

## BOOK REVIEWS

FERRER, JORGE, & SHERMAN, JACOB (Eds.). (2008). *The participatory turn: Spirituality, mysticism, religious studies*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. 388 pp. ISBN-10: 0791476014 ISBN-13: 978-0791476017. Hardback, \$90.00. *Reviewed by Craig Chalquist.*

Although a disturbing lifelessness never fails to haunt what scientist-philosopher Lancelot Law Whyte diagnosed as a total obsession with partial ideas, scholars and philosophers have resorted to monolithic explanations of spirituality with dull regularity: It's direct from God. It's linguistic. It's hierarchical, or neurological; culture-bound, or perennial; something your mom or dad told you to conform to.

By refreshing contrast, *The Participatory Turn* asks: Can we take religious experience, spirituality, and mysticism seriously today without reducing them to either cultural-linguistic by-products or simply asserting their validity as a dogmatic fact? Can we recognize and value many paths to many co-created mansions of the sacred? Can we learn to see the frameworks we apply as furnishing examples of spiritual enactment, of a “participatory turn” toward a true plurality invigorating spiritual life, rather than standing aloof being descriptive or merely explanatory?

For the scholars of this anthology—all of whom engage in a spiritual practice—a participatory turn in religious studies means moving beyond a largely cognitive preoccupation with categorizing, assimilating, mining, or otherwise colonizing spiritual experience into an appreciative, embodied awe of the enactive, communal, and co-constitutive dimensions of spirituality. In this kind of spiritual knowing, the assumed split between a supposedly pre-given Ultimate Reality and the mental apparatus that registers it gives way to an emphasis on “participatory events” in which the human and the divine engage in creative, often playful, and mutually transformative dialog.

Transpersonal psychology has tended to concentrate on charting individual spiritual experience even while transporting it into a universal or “perennial” context. This anthology draws on multiple perspectives to invite the reader into a plurality of spiritual approaches, each a delight in its own way, each preserved with its cultural background intact, and none compared with any others or melted down into one large ingot. Readers concerned about the continuing appropriation of spiritual models and practices from exoticized cultures—a common manifestation of empire-era entitlement—will appreciate the spaciousness of a paradigm that allows an infinite array of culturally and personally colored approaches freed from the imperial habits of comparison and assimilation.

Among the many facets of exuberant religiosity, the participatory turn also welcomes the gendered, the erotic, the sensual, the local, the nonverbal, and,

yes, the linguistic too. Emphasizing the interactive nature of spiritual encounter, the participatory set of approaches avoids overarching summations, empirical reductions, and 19<sup>th</sup>-Century grand conceptual systems to center instead on spirituality as both constructed and revealed, embedded in culture rather than built by it, and resistant to reckless transplantation into artificially imposed grids of competitive elucidation.

Religions and spiritual paths do share commonalities, one of which is that most seek a gradual transformation “from narrow self-centeredness toward a fuller participation in the mystery of existence” (p. 138). I would add that “self-centeredness” includes what Erich Fromm identified as group narcissism (our way or the highway) as well as idealization of the lone genius, scientist, or guru who purports to explain existence to us, as though one leaf could inform the rest of the true extent of the forest, let alone of a single tree.

At the same time, paths bent to serve an overriding goal of mapping or explaining the world tend to lose their original curvatures, byways, and departures to mechanical-feeling systems of straight lines and cleared landscapes. When witnessed in their natural context, however, the many windings among the realms and worlds of spirit are allowed their full transformational vitality, a vitality that frees the participant to innovate and experiment with a path’s original insights, stories, and wisdom teachings. Here a body-based imagination enters in to season critical appreciation with a capacity for dissolving the blockage of reified religious and philosophical constructs which have forgotten they are working fictions and sketches rather than absolute truths.

The book’s full Introduction lays out the book’s rationale and organization and includes a valuable overview of scholarly thought in religious studies. The varied points of view are themselves a mark of the irrepressible plurality at work in spiritual exploration through which transcendent dimensions shine like rays of light through stained-glass windows.

As a depth psychologist I appreciate the participatory deliteralizing of what the Introduction describes as static essences, spiritual hierarchies, and universal metaphysical paradigms. I am deeply wary of conceptual systems that seek philosophical or spiritual primacy over other perspectives, especially when those systems place themselves beyond analysis as possible examples of unconscious theologizing. The brutal logic of triumphalism is an old and persistent one that requires owning up to; whether different approaches are “lovingly” criticized for being unorthodox, mistaken, or unevolved makes no real psychological difference. Very often the most totalistic views are actually the most confining, the most covertly authoritarian, and the least friendly to genuine dialogue. They also favor goals, levels, and rhetorics of Progress to the detriment of enjoying the journey itself.

In terms of the book’s organization, its first section is more philosophical and theoretical in tone. Part I includes the following chapters: “A Genealogy of Participation” by Jacob H. Sherman, “Participation, Complexity, and the

Study of Religion” by Sean Kelly, and “Spiritual Knowing as Participatory Enaction” by Jorge Ferrer. Part II is geared more toward the application of participatory modes of spirituality and includes “Engaging with the Mind of God: The Participatory Path of Jewish Mysticism” by Brian L. Lancaster, a chapter on “Esoteric Paradigms” by Lee Irwin, and chapters by Beverly J. Lanzetta, William C. Chittik, Bruno Barnhart, Robert McDermott, G. William Barnard, and Donald Rothberg. Approaches range from scientific to Buddhist to Hindu to Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism, with Bergson and Aivanhov included for good measure.

As the author of *Terrapsychology: Re-engaging the Soul of Place*, I look forward eagerly to how the participatory turn will also foster a wider appreciation for the animated presence of the landscapes around us, disenchanted and under industrial siege but unceasing in their potent subvocal claims upon the psyches of their inhabitants.

### The Editors

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### The Reviewer

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