Rethinking the Future of World Religion:[1] A Conversation with Jorge N. Ferrer[2]

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When it comes to religious consciousness, the turn of the 21st century presents an unprecedented and challenging time in human history. On the one hand, the long-standing chasm between premodern theocentric religious traditions, and the modern anthropocentric, scientistic, and materialistic worldviews is widening. On the other hand, unlike what some may have anticipated, not only religion and spirituality are not on the decline, they are as strong as they have ever been.

Hundreds of new religions, cults, sects, and spiritual communities have emerged in recent decades. These new religious movements, along with globalization of religion, multiple-religion explorations, ecumenical services, religious syncretism, and secular spiritual orientations are among the many trends that shape today's religious landscape. Despite the widespread materialism in a technology-dominated world, we live in times of rich spiritual diversity, experimentation, and innovation. Our postmodern world seems to be evolving at an increasingly accelerated rate. While some are very comfortable moving along at such a fast pace, others, unable to cope with this rapid change, have either resorted back to religious fundamentalism, or have become profoundly confused and disenchanted.

Jorge Ferrer is one of few thinkers who have tried to map out the current landscape: He reflects on whether humanity will ultimately converge into one single religion, or will it continue to diversify into numerous forms of spiritual expression? Or perhaps, a middle path capable of reconciling the human longing for spiritual unity, on the one hand, and the developmental and evolutionary gravitation toward spiritual individuation and differentiation, on the other hand, is more likely?

In this interview he discusses four possible scenarios for the future of religion: global religion; mutual transformation of religions; interspiritual wisdom; and spirituality without religion—*as well as discussing his own participatory vision.*

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[1] Jorge N. Ferrer presented the four scenarios mentioned in this interview in the spring of 2011 in a keynote presentation at the *Symposium on Integral Consciousness* at the *California Institute of Integral Studies.* These scenarios are further elaborated on in Ferrer, J. N. (2012). The Future of World Religion: Four Scenarios, One Dream. *Tikkun*: *Culture, Spirituality, Politics*, *27*(1), 14-16, 63-64.

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***BS**: Thank you very much for this interview! I would like to start on a personal note regarding your own background in terms of religion and spirituality. Were you brought up religious or secular? Were you ever part of a religious community?*

JF: I was born in Barcelona, Spain, and was educated in a Catholic school (Maristas la Imaculada) where the object of devotion was not God, but the Virgin Mary. In retrospect, I can see how this impacted my spiritual orientation, which could be seen as more feminine, organic, and embodied than most traditional ones. Thus, I had twelve years of elementary and high school Christian education that was less rigid and more liberal than the one offered by other orders such as the Jesuits.

During my school years, I had some unusual experiences such as states of absorption or trance in the classroom. I remember that a teacher once abruptly woke me up during one of those trances and I broke up crying. I was sent to the school psychologist to see if I was epileptic—which was not the case. Then during my pre-adolescence I had numerous out-of-body experiences. These nonordinary experiences, as well as an increasing awareness of psychological wounds, impelled me to study psychology.

***BS**: So you were already aware of these psychological issues?*

JF: I was aware of a number of energetic blocks and associated psychological neuroses by the time I was seventeen years old. I was also fascinated by those nonordinary experiences, so I went into psychology to both try to understand them, and heal myself. Mainstream psychology in Spain was then dominated by cognitive psychology and neuroscience, which provided neither answers to my questions nor any healing. Thus, I launched a personal search through autodidactic study. I read most of Freud's *Collected Works* and from there I went on to read Jung and Fromm. Reading Fromm, Suzuki, and de Martino's *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* was a turning point in my search. That was my first contact with Eastern philosophies, which in turn led me to Alan Watts and eventually to the field of transpersonal psychology. At that time, I also joined a Hindu meditation group in Barcelona called the Brahma Kumaris—do you know them?

***BS**: Yes, they have a center in San Francisco too.*

JF: I was with them for about half a year and had beautiful meditative experiences, but some aspects of the group's philosophy, such as apocalyptic thinking and the belief that "they would be the only ones who would be saved", didn't sit well with me. Since I appreciated Zen, I moved on to study with the female Korean Zen teacher Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim for a couple of years in Barcelona.

***BS**: Were you in college at this time?*

JF: Yes, I was at the university studying psychology. Korean Zen is influenced by both Taoism and shamanism and the practice involved not only meditation, but also energy work, mantras, and magic. I was still nineteen when my teacher proposed to me to move to her center and become celibate for three years. At that time, however, what I actually needed was to explore and heal my sexuality. It was obvious that my Zen teacher, who was supposed to be a psychic reader, 'did not get it'. I left her school, entered psychotherapy, and eventually attended workshops to explore my sexuality, which were deeply healing and liberating. This event is at the root of my valuing my internal spiritual authority over external sources such as scriptures, doctrines, or spiritual teachers. Interestingly, much later I naturally entered a period of almost three years of celibacy that was both effortless and profoundly transformative. All this led me to conclude that a healthy celibacy cannot emerge from a mental or even spiritual imposition upon our primary world, but should rather organically flow from the inner dynamics of our sexual energy.

During this time I also had some very formative experiences with psychedelics. I experimented with combining psychedelics and meditation and continued psychotherapy. When I arrived in the U.S. in 1993, I attended individual and group psychotherapy, and immersed myself in meditation practices such as vipassana at Spirit Rock center and Zen practice with Joan Halifax (who is ordained in Thich Nhat Hahn's Order of Interbeing). For a time, Joan became the closest to having a traditional spiritual teacher I have ever had. At that time, she used to teach at CIIS and I also went to her center '*Upaya'* in New Mexico to do a vision quest under her guidance.

Later on, I connected with Donald Rothberg and became a member of the *Buddhist Peace Fellowship*'s (BPF) *Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement* (BASE) for a few years, doing volunteering service with homeless Latino women in the Mission district of San Francisco. Thus, for about 10-12 years I was affiliated with various kinds of Buddhist practice from Korean Zen to Thich Nhat Hahn's Zen to Theravadin vipassana and to socially engaged Buddhism. I also attended many talks by Tibetan Buddhist teachers and regularly practiced *tonglen* (giving and taking suffering) and other Tibetan practices, but never studied Tibetan Buddhism formally.

I should add here that right before coming to the U.S. I had my first encounter with the body of work called *Holistic Sexuality*, co-created by Ramon V. Albareda and Marina T. Romero. I was doing a personality study with Ramon when he invited me to a Holistic Sexuality workshop. The workshop was so powerful that for a few years I would go back for more in the summers, sometimes with other CIIS students. This work has been very important for me and provided essential experiential seeds for my participatory approach to spiritual growth. Eventually, I invited Marina to the States and for a few years I became involved in the facilitation of this work at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), Esalen Institute, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP), and other institutions. Although Buddhist practice had given me a lot, I experienced a lack of vitality in Buddhist circles that was not nourishing my soul. Holistic Sexuality was the perfect remedy and provided the right balance for my integral practice.

Finally, shamanism has also been very influential in my spiritual practice. Starting from intensive reading on the topic in Spain, I then studied it with Joan Halifax (whose teachings combine Buddhism and shamanism), and worked with Mexican mushrooms and ayahuasca for many years in both the United States and South America. About five years ago, I came across San Pedro (Wachuma) in Peru and felt a deeper calling I had never felt with other plants. Since then, San Pedro has become a very important plant teacher for me.

***BS**: In what way is the future of religion important to your worldview and current work?*

JF: Well, whether in my approach to intimate relations or the way I live by, I have always been naturally attuned to what is next—what is unfolding. I do not get too excited about what has already happened, but more about what is emerging and is new. Thus I am interested in the evolutionary spirituality that Sri Aurobindo, Haridas Chaudhuri, Ken Wilber, and many others talk about—which gives a sense of adventure to both being alive and spiritual inquiry. It is in this context that I am interested in the future of religion.

***BS**: You spoke about four scenarios in your presentation. In the first scenario you talked about* the emergence of a global religion *or a single world faith for humankind—the possibility of a global religion where either one religion will come to dominate others, or a synthesis of many or most traditions will emerge realizing the dream of a global spirituality; and you said that this scenario is not likely. Is this just a hypothetical possibility or is there more to this beyond a desire on the part of some religion for it to prevail over others?*

JF: I think that most religious traditions explicitly or implicitly aspire to have their creed prevail over the rest, because they genuinely believe that it is the best; that is, it represents the highest truth and is good for everybody. In some cases, this attitude (which I have called "spiritual narcissism") manifests as problematic fanaticism, in others simply as a candid belief. Spiritual narcissism is pandemic and not necessarily associated with a narcissistic personality.

For example, the Dalai Lama is very likely among the least personally narcissistic, but he firmly believes that his particular school of Tibetan Buddhism holds a higher truth than any other Buddhist school or religion. He supports a diversity of religions on psychological grounds (i.e., on the basis that people have different psychological dispositions), but he still believes that it is a temporary situation, and that, after the necessary reincarnations people will come to realize the superior truth maintained by his school.

***BS**: Also for example, in Islam there is a belief that it is the last religion and the last word!*

JF: Exactly. I believe this situation invites us to wake up to the possibility that there might be another way to hold the plurality of religions beyond believing that one must own the

highest truth. I don't believe that any of the existing religions will become global, in part because there is tremendous spiritual diversification, even within each religion. For example, which particular kind of Buddhism would prevail, as they are fighting internally over doctrinal issues? And the same is true with other religions.

In my view, the evolutionary move towards differentiation is positive and a sign of spiritual creativity. If spiritual diversification is a good thing, then the whole dream of a global religion becomes both illusory and misleading. If there is anything that might become global, it may take the form of a number of interreligious principles that all good-hearted people might agree upon.

***BS**:* *Are many of the other scenarios that you talked about more like a reaction to this first scenario?*

JF: Exactly, many are a reaction to spiritual narcissism, the deep-seated belief that one's spiritual choices are best for everybody.

***BS**:* *Yes, it is like a kind of provincialism—as all of these religions started as local practices.*

JF: Exactly, this is also true with Ken Wilber's proposal in transpersonal and integral studies. He articulates a spiritual meta-framework that is supposed to be universal, global, and truest, so his model functions like a dogmatic religion—the Wilberian-integral religion.

***BS**:* *You refer to the second scenario as the* mutual transformation of religions, *where religious traditions conserve their identity but are deeply and perpetually transformed through a variety of interreligious exchanges. The distinctive feature here is that religious cross-pollination will lead to spiritual creative unions in which diversity is not erased, but rather intensified. You maintain that this vision is consistent with not only the adoption of practices from other traditions by members of different faith communities, but also with the deepening or re-envisioning of one's own tradition in light of other religious perspective.*

You have given examples of this type of religious syncretism: the Haitian Vodou's blending of Christianity and African traditions or the Brazilian Santo Daime Church's incorporation of the indigenous use of ayahuasca into a Christian container. You maintain that currently this religious cross-fertilization is visibly taking place in interfaith dialogue, the New Age movement, and a number of eclectic and integrative spiritual groups. You have also included in this category the growing phenomenon of "multiple religious participation," in which an individual partakes in the practices and belief systems of more than one tradition, which can potentially result in the renewal of existing religious traditions through cross-cultural encounters

So, this seems to be the next natural reaction to, or movement from, the first scenario. You mentioned that interreligious dialogues are a part of this trend. Many people say that the interreligious dialogues that they have seen are more about stating your case, honoring or acknowledging the other, but sticking to your own truth and boundaries. I was wondering if you were inspired by certain kinds of interreligious dialogues that go further than that and the parties are really mutually interested in one another?

JF: I have read a lot about interreligious dialogue and attended a number of interreligious encounters, including the Parliament of the World Religions and others organized by Religions for Peace at the United Nations.

There are a variety of attitudes within the interfaith movement. What you described is a kind of tolerant dialogue in which people have an interest in each other but there are clear limits regarding how deeply transformative the dialogue can be. In some circles interreligious dialogue moved beyond that. In many cases, for example, Christians not only gain a deep understanding of say Buddhism, but also state that such understanding helped them to recognize aspects of Christianity that they would have otherwise overlooked. In addition, there are increasing numbers of interfaith experiments that move beyond verbal dialogue to include exchange of spiritual practices.

Interestingly, perhaps because of their self-critical postcolonial awareness, Christians seem to be the ones more open to these kinds of deeply transformative exchanges. What I see in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue is that many Christian theologians are ready to transform Christian doctrine through engagement of Buddhist teachings, but this is not always the case in the other direction. In any event, this is the direction I would like to see the dialogue move forward—toward mutual transformations not just at the level of doctrine, but also of spiritual practice. The reason for that is that I believe that different traditions have stressed, cultivated, and developed different human potentials.

BS: *Exactly, each tradition seems to have mastered a certain aspect of reality or a part of the larger whole.*

JF: And this cross-pollination can allow different traditions to remain in their identities and simultaneously be enriched by contact with other religions. One phenomenon that fascinates me is cross-fertilization at the visionary level. There are the levels of doctrine and practice, but what about the visionary, ontological, or metaphysical levels? In some contemporary ayahuasca ceremonies, for example, people access visionary worlds that combine indigenous and Christian motifs. I think we are going to see more of that in years to come. What people bring with them to these dialogs is key, and many involved in interreligious dialogues are practicing more than one tradition.

BS: *Do you think practicing more than one religion is just a temporary phase? Or is it really possible to continue with multiple traditions?*

JF: I think it's perfectly possible. It is well documented in individual biographical cases, but also in the case of entire societies, such as contemporary Japan. Many Japanese people practice a combination of Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism side by side. They tend to compartmentalize it; for example, Shintoism for nature, Buddhism for the self, and Confucianism for politics. On an individual level, Raimon Panikkar's case comes quickly to mind. He was both a Christian priest and Hindu *sanyasin*, and his influential approach to interreligious dialogue emerged from his own intra-religious dialogue.

***BS**: This has also been true in the past, for example, in Southeast Asia the animistic and indigenous traditions are just part of the Buddhist religion today. Buddhism has not washed over them and somehow has incorporated the older traditions into its religious practice, so it's possible that this will continue.*

JF: The phenomenon of "multiple religious participation" is increasing and has been well documented sociologically. For example, Judaism and Buddhism seem to somehow easily go together; many Buddhist teachers in the United States were Jewish by birth and there are many Jewish people who practice Buddhism.

***BS**: One individual explained the reason for this being that in Judaic theology there is not enough explicit acknowledgement of human suffering; and that Judaism tends to be a life-celebratory and God-glorifying tradition. So there is little acknowledgment of personal suffering in Judaism—and thus attraction to Buddhism.*

JF: I do believe that many people have the psychospiritual capability to hold different beliefs and practices in their lives. What we don't know is whether the phenomenon we are seeing now will eventually lead to syncretic religions or more to situations like the one in Japan.

***BS**: It seems that if there is a certain element of truth in any faith, it should withstand the test of time, and the reason for something to disappear would be its inability to hold true over the course of evolution of consciousness.*

In the third scenario you talked about the affirmation of interspiritual wisdom emerging from spiritual teachings, principles, and values endorsed by all religious groups and traditions. You have mentioned a number of people whose philosophy falls under this category such as Hans Küng's proposal for a global ethics, or the work of Christian author Wayne Teasdale who proposed a universal mysticism grounded in the practice of "interspirituality". Additional examples you have given are Beverly Lanzetta's proposal for an "intercontemplative" global spirituality that affirms the interdependence of spiritual principles giving birth to new spiritual paths, and Robert Forman's "trans-traditional spirituality" that feeds on the teachings of all religious traditions but is not restricted by the confines of any particular credo.

This may sound somewhat like the previous scenario, so I was wondering if you could elaborate on the difference? Is this true more at one end of the spectrum or limited to certain individuals? Is it starting to happen more and more?

JF: As you mentioned, this proposal has been articulated by a number of scholar-practitioners such as Brother Wayne Teasdale and Beverly Lanzetta, who were very engaged in the interfaith dialogue. In a way it is connected to the second scenario; their proponents hope or believe that the interfaith dialogue will lead to agreement upon a certain number of spiritual teachings or understandings such as the ethical principles of Hans Küng's Global Ethics. But this proposal goes farther than just ethics to include core spiritual teachings or doctrines.

I am fascinated by this proposal and would like to see it unfold. I can see how this might be more feasible with ethics than core spiritual doctrines, which I'm rather skeptical about, given the huge doctrinal differences among traditions.

***BS**: Küng got his license to teach revoked by the Vatican!*

JF: Still, I could envision that a minimum of core shared principles might emerge in the future.

***BS**: It seems like a pragmatic possibility; as these religious worlds come together, there will be some obvious issues and people can agree upon some shared realities regardless of the deeper end of these philosophies and develop a foundation on that pragmatic level.*

JF: I am a spiritual pragmatist and I'm interested in what works for people. In terms of the validity of doctrines, I also take a more pragmatic approach inspired by the Buddhist teaching of "skillful means" (*upaya*). I posit that spiritual teachings are valid insofar as they work; that is, insofar as they help people become less self-centered, create wholesome communities, lead to better relations with the environment, and so forth. This is connected to my non-objectivist participatory approach to spiritual truth.

***BS**: Do you see a possibility that while on the exoteric side world religions will stay as diverse as they are today, on the esoteric level there will be more mutual understandings in such a way that will influence the exoteric level—the emphasis being on the latter, since I have seen many individuals on the contemplative side fairly easily get along. But do you think that it will affect a larger population and the effect would disseminate through the mainstream traditions themselves?*

JF: I have no doubt that the more mystical or contemplative strands of religions cultivate their traditions' living fire, and that those practitioners tend to become beautiful human beings. But this is different from the perennial assertion that there is greater agreement in spiritual doctrine and truth at the esoteric or mystical dimension of the traditions.

The whole esoteric/exoteric distinction is problematic in many ways. I think that the Schuon-Smith hypothesis is erroneous and it does not stand against historical, textual and phenomenological evidence. Even within a single tradition, disagreements among contemplative practitioners abound. Take Buddhism for example: Zen and Tibetan Buddhist monks strongly disagree about the ultimate nature of reality; are they not considered Buddhist esoteric or mystical practitioners?

Although I question the hypothesis, contemplative practitioners do seem to get along better among themselves than believers who engage in religion on conceptual and doctrinal levels, which tends to lean more easily to fanaticism (and this is not to say that mystics cannot be religiously zealous!).

BS: *I recall from Haridas Chaudhuri's book: Modern Man's Religion, that he made a distinction between the 'universalist individual' within a religious tradition—since all of the major religions have a universal outlook and a person within that tradition could reach or embody the universal teachings, higher ethics and values etc.—and a 'universal religion'.*

JF: My dream or fantasy is that those practitioners get along, appreciate each other, and are engaged in spiritual cross-fertilization, but we know that many are actually trying to convert the other; you know that this happens even within the mystical branches.

So, can we embrace all this incredible spiritual diversity as something positive? Can we contemplate that different traditions may have found different soteriological solutions for the human dilemma, and that they may be advancing the evolutionary creativity of Being in different directions?

If we accept this view, there may be overlapping qualities among traditions, but we don't need to come to identical agreements, truths, or principles. These kinds of (failed) attempts have plagued the religious history of humankind. In my view, the objectivist perspective about spiritual truth underlying these attempts is not very generous regarding the creativity of spiritual unfolding.

***BS**:* *There seems to be strong tendencies to stick to the form of things—the way things are presented on the outer level—and the problem you are talking about is that perhaps we can get along on a more essential level, but there is still a tendency to understand that essence in the familiar forms and not recognize it in the outer forms of other traditions.*

JF: That's true and my sense is that at the essential level there are important differences too. For example, when Theravada Buddhists talk about *sunyata* (emptiness) and Mahayana Buddhists talk about the *dharmakaya,* or Christians talk about God-the-Father, they are talking about radically different things.

***BS**: There was a tendency thirty or forty years ago to say that all religions have a common core; it was well intentioned toward bringing about peace.*

But at the same time I have been thinking that certain kinds of layers might exist starting with forms on the outermost level, and then deeper or underlying structures that some phenomenologists are interested in; and then there is the meaning level, and deeper within there is the essence or essential layer. We may not know what 'essence' really means but perhaps 'essence' of, let say, water can take many forms and names in different languages and at the chemical level we refer to it as H_2O. But when you taste or experience water there may be many dimensions to that experience.

JF: In my work I advocate for the existence of diversity beyond form, that is, at those essential, cosmological, or metaphysical levels. However, I also believe that we can legitimately talk about a mystery out of which everything arises. Perhaps this mystery is closer to what you call the essential quality of all religions, but as soon as anyone 'essentializes' the mystery in terms of particular qualities (e.g., empty, personal, nondual, etc.), the challenges of spiritual pluralism re-emerge.

***BS**: Yes, especially if it is done prematurely. I am still working with a gradient of these different levels in terms of epistemology or ways of knowing with respect to various levels. For example, there is outer empiricism, and also inner empiricism and eventually more direct or immediate ways of knowing pertaining to the innermost levels. So there may be something there, but it certainly is not that simple and they cannot be equalized simplistically.*

JF: Exactly, and it is important to consider that such essence that we may think of as primordial may be also evolving with us through co-creative participation! For example, nondual consciousness might be the origin of things, but that doesn't mean that that's where we want to go spiritually speaking. Taking such origin as a goal might be actually regressive in an evolutionary context. We might be able to access such foundation of existence, but my question is, where do we want to go with that today?

***BS**: The last scenario before we get into the participatory paradigm is spirituality without religion. You include in this scenario a number of contemporary developments—from secular to postmodern, and from naturalistic to New Age spiritualities—that aim for the cultivation of a spiritual life free from traditional religious dogmas and/or transcendent or supernatural beliefs.*

You consider postmodern spiritualities, which remain agnostic about supernatural or transcendent sources of religion, and the New Age movement that tends to uncritically accept them, as the two most prominent trends that value the primacy of individual choice and experience, criticize the "received" religious doctrines and authoritarian institutions, and call for a democratization of spirit and a direct path to the divine. Lastly in this scenario, you included modern religious quests, secular surrogates for religion, and

postsecular spiritualities that use mottos such as "spiritual but not religious", "religion without religion," and "believing without belonging."

Many people nowadays talk about being spiritual, but not religious. What is your own view on the difference between spirituality and religiosity?

JF: My sense is that this distinction has practical value for people who have been brought up in religious contexts that were rather oppressive. In those cases, the distinction can allow such individuals to embrace spiritual values free from dogmatic specters.

Historically, there is a distinction between the terms *spirituality* and *religion*. For example, in the history of Christianity the term *spirituality* came to be used to refer to the more personal, affective, and experiential dimensions of religion— vs. its more communal, cognitive, liturgical, and doctrinal aspects.

But when it comes to judge whether particular groups or individuals are religious or spiritual, the distinction doesn't make much sense. Practitioners from the world traditions are usually considered to be religious, whereas many operating outside traditions identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious". But, to what extent are Christian monks (who in my experience can be non-dogmatic about Christian doctrine) less spiritual than New Age practitioners (who can hold their spiritual beliefs rather dogmatically)? Are those New Age people religious or spiritual? It seems like the dividing line here is between being doctrinal or dogmatic (religious) and practicing a more open-ended path (spiritual), and I think this can be helpful. But at the same time I don't think that we can use this distinction for mapping or categorizing. Why would one want to categorize someone as religious, and not spiritual, if she belongs to an organized religion? That doesn't make sense! But again, the distinction can have practical value for individuals who have been oppressed by an organized religion and want to take up a spiritual path.

BS: *So, I wonder if the distinction between exoteric and esoteric would be more meaningful in terms of 'religion vs. spirituality', where religious refers to the exoteric level, and spirituality to the esoteric?*

JF: My sense is that the distinction you are referring to does have some validity, but I hesitate to use the terms *spirituality* and *religiosity* as a way to distinguish mystical from non-mystical practitioners. You see, the overwhelming majority of mystics of the past considered themselves to be *very* religious; so who are we to say that they are "spiritual but not religious" according to our modern categories? The distinction is important but I wouldn't use those terms to make it.

BS: *Are there experiential illuminations that mark the exoteric/esoteric distinction?*

JF: There are actual experiential illuminations, as well as degrees of apprehension of spiritual truths in all religions; but again I would not use these terms as distinguishing categories.

BS: *In your* participatory *paradigm religious worlds and experiences are understood as co-created and emerging from the interactions of the entire range of human faculties: rational, imaginal, erotic, somatic, and so forth. Here you emphasize a shift from searching for spiritual unity in a global religion organized around a single vision, to recognizing an already existent spiritual human family that branches out in numerous directions from the same creative source. In other words, religious people may be able to find their longed-for unity not so much in an all-encompassing megasystem or superreligion, but in their common roots—that is, in that deep bond constituted by the undetermined creative power of spirit, life, and/or the cosmos in which all traditions participate in the bringing forth of their spiritual insights and cosmologies.*

You have said that in this scenario, it will no longer be a contested issue whether practitioners endorse a theistic, nondual, or naturalistic account of the mystery, or whether their chosen path of spiritual cultivation is meditation, social engagement, conscious parenting, entheogenic shamanism, or communion with nature. The new spiritual common ground will be the degree to which each spiritual path fosters overcoming of self-centeredness and a fully embodied integration that make us not only more sensitive to the needs of others, nature, and the world, but also more effective agents of cultural and planetary transformation in whatever contexts and measure life or spirit calls us to work.

This sounds like a whole-person or integral orientation. So I was wondering if there are participatory models that you are aware of that don't necessarily include this level of depth and breadth, and is that your contribution to bring the whole-person orientation into the participatory paradigm?

JF: Yes, there are various participatory models that emphasize different things. John Heron's work, for example, stresses the political dimension, although he has a holistic view of the person too. My work with Holistic Sexuality is very important here. In this approach, the spiritual path unfolds through the co-creative participation of all human attributes and ways of knowing (i.e., vital, somatic, emotional, mental, contemplative, etc.) in a spiritual power or creative dynamism of life or the cosmos.

BS: *That seems to be the key as you bring the whole person into the relationship. One can have all kinds of interactions and transactions, and even relationships, without engaging the whole person!*

JF: In the context of a participatory worldview, we could say that everyone *always already* participates in the creative unfolding of life, the cosmos, and/or the mystery. However, we can talk about different degrees of participation and also different gradations of

participatory awareness. Owen Barfield's distinction between original (or unconscious) participation vs. final (or conscious) participation was influential for me here. Degree of participatory consciousness is as important as the engagement of the whole person.

Later I learned that other approaches such as integral yoga have similar aims. As you know from our previous conversations, I feel that Sri Aurobindo de-emphasized the importance of the vital world and sexuality for a fully embodied spiritual participation—although I know that Chaudhuri appreciated better the integration of sexuality and spirituality. My sense is that the participatory paradigm is an academic and spiritual sensibility that each scholar or practitioner can shape in unique directions. In general, this sensibility could be said to stress the embodied, integrative, inquiry-driven, and relational dimensions of spirituality.

***BS**:* *One might say that in the traditional religious settings there has been a lot of emphasis on the social dimension; however, the religious traditions do not emphasize the subjective, the inner experiential dimension. In reading some of your works one might think that you emphasize the subjective dimension, the experiential dimension, but you are coming into that in a different way— more consciously.*

JF: It could also be said that my work expands the value of the subjective dimension by including experiential dimensions that have been previously suppressed in religious inquiry, such as the body and sexuality. At the same time, its relational emphasis underlines the inter-subjective dimension of spiritual practice and understanding. Our subjectivity is co-created through inter-subjective engagements.

***BS**:* *Haridas Chaudhuri has this simple teaching on the triadic principle of* uniqueness, relatedness *and* transcendence *that I like a lot. Actually, John Welwood used slightly different terms*—personal, interpersonal, *and* transpersonal *dimensions—for these in the 1980s. It seems like your approach does engage all of these three dimensions, even though it might appear as emphasizing the relational dimension, which has been missing and only recently being emphasized in psychology and psychotherapy?*

JF: Yes, this is great! My work also emphasizes these three dimensions equally as the intrapersonal (i.e., collaboration of all human attributes), interpersonal (i.e., cooperative relationships among human beings), and transpersonal (i.e., interaction between human beings and the mystery) dimensions of participation.

***BS**:* *How about the uniqueness of individuality?*

JF: I talk about this dimension in terms of "spiritual individuation" that emerges from the unique unfolding of the person as it becomes whole and co-creatively engages with the mystery.

***BS**: The transcendent aspect seems to have two different dimensions to me. One has been described using the metaphor of the overarching sky, but the other one is the underlying ground that connects everything—as in the case of a tree with the roots, the trunk, and the branches. A tree gets the food and water from the earth, but the air and light come from above; so that transcendent dimension is actually both of these. I wonder what your thoughts are on this issue?*

JF: Yes, the transcendent and the immanent have been usually antagonized in terms of different spiritual orientations, but my sense is that both are equally vital spiritual aspects of the mystery that transcend the person. Thus, my sense is that an integral or fully embodied spirituality requires the individual to be open to both types of transcendence.

BS: Yes, there is an issue here potentially with the mind being the medium of expression, but when you translate that into yogic terms, or Kundalini experiences, it really takes on a different experiential form.

JF: Yes, and I want to stress that the aforementioned polarity is not a duality. Immanent life and transcendent consciousness are two sides of the same coin—they are connected like sides of a Mobius string. This helps to understand why when we open into consciousness deeply enough, a sense of the erotic emerges, and when we delve deeply enough into the body and sexuality, the transcendentally numinous appears.

***BS**: Yes, in Sri Aurobindo's Savitri after one goes deep into the core of matter, one experiences light. I guess we will leave that to the Great Mystery!*

What is the role of the Divine Feminine in your view?

JF: The feminine and the masculine dwell at all levels. They exist in the immanent and the transcendent, as well as in all aspects of the human being and all levels of reality.

Because of our patriarchal history, however, masculine values have been privileged over feminine ones, leading to a marginalization of the embodied, vital, and erotic aspects of spirituality. In addition, the masculine and the feminine have been associated to antagonistic spiritual orientations such as transcendence (masculine) and immanence (feminine). Part of our evolutionary challenge is to restore balance both personally and collectively in the spirit of healing and integration.

***BS**: Is this part of your second and third scenarios?*

JF: Certainly in the interfaith movement there have been an increasing number of women participating. Of course, participatory spirituality could be seen as stressing "feminine" values such as full embodiment vs. the heart chakra spirituality characteristic of most

patriarchal traditions. But again, this emphasis seeks to counter our historical imbalance—the true horizon is integration.

***BS**:* *Lastly, what about the distinction between religious vs. secular? Is that included in your work?*

JF: Let me tell you two short personal stories that will convey my sense of this distinction. First, I remember that members of the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE) would go to meditation centers such as Spirit Rock to invite practitioners to provide service for the homeless. This was not very successful. Everybody had plenty of time for meditation practice (at times, entire months for retreats), but virtually nobody had an hour a week to offer to the homeless.

Second, my brother is a militant atheist and secular humanist who teaches sociology and politics at the University of Barcelona. He holds a scientific materialistic worldview and despises spirituality and religion. However, he fought for women's rights for years and is one of the main proponents of a universal basic income in Spain and Europe—for me there is a profound spirituality in what he is doing! What matters ultimately is what people actually do, not how they define themselves, "secular" or "religious." (I am not questioning here the value of personal retreats but this contrast brought to me this insight very sharply).

BS: *Hopefully the secular dimension would be included in the interfaith dialogue as it seems to be missing now.*

Thank you very much for your time—it is much appreciated!

JF: Yes, this was a great interview. Thank you!