

# INTEGRAL RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN A DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT

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**ABSTRACT** This article articulates how, through the use of a developmental lens, the academic study of religion can further liberate religion as a vehicle for human transformation. In short, this article positions the theoretical aims of Integral Religious Studies within the multifaceted streams of inquiry already underway in today's broader examination of religious studies. It begins with a description of how religious studies first emerged in the West, and then historicizes the trajectory of the discipline over the past several centuries. Next, having articulated the early streams of scholarly thought, it examines the limitations of the modern approaches to religion to show how postmodern methodologies in general, and the approach offered in this article in particular, correct for the mistakes of modern scholars. Finally, supporting the important truths uncovered by today's postmodern scholarship, and holding them in the proper context, the article moves on to explore how a model of Developmental Religious Pluralism enfolds a culturally sensitive hermeneutic of psychological development into a more holistically oriented, integral version of religious studies.

**KEY WORDS** human development; Integral Methodological Pluralism; pluralism; postmodernism; religion

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Religion has the potential to serve as a potent vehicle for human transformation.<sup>1</sup> Not only is religion the sole preserver of mystical knowledge capable of moving individuals through states of consciousness (from gross, to subtle, to causal, to witness, to nondual), but when understood through a developmental lens, religion also has the capacity to move individuals along a “conveyor belt” of human transformation (from traditional, to modern, to postmodern, to integral worldviews and beyond).<sup>2</sup>

The rejuvenation of religion as a transformative catalyst will be the result of several factors. Much of religion's potency will be unlocked as a result of lineage holders, religious leaders, and practitioners of various streams growing beyond the confines of traditional worldviews. Such a shift will allow modern and rational interpretations of their traditions to enter into the larger discussion and practice of religion on a global scale. The importance of these developmental shifts cannot be overstated. When modern/rational interpretations of our world's religions are released into the world, major swaths of individuals who might have otherwise discarded religion as pre-rational myth will suddenly have access to mystical teachings.

In addition to the formative role of lineage holders, religious leaders, and practitioners of the world's wisdom streams, the *academic study of religion* also holds several keys that are sure to help unlock religion's potential for transformation. This article gives primary focus to the academic study of religion in general, and the role of religious studies in particular. My contention is that when properly situated within a developmental context, religious studies has an important role to play in the broader emergence of an integral worldview throughout the globe. The result is something I call *Integral Religious Studies*.

I begin with a historical account. By way of historicizing Integral Religious Studies and situating the emergence of Developmental Religious Pluralism into the proper moment in time, I hope to account for the fact that all belief, theory, and modes of discourse are dependent upon and conditioned by not only the particular historical context in which they arise but also by the developmental view enacting them in any given

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occurrence. Such historical illuminations, alongside principles of developmental enactment, not only create deep reverence for the past but also allow us to consciously create new possibilities for the future.

## Historicizing Religious Studies

The history and complexity of religious studies is full of nuance, particularities, and overlapping factors that influence our understanding of and assumptions about religious topics. As with almost any subject it can be problematic to address such complexity with a framework that employs broad generalizations. However, despite the validity of critical arguments against the use of generalizations, it is my contention that providing at least some sort of general historical account of religious studies does have heuristic value insofar as it helps to orient the reader. To this end, the following section seeks to demonstrate, in brief, how the evolution of religious studies has unfolded and how we, as scholars, thinkers, practitioners, and external observers of religion now have the capacity to use a metatheoretical perspective to observe and integrate all of the practice and scholarship that has come to pass thus far. All of this, I hope, will help to situate this particular issue of the *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice* and its given aim to examine an integral perspective on religious studies.

### *The View Through a Western Lens*

For the purposes of this article, leaving open the possibility of multiple paths to modernity (Eisenstadt, 2000), I examine religious studies as it evolved in the cultural context of the West.<sup>3</sup> For means of classification and categorization I begin by looking at two general types of theoretical shifts within the field. I label these two types of shifts *vertical* and *horizontal*, respectively. Vertical transformational shifts, or what might be called *paradigm shifts*, are those changes in academic inquiry that dramatically revolutionize the way in which the field of study is understood. Most often, vertical shifts result from revolutions in culture, society, and identity that deeply transform collective worldviews.

Vertical shifts in *paradigm* can be directly contrasted with horizontal *categorical* shifts that represent changes in theoretical approach within an already existing paradigm. Horizontal shifts use a multitude of orientations to ask a wide variety of questions within a common working model of the world.<sup>4</sup> In other words, despite the new additions to the field that horizontal shifts bring, the general worldview or vertical paradigm within which differences emerge is left unchanged.

Disaggregating these two types of theoretical shifts (horizontal and vertical) in the subsequent pages will provide an initial framework that helps to make sense of the countless recalibrations that have transpired in the field of religious studies over the past few centuries. As our shared narrative of religious studies unfolds, I will clarify which categorizations represent horizontal shifts in methodological approach and which represent vertical shifts in paradigm.

## The Four Paradigms of Religious Studies

Thus far, three broad historical stages of vertical transformation have unfolded within the field of religious studies: 1) premodern fusion, 2) modern differentiation, and 3) postmodern contextualization. Currently, with the release of several pioneering books in the field, we find ourselves on the verge of a fourth paradigmatic shift into an integral or post-postmodern version of religious studies. As with most developmental sequences, not only did these three historical stages move from levels of less complexity (premodern) to levels of greater complexity (postmodern), but each new stage of historical unfolding also used relevant characteristics of each previous stage for its foundation. In other words, each emergent vertical paradigm successfully “enfolded” the paradigm that came before it.

		Vertical Paradigm	Horizontal Approach
Historical Stage	Post-Postmodern	Participatory Integration	Integral Methodological Pluralism
	Postmodern	Contextualization	Hermeneutics; Postcolonialism; Historicization; Identity
	Modern	Differentiation	Anthropology of Religion; Sociology of Religion; Psychology of Religion
	Premodern	Fusion	Religion not yet objectified

Figure 1. Historical stages, the major shifts in vertical paradigm, and the horizontal approaches emphasized in each paradigm.

Figure 1 depicts the historical time periods, the major shifts in vertical paradigm, and the horizontal approaches emphasized at each paradigm. I will leave the graphic for now without much explanation and will return to it again toward the end of this article to explain the details. Let us examine each of these paradigmatic shifts in greater detail moving from bottom (furthest in the past) to top (present/emerging paradigms).

***Premodern Fusion***

In the West, centuries of dominance and obedience gave full reign of power and authority to the Catholic Church. For most of the first millennium and for several centuries into the second millennium, knowledge in general and theological knowledge in particular was trapped in the interpretive framework and filter of the Church. The inerrancy of the Bible dictated cultural and social possibility, leaving little room for freedom of thought outside of its narrow lens. In short, the Church was simultaneously researcher, authority, and disseminator of wisdom. As a result of this early fusion of value spheres, the study of religion was not divorced from the rest of knowledge. Religion itself had not yet been made an object of conscious reflection; religious studies, as we know it today, simply did not exist.

Religious scholars are all too familiar with these early modes of scholarship. University of Chicago professor Bruce Lincoln (2006) articulates how we might best view religious studies within the context of premodern fusion:

For insofar as the task of defining anything presumes a discrete object that can be identified in contradistinction to others, this implies a model of “religion” that emerged only with the Enlightenment. Prior to that time, even in western Europe religion cannot be analytically (or practically) disarticulated from virtually all other aspects of culture. (pp. 1-2)

To say it another way, and to reinforce Lincoln’s point, in premodern times religion was so completely embedded into culture that it had not yet emerged as a legitimate field of objective inquiry.

Integral theorist Ken Wilber (1998) explains premodern fusion along the same lines as Lincoln, emphasizing the fact that “none of the premodern worldviews clearly differentiated art-aesthetics, empirical-science, and religion-morals” (p. 126). It was precisely because these value spheres were undifferentiated in the premodern historical paradigm that “what happened in one sphere could dominate and control what happened in the others” (p. 126). Wilber continues,

Thus, a scientist like Galileo could be prevented from pursuing the sphere of science because it clashed with the prevailing sphere of religion-morals. An artist such as Michelangelo was in constant conflict with Pope Julius II about the types of figures he was allowed to represent in his art, because expressive-art and religion-morals were not clearly differentiated, and thus oppression in one sphere was oppression in the other. (p. 126)

I will come back to this idea shortly, but for now it is worth noting that certain elements of this type of oppression and domination created a ruthless reaction in the opposite direction as the next vertical paradigm began to emerge (leading from differentiation to disassociation). As I will argue below, the reaction to years of Church oppression was so strong that, for many, it led to a direct repression of all forms of lived spirituality.

Figure 2 shows a snapshot of the descriptions above in graphic form. The historical time period is “premodern” while the vertical paradigm is one of “fusion,” wherein religion is still undifferentiated from all other spheres of life. At this stage a horizontal approach is not yet possible because religion has not yet been enacted as an object of contemplation or examination. This stage, as described later in this article, is the simplest of all the stages; it represents a time period prior to the emergence of religious studies.

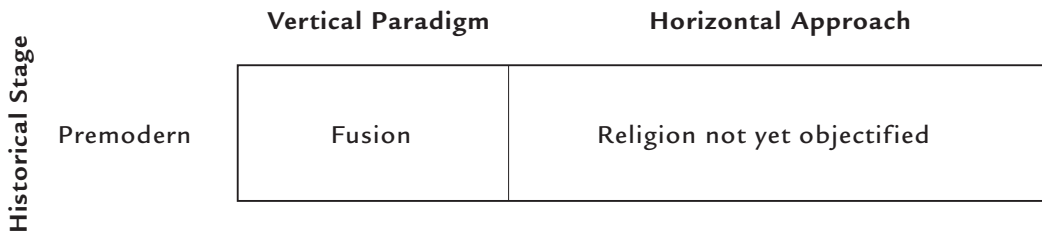


Figure 2. A premodern orientation to religious studies.

### ***Modern Differentiation***

Beginning with the Renaissance and culminating in the Western Enlightenment, a vertical shift in consciousness developed that would forever change the way in which knowledge was pursued.<sup>5</sup> Between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries elite thinkers began to gravitate away from a type of conformist and mythic-centered knowledge platform. As reason and self-reflexivity gained strength, the Church systematically lost its hold as single source of authority. These key confluences combined to create a full vertical paradigmatic transformation leading from premodern fusion to modern differentiation.

Again, it is perhaps Wilber who offers the most astute articulation of this vital fulcrum in Western social consciousness. Echoing the modern scholar Max Weber and theorists like Jürgen Habermas, Wilber explains that the modern paradigm of consciousness allowed a new perspective to emerge that consciously differentiated the major value spheres. Plato’s spheres of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness, or simply put, Art, Science, and Morals, were free from the domination of the Church and able to pursue their own truths independently.

The relative autonomy of value spheres represents a substantial leap forward. Whereas in the premodern paradigm it was simply not possible to pursue any independent truth outside of the confines of the Church, the modern paradigm created the possibility of the independent pursuit of knowledge that placed universal reason as the new centralizing authority. The significance such a shift had for the cultural consciousness of the West cannot be understated.

One prime example delivers the point home. As described above, in premodern times Church and State were fused: “If you disagreed with religious authorities, you could be tried for both heresy (a *religious* crime) and treason (a *political* crime). For heresy, you could be eternally damned; for treason, temporally tortured and killed...” (Wilber, 1998, p. 126). Now, with a relative degree of differentiation, truth based on reason and science was positioned on a pedestal, replacing the infallibility of scripture. Quite extraordinarily, with the rise of the Enlightenment, the religious and political heretics of yesterday became the intellectual leaders of the new modern cultural revolution.

Despite the positive implications of this differentiation of values, the transition into modernity was not without its own set of problems. Following Wilber’s articulation, it becomes clear that the momentum to differentiate each sphere of knowledge as separate and distinct was so strong that each went in a different direction without maintaining connection to the other. Differentiation turned into a pathological form of dissociation. In fact, the dissociation became so extreme that the sphere of empirical Science began to dominate the spheres of Art and Morality by “denying them any real existence at all” (Wilber, 1998, p. 126). Science became the new king, while morals and art suffered the repercussions of being second-class considerations (a phenomenon that still exists today). Wilber (1998) puts it succinctly: “If differentiation was the dignity of modernity, dissociation was the disaster” (p. 126).<sup>6</sup>

In addition to differentiation of values, modern consciousness also created a rational turn inward toward greater degrees of self-reflexivity, taking the external focus away from the heaven of “other-worldly-ness” and brought the focus into “this world.” “Instead of the infinite above,” as Wilber (2000) puts it, “the West pitched its attention to an infinite ahead” (p. 410). Progress and the promise of an improved future became the new God of those with modern consciousness:

The standard God of the modern Western world was set. It would become the God of the bourgeois as well as of the dedicated scientist; the God of the materialist as well as the social reformer; the God of the Greens and the “back to nature” movement wherever it appeared; the God of democracy as well as the God of the Marxists and Maoists—what they all had in common is the God of all that is visible, and all that can be seen, and all that can be grasped with the hands... An “other world” of any sort was thrown over; and the eyes of men and women settled steely on the horizons not above but in front of them, settled coldly on this world, and this world, and this world again. If salvation could not be found on this small earth, it could not be found at all. (p. 410)

At this point in the historical narrative, it is vital to make a clear distinction between the *practice of* religion and spirituality (in its more *transformational* dimensions) and the *study of* religion and spirituality (in its more *translative* dimensions). Whereas the practice of spirituality involves a direct relationship to spiritual teachings and personal implication, the study of religion and spirituality requires only an indirect and objective stance. Of course there are, indeed, those who take both perspectives as well (scholar-practitioners) but for the purposes of this brief outline this distinction between a personal relationship (practitioner) and objective relationship (scholar) to spirituality provides a foundation for a more comprehensive historical understanding.<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, the clear differentiation and eventual integration of each of these approaches play a significant role in the emergence of an integral approach to religious analysis.

Up until and through the beginning of the Renaissance, personal and objective approaches to the study of religion were fused (along with the major value spheres). It was assumed, with a few exceptions, that the study of religion could only be legitimately conducted by adherents of the tradition. With the birth of modernity, however, these two approaches were distinguished and seen as independent from one another (i.e., for the very first time, one could take religion as an object of study from outside of the tradition itself). Religious belief was no longer a prerequisite for engagement.

However, Wilber observes that as reason and autonomy gained even more momentum, social consciousness confused the whole of spirituality with its premodern variations (an error still rampant today). Alas, the practice of religion became conflated with a premodern level of consciousness, leaving us with what Wilber calls the *level-line fallacy*.<sup>8</sup> Even as the personal practice of spirituality became frozen at premodern levels and trumped by the age of reason and scientific inquiry, the study of religion and spirituality as object carried on. This means that while premodern interpretations and personal practice stagnated for the vast majority of spiritual adherents, the study of spirituality as an objective field of inquiry continued to progress through modern and eventually postmodern paradigms of inquiry.

One of the secondary objectives of this article, and the particular integral methodology I call *Developmental Religious Pluralism*, is to reunite the practitioner and scholarly orientations towards religion and spirituality. Ultimately, a deeper understanding of religion and spirituality’s historical stagnation will open and release spiritual practice from its premodern shackles, allowing its more complex manifestations to flourish in modern, postmodern, and integral engagement. Before explaining how this liberation may happen, let us first consider some of the other ways that the modern study of religion continued beyond the premodern paradigm of understanding.

### *Sensitivity to Methodological Approach*

Just as the shift from premodern to modern represents a vertical shift, many horizontal shifts occurred within modern consciousness as well. Following the Enlightenment, a particular type of sensitivity developed with regard to the objective study of religion. This new sensitivity showed scholars that there were multiple horizontal approaches to the same subject. Scholars discovered that the scientific study of religion produced dramatically different but equally valid results depending upon the disciplinary lens used by the researcher. As the centuries unfolded, scholars began to apply specific methodologies from other fields of academic inquiry to examine religion and religious phenomena. Over time, religion was examined through the lenses of sociology (Durkheim; Weber), psychology (Adler; Frazer; Freud; James; Jung; Otto; Tyler), phenomenology (de la Saussaye; Kristensen; van der Leeuw), and anthropology (Feuerbach).<sup>9</sup> Although each of the above approaches was in fact new, representing authentic categorical shifts in terms of their horizontal methodology, they all occurred within the same vertical paradigm of modern differentiation (Fig. 3). That is to say, all attempts at theorizing, no matter how diverse, were still articulated (historically) from within the same enacted workspace of a modern level of consciousness.

		Vertical Paradigm	Horizontal Approach
Historical Stage	Modern	Differentiation	Anthropology of Religion; Sociology of Religion; Psychology of Religion

Figure 3. A modern orientation to religious studies.

With religion as object, multiple horizontal approaches emerge to examine religion from different perspectives. As shown in Figure 3, horizontal approaches include anthropology of religion, sociology of religion, psychology of religion, among others.

### *Essentializing Religion*

In addition to a more particularized approach that understood how different lenses of social science produce different perspectives on religion, an essentialized approach also unfolded with modern consciousness that attempted to position and categorize major religious traditions. In an effort to gain more clarity, modern scholars assumed that they could systematize religion and religious phenomena into broad universal categories. This particular approach, seeking universal essences and broad commonalities, is now emblematic of the modern paradigmatic approach.

The common classification “world religions” stems directly out of this early attempt to find the essence of the great religious traditions around the globe. When speaking of world religions in an academic context, at least 13 major systems of praxis are typically listed: Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Jainism, Taoism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Baha’i, and Indigenous. Although it can be helpful to use such categories, it is valuable to remember that this type of categorization is limited by the contours of modern consciousness. Gavin Flood (1999) explains:

The construction of “world religions” is underpinned by a certain kind of theorizing whose roots are in the Enlightenment and which seeks universals. The ability to abstract the world religions from history and to see them as in some sense equal (though not often equal to Christianity with which they have been set in contrast), might itself be seen as part of the modernist idea of progress towards a clearer future in the academy. (p. 3)

In the discussion of postmodern contextualization, Flood’s comment does not imply that the category of “world religions” is problematic in and of itself, but rather, it points to the fact that significant issues arise if the generalizations about traditions lack a deeper and more nuanced perspective.

The differentiation of value spheres, the sensitivity to horizontal methodology, and the first attempts to categorize world religions are vital to our understanding of religious studies today. Despite the fact that scholars today correct many of the mistakes made by these early modernists, the value that this initial clarification adds cannot be understated. The important distinctions of anthropology of religion and sociology of religion, those initial insights into the origin of religion, psychology of religion, and use of phenomenological methodologies to explain the “sacred” in its various forms, continue to add to our collective knowledge systems and religious sensibilities. Similarly, the categorizations of various systems of faith, despite the misleading sense of homogeneity that they once implied, are still key elements to developing greater religious understanding and religious literacy worldwide. Now, however, we move on to the third vertical shift in religious studies to see how even these modern approaches were transcended and enveloped into a new vertical paradigmatic shift.

### *Postmodern Contextualization*

The modern paradigm of differentiation, despite the incredible value that it added, left several substantial problems that would need to be resolved by the next generation of scholars. The next major vertical paradigm shift into postmodernity is usually linked to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although its roots began to sprout almost a century earlier. Radical critiques of the modern position (from its lack of cultural, historical,

and contextual sensitivity to its erroneous assumption about the existence of some sort of objective “God’s eye view”), lead postmodern scholarship to revolutionize the modern paradigm with a new kind of contextualization and an ultrasensitivity to time, place, identity, language, and interpretation. I will unpack each of the horizontal categorical shifts at the postmodern paradigm one at a time. Recall, all of this historical account is provided to remind the reader where we have come from and to where we might head as religious studies blossoms into an integral age.

### *Sensitivity to Universal Claims*

As modern consciousness found itself taken as the object of reflection, its theories were brought into greater suspicion. For starters, as touched upon above with Flood’s insight, postmodernists continually bring the term *world religion* under strong scrutiny due to the fact that it emerged from a modern level of consciousness that lacked an awareness of the social power structures of Western discourse (e.g., Foucault), which inadvertently imposed static categories onto the cultural and religious “other” (e.g., Said’s *Orientalism*). Today’s scholars claim that any approach to categorize universal characteristics of traditions is naïve at best and based on totalitarian impulses at worst. The claim is made on solid ground, in principle. Each tradition, the postmodern critique explains, is so internally diverse, and so much shaped by regional values and identity that such broad categorizations lose value. Flood (1999) continues his point with even greater strength:

While the academic study of religions has largely moved away from the essentialist understandings that religion has some common, perhaps transcendent, essence it has only begun to take seriously the claim that religion cannot be abstracted from its cultural matrices. Courses on ‘world religions’ still present these constructed entities as if they are in some timeless realm (perhaps a realm of pure doctrine) outside of wider cultural patterns and history (especially colonial history, the relation between religion and capitalism, and recently globalization)... To address this issue the academic study of religion needs to examine religions within their political, cultural, and social contexts. (pp. 2-3)

Postmodern scholar Paul Griffiths (2006) takes a more critical approach, although it manages to deliver equal force along similar lines: “the sortal ‘world religion’ was developed and is still often deployed for the properly theoretical purpose of depicting alien practice as a consumable good accommodatable by late-capitalist appetites” (p. 72). In other words, rather than engaging the uniqueness of each manifestation of religiosity in the world, modern approaches tend to homogenize religion and place it neatly into categories that represent merely a pale reflection of the diverse reality on the ground. It is from this base that, for better or worse, generic categorizations of religion are “consumed” by a privileged (often Western) elite.

Other postmodern scholars, like Jonathan Z. Smith, level less a critique on the categorization of religion but take strong positions regarding the study of religion as a whole. Smith (1982) explains,

Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study. (p. xi)

Although extreme in nature, Smith’s comments set the foundation for almost all postmodern scholarship.



Rather than focusing upon a world “out there” of religious practices and beliefs (the modern paradigm’s primary object), postmodern scholarship in religion turns the lens onto knowledge itself and its linguistic and cultural modes of expression.

### *Sensitivity to the Scholar’s Point of View*

Among the many horizontal realizations of postmodernity, one fundamental discovery was that the postmodern scholar must be self-reflective. He must be aware of his own position, biases, and subtle conditioning that might bend a research project in a particular direction of an ideological agenda. Such self-reflective awareness was simply not present in modern scholarship.

Building upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Flood (1999) explains that “reflexivity refers to the ability of a researcher, or indeed as a strategy embedded within method, to become aware of the contexts of research and the presuppositions of the research programme” (p. 35). According to Flood (1999), assumptions are “the inevitable historical contingencies within which we all operate” (p. 7). Therefore, it is not to say that we must avoid assumptions all together, but rather we must seek to uncover and critically reflect upon all those assumptions molding and shaping our particular discourse that might otherwise remain unknown. Bringing assumptions to light and exposing the cultural, linguistic, social, and historical conditioning behind them offers a more transparent perspective on reality. Following the lead of postmodern scholars, the method employed in this article deliberately employs this type of self-reflexive approach, to some degree.

Although explored further in the following section on interpretation, one example of self-reflexivity is useful to provide the reader with an understanding of how this postmodern approach shows up in scholarship. As postmodern scholarship deepened, a realization began to emerge that the language used to describe a given subject was equally if not more important than the content of the subject itself. Wilber (1998) explains,

The importance of contextualism, interpretations, and hermeneutics in general came to the fore with what has been called the linguistic turn in philosophy—the general realization that language is not simply a representation of a pre-given world, but has a hand in the creation and construction of that world. With the linguistic turn, which began roughly in the nineteenth century, philosophers stopped using language to describe the world, and instead started looking at language itself. (p. 189)

The self-reflexive mirror had been set in place.

So what does it mean if all research and theory is shaped by language and co-created by the point of view of the researcher? Karl Popper’s (1994) “myth of the framework” suggests that within the context of religious studies and spiritual praxis “mystics and religious practitioners are prisoners of their conceptual frameworks” (as cited in Ferrer & Sherman, 2008, p. 27). Furthermore, Popper (as cited in Ferrer & Sherman, 2008) explains, “spiritual knowledge must always be shaped by or screened through them” (p. 27). Popper’s insight teaches us that identities and speech are preconditioned by the particular frameworks that lend meaning and social validation to our experience. Even if the insights are valid, whether one is a spiritual practitioner or a religious scholar, each insight can only be accessed by way of “our situated phenomenal awareness of them” (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008, p. 27). Similarly, renowned postmodern scholar and philosopher Paul Ricœur “has accepted the modern mantle of criticism, to take nothing for granted and to test everything. So far, he is with Descartes,” explains Ferrer. “With other postmodernists, however, he has turned his critical eye upon modernity itself, questioning the human capacity to arrive at the Cartesian idea of a single, clear and distinct, God’s-eye point of view” (as cited in Stiver, 2001, p. 137).

Gavin Flood (1999) helps to further fill out the postmodern perspective on “point of view” using a congruent line of thought:

Research within the many fields which comprise religious studies is in the end conversation with texts and persons. The researcher is entering into a dialogue with a text or person and herself becoming a part of an intersubjective and intertextual matrix in which all understanding—and explanation—arises. Understanding is always from a place.... and is legitimized by wider social forces. To develop method sensitive to context is to be open to the ‘otherness’ of the material or persons who are the ‘object’ of study and to recognize speaking and hearing subjects as the place of meaning. (Flood, 1999, p. 35)

It is clear that “point of view” is not only subject to language, but also to time, place, and culture—all of which represent fundamental postmodern sensitivities employed throughout this article.

### *Sensitivity to Interpretation*

Because there is always an observer, a researcher, or an individuated perspective with all of its relative conditioning (in all four quadrants), scholarship now understands that the whole of reality is subject to interpretation.<sup>10</sup> This leads to the startling discovery that there is not a single objective world out there that we are all describing. Rather, the world out there is always subject to our own unique perspective; we participate in the creation of the world in each instant of cognition.

In the most general sense, the study of interpretation is called hermeneutics. As Ricœur points out, “Hermeneutics itself puts us on guard against the illusion or pretension of neutrality” (Ricœur & Thompson, p. 43). There is always a relative vantage from which one is articulating. As one of the pillars of the postmodern paradigm, it serves us well to understand interpretation with a more nuanced perspective. Understanding interpretation not only serves the heart of postmodern thought but it too serves as the core foundation of this article. In the words of postmodern scholar and theologian David Tracy (1994), “Any act of interpretation involves at least three realities: some phenomenon to be interpreted, someone interpreting that phenomenon, and some interaction between these first two realities” (p. 10).

It is perhaps easy to underestimate the power and importance of interpretation. “Interpretation seems a minor matter, but it is not,” Tracy (1994) explains. “Every time we act, deliberate, judge, understand, or even experience, we are interpreting. To understand at all is to interpret” (p. 9). Tracy continues,

Interpretation is thus a question as unavoidable, finally, as experience, understanding, deliberation, judgment, decision, and action. To be human is to act reflectively, to decide deliberately, to understand intelligently, to experience fully. Whether we know it or not, to be human is to be a skilled interpreter. (p. 9)

The significance of interpretation is directly linked to the discovery that language creates our day-to-day reality on levels previously unimagined. For instance, new discoveries in the field of cognitive neuroscience support the strong version of the linguistic relativity hypothesis (the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”), namely that language does not simply influence the way we perceive reality (the weak version of the argument) but actually constrains it.<sup>11</sup> Modern scholars simply lacked the realization that in every instant we are imprisoned within the confines of language; we know the world only through representation. Fundamental to this linguistic turn is a more profound understanding that language is composed of what Saussure called *signs* and *signifiers*; representations of reality that do not and cannot refer directly to the thing-in-itself.

The American Pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (as cited in Hawthorn & Weiss, 1934), taking a slightly different approach to the significance of *signs*, explains what it is like to live from within this new linguistic postmodern paradigm of interpretation:

It seems a strange thing, when one comes to ponder over it, that a sign should leave its interpreter to supply a part of its meaning; but the explanation of the phenomenon lies in the fact the entire universe—not merely the universe of existents, but all that wider universe, embracing the universe of existents as part, the universe which we are all accustomed to refer to as ‘the truth’—that all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs. (p. 5)

In other words, signs are never neutral with an absolute meaning, but rather they are always, first and foremost, representations and interpretations of ideas.

As religious studies gained clarity and sophistication, scholars began to point out that there are other individual and social factors outside of language that also influence interpretation. Like linguistic differences, such variances create significant differentiation in religious praxis, belief, and behavior. For instance, gender or power differentials drastically influence the way a particular tradition evolves over time. Similarly, interaction with other value systems creates versions of syncretism and accommodation that might seem foreign to a practitioner of the same faith in a different area of the world. Although this article focuses on the role of interpretation from an individual perspective, all arguments are always first and foremost situated in the larger context of culture, social structure, identity, and history.

Interpretation, as valuable as it is to recognize, is not in and of itself the ultimate end or goal. Rather scholarship follows a pragmatic imperative that insists that interpretation leads to some form of effective action. “All theory of interpretation—like all theory itself—is an interpretation as good or as bad as its ability to illuminate the problems we discover or invent and its ability to increase the possibilities of good action” (Tracy, 1994, p. 9). The entire thrust of this article is designed to produce more effective action in the world as a result of a better understanding of religious interpretation. The result of this new contextual understanding, among other things, creates a radical shift toward a new form of religious pluralism.

As the study of religion turns the lens inward towards the one doing the inquiry, a whole series of new horizontal approaches emerge. These approaches include: hermeneutics, a focus on postcolonial considerations, an emphasis on historical context, and a deeper questioning of the influence of identity (Fig. 4).

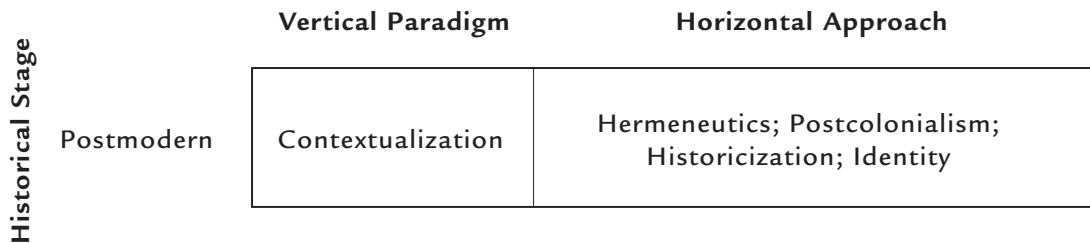


Figure 4. A postmodern orientation to religious studies.

### ***Post-Postmodern Participatory Integration***

Astute scholars like Flood sense the need for yet a fourth vertical paradigm shift in religious studies. There is a growing need for religious studies to “engage much more with wider debates in social sciences and humanities and to develop a rigorous metatheoretical discourse” (Flood, 1999, p. 3). However partial and preliminary it might be, this article begins to fill out Flood’s vision for a fourth vertical shift.

According to Wilber (2000), “If the great achievement of the Enlightenment (and “modernity”) was the necessary differentiation of the Big Three [value spheres of Art, Morals, and Science], the great task of

“postmodernity” is their integration, overcoming what [Charles] Taylor called ‘a monster of arrested development’” (pp. 148-149). It is to this end that I continue the postmodern march toward a more holistic model of religious studies. Only time will tell if the ideas posited in this article earn the right to declare a valid paradigm shift, but it is still useful to differentiate this work from the past methodologies by using a new term: *Integral Religious Studies*. In this context, the word *integral* has a specific meaning, best defined as:

Comprehensive, inclusive, non-marginalizing, embracing. Integral approaches to any field attempt to be exactly that: to include as many perspectives, styles, and methodologies as possible within a coherent view of the topic. In a certain sense, integral approaches are “meta-paradigms,” or ways to draw together an already existing number of separate paradigms into an interrelated network of approaches that are mutually enriching. (Wilber, as quoted in Visser, 2003, pp. xii-xiii)

Using the three categories of historical stage, vertical paradigm, and horizontal approach, I have graphically represented this new stage in Figure 5.

One of the most significant features that arises in this particular category is the understanding that reality (and therefore religious studies itself) is enacted not only according to cultural context, history, and identity, but also according to the developmental level of the researcher. If we call the postmodern era the emergence of “contextual” sensitivity, the paradigm of Integral Religious Studies is most certainly an era of “developmental” sensitivity.

From this view, we begin to see that vertical paradigms also represent stages on a path of vertical development. Including the developmental view of the researcher allows a much greater degree of sensitivity to the ways that religious studies is brought forth into the world. For instance, even if a researcher is embedded in a post-postmodern context, the vertical paradigm of “participatory integration” can only be brought forth if the researcher holds the level of development necessary to enact it. (Such is the case for all previous paradigms as well. It is only at this vertical paradigm that developmental enactment becomes obvious.)

An example will help to explain this point in a bit more detail. If a researcher only has the developmental capacity for contextualization (postmodern) or merely differentiation (modern), the horizontal approach of Integral Methodological Pluralism (an approach enacted by a more complex stage of development than the one in which the researcher currently finds himself) will remain over his or her head. Paradigms that are beyond the developmental capacity of the researcher will remain out of reach of being operationalized. From this more integral view, we can consider the entire field of religious studies (all vertical paradigms and all horizontal approaches) all at once. We can now return to the illustration at the beginning of this article (Fig. 1) and see how an integral orientation successfully synthesizes all existing vertical paradigms and all existing horizontal approaches to religious studies.

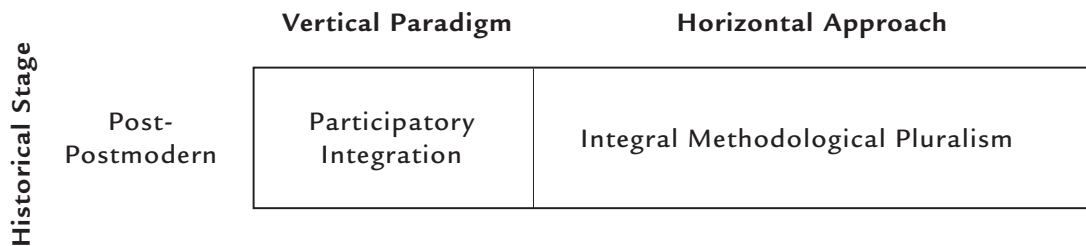


Figure 5. A post-postmodern or integral orientation to religious studies.

Another important realization comes online with this vertical paradigm. From the point of view of “participatory integration” (or what can simply be called Integral Religious Studies) using the horizontal approach known as Integral Methodological Pluralism, the researcher now sees that each new vertical paradigm transcends and includes the important features of the one that preceded it. For example, the postmodern paradigm includes the valuable horizontal methodological approaches that emerged in the modern paradigm. In most cases this shift occurred in a healthy way. That is to say, even though the postmodern paradigm gives way to new approaches like hermeneutics, it still includes the earlier approaches like the psychology of religion and sociology of religion.

In cases where the developmental shift to a vertical paradigm is less healthy, certain useful aspects of previous stages can be denied. For instance, although religion was not a direct study of inquiry during the paradigm of fusion, there were still many individuals who were practitioners of the tradition. At the modern level of differentiation, being a practitioner was frowned upon. In many cases, being a practitioner was seen as a factor that created too much bias in the researcher to make an honest inquiry. Using the map provided in this article, an integral researcher would notice the dissociation that occurred in the transition from fusion (premodern) to differentiation (modern) and would encourage more practitioners and scholars to bring their insights to the table.

Overall, we can notice that certain principles only become obvious at an integral stage of development. For example, the fact that each paradigm transcends and includes the former and the fact that each stage brings a new perspective become available only when the researcher can enact an integral worldspace. This realization extends the postmodern idea that the researcher has to be aware of his or her own perspective. In this case, the researcher must not only be aware of cultural and linguistic biases, but also about their developmental stage. Without an honest assessment of personal development, the researcher is not only ignoring their own tenets about self-knowing (bringing their own perspectives to the table), but rather is generally ignoring a substantial amount of important information (which is contradictory to the entire postmodern paradigm).<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

I would like to reiterate several characteristics that emerge when religious studies is placed in a developmental context. In doing so, I will also list a few examples of what sets “participatory integration” apart from the earlier paradigms. While including the sensitivities of modern and postmodern consciousness, I offer several ways that religious studies might leap forward yet again. An Integral approach to religious studies:

1. *Corrects for the errors of modern scholarship while still including an evolutionary perspective.* Although developmental in nature, the modern paradigm failed to see cross-cultural contexts and the influence of linguistics and social structures of power. Because it lacked a general sensitivity to these various complexities, the modern level of consciousness posited a world “out there” that was real in-and-of-itself as if it could be directly known. These basic errors led to universal assertions about the nature of reality, especially in the realm of religion. Not only did these assertions tend to be Western-centric but scholars within the modern paradigm often made arrogant strides to place Christianity in particular, and the monotheistic traditions in general, above and superior to all other religious traditions.<sup>13</sup> As its first point of methodological self-reflexivity, this article navigates around this modern trap. Although I do indeed employ a developmental approach, I do so only on careful footing so as to not make similar mistakes as early modern pioneers like Edward Tylor (1871) and James Frazer (1922), who, using an evolutionary perspective, failed to bring a critical and sensitive perspective to their approach.<sup>14</sup>

2. *Adds a developmental understanding to postmodern interpretation.* Just as each idea and concept needs to be contextualized into what Flood (1999) calls the “intersubjective and intertextual matrix,” I use such ideas to also elaborate how we might take seriously the notion that “understanding is always from a place” (p. 35). Each interpreter or researcher is always positioned from a particular perspective. Whether that place of understanding is related to identity (e.g., gender, profession, race) or some broader social, cultural, or historical lineage, perspectives are always conditioned to a certain degree. Furthermore, because no single perspective can be devoid of a particularized position, an integral scholar of religious studies must pay careful attention to how psychological development enacts different realities. Moreover, these realities are enacted in conjunction with one’s identity, role, and sociocultural context (i.e., reality is enacted by all four quadrants). Rather than falling back to a modern universal truth claim, pegging tradition against tradition or culture against culture, an integral orientation to religious studies enhances and propels a more nuanced perspective of religious interpretation by basing its claims on cross-cultural studies of how individual human beings grow in terms of psychological complexity.
3. *Uses broad categorizations of “world religions” but does not seek to essentialize each tradition as monolithic and homogeneous in structure and content.* Although some authors in this issue of the *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice* may indeed refer to great wisdom traditions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.), they do so to further prove the diversity within each of these categories rather than to essentialize them. Not only is this article privy to culturally conditioned differences between traditions, but it also takes this sort of careful scholarship one step further to show how, beyond broad identity categorizations, psychological development plays yet another important factor that creates radical diversity and heterogeneity even within traditions embedded in the same cultural-linguistic matrix.

Although pushing beyond the limitations of postmodern contextualization to transcend yet include its important distinctions is a fairly recent endeavor in religious studies, several scholars are beginning to explore this orientation more fully. At the Integral Theory Conference held at John F. Kennedy University in Pleasant Hill, California, in 2010, Bruce Alderman gave a superb presentation on the ways in which a post-postmodern view can help religion move beyond its tendencies toward mere inclusivism and pluralism.<sup>15</sup> At the same conference, Geert Drieghe surveyed some of the various problems that religious diversity presents to the average pluralist and how an integral lens can help scholars move beyond their current roadblocks toward a more effective methodological approach.<sup>16</sup> In the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (Oxford University Press, 2006) still other integral scholars find an even broader application. In their timely article, Sean Esbjörn-Hargens and Ken Wilber (2006) use an integral lens to offer a successful and truly impressive proposal for the “comprehensive integration of science and religion.”

Outside of the realm of academic scholarship, grassroots attempts to apply Integral Religious Studies in a more direct way are also under way. Three prime examples come from within the Christian tradition in the United States. The first is represented by the efforts of Reverend Tom Thresher, in the state of Washington. Setting his teachings in a developmental context, Thresher follows Wilber’s lead and is in sync with the ideas presented in this article, claiming that churches are uniquely positioned to transform our society. Currently, Thresher heads one of the very first integrally informed churches and is successfully guiding his congregation from a predominately pluralistic religious orientation to one that is fully integral. Thresher’s (2010) recent

book, *Reverent Irreverence: Integral Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, begins to outline what we might hope for from an integral church.

Cindy Wigglesworth's work with Unity Church represents a second powerful example. Recently, Unity Church pledged to become an "explicitly integral church" (personal communication, February 11, 2012). In her current position as Founder and Owner of Conscious Pursuits, Inc., Wigglesworth plans to use both her knowledge of Integral Theory as well as her "Spiritual Intelligence Assessment" to help transform Unity's entire system into one that employs post-postmodern sensibilities. Although still in its initial phases of transformation, the work Cindy is involved with at Unity Church is a harbinger of times to come.<sup>17</sup>

A final example is brought forth by the work of Father Chris Dierkes in Vancouver. Not only does Father Dierkes bring a horizontal approach based on Integral Religious Studies to his work in his community, but he has also put his genius into written work as well (Dierkes, 2010, 2011). His forthcoming book, *Indistinct Union: Integral Christian Mystical Theology and Practice*, offers an exciting example of how a scholar practitioner can bring deep clarity and wisdom using Integral Methodological Pluralism.

It is my deepest hope that this article falls in line and helps to support the pioneers listed above so that this work might spread in the world and have positive influence. One step at a time, we can rejuvenate religion as a vehicle of transformation. If we are successful, religion has the potential to emerge as the single greatest catalyst capable of ushering human beings through the dual-conveyor belts of mystical states and developmental structures.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is excerpted from *The Rainbow of Enactment*, Volume Two of a series titled *The Great Human Tradition* (DiPerna, in press).

<sup>2</sup> For more information on states of consciousness, see Wilber's (2006) discussion in *Integral Spirituality*.

<sup>3</sup> Even a statement like "the West" is problematic if it is reified. The West, like all other regional blocks of culture, is not monolithic. It is not accurate to say that the entirety of Western culture is a result of Greek thought any more than we can say that it is all Christian. Although both statements are partially true (the West was certainly influenced by Christianity and Greek thought), it is not accurate to make blanket statements as if they are true and comprehensive facts in and of themselves. For the purposes of this article, however, there is heuristic value in telling the narrative of "the West" as if it is a simple entity, as long as we do not assume that its homogeneity is the case in any sort of absolute sense.

<sup>4</sup> Wilber (2005) refers to this difference as "transformation vs. translation" (p. 90).

<sup>5</sup> Of course, this particular vertical shift (along with all vertical shifts) was a result of transformation in all four quadrants, not only consciousness (Upper-Left quadrant).

<sup>6</sup> An integral approach emphasizes and acknowledges both the differentiation and dissociation of value spheres.

<sup>7</sup> An anonymous reviewer of this article emphasized the fact that the distinction between translative and transformational approaches to religion also helps us to see more nuance within each of the paradigms themselves, as well as in the transitions from one vertical paradigm to the other. For instance, although religious studies as a field had not yet emerged in the era of premodern fusion, there were strong distinctions that existed within the traditions themselves during that particular historical time. As one example, the reviewer notes:

A more comprehensive consideration might mention that if a tradition is left as purely translative, there is no contextual backdrop of transformational shifts in perspective in which to relativize any single perspective. As can be seen from studying the works of church fathers whose lineage transmission had retained the transformational component, such as Origen, when the transformation component of a tradition is retained alongside the translation component, the vehemence of the latter is definitely lessened.

Hence, when founded within a paradigmatic context of premodern fusion, such traditions are likely to tend toward dogmatic assertion of pre-rationally enacted theological values. This point on the degree to which traditions retain both their translative and transformational components can also be extended as germane to the discussion of the modern and postmodern paradigms. Another potential reason for the dissociation of religion which occurred with the shift from premodernity to modernity is that the religious tradition of greatest relevance to this shift according to the present discussion, Christianity, had largely lost its transformational lineage. Hence, with the shift into modernity and the differentiation of the value spheres, there also arose alternative modes of translation, namely from the scientific tradition. These, quite naturally owing to their being rationally rooted, are of greater relevance and attraction to those enacting the rational stage of development. The argument could be made that had Christianity retained its transformational lineage, its relevance to society might have been considered as greater than was the case, and the dissociation averted. (personal communication, March 13, 2012)

<sup>8</sup> Here Wilber uses the term *level* to refer to the stage of consciousness (e.g., premodern, modern, postmodern). The term *line* refers to the specific area of intelligence (e.g. spiritual, cognitive, emotional). The term *level-line fallacy* refers to a case when a particular line of development (spiritual) is confused with a level of development (premodern), and consequently the entire line of spiritual development is repressed and abandoned to lower levels of development (mythic/premodern). For further details on the level-line fallacy, see Wilber (2006).

<sup>9</sup> One of the first anthropological accounts of religion outside of the West comes from the Persian scholar Abu Rayhan Biruni in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>10</sup> Although we list the importance of interpretation here within the post-postmodern paradigm, we find examples early strides at hermeneutics in the modern era. This is a reminder that stages are more like probability clouds rather than strict rungs on a ladder. With that said, the strength of interpretation and hermeneutics did not take hold until the postmodern era and as such, is rightfully situated here.

<sup>11</sup> For more details on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, see Thierry and colleagues' (2009) work in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

<sup>12</sup> A deep thank you to Ken Wilber (personal communication, April 17, 2012) for his help with this paragraph.

<sup>13</sup> Over the past century, the discovery of "myth of the given" has crippled these early beliefs. The "Myth of the Given" has been unpacked and explained by scholars such as Wilfrid Sellars (1997) and more recently by Wilber (2006).

<sup>14</sup> Modern scholars also became too reductionistic. For example, some scholars took the methodology of studying lower-level holons and made them paradigmatic of all other holons (e.g., lower holons do not have language, so it is inappropriate to apply their truths to the study of higher holons like humans). By overemphasizing the lowest levels of holons (chemistry, biology, etc.), these scholars overlooked the types of problems that emerged at higher levels. This is one of the reasons that hermeneutics becomes so vital at the postmodern paradigm. Early modernists had an essential bias toward scientific materialism that left out many of these other factors.

<sup>15</sup> For a distillation of Alderman's conference presentation, see his article published in the *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice* (Alderman, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> This article, "Integral Pluralism and the Problem of Religious Diversity," is available on the Integral Theory Conference website (Drieghe, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> In addition to the efforts toward forms of Integral Christianity, other traditions are beginning to use Integral Theory to update their teachings. Communities are beginning to form around integral expressions of Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, all of which are likely to continue as developmental sensitivity continues to grow.



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