cannot organize and make useful our various items of knowledge and wisdom. In historical study, we make broad overviews. We discern periods of history, we name characteristic themes for those periods, we compare the future period with past periods. This will be the type of historical writing I will focus upon in the remainder of this paper. I will be speaking of objective facts, hopefully accurately, and I will be seeking wisdom about ethical choices, but the format of my presentation will be describing periods of history and discussing

how those periods and their characteristics illuminate our memories and our anticipations in the arena I am calling “religion.”

Religion is an especially difficult topic to write history about. On the one hand, religion is a historical reality like any other. On the other hand, religion (good religion) is about giving expression to Spirit, to Awe, to the experience of the Awesome or the Infinite. Thus religion, a historical reality, gives expression to that which is not a historical reality. All the previous discourses of this book serve to define Spirit as something more than a historical or finite reality. Spirit as I have illustrated many times, is a relationship with the Infinite. Spirit, we might say, blows through our finite thinking, our finite feeling, and our finite behaviors. But Spirit is not merely a rational overview nor an unusual feeling nor a set of moral precepts. So how can we talk about the history of Spirit? We can't. We can only talk about the history of Spirit expression--that is, we can only talk about the history of religion.

When we see books entitled “The History of God,” we need to be aware that these books are not about the history of the AWESOME. The AWESOME has no history. The AWESOME is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Such books are only a history of human ideas about the AWESOME. And these human religious expressions of the AWESOME do have a history. The AWESOME itself does not. When this distinction is not noticed, religious history falls into confusion.

The above distinction enables us to make statements like the following: The religion of Jesus is time-specific and limited, but the essential message of Jesus is universal, true for all times--past, present, and future. Similarly, the teachings of the Buddha are time-specific and limited, but the illumination of the Buddha is universal, true for all times--past, present, and future.

The moment we confuse religion with Spirit or Truth or Illumination or God, we are not telling history. We are either exalting some religion to the status of an absolute Truth or we are demoting God or Spirit or Illumination to the status of a finite process.

Nevertheless, I will be telling my story of human religion because I am interested in Spirit and the Infinite. I am interested in inward wind of Awe and in the outward Awesome Otherness. I am interested in the Awed Ones who have lived in history. And I am interested in criticizing any historical accounts of religion which do not see the importance of Awe, the Awesome, and the Awed Ones in the telling of religious history. Nevertheless, Awe, the Awesome, and the Awed Ones are not historical facts. Religious history is the story of the deposits in our common memories made by the explosions of Awe in previous times. These memories are valuable because each of them is capable of refilling with Awe. But this dawning of fresh Awe is not happening back there in the past but here and now in the lives of those of us who are remembering the Awe-explosions of the past.

In the remainder of this discourse, I will be sharing my overview of the history of human religion. This will not be a detailed survey of human religion, but an overview of the basic religious metaphors that were used in broad time periods.

The following chart pictures the conclusions I have drawn from my findings on the topic of the general history of human society and of religion. This is a finite, temporal chart that may be recharted by me in the very next decade. This chart will certainly be amplified as my experience increases. Our historical stories are themselves changing historical realities.

I want the reader to begin by contemplating the following chart, noticing all its relationships and all the titles I have chosen. I will elucidate each of these terms in the paragraphs that follow.

An Overview of the History of Human Society and Religion

Cenozoic Era		Ecozoic Era					
Social Periods	Precivilization	Civilization		Post-Civilization			
	Nomadic Tribes	Neolithic Villages	Goddess Civilizations	Patriarchal Civilizations	Axial Civilizations	Industrial Civilizations	Planetary Confederation of Semi-autonomous Regions
Religious Metaphors	Power Entities and Places	Celebration of Natural Rhythms	Centralized Nature Priesthoods	The Rise of Divinised Kings	Beyond the Cultural Canopy	Critique of Metaphysics & Authority	Authenticity as Truth & Ethical Grounding
	Magical Powers from a Parallel World	Relating the Ordinary with the Super-ordinary		Mythic Overviews		Existential Description	The Transcendence Metaphor

An Overview of Social Periods

The top half of this chart is about the overall flow of human history on this planet. The categories for these turning points in the human story have been taken from a number of sources. I am especially indebted to Kenneth Boulding, Lewis Mumford, and Thomas Berry. Ken Wilbur has also provoked me to clarify my perspective.

The Ecozoic Turning Point

It was Thomas Berry who gave me the titles Cenozoic Era and Ecozoic Era. The insight behind these titles is that we are now in a huge planet-wide turning point. “Cenozoic” points to an Earth-era that dates back 65 million years to the time when dinosaurs were dying out, a time when birds and mammals are beginning to flourish. That era, according to Berry, is now coming to an end through human agency. We can no longer assume that the planet is simply taking care of itself and that nothing humans can do is large enough to significantly affect this planet’s destiny. We have reached a crossroads, and humans must choose whether we are going to opt for a “Technozoic Era” of planetary history or an “Ecozoic Era.” Going the Technozoic direction, according to Berry, means considering the Earth to be our spaceship understandable and controllable by human knowledge and serving only human interests. Going the Ecozoic direction means building a balanced partnership with the natural processes of this planet. This direction includes admitting that we simply do not know and may never know how to run this planet like a spaceship. The Ecozoic direction also includes a fundamental ethical commitment to the wellbeing of the planet. This wellbeing of the planet provides the master context for the wellbeing of humanity and every institution thereof.

The Dawn and Demise of Civilization

It was Kenneth Boulding, in his book *The Meaning of the Twentieth Century*, who gave me the titles I use in the second row. Like Berry, he saw that we are entering an unprecedented turning point in human history. Not since the dawn of civilizations has there been a comparable turning point. Boulding and others have pictured the future as so vastly different that we must see the coming period as the end of civilization and the beginning of something different, the advent of a third basic form of human social existence. This future social mode cannot be a return to tribal forms of society. It is a step beyond both the tribal and civilizational modes of society. We must learn from both but become something fundamentally new.

This perspective is enriched by illuminating what civilizations have actually been. The dawn of civilization was the dawn of hierarchical social ordering--royalty, landed aristocracy, military leaders, merchants, artisans, peasants and slaves. In recent centuries we have been tearing down civilization by eliminating royalty, landed aristocracy, peasants, and slaves. Democracy, if fully realized, is the end of civilization. The feminine movement can also be seen as a deconstruction of civilization. Industrial civilization is a paradox. It houses many progressive post-civilization movements, yet it can also be viewed as the most extreme version of hierarchical top-down ordering. The current gap between the moneyed aristocracy and the poorest of the poor is very extreme and growing greater. Yet, within the hearts of most contemporary humans, if not in their practice, is a commitment to democracy and to overcoming the extreme divergences in wealth. In my chart, I am asking us to see that this movement toward full democracy and thus some sort of flexible equity means the end of hierarchical civilization. It is becoming clear that attempts to move in a civilization-conserving direction will lead to untenable social chaos.

In the third row of my chart, I describe “post-civilization” as a “planetary confederation of semiautonomous regions.” This master image suggests a localized democracy functioning

within but not tyrannized by planetary interrelatedness. I would not be able, even in several books, to spell out all the details of this. It will take humanity a century or more to finish deciding what these details are to be. But in general terms, we can look for the end of nations as armed camps defending their various versions of “civilization.” We can look for the end of a global economy that runs mechanically on the principle of unlimited growth and the maximization of returns for the investor. We can look for an end to passive citizens who look to professional experts and aristocratic power mongers to make their decisions for them about the wellbeing of their local, regional, and planetary destiny. We can look for an end to any preferencing of men over women in the course of human affairs. For increasing numbers of us, these visions of the future no longer seem wildly idealistic. Rather, such vast changes are obvious directions necessary for our survival, wellbeing, and sanity

But our survival, wellbeing, and sanity are not assured. We must choose to survive and we must choose correctly in order to survive. The future is, as yet, unsettled. History is not a preordained story. Human freedom is part of the story. Thus, the picture I have painted is a vision of possibilities rather than an assured future. When conservatives accuse those of us who hold such a vision of being unrealistic because humanity is not “ready” for such a future, we who see this vision can respond by pointing out that continuing in our present ruts is also something that humanity is not “ready” for. We can point out that our familiar ruts are leading to dire consequences and that these ruts are not our only choice. As the biblical prophets continually said to their listeners, “I set before you life and death, so choose life.”

The Stages of Precivilization and Civilization

Let us look in more detail at the third row of my chart. I have divided precivilization into two stages: **Nomadic Tribes** and **Neolithic Villages**. The line between these two is set by the beginnings of what we call “agriculture” or perhaps I should say “gardening,” for large-scale agriculture with storage centers and food ownership by owning classes was part of the “dawn” of what I am calling “civilization.” Before gardening, humanity was organized in small groups who wandered over their home-landscapes gathering most of their food and hunting various game. With the dawn of gardening, settled villages became necessary and a more complex social organization began to emerge. These early settled villages were still tribal in their basic cultural form, so we might say that the period of neolithic villages was a time of transition toward civilization. Civilization dawned when large numbers of neolithic villages were grouped together and “managed” by “royal” hierarchies.

I have divided the period I call “civilization” into four stages: **Goddess**, **Patriarchal**, **Axial** and **Industrial**. The earliest forms of civilization retained close affinities with tribal cultures even though they were a new political and economic form which grouped tribal cultures together and required of them a certain cultural uniformity. The term “**Goddess**,” as a name for this stage of civilization, indicates that the ancient tribal affinities with nature and the tribal patterns of honoring the feminine aspects of humanity had not yet been extensively oppressed. The term “**Patriarchal**” means the application of the concept and practice of hierarchy to relationships between men and women and to the relationship between civilization and nature. All civilizations after this shift have been patriarchal civilizations. Only in the last century has a post-patriarchal mode of society seemed feasible to us. Indeed, it is still a surprise to many that there ever were human societies that were pre-patriarchal. Men ruling over women and civilization ruling over nature has become so thoroughly installed in the thought and practice of civilized people that both men and women have believed that patriarchy was in accord with human nature (or with some divinely ordained order of things). In our feminist sensitivities, we have begun leaving patriarchal society, but this departure is still considerably incomplete. Well-educated newscasters still use the term “mankind” rather than “humankind” or some other term that clearly includes women.

The early Goddess and Patriarchal civilizations had in common this primary struggle: giving social order to the various tribal heritages they were “integrating.” (We might also say “oppressing.”) Early civilizations had a commitment to uniformity that we would consider harsh. Civilizations then and now have been a maze of tensions compared with the relative harmony within tribal societies. Tribal societies, in spite of being close-knit groups, had a surprising tolerance for diversity within their own tribe, with other tribes, and with other forms of life. But civilization entailed the invention of a mode of social organization we might call “oppressive uniformity.” Early civilizations had little tolerance for dissent and tended to identify “Reality” with the cultural canopy itself. This basic flaw in the civilization-mode of human society has never been entirely overcome. Rejecting rigid, oppressive, hierarchical, top-down uniformity is a crucial part of what it means to end civilization and build something better.

The dawn of the great classical religions (between 1000 B.C.E. and 200 B.C.E.) provided foundations which resulted in a moderation of civilizational rigidities. Karl Jaspers and Lewis Mumford refer to this turning point as the dawn of **Axial** civilizations. “Axial,” as used by these historians, means a vast cultural turning point. In various cultures across the planet powerful religious movements arose at approximately the same time: the prophets of Israel, the early philosophers of Greece, Zoroaster in Persia, and in Asia the Buddha, Janism, Lao Tzu, and Confucius. The Upanishads of Hinduism and the biblical Moses were only a little earlier. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were only a little later. **A new consciousness was being initiated by these movements, and this meant the advent of a new form of civilization.** The post-axial form of civilization was more focused on the solitary individual and more aware that “Reality” is something larger than the cultural canopy of the existing civilization.

Also, civilization, after these religious breakthroughs, became more flexible, more open to cultural transformations. Social critique now had a firm footing in personal life and in a sense of reality that was not synonymous with cultural conditioning. Being unconventional became more common, and this enabled new forms of conventionality to emerge. Civilizations still insisted on uniformity and conventional behaviors, but civilization-building was now more dynamic and less static. If the vastness of this difference is not seen, then the immense contributions of these axial religions are undervalued.

The period of **Industrial** civilization represents one of our most paradoxical periods. On the one hand, this period manifests the fullest development of the worst aspects of civilization. On the other hand, it is a time of great creativity and ferment in which the themes of post-civilization have been born and grown. On the negative side, industrial civilization has expanded the social rulership over nature to the extent of threatening the viability of continuing human life on this planet. The gap between rich and poor, between the powerful and the weak, grows ever greater. The corporation, especially the global mega-corporation, has become the most powerful institution in industrial civilization, The global institutions of corporate power and each individual corporation is organized with a top-down firmness of control that would make an ancient king envious. The restraints of democratic governance and the restraints of the buying public are being systematically reduced by the actions of corporate power. The taming of this anti-democratic control over our lives seems impossible to many. At the same time, creative themes ferment. Hierarchical forms of culture and religion are undergoing massive critique. We see powerful movements envisioning new social options that are post-patriarchal, post-hierarchical, post-corporation, democratic, celebrating diversity, intolerant of all-out warfare, and protective of the natural environments of the planet. Industrial civilization is at a crossroads that leads either to (1) civilizations that devastate the natural planet and maximize human oppression or to (2) forms of post-civilization--to forms of planetary confederation of semiautonomous regions that live at peace with the natural environment and honor the feminine, the masculine, indeed every human person with whatever cultural, political, and economic well-being are possible within the limitations of a finite planet.

A Historical Overview of Primary Religious Metaphors

With the above briefly described overview of the social periods of human history in our minds, I invite our attention to the bottom half of my chart. I will begin with the bottom row and work up.

The Shift from Transcendence to Transparency

I am proposing that **the major turning point** in the entire history of religious metaphors is a shift which we are now in the midst of experiencing. I have written extensively on this in other places, so I will only describe this shift briefly. Since the dawn of human memory, humanity has used the transcendence metaphor. Humanity has used the picture of a separate Spirit space alongside, above, or beyond this ordinary space of our lives. Sometimes Gods and Goddesses dwell there. Sometimes sacred animal guides take us there and back. Sometimes a single God dwells there. Sometimes impersonal powers comprise this “world beyond.” Even the term “Spirit,” when used in this context, means something that “has come from above” that transcends the material or ordinary realm of life. Most people still use the transcendence metaphor in many subtle and not so subtle ways. We are using the transcendence metaphor when we speak of a Cosmic Law, an Order of Things, the Design of the cosmos, the rational universals, the higher powers, the power upstairs, the beyond, or the hereafter. Even when we speak of the immanence of God in nature or history we are using the transcendence metaphor, for God cannot be thought of as immanent within nature and history until God is first thought of as beyond nature and history.

By “the transparency metaphor” I mean something entirely alternative to the transcendence metaphor. The transparency metaphor envisions the human observer looking in only one direction: straight at natural and historical events. “Transparency” means that we are seeing through those events to the Infinite--to that Awe-filling Presence or Power which is the Source, Sustenance, Limitation, and Tomb of all finite realities. Using the old metaphor, Christians said, “Our Father who art in heaven.” Using the transparency metaphor, we can speak of the same experience, but say it differently. Perhaps we might say, “We trust the Infinite Presence shining through every event of our lives like we trust a loyal parent.” The language of this expression is different, but the “content” in personal awareness and trusting attitude is the same.

Magical Powers, Mythic Overviews, and Existential Description

The magnitude of this shift from transcendence to transparency is further illustrated in the **second row from the bottom** of the chart. Using the transparency metaphor, our religious thinking takes the form of one-story existential descriptions rather than two-story mythic overviews. Also we no longer talk about magical powers operating upon us from some parallel realm.

By “**magical powers**” from a parallel realm, I am referring to the religious imagination that dominated early tribal cultures and still exists in tribal cultures and, to some extent, in civilizations to this day. The Australian Aborigine spoke of a Dreamtime that preceded and, in a sense, hovered over ordinary time. A member of this culture pictured himself or herself going to this place, receiving integration and rejuvenation, and then returning to the ordinary realm better equipped to live life powerfully, successfully, courageously, or tranquilly.

By “**mythic overviews**” I mean elaborate stories of Divine figures usually mingling with mortal humans and in some way interacting with them. Mythic overviews usually include stories of the origin of the cosmos and/or the origin of the particular culture, city, or religious group involved in the story telling. Mythic overviews have been the primary way that the

transcendence metaphor has been used in all those social periods I have called “civilization.” With the dawn of civilization mythic overviews--that is, colorfully told meaning stories--flourished as a means of holding these larger social adventures together. The tribal peoples coming into a civilizing venture had to be acculturated. We can discern three different ways myths were used: (1) myths were used to tell the glorious story of the civilization itself, (2) myths were used to relate the individual persons to various aspects of finite living, and (3) myths were used to tell about Final Actuality, the Infinite, the Absolute, the Final Doing beyond and behind all finite doings. All three of these uses of myth might speak of Gods and Goddesses. But the purpose behind each of these three uses of myth was different.

The purpose of the first use of myth is purely political, to establish the authority of the royal hierarchy. The purpose of the second is more psychological. For example, the Gods and Goddesses of classical Greece--Venus, Mars, Aphrodite, Apollo, and so on--can be adequately interpreted as aspects of the human psyche projected onto the cosmic screen of the upper realm. Such uses of myth are psychological care rather than political ordering or religious nurture. Only the third use of myth is fully “religious” in its purpose. By “religious” I mean preoccupied with the expression of Awe--that is, with the communication of and the embodiment of Spirit. Myths about the Great Earth Mother who is both a nurturing and a devouring power are not talking about feminine psychology. Such myths are talking about the Awesome Otherness of the Infinite. Similarly, myths about the male God of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures are not talking about manhood. What is going on in the Biblical poetry is the use of the earthly patriarchal family as an ingredient in a myth-making, but the purpose of this myth-making was to express our relationship with the Infinite. In these biblical myths, humans hear Speech from an Authority on High, an authority that is Infinitely higher than the authority of the social royalty.

These three uses of myth can be distinguished, yet in Western Medieval practice they became thoroughly mingled. The religious tyranny against which Martin Luther rebelled had resulted from an improper mingling of the political and religious ways of myth-using. In Luther’s day, political power and its myths supported religious authority and its myths. The two had become virtually synonymous. Luther felt that both were being used to suppress rather than support authentic Spirit. Luther’s solution was to set up a new kind of political authority to defend a new kind of religious authority. Early Protestant movements were not a break with using mythic overviews, but they were an important battle to recover the independent validity of the religious use of myth. The Protestant Spirit recovery became one of the enabling factors for breaking loose the industrial period of civilization. Not only was religion delivered from the tyranny of a rigid religio-political synthesis, but also the political and intellectual realms were freed up as well. The religious and the political uses of myth now traveled side by side instead of inseparably mingled. And as we moved through time we became even more clear that religious expression and political order were separate processes. Having separated religion from politics, we are now puzzling over how to relate them.

In the modern period the intellectual realm was also released. With the advent and explosive growth of modern science, the dialogue between religion and science became tense. Scientifically oriented philosophers brought the entire custom of using mythic overviews up for review. They correctly pointed out that mythic overviews were not factual and that there was no way of proving these overviews through factual experimentation. Many scientific-minded persons tended to abandon mythic overviews altogether. The more religious-minded, (meaning those who intuited that myth, properly used, was talking about real experience and real ethical issues) scrambled to defend the inherited religious traditions from what they felt to be a scientific assault. The end of this story has been the abandonment of the mode of mythic overviews by many religious-minded people. And many religious people are now engaged in the shaping of a

new fundamental religious metaphor for carrying the freight once carried by mythic overviews. “Transparency” is my term for this new metaphor. Those who have thought through transparency thinking in a thoroughgoing way find no conflict between good science and good religion.

Still, we have many reactionary religious movements in every part of the world. These movements attempt to retain the “authority” of religious mythic overviews as their means of expression. When this is done in a literalistic fashion, religious myth directly conflicts with good science. In this conflict, science, not religion, will win the hearts and minds of totally honest people. The religious literalist eventually becomes a divided and despairing person, losing both the genius of his or her religious heritage and the genius of the scientific era as well. Only those religiously sensitive persons who translate their heritage into the transparency metaphor will reclaim both their religious heritage and the expanding knowledge of science. “**Existential Description**” is a term that points to the practical use of the transparency metaphor for doing our religious thinking.

From Divine Authority to Interior Authenticity

Let us look at **the third row from the bottom** of my chart. “Authenticity” is a key word when we are using the transparency metaphor. The transcendence metaphor uses the image of “authority.” When we switch to the transparency metaphor, “authenticity” replaces “authority.” Our confidence in making religious assertions comes from our interior experience of authenticity. Authenticity alone gives “authority” to our religious teachings--not the Pope, not the Bible, not some great teacher, not some “correct” religious community.

We are beginning to fathom that even when the ancients spoke of “Divine authority,” they were pointing to what we can now point to with our contemporary metaphor “authenticity.” We can still pursue valid religious and ethical truth, but that truth can no longer be pictured as coming from “on high.” Rather, valid religious and ethical truth is rooted in our realization of what is “authentic” and what is “inauthentic” in the actuality of our ongoing personal experience.

How can I be confident that what I have just described is actually the future of good religion? Certainly there remain thousands of religious teachers and millions of human beings who are passionately rejecting what I am saying. The above chart is not a poll of public opinion; it is what we might call “prophetic insight.” It is a truth validated by the criteria of truth I am describing with the term “authenticity.” I intend to be indicating a direction that will become our authentic future. The proclamation of a future in which the transcendence metaphor remains functional is false prophecy: it is an example of inauthentic thinking, speech, and living. I am not saying this in order to defend some private opinion of mine. I am saying this because I have been driven to say this by my own actual experience. Over the last several decades, I have often resisted and/or misunderstood this transition. But now I see, for better or for worse, that the transcendence metaphor is dead (that is, obsolete) and the transparency metaphor is capturing the empty spaces of religious and ethical vacuum that are left by the death of transcendence.

Next, I will look briefly at the other categories on the third row up from the bottom of the chart.

Power Entities and Places: It was not mythical overviews that characterized the metaphorical life of the tribal period. It was something more simple and concrete. It had to do with icons, rituals, and stories that were used to evoke (that is, become conscious of and practically use) powers that were not part of the ordinary round of life. In this now dim antiquity of our species, the transcendence metaphor was born in its first and most elemental expression. Primitive humanity envisioned a parallel world, whether they called it “Dreamtime”

or something else. “Magic,” when we use this word to characterize the metaphors of primitive religious life, is often used as a term of derision. But let us not deride our primitive ancestors for not being modern. The powers which our ancestors evoked were real enough. While they did not have the benefit of our modern scientific knowledge and existential discernments, they were not stupid. They knew the difference between something that was actual and something that was simply empty talk. Perhaps we can imagine, even with our contemporary worldviews, how Spirit experiences are like magical powers. Spirit is, among other things, always a burst of human freedom. Such bursts are like magic. Professional athletes who speak of “being in a zone” may be pointing to the magical power of human freedom. Extreme dread, extreme fascination, extreme tranquility in the midst of our formidable challenges are also moments of Spirit experience that can seem like the presence of magical power.

The earliest nomadic tribes emphasized the magic of particular places and of particular objects--rocks, trees, birds, animals, ancestral bones, and so on. Surely we can intuit how a wise ancestor, though dead, can still appear in one’s memory as a magical power. Primitive humanity also took trips, possibly with a shaman’s help, into a parallel world. Perhaps they took with them, or found in that world, some totem animal or figure. They came back from such trips and applied these powers of fresh awareness to their practical living. However difficult it may be for us to imagine ourselves living within those ancient cultures, we can perhaps intuit that profound discoveries took place. Life was indeed enriched. Religion was a vital part of their lives because it worked for them: it enabled them to be present to that relationship with the Infinite that characterizes the lives of “awake” human beings in any era.

Celebration of Natural Rhythms: With the dawn of gardening and the neolithic village, the metaphors of primitive religion began to emphasize the seasons and other natural rhythms. Religious forms expressed Awe in the experience of the seasons and the movements of the sun, the moon, and the stars. Such religion enabled agricultural practices and agriculturally shaped cultures.

Both the nomadic and the agricultural forms of primitive tribal religion are still being practiced today. As civilizations and their mythic religions developed, tribal religion was never completely replaced. Even when mythic overviews filled the foreground of religious practice, the evocation of magical powers was still practiced around the edges and behind closed doors.

Those of us who are using the best religious resources of the 21st century, still have lessons to learn from our primitive ancestors. Our primitive ancestors were human beings just like us. And their similarity with us is most clear in the religious dimension of living. We all face the same Final Mystery, no matter what stories we use to express our experience. The scientific knowledge of these early human societies was less adequate than modern science, but they were not thereby handicapped in experiencing the Final Mystery. Even though our evolved cultural canopy may now be termed “post-civilizational,” we are still confronting as much Mystery as precivilizational people. However knowledgeable or wise we become, our knowledge and our wisdom is still finite. The Mystery is Infinite, boundless, beyond all possibility of human comprehension, then or now.

Centralized Nature Priesthoods: When civilizations were just beginning, there was still a powerful trend to maintain a close harmony between human society and its natural environment. This emphasis was maintained in the early civilizational period by nature priesthoods who were at first approved by the civilizational hierarchy. Later, the political kings and aristocracies fought the nature priesthoods and, in effect, established civilization itself as their “Final Reality.” But in the earliest civilizations, the religious priesthoods ruled. They charted the passage of the seasons, supervised the storage of the grains, hired the soldiers to defend their storage bins, gave the civilization its cultural wholeness with the vast mythic stories

they created and taught. These stories may have integrated wisdoms from many tribes and, in the best of times, related people more powerfully than they had known before to the natural world that surrounded them and to the “transcendent forces” they saw operating in nature. Civilization with its new religions was not all bad news. The main gift of civilization has been the providing of a wider view of life for at least some of its members. We see this in the emergence of cities and universities as centers of learning. We see this is the emergence of planet-wide travel and communications.

The Rise of Divinised Kings: On the other side of the patriarchal revolution, kings came to symbolize in their own persons their entire civilizations. This gave kings a certain “divinity” since the civilization itself was seen as “Divine.” In the grand mythic overviews of this period, we see the Earth Goddesses being demoted and male Gods, representing civilization, taking precedence. Such myth-making disempowered the nature priesthods. This was an important battle then, and its themes are still important today. The rise of patriarchy was at root an overthrow of the nature-grounded relationship with the Infinite in favor of various types of political/social self-idolization. For the most part, political self-idolization won, though the earlier religious elements also survived. Nevertheless, the worship of civilization itself and the accompanying idolization of the civilizational oligarchy became an ongoing “evil factor” throughout the entire history of civilization. This period of history also included creative elements, but the tendency toward static, top-down, hierarchical, and self-worshiping civilizational uniformity became a major oppression of the human Spirit. Revolts against this oppression set the stage for the next era of civilization.

Beyond the Cultural Canopy is a phrase that I am using to characterize a common element in all the great axial religions that began emerging in various parts of the planet in the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. These “axial religions” gave the individual person a sense of being something more than a socially conditioned entity. These religions also projected upon the screen of the trans-ordinary world pictures of an Ultimate Reality that was more than a projection of the cultural fabrics. I think we can argue conclusively that all these religions which arose in the axial turning point were attacks on civilizational self-idolization. These movements began as small groups of slaves fleeing civilization, or small groups of monks meditating, or small groups of disciples following charismatic teachers. But in their flourishing, these movements ushered into being a new type of civilization in which a socially critical religious community was tolerated and even embraced occasionally by kings and queens. These new religions gave decaying civilizations a new burst of steam, a new ethical grounding, a new reason for going on with the arduous tasks of social reconstruction. Myths about the “good king” and the “good kingdom” became strong ingredients, especially in Western religious heritage. Jesus’ teachings on the Kingdom of God are a prominent example.

While axial religions and revitalized civilizations began to flower in the last half of the first millennium B.C.E., Christianity in the first century of the common era and Islam in the seventh century were fresh movements of axial religion. Both of these religious movements led to extensive civilizational reconstructions. The creativity of all the axial religions is somewhat obscured by the fact that each of the civilizations which these religions made possible also became perverted into new forms of civilizational self-worship. To this day we see Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, and Moslems warring with each other. We need to understand these conflicts as wars between self-worshiping religious civilizations. In their impetus toward profound Selfhood in relationship with Infinite Reality, each of these religious lineages witnessed to and still witnesses to a quality of life that is beyond every cultural canopy and beyond every finite religious expression. At this profound level of understanding, all the great axial religions are allies in the criticism of civilizational self-worship (which includes worshiping your own religion). The original axial impetus, properly recovered, could assist us, rather than hamper us, in building something better than civilization. Religious civilizations warring with each other is a

quality of the passing era of civilization. Our potential future is a post-civilizational environment in which a diversity of religious expressions is tolerated.

The Critique of Metaphysics and Authority: The paradoxical period of “industrial civilization” has also been a paradoxical period in religious history. On the one hand, this has been a period of remarkable Spirit release as well as the release of the rational mind. On the other hand, this has been a period in which all the inherited religions have come under unrelenting critique. Authorities, political and religious, were torn down and the individual thinker and the individual ethical person were exalted. Religious conservatives have had a hard time seeing this period as beneficial, even though they have accepted their share of its material benefits. Secular scientific enthusiasts have had a hard time seeing how the religious treasury inherited from the past has any further meaning. Clearly, we are still in this transition period. Only in recent decades have we come to see clearly what this period has been a transition to.

I find it is a testimony to the importance of Spirit in human life that our religious sensitivities have made it through this period of secular over-emphasis. In the light of our most recent Spirit recoveries, we are coming to see that industrial civilization has been an extreme example of social self-idolization. The advocates of industrial civilization have been willing and are still willing to threaten the further existence of humanity on this planet with “advanced” means of warfare and “advanced” means of using the Earth. Finding an ethical grounding that can criticize this industrialized social herd with sufficient power to stop this momentum toward doom has been the agony of every awake social and religious reformer. But not all social reformers are ready to understand the full depth of our ethical dilemma--namely, that an active expression of Spirit awareness is the ethical grounding we need. And on the other hand, not all religious reformers clearly understand that renewing their religion and ending the self-idolization of industrial civilization are two parts of the same job.

Our job also includes opposing total anarchists who reject all organized governance. We must label these post-civilizational forces for what they are: nostalgic dreamers who want to return to a preindustrial form of society. Industrial civilization, however problematical, has made an unshakable contribution to the future. The critique of the two-story metaphor has been one of those constructive happenings. Spirit is present in this critique. The beginning of democratic processes, the liberation of slaves, the rescue of women from second class status, the critique of crass superstition, all these and other “enlightenments” have been expressions of authentic Spirit emerging in the industrial period of civilization. The entire ideal of hierarchical civilization with its top-down distribution of power and wealth has come into question in this period of civilization. Spirit aliveness is being expressed by all those movements and persons who are finding detachment from the social modes we have called “civilization” and who are now envisioning a next fundamental social mode for humanity on this planet.

This completes my thumb-nail sketch of the history of religion. I am sure it is too short to do justice to these vast topics. It may also be too long to hold the attention of some readers. Nevertheless, this picture (or one slightly better) is a critical element in thinking clearly about the general topic of this book: Stages of Consciousness and the Experience of Spirit. I will conclude by reflecting on a few general questions.

Stages of Consciousness and Historical Progress

Does religion evolve into ever more conscious forms? Are the religions of civilization in some way better than the religions of tribal society? Will the religions of post-civilization be in some way better than the religions of civilization? Such questions will not go away. Such questions are also clouded by the fact that every type of good religion is capable of perverting into bad religion--religion that assists us to flee Spirit maturation. The good religion of any era is an assault upon the bad religion of any era.

There is a way in which good religion does evolve. The Infinite does not evolve. Spirit does not evolve. But our finite religious modes and metaphors do evolve. For example, the transparency metaphor is now our destiny whether we wish it to be or not. Authenticity, not authority, is our new mode of articulating Spirit Truth whether we wish it to be or not. Transparency, existential description, authenticity, and other such terms point to the fact that religion has evolved beyond the religious modes of both civilization and precivilization.

While we may, like all humans, play with the symbolism of magical powers and spin mythical overviews, to communicate clearly with one another what we mean by such symbols we must use some form of existential description of the actual experiences being pointed to in our interior lives. This new mode of Spirit expression is the mode of our times. Every other mode of being religious is now obsolete. Obsolete does not mean bad; it just means that these old ways are being subsumed into a wider view.

Social life, like biological evolution, moves on, and those who do not move on with it are simply left behind in a cul de sac, or else eliminated entirely from the destiny of the planet. This is the harsh truth both within biological evolution and human history. Moving on into new and necessary expansions in consciousness is what it means to obey the biblical God of history. Obedience to this Final Reality means moving on with the ever-ascending path of consciousness. Finite consciousness never arrives at Final Reality. The Infinite is always more than our finite consciousness of the Infinite. But openness to the Infinite means moving on in our finite consciousness.

Secondly, it is also true that **we must not understand the Spirit giants of previous eras as simpletons whom we have now moved beyond.** The Buddha, Lao Tzu, Moses, the Prophets, Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Hildegard, Francis, Claire, Aquinas, Teresa, Luther, Calvin, Wesley and Edwards--these people were not less wondrous because they lived in an era that used mythic overviews. All these persons and many more are still far ahead of most of us on the journey to Spirit maturity. They still challenge us to grow up. We cannot with integrity revert to their modes of religious expression, yet we can still see ourselves as novices on the path toward becoming peers of their Spirit maturity and insight.

But how can persons using obsolete religious metaphors be our Spirit mentors? The answer is that Spirit is not religion and religion is not Spirit. Our mode of religious expression may have evolved, but all humans, whatever their era of religious expression, are equal in being a Spirit relationship with the Infinite Mystery.

This equality before the Mysterious Wholeness does not mean that we who now live in the era of post-civilization can renounce our place in history and simply use the cultural and religious modes of the past. No, once finite cultural and religious formations have moved on into more inclusive forms, we cannot go back. We can learn from the past, but we cannot go back. We cannot unlearn the intervening centuries of our evolving consciousness. When we try to do such unlearning, we do not reduplicate our ancestors; rather we become a joke--like a senior citizen pretending to be a youth, or perhaps like an apple tree trying to be a fern.

Let me summarize my point with this mathematical metaphor. Any finite reality compared with infinity is zero. $1/\infty = 2/\infty = 3/\infty = 0$. Spirit has to do with being relationship with the Infinite. Our evolving religious modes are the 1, 2, 3 of this analogy. These religious modes are the finite expression of Spirit not Spirit itself. Magical powers is stage 1; mythical overviews is stage 2; and existential descriptions is stage 3. Stage 1 compared to Spirit is ZERO; stage 2 compared to Spirit is ZERO; and stage 3 compared to Spirit is ZERO. Every finite religious mode when viewed from the perspective of its capacity to express the Infinite has the same value: ZERO.

Therefore, the Spirit journey in each era is the same journey, even though the eras themselves are different and are progressively related. People of era three cannot go back to era two or one, but those who lived in those eras were no farther away from Spirit than we are. And we are no closer to Spirit than they were. Spirit is not one of the entities in a sequence: 1, 2, 3, SPIRIT. Spirit cannot be viewed as one entity among a sequence of finite entities.

Spirit, as a self-conscious relationship with the Infinite, did, however, **come into being at a particular time in the history of this planet.** But that time was not our century. The Buddha, Jesus, and other unusual persons were not Spirit beings who arrived early. No, Spirit, as a self-conscious relationship with the Infinite, arrived very early in the origins of the human species. In no era do all humans become Spirit-mature beings, but in every era there are some mature Spirit persons. We need to assume that there were mature Spirit persons in the very earliest societies of human cultural history. There had to be some who were Spirit-mature enough to detach themselves from obsolete cultures and invent new ones. I speculate that Spirit arrived soon after (or along with) the emergence of language and art. Religion, in the form of simple dances expressing the Awe of Death and the Awe of Life, probably predated sophisticated language and art. It is a good guess that we humans were profoundly religious animals long before we were proficient in the use of symbolic rationality.

In the psychological development of human children, symbol-using intelligence begins to emerge around age two. Spirit awareness, in its full sense, cannot be said to have arrived until the childhood ego has been fully established and that childhood ego experiences death, its own death, as well as the Spirit freedom to establish some sort of first experiment in adulthood. But this analogy with childhood development does not hold exactly for the evolution of the human species. In the earliest periods of tribal life there surely were adult persons who were mature Spirit beings. And the religious modes they used are not strictly analogous to an early stage of childhood. These early religious modes are now obsolete, but in their time they were adult inventions used by Spirit mature adults to dialogue with the full Mystery and to invent social and religious practices that kept in being the human form of life. Our Spirit challenges today come farther along the path of ascending consciousness, but the essence of the Spirit challenges we face today are more similar-to than different-from the Spirit challenges that have always been faced by the awakening element of the human species. In each era or decade of human history, we humans face the challenge to “die-to” the consciousness we now have, and we experience the freedom to invent consciousness that we have never been before. There is an ascending path of consciousness, but being a Spirit mature human being can happen at any point along that path.

Ken Wilber is an exciting person to dialogue with, for he has risked bold comprehensive positions on virtually every controversial subject. He has encyclopedic knowledge and sterling insights. He has been provocative to me because he comes at Spirit and religion from a slightly different angle of vision. Wilber’s picture of history and the one I have drawn agree on this: human history evolves--moving into ever-expanding intensifications of human consciousness. I also agree that pathologies result when this movement is resisted or incompletely accomplished. Yet Wilber’s picture differs from mine on a least one very crucial point. Wilber frequently confuses Infinite Spirit with finite religious modes. Spirit, cleanly defined, cannot be put in a finite sequence with finite religious modes and finite human consciousness.

One of the most glaringly ridiculous results of Wilber’s historical thinking occurs when he speaks of Jesus and Buddha as persons who lived before their times. Apparently Wilber cannot comprehend that full Spirit maturity is equally easy and equally rare in every era. I am not going to do a point-by-point criticism of Wilber’s views; I leave that task to those who have the persistence to understand his vast reflections in a competent manner. But I mention Wilber’s work in this discourse because I want to alert us to a difficulty that we all have in writing competent and helpful religious history.

My positive point is this: the most primitive shaman may have been a Spirit-blown human of equal depth and maturity with the Buddha, or Jesus, or any person living a thousand years into the future. Spirit can be expressed in whatever finite cultural forms happens to be “our culture.” And these cultural expressions are all finite and therefore doomed to be replaced by wider and more adequate finite expressions later on. But for the moment, it does not matter that our expressions are finite. Any expression of Spirit is finite. Any expression of Spirit is like an explosion which makes a crater in some particular finite place and time. Each of us can be a Spirit explosion making a crater in our cultural era. Spirit persons in the year 10,000, if humans manage such longevity, will be able to see, if they are Spirit-lucid and chance to notice our crater, that Spirit blew here and made this crater.

Spirit as the Motor of Cultural and Religious Evolution

But Spirit is something more than an empty crater in the rock of a surrounding culture. Spirit is also the freedom that built all cultures in the first place. Spirit is the freedom that transforms an obsolete culture into a relevant one. Spirit is the motor of all cultural and religious evolution. Spirit can become the motor in political and economic arenas as well.

The Spirit-filled are the Awed Ones who are filled with Awe by the Awesome Otherness that is confronting us in each and every natural and historical event. Some of the Awed Ones today are those who see that the Cenozoic Era is ending and that the Ecozoic Era is beginning and must be fully established. Some of the Awed Ones today are those who see that civilization is ending and that post-civilization is beginning and must be fully established. Some of the Awed Ones today are those who see that the hierarchies of wealth and power making peasants of most of us must be replaced by a planet-wide confederation of semiautonomous regions, democratically operated by humans on behalf of humans, animals, plants, fungi, and microbes.

And some of the Awed Ones today are those who see that the transcendence metaphor is dead and that the transparency metaphor has begun its life and must be fully established. Some of the Awed Ones today are those who see that the religious modes using images of magical powers and authoritative mythic overviews are ending and that authenticity and existential description are components of a workable religious mode that has already begun and must be fully established for our era.

Furthermore, the mature Awed Ones today are those who see that thoroughgoing religious transformation and thoroughgoing social transformation are two sides of the same coin. Without the motivity of a new religious resurgence there will not be an adequate reconstruction of our social vehicles. And on the other hand, we have not yet found an adequate religious resurgence until we see that living the life of being the Awe Ones entails deconstructing civilization and constructing a social vehicle for the entire human species that works--that works within the benevolent arms of this one finite planet, our Earth.

Spirit is not an escape to some irrelevant realm. Spirit is a profound calling that occurs within our own particular finite flow of events and nowhere else. Spirit is the motor of religious and cultural evolution and the key also to mobilizing our progressive political movements and constructing our alternative economic systems. Natural events, new ideas, new technologies make history, but most of all, Spirit makes history. History is made by Spirit freedom, Spirit compassion, Spirit confidence, equanimity, tranquility and joy. No one can fully understand or explain how your or my expression of Spirit maturity is going to make history, but it will.