

Teacherly Authority and the Metaphysics of Personhood: Two Case Studies

If we accept the notion that social revolutions essentially involve a fundamental re-ordering of the social structure, and if we accept the supposition that the social order is essentially viewed as a moral phenomenon by the members of the collectivity, then there must be a new source of morality involved in societal change, one that both desecrates the present system and paves the way for the acceptance of a new order. Since established religion represents a compromise with the ongoing secular institutions, the only other possible host of revolutionary thought, however unwittingly, is the non-institutionalized religious sector.

– *Edward Tiryakian* (as quoted in Wilber, 1983b, p. 99)

Both Wilber and Habermas have reasonable itemized lists of the desirable and undesirable properties of different forms of religious engagement.¹⁸ Both of their accounts are based on explicit theoretical constructs like those offered above—cultural evolutionary structure-types tied into complex characterizations of the internal dynamics of religious engagements. Their conclusions about what is possible and preferable for the future of religiosity in the post-industrial West are in broad agreement with the implications of my account here. The common theme is that the contemporary scene presents unprecedented configurations of religious authority, doctrinal innovation, and structure-type inter-animation. It is not simply that older forms of religious engagement are bad and that newer forms are good. Rather, their aim is to draw attention to the fact that certain aspects of older forms are being combined with newer ones, resulting in unique configurations that are situated in radically poly-vocal cultural contexts. Thus any evaluative distinctions between the various forms of religiosity currently available must be based on a nuanced understanding of how these forms affect the persons involved and how they relate to broader cultural, economic, political, and institutional realities.

Along these lines, in this section I aim to apply the conceptual framework sketched above to make a set of complex considered judgments about two contemporary educational configurations involving spiritual teachers and teachings. The goal here is to model the kinds of evaluative distinctions that are possible in light

of the kind of framework I have built. A truly comprehensive evaluation of these two religious configurations must be saved for the future—here I offer only the first word. On the one hand, the work of spiritual teacher Andrew Cohen and his organization, EnlightenNext (once know as The Impersonal Enlightenment Fellowship), represents a confluence of Classic and Integral structural aspects, blending sophisticated doctrinal innovations and enactive contemplative injunctions with traditional forms of guru–disciple teacherly authority. On the other hand, Rabbi Marc Gafni and his Center for World Spirituality organize multi-day retreats representing a mixture of Modern and Integral structural aspects, with translineage religious and philosophical doctrines contextualizing diverse and multitudinous contemplative injunctions and polycentric forms of teacherly authority. It is my hope that the potentially controversial and contested content in this section will not distract the reader from the broader purposes of the article. The goal here is just to show the kinds of considered judgments facilitated by the framework I offer, not to condemn or condone these teachers and their teacherly practices.¹⁹

As I will show, the key differences between these configurations hinge on how the content of what is being taught interfaces with the forms of teacherly authority that are being put into practice. Specifically, different doctrines about the metaphysics of personhood frame and justify different forms of teacherly authority. The question of whether there is a place for Classic guru-disciple relationships in the post-industrial West looms large, as do questions about the liabilities of spiritual eclecticism and the diverse forms of teacherly authority they engender. Overall, I think these two configurations represent some of the most complex and valuable forms of spiritual engagement available today, and yet they are built around radically dissimilar forms of teacherly authority. It is important to gain clarity about the differences between these two configurations, if only for the sake of facilitating dialogue about their respective affordances and unique contributions (and liabilities).

Cohen's teachings of *evolutionary enlightenment* are best classified as part of a lineage of panentheistic evolutionary metaphysics that includes Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin. The kind of teacherly authority he deploys stems from the guru traditions of Advaita Vedanta. Both traditions stress the *impersonal* realization of the awakened human. In an evolutionary context, the awakened individual is understood as, in essence, an impersonal evolutionary catalyst serving a cosmic function. By transcending the separate self of the ego, and by realizing the True Self, or Authentic Self, the individual is cleansed of the illusion of uniqueness and freed to participate without reservation or bias in the process of conscious evolution. The Authentic Self is everywhere the same—you and I are one in its realization—and the actions that follow from its realization are an expression of impartial, impersonal, and universal evolutionary impulses. The emphasis is on the *process* of cosmic evolution as it is instantiated in human history. This is a process that subsumes the individual, who is obligated to overcome their limitations and self-centeredness for the sake of the evolution of the whole.

The role of the guru (i.e., Cohen) is to facilitate this transformation of the individual, from a partial and unique ego to a radically impersonal expression of cosmic evolution. Because the ultimate goal of the teaching is to create a dynamic community of individuals, all of whom are awakened to the same evolutionary impulse, the Classic wholistic authority of the teacher can be justified. The teacher is ostensibly already an expression of the Authentic Self, which means he is already in touch with the impersonal evolutionary impulse that the student strives to realize. Thus, the teacher is taken as justified in enlisting the conformity of the student across a wide array of particulars affecting their life-trajectory. In the terms of the Classic structure, the teacher is already that One without a second (the Authentic Self) and the student strives to be That. So the goal of the teachings and the scope of teacherly authority are aligned in that they focus on overcoming individuality for the sake of what is universal.²⁰

This is significantly different from Gafni's teachings about the Unique Self, which are best classified as part of a tradition of acosmic humanism that includes key figures from post-(Western)-Enlightenment eso-

teric Judaism, especially Rabbi Mordechai Lainer and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kooke. The teacherly authority engendered by this lineage revolves around a kind of individualized instruction that enlists the participatory authorship of the student. This tradition argues that it is through the unique “sacred autobiography” of each individual that spiritual awakening unfolds. Individuals are called to evolve beyond their egocentrism and to participate in the ethically significant story of human and cosmic history through the expression of their Unique Self. This Unique Self is different for each individual, appearing as they navigate the contours of their singular life in light of universal principles and processes. The goal is to radically enliven the unique affordances of each individual’s personality through an infusion of transpersonal insight and an opening toward the sanctity of life and human relationships.

The role of the teacher (i.e., Gafni and his colleagues) is to awaken the student to their unique and inimitable role, their intrinsic value and importance, and the ethical obligations entailed by who the student is and who they can become. Because the ultimate goal of the teaching is to promote a kind of inspired self-authorship, autonomy, and responsibility, the teacher must honor the unique story of each student, working with them toward the co-construction of an awakened personality. The teacher is ostensibly already expressing their Unique Self and participating fully in the world as a profoundly inspired ethical personality. This kind of insight and agency justifies only a certain range of teacherly authority. While the teacher knows what it means to live their Unique Self, they do not know what it means to live yours or mine. Thus, the teacher cannot enlist conformity but must serve only to guide and scaffold the student in coming to actualize their full potentials and responsibilities in light of the broadest possible ethical and cosmic contexts. And so the goal of the teachings and the scope of teacherly authority are aligned in that they focus on facilitating the refraction of the universal through the individual.²¹

Both Cohen and Gafni have teachings that display Integral metaphysical and epistemological aspects. While they stem from specific traditions, they make translineage justificatory moves, pulling from a wide array of traditional, non-traditional, and scientific sources. Both are prodigious interlocutors and communicators, which gives their views a multi-perspectival interpretive bent and intersubjective validity. And both have catalyzed diverse and dynamic student bodies that engage in post-traditional forms of spiritual practice and contemplative enactment. However, as noted above, the teacherly practices they deploy and aim to justify (and thus the texture of the authority dynamics in their communities) are almost diametrically opposed.

Putting an emphasis on *impersonal evolutionary processes* allows Cohen to justify classic guru relationships, the subordination of the individual to the cosmic process, and the homogenization of personality characteristics and modes of ethical engagement. In the context of the post-industrial West, the liability here is that these forms of student-teacher relationship are incongruent with broader cultural values, representing a step backward behind the advances made in the wake of the Western Enlightenment. One of the great dignities accompanying the emergence of Modern forms of authority are ethical views that stress the inviolability of the individual, views that aim to insure persons are treated as ends in themselves, and never merely as means to an end. Classic forms of authority are built around the idea that persons lack this kind of intrinsic value; instead, persons are understood as instances of a generic metaphysical type, to be valued in terms of their position in the Great Chain of Being, the dominant social hierarchy, or as facets of broader cosmic processes. So while Cohen’s teachings represent a kind of sophisticated Integral view, they are nevertheless amenable to justifying authority dynamics that are out of step with some of the most important ethical innovations achieved by the West. Put bluntly: the greatest human rights violations in history have *all* followed in the wake of ideologies that subordinated the individual to broader processes and thus characterized persons as means to an end.

Gafni and the cohort of teachers involved with the Center for World Spirituality, on the other hand, emphasize the *interface* of unique personalities with universal spiritual values and processes. This justifies polycentric and individualized forms of teacherly authority and the valorization of heterogeneous forms of

life and ethical engagement. The liability here is that these forms of authority are not dissimilar enough from the kind of relativistic and market-driven spirituality that dominates post-industrial cultures. One of the great problems with Modern forms of authority is that they aim for democratization without necessarily facilitating the requisite forms of education and individual responsibility. Enlisting the participatory authorship of students entails that they are mature enough to be co-collaborators and self-directed learners. Without a great deal of maturity on the part of the student, these forms of engagement can degenerate into ineffective and piecemeal pursuits—driven by a desire for novel experience, not genuine transformation.²²

I have discussed these two examples here because they are two instances of engagements that claim to be harbingers of emerging Integral forms of spirituality. Indeed, I have suggested that both rely heavily on sophisticated doctrinal and contemplative procedures, which are best characterized as Integral. However, they also involve a complex mixture of other normative structures. Neither is Integral across the board; we are still forging tomorrow's religiosity. And while I think it is better to err on the side of eclectic individualism rather than evolutionary collectivism, I admit that both endeavors are still in process and continue to change and re-understand themselves. It is my hope that this brief and admittedly cursory discussion might bring some clarity to the various aspects of these spiritual educational configurations that require attention as apart of any comprehensive evaluation of their worth. I hope this discussion has also demonstrated the fruitfulness of the framework outlined in this paper, which is nothing more than a model useful in scaffolding complex and multifaceted evaluations of religious engagements.

