

13 Transpersonal psychology and the Spiritual but Not Religious movement

Beyond spiritual narcissism
in a postsecular age

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It was once believed that the rise of modernity would predictably lead to secularization and the decline of religion in North America.¹ However, although recent surveys show some signs of decline in organized religion, an increasing number of people consider themselves Spiritual but Not Religious.² The Spiritual but Not Religious (SBNR) movement is now a large and influential phenomenon that is altering the spiritual and religious landscape of not only North America but also many European countries.³

In a way, the SBNR movement is a predictable outcome of the confluence of two different sociocultural processes in the (post)modern West: the *secularization* of traditional religious authority, on one hand, and the *resacralization* of self, nature, and the cosmos, on the other.⁴ In this postsecular context, an SBNR “affiliation” becomes an essential – conscious, semiconscious, or unconscious – self-identification strategy to minimize the cognitive dissonance stemming from reenchanting subjective life and world while simultaneously feeling that one may be regressing to problematically perceived, past religious attitudes (e.g., dogmatism, exclusivism, authoritarianism). Thus, SBNR might well become – or be seen as – the postsecular spiritual identity *par excellence*.

The SBNR movement has many arguably positive attributes (e.g., holism, openness to hybridity, anti-authoritarianism), but also some problematic features; in this chapter, we explore one major problem. What we call *spiritual narcissism* can be understood in two different but often interrelated ways: (a) the appropriation of spirituality to bolster egoic ways of life (i.e., spiritual materialism) and (b) the belief in the universal superiority of one’s favored spiritual choice, path, or account of ultimate reality (i.e., sectarianism).

Two major conceptual frameworks fueling spiritual narcissism in the SBNR movement are *experientialism* and *perennialism*. Experientialism refers to the assumption that spiritual phenomena are fundamentally individual inner experiences, as seen in the SBNR movement’s prioritizing of individualism and personal experience.⁵ Perennialism refers to the assumption that there is one single spiritual ultimate (and associated liberated state) underlying all religions, as suggested in the SBNR movement’s anti-exclusivism and

belief that all religions teach the same thing.⁶ As Schneider points out, both orientations tend to come together in the SBNR movement: “The repudiation of institutional religion in favor of personal spirituality is . . . actually the repudiation of denominational belonging rather than of religion as such.”⁷ Whereas experientialism tends to foster spiritual narcissism of the egoic appropriation type (i.e., by framing spirituality as inner experiences the ego can possess) and perennialism usually results in spiritual narcissism of the universalist type (discussed in the following), in this chapter we argue that both assumptions reinforce sectarianism.

Since the egoic type has been already discussed in detail elsewhere,⁸ this chapter focuses on the universalist version of spiritual narcissism. Spiritual narcissism can be found throughout the world’s religious literature, as well as in the field of transpersonal psychology and transpersonal theory more generally. To address spiritual narcissism in transpersonal studies there is a contemporary movement, often framed under the banner of *participatory*, concerned with reformulating underlying philosophical assumptions of classical transpersonal psychology (e.g., experientialism and perennialism) in order to minimize or eradicate its limitations and inadequacies. Realigning the SBNR movement with the participatory approach in transpersonal psychology may thus help to undermine the SBNR movement’s spiritual narcissism. After a brief review of experientialism and perennialism in the SBNR movement, in this chapter we discuss two waves of transpersonalism (perennialist and participatory), suggesting that the SBNR movement can learn important lessons from the evolution of the transpersonal field to minimize sectarianism and better embody its anti-exclusivist ethos. The chapter concludes with some general reflections on the (im)possibility of fully avoiding sectarian spiritual narcissism in intellectual discourse.

The SBNR movement’s experientialism and perennialism

This section documents the SBNR movement’s allegiance to experientialism and perennialism. *Experientialism* arises in the SBNR movement when discussing the differences between spirituality and religion, as much of the literature emphasizes the movement’s centrality of the personal interior life over external religious institutions. For example, in his study of the ongoing shift from religion to spirituality, Heelas states that while religion is concerned with a god and external structures, spirituality has to do with the personal, interior, and immanent.⁹ Dogma and traditional religion are rejected for a customized spiritual path that specifically works for the particular individual. Mercadante makes the same distinction between spirituality and religion by stating that the former refers to the inner life of faith while the latter refers to organizational communal components.¹⁰ For Schneiders, whereas spirituality is “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives,”¹¹ religion entails belief in a transcendent reality in the context of

a cultural system or institution external to the individual. However, all the preceding thinkers acknowledge a significant overlap between spirituality and religion.¹²

Empirical research corroborates the prevalence of experientialism in the SBNR movement. For example, Roof interviewed about 1,599 members of the baby-boomer generation over eight to nine years and identified a great number of what he calls “seekers”¹³ – those who have generally rejected organized religion to adopt a highly individualized spirituality that emphasizes direct spiritual experience. Zinnbauer et al. found similar results for the SBNR group in their survey of 346 individuals.¹⁴ In Mercadante’s study of the SBNR movement, one of the defining characteristics of the “nones” (i.e., the religiously unaffiliated) is the affirmation of individual rights, self-determination, and personal responsibility. Nones value individual choice and personal preference in matters of spirituality. They are moral individualists who make decisions on ethical matters based on individual perceptions rather than religious dogma.¹⁵

In this context, *perennialism* enters SBNR discourse through the often-made distinction between *exclusive* religions (to be rejected) and an *inclusive* spirituality (to be embraced).¹⁶ On one hand, institutional forms of religion are rejected for claiming to have the correct answers concerning spiritual matters – a claim that renders alternate religious systems incorrect or partial. As Mercadante discovered, one main position rejected by SBNRs (i.e., those who consider themselves SBNR) is “an exclusivism that rejects all religions but one’s own.”¹⁷ On the other hand, SBNRs generally believe that all traditions have something valuable to offer and can be taken on more or less equal footing. A common belief in the SBNR movement, Mercadante writes, is that “[a]ll religions, at base, are seeking the same thing or teach the same basic principles.”¹⁸

But, what is the essential spiritual belief of the SBNR movement? As Houtman and Aupers conclude in their multicountry study of post-Christian spirituality, the contemporary “spiritual turn” is characterized by “the idea that the self is divine and by the immanent conception of the sacred.”¹⁹ This immanent monism, they add, not only is the often-neglected “main tenet of post-Christian spirituality” but also “contradicts SBNRs’ alleged individualism.”²⁰

Despite the asserted emancipatory and reconciliatory nature of SBNR experientialism and perennialism, a pernicious individualistic relativism and hidden exclusivism lurk behind them. Since the spiritual path is taken to be highly unique to each individual, SBNRs often believe that the various spiritual paths are all equally good but for different people – that is, no path can be said to be superior or inferior. This account can easily lead to a banalization of differences, lack of critical discernment, and even moral perniciousness. On what grounds can one then denounce patriarchal, oppressive, repressive, or eco-destructive spiritualities? Furthermore, the SBNR movement’s emphasis on inner experience as the privileged location for the

sacred inadvertently fuels sectarian tendencies. As we have seen, the divine is understood as an all-pervasive force residing in the world and within people's deepest selves.²¹ This immanent-monistic sectarianism is further cemented by the SBNR movement's commitment to perennialism. Like the perennial philosophy (discussed in the following), SBNRs believe that a nondual, monistic account of spirituality accurately reflects the mystical or esoteric core of all traditions. Privileging such a particular version of the sacred, however, ends up devaluing other views of what the ultimate spiritual goal entails (e.g., transcendentalist, personal, and dual accounts of the divine are demoted). Thus, when considering the primary aim of the spiritual path, SBNR experientialist perennialism is actually exclusive of many alternate spiritual perspectives.

As a way to assist with these issues in the SBNR movement, we find it helpful to examine the field of transpersonal psychology. Classical transpersonal psychology prefigured many of the themes found in the SBNR movement, and they have much in common with each other. For example, both are heavily influenced by Eastern traditions, tend to psychologize spirituality, seek to integrate science and spirituality, emphasize self-growth and spiritual transformation, hold an anti-exclusivist stance that is open to all spiritual traditions, and generally assume a perennialist outlook of spirituality. In addition, both transpersonal psychology and the SBNR movement were, in part, born out of reactionary movements against social and religious conventions that were seen as downplaying or suppressing authentic spirituality. The next section introduces transpersonal psychology and maps the evolution of the field from a perennialist to a participatory orientation.

Transpersonal psychology: from perennialism to participation

Transpersonal psychology originated in the mid-1960s out of the interest of a group of psychologists and psychiatrists (Anthony Sutich, Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof, Miles Vich) in expanding the field of humanistic psychology beyond its focus on the individual self. Etymologically, the prefix *trans* – means “beyond” or “through.” *Transpersonal* was originally coined in the field of transpersonal psychology to refer to experiences, motivations, developmental stages (e.g., cognitive, moral, emotional, interpersonal), modes of being and other phenomena that include but transcend the sphere of the individual personality, self, or ego.²² Historically, the transpersonal orientation emerged out of the encounter among Western psychology (psychoanalytic, Jungian, humanistic, and Existentialist schools in particular), Eastern contemplative traditions (especially Zen, Advaita Vedanta, and Taoism), and the psychedelic counterculture of 1960s' California. The transpersonal perspective also finds precedents in a plethora of spiritual traditions that are of great interest to many in the SBNR movement, such as Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Christian mysticism, Kabbalah,

and the various schools usually amalgamated under the name of Western esotericism.²³

The transpersonal anthropologist Lahood describes two turns or waves 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.”²⁴ Lahood characterizes this turn with a commitment to religious universalism (or perennialism) and included the work of Maslow, Grof, and Wilber as representative. The perennialist era in transpersonal scholarship prevailed from 1977 to the mid-1990s and was dominated by the work of Ken Wilber, who sought 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 a Zen-like nondual realization. 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, creative, and pluralistic dimensions of transpersonal events.²⁵ According to Dale, the participatory paradigm correlates with the nonlinear paradigm in contemporary science (i.e., moving beyond mainstream psychology’s linear statistical averaging) and provides the best explanation of transpersonal inquiry and development.²⁶

The second wave of transpersonal psychology emerged, in part, as a response to problems and shortcomings increasingly perceived in the first wave. In particular, as discussed in the following, the first wave operated under particular philosophical assumptions that were fueling spiritual narcissism in various ways. Two of these premises are experientialism and perennialism, which also heavily influence the SBNR movement. The next two sections offer a closer examination of the problems of perennialism and our suggested participatory solution.

The fundamental problems of perennialism

Both first-wave transpersonalism and the SBNR movement generally adopt a perennialist outlook of spirituality. Before examining the problems of perennialism, it is useful to review the origins of its popular understanding.

Although perennialist ideas had already been reintroduced in the West, it was not until the publication of Aldous Huxley that they reached the masses and became popular beyond esoteric and academic elites.²⁷ Huxley famously described the perennial philosophy as

the metaphysics that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic

that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being.²⁸

What characterizes Huxley's perennialism, as well as the one of the so-called traditionalists such as René Guénon, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, or Frithjof Schuon, is the conviction that this single perennial truth can be found at the heart of the mystical teachings of all the world religious traditions.²⁹

Although with different emphases, these authors claim that whereas the exoteric beliefs of religious traditions are assorted and at times even incompatible, their esoteric or mystical dimension reveals an essential unity that transcends this doctrinal pluralism. According to this view, for example, the same mystical experience of the nondual Ground of Being would be interpreted as emptiness (*sunyata*) by a Mahayana Buddhist, as Brahman by an Advaita Vedantin, as the union with God by a Christian, or as an objectless absorption (*asamprajñata samadhi*) by a practitioner of Patañjali's yoga. In all cases, the experience is the same, the interpretation different. In sum, perennialists maintain not only the existence of an experiential contemplative consensus about the ultimate nature of reality but also the objective truth of such a vision (i.e., it depicts "things as they really are").

Perennialism is burdened with three fundamental difficulties. The first is that it privileges a nondual monistic metaphysics. Perennialist models typically assume the existence of a universal spiritual reality that is the Ground of all that is, and of which the contemplative insights are an expression. Despite their insistence on the ineffable and unqualifiable nature of this Ground, perennialists consistently characterize it as nondual, the One, or the Absolute. The perennialist Ground of Being, that is, strikingly resembles the Neoplatonic Godhead or the Advaitin Brahman. As Schuon states, "the perspective of Sankara is one of the most adequate expressions possible of the philosophia perennis or sapiential esoterism."³⁰ The Absolute of the perennial philosophy, far from being a neutral and truly unqualifiable ground, is represented as supporting a nondual or monistic metaphysics. Both first-wave transpersonal psychology and the SBNR movement elevate monistic and nondual states to the zenith of spiritual development.³¹

A second problematic issue is that perennialism is geared toward an objectivist epistemology. The perennialist vision falls back into objectivism with its insistence on a pregiven ultimate reality that can be objectively known by the human Intellect (intuitive knowing). As Schuon states, "[t]he prerogative of the human state is objectivity, the essential content of which is the Absolute."³² Although objectivity should not be understood as limited to the empirical and external, Schuon writes that "knowledge is 'objective' when it is capable of grasping the object as it is and not as it may be deformed by the subject."³³ These assumptions make the perennial philosophy subject to all the anxieties of Cartesian consciousness, such as the false dichotomy between objectivism and relativism.³⁴

Third, these universalist and objectivist assumptions generally lead perennial philosophers to recede into dogmatism and intolerance toward different spiritual worldviews. In spite of the different metaphysical universes espoused by the contemplative traditions, perennialists insist “there is only one metaphysic but many traditional languages through which it is expressed.”³⁵ But what about spiritual traditions that do not posit a metaphysical Absolute or transcendent ultimate reality? What about spiritual traditions that refuse to fit into the perennialist scheme? The perennialist solution to conflicting spiritual traditions is to regard religious traditions and doctrines that do not accept the perennial vision as inauthentic, merely exoteric, or representing lower levels of insight in a hierarchy of revelations whose culmination is the perennial truth.³⁶ In this scheme, the different spiritual Ultimates, although absolute within their own specific religious universe, are merely relative in relation to the single Absolute that perennialism champions. With this move, perennialism relativizes the goals of the various traditions by positing a pregiven supra-ultimate referent beyond them, out of which all spiritual ultimates are merely partial aspects, dimensions, or perspectives. Furthermore, while ecumenically claiming to honor all spiritual truths, perennialists consistently grades spiritual insights and traditions according to how closely they approach or represent the supposed attributes of this pregiven Absolute reality (e.g., nondual traditions over dual ones, monistic over theistic, impersonal over personal).³⁷

Perennialists justify these rankings on the basis of metaphysical intuitions about the ultimate nature of the Absolute. The problem with this claim is that mystics from the most diverse times and places have reported metaphysical intuitions that not only did not conform to the perennialist cosmology but also were fundamentally at odds with each other. Generations of mystics from different traditions, and often from a single tradition, have debated metaphysical issues for centuries without substantial signs of agreement – the everlasting quarrels between Buddhist and Hindu contemplatives about the ultimate nature of the self and reality come quickly to mind in this regard.³⁸ These differences did not arise only among the exoteric representatives of the traditions (as perennialists accept) but also among the mystical or esoteric contemplatives themselves.

The perennialist certainty about the nondual or monistic nature of ultimate reality too easily results in spiritual narcissism. By adopting a perennialist framework, one might view oneself as having the higher-ranking perspective that subsumes all other spiritual perspectives. Believing each tradition is essentially talking about the same goal devalues their differences and promotes the egocentric belief that oneself truly knows what every spiritual seeker’s ultimate goal is – or should be. Despite their strong anti-exclusivist character, transpersonal psychology’s and the SBNR movement’s allegiance to perennialism catapults them back to a sectarianism that privileges particular spiritual traditions over all others.

The participatory turn as a solution to perennialist sectarianism

Can sectarianism be avoided without resorting to either (a) an ideological perennialism that hides exclusivist claims or (b) an individualistic or cultural relativism that banalizes differences and offers no grounds for critical discernment? We believe that this aspiration is (largely) achievable, and together with a number of scholars in the field of religious studies, we have called this third possible way the “participatory turn” in the study of religion and spirituality.³⁹ Originally articulated in the field of transpersonal psychology, the participatory turn proposed a shift from perennialism to participatory pluralism in the understanding of religious diversity. Since the participatory approach in transpersonal psychology was partly aimed at undercutting the spiritual narcissism rampant in perennialist transpersonalism, it may also provide assistance in deflating spiritual narcissism in the SBNR movement.

The *participatory approach* holds that human spirituality essentially emerges from human co-creative participation in an undetermined mystery or generative power of life, the cosmos, or reality.⁴⁰ It also reframes spiritual experiences as multilocal participatory *events* that can occur not only in the locus of an individual but also in a relationship, a community, or a place (countering thereby experientialism and egoic appropriation). Spiritual participatory events can engage the entire range of human epistemic faculties (e.g., rational, imaginal, somatic, vital, aesthetic) with both the creative unfolding of the mystery in the enactment – or “bringing forth” – of ontologically rich religious worlds. Extending Varela, Rosch, and Thompson’s enactive paradigm to spiritual cognition,⁴¹ the participatory approach presents an understanding of the sacred that conceives spiritual phenomena, experiences, and insights as *co-created events*. Spiritual knowing, thus, is not a representation of pre-given, independent spiritual objects, but an enaction of a world or domain of distinctions co-created by the different elements involved in the participatory event. In the same way that Rorty debunked the myth of the human “mind as mirror of nature,”⁴² we suggest it is important to put to rest the equally problematic image of contemplative or visionary “consciousness as mirror of spirit” implicit in much classical and contemporary spiritual discourse. By locating the emergence of spiritual knowing at the interface of human multidimensional cognition, cultural context, subtle worlds, and the deep generativity of life or the cosmos, this account avoids both the secular post/modernist reduction of religion to cultural-linguistic artifact and the religionist and perennialist privileging of a single tradition as superior or paradigmatic.

Participatory pluralism conceives a multiplicity of not only spiritual paths but also spiritual liberations and spiritual ultimates. On one hand, besides affirming the historical existence of multiple spiritual goals or “salvations,” the increased embodied openness to the generative power of the mystery

fostered by the participatory approach can naturally engender a number of novel holistic spiritual realizations that cannot be reduced to traditional states of enlightenment or liberation. On the other hand, participatory pluralism proposes that different spiritual ultimates can be enacted through participation in an undetermined mystery or generative force of life or reality. 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 or the cosmos allows for the participatory cocreation of an indefinite number of ultimate self-disclosures of reality and corresponding religious worlds. Whether there is an ultimate end point to overall spiritual evolution is an open question, but given the rich variety of spiritual cosmologies it can be reasonably conjectured that the mystery co-creatively unfolds in multiple ontological directions.

A participatory understanding of spiritual knowing should not then be confused with the view that mystics of the various kinds and traditions simply access different dimensions or perspectives of a readymade single ultimate reality – a view which merely admits that this pre-given spiritual referent can be approached from different vantage points. In contrast, the view advanced here is that no pre-given ultimate reality exists and that different spiritual worlds and ultimates can be enacted through human co-creative participation.

Participatory approaches seek to enact with body, mind, heart, and consciousness a creative spirituality that lets a thousand spiritual flowers bloom. To be sure, once enacted, spiritual phenomena become more easily accessible and, in a way, “given” to some extent for individual consciousness to participate in. In other words, spiritual forms that 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, and so on). But the fact that enacted phenomena become more available does not mean that they are predetermined, limited in number, organized in a transcultural hierarchical fashion, or universally sequential in their unfolding, or that no new spiritual manifestations can be enacted through co-creative participation.

Although this may at first sound like a rather “anything goes” approach to religious claims, we hold to the contrary that recognizing a diversity of co-created religious worlds, in fact, asks both scholars and practitioners to be more perspicuous in discerning the differences and merits of those worlds. Specifically, we suggest three 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; the *dissociation test*, which evaluates the extent to which spiritual traditions foster the integrated blossoming of all dimensions of the person; and the *eco-socio-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.

Since it is likely that most religious traditions would not rank too highly in these tests, it should be obvious that the participatory approach leads to a strong ranking of spiritual orientations. Thus, although this approach does not privilege any tradition or type of spirituality over others on *doctrinal*, *objectivist*, or *ontological grounds* (i.e., saying that theism, monism, or non-dualism corresponds to the nature of ultimate reality or is soteriologically superior), it does offer criteria for making qualitative distinctions among spiritual systems on *pragmatic* and *transformational grounds*. The crucial difference in relation to perennialist gradations, thus, is that participatory rankings are not ideologically based on a priori ontological doctrines or putative correspondence to a single pregiven ultimate reality, but instead ground critical discernment in the practical values of integrated selflessness and eco-socio-political justice. We stand by these values – not because we think they are universal, objective, or ahistorical (they are not), but because we firmly believe that their cultivation can effectively reduce today's personal, relational, social, and planetary suffering.

To further minimize the problem of sectarianism, participatory pluralism rejects the *dualism of mystery and enactments*, thus considering these enactments to be ultimate in their respective spiritual universes.⁴³ In other words, a participatory enactive epistemology affirms the radical identity of the manifold spiritual ultimates and the mystery, even if the former does not exhaust the ontological possibilities of the latter. The mystery–enactments dualism is pernicious: it not only binds scholars and practitioners alike to objectivist and hierarchical frameworks but also paves the way for interreligious exclusivism and spiritual narcissism (i.e., once a supra-ultimate Absolute is posited, practitioners can – and often do – claim their own religion's Absolute to be the closer, better, or more accurate account of the supra-ultimate Absolute). Building on the enactive paradigm's rejection of representational theories of knowledge,⁴⁴ we maintain that in the same way an individual is her actions (whether perceptual, cognitive, emotional, or subtle), the mystery is its enactments. In this understanding, emptiness (*sunyata*), the Tao, and the Christian God (in their many inflections) can be seen as creative gestures of the mystery enacted through participating human (and perhaps nonhuman) individuals and collectives.

Not positing a supra-ultimate spiritual referent beyond its specific enactments has two very important consequences. First, it preserves the ontological ultimacy of those enactments (e.g., God, emptiness, Tao, Brahman) in their respective spiritual universes, avoiding the traditionalist and neo-Kantian demotion of those ultimates to penultimate stations.⁴⁵ Second, it short-circuits the feasibility of promoting one tradition as objectively superior (i.e., holding the most accurate picture of the mystery), excising ontological competitiveness at its root and arguably settling one of the main challenges of religious pluralism.

To return to the SBNR movement, we argue that this participatory pluralist perspective can effectively erode the hidden exclusivism and sectarianism of the SBNR movement while avoiding cultural and individualist relativisms. Once the very idea of a pre-given ultimate is rejected, ranking particular spiritual states and associated traditions according to how they accurately represent or mirror such an ultimate becomes meaningless. Furthermore, the radical indeterminacy of the mystery undermines the objectivism of the perennial philosophy, preventing the mystery from being reified. Whether these moves are enough to entirely eradicate spiritual narcissism is a question for this chapter's conclusion.

Conclusion: beyond spiritual narcissism?

Legions of spiritual practitioners are rummaging through the spiritual marketplace in an attempt to optimize their well-being and attain one or another particular spiritual state they have come to believe is universal or most liberating. According to the participatory approach, however, a spiritual practitioner is expanding consciousness not just to access pre-given spiritual contents but also to enact or bring forth a rich variety of spiritual phenomena. In this light, spiritual identity becomes an ongoing participatory process arising from the confluence of human knowing, cultural context, spiritual aims and expectations, and the creative power of the mystery. Hyphenated spiritual identities, common in the SBNR movement, can then be seen as the fruit of participatory events enacted in interaction with such factors, including possible interactions with a diversity of subtle worlds.⁴⁶ The highly syncretic nature of the SBNR movement typically entails both a firm rejection of any kind of religious exclusivism and an openness to the wisdom of all spiritual traditions. Nevertheless, by adhering to the perennialist belief that all traditions ultimately deliver the same message or lead to the same place, SBNRs unknowingly fall back to sectarianism. Such a sectarianism becomes evident both whenever such a perennial truth is described (e.g., as nondual, monistic, immanent), and in the inclusivist claim that the perennial truth (with its favored spiritual ultimate) encompasses all other spiritual truths but not vice versa.⁴⁷

A chief way in which the participatory approach minimizes sectarianism is by holding the undetermined nature of the mystery, leaving open the possibility of both determinacy and indeterminacy within – as well as the paradoxical confluence or even identity of – these two apparently polar accounts. As Duckworth observes regarding this proposal, metaphysical biases are thus neutralized for the most part: such an “undetermined ultimate precludes emptiness from being the final word on reality because, being undetermined, ultimate reality can also be disclosed as theistic in a personal God. And importantly, this ‘God’ is not a lower reality than emptiness.”⁴⁸

That said, it is important to note that participatory approaches do not completely eradicate sectarianism. No conceptual framework can

successfully avoid privileging one or another perspective. As Derrida underlines, hierarchy is intrinsic to Western thinking and language.⁴⁹ To affirm or deny one thing implicitly denies or affirms, respectively, its opposite, polar, or alternate reality. In the present case, the idea of an undetermined mystery does not entirely settle the issue because it questions the legitimacy of exclusively positive or negative metaphysical accounts of the mystery.

Mindful of this predicament, we stress that the use of the term *undetermined mystery* should be understood to be mostly *performative* – that is, seeking to evoke the sense of not knowing and intellectual humility that might be most fruitful in approaching that creative power of life and reality that is the source of our being. In this regard, Duckworth argues that whereas to claim the determinacy–indeterminacy of the mystery bounds one to a closed model of truth, the undetermined fosters a humble and open-ended approach to such a mystery.⁵⁰ Doctrinal rankings are further minimized by the participatory grounding of qualitative distinctions on pragmatic values (e.g., integrated selflessness, embodiment, eco-socio-political justice). In addition, the participatory turn holds that there can potentially be different spiritual enactments that are nonetheless equally holistic, emancipatory, and ethically just, which further minimizes rankings; for example, fully embodied liberated states could be arguably achieved through Christian incarnation or Yogic integration of *purusa* (consciousness) and *prakriti* (nature) in the context of radically different ontologies.

Summing up, the participatory approach provides a framework that minimizes problematic hierarchies based on doctrinal ontological beliefs about the mystery, while conserving grounds for the criticism of dissociated, narcissistic, and oppressive visions and practices. While the participatory proposal might not entirely resolve the question of ontological ranking, we maintain that the question is significantly relaxed through the qualification of the mystery as undetermined, the overcoming of the dualism of mystery and enactments, the affirmation of a potential plurality of equally holistic visions, and the focus on transformational outcomes to make spiritual qualitative distinctions. Sectarianism and spiritual narcissism cannot be fully overcome conceptually (i.e., through any theoretical framework, whether participatory or not), but we propose that it can be transcended in the realm of human experience. This transcendence comes through an attitude of intellectual humility and genuine openness to the other, as well as to the world's mysteries – particularly those mysteries that surpass the conceptual mind and can paradoxically (for the human mind) house incompatible spiritual enactments, orientations, and values.

In closing, we propose that the understanding of SBNR as a plural, hybrid, and participatory spiritual identity holds the promise to overcome its hidden sectarianism and achieve greater fidelity to the SBNR movement's anti-exclusivist ideals. Will postsecular spiritualities eventually free themselves from the spiritual narcissism that has plagued most of the world's religious history? Only time will tell.

Notes

- 1 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002).
- 2 Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005); Linda Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual But Not Religious* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 3 Joantine Berghuijs et al., “Being ‘Spiritual’ and Being ‘Religious’ in Europe: Diverging Life Orientations,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28, no. 1 (2013): 15–32.
- 4 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Jürgen Habermas, “Secularism’s Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25 (2008): 17–29.
- 5 Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Sandra M. Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, no. 2 (2003): 175.
- 8 Jorge N. Ferrer, *Revisoning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002)
- 9 Paul Heelas, “The Spiritual Revolution: From ‘Religion’ to ‘Spirituality,’” in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, ed. Paul Fletcher, Hiroko Kawanami, and David Smith (London, UK: Routledge, 2002), 358–9.
- 10 Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*.
- 11 Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum,” 166.
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