The Participatory Turn
The Plurality of Religions and the Spirit of Pluralism

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Here Jorge Ferrer discusses the shortcomings of the main forms of religious pluralism that have been proposed as an antidote to modernism. He introduces the 'participatory turn' in the study of spirituality and religion, showing how it can help us to develop a fresh appreciation of religious diversity. He then offers some practical orientations to assess the validity of spiritual truths and outlines a participatory critical theory of religion.

When **David B. Barret**, the main editor of the massive *World Christian Encyclopedia*, was asked what he had learnt 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.' 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.' 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. As the theologian Hans Küng famously said, 'there cannot be global peace without peace among religions;' to which we 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. 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. As I showed in *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* (SUNY Press, 2002), however, most universalist visions of human spirituality tend to distort the essential message of the various religious traditions, hierarchically favouring certain spiritual truths over others and raising serious obstacles for interreligious harmony and open-ended spiritual inquiry.

My intention is this essay is to first uncover the spiritual narcissism characteristic of our shared historical approach to religious differences, 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 us to develop a fresh 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. 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 suggest that a participatory approach to religion not only fosters our spiritual individuation in the context of a shared spiritual human family, but also turns the problem of religious plurality into a celebration of the spirit of pluralism.

Uncovering our Spiritual Narcissism

A few marginal voices notwithstanding, 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 defence 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. Consider, for example, the Dalai Lama's defence of the need of a plurality of religions. While celebrating the existence of different religions to accommodate the diversity of human 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. In a way, the various ways we have approached religious diversity – exclusivism, inclusivism, and ecumenical pluralism – can be situated along a continuum ranging from more gross to more subtle forms of 'spiritual narcissism,' which elevate one's favoured tradition or spiritual choice as superior.

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. Let us now look at several types of religious pluralism that 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 we have seen, ecumenical pluralism admits genuine differences among religious beliefs and practices, but maintains that they all ultimately lead to the same end. The problem with this apparently tolerant stance is that, whenever its proponents describe such religious goal, they invariably do it in terms that favour one or another specific tradition (e.g., union with God, nondual liberation, and so forth). This is why ecumenical pluralism not only degenerates into exclusivist or inclusivist stances, but also trivialises the encounter with 'the other' – after all, what's the point of engaging in interfaith exchanges if we already know that we are all heading toward the same goal? The contradictions of pluralistic approaches that postulate an equivalent end-point for all traditions have been pointed out by students of religion for decades. 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. 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 Yogacara Buddhism's). 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. 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, our human cognitive apparatus would only allow us to know our culturally and linguistically mediated experience of them. Postmodern pluralism recognises a genuine plurality of religious goals, but at the cost of either stripping religious claims of any extra-linguistic veridicality or denying that we can know such truths even if they exist.

A notable exception to this trend is the metaphysical or deep pluralism advocated by some process theologians. Relying on Alfred North 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 Yahweh, 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 moulds of God's 'unchanging Being' and 'changing Becoming.'

The Participatory Turn

Can we take the plurality of religions seriously today without reducing them to either cultural-linguistic by-products or incomplete facets of a single spiritual truth or universe? I believe that we can and in the anthology I recently co-edited with Jacob H. Sherman, T*he Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies* (SUNY Press, 2008), we are calling this third way possible the 'participatory turn' in the study of religion and spirituality.

Briefly, the participatory turn argues for an understanding of the sacred that approaches religious phenomena, experiences, and insights as co-created 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.

But, how far are we willing to 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 sunnyata, or the Hindu Brahman). Would not accepting their co-created nature undermine not only the claims of most traditions, but also the very ontological autonomy and integrity of the mystery itself? Response: 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 we can preserve the ultimate unity of the mystery–otherwise we would be facing 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, we rescue the ultimate unity of the mystery 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 co-created 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. Once we do away with this assumption, on the one hand, and recognise 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 we choose 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 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 seek 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 recognising a diversity of co-created religious worlds in fact asks us to be more perspicuous in discerning their differences and merits. Because such worlds are not simply given but involve us as agents and co-creators, we are not off the ethical hook where religion is concerned but instead inevitably make cosmo-political and moral choices in all our religious actions. The next two sections elaborate on this crucial point.

The Validity of Spiritual Truths

It cannot be stressed strongly enough that rejecting a pre-given spiritual ultimate referent does not prevent us 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 we cannot discriminate between more evocative, skilful, 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-centredness?) 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?). As I see it, this approach invites a more nuanced, contextual, and complex evaluation of religious claims based on the recognition that traditions, 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 trivialising or relativistic egalitarianism. By contrast, a truly symmetrical encounter can only take place when traditions open themselves to teach and be taught, fertilise and be fertilised, 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 endeavours.

Towards a Participatory Critical Theory of Religion

The 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 realisations, and from heart-expanding sexual sublimation to the moral struggles (and failures) of ancient and modern mystics and spiritual teachers, human spirituality has been characterised by an overriding impulse toward a 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 generalised spiritual bias; for example, high level cognitive and spiritual functioning combined with ethically conventional or even dysfunctional interpersonal, emotional, or sexual behaviour.

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 only to transcendent awareness but also immanent spiritual energies, then body and world become spiritually significant realities that are recognised 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. 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.

Spiritual Individuation in a Common Spiritual Family

Let me conclude this essay with some reflections on the future of world religion and spirituality. Briefly, to embrace our participatory role in religious knowing may lead to a shift from searching for a global spirituality organised around a single ultimate vision to recognising an already existent spiritual human family that branches out from the same creative root. Traditions may then be able to find their longed-for unity not so much in a single spiritual megasystem or global vision, but in their common roots – that is, in that deep bond constituted by the undetermined dimension of the mystery (or the generative power of life, if one prefers more naturalistic terms) 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, but also a human community formed by fully differentiated spiritual individuals. Situated at the creative nexus of immanent and transcendent spiritual energies, spiritually individuated persons might become unique embodiments of the mystery capable of co-creating novel spiritual understandings, practices, and even expanded states of freedom. If we accept this approach, it is plausible to conjecture that our religious future may bear witness to a greater than ever plurality of creative visionary and existential spiritual developments. 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.

The affirmation of our shared spiritual family may be accompanied by the search for a common – nonabsolutist and contextually sensitive – global ethics. It is important to stress that this global ethics cannot arise out of our highly ambiguous moral religious past, but needs to be forged in the fire of contemporary interreligious dialogue and cooperative spiritual inquiry. In other words, it is likely that any 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). It may be more sensible, however, 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 spiritual traditions can live together. In any case, besides its obvious relevance for regulating cross-cultural and interreligious conflicts, the adoption of global guidelines—including guidelines about how to cope 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.

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 our spiritual narcissism and hold our spiritual convictions in a more humble, discriminating, and perhaps spiritually seasoned manner – one that recognises 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 affirming 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.

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