

# PARTICIPATORY SPIRITUALITY AND TRANSPERSONAL THEORY: A TEN-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE

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*ABSTRACT:* This article examines the evolution of participatory thinking in transpersonal studies and related disciplines since the publication of *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory* (Ferrer, 2002). Following an introduction to participatory spirituality, the paper discusses three ways this approach has been understood in the transpersonal literature: as disciplinary model, theoretical orientation, and paradigm or paradigmatic epoch. It then reviews the influence of the participatory turn in transpersonal studies, consciousness studies, integral education, and religious studies. After responding to Wilberian-integral, astro-archetypal, and participatory critiques, the article concludes with reflections about the nature and future of the participatory movement.

My contribution to the participatory turn in transpersonal studies was formalized in 2002, when *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory* (*Revisioning*) was published shortly after Tarnas's (2001) preview of the book in the pages of this journal.<sup>1</sup> The book had two general goals: (a) to critically examine some central ontological and epistemological assumptions of transpersonal studies, and (b) to introduce a participatory alternative to the neo-perennialism dominating the field thus far. At that time, Tarnas (1991) had already laid the foundations of a transpersonally informed participatory epistemology, Kremer (1994) had developed a participatory approach to indigenous spirituality, and Heron had introduced a participatory inquiry method as a relational form of spiritual practice and articulated a participatory ontology and epistemology (1992, 1996, 1998; Heron & Reason, 1997). Nonetheless, the prevalent transpersonal models conceptualized spirituality in terms of replicable inner experiences amenable to be assessed or ranked according to purportedly universal developmental or ontological schemes.

*Revisioning* reframed transpersonal phenomena as pluralistic participatory events that can occur in multiple loci (e.g., an individual, a relationship, or a collective) and whose epistemic value emerges—not from any pre-established hierarchy of spiritual insights—but from the events' emancipatory and transformative power on self, community, and world. On a scholarly level, I sought to bridge transpersonal discourse with relevant developments in religious studies (e.g., in comparative mysticism or the interreligious dialogue), as well as with a number of modern trends in the philosophy of mind and the

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cognitive sciences, such as Sellars's (1963) critique of a pregiven world entirely independent from human cognition and Varela, Thompson, and Rosch's (1991) enactive paradigm of cognition.<sup>2</sup>

In the wake of increasing interest from other scholars in the participatory perspective, I subsequently explored the implications of the participatory turn for such areas as integral transformative practice (Ferrer, 2003), embodied spirituality (Ferrer, 2006, 2008a; Ferrer, Albareda, & Romero, 2004), integral education (Ferrer, 2011a; Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda, 2005), religious studies (Ferrer, 2008b; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008b), spiritual individuation and the future of religion (Ferrer, 2010), and metaphysics and enlightenment (Ferrer, 2011b), among others.

More than a decade after the publication of *Revisioning*, the main aim of this essay is to assess the current status and ongoing impact of the participatory turn in transpersonal studies.<sup>3</sup> Although ample reference is made to the work of many other participatory thinkers, the analysis focuses on the impact of my work. After an outline of my participatory approach to transpersonal and spiritual phenomena, I identify three ways it has been received in transpersonal scholarship: as disciplinary model, theoretical orientation, and paradigmatic epoch. Then I examine the influence of the participatory turn in transpersonal and related disciplines, respond to several criticisms of my work, and conclude by reflecting on the nature and future of the participatory movement. My hope is that this paper provides not only an introduction to participatory transpersonalism, but also a collection of scholarly resources for those interested in exploring or pursuing a participatory orientation in transpersonal scholarship.

#### AN OUTLINE OF PARTICIPATORY SPIRITUALITY

Developed over time (e.g., Ferrer, 1998a, 1998b, 1999b, 1999c, 2000a, 2000b, 2001), published as a book (Ferrer, 2002) and expanded in an anthology (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008a, 2008b; Ferrer, 2008b), the *participatory approach* holds that human spirituality emerges from our cocreative participation in a dynamic and undetermined mystery or generative power of life, the cosmos, and/or the spirit.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, I argue that spiritual participatory events can engage the entire range of human epistemic faculties (e.g., rational, imaginal, somatic, vital, aesthetic, etc.) with the creative unfolding of reality or the mystery in the enactment—or “bringing forth”—of ontologically rich religious worlds. In other words, the participatory approach presents an enactive<sup>5</sup> understanding of the sacred that conceives spiritual phenomena, experiences, and insights as *cocreated events*. By locating the emergence of spiritual knowing at the interface of human multidimensional cognition, cultural context, and the creative power of the mystery, this account avoids both the secular post/modernist reduction of religion to cultural-linguistic artifact and, as discussed below, the religionist dogmatic privileging of a single tradition as paradigmatic.

0 *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 2011, Vol. 43, No. 1

The rest of this section describes eight distinctive features of the participatory approach: spiritual cocreation, creative spirituality, spiritual individuation, participatory pluralism, relaxed spiritual universalism, participatory epistemology, the integral bodhisattva vow, and participatory spiritual practice.

### **Dimensions of Spiritual Cocreation**

Spiritual cocreation has three interrelated dimensions—intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal.<sup>6</sup> These dimensions respectively establish participatory spirituality as embodied (spirit within), relational (spirit in-between), and enactive (spirit beyond), discussed below.

*Intrapersonal cocreation* consists of the collaborative participation of all human attributes—body, vital energy, heart, mind, and consciousness—in the enactment of spiritual phenomena. This dimension is grounded in the *principle of equiprimacy*, according to which no human attribute is intrinsically superior or more evolved than any other. As Romero and Albareda (2001) point out, the cognicentric (i.e., mind-centered) character of Western culture hinders the maturation of nonmental attributes, making it normally necessary to engage in intentional practices to bring these attributes up to the same developmental level the mind achieves through mainstream education (see also Ferrer, 2003; Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda, 2005). In principle, however, all human attributes can participate as equal partners in the creative unfolding of the spiritual path, are equally capable of sharing freely in the life of spirit here on earth, and can also be equally alienated from spirit. Intrapersonal cocreation affirms the importance of being rooted in *spirit within* (i.e., the immanent dimension of the mystery) and renders participatory spirituality essentially *embodied* (Ferrer, 2006, 2008a; Heron, 2006, 2007).

*Interpersonal cocreation* emerges from cooperative relationships among human beings growing as peers in the spirit of solidarity, mutual respect, and constructive confrontation (Ferrer, 2003; Heron, 1998, 2006). It is grounded in the *principle of equipotentiality*, according to which “we are all teachers and students” insofar as we are superior and inferior to others in different regards (Bauwens, 2007; Ferrer, Albareda, & Romero, 2004). This principle does not entail that there is no value in working with spiritual teachers or mentors; it simply means that human beings cannot be ranked in their totality or according to a single developmental criterion, such as brainpower, emotional intelligence, or contemplative realization. Although peer-to-peer human relationships are vital for spiritual growth, interpersonal cocreation can include contact with perceived nonhuman intelligences, such as subtle entities, natural powers, or archetypal forces that might be embedded in psyche, nature, or the cosmos (e.g., Heron, 1998, 2006; Jung, 2009; Rachel, 2010). Interpersonal cocreation affirms the importance of communion with *spirit in-between* (i.e., the situational dimension of the mystery) and makes participatory spirituality intrinsically *relational* (see, e.g., Heron, 1998, 2006; Heron & Lahood, 2008; Lahood, 2010a, 2010b; Osterhold, Husserl, & Nicol, 2007).

*Transpersonal cocreation* refers to dynamic interaction between embodied human beings and the mystery in the bringing forth of spiritual insights, practices, states, and worlds (Ferrer, 2002, 2008b). This dimension is grounded in the *principle of equiplurality*,<sup>7</sup> according to which there can *potentially* be multiple spiritual enactments that are nonetheless equally holistic and emancipatory.<sup>8</sup> This principle frees participatory spirituality from dogmatic commitment to any single spiritual system and paves the way for a genuine, metaphysically and pragmatically-grounded, spiritual pluralism. Transpersonal cocreation affirms the importance of being open to *spirit beyond* (i.e., the transcendent dimension of the mystery) and makes participatory spirituality fundamentally inquiry-driven (Heron, 1998, 2001, 2006) and *enactive* (Ferrer, 2000b, 2001, 2002, 2008b).

Although all three dimensions interact in multifaceted ways in the enactment of spiritual events, the creative link between intrapersonal and transpersonal cocreation deserves special mention. Whereas the mind and consciousness arguably serve as a natural bridge to subtle, transcendent spiritual forms already enacted in history that display more fixed forms and dynamics (e.g., cosmological motifs, archetypal configurations, mystical visions and states, etc.), attention to the body and its vital energies may give us a greater access to the more generative immanent power of life or the spirit (Ferrer, 2002, 2003, 2008a; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008b). If we accept this approach, it follows that the greater the participation of embodied dimensions in religious inquiry, the more creative one's spiritual life may become and a larger number of creative spiritual developments may emerge.

### **A Creative Spirituality**

In the infancy of participatory spirituality in the 1990s, spiritual inquiry operated within certain constraints arguably inherited from traditional religion. As Eliade (1982) argued, many established religious practices and rituals are “re-enactive” in their attempt to replicate cosmogonic actions and events. Expanding this account, I have suggested that most religious traditions can be seen as *reproductive* insofar as their practices aim to not only ritually reenact mythical motives, but also replicate the enlightenment of their founder or attain the state of salvation or freedom described in allegedly revealed scriptures (Ferrer, 2002, 2006, 2008a). Although disagreements about the exact nature of such states and the most effective methods to attain them abound in the historical development of religious ideas and practices—naturally leading to rich creative developments within the traditions—spiritual inquiry was regulated (and arguably constrained) by such pre-given unequivocal goals. In contrast, Heron (1998) distinguished between experiential training within a traditional body of doctrine, and authentic experiential spiritual inquiry, both individual and cooperative.

Participatory enaction entails a model of spiritual engagement that does not simply reproduce certain tropes according to a given historical a priori, but rather embarks upon the adventure of openness to the novelty and creativity of

nature or spirit (Ferrer, 2002, 2008b; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008b; Heron, 1998). Grounded on current moral intuitions and cognitive competences, for instance, participatory spiritual inquiry can not only undertake the critical revision and actualization of prior religious forms, but also the cocreation of novel spiritual understandings, practices, and even expanded states of freedom (see Ferrer, 2008b, 2011b).

### **Spiritual Individuation**

This emphasis in creativity is central to *spiritual individuation*, that is, the process through which a person gradually develops and embodies his or her unique spiritual identity and wholeness (Ferrer, 2008b, 2010, 2011b). Religious traditions tend to promote the homogenization of essential features of the inner and outer lives of their practitioners, for example, encouraging them to seek the same spiritual states and liberation, to become like Christ or the Buddha, or to wear the same clothes (in the case of monks). These aspirations may have been historically legitimate, but after the emergence of the modern self (Taylor, 1989), our current predicament (at least in the West) arguably calls for a bold integration of spiritual maturation and psychological individuation that will likely lead to a richer diversity of spiritual expressions (Ferrer, 2010, 2011b). In other words, the participatory approach aims at the emergence of a human community formed by spiritually differentiated individuals.

It is important to sharply distinguish between the modern hyper-individualistic mental ego and the participatory selfhood forged in the sacred fire of spiritual individuation. Whereas the disembodied modern self is plagued by alienation, dissociation, and narcissism, a spiritually individuated person has an embodied, integrated, connected, and permeable identity whose high degree of differentiation, far from being isolating, actually allows him or her to enter into a deeply conscious communion with others, nature, and the multidimensional cosmos. A key difference between modern individualism and spiritual individuation is thus the integration of radical relatedness in the later. Similarly, Almaas (1988, 1996) distinguished between an essential personhood that integrates autonomy and relatedness, and the narcissistic ego of modern individualism.

### **Participatory Pluralism**

The participatory approach embraces a pluralistic vision of spirituality that accepts the formative role of contextual and linguistic factors in religious phenomena, while simultaneously recognizing the importance of nonlinguistic variables (e.g., somatic, imaginal, energetic, archetypal, etc.) in shaping religious experiences and meanings, and affirming the ontological value and creative impact of spiritual worlds.

Participatory pluralism allows the conception of a multiplicity of not only spiritual paths, but also spiritual liberations and even spiritual ultimates. On

the one hand, besides affirming the historical existence of multiple spiritual goals or “salvations” (Ferrer, 2002; Heim, 1995), the increased embodied openness to immanent spiritual life and the spirit-in-between fostered by the participatory approach may naturally engender a number of novel holistic spiritual realizations that cannot be reduced to traditional states of enlightenment or liberation. If we regard human beings as truly *unique* embodiments of the mystery, would it not be plausible to consider that as we spiritually individuate, our spiritual realizations might also be distinct even if potentially overlapping and aligned with each other?

On the other hand, participatory pluralism proposes that different spiritual ultimates can be enacted through intentional or spontaneous participation in a dynamic and undetermined mystery, spiritual power, and/or generative force of life or reality.<sup>9</sup> The 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 ultimate self-disclosures of reality and corresponding religious worlds. Participatory approaches, that is, seek to enact with body, mind, heart, and consciousness a creative spirituality that lets a thousand spiritual flowers bloom.

### **A More Relaxed Spiritual Universalism**

The pluralistic spirit of the participatory approach should not eclipse its “more relaxed” spiritual universalism—although eschewing dubious equations among spiritual ultimates (e.g., the Tao is God or Buddhist emptiness is structurally equivalent to the Hindu Brahman), the participatory approach affirms an underlying undetermined mystery or creative spiritual power as the generative source of all spiritual enactments (Ferrer, 2002, 2008b). This shared spiritual dynamism should be distinguished from any Kantian-like noumenon or “thing-in-itself” endowed with inscrutable qualities and from which all spiritual ultimates are always incomplete, culturally conditioned, or cognitively constrained phenomenal manifestations (e.g., Hick, 1992). In contrast, the enactive epistemology of the participatory approach does away with the Kantian “two worlds” dualism by refusing to conceive of the mystery as having objectifiable pre-given attributes (such as personal, impersonal, dual, or nondual) and by affirming the radical identity of the manifold spiritual ultimates and the mystery, even if the former do not exhaust the ontological possibilities of the latter. Put simply, the mystery cocreatively unfolds in multiple ontological directions (Ferrer, 2011b).

Moreover, the relationship between pluralism and universalism cannot be consistently characterized in a hierarchical fashion, because while there are “lower” and “higher” forms of both universalism and pluralism (i.e., more or less rigid, sophisticated, encompassing, explanatory, etc.), “*the dialectic between universalism and pluralism, between the One and the Many, displays what it may well be the deepest dynamics of the self-disclosing of the mystery*”

0 *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 2011, Vol. 43, No. 1

(Ferrer, 2002, p. 191). In a similar vein, Puhakka (2008) offered some important reflections on the dialectic between “unity vs. diversity” (p. 8) in the context of the historical evolution of transpersonal discourse, with which I fully concur.

### **Participatory Epistemology and Critical Theory**

Despite its relaxed spiritual universalism, participatory pluralism does not entail the uncritical or relativistic endorsement of all past or present religious understandings or forms of life. Put differently, the participatory rejection of an objectifiable pregiven spiritual ultimate referent does not prevent 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 we cannot discriminate between more evocative, skillful, or sophisticated artifacts.

Whereas the participatory turn renders meaningless the postulation of qualitative distinctions among traditions according to a priori doctrines or a prearranged hierarchy of spiritual insights, these comparative grounds can be sought in a variety of practical fruits (existential, cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, etc.). Specifically, I have suggested two basic guidelines: the *egocentrism test*, which assesses the extent to which spiritual traditions, teachings, and practices free practitioners from gross and subtle forms of narcissism and self-centeredness; and the *dissociation test*, which evaluates the extent to which the same foster the integrated blossoming of all dimensions of the person (Ferrer, 2002, 2008b). Given the many abuses and oppressions perpetuated in the name of religion, it may be sensible to add an *eco-social-political test*, which assesses the extent to which spiritual systems foster ecological balance, social and economic justice, religious and political freedom, class and gender equality, and other fundamental human rights (see Heron, 2006).<sup>10</sup>

Two important qualifications must be made regarding these guidelines: First, 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 (e.g., Smith, 1994). Second, the participatory emphasis on overcoming narcissism and self-centeredness, although arguably central to most spiritual traditions, may not be shared by all. Even more poignantly, most religious traditions would likely not rank too highly in terms of the dissociation or the eco-social-political tests; for example, gross or subtle forms of repression, control, or strict regulation of the human body and its vital/sexual energies (vs. the promotion of their autonomous maturation, integration, and participation in spiritual knowing) are rather the norm in most past and present contemplative endeavors (Ferrer,

2008b). Likewise, many religions have had a demonstrably negative environmental impact (e.g., Nelson, 1998); supported violence, militarism, and authoritarian regimes (e.g., Juergensmeyer, 2000; Victoria, 2006); and brought about serious violations of human rights (e.g., Ghanea, 2010) even though they have also provided vital resources to secure them (e.g., Banchoff & Wuthnow, 2011). Thus, the integrative and socially engaged thrust of the participatory turn is foundational for the development of a participatory critical theory of religion.

More positively, the egocentricism and dissociation tests normatively point toward the universal ideal of a socially responsible *integrated selflessness*, which (although the attainability of a fully integrated selflessness is open to question) can act as a regulative principle à la Habermas's (1984) "ideal speech situation." The idea of integrated selflessness is thus capable of providing procedural criteria for critical discernment in spiritual matters, that is, concerning how qualitative distinctions in spiritual discourse might be made. From this evaluative principle, applicable standards, rules or tests to assess spiritual choices and practices can be derived. In addition to self- and peer-assessment (e.g., Heron, 1996, 1998), one might consider the use of standardized tests such as the Narcissistic Personality Inventory or NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988). In addition, the thoughtful combination of other tests may indicate the degree of psychosomatic integration of spiritual states, for example measures of transcendence (e.g., Akyalcin, Greenway, & Milne, 2008; Friedman, 1983) used with measures of body intelligence and awareness (e.g., Anderson, 2006).

To sum up, the emancipator epistemology of the participatory approach assesses spiritual paths according to the degree to which they foster both an overcoming of self-centeredness and a fully embodied integration that make us not only more sensitive to the needs of others, nature, and the world, but also more effective cultural and planetary transformative agents in whatever contexts and measure life or spirit calls us to be.

### **Integral Bodhisattvas**

Since for most individuals the conscious mind is the seat of their sense of identity, an exclusive liberation of consciousness can be deceptive insofar as we can believe that we are fully free when, in fact, essential dimensions of ourselves are underdeveloped, alienated, or in bondage—as the dysfunctional sexual behavior of numerous modern spiritual teachers attest (e.g., Butler, 1990; Kripal, 2002). As discussed above, participatory spirituality seeks to foster the harmonious engagement of all human attributes in the spiritual path without tensions or dissociations. Despite his downplaying the spiritual import of sexuality and the vital world, Sri Aurobindo (2001) was correct when he wrote that a liberation of consciousness *in* consciousness cannot be equated to an integral transformation entailing the spiritual alignment of all human dimensions (pp. 942ff).



With this in mind, I have proposed an “integral bodhisattva vow” in which the conscious mind renounces full liberation until the body, the heart, and the primary world can be free as well from alienating tendencies that prevent them from sharing freely in the unfolding life of the mystery here on earth (Ferrer, 2006, 2008a, 2011b). Needless to say, to embrace an “integral bodhisattva vow” is not a return to the individualistic spiritual aspirations of early Buddhism because it entails a commitment to the *integral* liberation of all sentient beings, rather than only of their conscious minds or conventional sense of identity. Likewise, as the above description reflects, my use of the term *bodhisattva* does not suggest a commitment to early Buddhist accounts of liberation as extinction of bodily senses and desires and release from the cycle of transmigratory experience (*samsara*) (Collins, 1998; Harvey, 1995; see Ferrer, 2011b).

### **Participatory Spiritual Practice**

In addition to many classical spiritual skills and values (e.g., mindfulness, compassion, or unconditional love), participatory spiritual practice cultivates the embodied, relational, and enactive dimensions of spiritual cocreation. This emphasis can be found in some traditional practices, many contemporary revisions of traditional practices, and a number of innovative spiritual developments. Examples include the following. Whereas some traditional practices (kabbalistic, contemplative, indigenous, esoteric, etc.) are participatory in many regards (see Ferrer & Sherman, 2008a; Lahood, 2007a), in their modern (re-)articulations one can find more explicit and robust affirmations of participatory values. In this context I locate, for example, Ray’s (2008) embodied reconstruction of Buddhist meditation and Rothberg’s (2006, 2008) relational expansion of Buddhist practice, Whicher’s (1999) integrative account of Patanjali’s yoga, and Schroeder’s (1994) and Vennard’s (1998) engagements of the body and sexuality in Christian prayer, among many others.

In addition, the last few decades have witnessed the emergence of a variety of novel participatory spiritual practices, such as Albareda and Romero’s interactive contemplation (see Ferrer, 2003), Heron’s (1998, 2006) co-operative spiritual inquiry, and my own Embodied Spiritual Inquiry or ESI (see Osterhold, Husserl, & Nicol, 2007), which was recently proposed as an effective method to foster the integration of spiritual experience (Bailey & Arthur, 2011). Other bodies of practice with important participatory elements include Grof’s Holotropic Breathwork (Grof & Grof, 1990), Almaas’s (2002) Diamond Approach, feminist and women spirituality approaches (Eller, 1993; King, 1992), modern forms of entheogenic spiritual inquiry (e.g., Bache, 2000; Ball, 2008), Sri Aurobindo’s integral yoga (Mukherjee, 2003), some contemporary somatic approaches (e.g., Johnson, 1995), relational approaches to spirituality (e.g., Achterberg & Rothberg, 1998; Bawens 2007; Lahood, 2010a; Welwood, 2000), and modern engagements of sexuality as spiritual path (e.g., Bonheim, 1997; Wade, 2004), among others. With this outline of participatory spirituality established, the discussion now turns to understandings of the participatory approach in the field of transpersonal studies.

## THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH: MODEL, ORIENTATION, PARADIGM, OR EPOCH?

To date, transpersonal scholars have understood the participatory approach in three main ways: as a disciplinary model, theoretical orientation or perspective, and paradigm or paradigmatic epoch. This section briefly examines each case.

### Disciplinary Model

The participatory approach is considered a theoretical model within the discipline of transpersonal psychology. In his excellent *Shadow, Self, Spirit*, for example, Daniels (2005) includes the participatory approach as one of the chief theories or models in the field, together with Maslow's metamotivational theory, Jung's analytical psychology, Assagioli's psychosynthesis, Grof's holotropic model, Sri Aurobindo's integral psychology, Wilber's structural-hierarchical model, Washburn's spiral-dynamic model, and Wright's feminist theory. After discussing some major differences among these models (e.g., on immanence, transcendence, or the self), Daniels aligns his own perspective with Sri Aurobindo's and the spiral-dynamic and participatory models, highlighting their convergence in the affirmation of a fully embodied, integrative spirituality. Other scholars who have referred to the participatory approach as transpersonal or spiritual model include Almendro (2004), King (2009), Péter (2009), and Friedman, Krippner, Riebel, and Johnson (2010).

### Theoretical Orientation

In addition, the participatory approach is understood as a larger theoretical orientation or perspective transcending the disciplinary boundaries of psychology and operating in a variety of transpersonal disciplines (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993), a multidisciplinary transpersonal orientation (Boucouvalas, 1999), or even beyond the boundaries of transpersonal studies (e.g., Ferrer & Sherman, 2008a; Lahood, 2007a). In this spirit, Washburn (2003) describes three major transpersonal theoretical orientations—structural-hierarchical (Wilber), spiral-dynamic (Washburn), and participatory (Ferrer)—noting that the participatory orientation challenges the other two in their claims to exclusive or complete spiritual truth.<sup>11</sup> Washburn also discusses feminist and ecological approaches, but suggests that they are perspectives “defined more in terms of a particular focus of inquiry (women spirituality, the sacredness of nature) than in terms of a theoretical orientation that would guide inquiry” (p. 3). As perspectives, feminism and ecology can be equally applied by advocates of the structural, dynamic, and participatory orientations.

Similarly, Goddard (2005, 2009) identifies three major theoretical orientations in the field: neo-perennialist (Wilber), neo-Jungian (Washburn), and pluralistic-participatory (Tarnas, Ferrer), which neatly correspond to Washburn's own categorization. In contrast to Washburn (2003), however, Goddard includes feminist, ecological, and shamanic perspectives within the participatory orientation. Goddard's work seeks to reconcile the differences among these

orientations through the development of an astro-archetypal integrative model, to which I return below.

Finally, Cunningham (2011) described the participatory approach as a transpersonal theoretical orientation located in-between the perennial philosophy at one end of the continuum and empirical scientific approaches based upon mechanist, materialistic, and reductionist assumptions at the other end.

### **Paradigm or Paradigmatic Epoch**

Finally, the participatory turn has also been understood as a paradigm or paradigmatic epoch. *Revisioning* introduced the participatory approach as a “participatory turn” in transpersonal and spiritual studies—a paradigmatic shift breaking with transpersonal theory’s prevalent epistemological strategies (inner empiricism) and ontological assumptions (perennialism). In the foreword to *Revisioning*, Tarnas (2002) offered a powerful paradigmatic account of the participatory approach, framing it as the second conceptual stage of the paradigm shift initiated by Maslow’s and Grof’s launching of the discipline of transpersonal psychology. In this regard, Tarnas wrote:

If the founding works of transpersonal psychology by Maslow and Grof constituted its declaration of independence, then this book may well be seen as its emancipation proclamation, its “new birth of freedom.” For here transpersonal theory is liberated from that mortgage to the past, those constraining assumptions and principles inherited from its Enlightenment and modern scientific origins. (p. xv)

Other authors who have written about the participatory turn as a conceptual revolution include Kripal (2003), Jaenke (2004), and Clarke (2009).

Building on Tarnas’s (2002) proposal, the transpersonal anthropologist Lahood (2007a) described two turns in transpersonal scholarship. The first began with the birth of transpersonal psychology in the late 1960s and can be defined as “an attempt to integrate psychologies East and West; an attempt to map the farthest shores of consciousness ...; and the merging of pragmatic science and spiritual concerns” (p. 2). Lahood characterized this turn with a commitment to religious universalism (or perennialism) and included the work of Maslow, Grof, and Wilber as representative. The second turn is the participatory one (as exemplified by Lahood in the works of Tarnas, Heron, and Ferrer), which represents a departure from transpersonal psychology’s allegiance to perennialism and emphasizes the embodied, relational, and pluralistic dimensions of transpersonal events.

In a subsequent essay, Lahood (2008) extended this account into three paradigmatic epochs of transpersonalism. Epoch one is the *pre-transpersonal movement* or “psychedelic revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s, leading to the hybridization of Eastern spirituality and entheogenic states and culminating with Maslow’s and Grof’s formalization of the movement. Epoch two, the *neo-*

*perennial era*, goes from 1977 to the mid-1990s and is dominated by Wilber's work, which seeks to integrate Western and Eastern philosophy, psychology, and religion into an evolutionary framework structured according to a supposedly universal teleological process whose ultimate aim is an integral nondual realization. Epoch Three, the *participatory turn*, begins in the early 1990s with Tarnas's (1991) analysis of Grof's consciousness research and is formalized in the writings of Heron (1992, 1998, 2006) and Ferrer (2002), both of whom Lahood names as articulating cogent alternatives to transpersonal neo-perennialism.

Whereas it may be valid to conceive the participatory approach as disciplinary model, theoretical orientation, or even conceptual revolution (or paradigm), my sense is that epochal claims may have been premature. It is one thing to argue that the participatory approach represents a conceptual revolution with regard to prior transpersonal theorizing—it is quite another to claim that it inaugurated a new paradigmatic era in transpersonal thinking. Before entertaining this possibility seriously, a thorough analysis of the actual impact of participatory thought on transpersonal scholarship seems necessary. The next section begins to explore the scope of such influence.

### THE IMPACT OF THE PARTICIPATORY TURN

Participatory perspectives in philosophy, religion, and the human sciences predate the publication of *Revisioning* and any possible influence of my work should be seen in this larger context.<sup>12</sup> Before reviewing the impact of the participatory approach, it is helpful to note the relationship of mutual inclusivity between transpersonal theory and the participatory turn. On the one hand, as we have seen, the participatory approach can be seen as a theoretical model, orientation, or paradigm within the field of transpersonal studies. On the other hand, transpersonal studies is only one among other scholarly disciplines—such as anthropology (Lahood, 2007c), indigenous studies (Bastien & Kremer, 2004; Marks, 2007), or comparative mysticism (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008a; Freeman, 2007)—impacted by the participatory turn. That said, this section follows the footprints of the participatory perspective in four bodies of knowledge: transpersonal studies, consciousness studies, integral and holistic education, and religious studies.<sup>13</sup>

#### Transpersonal Studies

In recent years an increasing number of transpersonal scholars have aligned themselves in varying degrees with different aspects of my participatory approach. I locate here, in chronological order, the works of Heron (1998, 2001, 2006), Tarnas (2001, 2006), Jaenke (2004), Paulson (2004), Daniels (2005), O'Connor (2005), Heron (2006), Hollick (2006), Hartelius (2006), Bauwens (2007), Kremer (2007), Lahood (2007b, 2007c), Irwin (2008), Kelly (2008), Lancaster (2008), Rothberg (2008), and Sherman (2008; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008b), among others.<sup>14</sup>

In general, *Revisioning* is often credited with freeing transpersonal thinking from the constraints of Wilber's neo-perennialism and associated hierarchical rankings of spiritual traditions, states, and orientations (e.g., Jaenke, 2004; Lahood, 2007b; Lancaster, 2004; Tarnas, 2001), as well as for articulating a more embodied, relational, and pluralistic approach to spiritual growth and understanding (e.g., Daniels, 2005, 2009; Heron, 2006; Lahood, 2008). As Lahood (2007a) points out, the participatory use of the language of events (vs. experiences) to refer to transpersonal phenomena has been adapted by many scholars in the field (e.g., Irwin, 2008; Kremer, 2007; Wade, 2004). Likewise, my participatory approach to spiritual diversity and pragmatic emancipatory epistemology is endorsed in many transpersonal works (e.g., Friedman et al., 2010; Hollick, 2006; Lancaster, 2004).

This spread of participatory thinking has begun to affect Wilber's writing and that of his colleagues and critics alike. Despite Wilber's (2002) early dismissal of *Revisioning* as expressing "a green-meme approach to spirituality," his most recent work (Wilber, 2006) incorporates a number of participatory insights and constructions. As Daniels (in Rowan, Daniels, Fontana, & Walley, 2009) indicated, for example, the cocreated nature of the spiritual path, the language of participation, and the use of the myth of the given in spiritual critical discourse are central features of the participatory approach introduced in my early work (e.g., Ferrer, 1998a, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2002). Although Wilber has assimilated aspects of the participatory approach into his integral theory, from a participatory perspective many problems remain (see Ferrer, 2011b). Other integral scholars employing participatory ideas in their theorizing include McIntosh (2007), who used *Revisioning's* enactive approach and epistemological critique to elaborate a more pluralistic "integral reality framework" that seeks to counter some of the problems of Wilber's model, and Ferendo (2007), who presented the participatory perspective on integral practice (Ferrer, 2003) as complementary to Wilber's approach.

In the rest of this section, I illustrate various ways in which the participatory perspective has been engaged in transpersonal works through three examples. Firstly, in his award-winning *The Science of Oneness*, Hollick (2006) proposed the adoption of Heron's (1996, 1998) co-operative inquiry to produce reliable inner knowledge, and devoted two chapters to argue that Heron's and Ferrer's participatory approaches lay the foundations for "a new, inclusive and holistic model of spirituality that speaks to the spirit of our age" (p. 345). For Hollick, participatory spirituality not only accommodates the diversity of spiritualities better than other models, but also stresses embodied, ethical, cocreative, relational, and cooperative dimensions of the spiritual path that he considers crucial in our times. The emerging "holistic model of human spirituality" (p. 352), Hollick concluded, should be able to

draw upon the ancient wisdom of the shamanic, polytheistic, monotheistic and transcendent religious traditions; welcome the devotional, intellectual, detached, engaged, solitary, social, exoteric, esoteric, transcendent, immanent and other spiritual paths; and embrace the co-creative, participatory view of our relationship with Spirit. (pp. 352–353)

Secondly, Lahood (2007a) edited two issues of the journal *ReVision* to explore the emergence of a participatory worldview in transpersonal studies, anthropology, indigenous studies, and ecopsychology, among other disciplines. With the title, “*The Participatory Turn, Part 1 & 2,*” the *ReVision* monographs not only engage extensively with my own work, but also include significant participatory developments by authors such as Tarnas (2007), Heron (2007), Kremer (2007), Abram (2007), Lahood (2007b, 2007c), Bauwens (2007), Conner (2007), and Marks (2007).

Finally, in an important essay, Daniels (2009) proposed that the participatory perspective represents a third vector (which he calls “extending”) in transpersonal development beyond the standard “ascending” (i.e., geared to other-worldly transcendence) and “descending” (i.e., geared to this-worldly immanence) ones. Daniels argued that previous formulations of the “descending” current tended to conflate two fundamentally distinct perspectives: depth psychological, whose focus is the exploration and integration of unconscious material (e.g., Jung, Washburn, Grof), and relational-participatory, which stresses the spiritual connection with others and the world. “Such relational, participatory thinking,” he wrote, “is exemplified in indigenous spiritualities, feminist spirituality (e.g., the connected self), transpersonal ecology (ecocentrism), relational spiritualities, and Ferrer’s (e.g., 2002) participatory vision (emancipation from self-centeredness, cocreative participation)” (p. 97).

Daniels concluded by making a strong case for the import of an “all-vector” transpersonal theory and practice; after surveying a number of spiritual models, he highlighted the participatory approach and Sri Aurobindo’s integral yoga as the two spiritual orientations conferring equal prominence to all three vectors (ascending, descending, and extending).

I close this section by noting the growing presence of the participatory perspective in related fields such as Gestalt-transpersonal therapy (Williams, 2006), psychosynthesis (Faith, 2007; Palmer & Hubbard, 2009), enneagram studies (Bailey & Arthur, 2011), Jungian psychology (Janiszewski, 2010), imaginal psychology (Voss, 2009), ecopsychology (W.W. Adams, 2005), occupational science (Collins, 2010), and relational and peer-to-peer approaches to spiritual growth (Bauwens, 2007; Heron, 2006; Lahood, 2010a, 2010b).

### **Consciousness Studies**

The participatory perspective is also present in certain scholarly sites dedicated to the study of consciousness. In 2006 Anthony Freeman, managing editor of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, published a provocative essay in this journal arguing that, in light of the participatory critique of a subtle Cartesianism in transpersonal theory (Ferrer, 2002), Dennet’s heterophenomenology (an agnostic third-person approach to first-person experiential reports) should be welcomed as the most coherent and suitable methodology

for transpersonal psychology (Freeman, 2006). Freeman's essay triggered a lively debate on the epistemological status of transpersonal psychology, the nature of transpersonal inquiry, and appropriate methods for the study of human consciousness, with responses by Tart (2006), W.A. Adams (2006), and Hartelius (2006)—the latter of which, in my view, provides the most effective response to Freeman's claims. (For an important related paper, see Walach and Runehov [2010].)

This is not the place to sum up this rather technical debate and I refer the interested reader to the original papers; my aim here is simply to point out the sites where the participatory perspective is present in the study of consciousness. In this vein, the participatory approach is also discussed in works on the nature of consciousness (Lancaster, 2004), in the context of the anthropology of consciousness (Lahood, 2007c, 2008), and as an important element of a general theory of enaction (Malkemus, 2011).

### **Integral and Holistic Education**

The presence of the participatory turn in integral and holistic education cannot be denied: Gidley (in Moltz & Gidly, 2008) named the five main approaches to integral theory and education as *macro-integral* (Wilber), *meso-integral* (Laszlo), *microintegral* (Steiner), *participatory-integral* (Ferrer), and *transversal-integral* (Nicolescu, Morin). The participatory approach to integral education was first introduced in a coauthored essay (Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda, 2005) that presented a pedagogical vision in which all human dimensions (body, heart, vital energy, mind, and consciousness) cocreatively participate at all stages of the learning process in interaction with the generative power of life or the spirit.

Since the initial article in 2005, this approach rapidly disseminated in scholarly circles.<sup>15</sup>

For example, Subbiondo (2006) articulated 10 principles of integral education drawn from a course of my design based on the participatory approach. Participatory integral education was also featured in the UCLA's *Spirituality in Higher Education Newsletter* (HERI project staff, 2005), in an important Higher Education Administration dissertation on the integration of contemplative and student-centered education (Seitz, 2009), and, more recently, in an anthology on the academic teaching of mysticism (Ferrer, 2011a). Further, a leading authority of holistic education, Miller (2006) included "participatory" as one of the central features of his "timeless learning" educational philosophy and adopted the "more relaxed universalism" proposed in *Revisioning* as its underlying spiritual framework.

In addition to the general introduction of participatory thinking to integral education, Embodied Spiritual Inquiry (ESI) is gaining notice as a pedagogical method seeking to put into practice the principles of participatory integral education. In this context, ESI students learn to collaboratively construct

knowledge from multidimensional experience (i.e., somatic, vital, emotional, mental, and contemplative). Using Albareda and Romero's embodied meditations (see Ferrer, 2003) as tools, ESI students inquire collaboratively into questions selected by participants in the context of a cooperative inquiry paradigm (Heron, 1996). For more information, see Osterhold, Husserl, and Nicol's (2007) case study that discusses ESI's pedagogical approach, epistemology, research process, and inquiry outcomes. ESI is also the focus of *Transformative Inquiry: An Integral Approach* (Nakagawa & Matsuda, 2010), an anthology of writings based on the presentation of this approach at Ritsumekian University in Kyoto, Japan (Ferrer, 2009b).

## Religious Studies

The participatory turn has received increasing attention in the field of religious studies. In alignment with my goals in writing the book, *Revisioning* was reviewed in religious studies journals (e.g., G. Adams, 2003; Fuller, 2002; Parsons, 2003). In addition, the religious scholar Kripal (2003) endorsed the book's major theses while cautioning about the potential danger that a historically dubious "moral perennialism" (i.e., the assumption of an ethical convergence in mysticism) might sneak through the back door of the participatory vision.<sup>16</sup> In a later essay on mysticism, Kripal (2006) highlighted the participatory critique of experientialism (i.e., the reduction of spiritual phenomena to intrasubjective experience) and recommendation to talk about the mystical in terms of "participatory events" including but transcending inner experience. Also in the context of the study of mysticism, Freeman (2007) presented the participatory approach as an effective middle path to resolve the long-standing impasse between essentialists and constructivists. Left (2003), supporting the idea of enacted spiritual shores, pointed out that the participatory approach "provides a new framework for appreciating [her] similar attempt to revision the tradition of Jewish mysticism" (p. 344).

Attention to the participatory perspective in religious studies increased following the publication of *The Participatory Turn* (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008a), which explicitly focused on the contemporary study of religion (see Ferrer & Sherman, 2008b). Besides the anthology's essays—which engaged traditions such as Sufism (Chittick, 2008), Kabbalah (Lancaster, 2008), Christianity (Barnhart, 2008; Lanzetta, 2008), Hinduism (McDermott, 2008), engaged Buddhism (Rothberg, 2008), Bergsonian vitalism (Barnard, 2008), and Western esotericism (Irwin, 2008) from various participatory standpoints—book reviews quickly appeared in journals such as *Tikkun* (Gleig & Boeving, 2009), *Network Review: Journal of the Scientific and Medical Network* (Clarke, 2009), *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (Chalquist, 2009), *Resurgence* (Reason, 2009), *Sophia* (Goldberg, 2010), *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (G. Adams, 2011), *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* (Gleig, 2011a), *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* (Gleig, 2011b), and *Religious Studies Review* (Prabhu, forthcoming).

Interest is continuing: The 2010 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) featured a well-received wildcard session on *The Participatory*

0 *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 2011, Vol. 43, No. 1



*Turn* (Gleig, Ferrer, Sherman, Barnard, Lanzetta, Irwin, & Kripal 2010) and a second panel engaging contemplative studies from a participatory perspective was presented at the 2011 AAR Annual Meeting (Grace, Sherman, Ferrer, Malkemus, Klein, & Lanzetta, 2011). In his recent study of the mystical dimensions of psychic phenomena, Kripal (2010) argued for the participatory nature of paranormal events in that “they appear for us but rely on our active engagement...to appear at all or gain meaning” (p. 269). Finally, despite its relatively recent publication, the anthology is an important focus of, or provides the methodological framework for, doctoral dissertations such as Haar Farris’s (2010) or Cabot’s (2011), as well as for Gleig’s (in press) research into new religions movements.

To return to the question raised above, I suggest that while the participatory perspective has definitively gained prominence in transpersonal studies and related fields, it is likely too early to regard it as a paradigmatic epoch in transpersonal scholarship. Although the number of transpersonal authors influenced by participatory thinking is increasing, it should be obvious that transpersonal studies is today a richly pluralistic field populated by many other theoretical orientations of equal or greater influence (e.g., Caplan, Hartelius, & Rardin, 2003; Cunningham, 2007, 2011; Daniels, 2005; Rothberg & Kelly, 1998)

### CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Having reviewed the spread of the participatory turn in terms of those who have accepted and adapted it, I now consider the main critical perspectives on my work, which fall into three areas: Wilberian-integral, archetypal, and participatory.

#### Wilberian-Integral

Two critical responses to *Revisioning* were issued from the camp of Wilberian integral studies although one of those authors (Paulson, 2002, 2003, 2004) later retracted his critique. First, Paulson (2002) claimed that anything of value in the book had been already said by Wilber, and the rest was, citing a personal communication from Wilber, “a condensation of three decades of postmodern wrong turns” (para. 43). The following year, however, Paulson (2003) retracted these views, stating that:

When I first read this book I hated it, but I have read and studied it for 2 years and find it one of the best books ever written on transpersonal psychology...This is not a Washburn or Wilber spin off but something entirely different. (para. 1)

Since then, Paulson (2004) seems to have moved to more participatory shores, as suggested by the following remark: “Wilber’s integral philosophy... is a ready-made system, not one codeveloped by the individual participating in life

through lived experience. It thus falls short of a participatory integral philosophy” (p. 140).

The second critical response came from Wilber, who first indicated that:

the view he [Ferrer] is representing is basically a green-meme view of psychology and spirituality...it is simply a matter of personal inclination: if you resonate with green-meme values, you will resonate with Ferrer; if you resonate with second-tier values [i.e., such as those of Wilber’s own integral theory], you will not. At this point, no amount of argument, evidence, facts, or rhetoric will make you change your mind...Ferrer’s book basically marks the end of the transpersonal movement. (Cited in Paulson, 2002, para. 43)

This passage is disconcerting: In addition to ostensibly making his perspective invulnerable to criticism, Wilber implies that disagreement with his model stems from operating at a lower developmental or evolutionary stage.

More substantially, Wilber (2002) charged *Revisioning* with falling into performative self-contradictions (i.e., critiquing hierarchical rankings while upholding the superiority of its own participatory approach) and promoting what he calls a flatland where no qualitative distinctions can be legitimately made.<sup>17</sup> Although I agree with Wilber’s analysis of the contradictions of anti-hierarchical stances, the critique does not apply to my work. As discussed above, my proposal does not privilege any tradition or type of spirituality over others *on objectivist or ontological grounds* (i.e., saying that theism, monism, or nondualism corresponds to the nature of ultimate reality and/or is intrinsically superior), but it does offer criteria for making spiritual qualitative distinctions *on pragmatic and transformational grounds*. The crucial difference is that these rankings are not ideologically based on a priori ontological doctrines or putative correspondence to a single nondual Spiritual Reality, but instead ground critical discernment in the practical values of selflessness, embodiment, and integration. I stand by these values, not because I think they are “universal” (they are not), but because I firmly believe that their cultivation can effectively reduce personal, relational, social, and planetary suffering. Thus, my response to Wilber’s charge is that one can critique these standards, but the participatory approach cannot be consistently pigeonholed as relativist or self-contradictory.

### **Astro-Archetypal**

In *Transpersonal Theory and the Astrological Mandala*, Goddard (2009) endorsed central aspects of the participatory approach and its critique of Wilber’s theory while offering four serious criticisms. First, Goddard proposed that participatory enactment is epistemologically valid at the first levels of spiritual awakening—where there is still a creative polarity between the individual and the mystery—but not at the final one, which reveals an “Absolute Identity...where there is nothing left to participate with anything” (p. 614). Although Goddard’s “astro-transpersonal model” is more cocreative,

0 *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 2011, Vol. 43, No. 1

flexible, and less linear than Wilber's theory, it ultimately supports Wilber's monistic nondual spirituality as the universal, mandatory final stage of spiritual realization. As with Wilber's rankings, however, Goddard offered no convincing evidence or argument to support this doctrinal stance.

Second, Goddard (2009) took issue with participatory pluralism, stating that to claim a multiplicity of spiritual ultimates is not less biased than to posit one single Ultimate—this critique apparently emerges from a misapprehension. As we saw above, participatory pluralism is grounded in a “more relaxed spiritual universalism” that, recognizing a shared undetermined mystery or spiritual power underlying all cocreated spiritual ultimates, avoids both the distortions of perennialism and the privileging of the One or the Many as utterly superior: “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” (Ferrer, 2002, p. 191). Thus, the participatory approach does not seek to “refute(s) an Ultimate beyond all possible ultimates” (p. 623), as Goddard believes; rather, it rejects dubious perennialist equivalences among religious ultimates, providing instead an alternative enactive understanding free from the objectivist assumptions and doctrinal hierarchical implications of perennialist approaches.

Third, and more intriguing, Goddard (2009) contrasted the perennialist return to the Ground of Being with what in his view is the participatory enthroning of Becoming. Favoring the perennialist view, he wrote, “participation itself returns to the Ground....We cannot logically say of any entity that it participates with the Ground” (p. 623). I believe that Goddard is onto something here. In contrast to the perennialist return to the ground—derived from the Neo-Platonic “metaphysics of emanation and return” of mystics such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Bonaventure (Harmless, 2008)—I take the view that the mystery, the cosmos, and/or spirit unfolds from a primordial state of undifferentiated unity toward one of infinite differentiation-in-communion.<sup>18</sup> Even if a return to the Ground were to be the final goal of cosmic evolution, this can be conceived in ways that maintain the existence of participatory individualities (cf. Bache, 2000).

Finally, Goddard (2009) claimed that the participatory view does not allow for “different levels of insight, clarity and ethical comportment in the spiritual sphere” (p. 616) and that, although fiercely critiquing spiritual rankings, the participatory approach also has its own. As the second charge is addressed in my response to Wilber above, I focus here on Goddard's first point. I am puzzled by Goddard's claim since my emphasis in overcoming self-centeredness and dissociation obviously entails ethical qualitative distinctions. As for levels of spiritual insight, although I accept the ones mapped by the traditions in the context of their particular aspirations, I do feel cautious about the legitimacy of making noetically-based cross-cultural rankings; after all, the very insights that one tradition considers identical with ultimate liberation (e.g., Advaita Vedanta's realization of the Self) other traditions (e.g., Buddhism) regard as an unequivocal sign of delusion and ignorance (Ferrer, 2002). Therefore, I believe

it more appropriate and productive to look at practical and transformational outcomes in the cross-cultural assessment of spiritual knowledge claims.

### **Participatory**

Critiques of aspects of the participatory turn also come from those who see its merit. In a significant paper, Lahood (2008) claimed that my metaphor of an Ocean with Many Shores (originally used to convey a plurality of enacted spiritual ultimates that nonetheless may share an overcoming of self-centeredness) results in a kind of “cosmological multiculturalism” that isolates the various spiritual worlds. For Lahood, the problem with this otherwise liberating account is that it builds rigid boundaries among the various spiritual universes, not accounting for the possibility of “cosmological hybridizations,” that is, the mixture or amalgamation of religious forms often leading to new insights and traditions. Lahood concluded by saying that “Ferrer’s Ocean of Many Shores...should really be constituted of hybrid spiritscapes: Oceans of many hybrids of hybrids” (p. 180).

Lahood (2008) is correct in noting that in its breaking with transpersonal (neo-) perennialism, participatory pluralism stresses the autonomy and diversity of spiritual worlds and ultimates. However, Lahood’s account fails to capture the participatory rejection of the radical separateness of spiritual cosmologies:

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... In this context, Vroom’s (1989) proposal of a “multicentered view of religion” that conceives traditions as displaying a variety of independent but potentially overlapping focal points should be seriously considered. (Ferrer, 2002, pp. 148–149)

In other words, the fact that traditional practices enact particular spiritual worlds (e.g., Patanjali’s traditional yoga leads to the experiential corroboration of the Samkhya dualistic metaphysics) does not mean that those universes are entirely isolated from one another. Although I did not use the language of “hybridization,” the participatory emphasis on interreligious interaction and (ensuing) emergence of novel spiritual expressions naturally contemplates such syncretistic possibilities. Even further, in light of Lahood’s (2010a) account of the hybrid nature of transpersonalism, the participatory approach itself can be seen as the upshot of a cosmological hybridization between Eastern, Western, and indigenous traditions, on the one hand, and contemporary spiritual, philosophical, and scientific orientations, on the other. In any event, following Lahood’s (2008) welcomed elucidation of this important phenomenon, in a recent essay on the future of religion I discussed types of spiritual hybridizations (conceptual, practical, and visionary) and concluded with the following:

*The future of religion will be shaped by spiritually individuated persons engaged in processes of cosmological hybridization in the context of a common spiritual family that honors a global order of respect and civility.* (Ferrer, 2010, p. 146)

In sum, criticism of the participatory approach mostly stems from either adherence to alternative ontological or metaphysical frameworks such as perennialism, or arguable misapprehensions of participatory claims, some of which may be rooted in ambiguities of my early presentation of the approach. In this article, I hope to have clarified both those possible ambiguities and the nature of such ontological disagreements.

### REFLECTIONS ON THE NATURE AND FUTURE OF THE PARTICIPATORY MOVEMENT

This investigation yields four conclusions regarding the nature of the participatory perspective, which together suggest and support a vision for the future. First, during the past decade there has been a growing literature on the participatory perspective in transpersonal studies and related disciplines such as consciousness studies, holistic and integral education, and religious studies. Second, whereas the participatory approach can be reasonably conceived as disciplinary model, theoretical orientation, and even conceptual revolution or paradigm, its proposed status as paradigmatic epoch is as yet uncertain. Given the rich diversity of theoretical perspectives in transpersonal scholarship (Cunningham, 2007, 2011; Daniels, 2005; Rothberg & Kelly, 1998), it is likely that the field will continue to house a number of mutually enriching orientations—such as spiral-dynamic, structuralist, perennialist, participatory, astro-archetypal, social-scientific, and so on—which arguably illuminate different aspects of transpersonal phenomena and their study. Although transpersonal scholars have taken important steps in exploring the differences, complementarities, and possible integration of these theoretical orientations (e.g., Daniels, 2005, 2009; Goddard, 2005, 2009; Ianiszeskwi, 2010; Washburn, 2003), further work is necessary in order to achieve a fuller and more cohesive understanding of transpersonal phenomena.

Third, although participatory spirituality provides resources for critical discernment in spiritual matters, it might be misleading to consider the participatory movement (or any particular participatory approach) a spiritual tradition that could be situated above all others. In contrast, participatory spirituality might be better understood as a spiritual orientation (i.e., toward embodiment, integration, relationality, and creative inquiry) that can be found in various degrees within many existing traditions (see Ferrer & Sherman, 2008a), that is increasingly alive in the ongoing contemporary renewal of traditions (e.g., Fox, 2002; Lerner, 2000; Ray, 2008; Whicher, 1999), and that may also give rise to new religious expressions (e.g., Ferrer, 2003; Heron, 1998) and shape the emergence of certain novel religious or spiritual traditions.

Four and perhaps most significant, the current state of participatory scholarship leads me to characterize the participatory movement more as a

*network* of independent thinkers sharing a scholarly/spiritual sensibility (e.g., about the cocreated nature of spiritual knowledge, the centrality of embodiment and multidimensional cognition, or the import of spiritual pluralism) than as a school of thought or discipline formalized through traditional scholarly structures. Although participatory associations, programs, journals, and book series may be launched in the future, this network-nature of the participatory movement is advantageous in at least the following two regards. On the one hand, a network promotes the transdisciplinary dissemination of the participatory perspective, preventing the scholarly isolation that afflicts many schools of thought and tends to limit the scope of their action to in-house disciplinary conversations among their members. In a similar vein, arguing against an APA division for transpersonal psychology, Krippner suggested that the creation of the APA division of humanistic psychology reduced the influence that a more diffuse movement operating throughout extant APA groups might have had on the discipline of psychology (Schroll, Krippner, Vich, & Mojeiko, 2009, pp. 42–43).

On the other hand, the inherently pluralistic character of a network can house greater theoretical diversity (think, for example, of the Scientific and Medical Network in the United Kingdom) than a school of thought, which often achieves its identity through commitment to specific paradigmatic assumptions or conceptual frameworks. Thus, a network-type organization is not only coherent with the pluralistic ethos of the participatory movement, but also fecund in the sense of not imposing a priori theoretical constraints via premature commitments to particular models or the aspiration to converge into a unified theory. Lastly, the decentralized nature of a network is consistent with the critique of hierarchical and authoritarian tendencies in society and religion issued by many participatory thinkers (e.g., Heron, 1998, 2006), as well as with related proposals for peer-to-peer modes of knowledge production, access, and distribution (Bauwens, 2007).

In closing, I extend an invitation to scholars to add their voices and perspectives to the conversation and to expand participatory thinking in new directions and into new fields. I proceed with the conviction that the participatory approach provides helpful understandings and practical tools to facilitate a more fertile interreligious interaction, empower individuals in the cocreation of their spiritual path, and, perhaps most fundamentally, participate more fully in the mystery out of which everything arises.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> To be completely accurate, the book appeared in October 2001, after the publication of a series of essays introducing my participatory perspective (e.g., Ferrer, 1998a, 1998b, 2000a, 2000b, 2001). I wrote *Revisioning* during 1994–1998 and defended it as my doctoral dissertation in 1999 (Ferrer, 1999a).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the influence of many spiritual, psychological, and philosophical schools and my own lived spiritual inquiry, my participatory perspective is particularly indebted to Tarnas's (1991) participatory epistemology, Maturana and Varela's enactive paradigm of cognition (Maturana & Varela, 1987; Varela et al., 1991), Albareda and Romero's holistic integration (Ferrer, 2003), Kremer's (1994) participatory indigenous studies, and Panikkar's (1984, 1988) pluralistic account of religion. Personal exchanges with the radical

participatory thinker and practitioner Heron (1992, 1998, 2006) helped me to develop and refine my perspective in significant ways. Important aspects of my work also emerged in contradistinction to Wilber's (1995) integral theory and other classical transpersonal models.

<sup>3</sup> Although *Revisioning* was translated into Spanish, Russian, and Italian, as well as widely discussed on the World Wide Web, I limit this assessment, with a few exceptions, to scholarly books and journal articles written in the Anglophone world. Two electronic resources for participatory spirituality are Bauwens' Peer-to-Peer Foundation (<http://p2pfoundation.net>) and Cabot's Participatory Studies ([www.participatorystudies.com](http://www.participatorystudies.com)).

<sup>4</sup> The "and/or" of this clause is crucial. Although most participatory thinkers affirm the ontological autonomy of spirit, to embrace a participatory understanding of spiritual knowing is not necessarily linked to religionist or supernaturalist premises or standpoints. Virtually identical participatory implications for the study of spirituality can be practically drawn if we conceive or translate the term *spirit* in a naturalistic fashion as an emergent creative potential of life, nature, or reality. Further, my use of the term *undetermined* to qualify the mystery is mostly performative—that is, it seeks to evoke the sense of not-knowing and intellectual humility I find most fruitful and appropriate in approaching the creative source of our being. Rather than affirming negatively (as the term *indeterminate*, which I used in *Revisioning*, does), *undetermined* leaves open the possibility of both determinacy and indeterminacy within the mystery (as well as the paradoxical confluence or even identity of these two apparent polar accounts), simply suggesting that the genuinely creative potentials of the mystery cannot be determined a priori.

<sup>5</sup> My use of the term *enactive* is inspired by Varela et al.'s (1991) pioneering articulation of a nonrepresentational paradigm of cognition. The participatory formulation adapts and extends the enactive paradigm—originally limited to the perceptual cognition of the natural world—to account for the emergence of ontologically rich religious realms co-created by human multidimensional cognition and the generative force of life and/or the spirit. For other discussions of spiritual knowing as enactive, see Kelly (2008), Irwin (2008), and Wilber (1995).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Chaudhuri's (1977) individuality, relatedness, and transcendence aspects of the human person (see also Shirazi, 2005), and Heron's (2006, 2007) enlivenment, engagement, and enlightenment modes of spiritual inquiry.

<sup>7</sup> The language of *equiprimacy*, *equipotentiality*, and *equipluralism* can raise the specter of Wilber's critique of the so-called "green meme" in spiritual discourse, with its problematic emphasis on antihierarchical egalitarianism. For a response to Wilber's "green meme" charge of the participatory approach, see Ferrer (2002, pp. 223–226) and below, and for a critique of Wilber's misleading use of the "green meme" by one of Claire Graves's students, see Todorovic (2002).

<sup>8</sup> Istress "potentially" to convey that every spiritual tradition—even those traditionally promulgating disembodied or world-denying doctrines and practices—can be legitimately re-envisioned from the perspective of more holistic understandings (see Ferrer, 2008b, 2010, 2011b). Think, for example, of Patanjali's yoga system—originally aimed at the arguably dissociative self-identification with a pure consciousness (*purusa*) in isolation (*kaivalyam*) from body, mind, and nature (*prakrti*), yoga is nowadays conceptualized and practiced globally in strongly integrative and embodied ways (e.g., Whicher, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Itake these enactments to be ultimate in their respective spiritual universes, but this in no way relativizes the various traditions' ultimates nor does it posit a supra-ultimate spiritual referent beyond them. As discussed below, I hold that the enactive paradigm allows us to not only move away from representational and objectivist accounts of spiritual cognition, but also avoid the problematic dualism between the mystery and its enactments. In *Revisioning*, I pointed out that this account of the mystery, far from neutral, can be seen as privileging certain spiritual views over others (Ferrer, 2002, pp. 178–181). No framework (participatory or otherwise) can successfully avoid privileging one or another perspective; hierarchy seems to be intrinsic to human language and thinking (although I would argue that it can be overcome in our way of being-in-the-world). My project, in contrast, seeks to elaborate a framework that *minimizes* certain problematic hierarchies based on historical doctrinal beliefs about the mystery (e.g., as being ultimately personal, impersonal, monistic, dual, or nondual), while conserving grounds for the criticism of dissociated, disembodied, and oppressive visions and practices. Although my proposal does not entirely settle the question of doctrinal ranking, I maintain that the question is relaxed through the focus on transformational outcomes to make spiritual qualitative distinctions (emancipatory epistemology), and the affirmation of a potential plurality of equally holistic visions manifesting through different enactments of the mystery (equiplurality principle).

<sup>10</sup> As Heron (personal communication, May 8, 2011) perceptively notes, the dissociation, egocentricism, and eco-social-political tests are related to the intrapersonal, transpersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of participatory spirituality, respectively.

<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that Washburn (2003) endorsed the participatory affirmation of a creative dialectical relationship between spiritual universalism and pluralism (on this important issue, see also Puhakka, 2008), and Daniels (2009) suggested the natural alignment between spiral-dynamic and participatory perspectives. I concur: These perspectives' emphasis on embodiment, relatedness, and instinctual/spiritual integration renders likely their future integration. An important theoretical difference lies between Washburn's (1995) neo-Kantian agnosticism toward the ontological status of spiritual realities and the participatory avowal of their co-created ontological value (see Ferrer, 2011b). As Ianiszewski (2010) argued, however, the spiral-dynamic and participatory orientations might be coherently integrated via linking Washburn's Dynamic Ground with a postulated participatory Noetic Field that is the source of ontologically rich enacted spiritual realities.

<sup>12</sup> Some historical roots of participatory thinking are discussed in Ferrer and Sherman (2008b), Sherman (2008) and Kelly (2008). More recent precedents are the works of Buber (1970), Chaudhuri (1974, 1977), Berman (1981), Tambiah (1990), Tarnas (1991), Heron (1992, 1998), Panikkar (1993), Reason (1994), Skolimowski (1994), Kremer (1994), and Abram (1996). See also the two *ReVision* monographs “*Toward a Participatory Worldview, Part 1 & 2*” (Torbert & Reason, 2001; Reason & Torbert, 2001), which include Tarnas’s important elucidation of the various meanings of the term *participation*.

<sup>13</sup> Participatory thinking is also alive in other fields such as qualitative research (e.g., Hiles, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2007), ecopsychology (e.g., Abram, 1996; W.W. Adams, 2005), indigenous studies (e.g., Bastien, 2003; Marks, 2007), anthropology (e.g., Lahood, 2007c; Tambiah, 1990), and contemporary Christian theology and spirituality (e.g., Burns, 2002; Dreyer & Burrows, 2005; Minner, 2004), among others.

<sup>14</sup> I do not suggest that all these authors necessarily identify themselves as participatory scholars, but rather that they have endorsed, supported, or developed participatory perspectives in transpersonal and spiritual discourse. Participatory thinking, as I argue in the conclusion to this essay, tends to crystallize not so much in a formalized school of thought granting its members a sense of distinct identity, but in a participatory sensibility to spirituality and scholarship informing a network of extraordinarily diverse scholar-practitioners.

<sup>15</sup> In addition to being reprinted in many publications (e.g., Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda, 2006, 2007, 2010a, 2010b), the essay catalyzed a number of invited keynote and plenary presentations at major educational conferences (e.g., Ferrer, 2005a, 2005b, 2009a).

<sup>16</sup> In subsequent writings (e.g., Ferrer, 2008b, 2010; Ferrer, Albareda, & Romero, 2004), I clarified my perspective on this issue: “I am not suggesting the existence of a ‘moral perennialism’ resting on a supposedly ethical common religious past. By contrast, I propose that any future global ethics will very likely not emerge from our highly diverse and ambiguous moral religious history, but rather from our critical reflection on such history in the context of our present-day moral intuitions (Ferrer, 2008b, p. 143).

<sup>17</sup> Notably, *Revisioning* anticipated and addressed Wilber’s critical points; for a response to the charge of performative self-contradiction, see Ferrer (2002, pp. 179–181; see also Ferrer, 1998a) and for a response to the “green meme” charge, see Ferrer (2002, pp. 223–226). Wilber (2002) has not responded to these rejoinders, nor has he re-engaged his response (Wilber, 1998) to my earlier critique of his spiritual epistemology (Ferrer, 1998b), which is also addressed in Ferrer (2002, pp. 66–69).

<sup>18</sup> Gleig and Boevig (2009) traced the origins of this metaphysics to the modern psychoanalytic ideal of an intimate autonomy “allowing for connection without the loss of individuality” (p. 68). For the romantic and mystical roots of this account, see Kirschner (1996).

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