

Holons and the Search for the Holy

February 7, 2016

Thank you for inviting me to speak here once again. This congregation has become, for me, the place where I can freely put my current mental ramblings to the test. Preaching here but once a year allows me to do a lot of ruminating - and my talks rise out of that process. In my time this morning, I will combine, or attempt to combine, the thinking of two authors who have recently caught my attention. One of those authors is Ken Wilbur, a man some of you have undoubtedly read. Wilbur, a contemporary philosopher, writes of theoretical physics, evolution, spirituality, and integral theory, among other things. He is not easy to read, but his understanding of the cosmos - including both the physical and the spiritual dimensions, has been extremely helpful to me as I strive to continue to learn and grow. His writings inspired the first part of my sermon title: holons.

The second author is a little known Baptist minister by the name of Paul Smith. Smith is an admirer of Wilbur and has based his ministry and theology, in part, on Wilbur's teachings. And I have to say that that ministry bears almost no relationship to what I think of when I think Baptist! He wrote a book called, "Integral Christianity" and it is this book which inspired the second part of my title, "the search for the Holy".

Much of my recent thinking has evolved from my puzzlement about the state of religion in America today. How can it be that fundamentalism and what I would call extremely archaic religious thought and practice seem to dominate the religious scene today? And why are there so many and so varied expressions of faith? Do these point to weakness or perhaps something else? Is religion in America simply fragmenting on its way to complete irrelevance? Or, is something new waiting to emerge? These are the questions that I hope to address today. And I ask your patience, because I will begin "here" and end "there" and you may not see the connection right away. I hope it all becomes clear by the time I have finished.

In his book, "A brief history of Everything", Wilbur writes at length about holons. Holon is a term coined by Arthur Koestler to refer to an entity that is both a whole and a part. The easiest example of this is the atom. A whole atom is made up of parts - electrons, protons etc. But that atom is also a part of a molecule, which is, in turn, a part of a cell and so forth, and they are all holons - whole/parts. And, according to Wilbur, all reality is composed of holons - and this includes matter and symbols and concepts and theories and institutions. It also includes the church - but we'll get back to that in a few minutes.

Wilbur identifies 20 characteristics of holons. You will be happy to know that I will only look briefly at one of these, what he calls vertical or evolutionary drives. Wilbur believes that every holon runs into its own inherent limitations and these create a type of turmoil which lead either to transcendence or dissolution. The holon will either move up in a way that addresses the limitations or break up into its parts which then may become new wholes. When a holon moves up in the evolutionary process, then new holons emerge - and each new holon includes its predecessor. In short, holons are not forever - but will, sooner or later, either transcend themselves and become something new, or will break up and its parts will become new wholes.

Okay, now let's move to the search for the holy. "The search for the holy" is my term - as far as I know, it does not appear in either Wilbur or Smith. I use it because I am convinced that this search, for the holy, for the other, for the more, for the sacred, lies at the very heart of all religious development and of humankind itself. Paul Smith, the second author that I am referencing, outlines five stages of religious development or, if you would, five stages of the search for the Holy, over the history of humankind. These are not unique to him, but his presentation has been very helpful to me. Smith anchors the religious stages in 5 different "types" of churches - although they clearly extend beyond just church. I want to look at them briefly:

The first he calls tribal Church. Tribal church has two defining characteristics. One is the closed and close knit "tribe" and the other is fear and fantasy. the Holy is seen as a

fearsome and unpredictable other “out there” who has to be appeased through magic, ritual and sacrifice.. You can see remnants of tribal church in other stages, but, at least in America, it has mostly been transcended. There are exceptions.

The next level is “warrior church” The warrior church evolved at a time when tribes were growing in size and power and sought to dominate lesser tribes. It is defined by “right belief” and those who comprise warrior church are convinced that their God-given role is to impose if not force their beliefs on others. This can incorporate anything from browbeating of friends and family to actual war. Fear is a clear carry-over from the tribal stage. Radical Islam and modern fundamentalism are perfect embodiments of this level.

Next comes “traditional church” According to Smith, the great majority of American Christians are part of the traditional church. For them the world is dominated by a god that punishes evil and rewards righteousness. There is only one right way to that God. They tend to focus on outward conformity rather than inward transformation. They continue the emphasis on right belief. They are credal. The mystical is suspect. Many of us here today are refugees from traditional church. Much of traditional Catholicism and much of the evangelical movement find a place here. But Traditional church is also represented amongst those in most main-line churches.

Modern church, the fourth stage, is represented by Protestant liberalism. It arose out of an attempt to make religion more rational - good preaching, good teaching, and lots of study groups became central. The Kingdom of heaven is focused not on the afterlife but on social justice and liberation from oppression. Religious experience is seen as pure fantasy as it cannot be approached rationally. Interestingly, Smith places the UU in this category, although he recognizes the difficulties of doing so. The more liberal branches of mainline Protestantism and catholic liberation theology fall into this stage.

Finally, we have post-modern church. According to Smith, post modernism says that absolute truth cannot be discovered at all - neither through reason nor tradition. In fact, the move is away from facts and logic to feeling and personal experience. Post

modernism thrives on spiritual experience and seeks out the mystical. It is found in some mainline churches as well as many of the “New Thought” churches. Post modern church embraces inclusivity, diversity, feminism, eco-justice and altered states of consciousness. For what it is worth, it is here that I belong.

So.....we have the stages - tribal, warrior, traditional, modern and post-modern, all but maybe tribal alive in some form or another in America today. I am wondering if it too much of a stretch to look at these stages in the institutional Church as holons - as being both whole and part, as participating both in dissolution and transcendence. And, if we do so, will this shed some light on the state of religion today?

Each of the historical stages could presumably be understood as an evolutionary movement that occurred as various internal limitations in the institutions became clear. As examples, Traditional Church, with its emphasis on right belief and one way has begun to yield as pluralism becomes more of a reality, in the Western world, at least. And modern church, with its emphasis on the rational and logical has begun to yield as the theoretical physicists have cast doubt on certainty itself.

- So, the right belief rigidity that was so much a part of my grandmother’s traditional Presbyterian church had yielded to a more “modern” church in my younger days. But all sorts of internal and eternal forces put incredible pressure on that version of church - and it began to break up into its former pieces - including right belief rigidity. And thus the re-emergence of what I would call “old stages” of faith. It’s an interesting way of looking at things.

So, maybe I can bring this to a conclusion with a couple of take aways:

First you will remember that holons always include those holons which preceded them. If we apply holon theory to the stages of religious development, then it must be true that all the characteristics of the former stages are present in the stage where we find ourselves. My grandmother’s “rigid right belief” lives on in me - only the beliefs have

changed and softened a bit! I am guessing that, if we could recognize, embrace and celebrate all those things that we have in common, then there would be far less judgement and ill will amongst those who are, after all, just searching - searching for that elusive call of the universe - the Holy.

Second: nothing ever stays the same - as much as we sometimes would like it to. Evolutionary change is built into every aspect of the universe. So, what we see today will not be the same as what is there tomorrow. That is a given. The fact that the various ways of searching for the holy are changing is not a death knell - it is a sign of health and hope. Something new is always emerging.