

Jorge N. Ferrer

Spiritual Knowing

A Participatory Understanding

We live in a world of rich spiritual diversity and innovation. Spiritual traditions offer disparate and often conflicting visions of reality and human nature. To the modern mind, this is profoundly perplexing: How to account for these important differences when most of these traditions are supposedly depicting universal and ultimate truths? In the wake of this predicament, it is both tempting and comforting to embrace universalist or perennialist visions that, in their claim to ‘honor all truths’, seem to bring order to such apparent religious chaos. Despite their professed inclusivist stance, most of the prevailing universalist visions in the modern West tend to distort the essential message of the various religious traditions, hierarchically favoring certain spiritual paths over others and raising serious obstacles for spiritual dialogue and inquiry.¹

In this chapter, I suggest that *spirituality emerges from human cocreative participation in an always dynamic and indeterminate spiritual power*. Furthermore, I argue that this participatory understanding not only makes universal hierarchical rankings of spiritual traditions appear misconceived, but also reestablishes our direct connection with the source of our being and expands the range of valid spiritual choices that we as individuals can make. After offering a participatory account of the nature of spiritual knowing, I provide a pluralistic understanding of not only spiritual paths, but also spiritual liberations and spiritual ultimates. Then I briefly explore some of the emancipatory implications of this participatory turn for interreligious relations, the problem of conflicting truth-claims in religion, the validity of spiritual truths, and spiritual liberation. Finally, I offer some reflections on the dialectic

[1] See Ferrer (2000b, 2001).

between universalism and pluralism in spiritual studies, and present a more relaxed and fertile spiritual universalism that passionately embraces the rich variety of ways in which we can cultivate and embody the sacred in the world.

Before proceeding further, however, I should stress that although I believe that the vision outlined in this chapter is more sensitive to the spiritual evidence and better honors the diversity of ways in which the sense of the sacred can be expressed, by no means do I claim that it conveys the final truth about the Mystery of being in which we creatively participate. In contrast, my main intention is to open avenues to rethink and live spirituality in a different, and I believe more fruitful, light. Likewise, although I believe that this vision is advantageous for both interreligious relations and individual spiritual growth, it should be obvious that its ultimate value is a practical challenge that needs to be appraised by others as they personally engage it and critically decide whether it fosters their spiritual understanding and blossoming. It is in this spirit of offering, invitation, inquiry, and perhaps skillful means that I advance the ideas of this chapter.

The Participatory Nature of Spiritual Knowing

I see spiritual knowing as a participatory activity.² In the context of this chapter, the term 'participatory' has three different but equally important meanings. First, participatory alludes to the fact that spiritual knowing is not objective, neutral, or merely cognitive. On the contrary, *spiritual knowing engages us in a participatory, connected, and often passionate activity that can involve not only the opening of the mind, but also of the body, the heart, and the soul.* Although spiritual events may involve only certain dimensions of human nature, all of them can potentially come into play in the act of *participatory knowing*, from somatic transfiguration to the awakening of the heart, from erotic communion to visionary cocreation, and from contemplative knowing to moral insight, to mention only a few. Second, participatory refers to the role that our individual consciousness plays during most spiritual and transpersonal events. This relation is not one of appropriation, possession, or passive representation of knowledge, but of *communion* and *cocreative participation*. Finally, participatory also refers to the fundamental ontological predicament of human beings in relation to spiritual energies and realities. Human beings are — whether they know it or not — always participating in the self-disclosure of spirit. This participatory predicament is not only the ontological foundation of the other forms of participation,

[2] Ferrer (2000a).

but also the epistemic anchor of spiritual knowledge claims and the moral source of responsible action.

Spiritual phenomena involve participatory ways of knowing that are presential, enactive, and transformative:

1. *Spiritual knowing is presential*: Spiritual knowing is knowing by presence or by identity. In other words, in most spiritual events, *knowing occurs by virtue of being*. To be sure, it may be tempting to explain this knowing by saying that 'one knows X by virtue of being X'. However, this account is misleading because it suggests a knowing subject and a known object, the very epistemic categories that many spiritual events so drastically dismantle. In contrast, spiritual knowledge is often lived as the emergence of an embodied presence pregnant with meaning that transforms both self and world. We could say, then, that *subject and object, knowing and being, epistemology and ontology, are brought together in the very act of spiritual knowing*.

2. *Spiritual knowing is enactive*: Following the groundbreaking work of Varela, Thompson, and Rosch,³ my understanding of spiritual knowing embraces an enactive paradigm of cognition. Spiritual knowing, then, is not a mental representation of pregiven, independent spiritual objects, but an *enaction*, the bringing forth of a world or domain of distinctions cocreated by the different elements involved in the participatory event. Some central elements of spiritual participatory events include individual intentions and dispositions; cultural, religious, and historical horizons; archetypal and subtle energies; and, as we will see, a dynamic and indeterminate spiritual power of inexhaustible creativity.

3. *Spiritual knowing is transformative*: Participatory knowing is transformative at least in the following two senses. First, the participation in a spiritual event brings forth the transformation of self and world. And second, a transformation of self is usually necessary to be able to participate in spiritual knowing, and this knowing, in turn, draws forth the self through its transformative process in order to make possible this participation. Therefore, one needs to be willing to be personally transformed in order to access and fully understand most spiritual phenomena. The epistemological significance of such personal transformation cannot be emphasized enough, especially given that the positivist denial of such a requisite is clearly one of the main obstacles for the epistemic legitimization of spirituality in the modern West.

[3] Varela et al. (1991).

An Ocean with Many Shores

Having outlined my understanding of spiritual knowing, I want now to introduce a participatory vision of human spirituality that, as we will see, discloses a radical plurality not only of spiritual paths, but also of spiritual liberations and spiritual ultimates.

Let us begin our story departing from a classic perennialist account. Perennialism generally postulates a single spiritual ultimate which can be directly known through a transconceptual, and presumably ineffable, metaphysical intuition. This insight, so the story goes, provides us with a direct access to 'things as they really are', that is, the ultimate nature of reality and our innermost identity. Central to this view is the idea that once we lift the manifold veils of cultural distortions, doctrinal beliefs, egoic projections, sense of separate existence, and so forth, the doors of perception are unlocked and the true nature of self and reality is revealed to us in a flashing, liberating insight. From a classic perennialist perspective, every spiritual tradition leads, in practice, to this identical, single vision. Or to use one of the most popular perennialist metaphors, spiritual traditions are like rivers leading to the same ocean.

Although this metaphor is used by perennialists to imply a cross-cultural spiritual ultimate, I would like to suggest an alternative reading. I propose that most traditions do lead to the same ocean, but not the one portrayed on the perennialist canvas. The ocean shared by most traditions does not correspond to a single spiritual referent or to 'things as they really are', but, perhaps more humbly, to *the overcoming of narrow self-centeredness and thus a liberation from corresponding limiting perspectives*.

With perennialism, then, I believe that most genuine spiritual paths involve a gradual transformation from narrow self-centeredness towards a fuller participation in the Mystery of existence. To be sure, this self-centeredness can be variously overcome (e.g., through the compassion-raising insight into the interpenetration of all phenomena in Mahayana Buddhism, the knowledge of Brahman in Advaita Vedanta, the continuous feeling of God's loving presence in Christianity, the cleaving to God in Judaism, or the commitment to visionary service and healing in many forms of shamanism, to name only a few possibilities). In all cases, however, we invariably witness a liberation from self-imposed suffering, an opening of the heart, and a commitment to a compassionate and selfless life. It is in this spirit, I believe, that the Dalai Lama thinks of a common element in religion:

If we view the world's religions from the widest possible viewpoint, and examine their ultimate goal, we find that all of the major world

religions ... are directed to the achievement of permanent human happiness. They are all directed toward that goal. ... To this end, the different world's religions teach different doctrines which help transform the person. In this regard, all religions are the same, there is no conflict.⁴

For the sake of brevity, and mindful of the limitations of this metaphor, since most traditions identify the liberation from self-centeredness as pivotal for this transformation, I will call this common element the Ocean of Emancipation.

Furthermore, I concur with perennialism in holding that the entry into the Ocean of Emancipation may be accompanied, or followed by, a transconceptual disclosure of reality. Due to the radical interpenetration between cognizing self and cognized world, once the self-concept is deconstructed, the world may reveal itself to us in ways that transcend conceptualization. Nevertheless, and here is where we radically depart from perennialism, I maintain that there is a *multiplicity of transconceptual disclosures of reality*. Perennialists erroneously assume that this transconceptual disclosure of reality must be necessarily One. In other words, perennialists generally believe that plurality emerges from concepts and interpretations, and that the cessation of conceptual proliferation must then result in a single apprehension of 'things as they really are'.

But to enter the Ocean of Emancipation does not inevitably tie us to a particular disclosure of reality, even if this is transconceptual. In contrast, what the mystical evidence suggests is that there are a variety of possible spiritual insights and ultimates (Tao, Brahman, *sunyata*, God, *kaivalyam*, etc.) whose transconceptual qualities, although sometimes overlapping, are irreducible and often incompatible (personal versus impersonal, impermanent versus eternal, dual versus nondual, etc.). The typical perennialist move to account for this conflicting evidence is to assume that these qualities correspond to different interpretations, perspectives, dimensions, or levels of a single ultimate reality. As I explain elsewhere⁵, however, this move not only is unfounded and problematic, but also covertly posits a pregiven spiritual ultimate that is then hierarchically situated over other spiritual goals. A more fertile way to approach the diversity of spiritual claims is, I believe, to hold that *the various traditions lead to the enactment of different spiritual ultimates and/or transconceptual disclosures of reality*. Although these spiritual ultimates may apparently share some qualities (e.g., nonduality in *sunyata* and *Brahmajñana*), they constitute independent religious aims whose

[4] Dalai Lama (1988), p. 12.

[5] Ferrer (2000b).

conflation may prove to be a serious mistake. In terms of our metaphor, we could say, then, that *the Ocean of Emancipation has many shores*.

The idea of different spiritual “shores” receives support from one of the few rigorous cross-cultural comparative studies of meditative paths. After his detailed analysis of Patañjali’s *Yogasutras*, Buddhaghosa’s *Visudhimagga*, and the Tibetan *Mahamudra*, D.P. Brown⁶ points out that:

The conclusions set forth here are nearly the opposite of that of the stereotyped notion of the perennial philosophy according to which many spiritual paths are said to lead to the same end. According to the careful comparison of the traditions we have to conclude the following: there is only one path, but it has several outcomes. There are several kinds of enlightenment, although all free awareness from psychological structure and alleviate suffering.

Whereas Brown, Wilber, and other transpersonalists have rightly identified certain parallels across contemplative paths, contextualists scholars of mysticism have correctly emphasized that the enaction of different spiritual insights and ultimates requires specific mystical teachings, trainings, and practices.⁷ Or put in traditional terms, particular ‘rafts’ are needed to arrive at particular spiritual ‘shores’: If you want to reach the shore of *nirvana*, you need the raft of the Buddhist *dharma*, not the one provided by Christian praxis. And if you want to realize knowledge of Brahman (*Brahmajñana*), you need to follow the Advaitin path of Vedic study and meditation, and not the practice of Tantric Buddhism, devotional Sufi dance, or psychedelic shamanism. And so forth. In this account, the Dalai Lama⁸ is straightforward:

Liberation in which ‘a mind that understands the sphere of reality annihilates all defilements in the sphere of reality’ is a state that only Buddhists can accomplish. This kind of *moksa* or *nirvana* is only explained in the Buddhist scriptures, and is achieved only through Buddhist practice. (p. 23)

What is more, different liberated awarenesses and spiritual ultimates can be encountered not only among different religious traditions, but also within a single tradition itself. Listen once again to the Dalai Lama

Questioner: So, if one is a follower of Vedanta, and one reaches the state of *satcitananda*, would this not be considered ultimate liberation?

His Holiness: Again, it depends upon how you interpret the words, ‘ultimate liberation.’ The *moksa* which is described in the Buddhist religion is achieved only through the practice of emptiness. And this kind of *nirvana* or liberation, as I have defined it above, cannot be achieved even by Svatantrika Madhyamikas, by

[6] Brown (1986), pp. 266–7.

[7] e.g., Fenton (1995); Hollenback (1996); Katz (1978).

[8] Dalai Lama (1988).

Cittamatras, Sautrantikas or Vaibhasikas. The follower of these schools, *though Buddhists*, do not understand the actual doctrine of emptiness. Because they cannot realize emptiness, or reality, they cannot accomplish the kind of liberation I defined previously. (pp. 23–4)

What the Dalai Lama is suggesting here is that the various spiritual traditions and schools cultivate and achieve different contemplative goals. He is adamant in stressing that adherents to other religions, and even to other Buddhist schools, cannot attain the type of spiritual liberation cultivated by his own. There are alternative understandings and awarenesses of emptiness even among the various Buddhist schools: From the Theravadin *pugdala-sunyata* (emptiness of the person; existence of the aggregates) to the Mahayana *dharma-sunyata* (emptiness of the person and the aggregates) and the Madhyamika *sunyata-sunyata* (emptiness of emptiness). And from Dogen's Buddha-Nature = Impermanence to Nagarjuna's *sunyata = pratitya-samutpada* or to Yogachara's, Dzogchen's, and Hua-Yen's more essentialist understandings in terms of Pure Mind, Luminous Presence, or Buddhahood (*Tathagatagarbha*). To lump together these different awarenesses into one single spiritual liberation or referent reachable by all traditions may be profoundly distorting. Each spiritual shore is independent and needs to be reached by its appropriate raft.

From Participatory Knowing to Spiritual Cocreation

Although the metaphor of an ocean with many shores is helpful to illustrate the variety of spiritual ultimates, it is ultimately inadequate to convey the participatory and enactive nature of spiritual knowing advanced in this chapter. As with all geographical metaphors, one can easily get the mistaken impression that these shores are pre-given, somehow waiting out there to be reached or discovered. This view, of course, would automatically catapult us back to a kind of perspectival perennialism, which accounts for the diversity of religious goals in terms of different perspectives or dimensions of the same pre-given Ground of Being.⁹

The participatory vision should not then be confused with the view that mystics of the various kinds and traditions simply access different dimensions or perspectives of a ready-made single ultimate reality. This view merely admits that this pre-given spiritual referent can be approached from different vantage points. In contrast, the view I am advancing here is that *no pre-given ultimate reality exists, and that different*

[9] Ferrer (2000b).

spiritual ultimates can be enacted through intentional or spontaneous cocreative participation in an indeterminate spiritual power or Mystery.

To be sure, once enacted, spiritual shores become more easily accessible and, in a way, 'given' to some extent for individual consciousness to participate in. Once we enter the Ocean of Emancipation, spiritual forms which have been enacted so far are more readily available and tend more naturally to emerge (from mudras to visionary landscapes, from liberating insights to ecstatic types of consciousness, etc.). But the fact that enacted shores become more available does not mean that they are predetermined, limited in number, or that no new shores can be enacted through intentional and cocreative participation. Like trails cleared in a dense forest, spiritual pathways traveled by others can be more easily crossed, but this does not mean that we cannot open new trails and encounter new wonders (and new pitfalls) in the always inexhaustible Mystery of being.

It is fundamental to distinguish clearly our position not only from perspectival perennialism but also from spiritual relativism and anarchy. The threat of spiritual anarchy is short-circuited by the fact that there are certain transcendental constraints upon the nature of spiritually enacted realities. In other words, there is a spiritual power or Mystery out of which everything arises which, although indeterminate, does impose restrictions on human visionary participation. As Varela, Thompson, and Rosch¹⁰ suggest in relation to evolution, the key move 'is to switch from a prescriptive logic to a proscriptive one, that is, from the idea that what is not allowed is forbidden to the idea that what is not forbidden is allowed'. In our context, we could say that although there are restrictions that invalidate certain enactments, within these parameters an indefinite number of them may be feasible.

A central task for spiritual inquirers and participants in the interreligious dialogue, then, is the identification of these parameters or restrictive conditions for the enactment of valid spiritual realities. If I ventured to speculate, I would suggest that the nature of these parameters may have to do not so much with the specific contents of visionary worlds, but with the moral values emerging from them, for example, the saintly virtues in Christianity, the perfections (*paramitas*) in Buddhism, and so forth. In this regard, it is noteworthy that, although there are important areas of tension, religions have usually been able to find more common ground in their ethical prescriptions than in doctrinal or metaphysical issues.¹¹ In any event, the regulative role of such parameters not only frees us from falling into spiritual anarchy, but also, as we will see in the

[10] Varela et al. (1991), p. 195.

[11] Küng (1991); Küng and Kuschel (1993).

next section, paves the way for making qualitative distinctions among spiritual insights and traditions.

Admittedly, to postulate that human intentionality and creativity may influence or even effect the nature of the Divine – understood here as the source of being – may sound somewhat heretical, arrogant, or even inflated. This is a valid concern, but I should add that it stems from a conventional view of the Divine as an isolated and independent entity disconnected from human agency, and that it becomes superfluous in the context of a participatory cosmology: Whenever we understand the relationship between the divine and the human as reciprocal and interconnected, we can, humbly but resolutely, reclaim our creative spiritual role in the divine self-disclosure.¹²

The idea of a reciprocal relationship between the human and the divine finds precedents in the world mystical literature. Perhaps its most compelling articulation can be found in the writings of ancient Jewish and Kabbalistic theurgical mystics. For the theurgic mystic, human religious practices have a profound impact not only in the outer manifestation of the divine, but also in its very inner dynamics and structure. Through the performance of the commandments (*mizvot*), the cleaving to God (*devekut*), and other mystical techniques, the theurgic mystic conditions Divine activities such as the restoration of the sphere of the *sefirot*, the unification and augmentation of God's powers, and even the transformation of God's own indwelling. As M. Idel¹³ puts it, the theurgic mystic 'becomes a cooperator not only in the maintenance of the universe but also in the maintenance or even formation of some aspects of the Deity'.

Furthermore, as both L. Dupré¹⁴ and B. McGinn¹⁵ observe, this understanding is not absent in Christian mysticism. In the so-called affective mystics (Richard of Saint Victor, Teresa of Avila, Jan van Ruusbroec, etc.), for example, we find the idea that the love for God substantially affects divine self-expression and can even transform God himself. In his discussion of Ruusbroec's mysticism, Dupré points out:

In this blissful union the soul comes to share the dynamics of God's inner life, a life not only of rest and darkness but also of creative activity and light. ... The contemplative accompanies God's own move from hiddenness to manifestation within the identity of God's own life. (p. 17)

And he adds:

[12] cf. Heron (1998).

[13] Idel (1988), p. 181.

[14] Dupré (1996).

[15] McGinn (1996c).

By its dynamic quality the mystical experience surpasses the mere awareness of an already present, ontological union. The process of loving devotion *realizes* what existed only as potential in the initial stage, thus creating a *new* ontological reality. (p. 20)

Although space does not allow me to document this claim here, I believe that the idea of a spiritual cocreation — ‘one that many have assumed but few have dared to express’¹⁶ — is also present in devotional Sufism, as well as in many Indian traditions such as Shaivism and Buddhism. In any event, my intention here is not to suggest the universality of this notion (which clearly is not the case), but merely to show that it has been maintained by a variety of mystics from different times and traditions.

To recapitulate so far, the common ocean to which most spiritual traditions lead is not a pregiven spiritual ultimate, but the Ocean of Emancipation, a radical overcoming of narrow self-centeredness which can be accompanied by a variety of transconceptual disclosures of reality. In other words, the Ocean of Emancipation has many spiritual shores or independent spiritual ultimates, some of which are enacted by the world spiritual traditions, and others whose enaction may presently require a more creative participation. Although there are certain constraints on their nature, the number of feasible enactments of spiritual worlds and ultimates may be, within these boundaries, virtually limitless. In a participatory cosmos, human intentional participation creatively channels and modulates the self-disclosing of Spirit through the bringing forth of visionary worlds and spiritual realities. Spiritual inquiry then becomes a journey beyond any pregiven goal, an endless exploration and disclosure of the inexhaustible possibilities of an always dynamic and indeterminate Mystery. Krishnamurti notwithstanding, spiritual truth is perhaps not a pathless land, but a goalless path.

After the Participatory Turn

A full discussion of the manifold implications of the participatory turn for transpersonal and spiritual studies lies beyond the scope of this chapter. However, I would like to mention at least a few of them in relation to the following four basic subjects: (1) the ranking of spiritual traditions; (2) the problem of conflicting truth-claims in religion; (3) the validity of spiritual truths; and (4) the very idea of spiritual liberation.

[16] Dupré (1996), p. 22.

On Ranking Spiritual Traditions

The participatory turn has important ramifications for our understanding of interreligious relations. Most spiritual gradations stem from the postulation of an ultimate referent from which the relative, partial, or lower value of religious systems and insights is assigned. In terms of our metaphor of an ocean with many shores, we could say that, after reaching a previously laid down spiritual shore or enacting a new one, mystics have typically regarded other shores as incomplete, inferior, or simply false. As the history of religions documents, however, there is no agreement whatsoever among mystics about either the nature of this spiritual ultimate or this hierarchy of spiritual insights. This lack of consensus, of course, is not only one of the most puzzling riddles in philosophy of religion, but also an overriding source of debate in contemporary interreligious dialogue. What is even more important, the idea of a universal spiritual ultimate for which traditions compete has profoundly affected how people from different creeds engage one another, and, even today, engenders all types of religious conflicts, quarrels, and even holy wars. Before suggesting a tentative solution to such a conundrum, and in order to grasp its complexity and pervasiveness, I first offer a few cross-cultural examples of spiritual gradations.

Hierarchical gradations of spiritual traditions have been developed in all major religious traditions. As is well known, Christianity often regarded previous pagan religions as incomplete steps towards the final Christian revelation. Likewise, in Islam, the teachings of Jesus and the ancient prophets of Israel are recognized as relatively valid but imperfect versions of the final Truth revealed in the Koran.

The profusion of alternative spiritual gradations in Hinduism is also well known. For example, while Sankara subordinates the belief in a personal, independent God (*Saguna Brahman*) to the nondual monism of Advaita Vedanta, Ramanuja regards the monistic state of becoming Brahman as a stage 'on the way to union with [a personal] God'¹⁷ and claimed that the entire system of Advaita Vedanta was resting on wrong assumptions.¹⁸ But there is more: Udayana, from the Nyaya school, arranged the rest of Hindu systems into a sequence of distorted stages of understanding of the final truth embodied in his 'ultimate Vedanta', which holds the ultimate reality of the 'Lord' (*isvara*).¹⁹ And 'Vijñānabhioksu, the leading representative of the revival of classical Samkhya and Yoga in the sixteenth century, states that other systems

[17] Zaehner (1960/1994), p. 63.

[18] Thibaut (1904).

[19] Halbfass (1991).

are contained in the Yoga of Patañjali and Vyasa just as rivers are preserved and absorbed by the ocean'.²⁰ As any scholar of Hinduism can easily realize, these examples could be endlessly multiplied.

In the Buddhist tradition we also find a number of conflicting hierarchies of spiritual insights and schools. As R.E. Buswell and R.M. Gimello²¹ point out,

Buddhist schools often sought to associate particular stages along the marga [the path], usually lower ones, with various of their sectarian rivals, while holding the higher stages to correspond to their own doctrinal positions. ... The purpose of such rankings was not purely interpretive; it often had an implicit polemic thrust.

We have already seen, in the words of the Dalai Lama, how Tibetan Buddhism considers the Theravadin and Yogacarin views of emptiness as preliminary and incomplete. It is important to stress that, for Tibetan Buddhists, their understanding of emptiness is not merely different but more refined, accurate, and soteriologically effective. Needless to say, this is not an opinion shared by representatives of other Buddhist schools, which consider their doctrines complete in their own right, and sufficient to elicit the total awakening described by the Buddha. To mention only one other of the many alternative Buddhist hierarchies, Kukai, the founder of the Japanese Shingon, offered a very exhaustive ranking of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist systems culminating in his own school.²² In Kukai's 'ten abodes for the mind' (*jujushin*), Buswell and Gimello²³ explain,

the fourth abiding mind corresponds to the Hinayanists, who recognize the truth of no-self ... whereas the sixth relates to the Yogacarins, who generate universal compassion for all. Kukai's path then progresses through stages corresponding to the Sanron (Madhyamika), Tendai (T'ien-t'ai), and Kegon (Hua-yen) systems, culminating in his own Shingon Esoteric school.

Only in the tenth stage, corresponding to the Shingon school, Kukai considers the Buddhist practitioner fully liberated.

Interestingly enough, contemporary discussions of spiritual gradations strikingly mirror some of these ancient debates. For example, whereas Ken Wilber²⁴ tries to persuade us (à la Sankara) of the more encompassing nature of nonduality when contrasted to dual and theistic traditions, the theo-monistic model establishes (à la Ramanuja) a

[20] Halbfass (1988), p. 415.

[21] Buswell and Gimello (1992), p. 20.

[22] see, e.g., Kasulis (1988).

[23] Buswell and Gimello (1992), p. 20.

[24] Wilber (1995).

mystical hierarchy where nondual, impersonal, and monistic experiences are subordinated to dual, personal, and theistic ones:

It is possible in a theistic teleological framework to account for monistic experiences in terms of the nature of theistic experiences, treating these as necessary and authentic experiences in the mystic theology. But the reverse does not hold true in a monistic framework. In a monistic framework theistic experiences are not regarded as necessary to the monistic ideal.²⁵

What at first sight is more perplexing about these rankings is that their advocates, apparently operating with analogous criteria (such as encompassing capacity), reach radically opposite conclusions about the relationship between nondual and theistic spirituality. When examined more closely, however, this should not be too surprising. The criteria proposed are often vague enough that they can be interpreted to favor one's preferred tradition upon the rest. Take, for example, Wilber's guideline that 'a higher level has extra capacities than previous ones'. Obviously, what counts as 'extra capacities' can be, and actually is, differently judged by the various authors and traditions according to their doctrinal commitments (e.g., nonduality versus the personal and relational qualities of the Divine).

After the participatory turn, however, these interreligious rankings can be recognized as parasitic upon the Cartesian-Kantian assumption of a universal and pregiven spiritual ultimate relative to which such judgments can be made. To put it another way, these interreligious judgments make sense *only* if we first presuppose the existence of a single noumenal or pregiven reality behind the multifarious spiritual experiences and doctrines. Whenever we drop this assumption, however, the very idea of ranking traditions according to a paradigmatic standpoint becomes both fallacious and superfluous. Do not misunderstand me. I am not suggesting that spiritual insights and traditions are incommensurable, but merely that it may be seriously misguided to compare them according to any pre-established spiritual hierarchy. The next sections suggest some directions where these comparative grounds can be sought.

The Problem of Conflicting Truth Claims in Religion

Closely related to the ranking of traditions is the so-called problem of conflicting truth-claims in religion. Roughly, this problem refers to the incompatible ultimate claims religious traditions make about the

[25] Stoeber (1994), pp. 17-18.

nature of reality, spirituality, and human identity.²⁶ Since all religions have been imagined to aim at the same spiritual end, the diversity of religious accounts of ultimate reality is not only perplexing, but also conflicting and problematic.

Although with different nuances, the attempts to explain such divergences have typically taken one of the three following routes: dogmatic exclusivism ('my religion is the only true one, the rest are false'), hierarchical 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'). Alternatively, to put it in different terms, contextualist scholars invoke conceptual frameworks, and perennialists appeal to hierarchical gradations of traditions and/or to esotericist, perspectivist, or structuralist explanations.

After the participatory turn, however, a more satisfactory response to this conundrum naturally emerges. In short, my thesis is that once we give up Cartesian-Kantian assumptions about a pregiven or noumenal spiritual reality common to all traditions, the so-called problem of conflicting truth-claims becomes, for the most part, a pseudoproblem. In other words, the diversity of spiritual claims is a problem *only* when we have previously presupposed that they are referring to a single, ready-made spiritual reality. However, if rather than resulting from the access and visionary representation of a pregiven reality, spiritual knowledge is enacted, then spiritual truths need no longer be conceived as 'conflicting'. Divergent truth-claims are conflicting *only* if they intend to represent a single referent of determined features. As S.M. Heim²⁷ suggests in relation to the various spiritual fulfilments: "Nirvana and communion with God are contradictory only if we assume that one or the other must be the sole fate for all human beings". But if we see such a spiritual referent as malleable, indeterminate, and open to a multiplicity of disclosures contingent on human creative endeavors, then the reasons for conflict vanish like a mirage. In this light, the threatening snake we saw in the dark basement can now be recognized as a peaceful and connecting rope.

In short, by giving up our dependence on Cartesian-Kantian premises in spiritual hermeneutics, religious traditions are released from their predicament of metaphysical competition and a more constructive and fertile interreligious space is naturally engendered. To break the Cartesian-Kantian spell in spiritual studies, that is, leads to affirming the uniqueness and legitimacy of each tradition in its own right, and

[26] see, e.g., Christian (1972); Griffiths (1991); Hick (1974, 1983).

[27] Heim (1995), p. 149.

only from this platform, I believe, can a genuine interreligious dialogue be successfully launched. The diversity of spiritual truths and cosmologies, then, rather than being a source of conflict or even cause for considerate tolerance, can now be reason for wonder and celebration. Wonder in the wake of the inexhaustible creative power of the self-unfolding of being. And celebration in the wake of the recognition of both our participatory role in such unfolding, and the emerging possibilities for mutual respect, enrichment, and cross-fertilization out of the encounter of traditions.

Two points need to be stressed at this point of our discussion. First, in my view, spiritual pluralism does not exist only at a doctrinal level, but at a metaphysical one. Plurality is not merely an exoteric diversion, but fundamentally engrained in the innermost core of each tradition. As R. Panikkar²⁸ forcefully puts it: 'Pluralism penetrates into the very heart of the ultimate reality'. And second, there is not a necessary, intrinsic, or a priori hierarchical relationship among the various spiritual universes. There is no final, privileged, or more encompassing spiritual viewpoint. There is neither a 'view from nowhere',²⁹ nor a 'view from everywhere'.³⁰ No human being can claim access to a God's eye that can judge from above which tradition contains more parcels of a single Truth, not because this Truth is noumenally inaccessible, but because it is intrinsically indeterminate, malleable, and plural.

By way of concluding this section, I should stress that my defense of many viable spiritual paths and goals does not preclude the possibility of equivalent or common elements among them. In other words, although the different mystical traditions enact and disclose different spiritual universes, two or more traditions may share certain elements in their paths and/or goals (e.g., belief in a personal Creator, attention training, ethical guidelines, etc.). In this context, H.M. Vroom's proposal of a 'multicentered view of religion'³¹ that conceives traditions as displaying a variety of independent but potentially overlapping focal points should be seriously considered. As I see it, this model not only makes the entire search for a 'common core' simplistic and misconceived, but also avoids the pitfall of strict incommensurability of spiritual traditions, thus paving the way for different forms of comparative scholarship.

[28] Panikkar (1984), p. 110.

[29] Nagel (1986).

[30] Smith (1989).

[31] Vroom (1989).

The Validity of Spiritual Truths

Regarding the thorny issue of the validity of spiritual insights, I should say that the criteria stemming from a participatory account of spiritual knowing can no longer be simply dependent on the picture of reality disclosed, but on the kind of transformation of self, community, and world facilitated by their enaction and expression. That is, once we fully accept the creative link between human beings and the real in spiritual knowing, judgments about how accurately spiritual claims correspond to or represent ultimate reality become nearly meaningless. The goal of contemplative systems is not so much to describe, represent, mirror, and know, but to prescribe, enact, embody, and transform. Or to put it in terms of the Buddhist notion of skillful means (*upaya*): 'The chief measure of a teaching's truth or value is its efficacy unto religious ends, rather than any correspondence with facts'.³² In other words, *the validity of spiritual knowledge does not rest in its accurate matching with any pregiven content, but in the quality of selfless awareness disclosed and expressed in perception, thinking, feeling, and action.*

It cannot be stressed strongly enough that to reject a pregiven 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 can not be qualitatively ranked according to their accuracy in representing any original template. However, this does not mean that we cannot discriminate between more evocative, skillful, or sophisticated artifacts. Grounds to decide the comparative and relative value of different spiritual truths can be sought, for example, not in a prearranged hierarchy of spiritual insights or by matching spiritual claims against a ready-made spiritual reality, but by assessing their emancipatory power for self and world, both intra- and interreligiously. By the *emancipatory power* of spiritual truths I mean their *capability to free individuals, communities, and cultures from gross and subtle forms of narcissism, egocentrism, and self-centeredness.* In very general terms, then, and to start exploring these potential qualitative distinctions, I believe that we can rightfully ask some of the following questions: How much does the cultivation and embodiment of these truths result in a movement away from self-centeredness? How much do they lead to the emergence of selfless awareness and/or action in the world? How much do they promote the growth and maturation of love and wisdom? To what degree do they deliver the promised fruits? How effective are they in leading their followers to harmony, balance, truthfulness, and justice within themselves, their communities, and towards the world at large? And so forth.

[32] Buswell and Gimello (1992), p. 4.

Apart from their emancipatory power, there is another orientation relevant to the making of qualitative distinctions among spiritual insights. Essentially, I see the project of constructing frameworks to portray a supposedly pre-given reality the hallmark of false knowing, that is, the pretension of a proud mind to represent a ready-made reality without the collaboration of other levels of the person (instinct, body, heart, etc.), which, I believe, are essential for the construction of genuine knowledge. In contrast, I propose that an enaction of reality is more valid when it is not only a mental-spiritual matter, but a multidimensional process that involves all levels of the person. Although space does not allow me to elaborate this point here, I believe that we are in direct contact with an always dynamic and indeterminate Mystery through our most vital energy. When the various levels of the person are cleared out from interferences (e.g., energetic blockages, bodily embedded shame, splits in the heart, pride of the mind, and struggles at all levels), this energy naturally flows and gestates within us, undergoing a process of transformation through our bodies and hearts, ultimately illuminating the mind with a knowing that is both grounded in and coherent with the Mystery. Because of the dynamic nature of the Mystery, as well as our historically and culturally situated condition, this knowing is never final, but always in constant evolution.

This being said, qualitative distinctions can be made among the various enactions by not only judging their emancipatory power, but also discriminating how grounded in or coherent with the Mystery they are. For example, it is likely that, due to a number of historical and cultural variables, most past and present spiritual visions are to some extent the product of dissociated ways of knowing — ways of knowing that emerge predominantly from the mental access to subtle dimensions of transcendent consciousness, but that are ungrounded and disconnected from vital and immanent spiritual sources. This type of spiritual knowledge, although certainly containing important and genuine insights, is both prey to numerous distortions and, at best, a partial understanding that claims to portray the totality. As I experience it, our lived engagement with both transcendent *and* immanent spiritual energies not only renders a priori hierarchical spiritual gradations obsolete, but also provides an orientation to critique more or less dissociated constructions.

Therefore, a sharp distinction needs to be drawn between 'knowledge that is matched with a pre-given reality' and 'knowing that is grounded in, aligned to, or coherent with the Mystery'. As I see it, the former expression inevitably catapults us into objectivist and representational epistemologies in which there can exist, at least in theory, one single most accurate representation. The latter expressions, in contrast,

as well as my understanding of truth as attunement to the unfolding of being, emancipate us from these limitations and open us up to a potential multiplicity of visions that can be firmly grounded in, and equally coherent with, the Mystery. This is why there may be a variety of valid ontologies which nonetheless can be equally harmonious with the Mystery and, in the realm of human affairs, manifest through a similar ethics of love, compassion, and commitment to the blooming of life in all its constructive manifestations (human and nonhuman).

Two important qualifications need to be made about these suggested guidelines. The first relates to the fact that, as the Dalai Lama³³ stresses, some spiritual paths and liberations may be more adequate for different psychological and cultural dispositions, 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 well as other spiritual typologies that can be found in both Hinduism and other traditions.³⁴ The second refers to the complex difficulties inherent in any proposal of cross-cultural criteria for religious truth.³⁵ It should be obvious, for example, that my emphasis on the overcoming of narcissism and self-centeredness, although I believe it central to most spiritual traditions, may not be shared by all.

These and other difficulties make it imperative to stress the very tentative and conjectural status of any cross-cultural criteria for spiritual truth. But there is more. I do not think that any resolution about cross-cultural spiritual criteria can be legitimately attained by scholars, religious leaders, or even mystics on a priori grounds. What I am suggesting is that the search for criteria for cross-cultural religious truth is not a logical, rational, or even spiritual problem to be solved by isolated individuals or traditions, but a *practical task* to be accomplished in the fire of interreligious dialogue and in actual practices and their fruits.

Spiritual Liberation

The thesis of a plurality of spiritual ultimates also has important implications for our understanding of spiritual liberation. Traditionally, spiritual liberation is said to involve two interrelated dimensions: (1) *Soteriological-phenomenological*, or the attainment of human fulfillment, salvation, redemption, enlightenment, or happiness, and (2) *epistemological-ontological*, or the knowledge of 'things as they really are', ultimate reality, or the Divine. Interestingly, according to most traditions, there is a relation of mutual causality and even final identity between

[33] Dalai Lama (1988, 1996).

[34] Beena (1990); Smith (1994).

[35] Vroom (1989); Dean (1995).

these two defining dimensions of spiritual emancipation: To know is to be liberated, and if you are free, you know.

It has been my contention that, although most traditions concur in that liberation implies an overcoming of limiting self-centeredness and associated restricted perspectives, this can be cultivated, embodied, and expressed in a variety of independent ways. Likewise, I also advanced the even more radical thesis that this spiritual plurality is not only soteriological or phenomenological, but also epistemological, ontological, and metaphysical. Put simply, there is a multiplicity of spiritual liberations *and* spiritual ultimates. The tasks remain, however, to address the tension between our account and the traditional claim that liberation is equivalent to knowing 'things as they really are', as well as to explore the implications of our viewpoint for spiritual blossoming.

To begin with, I should admit straight off that this tension is a real one, and that the participatory vision will probably not be acceptable to those who firmly believe in the exclusive or privileged truth of their religions. While respecting the many thoughtful and sensitive individuals who maintain exclusivist or inclusivist stances, I see these pretensions as problematic assumptions that not only cannot be consistently maintained in our pluralistic contemporary world, but also frequently lead to a deadlock in the interfaith dialogue.

The many arguments showing the untenability of religious absolutism are well known and need not be repeated here.³⁶ To the standard ones, I would like to add that religious absolutism is inconsistent with the nature of spiritual liberation as maintained by those religious traditions themselves. Most traditions equate spiritual liberation with boundless freedom. But if we rigidly maintain the exclusive Truth of our tradition, are we not binding ourselves to a particular, limited disclosure of reality? And if we tie our very being to a singular, even if transconceptual, disclosure of reality, then, we can rightfully wonder, how truly boundless is our spiritual freedom? Is this freedom truly boundless or rather a subtle form of spiritual bondage? And if so, is this the promised spiritual freedom we are truly longing for?

As I see it, the apparent tension between the participatory vision and the mystical claims of metaphysical ultimacy can be relaxed by simultaneously holding that (1) all traditions are potentially correct in maintaining that they lead to a direct insight into 'things as they *really* are', and (2) this 'really' does not refer to a Cartesian pregiven reality. Despite our deep-seated dispositions to equate Cartesian objectivity with reality, it is fundamental to realize that to reject the idea of a pregiven world is not to say good-bye to reality, but to pave the way for

[36] see, e.g., Panikkar (1984); Wiggins (1996).

encountering it in all its complexity, dynamism, and mystery. From this perspective, the expression 'things as they really are' is misguided only if understood in the context of objectivist and essentialist epistemologies, but not if conceived in terms of participatory enactments of reality free from egocentric distortions. After all, what most mystical traditions offer are not so much descriptions of a pregiven ultimate reality to be confirmed or falsified by experiential evidence, but prescriptions of ways of 'being-*and*-the-world' to be intentionally cultivated and lived.³⁷ The descriptive claims of the contemplative traditions primarily apply to the deluded or alienated ordinary human predicament, as well as to the various visions of self and world disclosed throughout the unfolding of each soteriological path. But since there are many possible enactments of truer and more liberated self and world, it may be more accurate to talk about them not so much in terms of 'things as they really are', but of 'things as they really *can* be' or even 'things as they really *should* be'.

In any event, it should be clear that when I say that this 'really' refers to an understanding of reality free from the distorting lenses of narcissism and self-centeredness, I am not limiting contemplative claims to their phenomenological dimension. On the contrary, a participatory epistemology can fully explain, in a way that no Cartesian paradigm can, why most traditions consider these two dimensions of liberation (phenomenological and ontological) radically intertwined. *If reality is not merely discovered but enacted through cocreative participation, and if what we bring to our inquiries affects in important ways the disclosure of reality, then the fundamental interrelationship, and even identity, between phenomenology and ontology, between knowledge and liberation, in the spiritual search stops being a conundrum and becomes a natural necessity.* If this is the case, there is no conflict whatsoever for the participatory vision to simultaneously maintain that there exist a plurality of spiritual ultimates and that all of them may disclose 'things as they really are'.

A More Relaxed Spiritual Universalism

In this chapter, I have introduced a participatory spiritual pluralism as a more adequate metaphysical framework than the perennialism typical of most transpersonal works. If I have argued so forcefully for a multiplicity of spiritual liberations and ultimates it is because spiritual pluralism (1) is more consistent with my own participatory understanding of spiritual states of discernment, (2) affirms, supports, and legitimizes the largest number of spiritual perspectives on their own terms, (3) provides a more fertile ground for a constructive and egalitarian interfaith

[37] Ferrer (1998, 2001).

inquiry and dialogue, and (4) is more generous in terms of recognizing the infinite creativity of Spirit than other meta-perspectives, allowing, impelling, and catalyzing Spirit's creative urges through human embodied participation. Although for these and other reasons my work emphasizes the metaphysical plurality of spiritual worlds, I should stress here that I do not believe that either pluralism or universalism per se are spiritually superior or more evolved. And it is now time to make explicit the kind of spiritual universalism implicit in the participatory vision.

There is a way, I believe, in which we can legitimately talk about a shared spiritual power, one reality, one world, or one truth. On the one hand, the discussion about whether there is one world or a multiplicity of different worlds can be seen as ultimately a semantic one, and metaphysically a pseudoproblem. On the other hand, a shared spiritual ground needs to be presupposed to make interreligious inquiry and dialogue possible and intelligible. After all, traditions do understand each other and frequently developed and transformed themselves through rich and varied interreligious interactions. The strict incommensurability of traditions needs to be rejected on logical, pragmatic, and historical grounds. Thus, it may be possible to talk about a common spiritual dynamism underlying the plurality of religious insights and ultimates. But let us be clear here, this spiritual universalism does not say that the Tao is God, that emptiness (*sunyata*) is structurally equivalent to Brahman, and similar, quite empty I believe, equations. And neither does it suggest the equally problematic possibility that these spiritual ultimates are different cuts, layers, or snapshots of the same pie. As I see it, the *indeterminate nature of Spirit* cannot be adequately depicted through any positive attribute, such as nondual, dual, impersonal, personal, and so forth. This is why, I believe, so many Western and Eastern mystics chose the so-called *via negativa* or apophatic language to talk about the Divine, and why such nonexperiential language was regarded by most traditions as closer to the Divine than any positive statement of its qualities.

The spiritual universalism of the participatory vision, then, does not establish any a priori hierarchy of positive attributes of the divine: Nondual insights are not necessarily higher than dual, nor are dual higher than nondual. Personal enactions are not necessarily higher than impersonal, nor are impersonal higher than personal. And so forth. Since the Mystery is intrinsically indeterminate, spiritual qualitative distinctions cannot be made by matching our insights and conceptualizations with any pregiven features. In contrast, I suggest that qualitative distinctions among spiritual enactions can be made by not only evaluating their emancipatory power for self, relationships, and world, but also discriminating how grounded in or coherent with the Mystery they are. Moreover, because of their unique psychospiritual and arche-

typal dispositions, individuals and cultures may emancipate themselves better through different enactions of the spiritual power, and this not only paves the way for a more constructive and enriching interreligious dialogue, but also opens up the creative range of valid spiritual choices potentially available to us as individuals. In sum, *this vision brings forth a more relaxed and permissive spiritual universalism that passionately embraces (rather than reduces, conflates, or subordinates) the variety of ways in which the sacred can be cultivated and embodied, without falling into spiritual anarchy or vulgar relativism.*

The relationship between pluralism and universalism cannot be characterized consistently in a hierarchical fashion, and even less in terms of spiritual evolution. While there are 'lower' and 'higher' forms of both universalism and pluralism (more or less sophisticated, encompassing, explanatory, emancipatory, grounded in the Mystery, etc.), my sense is that *the dialectic between universalism and pluralism, between the One and the Many, displays what may well be the deepest dynamics of the self-disclosing of Spirit.* From the rigid universalism of rational consciousness to the pluralistic relativism of some postmodern approaches, from perennialist universalism to the emerging spiritual pluralism of the interfaith dialogue, Spirit seems to swing from one to the other pole, from the One to the Many and from the Many to the One, endlessly striving to more fully manifest, embody, and embrace love and wisdom in all its forms. Newer and more embracing universalist and pluralistic visions will continue to emerge, but the everlasting dialectical movement between the One and the Many in the self-disclosing of Spirit makes any abstract or absolute hierarchical arrangement between them misleading. If I am right about the generative power of the dialectical relationship between the One and the Many, then to get stuck in or freeze either of the two poles as the Truth cannot but hinder the natural unfolding of Spirit's creative urges. This is why, although originally offered in a different context, the following remark by Habermas seems pertinent here: 'The metaphysical priority of unity above plurality and the contextualist priority of pluralism above unity are secret accomplices'.³⁸

To conclude this chapter, I would like to emphasize that it is *only* after travelling through the tremendously rich, complex, and multifaceted spiritual waters that we can, I believe, afford to immerse ourselves in the profound ocean of this more open, fertile, and relaxed universalism; a universalism that calls to be realized, not so much in isolated individual inner experiences, grandiose visions, or metaphysical intuitions, but through intimate dialogue and communion with other beings and the world.

[38] Habermas (1992), pp. 116–7.