

**Foreword to *The Common Heart: An Experience of Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Edited
by Netanel Miles-Yepez**

In 1984, Father Thomas Keating invited a broad range of spiritual teachers from virtually all of the world's great wisdom traditions—Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Indigenous, Islamic—to gather together at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. They kept no records, published no reports, filmed none of the proceedings. In fact, the results of that extraordinary gathering have been largely secret, until now.

The Common Heart is the first report of that meeting and several subsequent ones with the same group. It is in almost every respect a rather amazing document. First, and especially, in that it could and did happen; second, and as much, in the results, both startling and reassuring simultaneously.

A student once asked me, "Why study the tangled web of the world's traditional religions?" The implication was that the lot of them were old, outdated, and more or less worthless; and further, they all disagreed with each other anyway, so why bother?

I replied that yes, they were "old," and yes, they mostly disagreed with each other. "But every now and then, you find profound points of agreement between all of them. And anytime you find something that all of the world's religions agree on, you might want to pay very, very close attention, yes?"

This document is an example of some of those agreements and therefore, I believe, something we might want to pay very, very close attention to.

I realize that academic attempts to show certain common threads to the world's great religions—from Aldous Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy* to Huston Smith's *Forgotten Truth*—have all been attacked by postmodernists as being essentially meaningless, because even though writers such as Huxley and Smith purported to show cross-religion similarities, those similarities aren't real because cultural relativism asserts they cannot be real. Actual cultures and traditions, the charge goes, are all islands unto themselves, with massive incommensurability blocking passage or even communication between them. There can be no universal spirit because nothing universal can be known, or, therefore, said to exist in any meaningful sense. So there can be no agreement between, say, Taoist texts and Christian texts about ultimate reality.

But Father Thomas did not assemble texts in a room, he assembled humans in a room, who, quite apart from any help from the postmodern poststructuralists, were able to decide whether their respective spiritual traditions agreed on certain points. And, in fact, these human beings from very different backgrounds and traditions—cultural, linguistic, social, individual—did arrive at several profound points of agreement about what, by any other name, is Ultimate Reality. The wonderful, intense, difficult, playful, and respectful inter-religious dialogues that arrived at these conclusions—of both important similarities and wonderful differences—are the core of this extraordinary book.

And so it turns out that, even across different cultures and religions, meaningful human communication and agreement can and does occur, especially when the heart is silent and listens with respect. (And I have noticed, anyway, that postmodernists from different cultures seem to understand each other just fine, a bit of an embarrassment for the whole theory, what?)

As for these points of agreement, what are we to make of them? The first one is: “The world’s religions bear witness to the experience of Ultimate Reality, to which they give various names.” I ask because in today’s world, there looms a very difficult issue that simply must be addressed: why is it that, at first glance, the world’s religions—or the ones the public hears about on the news—seem to be the major source of human conflict, when, on the other hand, dialogues like these show that spirituality could be the primary source of peace among humankind? The disparity between the former and the latter is so large, so jarring, so hard to reconcile, and is made all the worse when beheadings in the name of God occur weekly, bombings in the name of God occur daily, and no world religion has a history totally free of such. I believe that unless we can find a way to understand and differentiate those two extremes of religion, both will be deeply suspect in today’s world.

Let me suggest one way to think about this, and let me give a frightfully abbreviated version (please see *The Eye of Spirit* for a more detailed look). Studies in developmental psychology over the last few decades show that individuals tend to undergo an unmistakable trajectory of human growth and development, from pre-conventional stages to conventional stages to post-conventional, or from pre-rational to rational to trans-rational, or from egocentric to ethnocentric to worldcentric. Without pigeonholing anybody or any tradition—because people and traditions can span the entire spectrum—there is a world of difference between those who are acting in egocentric, pre-conventional, and pre-rational ways, and those acting in post-conventional, worldcentric, and trans-rational ways. The latter, having developed and befriended

rationality, now transcend and include it; whereas the former are not acting beyond reason, but beneath it.

It is the bane of contemplative dialogues such as these that in the common mind, pre-conventional and post-conventional are lumped together, and pre-rational and trans-rational are unceremoniously equated, when they are quite literally poles apart. But for today's conventional, rationally-minded individual, the world's great contemplative and trans-rational mystics and realizers are indistinguishable from irrational fanatics or those seized with infantile oceanic fantasies.

This is not only sad, it is a cultural catastrophe of the first magnitude. And yet, until religion itself learns convincingly how to convey these differences and increasingly focus on the best in its post-conventional, transpersonal, and contemplative dimensions, religion for the world at large will likely remain either the province of pre-rational fanatics or rational cynics. Trans-rational dialogues such as these—which embrace rationality fully and then go beyond it into the mystery of the divine and the obviousness of the ultimate—will never gain the deep appreciation and even reverence they deserve.

The points of agreement in the following dialogues do indeed spring from that deep space of trans-rational openness and contemplative transparency, where the human heart stands naked to the divine, discovering at the end of that journey into the present a dividing line between them almost impossible to find, a gateless gate to that I AMness that only alone is.

And what are the rest of these extraordinary points of agreement? These things about which the world's religions can concur? Please start reading and sharing in these dialogues from the Unborn and Undying, and know that you are indeed on a journey into

your very own heart, a common ground that is timeless and therefore eternally present, spaceless and therefore infinitely open, an Ultimate Reality that is reading this page, holding this book in its hands, and looking out through your very own eyes in this very present moment, for where else possibly could the journey begin and end?

Ken Wilber

Denver, Colorado

Winter 2005