

CONFORMING AND TRANSFORMING
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In the letter to the Romans (12:2) St Paul writes:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

What I note here is a difference between conforming and transforming—do not be conformed (to this world), be *transformed*. I am perhaps reading too much into this, but I see conforming as an outer thing, and transforming as an inner one. I conform to something outside of me, a framework, a structure, like a rose bush growing up a trellis, or like water or some other soft material conforms to its container. But being *transformed* has an inner resonance to it, something that happens from the inside out. *Do not be conformed; be transformed*. And we are transformed by the renewing of our minds; we are transformed by a new way of thinking, perhaps an enlightenment or an awakening to a new vision of reality which leads to a new understanding of the world. It is *then*, Paul says, when we have been transformed, that we will be able to discern the will of God; *then* we will be able to understand what is good and perfect, after we have undergone this transformation. Up to then we will be only guessing and/or doing what we are told.

We speak of the effect of religion or of our spiritualities in two very distinct ways—I think of them as conforming and transforming. In the Christian context for instance we speak first of all of “putting on Christ,” as in the Baptismal formula: “You have put on Christ, in him you have been baptized.” St Paul tells us in the letter to the Romans to “lay aside the works of darkness and *put on* the armor of light” (13:12); and to “*put on* the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh” (13:14). This is *conforming*, putting on something over us from the outside. Listen to this passage from the letter to the Colossians (3:9-15), which speaks of both conforming and transforming:

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.

Interesting to note again that the renewal comes through knowledge, a conforming which leads to transforming again through the renewal of the mind. This is the conforming that we should do that will lead to transformation, the renewal of our minds, and...

In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

So what should we do, what should we conform to “as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved”? We should...

...clothe ourselves with compassion,
kindness, humility, meekness, and patience;
bear with one another;
forgive each other;
clothe yourselves with love;
let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts;
and be thankful.

“You have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.” The outer self is being renewed by clothing itself with love, active love, that is, not the feeling but the actions, the choices of love. That, of course, is a good and necessary conforming, the minimum we should aim for as followers of Jesus.

I’m reminded of yoga, the classic yoga as taught by Patanjali, not simply the hatha yoga postures. It begins with the first two branches, called *yama* and *niyamas*—controls or restraints and observances. The basic premise is that one cannot really gain the full benefits of the *asana* practice (outside of increased flexibility and core strength perhaps) without a certain ethical background, a certain foundation. I’m reminded too of the Buddha’s teaching; one author called it “the yoga of compassion”: that there are certain practices of going out of oneself, getting beyond oneself in service and selflessness that lead to an inner awakening. And so we in the Christian tradition refer to the corporal works of mercy, that whether we feel like it or not we need to go out of ourselves, and that going out of ourselves is going to have an inner effect not unlike the effects of the habits of virtue. And we understand our conforming is good if and because and only if and because it leads to inner transformation.

The reason I bring this up is that I think there are two problems we face. The first is that often we post-moderns prefer to skip the step of conforming and leap right to the transformation, not so subtly putting down mere religious observance, a kind of a Gnosticism and libertinism that has been around at least as long as the New Testament. In art I think of it as the equivalent of trying to paint abstract without ever having learned to draw the human figure; or writing free form poetry without ever having learned rhyme or meter—which T. S. Eliot said is like playing tennis without a net. Also I think it’s like the Western co-opting of Asian mysticism such as adopting the Sufi tradition without paying any attention to popular religiosity of Islam or the studying the Quran. I just don’t think for the most part it is possible or the usual course of growth. So we walk a fine line between realizing that conforming is not the end, but knowing as well that there is something beyond conforming.

The second problem is that at the same time we need to remember that there is something beyond conforming, even conforming to good things. We also speak, in the Christian tradition, very subtly about transforming usually when we hear of the indwelling power of the Spirit; when we hear Jesus say that the “stream of

living water shall flow from out of the believer's heart" or when St Paul says "be transformed by the renewal of your minds" or when we hear St Peter say that we can become participants in the divine nature. I suppose what we need to find is that right balance: how much structure, first of all, do I need to lead me to the balanced place of nourishment and growth and challenge; and then we answer that same question of those for whom we have the responsibility of growth and training—as parents, as teachers, as spiritual leaders, pastors and ministers as well as members of communities. Most of all, we begin to ask ourselves how do we know when we are moving from one phase to the other; how do we know how much structure and how much freedom to give young people? And how do we foster the environment of transformation?

So, without putting the conforming stage down in anyway, let's talk about the transformation aspect of spirituality, the real goal, when the growth starts to happen from within. What brings it about?

Ken Wilber has an essay entitled "Translation versus Transformation." He uses the word "translation" where I use "conformation," but he writes in a very similar vein to what I have already learned and I am borrowing some of his language here. He says that religion seems to perform two very different functions. First of all, religion acts as a way of creating and building up a sense of a separate self, conforming to a certain image, archetype or model. (I find his language a little pejorative here, but let's wrestle with it...) That separate self or the collective of separate selves that gets created by our religious belonging then has to be fortified, defended and promoted. At this stage we might think that as long as we merely believe the myths, perform the rituals, say the right prayers (in the right language), and embrace the proper dogmas, we are going to be saved. This is the process of conformation, conforming to an external framework. Let's take any judgment about this phase off for a moment and simply think of it as a necessary stage. But translation/conforming must be followed by a stage of transformation, going beyond mere observance, going from changing our outer selves to being changed.

At some point, hopefully, the spiritual aspirant is going to feel comfortable enough within and with this framework to open up to more than conforming, to open up to transforming instead of conforming. This is when we move from fear to love—the perfect love that casts out all fear; what we once did by compulsion, we now do by love, as St Benedict says in his rule for monks, "our hearts open wide, and we run with unspeakable sweetness of love on the path of God's commandments... that we may deserve to be partakers of his kingdom" (RB Pro. 49-50). We may do the same things, we may change them ever so slightly (like in a yoga posture), but that change will make all the difference. What follows from transforming self of course is transforming the world from within—to going beyond the external signs to actually "circumcising our hearts." But again I ask, how does this come about?

I also want to introduce into this discussion the venerable teaching about the three stages of the soul's ascent to God that comes from the ancient Christian monastic tradition and remains all the way through St John of the Cross who

perhaps gives it its most sublime articulation. The teaching is that the spiritual life progresses through three stages: the purgative, the illuminative, and the unitive. The *purgative* stage of course is one of “purging,” purifying, cleansing ourselves of inordinate, unethical, unhealthy behaviors, lining ourselves up with some type of moral order. Perhaps this corresponds to superego development. This I see as the stage of *conformation*, what Ken Wilber calls “translation.” The *illuminative* stage then in a sense is the gift of that first phase—there is a certain way of knowing that comes about from having gotten ourselves into right relationship, a certain knowing that we cannot even access until we have gotten some clarity of vision due to righteous, upright, virtuous living. And then later comes the unitive stage, which we can barely speak of here but merely point to it, the stage of life where we are, to use the language of the English mystics, “oned” with God, the ultimate transformation.

Side note, I do not think that these stages are static elements nor that they happen in temporal isolation one from the other. We merely need to point to the fact that at some point conforming is going to lead to transformation, when as St John writes, “perfect love casts out all fear.” We also need to let this knowledge and promise of transformation inform all that precedes it; that knowledge, that hope already acts as a seed in potential, and the conforming already starts the work of transforming.

This is where I do like Ken Wilber’s language from another context, and he is drawing on the language of psychologists such as Claire Danes. They write about the move in human development from selfishness to care to universal care (for woman) or (for males) from selfishness to rights to universal rights. They suggest that each human being, as a child needs to start at a necessary phase of selfishness, needs to be able to scream for mother when hungry or frightened, because that child is totally dependent on outside forces for survival. It’s a good thing to cling to mother and have one’s psychological and physical needs met at this early stage, and we have learned that children that do not have their legitimate basic needs met at this stage suffer for it all of their lives. But then each human being is meant to move from selfishness to care. Now they distinguish here that generally women move from selfishness to care whereas men move from selfishness to rights, that is, care of or the rights of first of all family, and then an ever widening extended family circle, tribe, village, perhaps ethnic group, nation, the collective of belonging. And then there is a stage beyond this as well, to move from care or rights—care of family, tribe and nation, to universal care, universal rights.

Now, I wonder if these three stages of growth do not also correspond to the three stages of the spiritual life that I mentioned above. The *purgative* stage is the move from selfishness to care, ethics and morality being as much as anything about how to live in a world with other people. The *illuminative* phase is that stage where we spend perhaps the majority of our lives, care and/or rights for family, tribe, nation of belonging, the group that gives us a sense of identity and belonging. And in some marvelous way—and this is what I think I am adding to this teaching—I have come to think that the *unitive* stage, that ultimate stage of the spiritual life, in some way corresponds with the opening up to universal care

and universal rights, and further that perhaps it also corresponds on a broader scale with the global transformation that is going on and global consciousness that we are being called to individually and collectively in this day and age.

I was thinking of some examples. First of all the Roman saints Pontian and Hippolytus, second century Christian martyrs. Similar to Ss. Cornelius and Cyprian, Hippolytus is always associated with Pontian, who was a pope, but Hippolytus outshines Pontian in many ways. Also similar to Cornelius as opposed to Cyprian, Hippolytus was the harsh one, the intransigent one. (If I had to guess, I would say that Hippolytus was an 8 on the Enneagram—his first answer to every question was “no.”) For example, in regards to the liturgy, he was steadfastly against people using the vernacular for the Eucharist, and he wanted to retain the liturgy in the sacred scholarly language. Meaning, he didn’t want the Eucharist celebrated in that vulgar language of Latin—he wanted it to stay in Greek. (So, even our current language debates must be put into perspective.)

But worse than his refusal of Latin, Hippolytus refused to accept the teaching of the legitimately elected pope, Zephyrinus, and then he called the next pope, Callistus, a heretic; and then allowed himself to be named an anti-pope by a circle of followers who thought that the church should be an elect community of pure souls that had to remain uncompromisingly separated from the world and all its dangers. He and his friends remained in schism through the next two pontificates, of Urban and Pontian. Perhaps we could say that he had moved from purgative to illuminative, perhaps from selfishness to care and rights—for his immediate circle, but hadn’t yet moved beyond that. But then, as ironic fate would have it, he was exiled with Pope Pontian. It is only then that some kind of reconciliation took place, and Hippolytus resigned. (Maybe the one area where Pontian outshines Hippolytus was in his humility. Pontian himself had already resigned his office for the good of the church.) When they died their bodies were brought back to Rome together and buried with solemn rites as martyrs. So, basically, what we have here is someone who was a schismatic and a heretic himself. And I can’t help but think that the martyrdom of exile was some sort of grace of God—to finally break through Hippolytus’ self-will.

Another example, in the Book of Deuteronomy (10:12-22), we hear the Israelites being challenged to stop being so stiff-necked, and now that they have circumcised their foreskins—now that they have fulfilled the external signs and practices—to circumcise their hearts—internal transformation. This, of course, is what will become the very center of Jesus’ teaching centuries later as he brings the law to its fulfillment. And part of that internal transformation involves breaking out of the caged little world of self or the little protected collective of separate selves: they are told not only accept no bribes, and not only care of orphans and widows, but even to care for aliens. This isn’t all about you! Nor is it all about your tribe and your family. Open the doors!

I’m thinking, too, of the marvelous experience of Malcolm X just before he was murdered, what he called his “second conversion,” when during his *hajj* to

Mecca he realized that all these people around him, black, white, brown skinned, from every nation and language group, were all his brothers and sisters, and he left the Nation of Islam of Elijah Muhammad to form the Organization of African-American Unity, and eventually moved from fighting for civil rights to fighting for human rights. This again is the movement from selfishness to care (in his first conversion from being a hoodlum to being an observant Muslim), and then from care to universal care; or from selfishness to rights to universal rights. This is the work of transformation, inner transformation that enables us to transform the world.

As witnessed from all of these examples, unfortunately sometimes this circumcising of the heart, this opening of the heart, the move to the unitive stage, opening to universality, only happens when that whole structure gets challenged, undermined and perhaps even dismantled completely—like Hippolytus being sent into exile, like the falling out between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammed and the Nation of Islam (who will eventually have him killed), like the Chosen People being wandering in the desert or sent into exile. At some point authentic transformation is not a matter of merely believing, but about the death of the believer, a total surrender of self—even the collective self—with all its opinions and plans. This of course is what John of the Cross refers to as the dark night of the soul, the second necessary purgation that must take place to cross over from the illuminative to the unitive, from illumination to the truest union with the Beloved. At some point authentic religion becomes not a matter of merely conforming and making the world conform, as much as about being transformed by this kind of death and the dismantling of everything that was holding our understanding of the world together. It's only then that we are able, through our transformation, to transform the world around us. As we realize our own transformation—we have to believe this!—our very presence automatically effects transformation in others, as we become the seed that falls into the ground and dies; as we become like yeast in the dough, like salt in the earth, both of which act by non-acting in a sense, that act by disappearing.

I think that this brings about the renewal of our mind that Paul is writing about.

I guess what I want to say to you, as one vowed religious to another, is that corporately, just as personally, we may have to fall apart from time to time in order to let God really be God. We tend to spend a lot of time shoring up the superstructures of our church, of our orders and congregations, of our communities, of our institutions, of our schools, and sometimes that is right and fitting. But there is also a time for letting things die, break apart or, perhaps better, letting things break out of their containers. Perhaps this is what is trying to happen to us as a church. While a certain globalization is happening in the greater world, there is also a movement in the church toward a breaking out of our euro-centric cultural, philosophical and ritual container, for instance. Some would argue, following on the lines of Karl Rahner and Ewert Cousins, for instance, that instead of resisting this breaking out of our containers, the followers of Jesus should be leading and guiding it—they are like sheep without a shepherd!—because it is the Christ event itself that inspired and initiated the opening of the covenant to all, the breaking out of the containers. In Christ there

is no east or west, male or female, slave or free—"In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!"

There is a globalization happening, a global consciousness and awakening. What we "spiritual warriors" have to offer is our understanding and articulation of what that universal wisdom is that is part of the common treasure of the human race. But the only way we will discover and understand it for ourselves is through a certain kind of death, death that will yield new birth.

But it is only when we have allowed our old shells—individual and corporate—to fall into the ground and die that the new seed can be born; it is only when we have allowed our old shells—individual and corporate—to fall into the ground and die that the real transformation of the unitive way can take place. What we will discover in the process is that we will open up to a universal truth both in how we understand the Christ mystery and how we express it, an understanding that may be gleaned from having discovered that same universal truth at the heart of another tradition that in turn has enabled us to see another aspect of the Christ mystery, perhaps for the first time or at least in a new way, and so then to be able to express it to a new generation in a new way.

The last thing I want to add—perhaps it goes without saying—is that all this rests on our individual commitment to spiritual growth through our spiritual practice, to discern that unitive depth within ourselves which will enable us to undergo the purgative transformation to open us to union with the divine, which will in turn help us to understand the universality of spiritual wisdom, when we are transformed by a renewal of our minds.

I want to end with these two quotes, one from now Cardinal Walter Kasper from an essay of his entitled "The Transmission of Faith":

The new evangelization is first of all and above all a spiritual commitment. It is therefore fundamental that we let ourselves be questioned constantly in a new way by the Gospel; then we ourselves live more decisively and with full joy according to the spirit of the Gospel. If we are sincere, we must recognize that we ourselves are often the obstacle to the Gospel and its diffusion. Without our personal conversion, all the reforms, even the most necessary and well intentioned, fall away, and without our personal renewal they end up in empty activism. Without listening to the Word and will of God, without a continual conversion and purification of our life, without the spirit of adoration and without continual prayer, there will be no renewal of the Church... ¹

Walter Kasper

And the second is from the Dalai Lama, on why there is a greater interest on mysticism and contemplative prayer in our day and age.

¹ W. Kasper, "The Transmission of the Faith," quoted in Bose, pp. 2-3

Meanwhile, many of my Christian brothers and sisters, led notably by such figures as Thomas Merton and John Main, have taken up the practice of meditation in their daily lives. This is very important, for I believe that if we combine prayer, meditation and contemplation in our daily practice it will be very effective. Focusing less on building temples to religion on the outside, in favor of constructing temples to goodness within ourselves, is true to the real intention of spiritual practice, which is to **help individuals bring about inner transformation.**²

The Dalai Lama

² Jesus: The Teacher Within, p. 12