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Integral Consciousness and the Future of Evolution: How the Integral Worldview is Transforming Politics, Culture and Spirituality

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Steve McIntosh. Paragon House, St. Paul, MN. 2007. 310 pp.

Why am I reviewing a book on integral consciousness for the *Journal of College and Character*? Because character, in my opinion, is linked to values, and values are integrally associated with politics, culture, and spirituality, a concept that lies at the heart of this book.

Where do our values come from? When we look back into our cultural history, what are the sources that inform our values? Have those values changed over time? If we base our values on a tradition, is there a difference in that tradition today from what it was when it originated? In other words, *have values evolved*? If your answer is “no,” then the premise of this book is probably not of interest to you. If, on the other hand, you see cultures and their values evolving, then the fascinating questions become, “What happens next?” “In what direction are values moving?” And, “What are the implications for education?”

Integral Philosophy

According to McIntosh, “Integral philosophy is a new understanding of how the influences of evolution affect the development of consciousness and culture” (p. 2). Integral philosophy, however, is not a recent concept. In the second part of the book, McIntosh traces its development through the work of Georg Hegel, Henri Bergson, James Mark Baldwin, Alfred North Whitehead, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Jean Gebser, Jurgen Habermas, and Ken Wilber. Hegel recognized that history progresses in a dialectical process, which evolves through the conflict that results from dissatisfaction with a current state of affairs. Bergson was the first philosopher to see a spiritual context for Darwin’s evolutionary science, emphasizing the inner nature of things as well as their outward manifestations. Whitehead went on to examine the conflicts between religion and science and to propose a reconciliation. Chardin took this direction even further and developed the idea of successive enveloping spheres of evolutionary activity. Gebser “had a clear intuition that human history would soon produce an emergent new structure of consciousness and culture, which he termed *integral consciousness*” (p. 176), a foundation that informs much of the thinking in McIntosh’s book. Baldwin advanced the developmental stage theory of consciousness, and Habermas’s insights were a major influence on Ken Wilber, who is today’s most prolific writer on integral philosophy.

To this historic line of thinking, McIntosh has added several dimensions of his own:

1 That within the integral worldview the disciplines of science, philosophy, and spirituality should be afforded a degree of separation from each other.

- 2 That evolution is subject to some kind of transcendental causation or morphogenic pull, and that it is a purposeful phenomenon of growth that proceeds in a generally positive direction.
- 3 That human spiritual development is organized within a larger holarchic structure, and
- 4 That the integral worldview will become the central focus of an integral political agenda as it emerges throughout the 21st Century.

Let's look at these ideas.

1. On the separation of science, philosophy and religion, McIntosh explains that,

Critical to my approach is the need to maintain the ethic that keeps integral philosophy free from religious bias. Although integral philosophy has a strong spiritual component, its spirituality is broad enough to include a wide diversity of spiritual beliefs because it is careful to minimize its reliance on metaphysics. Like the three legs of a stool, science, philosophy, and religion each have an important role to play in supporting higher levels of civilization. These different approaches to truth each address distinct and irreducible aspects of human experience that must be accounted for in any integral understanding of reality. And while these diverse fields do well to inform and support each other, like the legs of a stool they must be kept apart; if they come too close together the stool falls over. That is, philosophy must not be limited to only what can be proved by science, nor should it be extended to encompass matters of faith or propositions that must be taken on the authority of a spiritual teacher or a religious text. Integral philosophy is thus informed by science and religion, but it remains respectfully independent of both. (p. 5)

2. Is human evolution a purposeful phenomenon of growth that proceeds in a generally positive direction? For the answer to this question McIntosh turns to the power of self-awareness.

It's because with self-awareness comes the ability to take hold of the evolutionary process itself. Through self-reflection, humans have the unique ability to see themselves in perspective within the scale of evolution, and this creates both the desire and the ability to improve their condition relative to the state of their animal cousins. And for generation after generation humans have generally continued to improve their conditions.

The evolutionary significance of human consciousness is clearly demonstrated by the now-obvious fact of global human culture. Development in the complexity of human cultural structures is undeniable. And like the previous evolutionary breakthrough seen in the appearance of life, the appearance of human culture is accompanied by new methods of development and a new pace of progress. (p. 14)

3. McIntosh spells out his personal view of human spiritual development by explaining that

According to my understanding, spirituality is primarily a matter of direct personal experience. However, one's personal experience of spirit is inevitably guided and enhanced by a belief system that provides a cosmology that defines spirit's role in the universe. And from the perspective of my cosmology, the evolving universe of nature, self, and culture is unfolding within the already-perfect larger spiritual universe. (p. 118)

4. And finally, the emergence of an integral political agenda for the 21st Century is described this way:

The rise of every historically significant new worldview brings about substantial political evolution. Each emerging worldview's new political vision serves as a showcase for its relatively more evolved values and higher ideals of morality.

Just as much of modernism and postmodernism emerged from the crucible of politics, we can expect something similar with the rise of the integral worldview. After considering this carefully for a long time, I've come to the conclusion that the politics of integral consciousness can be expected to engage life conditions in the twenty-first century in two ways: First, integral politics will make common cause with the postmodern political agenda, helping it to be more effective by moderating it and by translating its truths into terms that can be better understood by the modernist majority. And second, integral politics will demonstrate its new ideals by championing a transcendent vision of a more evolved form of human political organization. (pp. 97-98)

Integral Consciousness

A major contribution of integral philosophy to the study of consciousness is the idea that consciousness evolves, both individually and culturally. With regard to the evolution of consciousness in individuals, McIntosh links it to the work of developmental psychologists.

We have all had a direct experience of the development of our own consciousness because we have all grown up from childhood. Our experience of this development includes a sense in which our values have evolved, our perspectives have changed, and our thoughts, feelings, and sense of self have become more sophisticated and complex. The great contribution of developmental psychology has been its demonstration that this growth in consciousness proceeds through discreet, universal stages of development. And even after adulthood is reached, development continues to be governed by a series of distinct stages or waves. (p. 30)

The model that McIntosh feels is best descriptive of the evolution of consciousness and culture is the result of the work of Clare W. Graves, in which he proposed a "dialectical spiral of development" later elaborated upon by Don Beck in his book with Christopher Cowan, *Spiral Dynamics*. The spiral's structure is dialectical because its growth exhibits Hegel's pattern of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. In McIntosh's description, it takes us through the following stages of consciousness: Archaic, Tribal, Warrior, Traditional, Modernist, Postmodern, Integral, and Postintegral. In the spiral of development, each stage becomes less effective over time, and the next level becomes its antithesis. "In the course of healthy development, this is then followed by a season of synthesis wherein a stage's primary work is accomplished. Then after its 'prime time,' a stage of culture usually matures into a more orthodox thesis of itself that eventually calls forth its own transcendence by a new level's fresh antithesis" (p. 62). The value of understanding this dialectical spiral of development is that "we can use it to predict the future and heal the past, not just on a global level, but in our own families and communities—indeed, even within our own psyches" (p. 65).

Here's where the discussion of character, values, and evolution intersect. Since the dialectical spiral of development describes both the past and the future, it provides us with a powerful instrument for

- 1 Understanding past human cultures,
- 2 Realizing that all of these different cultures still exist to some degree simultaneously in

- the present,
3 Observing the emergence of the new synthesis of culture, and
4 Finding ways to foster that new synthesis as an improvement over previous stages.

The Role for Education

Can you see the role for education in this scenario? The possibilities are immense. McIntosh talks about the spiritual path inspiring individuals “to try to make a meaningful difference in the world around us. But this outwardly directed urge to service is often dampened when we remember Gandhi’s famous saying that ‘we must become the change we want to see in the world,’ which inevitably leads back to the task of working on ourselves” (p. 1).

Educational institutions can create opportunities for individuals to both work on themselves and to dedicate themselves to worthy service. I recently joined the faculty of Walden University and was immediately impressed by Walden’s vision and mission statements.

The Vision Statement talks about social evolution this way:

Walden University envisions a distinctively different 21st Century learning community where knowledge is judged worthy to the degree that it can be applied by its graduates to the immediate solutions of critical societal challenges, thereby advancing the greater global good. (“About Us,” para. 9)

The Mission Statement goes on to address the prerequisite personal development. “Walden University provides a diverse community of career professionals with the opportunity to transform themselves as scholar-practitioners so that they may transform society” (para. 8).

These are generalized statements that point us in a particular direction. McIntosh’s model of integral consciousness provides a more detailed sense of the forms that personal transformation and societal evolution might take. The prospect is exciting.

References

About us. (n.d.) Retrieved January 26, 2009, from Walden University Web site:
www.waldenu.edu/c/About/About.htm