

This article surveys a Christian perspective on a developmental path to unitive states and stages, also known as "transformative union" with God. It relies on the teachings of Christian mystics and contemplatives as well as numerous integrally informed researchers and theorists, though it does not cover all AQAL elements. It also does not venture beyond unity consciousness, which Bernadette Roberts has shown is transcended by a further stage she calls "no-self." A version of this article was published in the Fall 2004 issue of "Nectar of NonDual Truth."

## Returning to the Marketplace with Bliss-bestowing Hands

By John Forman, ObISB

"Christianity has been largely suspicious of practices, conversations, and experiences of non-duality. What many do not realize is they have access to these within their own teaching and tradition. There are, in other words, Christian theologies, experiences and practices for engaging in an experience and manifestation of incarnational non-duality."

Any conversation about the One Taste of non-dual truth necessitates the use of dualistic indicators and concepts: we must use words to try to describe that which is beyond words. Non-dual truth is post-conceptual truth, which simply means that it can only be truly known in direct experience. The spiritual traditions use metaphor and logic to point us beyond conceptual thought towards our own Divine awareness. Fortunately, this exercise of "pointing God out" can produce fruit with characteristics noticeable in body,

mind and spirit.

One metaphor to describe One Taste – this always, ever-present Truth – is to say that it is like a highly complex, well-aged wine that has multiple flavors, undertones and nuances, rather than a uniform single flavor, and that these can be teased out for purposes of learning and experiencing. Thus, "one taste" of a fine wine is a multidimensional experience. In the same sense that you can teach your palate to notice the peppery nature of a great syrah, that aspect of flavor is never separated in the actual experience of drinking it. The role of wine in Christian liturgy and experience also makes it particularly apt for explorations of higher, more inclusive truths.

This wine metaphor also facilitates a consideration of the contribution of the Christian "flavor" to the complexity and beauty of the One Taste of non-dual Truth. In turn, it makes available a new awareness to Christians to experience the gift of "*This is my blood, which is given for*

*you...*" as the transcendent clear light of consciousness and *"This is my Body, broken for you..."* as the fullness of radiant incarnate physicality.

The Truth of non-duality contains within it the conceptual paradox that can be pointed to by saying Buddha-consciousness, Krishna-consciousness or the Tao and so forth are not Christ-consciousness, nor are these different things. Christ-consciousness carries within it an experience of transcendence *and* immanence with a flavor that is resonant to all and particularly recognizable to Christian lineages. What remains to be seen is if this enhanced awareness might become a path that produces new fruits of Spirit.

### **Nonduality beyond Form and Formlessness**

Many Christians carry an incomplete perception of Buddhist, Hindu and other "flavors" of non-dual consciousness. They do not realize that there is a great deal more to Unity than transcendence spoken of only in terms associated with Asian spiritual traditions, such as release, liberation, cessation, emptiness and so forth. This partial understanding of Unity is resolvable through the path that winds throughout their own lineage – that is non-dual "light" as also the incarnational unfolding of Spirit: the Unity of Flesh and Spirit. Many Christians are under the impression that Asian traditions such as Buddhism are asserting that the only purpose of practice is to escape *samsara* or *maya*– the ordinary everyday reality of time, space and becoming – and to enter into Nirvana, which they frequently oversimplify by translating into the absence of form. Consequently, Christianity has been largely suspicious of practices, conversations, and experiences of non-duality. What many do not realize is they have access to these within their own teaching and tradition. There are, in other words, Christian theologies, experiences and practices for engaging in an experience and manifestation of incarnational non-duality.

Christianity shares with all other major traditions an interest in the perennial question: why are we here? Humans, among all sentient beings, uniquely recognize and appreciate that we are all children of the Divine. Many Christians also recognize that we contribute to and receive the reflexive consciousness of the created universe, although this is not yet mainstream to Christianity. There are also many who find themselves on a path in response to a spiritual "call" of some kind and, after a series of ego-deaths and rebirthings, many of these people come to experience themselves as intentional instruments of Divine flow and presence. As with many other traditions, Christianity is most useful when it engages both the religious and the spiritual in

communities of “the people” who seek closer engagement with and intentional surrender to the Divine. While much of our attention is often drawn to those religious communities that hope to reduce and monopolize spiritual truth, there are increasing numbers of other sacred communities seeking and being nourished by many facets of truth: cognitive, emotional, moral, relational, environmental, historical, and somatic as well as truths, practices, and lessons from disciplines and traditions outside Christianity.

### **Christianity’s Triple Aspect of Godhead**

The contribution that Christianity makes to the Good, True and Beautiful wine of One Taste can be expressed in the descriptions of the three primary undertones of the Christian “flavor” so brilliantly articulated by Oxford University’s professor of Divinity, Keith Ward. One undertone, we can acknowledge as the *Creator*: the loving, womb of the Kosmos<sup>1</sup> that desires to be and to be experienced in its one eternal and multifaceted moment of creation. Ward calls this aspect of the Divine: “...*the utterly transcendent creative ground of all being, beyond human comprehension, the unlimited ocean of infinity, the abyss beyond duality from which all things issues, the ultimate cause of all.*”<sup>2</sup> We might usefully consider the Creator as the dimension of objective Truth.

Another essential flavor we call, among other names, *Redeemer*: the Divine consciousness, the Word or Wisdom embodied as Jesus the Christ, or in Ward’s words “...*the supreme intelligence in which all possibilities exist...ordered with perfect wisdom. Infinity takes form as mind and self-luminous awareness...the uncreated light of wisdom, which gives form and intelligibility to all things*”<sup>3</sup>. Consider the Redeemer as the dimension of Beauty, which is experienced in the “eye of the beholder.”

The third essential flavor is what we experience as *Sustainer*: the immanent creative energy of Being. “[T]he dynamic energy,” as Ward writes, “*which gives actuality to the forms conceived by the divine wisdom, which values and affirms them, and which delights in their particularity.*” The Sustainer or Spirit can be considered as the dimension of the Good that is understood and contributed to by human interactions.

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<sup>1</sup> Kosmos with a capital K is being used to refer to not just the physical universe (cosmos) but the physical and spiritual (Kosmos) in the sense that the Greeks used it.

<sup>2</sup> Ward, Keith God: A Guide for the Perplexed One World, Oxford, England 2002

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

## Clarifying Christianity's Nondual Architecture

Among the dozens of philosophers, theologians and theorists who have written on the subject, perhaps Ken Wilber has written most persuasively about the mutual, interdependent arising of the Good, the True and the Beautiful. Wilber's four-quadrants are a useful platform for exploring each of these elements of flavor, as they echo the beauty, goodness and truth (or "I, We, It/Its"<sup>4</sup>) of the Jesus experience and the dynamic, dancing interplay between transcendence and immanence in the context of non-duality.

<p>SUBJECTIVE INDIVIDUAL INTENTIONAL</p> <p>ART: The realm of the "beautiful"</p>	<p>OBJECTIVE INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIORAL</p> <p>SCIENCE: The realm(s) of the "true"</p>
<p>MORALITY: The realm of the "good"</p> <p>CULTURAL SUBJECTIVE COLLECTIVE</p>	<p>SOCIAL OBJECTIVE COLLECTIVE</p>

Wilber has referred to Jesus the Christ as an "involutional given"<sup>5</sup>. Several nondual traditions talk about the human and the divine meeting in the nondual heart, where the ascent and descent currents unite, which becomes a powerful image in the context of Christ's Sacred Heart, where these two currents come together in compassion. For centuries, the emergence of the fully human/fully Divine has been told in the stories and symbols of the Advent season. These stories can be fruitfully updated if we pay careful attention to the intent, understanding, resources and circumstances of the Gospel writers as well as what the urgings of Spirit are offering us today. For now, it is sufficient to say that this God/Man emergence and the Gospel stories begin with barely discernable ripples on the surface of a tiny area of human consciousness. Mary, Joseph and a handful of Jewish prophets detected and said "yes" to the promise of a certain Divine manifestation. As this foggy pattern of manifestation took on more clarity, more people were able to respond with their own affirmations, some of which were heard only by the Divine and some of which resulted in "voices crying in the wilderness." Finally, the whisper of a Christian non-duality took full breath in the Logos made Flesh – the experienced unity of Heaven and Earth, Eros and Agape. That breath continues to inspire.

<sup>4</sup> For details, see especially Wilber's "Sex, Ecology and Spirituality" 1995

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication.

Now, while this Christian non-dual architecture is available to all, its ramifications can really only be fully elucidated by the attendant emergence a sufficiently complex theology. That which appears as conceptually anomalous must be transcended by a theology able to navigate post-conceptual experience with conceptual rigor and all the while be fully embodied. That which simply "is" and so transcends time/space/emergence also manifests fully with identifiable intentionality, social structure, cultural and natural expression. Consequently, it seems a useful next step is the articulation of what might be called an Integral Theology that takes advantage of the prodigious work Wilber has done in creating a spiritual framework for incorporating and enhancing the paths and nuances blazed by others, especially theologians Keith Ward, David Tracy, Bernard Lonergan, Morton Kelsey and John MacQuarrie.

The exposition of an Integral Theology is on the horizon, but in the meantime, we can witness the maturing of this profound Taste by taking samples over time. In the "outside time" context of non-dual surrounding, grace is given and manifestation emerges. We experience this Kosmic dynamic within time as evolution ascending (matter unfolding towards Spirit: Eros – seeking the One) and involution descending (Spirit enfolding into Matter: Agape – embracing the Many). More concretely, we experience and act in these movements based on our current best ability to make sense of them. These movements, too, follow a pattern of increasing clarity as the three undertones of Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer mature and ripen in our hearts and minds.

For purposes of simplicity (and in keeping with our triune theme!), consider three major stages of human consciousness that have arose in history: Pre-modern, modern, and postmodern. These modes of consciousness also are expressed in our own individual paths of growth and transformation.

### **Pre-modern mode of mind**

When the church was still in its infancy as a reformation movement within the tribes of Judaism, it was much more prevalent and also much easier to defend the six-day version of creation. All Christians continue to believe that God create the universe as a central tenet, but this original fairly literal translation of scripture is less widespread or defensible. Similarly, the Bible was seen to be the one source of divine truth and protected from error by God, and consequently, formed the one, true basis for Christian ethics. The pre-modern Christian mind awaited (and still waits in premodern Christian thinking today) the

physical arrival of Jesus and a host of angels to battle Satan physically for the souls of men, after which some of those who had died would be brought back to life in the bodies they had when they died. In all these interpretations, the pre-modern interpretation relied on a distinction between the human realm and the natural/divine realm.



Over time, with God's grace interacting with us in what might be called an invitation to participate, we moved from magical thinking to an increasing sense of freedom.

Evolution/involution provided "us" not with wings or gills, but with an arising self-awareness to guide and direct ourselves. Here, we became physically, emotionally and intellectually freer to choose among alternatives, including to craft or to destroy. We were able to ask: "For what purpose did you create us?" And the premodern Christian, who is more likely to interpret the Trinity as three separate persons, ask this mainly of the Creator...less of the Redeemer or the Sustainer. And as the order and clarity of

the Law and the Truth seem to get farther away from us, the question comes up with greater urgency.

Among many others, today's Christians lament the "breakdown of the family" and the collapse not only of our religious institutions, but also of our political, business, educational, legal and healthcare systems. This leads many people to the conclusion that we need versions of order...a return to the clarity of the 1950s. This is a move that's not only impossible (there's no way to run a sausage machine in reverse and get a pig!) but it negates all the gains we've made since then. (Ask your friends who are African American, women executives, or gay priests how fantastic it was in the "good old days.") Part of the breakdown we are experiencing is genuine decay, but a great deal of it is actually caused by "solutions" created by pre-modern thinking and social systems that are simply not sufficiently complex to handle the task. Note how the church is increasingly marginalized whenever another school district chooses to teach "six-day creationism" as though that were the answer to the breakdowns of our institutions. In fact, some of that breakdown is quite useful. Over the course of history, as pre-modern perspectives provided fewer and fewer satisfying answers, it brought us the modern mind.

## Modern mode of Mind

Our increasing knowledge and understanding led us to uncover what began in the Western world as a path for learning the thoughts of God the Creator, and it has become the truth of science. We learned to lean on evolution, especially as “progress,” which brought us both new understanding and new problems, especially in the arena of cultural development. With the modern mind, we are able and must consider multiple aspects of people, but we also arrive in time at the limits of a stage continually evolving its ability to make sense of the dynamics and roles of the manifest and the Divine. The gift of the modernist mind is the capacity to move beyond a juridical sense...rules and regulations that provide the clarity of order...into a more personal, individualized exploration that continues to enlighten us with scientific achievement and knowledge – in other words, the means to engage the manifest more fully. One of its early tasks seems to be the demythologizing of the premodern understanding – specifically for Christians – of the undertones of Creator and Sustainer, and to overemphasize a personal relationship with Jesus, especially the very human Jesus.



The emergence of the modern mind brought into prominence the social systems that nourish it – the university system, the scientific community, a church that emphasize the possibility of a personal relationship with the Divine. Now it becomes acceptable to consider the creation story as a poetic rendering of what contemporary science explains as the “Big Bang.” The Bible still contains truth, but more in the form of the truth that could be told at the time. Because it speaks to certain enduring truths, the Bible can still be the basis of ethical behavior and simply needs to be updated by something more like natural law. Christ may, in fact, be battling for souls, but now it’s less compelling to frame the battle in a physical arena and may be more readily acceptable as the triumph of love over death.

It was the full and enthusiastic modernist exploration that led both to threats of nuclear annihilation and to the exciting possibilities of quantum physics as we began to cross the edges of the rational,

materialistic understanding of creation. As highly rational Newtonian physics gave way to quantum physics, Christians were faced with a science that explained the foundations of reality as foam – as more relational and probabilistic than distinct and solid. All the while, Newtonian physics still works in its proper application, so what have we here? One answer is that we have come again to an opening into a more complex understanding of the seeming paradoxes emerging from human volition in dance with Divine grace.

### **Postmodern Mode of Mind**



Eventually, as the limits of the modern mind became more apparent, individuals began to experience the awareness of reality as flow. Also, the “self” begins to be seen as something more like an energy map in constant flux, like the flame of a candle – a processive “self” as an open, self-organizing system in interaction with others and with the surrounding environment. With this new complex mode of consciousness, we learned that compassion – the ability to “be together with suffering” – is also a practice that extends the identity and that it is not the same thing as mastery, nobility or altruism, though it contains at least aspects of all these.

This is, of course, part of the great postmodern experiment and our new ability to deconstruct...to distinguish our socially constructed reality from a naïve realism of representational truth. Powerful and useful, the postmodern critique of modernism allowed us to make gains in civil rights, women’s rights and spawned the environmental movement. Where our modern minds had begun to show us where we are alike, our postmodern minds help us to notice where we are different in the many spiritual experiences and expressions available to us. Postmodern thinking opens the possibility for understanding creation as continuous; even to the point of God interacting with the free decisions of rational beings. The Bible becomes one record of revelatory experiences, and also as one of many good sources of ethical learning. Ethics and morality is more contextual and personal than the scripture writers could have anticipated. The “life eternal” may be in the form of purely spiritual bodies or some other new form of existence in the “new heaven and earth” promised. Without postmodern perspectives, we’d be unable to genuinely experience the

great value in a Christian church that also taught wisdom from beyond its boundaries...but there are limits to postmodernism as well.

### **Evolutionary Potential**

A number of evolutionary biologists – grand masters, Ernst Mayer and Stephen Jay Gould among them – have made the case that further human speciation is unlikely given our proximity to and interaction with each other. But none of them imply that evolution will end. The “mutations” in our evolutionary process now seem to be occurring not in our anatomy and physiology, but rather in our patterns of thinking and knowing, feeling and desiring, our choosing and willing. So, while our human exteriors might not evolve much in the future, our human interiors become the playground of transformation. Consequently, we come to a point where it becomes quite tempting to privilege the undertone of the Sustainer – that which is experienced so individually and yet which permeates the entire web of life.

While most Christians have always acknowledged the Trinity, either as three individuals, three facets of God, or a timeless God acting in our times in three phases. We are poised for the exploration of a new experience of God – the mysticism of a Godhead that is the timeless “beingness” of being, the source beyond and within Creation, who enters into time in the universe in unique ways beyond our understanding to be active in our hearts and minds.

*What's coming next?* A good candidate for a post-postmodern or integral theology will involve the animation of a still larger interpretive framework. This would allow us to retrieve and update the richness of Christian insight from all three modes of consciousness: premodern mythological motifs and ritual, modern individual worship and study, and postmodern spiritual eclecticism. Our premodern mythology, which we could hold – as Joseph Campbell invited us – “as if” they held some truth would allow us to reincorporate them as part of a desperately needed source of healing, liberation, presence, growth and ever more direct awareness of the flow of the Divine. As a result, we would see an increasingly differentiated, celebrative participation in story, ritual, music, dance or movement as well as room for nurturing, clarifying, re-directive order and non-attached, clean compassionate iconoclasm.

Our modern thirst for knowledge, desire for spiritual mastery and individual knowledge of God could bring a more informed voice to national and global debates. We would see the church becoming more relevant as a source of knowledge and inspiration, rather than a tired and sleepy anachronism.

Our postmodern willingness to try on the minds of others opens the possibility for far more genuine interreligious dialogue as we are actually able to taste the experience of the other – to note and articulate where we are exploring vastly different flavors of the Divine and where we are coming much closer as we begin to explore the contours of a new, more integral container for all our experiences.

This new framework, one that honors the insights of Christian expression and understanding from premodernity to postmodernity, would allow us to embrace reciprocals or, in some cases, even opposites without allowing one to be destroyed by another, to dominate or repress another. We would bring them together in the pursuit of both union and distinction. In addition to re-engaging all three undertones – Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer – we might find ourselves opening to the recognition that none of these is primary and, beyond that, all of these are simply flavors in the One Taste...each of them simply “fingers pointing at the moon.”

Our new understanding would be gained by saying “yes” once again to the same urgings that brought us to modern and then to postmodern consciousness, but this time we would be activating a still more complex reflexive consciousness, enhanced by further differentiation, understanding, and intentionality. It would, as Robert Ludwig has written, “inspire creative energies for envisioning and shaping harmony and balance between the human and our larger cosmic context.” We are right now on the cusp of emerging new patterns of relating to the Divine in a fuller more inclusive way that incorporates the full spectrum of Christian revelation that unites Heaven and Earth in the non-dual heart of each of us. It is essential for Christians to say “yes” to the Divine and to become ambassadors of God as bodhisattvas (Spiritual warriors of wisdom and compassion)...just as Jesus was...to reach for the ever, already-present non-dual truth for the benefit of all sentient beings through our own incarnational radiance of light.

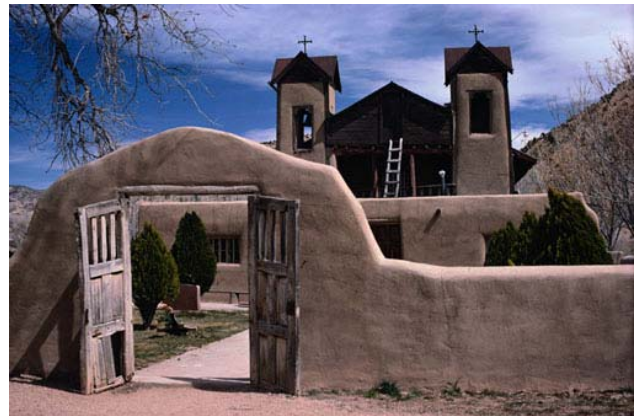
### **Actualizing the Path**

As we watch for the fruits of new knowledge, conversations and actions, we can each ponder our own uniquely human role in a deep and wide network of beings with varying degrees of awareness. Ken Wilber has said only half jokingly that “a little enlightenment is better than none.” There is value in seeking and experiencing non-dual truth regardless of the specific undertones of flavor that first brought you to desire a more intimate encounter with the “wine” of One Taste. After

an occasional peak experience—of opening to dimensions of the Divine, we return to our ongoing existence with new sophistication to our palates...with increasingly stable access, we acquire pointing-out instructions for others...ultimately, of course, there's nothing to be done: each moment is perfection. This is the original moment of Creation...there will be nothing else to come...and yet...

Each of us individually and as members of many communities can say our own "yes" to the Divine. The struggle...the "good fight"...is, in part, the painful pioneering past the limitations of postmodernism and the foggy emergence of the next phase, which must include some movements of reconstruction and increasing exposures to states and stages of ever more direct experience of non-duality.

Only this will sufficiently inform the next phase of our evolution so that our great-grandchildren and generations on beyond them have something to turn to when they are ready to explore beyond their own natural egocentricity that provides nourishment, order and that lovingly opens doors into the modern mind, the postmodern mind and whatever comes next. The reconstructed church will need to be populated with "open beings" – open, that is, in how they are and how they show up in these institutions that bring forward all that is already working. But it will need to be an institution that also transcends and shepherds future generations away from the limitations of what we now inhabit ("Yes, children, there are moral truths...and there might also be superstrings...and also tears of joy...and also..."). Finally, it will have to do so without insisting that people transform but by enticing and encouraging them through natural gateways as and when they are ready.



In addition, we'll need to create appropriate structural and social encouragements and boundaries, based on the highest moral stances that we can articulate. These, too, must be influenced by those capable of tasting nonduality with increasing stability, because as Ewert Cousins once wrote:

*"Although the transcendent is immanent in all levels of the cosmos – even in a speck of dust or an atom – the*

*transcendent is not present in all levels in the same way, but according to the perfection of the level....the Spirit works in the plant kingdom as the ultimate source of vital energy, but is not present in his full personal reality because the plants are not persons and do not have the power to receive or give a personal response... However, human beings can respond in a personal way since they are images of the Trinity. Finally, on the level of grace, the Spirit is present to human beings in a most personal way, transforming them into a likeness of the Trinity."*

Perhaps perfect and always already present Oneness with the Divine and the manifestation of this Suchness comes down to this: becoming the bread and wine of life, shared for one another. Perhaps "unity Christianity" is, in part, an experience of Christ-consciousness whereby one comes to see the whole of the Kosmos and regard it lovingly, as Christ – Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer – surely does. To follow Jesus the Christ then, includes an individual and collective pursuit of the path and pattern he was – divinely assisted, self-transforming, death and resurrection as we hope to return to the marketplace with bliss-bestowing hands in the form of healing, liberation, compassionate presence and action.

