LEARN MORE AND TAKE ACTION!

Beyond Pesticides
(Beyondpesticides.org)
Center for Children's Health and the Environment
(www.childenvironment.org)
Center for Health, Environment & Justice
(www.chej.org)
Children's Environmental Health Network
(cehn.org)
Environmental Working Group
(ewg.org)
Institute for Children's Environmental Health
(iceh.org)

typically suppressed part of the mind, about toxics, and environmental causes of cancer and endocrine disrupters, and that pesticides in foods aren't very healthy. What have we been doing with that knowledge?

But we are all so busy, and the powers-that-be seem so, well, powerful. And probably the EPA or the Sierra Club or *someone else* will take care of it. After all, we have our careers, marriages, divorces, and spiritual lives to think of. And if we are parents, there are the things that just can't wait: PTA meetings, tutoring in math, getting our children into top private schools, making sure the computer is up-to-date, finding a good therapist.

And so it goes. This book is not only a clearly written, well reasoned, carefully researched, and devastating critique of modern industrial practices and their protectors in government, it is also a direct challenge to the moral and spiritual value of our entire way of life. In a chapter appropriately entitled "Values," the authors explore the question of what really is important to us, and why our children's health seems so low on the list. And then along with the *personal* guilt and shame, there arises a simple, appalling question: who are we to tell anyone what is right and wrong anymore? The writers for *Tikkun* (certainly including myself), our nation's priests and rabbis and philosophers and political theorists, all the candidates for all the political offices, newspaper editorialists, new-age teachers—we all share the endlessly repeated conviction that people ought to listen to us, that we know what's right, what's important, what's true. If we do, why do we continue living this way? Why don't we put down our portfolios, our latest book project, our need to get little Sammy into Princeton, and make all this stop?

If we did we would find that we are not alone. As the last part of this critically important book makes clear, a number of people—housewives and doctors, courageous public servants and ordinary citizens, innovative chemists turning chemistry (of all things) green, and employees of underfunded little NGOs tracing the toxic trail—have been fighting this good fight for some time now. The stories of these likely and unlikely heroes can give us some pride in the human spirit and some inspiration about what we should be doing ourselves. So even if it hurts to read this book, read it anyway. Face the truth, take the example of the courageous souls who are resisting, and act. ■

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SPIRITUAL DEMOCRACY

BEYOND CONSCIOUSNESS AND CULTURE

THE PARTICIPATORY TURN: SPIRITUALITY, MYSTICISM, RELIGIOUS STUDIES
Edited by Jorge N. Ferrer
and Jacob H. Sherman
State University of New York Press, 2008

Review by Ann Gleig
and Nicholas G. Boeving

THE QUESTION OF WHETHER OR not we can preserve the ontological integrity of religion, spirituality, and mysticism without sacrificing the integrity of modern critical scholarship lies at the heart of *The Participatory Turn*. This exciting new collection brings together several of the most robust currents in the field of Religious Studies to pose some of the most pressing and provocative questions asked within and of the discipline. Can we, in our contemporary pluralist climate, accommodate not only different religious claims but also other forms of competing contemporary discourse? Can we be religious without being naive, as well as critical without being reductive? Can we find a middle ground between the absolute foundations of traditional religion and the dizzying groundlessness of a relativistic postmodernity? Can we, in other words, integrate our premodern, modern, and now postmodern worlds?

Editors Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman make a strong case we can. Their basic project is the integration of religious experience and practice with modern critical thinking and postmodern epistemological insights about the constructed nature of human knowledge. What emerges from this "both/and" endeavor is "a pluralistic vision of spirituality that accepts the formative role of contextual and linguistic factors in religious phenomena, while simultaneously recognizing the importance, and at times even centrality, of nonlinguistic variables (e.g., somatic, imaginal, energetic, contemplative, and so on) in shaping religious experiences and meanings, and affirming the ontological value and creative impact of spiritual worlds and realities."

The participatory turn, therefore, is simultaneously methodology and ontology. As a dialectical methodology, it integrates the linguistic latticework that postmodernism has shown us underlies and creates all of human experience with the profound ontological disclosures of religious phenomena. This integration allows for recognition of how culture and language shape religious phenomena without reducing both spiritual experience and the real ontological worlds it reveals to their cultural components. As a participatory ontology, it approaches religious phenomena as co-created

events that arise from the encounter between the entire range of human capacities for knowing (including but certainly not limited to critical rationality) and the radically open and creative "mystery" that always exceeds our attempts to map or limit it. In including both the ontological and contextual forces that shape, but never circumscribe, the varieties of religious expression, the participatory turn also offers a new response to the challenge of religious diversity that does not succumb to the explicit or implicit privileging of a favored religious tradition that hinders current positions.

In order to arrive here, the editors, from the opening line (which tellingly is a question) expertly guide us through the often disorderly, sometimes contentious, and always lively field of Religious Studies. The superb introduction is that rare textual marvel that captures and clarifies, in the space of some forty-nine pages, the entire history of a field and somehow leaves the reader feeling as if nothing essential has been left out. The editors helpfully divide the discipline into two distinct paradigms: the philosophy of consciousness and the philosophy of the sign. The first of these originates in the Romantic attempt to protect the sacred from the rationalist-empirical critique of the Enlightenment by casting aside its metaphysical trappings and locating it in the private realm of human consciousness. Dominating the field through the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Mircea Eliade, this position holds that the true essence of religion is to be found not in the secondary overlay of religious doctrine or tradition but rather within a universal human subjective experience of the sacred.

Are spiritual experiences nothing but language and culture?

Following wider trends in the humanities, the discipline of Religious Studies succumbed to the more tyrannical turn of radical contextualism, which resulted in the rise of the "cultural-linguistic paradigm." The major argument here is that language is not only expressive but is constitutive of all human experience. The various perspectives under the cultural-linguistic rubric are united by an insistence that the proper function of Religious Studies is the analysis and interpretation of religious languages and their relationship to other linguistic frameworks. Rather than consciousness or experience, language itself is the crucial and only fulcrum, here, collapsing ontology into nothing but the sign itself. The result is a "linguistification of the sacred" that contextualizes, relativizes, and reduces the sacred to linguistic expression.

It is this reduction of the sacred and spiritual experiences to *nothing but* language and culture that the participatory turn seeks to redress. This does not mean, however, a return to the earlier philosophy of consciousness that, as the editors rightly note, is equally unsatisfactory. That earlier philosophy posits a supposedly universal consciousness that is, in actuality, disembodied and ahistorical. Isolating the sacred within such a decontextualized consciousness removes it from the world of gendered bodies, relationships, and culture.

In its attempt to move beyond the limitations of both consciousness and culture, *The Participatory Turn* draws on seven of the most vigorous contemporary trends within the field. The book's editors claim that such strands, when woven together, constitute an emerging academic ethos that recovers ontology without sacrificing the advances of critical scholarship. A brief glance at each of the strands hints at its contribution in combating the shortcomings of both problematic predecessors:

1) *The postcolonial re-evaluation of emic epistemologies* (emic: as described by non-Western people in the language of their own culture) targets the employment of Western scientific and philosophical categories of knowledge, particularly critical rationality, as the ultimate arbiter of what counts as legitimate knowledge. It recognizes the validity of a multiplicity of non-Western cultural and religious ways of knowing.
2) *The postmodern and feminist emphasis on embodiment and sacred immanence* affirms an immanent spirituality that dwells within and not above or apart from the world; celebrates the body, emotions, and sensuality; and resacralizes everyday life as the site of spiritual growth.
3) *The "pragmatic turn" in contemporary philosophy* establishes philosophy as a transformative activity in which interpretation is always bound up with action.
4) *The resacralization of language* undermines the modern split between language and ontology by recognizing the sacred nature, dimensions, and potentials of religious languages and poetic writing.
5) *The renewed interest in the study of spirituality* indicates both culturally and academically the hunger for a deeply lived religion.
6) *A focus on the question of truth in postmetaphysical thinking* anchors the theoretical axis of the participatory turn.
7) *An emphasis on the irreducibility of religious pluralism* helps account for the diversity of religious expression without reproducing the hierarchical rankings and privileging that have dominated past frameworks.

The sixth and seventh strands merit special attention. In the sixth, Ferrer and Sherman challenge the dominance and unquestioned assumptions of neo-Kantian epistemological frameworks in the contemporary study of religion. The basic premise of Kant's hugely influential theory of knowledge is that we can never directly experience things as they truly are, as unconditioned "noumena." Rather we can only encounter them through the filter of certain a priori categories inherent to our intellect and through the mediation of our senses as conditioned "phenomena." The editors correctly point out that the modern and postmodern reduction of all metaphysical claims to

conditioned discursive contexts reveals a normative allegiance to neo-Kantian frameworks that either bracket (as inaccessible noumena) or deny the existence of any supernatural sources of religion. To deny that religious phe-nomena can ever have extralinguistic or transcultural referents, however, assumes an ethnocentric materialistic metaphysical perspective that dismisses various contemplative traditions' claim that one can experience unconditioned dimensions of reality.

This tension is expressed in the longstanding perennialist-constructivist debate about mysticism. Perennialists are united by their belief that behind a variety of different mystical accounts lies the same underlying ultimate reality or "common core." Put simply, perennialists argue that different mystical paths lead to the same unconditioned ultimate reality that is then interpreted according to the mystics' particular culturally conditioned tradition. Asserting that *all* knowledge is conditioned by linguistic and cultural forms, constructivists adamantly counter, however, that the mystical experience itself, and not just its interpretation, is fully determined by the mystics' conceptual apparatus. Even if an unconditioned reality exists, constructivists insist that we can only encounter it indirectly mediated through our culturally conditioned framework.

As Ferrer and Sherman perceptively point out, however, both sides remain hostage to Kantian assumptions in accepting a dualism between a constructed framework and an unconditioned reality. They alternatively propose that a **religious event is neither a purely objective unconditioned discovery nor a merely subjective construction but rather a participatory or co-created phenomenon** that undoes the very distinction between subjectivism and objectivism or conditioned and unconditioned. They claim that religious phenomena are participatory—in other words, the phenomena emerge from the interaction of all the different human ways of knowing (such as the rational, imaginal, somatic, aesthetic, contemplative, and so forth) and a real nondetermined creative spiritual power. Ontological veracity, in other words, is not inherently at odds with a contextualist sensibility. To acknowledge that humans do not only discover but also shape and co-create spiritual landscapes does not annul the metaphysical reality of such religious worlds.

Is there one spiritual reality 'out there,' or many?

Bringing together ontological veracity and a contextualist sensibility affords us a new perspective on the seventh strand, the *irreducibility of religious pluralism*: if we relate but not reduce ontology to a contextual framework, we can affirm a plurality of mediated but ontologically existing religious worlds that can, in turn, account for the diversity of religious expression without reproducing the hierarchical rankings and privileging that afflicts, in varying degrees, the current responses of universalism, exclusivism, inclusivism, and ecumenical pluralism. As Ferrer correctly notes, all of these proposed solutions to religious diversity either explicitly or implicitly endorse the exclusive or ultimate truth of their preferred tradition. Universalism's search for a single essence behind the multiplicity of religious expressions was motivated by the attempt to secure a favored spiritual tradition as that ultimate essence. Similarly, exclusivism ("my religion is the only true one"), inclusivism ("my religion is the most complete; the others are only partially true"), and ecumenical pluralism ("there are real differences between religions but all lead to the same [which conveniently happens to be my] spiritual goal") all promote the superiority of a particular religious tradition.

Approaching religious diversity as the result of the interaction between the multidimensional cognitive components of human beings and the radical openness and inexhaustible creativity of an indeterminate mystery affords us an alternative response. It affirms the participatory enactment of an indefinite number of not just spiritual paths but spiritual goals and ultimate realities. This liberates religious thinking and interreligious dialogue from the tyranny of a single static ultimate reality against which all forms of religious diversity are evaluated. In short: there is no one ultimate metaphysical referent; religious diversity reflects the reality of the plurality of ontological ultimates.

With these seven strands, then, the editors issue a clarion call to move beyond the intellectual idolatry of the text and to bring ontology, now forged in the fires of critical scholarship, back to the field of Religious Studies. The participatory turn recognizes that ontology is constructed, but that it is also "out there" too. It is not out there in the static sense that the perennialists would have us believe, as a single ontological ocean with many epistemological shores, but as a dynamic, excessive, and radically plural mystery that we can never definitively chart or circumscribe. Far from any grand unified theory—such a colonizing and confining project being one of its main targets—it is an orientation or sensibility that others are invited to recover in our religious pasts, discover in our religious presents, or creatively flesh out for our religious futures.

The next two sections of the anthology are worthy responses to this invitation. Part One, "Participation and Spirit: Classical and Contemporary Approaches," offers three sophisticated but accessible essays by Sherman, Kelly, and Ferrer, which develop further the issues raised in the introduction and provide some solid theoretical and historical context. Sherman's concise and detailed genealogy of participation guides us through the corridors of classical, medieval, and modern philosophy to uncover three historic forms of participation: formal, existential, and creative. Implicit in all three is the invitation to think in terms of a noncompetitive logic of intrinsic, constitutive relationality that, in turn, allows an acknowledgment of a person's contribution to a mystical event without

reducing its ontological status. Sean Kelly usefully distinguishes between embedded and enactive modes of participation and shows how the French systems thinker Edgar Morin can add sophistication to contemporary participatory approaches. And Ferrer, persuasive and passionate as ever, discusses what his vision of participation can contribute to the challenges of religious pluralism. In disclosing a radical plurality not only of spiritual paths but also of spiritual liberations and spiritual ultimates, his account overcomes the problematic privileging and hierarchical rankings inherent to prevailing models and expands the range of authentic spiritual choices open to us.

Part Two, "Surveying the Traditions: Participatory Engagements," uncovers, recovers, and applies a participatory sensibility to a variety of ancient and contemporary religious, esoteric, and philosophical traditions ranging from Sufism to Western Esotericism, Christian mysticism to Engaged Buddhism. Of the seven chapters offered here, some are more convincing than others in resonating with the contemporary participatory turn, but all exert sufficient analytic pressure on self-sufficient or independent models of ontology. To give a taste: G. William Barnard convincingly establishes French philosopher Henri Bergson as a useful resource for the participatory turn. In highlighting the centrality of the body and the gendered nature of knowledge in the embodied and intimate mysticism of Teresa of Avila, Beverly J. Lanzetta emphasizes the political and cultural co-constructed dimensions of mysticism. William Chittick nominates the Sufi mystic, Ibn al 'Arabi, as uncontested champion of a participatory approach discussing how his work explicates the range of human participation in the divine with unmatched detail and profundity.

Deepening the Participatory Turn: Participation and Spiritual Democracy

Within the rich tapestry that is the contemporary participatory turn, one thread is muted: democracy. After all, the notion of participation is fundamental to democracy, which is essentially a political system in which all members of the population may participate.

Implicit in the participatory turn is an extension of democracy from the political to the ontological realm. Here we extend the thought of social theorist Anthony Giddens, who has traced the growth of democracy from the political sphere to the world of family, relationships, and sexuality. The latter have been radicalized through what Giddens calls a "democracy of the emotions." This denotes how the traditional concept of marriage as an economic contract constituted by an inherent gender inequality has been replaced by the "pure relationship," which is characterized by equality, intimacy, and communication. Pointing out that all of these qualities are inherently democratic, Giddens illuminates the striking parallels between the pure relationship and public democracy.

There are similarly striking parallels between political/emotional democracy and a participatory sensibility. As noted, the participatory turn is fundamentally a rethinking of the relationship between the human and the metaphysical. In this approach, a top-down authoritarian model of divinity is replaced by a more intimate and equal partnership and democratic redistribution of creative power. Also, just as the rejection of prescribed and oppressive gender roles is central to a democracy of the emotions, so the feminist stress on sacred immanence, wholeness, and relationality is central to the participatory turn. Ontological hierarchy—whether in the theistic guise of God as Lord and Father or an elitist perennialism—has too often reflected, generated, and justified social and political systems of domination. While the radically democratic dimensions of the participatory turn have been celebrated by John Heron and Jeffrey J. Kripal, a further exploration of its democratic influences and implications will support the full manifestation of its liberative promise.

Hence, just as Giddens calls for a further democratizing of political democracy, we call for a deepening of the ontological democracy implied within a participatory ontology. Included in this call is the question of who is admitted to, as well as left out from, the ostensibly round ontological table to which Ferrer and Sherman invite us. Those of us lucky enough to share our lives with animal companions don't need to read the latest groundbreaking research "proving" the authenticity of their inner emotional lives to know that they have them. They, like us, are conscious beings with an awareness of others. And consciousness, inasmuch as it participates in the mystery our editors invoke, is the crux upon which this model rests. So, to put it rather bluntly: what happens when they die? The problem of atheism is equally ignored. After all, what does the spiritual path (ultimate) look like when spirit itself is denied? It's not that Ferrer and Sherman's model can't account for animals or atheists; it potentially could, but they simply don't go there. One hopes that in the future such quandaries will be afforded greater attention, as these are the kinds of theoretical knots that, once unraveled and reworked, only strengthen a model and lend it greater appeal and explanatory power.

Thinking about the participatory turn as a type of ontological democracy also sheds light on other ethical dimensions. Far from weakening family duties and obligations, Giddens insists a democracy of the emotions fosters and demands more responsibility. The same applies to participatory ethics: the move from a monarchical to a democratic ontology also necessitates a re-envisioning of ourselves from children *under* the Lord/Father to individuated adults in relationship *with* the mystery. Many will undoubtedly decry this as Promethean and hubristic. As Ferrer recognizes, to claim that human creativity influences

the nature and workings of the mystery may sound arrogant or inflated. Yet with power comes responsibility. And foremost among our responsibilities, Ferrer declares, is to evaluate the different coconstructed religious worlds: "because such [worlds] are not simply given but involve us as agents and cocreators, we are not off the ethical hook where religion is concerned but instead inevitably make cosmo-political and moral choices in all our religious actions."

Are some religions better than others?

ON WHAT GROUNDS THOUGH DO WE make such choices? If we discard the very notion of ontological veracity as a measuring stick and reject all models of spiritual hierarchy, how do we discriminate between the radical plurality of religious ultimates, goals, and routes to salvation? Ferrer, wisely in our perspective, opts for the ethical. Ontologies are ultimately evaluated and legitimated by their ethical and transformative effects and here he offers, with certain qualifiers, two major guidelines: (1) *the egocentricism test:* to what extent does a spiritual tradition free its practitioners from narcissism and self-centeredness? And (2) *the dissociation test:* to what extent does the spiritual tradition foster the integrated blossoming of all dimensions of the person?

In the ever-contested relationship between the mystical-ethical, therefore, this book—clear heir to William James's pragmatic perspective that mysticism is to be judged by its fruits rather than its origins—comes out firmly on the side of the ethical. In light of such events as the "fall of the Western guru," that is, the various financial and sexual scandals that rocked a number of North American Asian communities in the 1980s and proved that profound mystical insight can coexist with psychologically and ethically disturbing behavior, such a position is prudent. However, it will fail to convince those religious practitioners for whom religious commitment always transcends ethics; a perspective exemplified most dramatically perhaps in Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac. For such thinkers, privileging the ethical over the ontological will be unsatisfactory.

Are all unseen religious realities connected?

A SECOND QUESTION TO ASK ABOUT THE radical plurality model is how to unite what otherwise threaten to end up as an indefinite number of isolated and isolating monadic spiritual universes. Metaphysically this is effected through rejecting both complete identity and total separation in favor of a relational ontology that preserves unity while respecting difference. Utilizing the metaphor of the "healthy family," Ferrer translates this relational metaphysics into a cosmopolitan vision of a human community populated by individuated spiritual practitioners who are unified through their common roots in the mystery. Yet like all families, this one is culturally specific and needs to be acknowledged as such. Ferrer's healthy family dovetails perfectly with the developmental ideal of contemporary American psychoanalytic theory in which psychological maturity is defined as the supplementation of autonomy with intimacy thereby allowing for connection without the loss of individuality. Revealing the psychoanalytic lineage of this model does not, of course, delegitimate it. Yet rendering its cultural location transparent will afford more clarity on why this wider vision of community will resonate with certain spiritual groups and be less appealing for others.

What is the place of ethics in interreligious dialogue?

FOR FERRER, THE DEVELOPMENT OF A nonabsolutist and contextually sensitive global ethics is crucial in fostering respect and communication between different spiritual traditions. In a review of Ferrer's earlier work on transpersonal theory, Jeffrey Kripal cautioned against a "moral perennialism" sneakily succeeding its ontological cousin. In response, Ferrer has further problematized the framing of traditional religious or spiritual communities as moral resources. Acknowledging the historic rarity of a fully embodied or integrative spirituality, he states that a global ethics cannot be grounded in our past spiritual history; rather, it must be forged in critical reflections on such a history in context of our present ethical concerns. Past and present remain in critical tension in the text but ultimately the values and ideals that inform it are very much of the present: maturity, individuation, embodiment, integration, and autonomy-with-intimacy.

And these are contemporary cultural values that we may wish to claim and celebrate. Ontological democracy places the ethical onus squarely on us to collectively create the best of all possible worlds: ontological and cultural. Once we recognize the radically creative power of our consciousness, we are not only empowered to renovate the problematic authoritarian and oppressive aspects of historical religious forms, but also to sculpt entirely new forms of spiritual expression and ultimates. Are we ready for such responsibility? Are we ready to bring our ontological and cultural worlds into alignment? Are we ready to fully deepen democracy, for what Kripal calls a true Spirit of Democracy? As Rainer Maria Rilke reminded us, the essential thing is to "live our questions now" and in the very posing of such questions, this brave and hopeful book offers much not only to the future of Religious Studies but also to the future of religious expression and interreligious dialogue. As such, perhaps the most fitting accolade one could bestow upon it is that from beginning to end it is like the very mystery it is rooted in: a beautiful, unbounded, beguiling question mark. ■

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