

# The Plurality of Religions and the Spirit of Pluralism: A Participatory Vision of the Future of Religion

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This paper first uncovers the subtle spiritual narcissism that has characterized historical approaches to religious diversity and discusses the shortcomings of the main forms of religious pluralism that have been proposed as its antidote: ecumenical, soteriological, postmodern, and metaphysical. It then argues that a participatory pluralism paves the way for an appreciation of religious diversity that eschews the dogmatism and competitiveness involved in privileging any particular tradition over the rest without falling into cultural-linguistic or naturalistic reductionisms. Discussion includes the question of the validity of spiritual truths and the development of a participatory critical theory of religion. The essay concludes with an exploration of different scenarios for the future of religion—global religion, mutual transformation, interspiritual wisdom, and spirituality without religion—and proposes that such a future may be shaped by spiritually individuated persons engaged in processes of cosmological hybridization in the context of a common spiritual family. A participatory approach to spirituality turns the problem of religious plurality into a celebration of the critical spirit of pluralism.

When David B. Barret, the main editor of the massive *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Barret et al., 2001), was asked what he had learned about religious change in the world after several decades of research, he responded with the following: “We have identified nine thousand and nine hundred distinct and separate religions in the world, increasing by two or three religions every day” (cited in Lester, 2002, p. 28). Although there may be something to celebrate in this spiritual diversity and ongoing innovation, it is also clear that the existence of many conflicting religious visions of reality and human nature is a major cause of the prevailing skepticism toward religious and spiritual truth claims. Against the background of modernist assumptions about a singular objective reality, it is understandable that the presence of a plurality of mutually exclusive accounts leads to the confident dismissal of religious explanations. It is as if contemporary culture has succumbed to the Cartesian anxiety behind what W. E. Hocking called the “scandal of plurality,” the worry that “if there are so many divergent claims to ultimate truth, then perhaps none is right” (cited in Clarke, 1997, p. 134). This competitive predicament among religious beliefs is not only a philosophical or existential problem; it has also profoundly affected how people from different credos engage one another and, even today,

plays an important role in many interreligious conflicts, quarrels, and even holy wars.<sup>2</sup> As the theologian Hans Küng (1988) famously said, there can be “no world peace without peace among religions” (p. 194) to which one may add that “there might not be complete peace among religions without ending the competition among religions.”

Typical responses to the scandal of religious plurality tend to fall along a continuum between two drastically opposite positions. At one end of the spectrum, materialistic, scientifically-minded, and “nonreligionist” scholars retort to the plurality of religious world views to downplay or dismiss altogether the cognitive value of religious knowledge claims, regarding religions as cultural fabrications which, like art pieces or culinary dishes, can be extremely diverse and even personally edifying but never the bearers of any “objective” truth whatsoever (e.g., Rorty, 1998). At the other end, spiritual practitioners, theologians, and “religionist” scholars vigorously defend the cognitive value of religion, addressing the problem of religious pluralism by either endorsing the exclusive (or ultimately superior) truth of their preferred tradition or developing universalist understandings that seek to reconcile the conflicting spiritual truths within one or another encompassing system. Despite their professed

integrative stance, most universalist visions of human spirituality tend to distort the essential message of the various religious traditions, hierarchically favoring certain spiritual truths over others and raising serious obstacles for interreligious harmony and open-ended spiritual inquiry (see Ferrer, 2000, 2002).

My intention in this essay is to first uncover the spiritual narcissism characteristic of our shared historical approach to religious diversity, as well as briefly discuss the shortcomings of the main forms of religious pluralism that have been proposed as its antidote. Second, I introduce the “participatory turn” in the study of spirituality and religion, showing how it can help to cultivate a fresh appreciation of religious diversity that avoids the dogmatism and competitiveness involved in privileging any particular tradition over the rest without falling into cultural-linguistic or naturalistic reductionisms. Then I offer some practical orientations to assess the validity of spiritual truths and outline the contours of a participatory critical theory of religion. To conclude, I explore different scenarios for the future of religion and suggest that a participatory approach to religion not only fosters our spiritual individuation in the context of a common human spiritual family, but also turns the problem of religious plurality into a celebration of the critical spirit of pluralism.

### Uncovering Our Spiritual Narcissism

A few marginal voices notwithstanding (e.g., see Lings & Minnaar, 2007; Oldmeadow, 2004; Stoddart, 2008), the search for a common core, universal essence, or single metaphysical world behind the multiplicity of religious experiences and cosmologies can be regarded as over. Whether guided by the exclusivist intuitionism of traditionalism or the fideism of theological agendas, the outcome—and too often the intended goal—of such universalist projects was unambiguous: the privileging of one particular spiritual or religious system over all others. In addition to universalism, the other attempts to explain religious divergences have typically taken one of the three following routes: exclusivism (“my religion is the only true one, the rest are false”), inclusivism (“my religion is the most accurate or complete, the rest are lower or partial”), and ecumenical pluralism (“there may be real differences between our religions, but all lead ultimately to the same end”).

The many problems of religious exclusivism are well known. It easily fosters religious intolerance, fundamentalist tendencies, and prevents a reciprocal and symmetrical encounter with the other where divergent

spiritual viewpoints may be regarded as enriching options or genuine alternatives. In the wake of the scope of contemporary theodiversity, the defense of the absolute cognitive superiority of one single tradition over all others is more dubious than ever. Inclusivist and ecumenically pluralist approaches suffer from similar difficulties in that they tend to conceal claims for the supremacy of one or another religious tradition, ultimately collapsing into the dogmatism of exclusivist stances (e.g., see Ferrer, 2002; Halbfass, 1998). Consider, for example, the Dalai Lama’s defense of the need of a plurality of religions. While celebrating the existence of different religions to accommodate the diversity of human karmic dispositions, he contends that final spiritual liberation can only be achieved through the emptiness practices of his own school of Tibetan Buddhism, implicitly situating all other spiritual choices as lower—a view that he believes all other Buddhists and religious people will eventually accept (D’Costa, 2000). Other examples of inclusivist approaches include such diverse proposals as Kukai’s ranking of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist systems as progressive stages towards his own Shingon Buddhism (Hakeda, 1972); Swami Vivekananda’s proclamation of (neo-)Vedanta as the universal “eternal religion” (*sanatana dharma*) that uniquely encompasses all others (Halbfass, 1988); the Baha’i belief in its being the last and highest, though not final, revelation of a succession of religions (Coward, 2000); and Wilber’s (1995) arrangement of all religious goals as hierarchical stages of spiritual development culminating in his own articulation of a nondual realization.<sup>3</sup> In a way, the various approaches to religious diversity—exclusivism, inclusivism, and ecumenical pluralism (more about the latter in a moment)—can be situated along a continuum ranging from more gross to more subtle forms of “spiritual narcissism,” which ultimately elevate one’s favored tradition or spiritual choice as superior.<sup>4</sup>

The bottom line is that, explicitly or implicitly, religious traditions have persistently looked down upon one another, each believing that their truth is more complete or final, and that their path is the only or most effective one to achieve full salvation or enlightenment. The following section considers several types of religious pluralism have been proposed in response to this disconcerting situation.

### The Varieties of Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism comes in many guises and fashions. Before suggesting a participatory remedy to our spiritual narcissism in dealing with religious

difference, I critically review here four major types of religious pluralism: ecumenical, soteriological, postmodern, and metaphysical.

As noted, *ecumenical pluralism* admits genuine differences among religious beliefs and practices, but maintains that they all ultimately lead to the same end (see, e.g., Hick & Knitter, 1987; Hick, 1989). The problem with this apparently tolerant stance is that, whenever its proponents describe such religious goal, they invariably do it in terms that favor one or another specific tradition (e.g., God, the transcendentally Real, emptiness, and so forth). This is why ecumenical pluralism not only degenerates into exclusivist or inclusivist stances, but also trivializes the encounter with “the other”—after all, what is really the point of engaging in interfaith exchange if we *already know* that we are all heading toward the same goal? A classical example of this stance is the theologian Karl Rahner’s (2001) famous proposal that practitioners of other religions could attain salvation by walking different paths because, though unknown to them, they are “anonymous Christians” who can be delivered through God’s grace. The contradictions of pluralistic approaches that postulate an equivalent end-point for all traditions have been pointed out by students of religion for decades (e.g., Cobb, 1975, 1999; D’Costa, 1990; Panikkar, 1987, 1995). A genuine religious pluralism, it is today widely accepted, needs to acknowledge the existence of alternative religious aims, and putting all religions on a single scale will not do it.

In response to these concerns, a number of scholars have proposed a *soteriological pluralism* that envisions a multiplicity of irreducible “salvations” associated with the various religious traditions (e.g., Heim, 1995). Due to their diverse ultimate visions of reality and personhood, religious traditions stress the cultivation of particular human potentials or competences (e.g., access to visionary worlds, mind/body integration, expansion of consciousness, transcendence of the body, and so forth), which naturally leads to distinct human transformations and states of freedom. A variant of this approach is the postulation of a *limited* number of independent but equiprimordial religious goals and *conceptually possible* ultimate realities, for example, theism (in its various forms), monistic nondualism (à la Advaita Vedanta), and process nondualism (such as that of Yogacara Buddhism) (Kaplan, 2002). The soteriological approach to religious difference, however, remains agnostic about the ontological status of spiritual realities, being therefore pluralistic only at a phenomenological level

(i.e., admitting different human spiritual fulfillments), but not at an ontological or metaphysical one (i.e., at the level of spiritual realities).

The combination of pluralism and metaphysical agnosticism is also a chief feature of the *postmodern* solution to the problem of conflicting truth claims in religion. The translation of religious realities into cultural-linguistic fabrications allows postmodern scholars to explain interreligious differences as the predictable upshot of the world’s various religious beliefs, practices, vocabularies, or language games (Cuppit, 1998; Flood, 1999). In other words, the various gods and goddesses, spirits and ancestors, archetypes and visionary worlds, are nothing but discursive entities (Braun, 2000). Postmodern pluralism denies or brackets the ontological status of the referents of religious language, which are usually seen as meaningless, obscure, or parasitic upon the despotic dogmatism of traditional religious metaphysics. Further, even if such spiritual realities were to exist, the human cognitive apparatus would only allow knowledge of culturally and linguistically mediated experience of them (e.g., Katz, 1998). Postmodern pluralism recognizes a genuine plurality of religious goals, but at the cost of either stripping religious claims of any extra-linguistic veridicality or denying that one can know such truths even if they exist.

A notable exception to this trend is the *metaphysical* or *deep pluralism* advocated by a number of process theologians (Cobb, 1999; Griffin, 2005). Relying on Whitehead’s distinction between “God’s unchanging Being” and “God’s changing Becoming,” this proposal defends the existence of two ontological or metaphysical religious ultimates to which the various traditions are geared: God, which corresponds to the Biblical Yaveh, the Buddhist Sambhogakaya, and Advaita Vedanta’s Saguna Brahman; and Creativity, which corresponds to Meister Eckhart’s Godhead, the Buddhist emptiness and Dharmakaya, and Advaita Vedanta’s Nirguna Brahman. A third possible ultimate, the cosmos itself, is at times added in connection to Taoism and indigenous spiritualities that venerate the sacredness of the natural world. In addition to operating within a theistic framework adverse to many traditions, however, deep pluralism not only establishes highly dubious equivalencies among religious goals (e.g., Buddhist emptiness and Advaita’s Nirguna Brahman), but also forces the rich diversity of religious ultimates into the arguably Procrustean molds of God’s “unchanging Being” and “changing Becoming.”

### The Participatory Turn

Can the plurality of religions be taken seriously today without reducing them to either cultural-linguistic by-products or incomplete facets of a single spiritual truth or universe? I believe this is possible and in the anthology I recently co-edited with Jacob H. Sherman, we are calling this third way possible the “participatory turn” in the study of religion and spirituality (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008).

Briefly, the participatory turn argues for an understanding of the sacred that approaches religious phenomena, experiences, and insights as *cocreated* events. Such events can engage the entire range of human faculties (e.g., rational, imaginal, somatic, aesthetic, contemplative, and so forth) with the creative unfolding of reality or the mystery in the enactment—or “bringing forth”—of ontologically rich religious worlds. Put somewhat differently, we suggest that religious and spiritual phenomena are “participatory” in the sense that they can emerge from the interaction of all human attributes and a creative spiritual power or dynamism of life. More specifically, we propose that religious worlds and phenomena, such as the Kabbalistic four realms, the various Buddhist cosmologies, or Teresa’s seven mansions, come into existence out of a process of *participatory cocreation* between human multidimensional cognition and the generative force of life and/or the spirit.<sup>5</sup>

But, how far can one go in affirming the cocreative role of the human in spiritual matters? To be sure, most scholars may be today ready to allow that particular spiritual states (e.g., the Buddhist *jhanas*, Teresa’s mansions, or the various yogi *samadhis*), spiritual visions (e.g., Ezekiel’s Divine Chariot, Hildegard’s visionary experience of the Trinity, or Black Elk’s Great Vision), and spiritual landscapes or cosmologies (e.g., the Buddha lands, the Heavenly Halls of Merkavah mysticism, or the diverse astral domains posited by Western esoteric schools) are largely or entirely constructed. Nevertheless, I suspect that many religious scholars and practitioners may feel more reticent in the case of spiritual entities (such as the Tibetan *daikinis*, the Christian angels, or the various Gods and Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon) and, in particular, in the case of ultimate principles and personae (such as the Biblical Yaveh, the Buddhist *sunyata*, or the Hindu Brahman). Would not accepting their cocreated nature undermine not only the claims of most traditions, but also the very ontological autonomy and integrity of the mystery itself?

Given the rich variety of incompatible spiritual ultimates and the contradictions involved in any conciliatory strategy, I submit that it is only by promoting the cocreative role of human cognition to the very heart and summit of each spiritual universe that it is possible to preserve the ultimate unity of the mystery—otherwise one faces the arguably equally unsatisfactory alternative of having to either reduce spiritual universes to fabrications of the human imagination or posit an indefinite number of isolated spiritual universes. By conceiving spiritual universes *and* ultimates as the outcome of a process of participatory cocreation between human multidimensional cognition and an undetermined spiritual power, however, the ultimate unity of the mystery is rescued while simultaneously affirming its ontological richness and overcoming the reductionisms of cultural-linguistic, psychological, and biologically naturalistic explanations of religion.

What I am proposing here, then, is that *different spiritual ultimates can be cocreated through intentional or spontaneous participation in a dynamic and undetermined mystery, spiritual power, and/or generative force of life or reality*. This participatory perspective does not contend that there are two, three, or any limited quantity of pre-given spiritual ultimates, but rather that the radical openness, interrelatedness, and creativity of the mystery and/or the cosmos allows for the participatory cocreation of an indefinite number of self-disclosures of reality and corresponding religious worlds. These worlds are not statically closed but fundamentally dynamic and open to the continued transformation resulting (at least in part) from the creative impact of human visionary imagination and religious endeavors.

In the context of the dilemmas posed by religious pluralism, one of the advantages of a participatory account of religious knowing is that it frees religious thinking from the presupposition of a single, predetermined ultimate reality that binds it to reductionistic, exclusivist, or dogmatic formulations (for an extended discussion, see Ferrer, 2008a). Once one does away with this assumption, on the one hand, and recognizes the ontologically creative role of spiritual cognition, on the other, the multiplicity of religious truth claims stops being a source of metaphysical agnosticism and becomes entirely natural, perhaps even essential. If one chooses to see the various spiritual ultimates not as competing to match a pre-given spiritual referent but as creative transformations of an undetermined mystery, then the conflict over claims of alternative religious

truths vanishes like a mirage. Rather than being a source of conflict or a cause for considerate tolerance, the diversity of spiritual truths and cosmologies becomes a reason for wonder and celebration—wonder inspired by the inexhaustible creative power of the mystery and celebration in the wake of our participatory role in such creativity, as well as of the emerging possibilities for mutual enrichment that arise out of the encounter of traditions. In short, a participatory approach to religion seeks *to enact with body, mind, heart, and consciousness a creative spirituality that lets a thousand spiritual flowers bloom.*

Although this may at first sound like a rather “anything goes” approach to religious claims, I hold to the contrary that recognizing a diversity of cocreated religious worlds in fact asks one to be more perspicuous in discerning their differences and merits. Because such worlds are not simply given but involve humans as agents and cocreators, no one is off the ethical hook where religion is concerned; instead, cosmo-political and moral choices are inevitable in all religious actions. The next two sections elaborate on this crucial point.

### **The Validity of Spiritual Truths**

**I**t cannot be stressed strongly enough that rejecting a pre-given spiritual ultimate referent does not prevent humans from making qualitative distinctions in spiritual matters. To be sure, like beautiful porcelains made out of amorphous clay, traditions cannot be qualitatively ranked according to their accuracy in representing some imagined (accessible or inaccessible) original template. However, this does not mean that one cannot discriminate between more evocative, skillful, or sophisticated artifacts.

Whereas the participatory turn renders meaningless the postulation of qualitative distinctions among traditions according to a priori doctrines or a prearranged hierarchy of spiritual insights, these comparative grounds can be sought in a variety of practical fruits (existential, cognitive, emotional, interpersonal), perhaps anchored around two basic orientations: the *egocentrism test* (i.e., to what extent does a spiritual tradition, path, or practice free its practitioners from gross and subtle forms of narcissism and self-centeredness?) and the *dissociation test* (i.e., to what extent does a spiritual tradition, path, or practice foster the integrated blossoming of all dimensions of the person?).<sup>6</sup> As I see it, this approach invites a more nuanced, contextual, and complex evaluation of religious claims based on the recognition that traditions,

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like human beings, are likely to be both “higher” and “lower” in relation to one another, but *in different regards* (e.g., fostering contemplative competences, ecological awareness, mind/body integration, and so forth). It is important then not to understand the ideal of a reciprocal and symmetrical encounter among traditions in terms of a trivializing or relativistic egalitarianism. By contrast, a truly symmetrical encounter can only take place when traditions open themselves to teach and be taught, fertilize and be fertilized, transform and be transformed.

Two important qualifications need to be made about these suggested guidelines. The first relates to the fact that some spiritual paths and liberations may be more adequate for different psychological and cultural dispositions (as well as for the same individual at distinct developmental junctures), but this does not make them *universally* superior or inferior. The well-known four yogas of Hinduism (reflection, devotion, action, and experimentation) come quickly to mind in this regard, as do other spiritual typologies that can be found in other traditions. The second qualification refers to the complex difficulties inherent in any proposal of cross-cultural criteria for religious truth. It should be obvious, for example, that my emphasis on the overcoming of narcissism and self-centeredness, although arguably central to most spiritual traditions, may not be shared by all. Even more poignantly, it is likely that most religious traditions would not rank too highly in terms of the dissociation test; for example, gross or subtle forms of repression, control, or strict regulation of the human body and its vital/sexual energies (versus the promotion of their autonomous maturation, integration, and participation in spiritual knowing) are rather the norm in most past and present contemplative endeavors (see Ferrer, 2008b).

### **Toward A Participatory Critical Theory of Religion**

**T**he embodied and integrative impetus of the participatory turn is foundational for the development of a participatory critical theory of religion. From a participatory standpoint, *the history of religions can be read, in part, as a story of the joys and sorrows of human dissociation.* From ascetically enacted mystical ecstasies to world-denying monistic realizations, and from heart-expanding sexual sublimation to the moral struggles (and failures) of ancient and modern mystics and spiritual teachers, human spirituality has been characterized by an overriding impulse toward a

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liberation of consciousness that has too often taken place at the cost of the underdevelopment, subordination, or control of essential human attributes such as the body or sexuality. Even contemporary religious leaders and teachers across traditions tend to display an uneven development that arguably reflects this generalized spiritual bias; for example, high level cognitive and spiritual functioning combined with ethically conventional or even dysfunctional interpersonal, emotional, or sexual behavior (see, e.g., Feuerstein, 2006; Forsthoefel & Humes, 2005; Storr, 1996)

Furthermore, it is likely that many past and present spiritual visions are to some extent the product of dissociated ways of knowing—ways that emerge predominantly from accessing certain forms of transcendent consciousness but in disconnection from more immanent spiritual sources. For example, spiritual visions that hold that body and world are ultimately illusory (or lower, or impure, or a hindrance to spiritual liberation) arguably derive from states of being in which the sense of self mainly or exclusively identifies with subtle energies of consciousness, getting uprooted from the body and immanent spiritual life. From this existential stance, it is understandable, and perhaps inevitable, that both body and world are seen as illusory or defective. In contrast, when our somatic and vital worlds are invited to participate in our spiritual lives, making our sense of identity permeable to not only transcendent awareness but also immanent spiritual energies, then body and world become spiritually significant realities that are recognized as crucial for human and cosmic spiritual fruition.

This account does not seek to excoriate past spiritualities, which may have been at times—though by no means always—perfectly legitimate and perhaps even necessary in their particular times and contexts, but merely to highlight the historical rarity of a fully embodied or integrative spirituality (Ferrer, 2008b). At any rate, a participatory approach to spirituality and religion needs to be critical of oppressive, repressive, and dissociative religious beliefs, attitudes, practices, and institutional dynamics.

#### **The Future of Religion: Four Scenarios**

In light of our previous discussion, it is possible to consider at least four scenarios for the future of world religion and spirituality. As we go through them, I invite you, the reader, to not only consider their plausibility but also inquire into what particular scenario you feel is the most desirable: What would you like to see happening?

#### **A Global Religion**

The first scenario portrays the emergence of a single world religion for humankind.<sup>7</sup> This global religion may stem from either the triumph of one spiritual tradition over the rest (e.g., Catholic Christianity or the Dalai Lama's school of Tibetan Buddhism) or some kind of synthesis of many or most traditions (e.g., the Baha'i faith or Wilber's neo-perennialism). The former possibility would entail that religious practitioners—except those from the “winning” tradition—recognize the erroneous or partial nature of their beliefs and embrace the superior truth of an already existent tradition. The latter means that most or all traditions would ultimately come together or be integrated—whether in an evolutionary, hierarchical, systemic, or perspectival fashion—into one spiritual megasystem embraced by all religious people. A contemporary defense of a converging world faith emerging from interreligious interactions is offered by Braybrooke (1998).

#### **Mutual Transformation of Religions**

In this scenario, the various religious traditions conserve their identity, but are enriched and transformed through a variety of interreligious exchanges and interactions (Cobb, 1996; Streng, 1993). This approach paves the way for not only the adoption of practices from other traditions (e.g., Gross & Muck, 2003), but also the emergence of deeper understandings and even revisions of one's beliefs in light of others' religious perspectives (e.g., Ingram & Streng, 1986)—a phenomenon aptly described by Sharma (2005) in terms of “reciprocal illumination.” A historical precursor of this possibility can be found in religious syncretism (i.e., the mixture of two or more traditions), such as the Haitian Vodou's blending of Christianity and African traditions or the Brazilian Santo Daime Church's incorporation of the indigenous use of ayahuasca into a Christian container. Today this religious cross-fertilization is visibly taking place in the interfaith dialogue, the New Age movement, and a legion of eclectic and integrative spiritual groups. Interestingly, the Jesuit thinker Teilhard de Chardin believed that this cross-fertilization would lead to a “global consciousness” characterized by religious “creative unions in which diversity is not erased but intensified” (Cousins, 1992, p. 8).

Within this scenario I would also locate the growing phenomenon of “multiple religious participation” (Berthrong, 1999), in which an individual partakes in the practices and belief systems of more than one tradition, leading to a “multiple” or “hyphenated religious identity,”

such as Jewish-Buddhist, Hindu-Christian, Buddhist-Taoist, and so forth. Also related to this picture is the ongoing renewal of many religious traditions through cross-cultural encounters, a trend that can be discerned in contemporary American Buddhism, Neo-Hindu applied spiritualities, and the novel social understandings of salvation in Asia (Clarke, 2006). What is more, some sociologists claim that this phenomenon may also be impacting secular culture. This is the gist of Campbell's (1999) "Easternization thesis," according to which the West is changing its ethos via the importation of Eastern religions and adopting Eastern ideas and practices such as interconnectedness, reincarnation, or meditation (see also Bruce, 2002; Hamilton, 2002). A contemporary way to speak of all these richly transformative religious and cultural interactions is in terms of processes of "cosmological hybridization" (Lahood, 2008), which can be not only conceptual (of spiritual beliefs and understandings), but also praxis-oriented (of spiritual practices) and even visionary (of spiritual ontologies and cosmologies).

### **Interspiritual Wisdom**

Another scenario is the affirmation or emergence of a number of spiritual principles, teachings, or values endorsed by all religious traditions. Kung's (1991) proposal for a global ethics heralded this possibility, but it was the late Christian author Teasdale (1999) who offered its most compelling articulation in terms of a "universal mysticism" grounded in the practice of "interspirituality" or "the sharing of ultimate experiences across traditions" (p. 26). Though seeking to avoid the homogenization of traditions into one single global religion, Teasdale used the traditional metaphor of the blind men and the elephant to convey his perspectival account of a given "ultimate reality" of which all religions have partial perceptions that nonetheless constitute paths leading to the same summit. Developing a similar intuition but eschewing Teasdale's objectivist assumptions is Lanzetta's (2007) recent proposal for an "intercontemplative" global spirituality that affirms the interdependence of spiritual principles and can "give birth to new traditions and spiritual paths in the crucible of dialogue" (p. 118); as well as Forman's (2004) articulation of a "trans-traditional spirituality" that feeds on the insights of all religious traditions, moving beyond the confines of any particular credo.

### **Spirituality without Religion**

This scenario is composed by the impressive number of contemporary developments—from secular to postmodern to Jungian and from naturalistic to New

Age spiritualities—that advocate for the cultivation of a spiritual life free from traditional religious beliefs and/or transcendent or supernatural postulates (e.g., Caputo, 2001; Cupitt, 1997; Elkins, 1998; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Van Ness, 1996). Two prominent trends within this category are postmodern secular (and non-secular) spiritualities and the New Age movement. Though the former rejects or remains agnostic about supernatural or transcendent sources and the latter tends to uncritically accept them, both join hands in their affirmation of the primacy of individual choice and experience, as well as in their criticism of religious dogmas and authoritarian institutions. Calls for a "democratization of spirit" (Tacey, 2004), a "direct path" to the divine (Harvey, 2009), or the reclaiming of one's "inner spiritual authority" (Heron, 2006) are intimately linked with these developments. One could also locate here scholarly spiritualities that combine experiential participation and critical reason (e.g., Ferrer & Sherman, 2008; Kripal, 2001; Neville, 2002), most forms of religious naturalism (e.g., Kauffman, 2008), modern "religious quests" (Roof, 1999), "secular surrogates" for religion (Ziolkowski, 2007), "postsecular spiritualities" (e.g., King, 2009), and proposals for a "humanizing spirituality" (Lesser, 1999). Expressions such as "spiritual but not religious" (Fuller, 2001), "religion without religion" (Caputo, 1997), "religion of no religion" (Kripal, 2007), and "believing without belonging" (Taylor, 2007) capture well the essential character of this orientation.

### **A Participatory Vision of the Future of Religion**

As should be obvious, with the possible exception of a homogenizing global religion, the above scenarios are not mutually exclusive, and it is likely that they will all become key players in shaping the future of world religion in the next millennium. And yet, there is something intuitively appealing in the search for spiritual unity, and here I would like to outline how a participatory perspective can not only respond to this concern, but also house most of the above scenarios while avoiding the hidden spiritual narcissism and other ideological pitfalls of traditional and modern universalisms.

To begin with, to embrace the human participatory role in spiritual knowing may lead to a shift from searching for a global religion organized around a single ultimate vision to recognizing an already existent spiritual human family that branches out from the same creative root. In other words, traditions may be able to find their longed-for unity not so much in an all-

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encompassing megasystem or superreligion, but in their common roots—that is, in that deep bond constituted by the undetermined dimension of the mystery or generative power of life in which all traditions participate in the cocreation of their spiritual insights and cosmologies. Like members of a healthy family, religious people may then stop attempting to impose their particular beliefs on others and might instead become a supportive and enriching force for the “spiritual individuation” of other practitioners, both within and outside their traditions.

This mutual empowerment of spiritual creativity may lead to the emergence of not only a rich variety of coherent spiritual perspectives that can *potentially* be equally aligned to the mystery,<sup>8</sup> but also of a human community formed by fully differentiated spiritual individuals. In this context, individual and collective spiritual perspectives can mutually illuminate and transform one another through countless conceptual, practical, and visionary processes of cosmological hybridization. And this access to an increased number of spiritual insights, practices, and visionary worlds may in turn foster our spiritual individuation, as it will expand the range of choices available for individuals in the cocreation of their spiritual path (cf. Heron, 2006). As Tacey (2004) stated, contemporary spiritual culture is already moving in this direction: “Spirituality has become plural, diverse, manifold, and seems to have countless forms of expression, many of which are highly individualistic and personal” (p. 38). It is important to sharply distinguish between the modern hyper-individualistic mental ego and the participatory selfhood forged in the sacred fire of spiritual individuation. Whereas the disembodied modern self is plagued by alienation, dissociation, and narcissism, a spiritually individuated person has an embodied, integrated, connected, and permeable identity whose high degree of differentiation, far from being isolating, actually allows him or her to enter into a deeply conscious communion with others, nature, and the multidimensional cosmos.

In this scenario, it will no longer be a contested issue whether practitioners endorse a theistic, nondual, or naturalistic account of the mystery, or whether their chosen path of spiritual cultivation is meditation, social engagement, conscious parenting, entheogenic shamanism, or communion with nature.<sup>9</sup> The new spiritual bottom line, in contrast, will be the degree into which each spiritual path fosters *both an overcoming of self-centeredness and a fully embodied integration that make us not only more sensitive to the needs of others, nature, and*

*the world, but also more effective cultural and planetary transformative agents in whatever contexts and measure life or spirit calls us to be.*

The affirmation of our shared spiritual family may be accompanied by the search for a common—nonabsolutist and contextually sensitive—global ethics (Küng, 1991; Küng & Kuschel, 1993). It is fundamental to stress, however, that this global ethics cannot arise out of our highly ambiguous moral religious past, but needs to be crafted in the tapestry of contemporary interreligious dialogue and cooperative spiritual inquiry. In other words, it is likely that any possible future global ethics will not be grounded in our past spiritual history but in our critical reflection on such history in the context of our present-day moral intuitions (for example, about the pitfalls of religious dogmatism, fanaticism, narcissism, and dissociation). As Smart (2003) points out, however, it may be more sensible to search for a global pattern of civility that “does not lay down who is right and who is wrong but rather determines how peacefully the differing groups and beliefs can live together” (pp. 130-31).<sup>10</sup> In any case, besides its obvious relevance for regulating cross-cultural and interreligious conflicts, the adoption of global guidelines—including guidelines about how to deal with disagreement—is crucial to address some of the most challenging issues of our global village, such as the exploitation of women and children, the increasing polarization of rich and poor, the environmental crisis, coping with cultural and ethnic diversity, and fairness in international business.

Let me draw this section to a close with the following: Situated at the creative nexus of immanent and transcendent spiritual energies, spiritually individuated persons might become unique embodiments of the mystery, capable of cocreating novel spiritual understandings, practices, and even expanded states of freedom. If one accepts this approach, it is plausible to conjecture that the religious future of humanity may bear witness to a greater-than-ever plurality of creative visionary and existential spiritual developments grounded in a deeply felt sense of spiritual unity. This account would be consistent with a view of the mystery, the cosmos, and/or spirit as moving from a primordial state of undifferentiated unity towards one of infinite differentiation-in-communion. If I may wear my visionary hat just a bit longer, I would say that *the future of religion will be shaped by spiritually individuated persons engaged in processes of cosmological hybridization in the context of a common spiritual family that honors a global order of respect and civility.* Or, to return to my

earlier invitation to the reader, this is the scenario I would personally like to see emerging in the world and that I am thus committed to actualize.

### Conclusion

To conclude, I propose that the question of religious pluralism can be satisfactorily answered by affirming the generative power of life or the mystery, as well as of our participatory role in its creative unfolding. The time has come, I believe, to let go of spiritually narcissistic tendencies and hold all spiritual convictions in a more humble, discriminating, and perhaps spiritually seasoned manner—one that recognizes the plausibility of a multiplicity of spiritual truths and religious worlds while offering grounds for the critical appraisal of dissociative, repressive, and/or oppressive religious expressions, beliefs, and practices. To envision religious manifestations as the outcome of our cocreative communion with an undetermined spiritual power or dynamism of life allows one to affirm a plurality of ontologically rich religious worlds without falling into any of today's fashionable reductionisms. The many challenges raised by the plurality of religions can only be met by embracing fully the critical spirit of pluralism.

In addition, a participatory approach allows the discernment of the long-searched-for spiritual unity of humankind, not in any global spiritual megasystem or integrative conceptual framework, but in our lived communion with the generative dimension of the mystery. In other words, the spiritual unity of humankind is not to be found in the Heavens (i.e., in mental, visionary, or even mystical visions) but deep down into the Earth (i.e., in our vital, embodied, and cocreative connection with our shared roots). The recognition of our common roots may allow us to firmly grow by branching out in countless creative directions without losing a sense of deep communion across differences. Such recognition may also engender naturally a sense of belonging to a common spiritual family committed to fostering the spiritual individuation of its members and the transformation of the world.

### Notes

1. Parts of this article have been adapted from J. N. Ferrer and J. H. Sherman (Eds.), *The participatory turn: Spirituality, mysticism, religious studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008). The author would like to thank Jacob H. Sherman for his helpful feedback and editorial advice.

2. Although it would be naïve to claim that these conflicts are mostly driven by competitive religious sentiments (social, economic, political, and ethnic issues are often primary), the rhetoric of religious exclusivism or superiority is widely used to fuel fundamentalist attitudes and justify interreligious violence across the globe.
3. For an extended discussion of the shortcomings of Wilber's neoperennialism, see Ferrer (2002). Wilber's ranking of nondual mysticism over theism and other contemplative paths has been also critiqued by Helminiak (1998), Adams (2002), and, perhaps most effectively, by Schlamm (2001), who uses Rawlinson's (1997) nuanced taxonomy of mystical traditions to show the arbitrariness and doctrinal nature of such rankings.
4. That the Dalai Lama himself, arguably a paragon of spiritual humility, altruism, and open-mindedness, holds this view strongly suggests, I believe, that spiritual narcissism is not necessarily associated with a narcissistic personality but rather a deeply-seated tendency buried in the collective realms of the human unconscious. Ethnocentricity—the culturally inculcated or indoctrinated belief in cultural/religious superiority—very likely contributes to the structuring of this pervasive tendency.
5. Note that virtually all the same participatory implications for both the study of religion and individual spiritual cultivation can be practically drawn if one were to conceive, or translate the term, *spirit* in a naturalistic fashion as an emergent creative potential of life, nature, or reality. Methodologically, the challenge to be met is to account for a process or dynamism underlying the creative elements of religious visionary imagination that cannot be entirely explicated by appealing to biological or cultural-linguistic factors. Whether such creative source is a transcendent spirit or immanent life will likely be always a contested issue, but one, I believe, that does not damage the general claims of the participatory turn. My personal position is that (1) human spirituality can be understood as a process of participatory cocreation with both transcendent and immanent spiritual sources; (2) attention to the body and its vital energies gives the most direct access to immanent spiritual life; (3) immanent life stores the most generative potentials of spirit; and, therefore, (4) the active participation of embodied dimensions in unconstrained

spiritual inquiry may lead to an increased plurality of creative existential and visionary developments. Though admittedly speculative, this proposal is in accord with many mystical teachings, such as those regarding the creative role of the primordial *shakti* or *kundalini* in Hindu tantra, the (re-)generative power attributed to the *chi* energy in Taoism, or even the motivation behind certain celibate unions (*virginiae subintroductae*) in the early church. On the relationship between embodiment and spiritual creativity, see Ferrer (2008b).

6. It is probably sensible to supplement these orientations with not only a sharp cultural and contextual sensitivity, but also what one might call the *retrospective test*, which alludes to the likely need—at least in certain cases—of allowing the pass of time before assessing the actual fruits of specific spiritual paths and insights. This seems crucial, especially in light of certain dynamics of psychospiritual development, for example, in cases in which—due to either biographical factors or intrinsic features of particular processes of spiritual opening—states or stages of self-inflation or even extreme dissociation may be a necessary step in the path towards a genuinely integrated selflessness. I am indebted to Michael Washburn (personal communication) for this important qualification.
7. On the very different phenomenon of “religious globalization” (i.e., diasporas, transnational religions, and religions of plural societies), see Juergensmeyer (2003).
8. I am stressing here the qualifier “potentially” to suggest that every spiritual tradition, even those traditionally promulgating arguably dissociative (or unilaterally transcendentalist, or disembodied, or world-denying) doctrines and practices can be creatively (and legitimately, I would argue) re-envisioned from the perspective of more holistic understandings. Whicher’s (1999) integrative, embodied reinterpretation of Patanjali’s dualistic system of classical yoga—whose aim was the self-identification with a pure consciousness (*purusa*) in isolation (*kaivalyam*) from all possible physical or mental contents (*prakrti*)—offers an excellent example of such hermeneutic and spiritual possibilities.
9. This account does not exclude, of course, the possibility to complement, either in a concurrent or sequential fashion, one’s favored spiritual path with

practices or engagements that cultivate different human potentials and attributes. For participatory perspectives on integral transformative practice and education, see Ferrer (2003) and Ferrer, Romero, and Albareda (2005).

10. Smart (2003) is understandably suspicious of the possible ideological problems inherent to the imposition of a single ethics for the entire world. For discussions of the promises and pitfalls of a global ethics, see Twiss and Grelle (1998).

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