

SPEAK NOW OR FOREVER HOLD YOUR PEACE:  
A REVIEW ESSAY OF KEN WILBER'S  
*THE MARRIAGE OF SENSE AND SOUL:  
INTEGRATING SCIENCE AND RELIGION*

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We have been invited to a wedding by Ken Wilber. This ceremony is not to be an inconsequential affair, but rather resembles a Royal Wedding with all its pomp and circumstance. The marriage, it has been announced, will result in the unification of two previously combative kingdoms into one domain, a cause for much rejoicing. Yet as the guests assemble and the ceremony begins, I find myself filled with doubts. Will this marriage fulfill the deepest passions of these eminent consorts or is it doomed to divorce? Will the vows to be taken allow the full expression of their nature or rather augur its distortion and oppression? Will the fruits of this union bring harmony or further discord and dissociation? In this essay, I would like to explore the merits of Ken Wilber's nuptial arrangement before the vows have been taken. But let us begin by having a look at the identity of the consorts, the motives for their marriage, and the nature of their vows.

In short, the primary aim of *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (Wilber, 1998) is "to integrate premodern religion with modern science" (p. 10). By premodern religion Wilber means the Great Chain of Being, a hierarchy of levels of reality (matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit) which he believes lies at the core of most world religious traditions and constitutes the basis for a universal perennial philosophy, i.e., a contemplative consensus about the nature of reality. By modern science he understands, following Max Weber and Jurgen Habermas, the type of autonomous scientific research that emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the West after the breakdown of the unified religious-metaphysical world view of the Middle Ages into the cultural values spheres of science, art, and morality. As Wilber points out, these differentiations allowed scientific, artistic, and moral-political practices to develop their own logic and standards of validity free from the dogmatic clutches of the Church. For Wilber, then, "to integrate religion and science, we need to *integrate the Great Chain with the differentiations (if modernity)*" (p. 14). In addition, as we

shall see, Wilber identifies the structure of modern scientific inquiry with certain aspects of the philosophies of empiricism, Thomas Kuhn, and Karl Popper.

According to Wilber, to marry science and religion is important not only to legitimize the cognitive value of spiritual experiences, but also to foster the integration of the currently fragmented cultural spheres of morality, art, and science-or, as he puts it, the Big Three: the WE, the I, and the IT, or the Good, the Beautiful, and the True. On the one hand, Wilber claims, this union can emancipate religion from both its problematic commitment to mythical and dogmatic claims, and its modern marginalization as mere "subjective" experience that cannot provide any form of valid, "objective" knowledge. On the other hand, it can help to integrate the Big Three, whose healthy differentiation defined the dignities of the modern era-such as democracy, individual rights, and the abolition of slavery-but whose present state of dissociation is, for Wilber, lurking behind most of the maladies besetting our present predicament-such as the ecological crisis, ethnocentric imperialism, and the culture of narcissism. Following Habermas, Wilber identifies the main cause of this dissociation as the "colonization" of the I and the WE by the IT, that is, the dominance of the value spheres by the instrumental-technical rationality typical of the natural sciences. This form of reason aims at prediction and control and only admits as source of valid knowledge public, replicable, and verifiable sensory experiences. As a result of this colonization, Wilber observes, all genuine human knowledge has been reduced to sensory evidence, and the interiority of the Kosmos thereby collapsed into a "flatland" without depth where no qualitative distinctions can be consistently made. Only by redeeming the epistemic status of inner experiences and other ways of knowing, then, can the "flatland" be overcome, the Big Three integrated, and the cognitive value of spirituality regained,

Before offering his own proposal for reconciliation, Wilber critically reviews several previous attempts to integrate the Big Three. First, he charges romanticism with having confused dedifferentiation with integration and consequently devaluing rationality and falling prey to regressive agendas. Then he examines German idealism, whose glorious vision was undermined for not having a "yoga," that is, for not developing practical injunctions or "interior experiments" that would allow the experiential reproduction and testing of extraordinary insights. Finally, he accuses postmodernism of having taken too far the interpretive element of human knowledge and degenerated into narcissistic egocentrism, self-contradictory relativism, and a nihilistic "aperspectival madness" that denies all depth and celebrates the view that "no belief is better than any other" (p. 136V)

As a radical cure for the flatness and fragmentation of our times, Wilber proposes a *broad empiricism* that embraces not only sensory experience (approached by the natural sciences), but also mental experience (approached by logic, mathematics, semiotics, phenomenology, and hermeneutics) and spiritual experience (approached by experiential mysticism). This common epistemological framework for anhuman knowledge rests on a unified methodology which incorporates what Wilber believes are the "essential aspects" of the scientific method. According to Wilber, any genuine human inquiry (sensory, mental, or spiritual) follows the same "three strands of all valid knowledge:" (I) an instrumental injunction, or a paradigm, practice, ordinance,

or procedure (e.g., histological instructions, learning geometry, meditation), (2) a direct apprehension of the data disclosed by the injunction (e.g., seeing that the cell has a nucleus, mentally recognizing the truth of the Pythagorean theorem, spiritually realizing God), and (3) a communal confirmation, a verification or refutation of the apprehension by others who [have adequately completed the injunctive and apprehensive strands (e.g., by scientists, mathematicians, and mystics who have followed similar procedures)]. Central to Wilber's proposal is a defense of Popper's principle of *falsifiability* as the criterion for both anchoring the validity of knowledge claims and demarcating between genuine and dogmatic knowledge in every domain: sensory, mental, and spiritual. In the sense Wilber uses it, falsifiability holds that genuine knowledge must be potentially refutable by experiential evidence, and that this falsifiability allows us to demarcate between science and pseudoscience: "The falsifiability principle," he tells us, "becomes an important aspect of the knowledge quest in all domains, sensory to mental to spiritual. And in each of those domains, it does indeed help us to separate the true from the false, the demonstrable from the dogmatic" (p. 160).

As in all genuine marriage, of course, some form of compromise is required to warrant a fruitful and enduring union, and these distinguished consorts are not exempt from having to take serious vows. Science needs to let go of its narrow reductionism and accept a broad empiricism which accepts not only sensory, but also mental and spiritual experiences as valid sources of knowledge. And religion must bracket its bogus mythical beliefs, accept scientific notions such as evolution, focus on its experiential and universal mystical core, and subject its claims to the falsificationist challenge. (Arguably, such vows would be more costly for religion and, as I shall contend, misguided and ultimately undermining its own integrity.) Once this covenant is consummated, Wilber assures us, we can happily realize that the conflict is not between "real science" and "real religion," which now become "fraternal twins" following the three strands of valid knowledge accumulation (injunction, apprehension, falsification), but between bogus science (reductionistic scientism) and bogus religion (unfalsifiable myth and dogma). In fact, Wilber contends, "real science and real religion are actually *allied* against the bogus and the dogmatic and the non-verifiable and the non-falsifiable in their respective spheres" (p. 169).

To recapitulate, Wilber's nuptial arrangement between religion and science is actually a marriage between the Great Chain of Being and an empiricist-Kuhnian-Popperian account of science. This ceremony entails their mutual commitment to a broad empiricism and a unified methodology (the "three strands of all valid knowledge") that anchors the validity of sensory, mental, and spiritual claims on their falsifiability. To ensure a happy future together, both consorts need to take important vows: Science shall adopt a broad empiricism that embraces sensory, mental, and spiritual experiences, and religion shall drop its mythical beliefs and focus on its alleged empirical (experiential), universal, and falsifiable mystical core. The promised fruits of this union are the recovery of the depths of the Kosmos, the legitimization of spirituality, and the integration of the Big Three. A happy marriage, indeed.

*The Marriage of Sense and Soul* contains many valuable and important insights. Some of them are not new **but** still worth repeating, like the critique of scientism and the

pitfalls of dogmatic religion. As usual in his scholarship, Wilber should be credited for having synthesized vast amounts of complex information with extraordinary rigor and clarity. Another of his great accomplishments is to have expanded the Great Chain of Being by incorporating the differentiations of modernity, giving thereby the perennial vision greater contemporary relevance and explanatory power than any other traditional account. Furthermore, by stressing the fourfold intrinsic nature of all phenomena-c-intentional, behavioral, cultural, and social-Wilber paves the way for extending our understanding of spirituality out of the merely inner and individual to all corners of the Kosmos, redeeming spirituality from its modern marginalization as "subjective" individual experience while conserving the fundamental differentiations of modernity. In my opinion, however, the most outstanding merit of the book is to have shown with unparalleled force that contemporary forms of spirituality (in the West, I would qualify) need to embrace the differentiations of modernity if they want to avoid a calamitous regression to premodern religious dogmatism and imperialism. In this regard, Wilber's arguments are compelling *and* uncompromising, and after *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* it should be obvious that any contemporary articulation of spirituality that does not take into account these distinctions will be seriously deficient. Finally, Wilber's diagnosis of the etiology of the maladies of our present fragmented predicament is accurate, I believe. Also, his suggestion, that the integration of the value spheres of art, morality, and science calls for both a recovery of the interiors and, perhaps more originally, a reevaluation of the cognitive status of spirituality, needs to be, in my opinion, seriously considered by modern critical thinkers.

In spite of these achievements, however, I believe that Wilber's remedies tragically prescribe the illness for the cure: *Wilber's nuptial arrangement not only perpetuates the dissociations of the modern era, but also renders the legitimation of spiritual knowledge hopeless*. Of course, when one of the leading figures in transpersonal studies so severely undermines the possibility to legitimize spirituality, one cannot but resolutely speak up in the hopes of preventing a marriage whose vows prophesy an unhappy life for both science and religion.

In the remainder of this essay, then, I shall focus on the following three interrelated points. First, I shall argue that Wilber's proposal of empiricist standards of knowledge as paradigmatic for all ways of knowing fosters, rather than heals, the fragmentation of the modern era. Second, I shall show that to resuscitate Popperian falsifiability to characterize all genuine knowledge and demarcate between science and dogma is not only misguided and unpracticable in the natural and social sciences, but also inimical to the nature of spiritual inquiry. Finally, I shall raise some questions about the identity of *the* science and *the* religion whose marriage Wilber ceremoniously arranges and prematurely celebrates. Let us have a more detailed look at the reasons for these unexpected marital conflicts.

#### THE EMPIRICIST COLONIZATION OF SPIRITUALITY

According to Wilber, "the real problem of our modern fragmentation ... is that *all higher modes of knowing have been brutally collapsed into monological and empiri-*

*cal science. . . . it is the reduction of all knowledge to monological modes that constitutes the disaster of modernity"* (p. 38). Wilber rightly points out that this positivist prejudice results in the reduction of all valid knowledge to sensory evidence and the consequent devaluation of spirituality to "subjective" experiences that now cannot meet the "objective" standards of valid knowledge characteristic of the natural sciences.

Although accurate, I believe that this is only half of the story. In addition to sensory reductionism, positivism holds both that there exists a single method for all valid knowledge (methodological monism), and that the natural sciences represent this methodological ideal for all other sciences (scientism) (Chalmers, 1990, p. 3-23; Sorell, 1991, p. 4-18; von Wright, 1971, p. 4). The problem with positivism, then, is not only the reduction of valid knowledge to sensory evidence, but also the assimilation of all human inquiry (aesthetic, historical, social, spiritual, etc.) to the methods and aims of the natural sciences (experimentation, replication, testing, verification, falsification, etc.). Accordingly, the empiricist colonization responsible for many of the maladies of modernity stems not only from sensualist reductionism, but also, and perhaps more fatally, from *the understanding of all human disciplines and practices according to the language, methods, and standards of validity of empirical knowledge*. And this, alas, is *precisely* the heart of Wilber's integration of science and religion!

Let us have a closer look at the nature of this move. In spite of talking about different types of inquiry and truth (empirical, phenomenological, spiritual, etc.), Wilber consistently uses the language and principles of empirical science as the universal standards for genuine knowledge in all domains. Echoing the positivist aspirations, Wilber suggests that "the Big Three-art, objective science, and morals-ean be brought together under one roof using the core methodology of deep empiricism and deep science (the three strands of all valid knowledge)" (p. 176). The "three strands of all valid knowledge" (injunction, apprehension, and confirmation/falsification), let us remember here, are a blend of certain aspects of the philosophies of empiricism, Kuhn, and Popper, all of which emerged from the study of the natural sciences (of physics, to be more exact!). Wilber celebrates that the use of this "same general methodology ... brings broad science to the interior domains of direct mental and spiritual experience" (p. 176). For example, Wilber claims that a genuine spiritual science should be based on inner experiments that generate replicable and falsifiable experiential data: "in the spiritual sciences the exemplar, the injunction, the paradigm, the practice is meditation or contemplation. It too has its injunctions, its illuminations, and its confirmations, all of which are repeatable-verifiable or falsifiable-and all of which therefore constitute a perfectly valid mode of knowledge acquisition" (p. 170). "With this move," he adds, "science is ... *satisfied* that its central method is still the epistemological cornerstone of all inquiry" (p. 176). No ambiguities here, the positivist dream made true in the service of spiritual legitimization.

As should be evident, then, Wilber's attempt to overcome the colonization of all value spheres by instrumental reason and to validate other forms of inquiry actually leads to the opposite outcome he wants to achieve. Ignoring the attainments of decades of human and social science (Gadamer, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1983; Rabinow & Sullivan.

1987), Wilber tries to persuade us that the method of the natural sciences (of physics, to be more exact) constitutes the paradigm of good science that all human inquiry must adopt. And rather than trying to unpack the validity claims of spiritual inquiry, Wilber suggests that a genuine spiritual *science* must meet such imported empiricist standards as replicability or falsifiability. As we shall see, these unnecessary constraints confine spiritual inquiry within an epistemic straitjacket that sabotages the validation of its knowledge claims.

The pitfalls of this positivist move have already been eloquently explained by others. According to Habermas, for example, one of the main difficulties of modernity is the understanding of all spheres of knowledge according to the structure of natural science. For Habermas, it is this extension of the instrumental reason characteristic of the natural sciences to other domains of life, and not merely sensualist reductionism, that is lurking behind the empiricist colonization of the life-world and the fragmentation of modernity (Habermas, 1971, 1987, 1988). Extending this critique to the realm of spiritual inquiry, Rothberg (1994) points out that

to interpret spiritual approaches through categories like "data," "evidence," "verification," "method," "confirmation," and "intersubjectivity" may be to enthrone these categories as somehow the hallmarks of knowledge as such, even if these categories are expanded in meaning from their current Western usage. But might not a profound encounter with practices of spiritual inquiry lead to considering carefully the meaning of other comparable categories (e.g., *dhyana*, *vichara*, *theoria*, *gnosis*, or *contemplatio*) and perhaps to developing understandings of inquiry in which such spiritual categories are primary or central when we speak of knowledge? To assume that the categories of current Western epistemology are adequate for interpreting spiritual approaches is to prejudge the results of such an encounter (p. 8).

What Habermas, Gadamer, Chalmers, Polkinghorne, Rothberg, and many others have convincingly shown is that it is highly questionable to import the language and epistemic categories emerging from the study of the natural world to account for the validity of knowledge in all domains of human reality (arts, literature, economics, politics, spirituality, etc.). Most artistic, social, and spiritual endeavors are aimed not so much at describing human nature and the world, but at *engaging them in creative, participative, and transformative ways*, and therefore have different goals, methods, and standards of validity. According to Gadamer, for example, hermeneutics "is not concerned primarily with amassing verified knowledge, such as would satisfy the methodological ideal of science" (p. xxi), but with "the experience of truth that transcends the domain of scientific method wherever that experience is to be found" (p. xxii). To burden these alternative ways of knowing with demands of experimental evidence, replicability, and falsifiability may be equivalent to trying to test the flavor of a savory soup with a very rusty fork.

Interestingly enough, Wilber admits the validity of an epistemological pluralism and says he has taken a different path to integrate science and religion simply because such a notion is not accepted in our times. This is an odd claim. On the one hand, epistemological pluralism is widely embraced today not only *between* but also *within* the natural and human sciences (Chalmers, 1990; Habermas, 1971; Heron, 1996a;

Polkinghorne, 1983; Reason, 1994). The positivist myth of a single epistemology and unified methodology for all sciences is only alive in the minds of a few recalcitrant scientists. As Habermas puts it, "the empiricist theory of science has defended the concept of the unity of scientific method that was already developed in the Neo-Positivism of Vienna. This discussion can be regarded as over, the few remaining echoes notwithstanding" (1984, p. 109). On the other hand, Wilber's account of an epistemological pluralism is not pluralistic enough. His proposal of three eyes of knowledge, although radically overcoming sensory reductionism, still restricts sensory, mental, and spiritual inquiries within his reconstruction of the method of natural science (the "three strands of all human knowledge"). This is not epistemological pluralism at all, but a positivist extension of the canons of instrumental reason to all areas of human life.

The inconsistency of trying to legitimize other ways of knowing by imposing the logic of natural science naturally engenders an important number of tensions in Wilber's work. For instance, it leads him to accept certain objectivist assumptions that have been strongly challenged today, if not refuted, even in relation to natural science. I shall just mention two examples: First, it is not clear how one can reject the representation paradigm of cognition and still defend the adequacy of a correspondence theory of truth for natural science. Even accepting that some of the features of the empirical-sensorimotor world are intrinsic, <I believe they are, a correspondence theory of truth does not necessarily follow from this premise. In any case, he should at least address the fatal assaults that the correspondence theory of truth has suffered in the last half of the century at the hands of philosophers like Davidson (1984), Goodman (1978), Putnam (1979), Quine (1953, 1990), or Rorty (1979). Second, in spite of more than twenty-five years of feminist science showing the inescapable presence and essential role of emotions in *all* human inquiry (Jaggar, 1989; Keller & Longino, 1996, p. 33; Shepherd, 1993, p. 51-77), Wilber still endorses the objectivist illusion that "objective truth" is "the truth according to *dispassionate* standards" (p. 49) (emphasis mine). Actually, although Wilber carefully avoids identifying which is the bride and which is the groom of this marriage, the assimilation of spiritual inquiry to the methods and aims of a masculinized science may even make us wonder if these nuptials are fated to result in patriarchal domination, rather than in dialogical partnership.

Taken together, these empiricist tensions and demands strongly suggest that Wilber has not taken his critique of scientism far *enough*. After denouncing the colonization of all cultural spheres by empirical monological science, he surprisingly, and inconsistently, proclaims the language, method, and standards of natural science as paradigmatic for all ways of knowing. The elevation of the logic of natural science as *the* model for all human inquiry (aesthetic, hermeneutic, spiritual, etc.) obviously perpetuates the colonization of the I and the WE by the IT that he is rightfully trying to overcome. This relapse into positivism effectively short-circuits his attempt to articulate an expanded account of human knowledge and traps him into the very cul-de-sac from which he claims to have escaped. And in the next section, we shall see how the retention of these positivist prejudices sacrifices the integrity of spirituality and leaves us with a self-defeating account of spiritual inquiry.

One of the unfortunate consequences of this residual positivism is the resuscitation and extension of Popperian falsifiability as the hallmark of genuine knowledge in all domains of inquiry, sensory to mental to spiritual. As we have seen, Wilber claims that falsifiability helps us to anchor the validity of all knowledge claims and to demarcate between science and pseudoscience, genuine and bogus knowledge, authentic spirituality and dogma. In this section I shall show that the falsifiability principle not only is implausible in the natural and social sciences, but also that its application to spiritual matters is deeply self-defeating.

### *Falsifiability in Science*

It is general knowledge that falsifiability is regarded in contemporary philosophy of science as both a naive account of scientific practice and an unreliable guideline to demarcate between science and pseudoscience (Curd & Cover, 1998, p. 78; Klee, 1997, p. 67-73). The standard objections to Popperian falsifiability are well known and need not to be repeated here in detail. The history of science, for example, does not support a falsificationist view of scientific practice, as the writings of Paul Feyerabend (1975), Thomas Kuhn (1970a), and Richard Swinburne (1964) showed decades ago. In spite of his several exaggerations, Feyerabend was correct when he pointed out that "the doctrine of falsifiability would wipe out science as we know it. There are few episodes that seem to conform to the falsifiability pattern" (1995, p. 90).

Ever since the 1960s and 1970s, it has become obvious that a fundamental shortcoming of this doctrine was that, since theories are *not* single entities but sets of interrelated initial conditions, assumptions, and hypotheses, they can always be "saved" from seemingly falsifying data through the introduction or modification of auxiliary hypotheses. These ad hoc procedures, historians of science observed, rather than being rare or inimical to good science, were actually everyday scientific practice and essential for scientific progress (Kuhn, 1970b, p. 13; O'Hear, 1980, p. 90-123). To mention a classical example, irregularities in Uranus's orbit did not lead to the refutation of Newton's gravitational theory, but to the postulation of a new planet that eventually resulted in the discovery of Neptune! (Bamford, 1996). Furthermore, falsifying evidence is not normally taken as refuting a given theory, but is put aside as an unexplained anomaly to be answered in the future. In practice, a theory is regarded as refuted not when it is falsified, but only when a better one comes along (Lakatos, 1970, p. JJ9). In addition, what counts as the standards of falsification is open to interpretation and ultimately depends on conventional decisions taken by the different scientific communities (Bernstein 1985, p. 71; Kuhn, 1970b). There are no pure falsifying data floating "out there," nor are there crucial experiments providing a conclusive refutation of a theory (Pinch, 1985), as Popper himself admitted (Popper, 1959, p. 50). But then, as Kuhn asked in a well-known passage, "what is falsification if it is not conclusive disproof? ... Rather than a logic, Sir Karl has provided an ideology; rather than methodological rules, he has supplied procedural maxims" (1970b, p. 15).

Another fatal stroke to falsificationism was provided by the Duhem-Quine principle of underdetermination of theory by evidence, which revealed not only that logically incompatible theories may fit all possible evidence, but also that theories can accommodate virtually any disconfirming evidence by making the adequate adjustments in the system (Duhern, 1953; Quine, 1953, 1990). Of course, this principle made the entire falsificationist logic flawed, and this is why contemporary textbooks in philosophy of science consider that falsificationism was "killed" by the underdetermination of theory (Klee, 1997, p. 73). Needless to say, these and other formidable problems have made falsificationism inapplicable today in virtually all natural and human disciplines, from mathematics (Kircher, 1984) to economics (Caldwell, 1984; Hausman, 1985), from astronomy (Bamford, 1996) to hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1990), from evolutionary biology (Ruse, 1988; Stamos, 1996; Van Der Steen, 1993) to social sciences (Fay, 1996; Hollis, 1994; Outhwaite, 1996), from cognitive science (Bechtel, 1998) to psychoanalysis (Ahumada, 1997; Cioffi, 1985), and from science teaching (Lawson, 1993) to evolutionary epistemology (Gatens-Robinson, 1993), to mention a few.

As for falsificationism as a demarcation criterion between science and pseudoscience, it soon became apparent that it was simultaneously too strong and too weak, too restrictive and too permissive. Actually, the application of falsifiability seems to lead exactly to the opposite picture that Wilber paints. On the one hand, falsificationism would make non-scientific most well accepted scientific notions and disciplines of human knowledge. For example, the idea of evolution, one of Wilber's favorite scientific notions, is not falsifiable according to Popper, but this of course has never been a problem for evolutionary biologists (Kitcher, 1982; Sanders & Ho, 1982; Stamos, 1996). On the other hand, falsificationism would make us accept as scientific any potentially falsifiable claim that no one has yet refuted, including irrationalities such as that three flying elephants shall land on the dark side of the moon this morning. As philosopher of science Laudan (1996) puts it, falsificationism renders

"scientific" every crank claim which makes ascertainably false assertions. Thus flat Earthers, biblical creationists, proponents of laetrile or orgone boxes, Uri Geller devotees, Bermuda Triangulators, circle squarers, Lysenkoists, charioteers of the Gods, *perpetuum mobile* builders, Big Foot searchers, Loch Nessians, faith healers, polywater dabblers, ... all turn out to be scientific on Popper's criterion-just as long as they are prepared to indicate some observation, however improbable, which (if it came to pass) would cause them to change their minds (p. 219).

The claim that falsifiability allows us to differentiate between genuine and dogmatic knowledge is an empiricist myth that must be laid to rest.

### *Falsifiability in Religion*

In addition to dubiously resurrecting falsifiability in the natural and human sciences, Wilber extends its scope to spiritual matters. Briefly, Wilber proposes that "authentic spirituality ... must be based on falsifiable evidence" (p. 166), and that this falsifiability helps us to discriminate between genuine and dogmatic spiritual claims: "the

three strands of deep science (injunction, apprehension, confirmation; or paradigm, data, falsifiability) apply not only to exterior experience; they are the means whereby we decide if a particular interior experience carries genuine knowledge and cognitive content, or whether it is merely hallucinatory, dogmatic, bogus, idiosyncratic, or personal preference" (p. 202). By using this demarcation principle, Wilber wants to discriminate between mythical and dogmatic religious beliefs (which are unfalsifiable) and genuine contemplative insights (which are falsifiable). What is more, Wilber believes that these falsifiable insights will make the Great Chain of Being the well-founded spiritual ontology upon which all *religions* will rest: "*submitted to the tests of deep science, the Great Chain of Being and its newfound validity ought to be enough foundation for any religion*" (p. 204).

In what follows, I shall argue that, contrary to Wilber's assertion, most contemplative claims are *not* falsifiable and that to ground the validity of spiritual knowledge on this principle is therefore a well-intentioned but ultimately self-defeating exercise in apologetics. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this claim is to invite the reader to the following thought-experiment: Imagine, for example, that you are in a Theravada Buddhist retreat and report to your teacher the unmistakable direct spiritual insight you had during meditation into the eternal, indestructible, independent, absolute and substantial nature of the Self (as Advaita Vedanta claims)-or into the existence of the soul (as Christian mysticism claims), or into the reality of a personal and loving God (as most Semitic mystics claim), etc. Will these "experiential data" be taken as falsifying or refuting the Buddhist doctrine of no-self (*anatmanil* Will the teacher even consider its potential fallibility? Hardly so. As any Buddhist practitioner well knows, these data will be regarded as an obvious sign of delusion, wrong view, attachment to permanent existence, or even of egoic resistance. And you will probably be told by your teacher, with more or less gentleness, to go back to your meditation cushion and keep practicing until you overcome delusion and "see things as they really are," that is, marked by no-self and impermanence as the Theravada canons maintain. Needless to say, a similar parable can be told, the necessary changes having been made, in the case of any other contemplative tradition.' The reader is invited to try to make a solid case for the falsifiability of the central claims of any mystical tradition: Which "experiential evidence" would count as falsifying the ultimate identity of Atman-Brahman in an Advaitin community? Which "experiential data" would falsify the claim of the existence of a personal and loving God in a community of Christian contemplatives? So much for the falsifiability of direct spiritual experiences in communities of the adequate."

Of course, this parable raises many interesting questions about the nature of spiritual knowledge which I *cannot* adequately address here. For our present purposes, it should suffice to say that, in any contemplative community, no single spiritual experience will count as an adequate falsification of the sacred knowledge of their tradition. Furthermore, as our parable suggests, what in one tradition is seen as a crucial spiritual insight, in another can be regarded as the most deceptive of delusions. In their corresponding communities, we need to conclude, *spiritual claims can be corroborated, but not falsified. And the validity of this corroboration is not universal or absolute (as it is traditionally claimed) but contextual and relative.*

An alternative to avoid the contextuality of such a corroboration is to assume, erroneously I believe, that there are pre-given spiritual data existing "out there," independently from the spiritual traditions and practices that enact them, against which we can dash our spiritual hypothesis. I believe that this objectivist assumption represents a serious distortion of the nature of the spiritual path and the logic of spiritual inquiry. What most mystical traditions offer are not so much "descriptions" of reality to be confirmed or falsified by experiential evidence, but "prescriptions" of ways of "being-and-the-world" to be intentionally cultivated and lived. To put it another way, spiritual cosmologies are not primarily descriptive systems in need of experiential testing, but prescriptive systems that invite us to radically transform ourselves and the world. In the same vein, the aim of most contemplative practices is not to "have experiences," but rather to bring forth and participate in special states of discernment (involving somatic as well as affective, cognitive, and intuitive dimensions) that have a transforming and emancipatory nature. Meditative practices are not "replicable experiments" designed to provide "data" that "verify" or "falsify" spiritual claims, but the embodiment and lived expression of the teachings of a given tradition. The role of spiritual experiences on the spiritual path is not to test the teachings of a spiritual tradition, but to provide one with signposts of being on the right track in the specific soteriological path laid down by that tradition. And this is not to say, as some radical constructivists wrongly claim, that novel insights do not occur or are never incorporated by spiritual traditions. They actually are, and this is why religious traditions are not closed, self-encapsulated systems, but "living hermeneutic processes" (Vroom, 1989, p, 328) which grow and renew themselves out of the interaction among doctrines, interpretations, and new experiences. Finally, if I may dare to say, from a contemplative perspective, it could be argued that what makes a spiritual claim dogmatic is not that it cannot be experientially falsified, but that it is held with attachment, with clinging, as an Absolute Truth, and so forth. This, and not the unfalsifiability of its claims, is the real dead end of any genuine spiritual inquiry.

In spite of Wilber's salutary intentions, then, to posit falsifiability as the principle to anchor the validity of genuine spiritual claims and distinguish them from dogma would undermine the central insights of the very contemplative traditions he champions. Once again, this strongly suggests that what is needed is not to artificially force spirituality to meet the standards of natural science, but to challenge the hegemony of these canons and articulate standards of validity emerging from the logic of spiritual inquiry. What is needed is to ground the validity of spiritual knowledge not on replicable spiritual experiments that bring falsifiable experiential data, but on its emancipatory and transformative power of self and world.

WHICH SCIENCE! WHICH RELIGION!

To conclude, serious questions can be raised about the identity of the consorts whose marriage Wilber elegantly arranges. What I am asking here is not whether or not Wilber's religion and science can be married (he nicely shows that they can), but rather *which* religion and *which* science need to be brought to the altar today. As we have seen, Wilber marries premodern religion (i.e., a perennialist version of the Great

Chain of Being) and modern science (i.e., an empiricist account of the method of natural science). But, we may rightfully ask: Why *premodern* religion? Why *modern* science? Even accepting that premodern religion could be equated to the Great Chain of Being, how well does the Great Chain represent contemporary spiritual consciousness? How adequately does Wilber's amalgam of classical empiricism and his accounts of *the* philosophies of science of Thomas Kuhn and Karl Popper depict the current natural, social, and human sciences? In short, is this the ceremony we really need to bear witness to today?

I have serious doubts. Perhaps the science that needs to be married today is not an artificial reconstruction of exhausted philosophies of science, but the pluralistic view of valid knowledge that has gradually arisen during the last decades of postempiricist philosophy of science, hermeneutics, feminist scholarship, and human science research, among other disciplines. And perhaps the religion that is waiting to be espoused is not a universalist Great Chain of Being—a hybrid of Neoplatonism and Neovedanta-s-but forms of spiritual awareness emerging, for example, from the living interreligious dialogue, which, incidentally, started with universalist assumptions and aspirations but gradually moved to more dialogical, hermeneutic, and pluralistic understandings (Clarke, 1997; Corless, 1993; Griffiths, 199J; Heim, 1995; Prabhu, 1996; Vroom, 1989). Listen to the Dalai Lama (1996):

In order to develop a genuine spirit of harmony from a sound foundation of knowledge, I believe it is very important to know the fundamental differences between religious traditions.... Some people believe that the most reasonable way to attain harmony and solve problems relating to religious intolerance is to establish one universal religion. However, I have always felt that we should have different religious traditions because human beings possess so many different mental dispositions .... If we try to unify the faiths of the world into one religion, we will also lose *many* of the qualities and richness of each particular tradition. Therefore, I feel it is better, in spite of the many quarrels in the name of religion, to maintain a variety of religious traditions (p. 41).

This is the spirit that was cultivated, for example, in the recent Gethsemani encounter between Buddhist and Christian monastics, where, in spite of the acknowledgment of important differences in their spiritual lives (on God, on grace, on anger, on intuition, etc.), a profound sense of mutual enrichment and communion emerged in the midst of this rich diversity (Mitchell & Wiseman, 1997, p. xxii),

Do not misunderstand me here. I am not advocating for a vulgar relativist (and ultimately dogmatic and intolerant) celebration of religious pluralism per se. On the contrary, I firmly believe not only that the ecumenical search for common ground is an important and worthy enterprise, but also that qualitative distinctions can be made among spiritual teachings and traditions. At least, I have the conviction that it is possible to identify certain elements common to most contemplative traditions (some form of attentional training, certain ethical guidelines, an intentional moving away from self-centeredness, a sense of the sacred, etc.). However, to assume the essential unity of mysticism paradoxically can do violence to the truly essential message of the different spiritual traditions.' Perhaps the longed-for spiritual unity of humankind can only be found in the multiplicity of its voices. If there is a perennial philosophy, this needs to be established on the basis of interreligious inquiry and dialogue, and not

presumed as an unassailable axiom from which inquiry must depart and to which dialogue must lead. And if there is not a perennial philosophy, this is no reason to despair. Once we free ourselves from positivist and empiricist prejudices, alternatives to perennialism naturally emerge that allow us to look at the spiritual life with refreshed eyes: Eyes that discern that contemporary spirituality does not need the perennial philosophy as its fundamental metaphysical framework. Eyes that appreciate and honor the multiplicity of ways in which the sense of the sacred can not only be conceptualized, but also intentionally cultivated, embodied, and lived. Eyes that recognize, in short, that the sacred need not be universal to be sacred. But this is obviously a song for another day, a tune for another wedding.

#### NOTES

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For an examination of this charge, see Ferrer (in press).

) Cf. Hoffman's (1982) parable of the *bhikkhu* (pp, 155-156).

<sup>4</sup> For classical discussions on the falsifiability of religious claims, See Barnhart (1977), Blackstone (1963), Flew and MacIntyre (1955), Kellenberger (1969), and McKinnon (1970). For other critiques of Wilber's account of spiritual inquiry, see Helminiak (1998) and Heron (1996b; in press).

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the assumptions and pitfalls of perennialism, see Ferrel' (1998).

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