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## Does Spiritual Awakening Exist? Critical Considerations in the Study of Transformative Postconventional Development

Glenn Hartelius

*California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, California, USA*

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# Does Spiritual Awakening Exist? Critical Considerations in the Study of Transformative Postconventional Development

## Editors' Introduction

The yellow letters arched over the road were alien, marking entry into the borderlands of my reality. I eased the car forward, on my way to the ashram's enlightenment intensive, with scant idea of what lay ahead. If there was risk, I cared little. The circle in which I grew up—a closely held religious community—inspired a thirst for something deeper, but offered few tools beyond reining in impulses and cultivating belief: a sort of cognitive-behavioral religion. Some months earlier I had lost faith in the message and the messengers, and that world had collapsed catastrophically. If this event offered some new way toward what the spiritual stories of my early years promised, I did not arrive with that hope. I would be satisfied if it afforded a place to talk out my distress and find some temporary relief.

By the third day I had expressed, confessed, contemplated, and wept for hours, and the release brought welcome ease. I was ready to slide through the last hours and return home. An assistant who accompanied me on a walking meditation urged me to sustain my intention on the retreat's question, Who am I? Apparently he sensed some shift, because he told me I was ready, and took me to meet with the event's leader. The intensive master gazed at me closely, and said, "How big are you?" As he spoke, I noticed that the felt sensation of *me* extended into the space around my body. I could not feel where I ended, but I could feel that my body was within the awareness, rather than the other way round. My eyes widened as I replied, "I have no size."

This moment was a turning point, a shift in experience that redirected my life. The awareness that usually resided in my head, unnoticed because it was constantly engaged with a stream of ideas and concerns, now coursed quietly through my whole body. Newfound sensitivities to others and the world awakened, to be discovered over coming months and years. Was this some great enlightenment? Far from it. Was it spiritual? It gave access to experiences that resonated with stories told in spiritual traditions, but it could as well be understood psychologically. Was it an awakening? It was a shift in capacities, but no more or less so than when intellectual abilities sharpen in adolescence.

The Special Topic Section of this issue, edited by Kelly Kilrea, addresses *spiritual awakening*. While the experiences given this name are worthy of study—and we have used the name here in line with current nomenclature—one needs to ask whether spiritual awakening is the most useful term in the context of psychology. Such a title seems to imply a single, distinct phenomenon; it suggests a somewhat discrete, time-limited event that is unambiguously spiritual in nature, and that uniquely fills this meaning. Even the evidence within the papers offered here does not bear out these assumptions, given that Taylor (this issue) theorizes that there may be two distinct types of awakening within a small sample. Compared with the teaching attributed to the Buddha suggesting there are 8,400 paths corresponding to the 8,400 types of sentient beings (Wong, 1998), this estimate may be low. If the past

history of psychology is any guide, there are likely to be various processes relating to transformative postconventional development, some number of which may be identified as spiritual awakening when they occur in some contexts.

Given that psychology aspires to study the human mind, and not just the Western mind, it is worth noting that a label such as spiritual awakening may carry cultural notions rooted specifically in a strong Anglo-American Protestant tradition of religious revivals and awakenings (cf. McLoughlin, 2013). While Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, Judaism, and other spiritual traditions have terms and concepts that could be translated as awakening, such terms typically carry a range of meanings that can be translated in a variety of ways. When designations from various traditions are uniformly translated as awakening, the risk increases that Western, and specifically Protestant, connotations may be subtly inserted. The risk of a cultural colonialism is particularly poignant in the domain of spirituality.

An incident that occurred during a later visit to the aforementioned ashram may illustrate how powerful, deeply-seated cultural values may flow below the surface undetected in the context of spirituality. One day, when arriving at the ashram, I saw the ashram's power couple march out of the guru's meeting hall. They both were well dressed and good looking, appeared to be in their late 30s, and drove an expensive car. Money, status, *and* spirituality—this couple seemed to have it all—including the guru's favor. I noticed that both husband and wife were walking quickly using vehement, contained, staccato movements—the way a blue-blood couple might behave on being told they had been expelled from their favorite country club.

On inquiry, I was told that the couple had brought concerns to the guru about the meditation practice into which he had initiated them. Medical tests reportedly showed decreases in some organ functions. When the guru confirmed that this was one effect of the meditation, the couple stormed out—soon afterwards leaving the guru and withdrawing from the community. From a perspective in which this life is but one of many lives in succession, shortening the lifespan in service of liberation is clearly a worthwhile investment; from a Western perspective, in which

spiritual attainment is often something to be added to material success, the notion that health, vitality, or even sexual potency might be impinged may prove unacceptable. This deep cultural difference only emerged in the wake of medical testing showing that the meditative practices in use might be bestowing something different than more radiant health.

Spiritual development can be understood through a variety of models: Eastern, Western, indigenous, philosophical, psychological, and neurobiological (e.g., Friedman, Krippner, Riebel, & Johnson, 2010). Changes related to spiritual development may be gradual (Brown & Engler, 1980; Teklinski, 2018) or rapid (Cheng, 2000; Hastings, 2010; Taylor, 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b), or some interweaving of the two (Cook, 1983). Sudden psychological change itself is not exclusively spiritual, having been described in a wide variety of contexts (Taylor, 2013a), and frequently associated with mundane or secular activities (Taylor, 2012b). In line with this observation, several participants in Wade's (2018, this issue) study identified their awakening experience as specifically not spiritual.

There are likely a number of discrete phenomena that could be referenced by a term such as spiritual awakening, which may point toward the need for a more comprehensive term such as transformative postconventional development. While phenomenological studies are an appropriate place to begin this project, caution should be exercised in early commitment to a particular term, or a single phenomenon. If a particular type of rapid psychological change is as likely to occur in secular contexts as spiritual ones (Taylor, 2012b), specifically characterizing this process as a spiritual event may impose an overly narrow frame. Similarly, a label such as awakening is a bit colloquial as a psychological term. For example, the term *sexual awakening* appears only rarely in the literature of psychology; the term *puberty*, even if not entirely synonymous, is much more common. Together with the possible Protestant connotations of awakening, as noted, a new and more effective term for transformative postconventional development is urgently needed.

Spiritual or religious interpretations of any such phenomena deserve careful attention in their own right, both in order to understand the

potential impact of differing hermeneutical frames, and because religious communities and practices should be afforded the respect they deserve as time-honored approaches to well-being and meaning. At the same time, it is vital to retain distinctions between the phenomenology of lived experiences and the meanings ascribed to these experiences by spiritual or religious communities. The challenge to maintain this separation is more complex—and more imperative—in the case of New Age religion (Hanegraaff, 2009), since one of the beliefs of this form of popular spirituality is that some particular metaphysical vision can explain scientific and spiritual phenomena alike (Hartelius, 2017). While this is an appealing and inspiring notion (Hartelius, 2015), the metaphysical vision that allegedly harmonizes science and spirituality is invariably itself a kind of religious vision, with the effect that science is effectively subsumed under a particular religious worldview.

While New Age adherents are likely to protest that their beliefs are not religious, but instead something *meta* to both spirituality and science, their resolution between science and spirituality comes at the price of belief in a particular vision of reality for which there is no scientific evidence, yet which often claims the right to acceptance because of its potential power to explain both the seen and unseen worlds in a meaningful way, and thereby improve the human condition. Yet this is very much parallel to what the major religions of the world offer, suggesting that New Age spirituality does indeed function as a religion whether or not its devotees wish to say so. While these recently minted New Age traditions deserve to be treated with as much respect as any other religion, the typical claim that they are superior to science and all other spiritual traditions should perhaps be recognized more as a belief that is commonplace among conservative religious communities than a fact to be asserted in secular and scientific contexts.

The life of Wilhelm Reich, reviewed in two of the general section papers introduced in the next section (Hunt, this issue), offers a relevant cautionary tale of a brilliant man questing for measurable evidence of spiritual phenomena without healthy delineations between science and his own spiritual vision. Reich interpreted certain types of felt experience—namely "inner bodily energy streamings"—as evidence of a

numinous vital force, which he saw as an expression of "the pulsating pattern underlying all animal movement"; this, in turn, "led him to intuit orgone as a universal life force—within and without" (Hunt, 2018, p. 24). The flaw here was his untempered confidence in his own particular interpretations—a confidence that led to rifts with those who challenged his thinking, then to erratic and paranoid behavior, and finally to a tragic end. The flexibility to be able to retain confidence in the authenticity of such experiences while also holding questions about what that experience might mean from the perspective of a more empirical inquiry might have allowed Reich's intelligence to come to fruition in a more constructive way.

Certainly, the study of transformative post-conventional development and sudden psychological change is one that may have great value. The papers offered here are put forward to support these efforts, with the acknowledgment that this area of research is in very early stages of development. As such, relatively open inquiry is offered here under the umbrella of the preliminary term of spiritual awakening, with the hope that this will mature into more careful and critical examinations of assumptions, frameworks, and terminology as more data are collected.

### In This Issue

In addition to the Special Topic Section on Spiritual Awakening, this issue offers several general topic papers. The first two of these, by Harry Hunt, shed light on spiritual awakening from a different angle. Both papers consider Wilhelm Reich as transpersonal psychologist. Part 1, entitled, "Context, Development, and Crisis in Reich's Bio-energetic Spiritual Psychology," considers Reich's vision of a pervasive, transformative life energy he called orgone, in the context of a life trajectory that wove together psychoanalytic innovations that would help to precipitate a somatic psychology, an activist egalitarian idealism, growing paranoia, narcissism and isolation, and conflicts with government agencies that led to his death in prison. All of this is framed starkly yet compassionately as struggles of a man not only on his own spiritual path, but on a mission to ground human spirituality in physical science. In this latter, Reich was aligned with transpersonal

psychology—though as Hunt points out, he likely would have rejected any such identification.

Part 2 of Hunt's work, titled, "The Futural Promise of Reich's Naturalistic Bio-Energetic Spirituality," looks at how Reich's vision of a better coming world embodied a this-worldly mysticism, and so prefigured New Age spirituality. In this regard, his work resonated with that of authors such as Bergson, Heidegger, and de Chardin, among others. Hunt unpacks what Reich's vision implies for neo-shamanism, experiential approaches to presence, self actualization, essentializing versions of Christianity, consciousness studies, and systems approaches to scientific research. Hunt's thoughtful reflections on the work of Reich is part of a series of illuminating papers in which he considers innovators of this-worldly mysticism in the 1930s to 1950s whose work intimated a spiritual New Age—beginning with his recent paper on Simone Weil (Hunt, 2017).

Also on the theme of contemporary mysticism is Lora Menter's paper entitled, "Transcendence from Below: The Embodied Feminine Mysticism of Marion Woodman." Woodman is a well known Jungian analyst who uses Jungian psychology as a context for her own mystical path, and as a feminist path that considers and counters the deep psychic impacts of patriarchy. Though Woodman's work is couched in the language of an earlier feminism, Menter reframes it through the lenses of healing fiction and participatory enactment as a transformative, feminist-informed path to authentic selfhood.

**Glenn Hartelius, Main Editor  
California Institute of Integral Studies**

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### About the Author

Glenn Hartelius, PhD, is Founder and Chair of the online PhD program in Integral and Transpersonal Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco, where he serves as Professor. He is also leading an initiative to develop a new research facility at CIIS for research in whole person neuroscience. In addition to his work as main editor for the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, he is co-editor of *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology* and Secretary of the International Transpersonal Association. His research on the definition and scope of transpersonal psychology has helped to define the field. He has also taught at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Naropa University, Saybrook University, and Middlesex University in the UK.

### About the Journal

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