The reinvention of religion

The Participatory Turn: spirituality, mysticism, religious studies
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In 1991 Richard Tarnas ended his *The Passion of the Western Mind* with an essentially hopeful assessment of the point that humanity had reached after an extraordinary wandering during three millennia of culture. In the Epilogue, he recalled how the three successive revolutions of Copernicus, Descartes and Kant had left us with the knowledge that "there are no perspective-independent facts" and that "the world beyond the mind … cannot even be justifiably postulated." Subsequent thought stemming from Schelling and Hegel had, however, brought to this dilemma the realisation that "the relation of the human mind to the world was ultimately not dualistic but participatory." This was truly liberating: it meant that "from within its own depths the [human] imagination directly contacts the creative process within nature, realizes that process within itself, and brings nature's reality to conscious expression." This participatory baton carried by Tarnas was then taken up in 2002 by Jorge Ferrer (*Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*) from the standpoint of the study of religion. Now in *The Participatory Turn* he is joined by 10 other authors to present a powerfully convincing picture of what may be the most significant philosophical turn since Kant.

Ferrer's work stands amongst modern reactions to the scandal of religious diversity. How can it be that the major religions claim access to absolute truth, and yet appear to teach contradictory accounts of what this truth is? Indeed, how is it that respected teachers such as the Dalai Lama and Thomas Merton can be deeply versed in interfaith studies and still advocate their own distinct path? The standard answer in the past has been that the religions are many paths ascending the same mountain; that as each path progresses towards increasingly general concepts, so these concepts converge into a single apprehension of reality. Ferrer, however, has summarised with great care and academic rigour the shift towards the position that this is not the case. Rather, the paths remain essentially different. He quotes the Dalai Lama's view that even within Buddhism the ultimate goals of different spiritual schools are essentially different. Unity does exist, but it is achieved only after the path has ended and all concepts and linguistic expressions have been deconstructed and one is left not with "reality" as it has been classically understood in the West, but mystery. Rather than "many paths up one mountain", Ferrer advocates the metaphor of "many rivers leading to one ocean", an ocean that represents not "things as they really are" but rather "the overcoming of narrow self-centredness and thus a liberation from corresponding limiting perspectives".

From this viewpoint religious diversity is not a scandal that invalidates religion, but it becomes the essential clue to the world. Following this clue, Ferrer proposes that diversity is a necessity, because existence is not pre-given, but is always a creation in which we participate, in diverse ways. More precisely, Ferrer and his co-editor Jacob Sherman argue for

> "an *enactive* understanding of the sacred, seeking to approach religions phenomena, experiences and insights as cocreated events." In other words, they "suggest that religious and spiritual phenomena are 'participatory' in the sense that they can emerge from the interaction of all human attributes and a nondetermined spiritual power or creative

dynamism of life."

Presented baldly, as I have just done, without the context that the editors carefully develop, this formulation is hard to grasp; so I will enlarge on some of their concepts. "Enactive" is a term drawn from the influential work of the biologist Francisco Varela on the evolutionary of organisms. The word describes the way in which an organism, when sufficiently complex, can manifest a genuine agency, initiating a particular response to a particular selection of external stimuli. The organism thereby breaks open the chains of cause and effect with a novel causation, and at the same time asserts its own particular sensitivity to the selected stimuli, thus creating a primitive form of "meaning" within the relationship between the organism and its environment. In the human case, the word "enactive" emphasises the active nature of what is being done, in contrast to the passive sense usually carried by "experience". Varela's emphasis on action is also echoed in Ferrer and Sherman's phrase "all human attributes" in the quotation above: we are not just speaking here about a mental experience, but it could be any combination of attributes such as intuitive, emotional, bodily and so on.

The use of the words "cocreated" and "nondetermined spiritual power" are an attempt to express the idea that this action extends outside oneself, but without presuming in advance anything about what exists outside oneself. The action is not a purely internal imagination, but neither is it an interaction with any external entity to which one could ascribe in advance any existence or any nature. The act of participation itself defines and specifies what it is that is other than the self. "Participation" introduces a category that goes beyond the older philosophical concepts of thing-in-itself and reality. It describes an action of the whole person that transcends the duality between self and other.

It becomes clear as the book unfolds that, though the editor's definition of the participatory turn is phrased in terms of "religious experience", its implications extend to a domain much wider than that which is traditionally implied by these words. This particular sense of participation engages with science and complexity theory through the idea of enaction. The stress on multiple human attributes reflects a celebration of multiplicity that links with feminist spirituality as well as body-based and indigenous spirituality. The approach not only challenges previous philosophical concepts but reconstructs them. And it reunites the internal (contemplative) and external (active) spiritual paths. Clearly many books would be required to do justice to all this, yet this volume does an excellent job of at least touching on all these, and exploring quite a few in detail. I can mention only part of this below.

Jacob Sherman, the co-editor has a chapter in his own right surveying the history of the multifaceted term "participation" from Plato to the present day, which helps a lot in fleshing out the idea. Aquinas plays a pivotal role in this history by exploring the dynamic act-of-being (*esse*) as distinct from "being" as "what something is" (*essentia*), a distinction that he obtained from Avicenna and Al-Farabi. According to Aquinas, everything has being (*esse*) through participation in absolute being, which is of course identified by him with God. Sherman stresses that this participation is dynamic, and not a merely a logical matter: as Aquinas puts it, "the act of being is the most intimate reality in any being, and that which is most profound in all things." Since being comes from participation, and participation is a movement out from oneself, "to be created is to be fundamentally ecstatic". Participation flows through the chain of being (as Dionysius had described earlier) so that "beings are dyadically constituted as an inseparable polarity of substantial existence *in* themselves and *for* others." Participation thus builds a universe that is fundamentally relational.

At this point in the history, however, participation is unidirectional, with "being" descending from God as the sole creator. Meister Eckhart takes this one step further in recognising that human artistic activity is in itself creative, and that by participating in God the human and God "work one

work". On this conception we give being as well as receiving being in a two-way participation. Sherman then traces this line of thought to Schelling and thence to modernity. (This theme of humanity participating *with* God in the evolution of creation is fascinatingly taken up in detail by Les Lancaster in a chapter on Kabala.)

Although the image of the ocean with many rivers emphasises plurality, it is definitely not the case the "anything goes". Ferrer insists that there are genuine ethical distinctions to be made in terms of "a variety of markers and practical fruits." There is a whole area here of relating ethics to the concept of participation which is only sketched at this stage, principally through the chapter by Beverly Lanzetta on feminine theosis (deification) in the writings and life of St Teresa of Avila, and by Donald Rothberg in a chapter on relating inner and outer transformation in Buddhism. Ethics also arise implicitly from the notion of participation in Ibn al-'Arabi's teaching, paraphrased here by William Chittick in the saying: "the divine face turned towards each thing is identical with the thing's face turned towards God" (reminding us of Eckhart's "The eye with which I see God is the same with which God sees me"). This suggests that in a participatory, relational cosmos the only alternatives may be either to love others as ourselves or to hate others as ourselves.

The scholarly approach here may not be to everyone's taste, but I found it riveting reading which added substantially to my understanding of the world. I thoroughly recommend it.

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