

Ken Wilber

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Date of Birth: January 31, 1949, Oklahoma City, OK.

Notable Publications: *The Spectrum of Consciousness* (1977); *The Atman Project* (1980); *Grace and Grit* (1991); *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* 2001

INTRODUCTION

Ken Wilber is an American independent scholar and a prolific and popular author who advocates for what he calls and “integral” view of reality, which synthesizes ideas from psychology, history, anthropology, religion, sociology, and philosophy into a purportedly unified and multidimensional worldview. In 2021, a Hollywood film called “Grace and Grit” was released about the loss of his wife Treya to cancer.¹ Wilber has been associated with the “transpersonal psychology” movement, a school of thought that attempts to incorporate mystical states of consciousness into more mainstream psychological theories. Wilber has referred to himself as a pandit (or teacher) as opposed to a guru (a spiritual advisor or leader). He believes he is bringing together a truly global philosophy for our day. His influence has come almost entirely through his writing and not through teaching courses or giving public lectures. However, according to his publisher,

In 2000, he founded Integral Institute, a think-tank for studying issues of science and society, with outreach through local and online communities such as Integral Education Network, Integral Training, and Integral Spiritual Center. In 2007, Wilber co-founded Integral Life, a social media-hub dedicated to sharing the integral vision with the worldwide community, as well as documenting and catalyzing the progress of the integral movement.²

Wilber’s worldview emphasizes the reality of a spiritual realm, but is profoundly non-Christian and, as such, needs to be evaluated.

With the publication of his first book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness* (1977), Wilber began to attract accolades from noteworthy thinkers such as well-known religious scholar Huston Smith (1919-2016) and those associated with the New Age movement. Wilber himself disavows the label “New Age” because of its association with sensationalism, utopianism, and irrationality. Nevertheless, his books are typically found in the “New Age” section of bookstores, and he is widely endorsed by New Age luminaries such as Deepak Chopra and Jean Houston. His book, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (2000), was endorsed by then-Vice President Albert Gore. His writings were influential in the erstwhile Emergent Church movement, led by the likes of Rob Bell and Brian McLaren, both of whom eventually became full-fledged heretics.

WILBER’S WORLDVIEW

While attempting to reconcile theories from East and West, Wilber’s essential worldview is that of nondualistic pantheism,³ as expressed in Zen Buddhism⁴ and Advaita Vedanta Hinduism.⁵ Nondualism affirms that all of reality is undivided or one. The classic Hindu affirmation of this is found in the Upanishads: “Thou art that.” This means that oneself (the Atman) is one with the Universal Self (or Brahman). Put positively, the doctrine is called monism. All apparent dualities (of God as distinct from creation, of heaven or hell; of good or evil, of life or death) are unreal and misleading. Wilber claims that “The two-ness of experience is the fundamental lie.” The nondual reality is what Wilber calls “Spirit” or “Emptiness,” which he claims is “unqualifiable.” Therefore, the universe (which he calls the Kosmos) and persons are divine in their essence. Wilber rejects monotheism in general and Christianity in particular, viewing them as offering a lower and “tribal” or “mythic” understanding of religion and reality.

Yet instead of dismissing the world of history as illusory (or maya) as do many nondualists (such as the Hindu philosopher Sankara [788-820]),⁶ Wilber attempts to explain the evolution of consciousness as a process whereby “God-in-the-making” is externalized in the world of forms. In this sense, he resembles the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), who explored the “phenomenology of Geist” or the evolution of Spirit through various historical epochs. (Hegel, although notoriously difficult to interpret, was more likely a panentheist than a pantheistic nondualist.)

Wilber's writings represent probably the most well-researched and systematic contemporary attempt to justify a pantheistic and nondualistic worldview. Nevertheless, his 330 page work, *A Brief History of Everything*—a summary of his much longer *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*⁷—contains no footnotes.⁸ Unlike many New Age authors, he does not appeal to parapsychological data to validate his claims, such as channeled messages,⁹ UFO contacts (which he ridicules) or information gathered from near-death experiences. Nor does he simply assert his worldview on the basis of his authority as a guru. Thus, he is often hailed as a major philosopher, and his books have been published in a collected works edition, an honor only paid to major intellectual figures. However, his main publisher, Shambhala, which publishes his collected works, is not an academically established publisher. Wilber is not generally accepted as a philosopher in academic circles, given his lack of advanced degrees and not being associated with an accredited academic institution. Despite his fame, Wilber's worldview is both unbiblical and riddled with philosophical errors.

WILBER ON CHRISTIANITY

Despite Wilber's attempt to be incorporate vast amounts of material from a diversity of religions and philosophies, he offers surprisingly little about Christianity. In passing, he endorses "Gnostic Christianity," but says little about Jesus or any major Christian theologian or apologist—ancient, modern, or contemporary. "Gnostic Christianity" is an oxymoron, since the Gnostics were second century heretics who distorted the original teachings of Jesus.¹⁰

Wilber dismisses monotheism as the worship of a "mythic god" and as "exoteric" (external and superficial) religion. His controlling paradigm is that of nondualism, and every subject he addresses is interpreted by that model. For instance, he claims that Jesus awakened to the reality that "Atman is Brahman" (the individual soul is really one with the cosmic Soul), just as many other mystics have done.

In an interview in *Shambhala Sun* (as well as in *Sex, Ecology, Spirit*), Wilber misinterprets one of Jesus' statements along pantheistic and nondualistic lines, which is typical of New Age-oriented writers.¹¹ Wilber misinterprets Jesus' declaration, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) to mean that Jesus was affirming the identity of Atman (individual self) with Brahman (the universal Self). In other words, Jesus (whom Wilber calls, "The Adept from Nazareth") was claiming to have discovered his oneness with an impersonal Christ Consciousness, just as many other mystics have done. This kind of pantheistic declaration is supposedly what lead to Jesus' execution. Further, he claims that the church limited the possession of deity to the man Jesus alone, when, according to Wilber, everyone is divine in essence, if not in experience.

Yet these nondualistic Hindu categories are utterly alien to Jesus' authentic teachings and to the whole of Holy Scripture, which affirm the existence of one transcendent and personal God, who sent his only Son into the world to redeem it (John 1:1-18; 3:16-18; Romans 5:1-8). Wilber's interpretation of Jesus' statement illustrates what James Sire has called "worldview confusion." Wilber wrongly superimposes a nondualistic worldview onto a monotheistic and incarnational worldview.¹² This is not *exegesis* (finding the meaning therein), but *eiseesis* (substituting a meaning not there).

Jesus, a Jewish monotheist who affirmed the truth of the Hebrew Bible (John 10:31), identified himself with the Creator and Lord of the universe, not with a universal and impersonal consciousness (John 8:58; 10:30). He affirmed that the central human problem was sin against a holy God, not ignorance of one's own oneness with Spirit, as Wilber teaches (Mark 7:21-23). Salvation is found in allegiance to Jesus Himself, not by turning inward through meditation, as Wilber teaches (Matthew 11:27-30; John 3:16). Jesus never taught anything resembling pantheism or nondualism, nor did any of his apostles, all of whom were monotheists who confessed Jesus as Lord.¹³

We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one." For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live (1 Corinthians 8:4-6).

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Besides endorsing an unbiblical worldview, Wilber's worldview is internally inconsistent and does not correspond to the facts.¹⁴ First, Wilber's cosmology suffers from an infinite regress problem. He claims that reality is made up of whole/parts called "holons." A holon is complete in itself, but is made up of both smaller holons and is itself part of larger holons. For example, "a whole atom makes part of a molecule; a whole molecule makes part of a whole cell." Wilber asserts that this "holarchy" extends infinitely in both directions: there is no smallest or greatest holon. By claiming this, Wilber avoids the idea that the universe contingent and is created by a necessary, self-existent being outside of itself, that is: God (see Acts 17:25). Instead, all we have is holons "all the way up and all the way down." There is, thus, no room for a Creator. While it is true that physicists keep finding (or at least positing) smaller and

smaller entities and astronomers have yet to exhaust the depths of the universe with their high-powered telescopes, it makes little philosophical sense to claim that the universe has no upper or lower limit. Any line is, in principle, infinitely divisible mathematically, but this does not mean that any physical object can be divided into smaller and smaller units *ad infinitum*. If this were the case, then any and every object would face the challenge of jumping out of a bottomless pit (the infinite regress problem). Without some fundamental building blocks, nothing gets built.

The idea that the universe is infinite in extension—there is no largest holon—fairs no better. The most widely accepted cosmologies view the universe as finite, not infinite. Moreover, the well-established Big Bang cosmology tells us that the universe had an absolute beginning in time; therefore, it is not infinite in duration. (Nor does modern cosmology allow that the universe is infinite space, matter, or energy.) If the universe had an absolute origination, then it makes good sense to claim that this beginning was caused by an agent (or First Cause) outside of the universe. This evidence points to theism, not Wilber's pantheism, which denies the existence of a transcendent and personal Creator. Additionally, Wilber's concept of an infinite holarchy is incompatible with his own stated nondualism, which allows for no parts at all. Parts and whole divides up reality. But for Wilber, all is one—nothing more. Wilber's entire scheme of whole/parts is dualistic to the core, and so irreconcilable with his denial of "two-ness" or duality.

Second, Wilber's nondualism excludes any development of the universe or cultures through time. If all is one and with distinction, there are no parts of reality left to develop or change in history. Yet Wilber repeatedly explains "the evolution of consciousness," while affirming that nonduality is both "the ground and the goal" of the entire process. If nonduality is case, there is no process and there is no goal. Hindu nondualists are at least consistent in rejecting history as illusory and unimportant. Christians, however, believe that God, who transcends the cosmos, nevertheless acts within it to accomplish divine ends throughout history. There is nothing contradictory about these claims, and they may be verified philosophically and historically.

Third, Wilber's concept of God (which he calls "Spirit" or "Emptiness") is incoherent because he says it is "unqualifiable"—beyond logical and linguistic description. This idea of ineffability is invoked by many nondualists, since the nondual state cannot be described in language, since language hinges on affirming and negating properties with respect to objects ("The apple is red" or "Jesus is sinless"); language is a dualistic enterprise to the core. If so, Wilber's "Spirit" cannot serve as an explanation of anything, because its very meaning cannot be picked out of the conceptual crowd. To claim, "An unknowable, ineffable X, explains history and religion" is logically absurd. What does the explaining in any explanation must be intelligible and knowable. To say that George is suffering from an unknown malady is not to explain that maladies cause, nature, or cure. It explains nothing. On the other hand, Christianity teaches that God is knowable. He is a just, loving, and personal being, who is revealed in nature (Psalm 19:1-4; Romans 1:19-21), conscience (Romans 2:14-15), Scripture (2 Timothy 3:15-17), and in Jesus Christ, the Incarnation of God (John 1:1-3; 14, 18). As Paul says concerning our knowledge of God, we see in part and we know in part; but we do see and we do know true statements about God (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Fourth, Wilber's denial of a personal God—the "mythic god" of mere anthropomorphism and tribalism—takes away any meaning or significance or reality for human persons. Personhood is not fundamental to Wilber's Kosmos; it must be transcended through mystical experiences. Prayer, worship, and any relationship with God is impossible. In fact, all relationship is ruled out in a nondualistic worldview. One is "the loneliest number," after all, as the pop group, Three Dog Night, sang in their hit "One" in 1969.

On the contrary, according to the Bible, God himself is tri-personal and triune: Father, Son, and Spirit: one God in eternal relationship and fellowship (Matthew 3:13-17; John 1:1-3; 17; 1 Peter 1:1-2). As C. S. Lewis wrote,

we learn from the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity that something analogous to 'society' exists within the Divine being from all eternity—that God is Love, not merely in the sense of being the Platonic form of love, but because, within Him, the concrete reciprocities of love exist before all worlds and are thence derived to the creatures.¹⁵

The triune God brings human beings into existence in God's personal image and likeness in order that they may have communion with him and with each other (Genesis 1:26-27). The triune God also deigns to offer redemption to human beings after the fall (Matthew 28:18-20).

Fifth, nondualism philosophically excludes the conflict between good and evil, since to admit moral dualities or polarities is to believe the fundamental lie of "two-ness," as Wilber puts it. "There is only God," Wilber affirms. If so, there is no ontological room for evil. But God, for Wilber, is not a good and moral being who creates the cosmos and acts in history. God is only "Emptiness," which is hardly a moral category (if it is a conceptual category at all). Nonetheless, the properly functioning human conscience recognized the realities of virtue and vice, of heroism and terrorism, of good and evil. Any worldview view that eliminates these distinctions as unreal fails the most basic reality test a worldview can encounter.

Moreover, Wilber himself makes moral judgments in his writings when he rejects the monotheistic view of God as primitive and unenlightening and when he condemns the KKK.¹⁶ Wilber also claims that the more developed or evolved an entity is (the more complex its structure of holons is), the more respect it deserves. He calls this principle “the basic moral imperative.” But he has no philosophical basis for affirming any ethical judgments, since such discrimination presupposes the objective reality of various entities possessing value. Nondualism disallows these realities, since only an impersonal God (called “Emptiness”) exists.

Christians, however, know the reality of a good world gone wrong through sin against God’s eternally holy character and wise commands. Evil is very real in a sinful and fallen world; but it has been named, unmasked, and defeated through the perfect life, vicarious death, death-defeating resurrection, and triumphant ascension of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15; Colossians 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8; Acts 1:6-11). Evil will finally be overcome through his Second Coming at the end of the age (Matthew 25:31-46; Acts 1:11; Philippians 3:21).

Sixth, Wilber’s nondualistic worldview offers no hope of salvation, either individually or globally. This follows for two reasons. First, Wilber can provide no moral vision or philosophy for the individual or society beyond the very general advice to meditate and to think integrally (which excludes monotheism). Moreover, his model of social change is logically incoherent. In an interview in the journal *What is Enlightenment?* in 2002, Wilber claimed that the goal for those who want to transform society should be to “incarnate nondualism.”¹⁷ The very concept of nondualism eliminates the possibility of incarnation, since incarnation means to bring an objectively real higher reality to bear on an objectively real lower reality. In other words, incarnation logically necessitates a dualism between higher and lower, and thus rules out nondualism as a worldview. However, the Apostle Paul’s words make the concept of incarnation crystal clear: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9; see also Philippians 2:5-11). Having denied the ontological distinction between the Creator and creation (Genesis 1:1; John 1: 1-3; Romans 1:18-32), Wilber can only seek spiritual liberation from within the self, which he denies is sinful and which he identifies with an impersonal and pantheistic oneness that does not exist. As such, he falls under Jeremiah’s condemnation of those who have forsaken God, “the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water” (Jeremiah 2:13).

Ken Wilber—Without Jesus Christ

Wilber writes little of Jesus Christ in his books, which is a strange omission, given that Jesus has influenced world history more than any other individual. Sadly, Ken Wilber has thus denied the unique deity, cosmic authority, and redemptive power of “the only name under heaven by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). In his attempt to explain everything, Wilber has defined and demeaned the Lord of the cosmos. Instead of coming to Christ as the one mediator between God and sinful humanity (1 Timothy 2:5), Wilber teaches that God is found within. Therefore, Wilber’s philosophy amounts to a huge superstructure build on nothing more than shifting and sinking sand (Matthew 7:24-27).

Notes

- 1 This is taken from Ken Wilber, *Grace and Grit* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1991). I reviewed the film for *The Christian Research Journal*. “Grit Without Grace: Love and Tragedy According to Nondualism: A Review of the film ‘Grace and Grit,’” (Sept 23, 2021), <https://www.equip.org/articles/grit-without-grace-love-and-tragedy-according-to-nondualism-a-review-of-the-film-grace-and-grit>. For the story of my losing my own wife, see Douglas Groothuis, *Walking Through Twilight: A Wife’s Illness—A Philosopher’s Lament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017).
- 2 “About Ken Wilbur,” Shambhala Publications, accessed October 6, 2023, <https://www.shambhala.com/ken-wilber>.
- 3 A separate 4-page Profile has been published related to this subject: Douglas Groothuis, “Pantheism,” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2022). A complete collection of Profiles (over 600 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at: https://www.watchman.org/Pantheism_Profile.pdf.
- 4 Jason Barker, “Zen Buddhism,” *Profile Notebook*, 2011, available at: <https://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/zenprofile.pdf>.
- 5 C. Fred Smith, “Hinduism,” *Profile Notebook*, 2015, available at: <https://www.watchman.org/staff/jwalker/ProfileHinduism.pdf>.
- 6 See Douglas Groothuis, “Sankara’s Two Level Theory of Truth: Nondualism on Trial,” *Journal of the International Society of Christian Apologetics*, 1, no.1 (2008).
- 7 Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, revised ed. (Boulder: Shambhala, 2000).
- 8 See Douglas Groothuis, “Review of *A Brief History of Everything*,” *Christian Research Journal* (June 10, 2009), <https://www.equip.org/articles/a-brief-history-of-everything>.
- 9 Rick Branch, “Channeling,” *Profile Notebook*, 1994, available at: <https://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/channelingprofile.pdf>.
- 10 Douglas Groothuis, “Gnosticism,” *Profile Notebook*, 2021, available at: <https://www.watchman.org/files/ProfileGnosticism.pdf>.
- 11 “The Kosmos According to Ken Wilber: A Dialogue with Robin Kerman,” *Shambhala Sun*, September 1996.
- 12 See James Sire, “Worldview Confusion,” *Scripture Twisting: Twenty Ways Cults Misinterpret the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980).
- 13 See Douglas Groothuis, “Comparing Gods,” *Confronting the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).
- 14 I give a large-scale rational case for the Christian worldview in *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2022). See also Douglas Groothuis and Andrew I. Shephardson, *The Knowledge of God in the World and in the Word: An Introduction to Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022).
- 15 Lewis, C. S. *The Problem of Pain* (Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis) (p. 21). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.
- 16 George Dolak, “Ku Klux Klan,” *Profile Notebook*, 2020, available at: <https://www.watchman.org/files/ProfileKKK.pdf>.
- 17 “The Evolution of Enlightenment: Andrew Cohen and Ken Wilber in Dialogue,” *What is Enlightenment?* Spring/Summer 2002, 38ff.



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