



The Future of World Religion: A Participatory Dream

Jorge N. Ferrer

Jorge considers four possible scenarios and further develops his preferred scenario with a participatory turn.

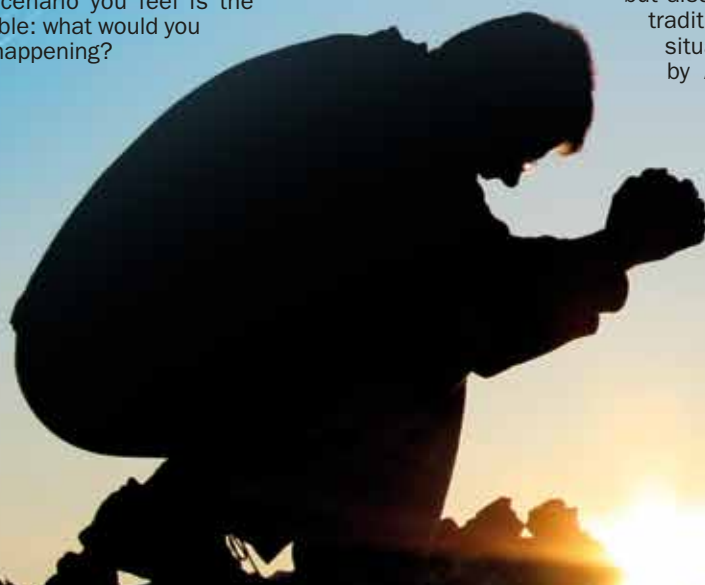
Religious globalisation, new religious movements, transnational religions, global proselytism, religious violence, multiple religious identities, ecumenical services, religious syncretism, secular and postsecular spiritualities—all these are among the many remarkable trends that shape the religious landscape of the beginning of the twenty-first century. Despite the rampant materialism still dominant in an increasingly technocratic world, it is clear that we live in times of rich spiritual diversity, proliferation, and innovation. For instance, when David B. Barret was asked almost ten years ago what he had learned about religious change in the world after several decades of research, he responded, “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 cornucopia, this apotheosis of the religious imagination can also be the source of profound uncertainty and confusion. Where is the world heading religiously speaking? Will humanity ultimately converge into one single religious credo? Or will it rather continue to diversify into countless forms of spiritual expression often at odds with one another? Alternatively, can we envision a middle path capable of reconciling the human longing for spiritual unity, on the one hand, and the developmental and evolutionary pulls toward spiritual individuation and differentiation, on the other? I believe that we can, and in this essay I offer the contours of such a vision after considering four other scenarios for the future of world religion. As we go through them, I invite you, the reader, to consider not only their plausibility but also inquire into what scenario you feel is the most desirable: what would you like to see happening?

Religion in the global village: four scenarios

The first scenario portrays the emergence of a *global religion* or single world faith for humankind. 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 a synthesis of many or most traditions (e.g., the Baha’i faith or New Age spiritual universalism). The former possibility, historically the ambition of most religions, entails the wildly unlikely prospect that religious practitioners, except those from the “winning” tradition, would recognise the erroneous or partial nature of their beliefs and embrace the superior truth of an already existent tradition. The latter means that most traditions would ultimately come together or be integrated into one world faith embraced by all religious people, perhaps as the ultimate upshot of increased interreligious interaction. The dream of a global spirituality—however ecumenically or ideologically conceived—inspires spiritual sensibilities at work in such diverse spheres as interfaith dialogue, transpersonal psychology and integral theory, and many new religious movements.

In the second scenario, which we may call *the mutual transformation of religions*, spiritual traditions conserve their identity but are deeply and endlessly transformed through a variety of interreligious exchanges and interactions. The distinctive feature here is that, as Teilhard de Chardin believed, religious cross-pollination will lead to spiritual creative unions in which diversity is not erased but rather intensified. This vision is consistent with not only the adoption of practices from other traditions by members of different faith communities, but also the deepening or re-envisioning of one’s own tradition in light of other religious perspectives—a situation that, when mutual, was aptly described by Arvind Sharma as “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-fertilisation is visibly taking place in interfaith dialogue, the New Age movement, and a multitude of eclectic and integrative spiritual groups.

Within this scenario, I would also locate the growing phenomenon of "multiple religious participation," 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 clearly discerned in contemporary American Buddhism, Neo-Hindu applied spiritualities, and the novel social understandings of salvation in Asia influenced by Western values. An increasingly fashionable way to speak of all these richly transformative interactions, taken today by many to be historically normative, is in terms of a "cosmological hybridisation" that is not only doctrinal (of spiritual teaching and beliefs), but also sometimes practical (of spiritual techniques) and even visionary (of spiritual ontologies and cosmologies). "We are all hybrids," is the new motto of this emerging spiritual ethos.

A third scenario stems from the affirmation of an *interspiritual wisdom* or a number of spiritual principles, teachings, and values endorsed by all religious groups and traditions. Hans Küng's proposal for a global ethics heralded this possibility, but it was the late Christian author Wayne Teasdale 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. Specifically, Teasdale identified nine elements of such interspiritual wisdom: moral capacity, solidarity with all living beings, deep nonviolence, spiritual practice, humility, mature self-knowledge, simplicity of life, selfless service and compassionate action, and prophetic voice. Developing a similar intuition is Beverly Lanzetta's proposal for an "intercontemplative" global spirituality that affirms the interdependence of spiritual principles and can give birth to new spiritual paths. Also related is Robert Forman's articulation of a "trans-traditional spirituality" that feeds on the teachings of all religious traditions but is not restricted by the confines of any particular credo.

The last scenario, *spirituality without religion*, comprises an impressive number of contemporary developments—from secular to postmodern and from naturalistic to New Age spiritualities—that advocate for the cultivation of a spiritual life free from traditional religious dogmas and/or transcendent or supernatural beliefs. Two prominent trends here are postmodern spiritualities and the New Age movement. Though the former reject or remain agnostic about supernatural or transcendent sources of religion 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 many received religious doctrines and authoritarian institutions. Calls for a democratisation of spirit, a direct path to the divine, or the reclaiming of the individual's inner spiritual authority are intimately linked with this scenario. We could also situate here most forms of religious naturalism, modern religious quests, secular surrogates for religion, and postsecular spiritualities. Expressions such as "spiritual but not religious," "religion without religion," and "believing without belonging" capture well the essential character of this orientation.

A Participatory Dream

As should be obvious, with the possible exception of a hegemonic global religion, the above scenarios are not mutually exclusive, and it is likely that they will all shape the future of world religion in the twenty-first century. And yet, there is something intuitively appealing in the search for spiritual unity, and here I would like to outline how a participatory perspective addresses this concern without hampering the arguably wholesome impulses toward religious diversification and spiritual individuation at play in our times.

Participatory approaches understand religious worlds and experiences as co-created events emerging from the interaction of the entire range of human faculties (the rational, imaginal, somatic, erotic, aesthetic, and so forth) and a dynamic and undetermined mystery, spiritual power, and/or generative force of life or the cosmos. To embrace our participatory role in spiritual knowing may lead to a shift from searching for spiritual unity in a global religion organised around a single vision to recognising an already existent spiritual human family that branches out in numerous directions from the same creative source. In other words, religious people may be able to find their longed-for unity not so much in an all-encompassing megasystem or superreligion, but in their common roots—that is, in that deep bond constituted by the undetermined creative power of spirit, life, and/or the cosmos in which all traditions participate in the bringing forth of their spiritual insights and cosmologies. The recognition of these shared roots naturally paves the way for a global approach to religious diversity that preserves a deep sense of communion across differences.

An important practical consequence of this approach is that, if religious people were to adopt it, they could then, like members of a healthy family, stop attempting to impose their particular beliefs on others and might instead become a supportive force for practitioners' spiritual individuation both within and outside their traditions. This mutual empowerment of spiritual creativity may lead to the emergence not only of a human community formed by fully differentiated spiritual individuals, but also of a rich variety of coherent spiritual perspectives that can be (potentially) equally aligned to the mystery. In this context, different spiritual perspectives can mutually illuminate and transform one another through unlimited doctrinal, practical, and visionary hybridisations. And this access to an increased number of spiritual insights, practices, and visionary worlds may in turn foster further human spiritual individuation as it expands the range of choices available for individuals in the co-creation of their spiritual paths.

It is important here to distinguish sharply 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. (Of course, it may be desirable to complement each pathway with practices that cultivate other human potentials). 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 agents of cultural and planetary transformation in whatever contexts and measure life or spirit calls us to work.

The affirmation of our shared spiritual family naturally calls for the articulation of a common, contextually sensitive global ethics. This global ethics, however, cannot arise exclusively out of our highly ambiguous moral religious past, but needs to be crafted in the tapestry of contemporary interfaith interactions, comparative religious ethics, cross-cultural dialogue on global human rights, and cooperative spiritual inquiry. In other words, it is likely that any viable future global ethics will be grounded not only in our spiritual history, but also 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). Besides its obvious relevance for regulating cross-cultural and interreligious conflicts, the adoption of global guidelines—including guidelines for dealing with disagreement—seems crucial to address some of the most challenging issues of our global village, such as the exploitation of women and children, the increasing polarisation of rich and poor, the environmental crisis, xenophobic responses to cultural and ethnic diversity, and unfairness in international business.

To close this essay in a more hopeful note, I propose that, situated at the creative nexus between the mystery's generative power and our own psycho-cultural dispositions, 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 visionary and existential developments grounded in a deeply felt sense of spiritual unity. Such spiritual unity, however, may not be found in the heavens (i.e., in mental, visionary, or even mystical visions) but deep down into the earth (i.e., in our embodied creative connection with our shared roots). This account would be consistent with a view of the mystery or the cosmos as moving from a primordial state of undifferentiated unity toward one of infinite differentiation-in-communion.

If you let me wear my optimistic visionary hat just a bit longer, I would say that the future of world religion will be shaped by spiritually individuated persons engaged in processes of cosmological hybridisation in the context of a common spiritual family that honours a global order of respect and civility. This is the scenario I would personally like to see emerging in the world and that I am committed to help actualise.

Note: This essay is based on themes more fully developed in Jorge N. Ferrer's new book, *Participation and the Mystery: Transpersonal Essays in Psychology, Education, and Religion* (State University of New York Press, 2017)

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