

2024

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Jorge N. Ferrer

*Instituto Transpersonal Integrativo, Barcelona, Spain*

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### Recommended Citation

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# An Open Mystery: Reflections on the Metaphysical Status of the Participatory Approach

*Jorge N. Ferrer, PhD*  
Instituto Transpersonal Integrativo  
Barcelona, Spain

This paper provides an assessment and clarification of the metaphysical status of the participatory approach to transpersonal and spiritual phenomena (Ferrer, 2002, 2017a). To that end, I first respond to several criticisms of the approach issued by scholars in recent years; for instance, that it hides a perennialist metaphysics (e.g., Abramson, 2015) or that it is metaphysically vague (e.g., Taylor, 2021). After reviewing these critical discussions, I describe the open and minimalist nature of the participatory metaphysics, arguing that such features cultivate a fertile soil for transpersonal scholarship, human flourishing, and interreligious relations. Applying a biomimetic approach, I argue that spiritual pluralism can be better understood—and more positively appreciated—when seen as an expression of life’s diversification. In this spirit, I suggest that rhizomatic, treelike images are helpful to visualize not only religious traditions’ differences and similarities, but also the problems of neo-perennialist and essentialist accounts of spirituality. I conclude with a vindication of the eminently pragmatist, edifying, and transformative nature of the participatory approach.

**Keywords:** *participatory approach, participatory theory, metaphysics, perennialism, essentialism, religious pluralism, pragmatism, cosmology, biomimetics*

The participatory approach holds that human spirituality essentially emerges from our cocreative participation in an undetermined mystery or generative power of life, the cosmos, or reality (Ferrer, 2000, 2002, 2017a). Since its inception, this approach has received the full or partial support of a significant number of transpersonal and religious studies scholars (e.g., Cabot, 2014, 2015; Daniels, 2021; Duckworth, 2014; Fernandez-Borsot, 2020; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008a; Gleig, 2011; Hartelius, 2016a; Kripal, 2003; Lahood, 2007; R. Tarnas, 2001; Washburn, 2020).<sup>1</sup> In recent years, however, several critical discussions on the metaphysical nature of participatory transpersonalism have appeared in the literature (e.g., Abramson, 2015; Daniels, 2022; Lancaster & Friedman, 2017; Taylor, 2021, 2022).<sup>2</sup>

My main aim in this article is to clarify how I understand the metaphysical status of my participatory perspective, without assuming that this comprehension represents other participatory

viewpoints.<sup>3</sup> To this end, I first review the aforementioned discussions in a bid to dispel potential confusions reasonably elicited by my proposal. Then, I offer an updated—and hopefully clearer—account of the open and minimalist participatory metaphysics I consider to be salutary for transpersonal and spiritual studies. Lastly, after arguing for the import of (re-)grounding spirituality in life to account for spiritual diversity, I conclude with some reflections on the eminently pragmatist and transformative thrust of the participatory approach.

## Critiques of the Participatory Approach

Interestingly, whereas for some scholars the participatory approach hides a type of the very perennialist metaphysics it challenges (e.g., Abramson, 2015; Sugobono, 1999; Taylor, 2021), for others the approach is not metaphysical *enough*; they believe that transpersonal psychology needs a more explicit or systematic metaphysical framework (e.g., Buchanan, 2019; Capriles, 2013; Taylor, 2021,

2022). Each of these two conflicting lines of criticisms will be considered in turn.

### The Charge of Participatory Crypto-Perennialism

The contention that the participatory approach conceals a perennialist metaphysics has been most vigorously raised by Abramson (2015), so my discussion will be limited to his work (but see also Sugobono, 1999; Taylor, 2021). Specifically, Abramson claimed that the participatory postulation of both a diversity of spiritual ultimates and a mystery (out of which those ultimates are enacted through human cocreative participation) is equivalent to *perspectival perennialism*. Perspectival perennialism defends that the various religious accounts of ultimate reality (Brahman, the Tao, emptiness, etc.) are different perspectives or dimensions of a single supra-ultimate Absolute (Clayton, 2014; Ferrer, 2002)—as the traditional image of several blind men touching different parts of the same elephant illustrates (see Figure 1).

In my view, three features radically differentiate the participatory approach from perspectival perennialism. First, the participatory approach rejects the myth of the given intrinsic to perspectival perennialism, which posits a pregiven or objective referent for the supra-ultimate Absolute (i.e., the whole elephant) of which different partial snapshots can be taken. In this regard, note that even when traditionalist scholars speak about an ineffable or transconceptual Absolute, they immediately—and arguably contradictorily—qualify it, stating, for example, that Advaita Vedanta’s nonduality offers the most accurate doctrinal articulation of the perennial wisdom (e.g., Schuon, 1990, 1999; Smith, 1976; Subogono, 1999). Although not a traditionalist, Huxley (1945/2009) put it this way in *The Perennial Philosophy*:

This teaching [the perennial philosophy] is expressed

most succinctly in the Sanskrit formula, *tat tvam asi* ("That are thou"): the Atman, or immanent eternal Self, is one with Brahman, the Absolute Principle of all existence, and the last end of every human being, is to discover this fact for himself, to find Who he [sic] truly is. (p. 2)

Second, the participatory approach adopts an enactive paradigm of cognition (Gallagher, 2023; Stewart & Gapenne, 2014; Varela et al., 1991), which in the present context holds that the various spiritual ultimates are not perspectives of a single supra-ultimate Absolute, but rather enactings bringing forth different experiential and perhaps even ontological realities.<sup>4</sup> Thus, enactive spiritual cognition short-circuits the objectivist assumptions underlying perspectival perennialism. Third, and perhaps most crucially, the participatory approach rejects the *dualism of the mystery and its enactings*, avoiding thereby the traditionalist duality between various “relative absolutes” (i.e., of the different religious traditions) and the Absolute in itself, which is posited to exist behind the religions’ absolutes as “the Godhead in Its Infinitude and Oneness ... above all relativity” (Nasr, 1989, p. 294). As I argued elsewhere (Ferrer, 2017a), in the same way an individual is their actions (whether perceptual, cognitive, emotional, or subtle), we could say that the mystery is its enactings. In this understanding,

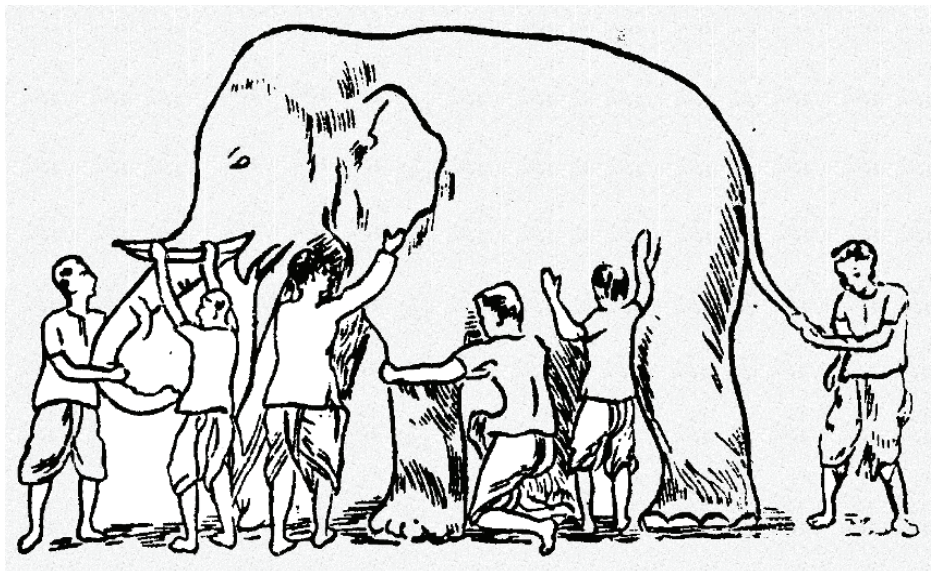


Figure 1. Traditional metaphor of the blind men and the elephant (from www.jainworld.com; in the public domain)

religious ultimates such as emptiness (*sunyata*), the Tao, and the Christian God (in their many inflexions) can be seen as creative gestures of the mystery historically enacted through participating human (and perhaps nonhuman) individuals and collectives.

Thus, when Abramson (2015) charged the participatory approach with conflating “the ‘Absolute that is beyond all religious Absolutes’ with the multiple Absolutes of the different traditions” (p. 42), he misunderstood that such a move is not a conflation but a deliberate overcoming of an arguably pernicious spiritual dualism.<sup>5</sup> This dualism of the mystery and its enactments is pernicious; it not only binds scholars and practitioners alike to objectivist and hierarchical frameworks, but also paves the way for religious exclusivism and spiritual narcissism. For example, 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. In addition, not positing a supra-ultimate spiritual referent beyond its specific enactments preserves the ontological ultimacy of those enactments (e.g., God, emptiness, the Tao, Brahman) in their respective spiritual universes, avoiding the traditionalist and neo-Kantian demotion of those ultimates to penultimate stations (see S. B. King, 2001; Nah, 2013).<sup>6</sup>

In any event, I hope that this section showed that the participatory approach does not have cracks allowing the filtration of a perennialist metaphysics. Before explaining further why I consider it erroneous to equate what I call “the mystery” with any kind of supra-ultimate Absolute, the next section discusses the viewpoints of those scholars who see the participatory approach as metaphysically weak.

### **The Charge of Participatory “Weak” Metaphysics**

In sharp contrast to crypto-perennialist charges, other scholars have critiqued the participatory approach for not articulating a more explicit or robust metaphysics. Because Taylor (2017a, 2021, 2022) presented the most energetic account of this view, I focus on his work before briefly discussing other related viewpoints.

Initially, Taylor (2017a) read my account of the mystery as undetermined as a tactic to avoid

making explicit metaphysical claims: “[Ferrer’s] insistence on the undetermined nature of the mystery could be interpreted as a reluctance to disclose his own metaphysics” (p. 116). In a subsequent article, he added, “Ferrer’s concept of the ‘mystery’ can be considered bad metaphysics, since it is so vague and general” (2021, p. 68). Although Taylor (2021) duly acknowledged that I deliberately presented such vagueness as a virtue partly to avoid “claims or insinuations of dogmatic certainty and associated religious exclusivisms” (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008b, p. 64), he still perceived the account as deficient. I address Taylor’s concerns in the second half of this essay, but it is important to first discuss some questionable aspects of his own proposal, as it is from this perspective that his criticisms emerge (for fuller critical appraisals of Taylor’s work, see Daniels, 2022; Ferrer, 2017b; Hartelius, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b).

In Ferrer (2017b), I argued that Taylor’s (2016) “soft perennialism” privileges an immanent and impersonal spiritual force underlying all mystical experiences, thereby downplaying the transcendentalist and theistic claims about ultimate reality espoused by many religious traditions. Further, I suggested that Taylor’s association of such a universal spiritual force with both “pure consciousness” and “apophatic union” favors monistic and formless spiritualities not only over theistic but also visionary ones, including most Indigenous, shamanic, and esoteric traditions. In addition, though there is clearly nothing patriarchal about his personhood or intentions, feminist historical analyses of mysticism suggest that Taylor’s (2016, 2021) rankings might be rooted in a patriarchal religious ethos. Both Jantzen (1995) and Hollywood (2002), for example, identified patriarchal biases in the historical denigration of visionary forms of Christian mysticism: Whereas formless and apophatic mystical states were mostly reported by male figures (e.g., Eckhart, Ruusbroec; the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*; see also Sells, 1994), most female mystics expressed their spirituality through vivid visions of the spiritual and the divine (e.g., Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Mechthild of Magdeburg; see also Ruether, 2023). In contrast to the common elevation of formless

states in patriarchal traditions, Jantzen (1995) wrote, “Since women were those who could be seen as most like ‘the handmaiden of the Lord,’ they might, ironically, to be most likely to be privileged with a vision of the mysteries of God” (p. 324). In this regard, Jantzen (1989) proposed that the common association between higher forms of mysticism and monistic states (such as pure consciousness events) may be a product of the male psyche.<sup>7</sup>

In response to this line of criticism, Taylor (2022) stated, “I admit to the charge of ‘demoting’ theistic traditions” (p. 70). Then, he offered the following rationale for this devaluation: “I believe that the exoteric [he meant to write “esoteric”; S. Taylor, personal communication, December 26, 2023] mystical traditions involve a more direct and profound form of spiritual experience than theistic traditions” (p. 70). In addition to supporting the dubious traditionalist exoteric diversity/esoteric unity dichotomy portrayed in Figure 2 (see Ferrer, 2002),<sup>8</sup> this rationale is based on two serious misconceptions. First, Taylor believes that all truly esoteric mystical traditions converge in considering “a formless pure consciousness or an all-pervading spiritual quality” (p. 70) the most profound spiritual state. This statement can be easily refuted: Although pure consciousness events can be indeed found across many—though by no means all—mystical traditions (see Forman, 1990, 1998), the ontological and spiritual status of these events is understood in drastically different ways. For instance, for the overwhelming majority of Christian mystics, such an

event was not thought of as the most profound of spiritual state—and even less as one conveying “the essential or fundamental reality of the universe” (Taylor, 2022, p. 67)—but as a purifying encounter with one’s soul as a step toward a dual state of feeling the presence of, or communing with, a personal and loving God (e.g., Harmless, 2008; McGinn, 1991–2021; Stoeber, 1994). Second, Taylor pigeon-holed all theistic traditions and mystical states (except Meister Eckhart’s Godhead; see Ferrer [2017a] for a critique of this typical perennialist cherry-picking move) as merely “exoteric,” overlooking not only the depth and richness of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism, but also the fact that these traditions also contain exoteric and esoteric currents (e.g., Chittick, 1997, 2008; Idel & McGinn, 1996; Lancaster, 2008; McGinn, 1991–2021).

Taken together, these observations show the faulty circularity of Taylor’s (2022) argument: Wrongly assuming that all esoteric (or genuinely mystical) traditions privilege an impersonal ultimate justifies—and even forces—the demotion of theistic mysticism as exoteric and thus less profound. This move is even more disconcerting given his previous (and contradictory) statement: “Even though Christianity and Buddhism disagree about the existence of God, Christian and Buddhist mystics have essentially the same experiences” (p. 65). Does Taylor not regard Buddhist mystics as esoteric (as they *supposedly* experience the impersonal spiritual force) and theistic mystics as exoteric (as they experience a personal God)? I stress “supposedly” in

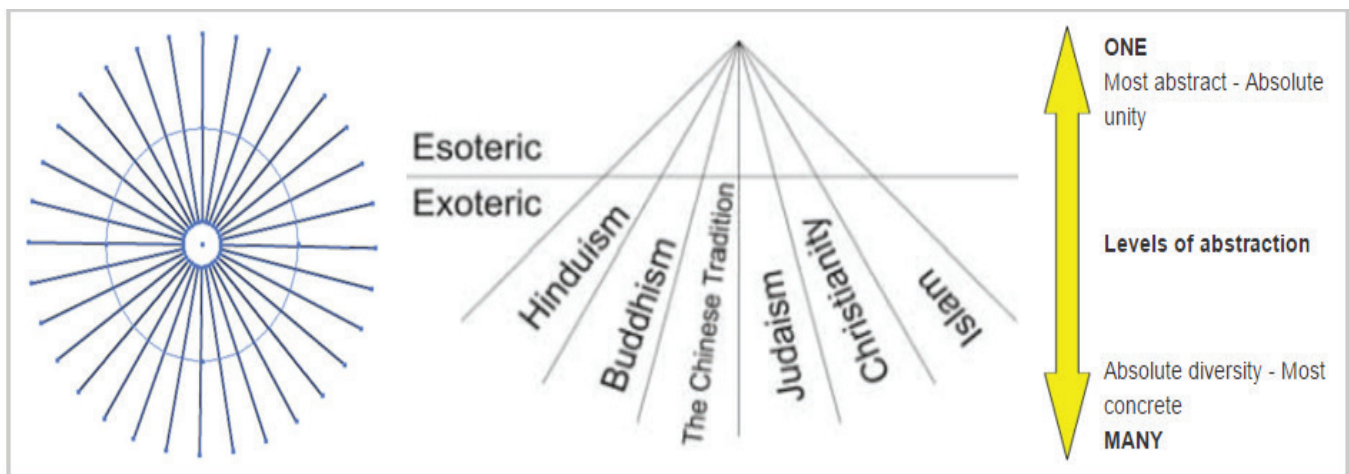


Figure 2. Esotericist perennialism (from www.origin.org; in the public domain)

the prior sentence because it is highly questionable that Taylor's impersonal/immanent spiritual force is equivalent to most Buddhist accounts of ultimate reality or liberating insight, whether it is the claim to a direct apprehension of reality (*satori*) in Zen schools (e.g., Faure, 1993), *nirvana* as the extinction of all bodily senses and desires in Theravada Buddhism (e.g., Collins, 1998), or emptiness (*sunyata*) as the codependent origination or interpenetration of all phenomena in Mahayana Buddhism (e.g., Tsering, 2009), to name only a few of many Buddhist goals (see Faure, 2009; Tenzin Gyatso, 1988).

Returning to his critique of my work, Taylor (2022) stated that "Ferrer's concept of multiple spiritual absolutes cannot account for the similarities across traditions between spiritual principles such as Tao, Brahman, En Sof, The One and so forth" (p. 71). This claim is also perplexing. Leaving aside the serious problems with conflating ultimates such as Brahman and the Tao (e.g., Neville, 2001), Taylor ignored the seven types of similarities (i.e., cognitive, practical, functional, structural, phenomenological, homoversal, and ontological)—including occurrences of pure consciousness events—I presented in an essay discussing his work (Ferrer, 2017b, p. 265) that he cited and so, one should assume, he had read. In that essay, I also explained that from its inception (see Ferrer, 2002) the participatory approach embraced an account of religion and mysticism as family resemblance concepts (e.g., Dupré, 1987; Fitzgerald, 1996; Harrison, 2006; Prothero, 2010). According to this view,

although there is not a singular essence in religion, mysticism, or spirituality, there can be many overlaps among traditions because each tradition is similar in important respects to some others in the family, even if not in all respects to any, or in any respect to all. (Ferrer, 2017b, pp. 264–265)

Importantly, the family resemblance approach to religious diversity has received empirical corroboration in contemporary cross-cultural studies of religion and spirituality. After their wide-range empirical study on religiousness in 12 countries (from Canada to Ghana and from Peru to India),

Nynäs et al. (2022) concluded, "The notion of family resemblance seems to be relevant in understanding the complex configurations of multiple features or items, as a matter of a series of overlapping shared features, where none of them is necessarily shared by all members" (p. 88). I believe that these empirical findings problematize both Taylor's (2016, 2017b) and any other essentialist account of a global or universal spirituality. In any case, they also show that the participatory approach can perfectly explain strong similarities among religious traditions without resorting to Taylor's soft perennialism or any other (neo-)perennialist model.

In alignment with the participatory approach, Taylor (2016, 2017b) originally claimed that his "soft perennialism" rejected hierarchical relationships among spiritual traditions and states; paradigmatic stages of spiritual development; and a single, final destination for spiritual aspiration. However, it can be argued that Taylor's (2022) now-admitted religious hierarchies (e.g., impersonal over theistic traditions), plus his conflation of diverse spiritual ultimates into a single immanent/impersonal spiritual force, effectively sabotage his attempt to distance his work from "harder" perennialist models (à la Wilber, 1995, 2006) and reconcile participatory and perennialist perspectives.

Other authors who perceived weakness in participatory metaphysics include Subogono (1999), Capriles (2013), and Buchanan (2019). Interestingly, after issuing their charges, each of these authors invariably advocated for their own preferred metaphysical frameworks. For example, whereas Taylor (2016, 2021) favored an immanent/impersonal spiritual force underlying all genuinely mystical experiences, Subogono (1999) championed the traditionalist transcendentalist metaphysics promulgated by Schuon's (1984) "transcendent unity of religions." And whereas Buchanan (2019) suggested that a process theology and cosmology grounded in Whitehead's "description of the primordial and consequent natures of [the Christian] God" (p. 217) offers a more sophisticated metaphysical foundation for transpersonal studies than the participatory approach,<sup>9</sup> Capriles (2013) critiqued the participatory account of spiritual cocreation and rejection of a pre-given spiritual ultimate largely on

the basis that it contradicts the teachings of his own tradition, Dzogchen Buddhism (and Buddhism, in general), which in his eyes unquestionably depicts the superior spiritual truth.<sup>10</sup> Finally, though building solid bridges between participatory theory and archetypal cosmology, B. Tarnas (2016) suggested that one positive attribute that can be credited to the participatory undetermined mystery is *archetypal*, subsuming thereby the participatory approach into an archetypal-astrological worldview—although this outcome may not have been the author’s intention.

As should be evident, these scholars’ metaphysical frameworks are radically at odds with one another, and in some cases it is hard to distinguish their critiques from standard religious apologetic moves. More positively, the variety of the proposed metaphysical frameworks further advances the case for the spiritual and transpersonal pluralism endorsed by the participatory approach. In the next section, I explain why the open and minimalist metaphysics of the participatory approach obstructs claims for the superiority of any particular system, avoiding both philosophical omnipotence and religious sectarianism without elevating the participatory approach to a metaphysically privileged position.

### **An Open and Minimalist Participatory Metaphysics**

Today it is widely accepted that no perspective (whether scientific or philosophical) is entirely free from metaphysical assumptions (e.g., Cunningham, 2023; Daniels, 2022), a recognition that is not equivalent to granting free license for metaphysical speculations about otherwise explainable phenomena (see Daniels, 2021; Friedman, 2021; Hartelius, 2021, 2022). I concur with authors such as Daniels (2022), Hartelius (2021), and Washburn (2020) that in general, and particularly in transpersonal studies, it is important to hold metaphysical assumptions in an open and minimalist fashion due to epistemic humility as well as for heuristic reasons.<sup>11</sup> In this spirit, I have advocated for the adoption of Stroud’s (2004) open naturalism in transpersonal psychology (Ferrer, 2014, 2017a; for a fuller discussion, see Hartelius, 2021), a naturalism that “is not committed in advance to any determinate and therefore potentially restrictive

conception of what is so” (Stroud, 2004, p. 35). But, what exactly do I mean by an “open” and “minimalist” participatory metaphysics?

### **Metaphysical Openness**

In alignment with Stroud’s (2004) proposal, I opted to use the word *undetermined* to qualify the nature of the mystery (Ferrer, 2008, 2017a). Rather than affirming negatively (as my prior term *indeterminate* did; Ferrer, 2002), *undetermined* leaves open the possibility of both determinacy and indeterminacy within the mystery, as well as the paradoxical confluence or even identity of these two apparently polar accounts. As I explained elsewhere (Ferrer, 2017a), my original account of the mystery as *indeterminate* did not fully avoid religious sectarianism because it favored apophatic (*via negativa*) over kataphatic (*via positiva*) spiritual orientations and associated discourses (see Ferrer, 2002; cf. Subogono, 1999). In addition, in contrast to Taylor’s (2016, 2021) immanent spiritual force and Subohono’s (2013) transcendent unity of religions (after Schuon, 1984), *undetermined* also leaves open both immanentist and transcendentalist accounts of the mystery—even though I have suggested that what were historically considered transcendent realities could be more properly understood today as potential *subtle* realms of a seamless multidimensional cosmos (Ferrer, 2017a).<sup>12</sup> Finally, the term also leaves open the personal or impersonal nature of the mystery, as well as whether there is an ultimate identity between the mystery and the human deepest identity.

Crucially, in my latest transpersonal works, I stopped using the culturally and metaphysically loaded terms *spirit* and *spiritual* to refer to the mystery (e.g., Ferrer, 2017a). Besides historically standing in opposition to the body and the worldly, part of the problem with these terms is their Western and particularly Christian origin (in a Biblical context, *spiritual* meant being animated by God or the Holy Spirit). Thus, many religious practitioners of non-Western, non-theistic traditions (e.g., Theravada Buddhists) do not accept them; for two well-documented historical accounts of these terms and their modern developments, see Sheldrake (1992, 2013). Even when I used the term *spirit*, I clarified that such a usage did not wed

the participatory approach with supernaturalist or metaphysical viewpoints:

To embrace a participatory understanding of religious knowledge is not *necessarily* linked to confessional, religionist, or supernaturalist premises or standpoints. ... virtually all the same participatory implications for the study of religion can be practically drawn if we were to conceive, or translate the term, *spirit* in a naturalistic fashion as an emergent creative potential of life, nature, or reality. ... Whether such creative source is a transcendent spirit or immanent life will likely be always a contested issue, but one, we believe, that does not damage the general claims of the participatory turn. (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008b, p. 72)

As Duckworth (2014) observed regarding the participatory proposal in the context of religious studies, metaphysical biases are neutralized for the most part: 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” (pp. 346–347). Irwin (2008) concurred, “The participatory model is not based on preconceptions about the validity of (or relationship to) any particular metaphysical view, but seeks to elucidate this view as yet another example of authentic spiritual encounter” (p. 200). Therefore, to characterize the mystery as undetermined fosters noncompetitive (at least doctrinally speaking) and thus more harmonious and mutually enriching relationships among both transpersonal orientations and religious traditions, which are as vital today as ever. As the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (2006) compellingly argued, the rhetoric of religious exclusivism or superiority is widely exploited to perpetuate interreligious violence and religion-based terrorism across the globe; after all, it is much easier to kill your neighbor when you believe that God is (only) on your side.

In addition to its practical value, qualifying the mystery as undetermined may be conceptually required. In an essay discussing my notion of the mystery, Mthembu (2021) argued for the necessary

theoretical incompleteness of any account of the mystery due to a variety of principles, such as “theoretical underdetermination” (according to which theories are undetermined by data; after Quine, 1953/1980), “process impermanence” (which states that the dynamic nature of all phenomena averts all attempts at theoretical closure), and “recontextualization” (wherein the very process of accounting for the mystery can result in changes in the mystery itself). Thus, conceptual attempts to label or describe the mystery may be thwarted by human cognitive limitations, the evolving dynamics of mystery, and the participatory nature of human knowing.

But, would not positing the undetermined nature of the mystery—and thus the cocreated nature of the various religious ultimates—undermine the claims of most traditions and the very ontological integrity of the mystery itself? In his critique of participatory spiritual cocreation, for example, Capriles (2013) pointed out that not only Dzogchen Buddhism but also other traditions (such as Hindu, Taoist, or Christian) hold their ultimate realities as given and universal, not humanly cocreated (cf. Chittick, 2008). True, but given the rich variety of incompatible spiritual ultimates and the aporias involved in any conciliatory strategy (see Ferrer, 2002, 2017a), I submit that it is only by promoting the cocreative role of human cognition to the very heart and summit of each spiritual universe that the ultimate unity of the mystery can be preserved—otherwise an arguably equally unsatisfactory alternative emerges, forcing one to either reduce spiritual universes to fabrications of the human imagination or posit an indefinite number of isolated spiritual universes. By conceiving spiritual worlds *and* ultimates as the outcome of a process of participatory cocreation between an always historically situated human cognition and an undetermined creative power, however, one rescues the ultimate unity of the mystery while simultaneously affirming its potential ontological richness and overcoming the reductionisms of cultural-linguistic, psychological, and biologically naturalistic explanations of religion.

Lastly, the participatory approach also leaves open the question whether the primordial



constituent of the cosmos is consciousness, matter, or both. Excepting debates in the United States over teaching creationism in schools, the science/religion wars appear to have sorted participants into two different but related antagonistic camps. Put simply, in one camp are those who regard mind or consciousness as a (or *the*) fundamental nature of the universe and, in other camp, those who consider consciousness a byproduct, epiphenomenon, or emergent quality of matter and life—or even a subjective delusion (see Genaro, 2018). I do not think that anyone can determine beyond doubt who is right or who is wrong in this conflict, but I submit that there are no reasons for despair. One might ask, what is a greater miracle—that the entire universe is and has always been conscious in one way or another, or that consciousness has somehow arisen from senseless dead matter? Although I personally sympathize with meaningful accounts of the cosmos' unfolding, I submit that both options, especially when engaged not only intellectually but also heartfully, can lead to an equal sense of wonder and reverence that unlocks the spiritual depths of human nature (cf. Rubenstein, 2010). In any case, having established the metaphysical openness of the participatory approach, I turn now to its minimalist status.

### **Metaphysical Minimalism**

In a recent article defending the import of metaphysical hypotheses in psychological science, Cunningham (2023) stated,

Jorge Ferrer's conception of participatory spirituality as an enactive and cocreative encounter with an undetermined "Mystery"—characterized as "a spiritual power, and/or creative energy of life or reality" (Ferrer, 2008, p. 136) that is the "generative power of life, the cosmos, and/or the spirit" (Ferrer, 2011, p. 2) "from which everything arises" (Ferrer, 2002, p. 4)—has all the hallmarks of a metaphysical hypothesis. (p. 29).

Perhaps. But, even if this were the case, I want to clarify that, when speaking about the mystery as the creative power of life, the cosmos, and/or reality, what I have in mind is nothing more—and nothing less—than *the cosmic creative process accepted*

*by modern science and cosmology*. I believe that this clarification, together with my dropping of the loaded term *spirit*, address Washburn's (2020) perception of an unnecessary metaphysical baggage in the participatory approach. While appreciating that the notion of an undetermined mystery averts religious exclusivism and hierarchical rankings, Washburn observed,

It raises the question of how we can possibly know that there is an undetermined generative power of life or reality and, therefore, how we can possibly know that the realities described by different spiritual traditions have the kind of cocreated status that the participatory approach attributes to them. (p. 37)

I strongly suspect that semantic issues muddle this discussion, and it may be the case that my use of the term *power* evokes metaphysical ghosts. That said, I would reply, "How can we possibly deny that there is a process of creative unfolding in the cosmos in which human beings are participatory agents"?

It is worth noting that cosmologists and astrophysicists appear to have no issues about speaking about an "energy" (or force) behind the continuous creation of the universe, even if its nature continues to be, oh well, undetermined. As the astrophysicist Ray R. Gould (2019) wrote, "No one knows the nature of the primordial energy that is assumed to drive [cosmic] inflation, or how it relates to the larger framework of physics" (p. 80). This rather mysterious (at least for contemporary science) creative process is what, with his tongue in the vicinity of his cheek, the cosmologist Brian Swimme called "the greatest discovery of the scientific enterprise: You take hydrogen gas, and you leave it alone, and it turns into rosebushes, giraffes, and humans" (as cited in Bridle, 2001, para. 13). Expressing a similar sentiment, Gould wrote, "Everything we see in our observable universe was once packed into a region no bigger than a grapefruit" (p. 73). Thus, if the participatory account of the mystery is metaphysical, I argue that it is so in ways consistent with the established knowledge of contemporary cosmology.<sup>13</sup>

Let me make this point in a different way. Though the human mind is certainly capable

of questioning everything, I find it extremely challenging to be seriously skeptical regarding the following three statements:

1. There is something instead of nothing: as I write these words, I am here, on this planet floating in the cosmos—and you are there now too, reading them.
2. This “something” is not only constantly changing but also undergoing a process of creative diversification, complexification, order, and interiorization (i.e., from particulate to galactic, to stellar to planetary—to chemical to biological to mental to cultural and to spiritual phenomena; Gould, 2019; Swimme, 1994).<sup>14</sup>
3. Human beings are self-conscious participants in such a cosmic creative unfolding.

Supporting the last premise, Gould (2019) stated that with human beings, “the universe has reached a remarkable milestone: the creation of creativity itself” (p. 137). Further, modern cosmology corroborated Sagan’s well-known insight that, in a literal way, we are a means by which the cosmos can know itself (Sagan & Burton, 2017). In this regard, Gould explained, “Atoms do not age. Each one of the thousand trillion hydrogen atoms in your body is nearly fourteen billion years old, a relic of the Big Bang itself” (p. 84). This finding, I suggest, provides foundations for a fully embodied spirituality, as the body itself can then be seen (and experienced!) as a direct bridge to cosmic remembrance and awareness (see also Ferrer, 2017a).<sup>15</sup>

Although minimalist and converging with modern cosmology, the above premises have deep implications for transpersonal and spiritual studies. As R. Tarnas (2006) poetically asked, “Is it not much more plausible that human nature, in all its creative multidimensional depths and heights, emerges from the very essence of the cosmos, and that the human spirit is *the spirit of the cosmos itself* as inflected through us and enacted by us?” (p. 492). In other words, human spiritual imagination and cognition can be seen as channeling the very creative urges of the cosmos—or, at least, of life. If such creative process or energy birthed the entire universe and/or the diversity of life, then it becomes also more

plausible to entertain the ontological richness of the spiritual realms described by the world’s religious traditions. Perhaps, the universe is not only expanding outward but also *inward* (cf. Gould, 2019). If so, the various spiritual worlds could be interior and/or interdimensional aspects of a single multifaceted cosmos or multiverse.

These considerations, I believe, also address the questions raised by both Taylor (2021) and Washburn (2020) about the participatory proposal that spiritual phenomena are cocreated by humans and the mystery—though I have argued that we should also leave open the possible impact of subtle entities, energies, archetypes, and the like (e.g., see Barnard, 2022; Ferrer, 2017a; B. Tarnas, 2016; R. Tarnas, 2006).<sup>16</sup> I would expand on the nature of spiritual cocreation here: my sense is that a full understanding of most visionary spiritual events—whether spontaneous or facilitated by spiritual practice or entheogens—requires taking into account the complex interface between the widely accepted eminently constructive or top-down nature of human perception/cognition (Goldstein & Brokmole, 2016; Riener, 2019; Seth, 2021) and the relaxing of so-called filtering brain mechanisms.

The filtration theory of cognition popularized by Aldous Huxley (1954) in *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (after Henri Bergson and C. D. Broad; see Webb, 2023) states that the human brain filters out tremendous amounts of data to avoid an information overload that would be evolutionarily maladaptive (for contemporary accounts, see Kelly et al., 2007; Kripal, 2019); think, for example, of the tiny sliver (.0,0035%) of the electromagnetic spectrum visible to the human eye (Sloney, 2016). Interestingly, contemporary neuroscience has established that entheogens such as LSD inhibit the thalamus’s gating function while increasing connectivity from cortex to thalamus, thereby allowing a greater inflow of sensory data than is ordinarily available (e.g., Bedford et al., 2023; Preller et al., 2019; Swanson, 2018).<sup>17</sup> Based on these findings, I hypothesize that most spiritual states/visions may emerge from the interaction between the reduction of brain filtering mechanisms that is arguably also facilitated by sustained contemplative or spiritual practice, on the one hand, and a constructive, top-down

“empowered imagination” (Hollenback, 1996; see also Wolfson, 1994) shaped by a plethora of contextual, conceptual, and doctrinal variables (e.g., Katz, 2004; Klein, 1986) on the other.

Moreover, whereas my personal bet is then that most spiritual phenomena encountered by humans are to some extent subjective-objective or cocreated (and thus overcoming the Cartesian objective/subjective disjunctive; see Ferrer, 2002), to strip subjectivity from any ontological value is an unjustified, reductive physicalist move. In other words, the fact that spiritual phenomena may “exist only as powers or products of our bodies, brains, cultures, or psyches” (Washburn, 2020, p. 37) does not necessarily cancel their ontological status (cf. Jung, 1938)—even less so when one considers that the very creativity of the cosmos may be channeled through human embodied cognition and culture. In a similar vein, Gleig and Boeving (2009) wrote, “ontological veracity ... is not inherently at odds with a contextualist sensibility. To acknowledge that humans do not only discover but also shape and cocreate spiritual landscapes does not annul the metaphysical reality of such mystical worlds” (p. 66; cf. Miner, 2004). Hartelius (2016b) put it this way: “In participatory thought, however, existence is not self-existent, but relational: The object is not primary, but something that arises, as it were, out of a network of relationships, a sort of intersubjective field” (p. v). The point here is that once we accept that all knowledge arises from the interaction between subjects and objects (or subjects and subjects), the Cartesian aspirations to purely “objective” knowledge (and the related epistemic devaluation of subjectivity) become nearly meaningless.

That said, although I proposed that the occurrence of shared visions of subtle phenomena (such as auras or nonphysical entities) in the external world is suggestive of their extra-psychedic ontological status (Ferrer, 2014, 2017a), I believe more rigorous and systematic research should be carried out before reaching any confident conclusion. This, in part, is why I always employ the terms *potential* and *possible* in this article to qualify the ontological richness of spiritual phenomena. This development, I think, aligns my perspective with Washburn’s (2020) “open-minded agnosticism that is receptive

to spiritual phenomena and ready to engage them but that suspends judgment on their ontological status” (p. 37). In this vein, when considering the ontological status of subtle entities as “constructed, cocreated, or fully independent” (Ferrer, 2017a, p. 211), I wrote that “I do not have a definitive answer to this question” (p. 212), leaving open not only the three options but also the possibility that some entities may be constructed, others cocreated, and still others fully independent.<sup>18</sup>

The real practical challenge, as I see it, is how to distinguish between more or less valid, fruitful, and emancipatory spiritual enactments. Leaving aside absurd claims or intentional parodies such as the universe’s creation by a Flying Spaghetti Monster (Henderson, 2006), I have always rejected relativism and defended the idea that not all spiritual enactments have the same value or are equally “valid.” Some of them are more valid than others, not because they better represent a universal or “objective” spiritual reality (even though, like in the physical world, there may be constraints), but because they more fully and efficiently foster the harmonious relations between—and wholeness, well-being, and survival of—a greater number of sentient beings (see Ferrer, 2002, 2017a).

Whether or not one fully accepts such implications, I propose that to hold them is valuable for both human flourishing and interreligious relations, at least in the following four ways:

1. To understand human beings as unique embodiments of the mystery empowers spiritual creativity, for example, toward the cocreation of novel spiritual understandings, practices, and even expanded states of freedom.
2. To envision religious manifestations as the outcome of human cocreation with such a cosmic creative force allows for entertaining the potential ontological richness of spiritual worlds without falling into any of today’s fashionable reductionisms.
3. To share a sense of communion with such a creative mystery through its multiple manifestations fulfills the long-searched-for spiritual unity of humankind, eschewing the

need for any perennialist essentialism or global spiritual megasystem that can be ideologically posited over all spiritual traditions and orientations.

4. To recognize the human participatory role in the cosmos's creativity can help us to celebrate the diversity of spiritual expressions in the same way that we rejoice in the almost infinite diversity of life (leaving mosquitos and nasty viruses aside, that is) with its millions of wondrous species.

The next section expands on the nature of participatory pluralism by elaborating on this parallel between spiritual and natural diversity, suggesting that it may be more than a mere "analogy."

### A Spirituality Grounded in Life

In my work, to show the congruence between spiritual and living diversity, I have consistently selected nature-inspired imagery to illustrate the rich variety of spiritual manifestations. From my early metaphor "an ocean with many shores" (Ferrer, 2002), which conveyed the various ways to overcome self-centeredness, to my use of rhizomatic and arboreal images to depict spiritual diversification (Ferrer, 2017a) or those of nature's four seasons in unpacking the deep spiritual dynamics of integral education (Ferrer, 2017a; Ferrer et al., 2006), I have always sought to *(re-)ground spirituality in life*. It can be said that my work applies a *biomimetic approach*—one inspired by natural systems to understand or solve complex human questions (e.g., Dicks, 2023; Primrose, 2020)—not only to illustrate and nurture spiritual diversity but also to articulate spiritually oriented research, educational, and integral

practices (see Ferrer, 2017a; Ferrer & Sohmer, 2017; Sohmer & Ferrer, forthcoming). In other words, my participatory perspective stretches naturalistic observation to shed light on—and perhaps even deepen—academic, cultural, and spiritual inquiry. In what follows, I endeavor to show the power and fruitfulness of this approach in heightening an understanding of religious pluralism as well as of the problems of sectarian essentialist and perennialist accounts.

Specifically, I submit that we can *appreciate spiritual pluralism as an extension of life's diversification*, as illustrated for example in extremely complex microbiological trees and networks (Blai & Archibald, 2021; Hug et al., 2016; see Figure 3). As I presented in a series of public talks (e.g., Ferrer, 2017c, 2022), picturing religious traditions as branching out in different but potentially overlapping rhizomatic directions (thus including



**Figure 3.** Tree metaphor of relations between major world traditions (from [www.bitlanders.com](http://www.bitlanders.com); in the public domain)

both tree- and network-style organizations) allows a visualization of their differences and similarities, and illustrates how misleading it may be to conflate them or force their convergence. After all, who would want to see all botanical and animal species converging into a single biological mega-organism?

In this regard, Grande (2024) recently published a monumental work systematically developing this arboreal account of religions and their diversification. In *The Evolution of Religions*, Grande postulated that all religions are branches of a complex evolutionary tree of tremendous ideological diversification. In full harmony with the participatory proposal (although remaining totally agnostic about the ontological status of supernatural referents), Grande extensively used the metaphor of phylogenetic trees not only to explain religious diversity, but also to reject any kind of ladders of evolutionary progress, pre-determined goals, and universal pinnacles in religious evolution.

One might reply that natural and cultural processes are not commensurable and so the use of a tree-of-life image to positively account for spiritual diversity is thus invalid or unjustified. This response, however, is based on the modern Western nature–culture binary opposition that scholars such as Descola (2011, 2013) or Viveiros de Castro (2014) have, in my opinion, rightfully deconstructed. Descola’s work is particularly illuminating, as it showed the provinciality of the modern Euro-American allegiance to a naturalistic ontology that, in addition to assuming that all that exists is the natural world studied by empirical science, restricts “soul” or personhood to human beings.<sup>19</sup> This ontology, Descola continued, is at odds with many non-Western ontologies—such as Amerindian, Siberian, or Asian animisms—that grant personhood and thus culture not only to humans but also to animals, plants, and other environmental elements (e.g., Brightman et al., 2012). Interestingly, in this regard both Harvey (2005) and Ingold (2021) pointed out that, rather than a system of beliefs, animism should be considered a way of being that engages (at least) all living beings as subjects, a view that from a participatory perspective situates animism as a valid enaction of the world—especially

as it naturally leads to a greater appreciation and respect toward all sentient beings. After centuries of being seen as an anthropocentric projection or primitive belief of savage people who were cognitively unable to “objectify” nature (e.g., Clodd, 2017; Durkheim, 1915; Tylor, 1954/1871), animism is increasingly considered a legitimate cosmology and epistemology in Western thought (e.g., Bird-David, 1999; Harvey, 2005; Ingold, 2021); for an impressive collection of essays showing the contemporary philosophical revival and relevance of animism, see Harvey (2013). From a different angle, modern biomimicry has not only challenged modernity’s assumption that cultural inventions are not part of nature—it has gone so far as to denounce the pernicious ecological consequences of such a belief (Dicks, 2013).

In addition, as Bejan and Zade (2013) showed, treelike structures—from lightning bolts to cardiovascular systems to river basins—are natural designs that maximize current flow efficiency (e.g., of electricity, blood, or water). These authors also demonstrated how such designs abound in cultural artifacts such as highway systems, military supply logistics, and the organizational flowcharts of corporations and political bodies. Their so-called “constructal law,” they argued, runs through biology, physics, technology, and social organizations, thereby also overcoming the nature–culture divide. In the same vein, I hypothesized that treelike structures can illustrate—and perhaps account for—the flow of spiritual creativity streaming in and through human individuals and collectives; think, for example, of the world religions tree (see *The Archeologist* Editor Group, 2023) or the countless genealogical trees of various religious traditions, rooted in revelatory or founding events and branching out in many different schools, sects, or denominations (e.g., Figure 4; Maps and Tables, 2016).

It is important to remember that there are over 2,000 religions in the world today (Johnson & Zurlo, 2019; other scholars estimate over 10,000 organized religions—see Grande, 2024), many of which propose drastically different—and often incompatible—cosmologies and ultimate principles (e.g., Kaplan, 2002; Neville, 2001;

Prothero, 2010). Further, diversity reigns within most religious traditions: Christianity, for example, currently has over 46,000 denominations (Zurlo et al., 2022). Add to this already extremely complex picture current trends such as religious syncretism (e.g., Palmisano & Palofinno, 2017); the New Age and the Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) movements' transtraditionalism (e.g., Mercadante, 2014; Parsons, 2018; Sutcliffe & Gilhus, 2013); multiple religious identities (Bidwell, 2018); the ongoing mutual transformation of religions (e.g., Ingram & Streng, 2007); and secular, postsecular, and posthuman spiritualities (e.g., Ferrando & Banerji, 2023; Giordan & Pace, 2012; Walach, 2015), and one is forced to agree with Teilhard de Chardin's belief that religious cross-pollination will lead to "creative unions in which diversity is not erased but rather intensified" (Cousins, 1992, p. 8).

Bearing this picture in mind while looking at the world religions tree (see *The Archeologist* Editor Group, 2023), perhaps it is feasible to recognize the hubris involved in the claim of any single tradition—let alone one of any single human being, no matter how erudite or enlightened they might be—about the universal superiority of their favored spiritual state or religious ultimate. I firmly believe that such a spiritual narcissism, historically pandemic in the human approach to religious pluralism, needs to be put to rest given the tremendous and, I would argue, spiritually enriching diversity of world religions (see Ferrer, 2017a).<sup>20</sup>

To summarize, in this section I have shown that the metaphysics of the participatory approach is open-ended and minimalist; its conception of the mystery is consistent with contemporary

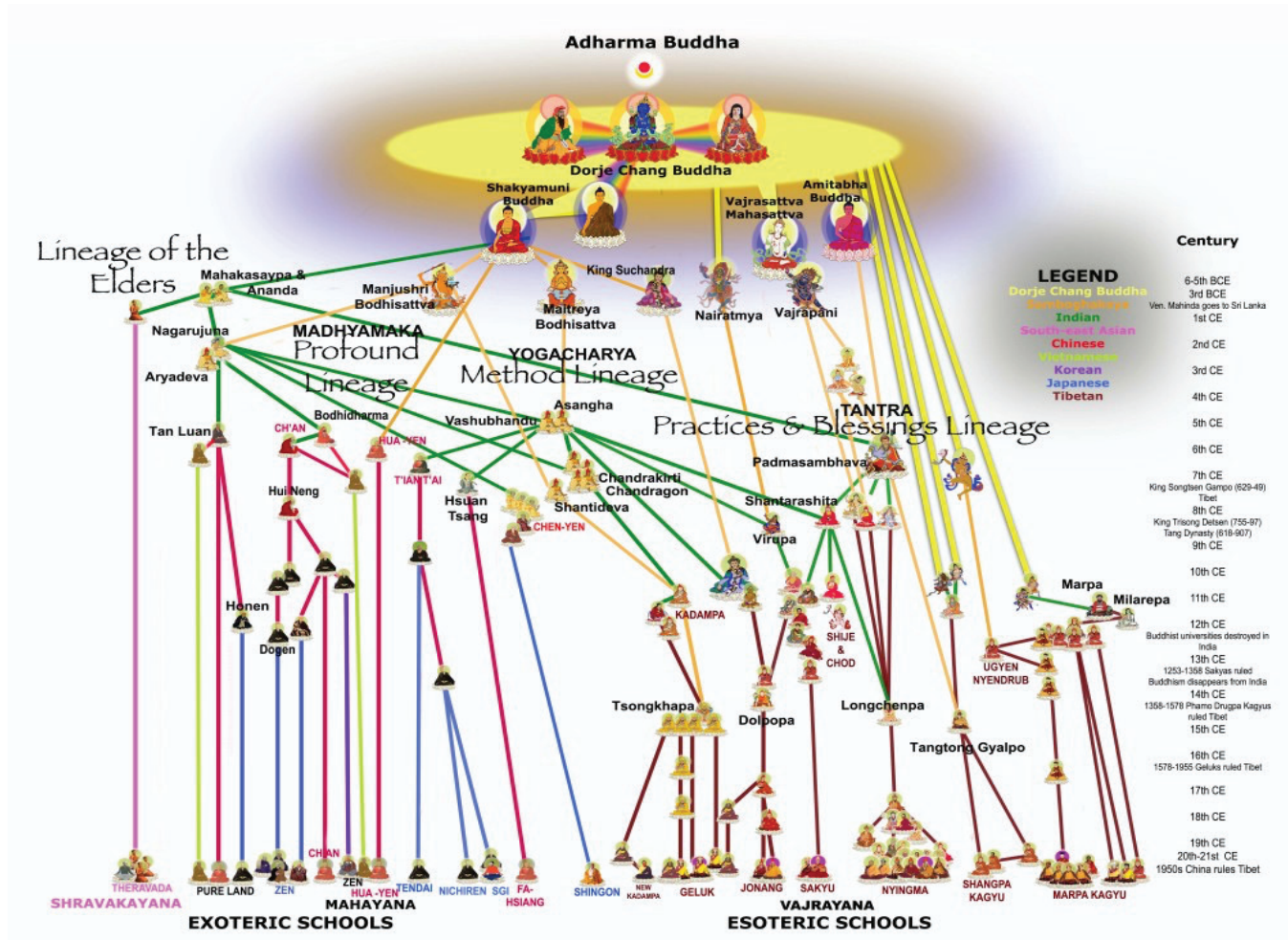


Figure 4. Genealogical trees of major Buddhist schools and sects (from www.holyvajrasana.org; in the public domain)

cosmological knowledge; its spiritual pluralism biomimetically parallels nature's diversification; and its adoption may be practically beneficial for both transpersonal psychology and interreligious relations. In the Conclusion section, I stress the pragmatist thrust of the participatory approach.

### Conclusion

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty (1979) articulated the important distinction between systematic and edifying philosophers. Whereas the goal of *systematic* thinkers is the discovery of universal or objective truths, essences, or structures (e.g., Plato, Descartes, Hegel), *edifying* philosophers are mostly concerned with improving the human condition (e.g., James, Dewey, Gadamer). Expanding this typology, Taber (1983) added a third category, *transformative* philosophers, who advocate for the need of a revolution in consciousness to open new dimensions of experience *and* bring forth re-enactments the world (e.g., Fichte, Heidegger, Śāṅkara). I believe that these distinctions shed light on the nature of many transpersonal debates; for example, I contend that some of my differences with Abramson (2015), Capriles (2013), and Wilber (1995, 2006) are rooted in their being mostly systematic-transformative thinkers while I lean toward an edifying-transformative philosophy. Perhaps, as William James (1907/2008) famously observed, many philosophical disagreements boil down to temperamental differences.

In an edifying-transformative spirit, in the same way that Rorty (1979) debunked the systematic philosophical myth of “mind as mirror of nature” (i.e., the belief that mental representations reflect independent objects in the external world), I proposed dropping the myth of contemplative or visionary “consciousness as mirror of spirit” that is explicit or implicit in most classical and modern spiritual discourses (see Ferrer, 2017a). Whereas the representational theory of mind denounced by Rorty (1979) has been refuted by modern philosophy of science (e.g., de Oliveira, 2021; van Fraassen, 2008) as well as cognitive psychology and neuroscience (e.g., Bergen, 2012; Seth, 2021), among other disciplines (see Frisina, 2002), its underlying assumptions still breathe with ease in

the work of transpersonal thinkers who assume or claim the universal, objective, or superior truth of their favored systems (e.g., Capriles' [2006, 2009] Dzogchen Buddhism, Wilber's [1995, 2006] AQAL model).

In contrast, from its inception, the participatory approach rejected representationalism and, applying Varela et al.'s (1993) enactive cognitive paradigm to spiritual discourse, proposed that spiritual knowing is not a depiction of pregiven, independent spiritual referents, but an enaction, a “bringing forth” of a world or domain of distinctions cocreated by the different elements involved in the participatory event (Ferrer, 2002, 2008). Incidentally, the dismissal of representationalism is perfectly compatible with both the open naturalism and the scientific realism (e.g., about modern cosmology's findings) with which I have characterized the participatory approach (see Price, 2004; Rydenfelt, 2021). Once we drop objectivist assumptions, however, the perplexity and tensions caused by conflicting truth claims about the nature of ultimate reality fade away like a mirage. As Hartelius (2016b) argued, in a participatory context “multiple ontological claims regarding ultimacy can coexist because they are claims relating to ontologically real relational processes, not self-existent objective-like referents” (p. v). In short, letting go of representationalism in transpersonal studies is aligned with not only modern scientific knowledge but also a participatory spiritual pluralism that considerably relaxes interreligious doctrinal competition.

It is worth reiterating that I never claimed that the participatory approach conveys the nature of the mystery underlying all spiritual expressions in any kind of objectivist fashion—except in the minimalist sense that such a mystery may be equivalent to the creative force propelling cosmic, biological, and cultural evolution. In contrast, I have always insisted that my use of the term *undetermined* to qualify the mystery is eminently *performative*—that is, it seeks to evoke the sense of not-knowing and mental humility that I have found most fruitful in approaching the creative power of the cosmos that is the source of our very being (Ferrer, 2008, 2017a). My emphasis on an emancipatory epistemology

(which assesses the validity of spiritual insights and experiences according to their spiritually liberating power) and related focus on transformational outcomes (vs. doctrinal or objectivist criteria) to make qualitative distinctions in spiritual matters also illustrate the edifying-transformative impetus animating my overall project.

However, even if pragmatically posited, would not the participatory approach be another philosophical/spiritual system competing for supremacy? Possibly, as I firmly stand on the conviction that moving toward selflessness and generosity (vs. selfishness), human integration (vs. dissociation), and eco-sociopolitical justice (vs. eco-sociopolitical oppression) is, to put it bluntly, a very good thing (see Ferrer, 2002, 2017a).<sup>21</sup> That said, although the participatory approach avoids relativism by providing orientations for critical discernment in spiritual matters, it is misleading to metaphysically situate it above any religious tradition or philosophical system. In contrast, I have suggested that participatory spirituality might be better understood as a spiritual stance or orientation (i.e., toward a socially responsible integrated selflessness and creative spiritual inquiry) that can be found in various degrees within many existing traditions (see Ferrer & Sherman, 2008a); that is increasingly alive in the ongoing contemporary renewal of traditions (e.g., Fox, 2002; Horton & Harvey, 2012; Ray, 2008; Urban, 2003); that may also shape novel spiritual practices and understandings (e.g., Bauwens, 2007; Ferrer, 2003; Heron, 1998; Mecheva, 2023); and that has already influenced many approaches to psychospiritual healing and transformation such as Gestalt therapy (Lahood, 2015), psychoanalysis and Jungian analysis (Brown, 2016, 2017), addiction recovery therapy (Eng, 2020), and psychosynthesis (Palmer & Hubbard, 2009), among others (see Ferrer, 2011, 2017a). In other words, I do not see the participatory approach as a doctrine predicating metaphysical or objectivist truth claims but rather as a stance or attitude toward human and world transformation (cf. van Fraassen, 2002).

To be sure, systematic thinkers, arguably due to deeply engrained habits of thought, simply cannot believe that any perspective challenging their claims for objective or universal truth is not

competing for metaphysical dominance and thus often accuse edifying thinkers of falling into self-contradiction fallacies (e.g., Capriles, 2013; Wilber, 1995, 2002). But such charges are only valid in the context of systematic thinking and vanish—like the ghost some children see in a dark room before a light is turned on—in universes of discourse with different aims. Once it is revealed that the hidden premises of the self-refutation charge presuppose its conclusion, the reasoning becomes what logicians call a syllogistic fallacy (see Ferrer, 1998, 2002).

In closing, while the participatory proposal might not entirely settle the question of metaphysical neutrality (which I take to be conceptually impossible), I maintain that the question is significantly relaxed through the qualification of the mystery as undetermined, the overcoming of the dualism of the mystery and its enactments, the focus on emancipatory and transformational fruits in spiritual matters, and the affirmation of a potential plurality of equally holistic visions emerging through different enactments of the mystery. In any event, my hope is that this essay dispels confusion about the metaphysical status of the participatory approach or, at any rate, advances the dialogue about the relationship between transpersonal psychology, science, and metaphysics.

### Notes

1. In the field of Religious Studies, see also the book reviews by Goldberg (2010), King (2011), Adams (2011), and Allison (2017).
2. It is important to distinguish between two different meanings of the term *metaphysics*. On the one hand, the notion of metaphysics in Western philosophy is generally based on the distinction between appearance and reality, with a metaphysical statement being one claiming to portray the “Reality” presumably lying behind the realm of appearances; at any rate, metaphysics is concerned with the fundamental nature of reality (Marmodoro & Mayr, 2019; van Inwagen, 1998). On the other hand, in religious and spiritual literature the term is also widely used to refer to subtle or nonphysical worlds, levels, realms, or dimensions of reality allegedly existing beyond



the sensible world or within the ontological depths of human consciousness (e.g., Chittick, 1994; Irwin, 1996; Spangler, 2010; Wilber, 2006). Virtually all religious traditions (see Schilbrack, 2014) and some transpersonal authors (e.g., Wilber, 2006; Grof, 1998; Taylor, 2021, 2022) make metaphysical claims in at least one of these senses, if not both. That said, it is important to note that metaphysical foundationalism (i.e., the view that there is a fundamental physical [e.g., atoms] or nonphysical reality [e.g., consciousness] upon which everything else depends) has received serious challenges in contemporary Western philosophy; for a summary of these challenges and a presentation of some of the increasingly prevailing, nonfoundationalist metaphysical alternatives, see Oberle (2022).

3. Thus, the expression “participatory approach” in this paper refers exclusively to my own participatory perspective. As I have argued, participatory transpersonalism is shaped by a highly diverse network of independent scholars who nonetheless appear to share values such as pluralism, embodiment, relationality, and creative inquiry in spiritual matters (see Ferrer, 2011, 2017a; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008b).
4. To be more precise, the participatory formulation adapts and extends the enactive paradigm—originally limited to the perceptual cognition of the natural world—to account for the possible emergence of spiritual referents or domains of distinctions cocreated by human multidimensional cognition and the generative force of life or the cosmos. For other discussions of spiritual knowing as enactive, see Kelly (2008) and Irwin (2008); for an important synthesis of bio-cognitive, phenomenological, and transpersonal participatory accounts of enaction, see Malkemus (2012).
5. For a more thorough rebuttal of Abramson’s (2015) views, see Hartelius (2015a, 2015b). See also Merlo (2011) for some reflections on how a hypothetical nondogmatic, nonhierarchical, and noninclusivist perennialism might be consistent with the participatory approach. Originally, Taylor (2016, 2017b) also introduced his “soft perennialism” as a reconciliation of perennialist

and participatory perspectives. In my view, the most solid attempts to reconcile Wilberian neo-perennialist and participatory perspectives on spiritual enaction and pluralism are due to Alderman (2011, 2012a, 2012b). Also, although they ultimately subordinated the participatory approach to the Wilberian model as “the very elaboration of pluralism towards integral” (para. 24), Todor and Jivanescu (2019) thoughtfully presented participatory and neo-perennialist perspectives as compatible and worth integrating.

Although I value these and other integrative efforts (e.g., Ferendo, 2007; McIntosh, 2007), in the end they all privilege either integral theory or the participatory approach. Why? Because whereas from a Wilberian-integral perspective the participatory approach exemplifies the pluralistic stage on its way toward the truly integral, from a participatory perspective Wilber’s nonduality is a legitimate but merely optional spiritual enaction among many possible others that cannot be non-ideologically situated as “lower” spiritual aims (see Ferrer, 2017a). This predicament leads me to believe that Wilberian-integral and participatory perspectives are incompatible *at least in their approach to spiritual diversity*, which is nurtured and celebrated by the participatory approach versus being relativized and ultimately pruned into a single final state of nonduality (or “one taste”) in integral theory (see Wilber, 1995, 2006).

6. Neo-Kantianism operates within the Myth of the Framework, according to which the human mind projects its categories onto an unknowable noumenon creating the phenomenal world of our experience (Ferrer, 2002; Popper, 1994). In this context, the realm of the noumenal—the most Real, the thing in itself, the *Ding as sich*—is rendered necessarily forever beyond human grasping, leaving us with a world not quite real but necessarily so. Although this view appears to receive support from cognitive science’s findings on the top-down nature of perception (e.g., Seth, 2021), in a participatory-enactive context both neurocognitive mechanisms—and the projections of the transcendental ego that Kant saw as a ceiling between the phenomenal

and the noumenal—become a window, the very means through which the cosmos or the real puts forth itself through human perception and cognition. For a fuller discussion of the alienating epistemological/existential impact of neo-Kantianism, see Tarnas (1991); for an analysis of its Western ethnocentric and disembodied underpinnings, see Lakoff and Johnson (1999), King (1999), Schilbrack (2014), and Ferrer (2014, 2017a).

7. See also Hollenback (1996) for a critical discussion of the typical exclusion of visionary Indigenous traditions in the modern study of mysticism.
8. Since religious practitioners display different degrees of understanding and experiential enactment of their traditions' teachings, some form of exoteric/esoteric distinction might be valid after all. However, in addition to being textually unwarranted (Griffiths, 1991; Hollenback, 1996; Neville, 2001), esotericist universalism has been intersubjectively challenged (refuted?) in the contemporary inter-monastic dialogue (Bleé, 2011). Buddhist and Christian monks, for example, acknowledge important differences on both their understandings *and* experiences of what their respective traditions consider to be ultimate (e.g., Mitchell & Wiseman, 1997; Walker, 1987). As Harmless (2008) wrote discussing the Soto Zen founder Dogen's teachings, although "he pointed to the radically nondual, it cannot be presumed he is speaking of a oneness within ultimate reality that is anything like what Christians or Muslims speak of, much less what Hindus mean when they speak of a deeper monism" (p. 253). What is more, even within a single tradition, strong disagreements about the nature of ultimate reality abound among teachers, monks, and contemplative practitioners (see Ferrer, 2017a). Consider the words of the Dalai Lama: "The moksa which is described in the Buddhist religion is achieved only through the practice of emptiness. And this kind of nirvana or liberation, as I have defined it above, cannot be achieved even by Svatantrika Madhyamikas, by Cittamatras, Sautrantikas or Vaibhasikas. The follower of these schools,

though Buddhists, do not understand the actual doctrine of emptiness. Because they cannot realize emptiness, or reality, they cannot accomplish the kind of liberation I defined previously" (Tenzin Gyatso, 1988, pp. 23–24; see also Faure, 2009). What is left of esotericist universalism, one wonders, when even the monks and major mystical figures of a single tradition intensely disagree about the nature of ultimate reality?

9. In a series of important works, the process theologian Ronald Faber (e.g., Faber, 2014, 2019; Faber & Keller, 2014) developed a Whiteheadian account of religious pluralism that is highly attuned to participatory pluralism (R. Faber, personal communication, January 18, 2016). Despite its theistic language, Faber's "polyphilic" pluralism rejects both interreligious competition and the search for common denominators in religion through the celebration of a mutually enriching participation in radical spiritual multiplicity and the infinite becoming of the creative mystery.
10. Capriles (2006, 2009) displayed the same disconcerting strategy when critiquing the works of other transpersonal theorists (i.e., Grof, Washburn, and Wilber); for Capriles, any claim or approach that questions or contradicts Dzogchen teachings is automatically taken to be defective or plainly erroneous. This circular reasoning strikingly resembles traditional religious apologetics, as when fundamentalist Christians critiqued Buddhism for not "getting" that a personal God is the creator of existence or that Jesus was not merely a man (e.g., Yandell & Nentlan, 2009). It is also worth noting that both classical and modern Buddhist scholars pointed out that Dzogchen's essentialist accounts of ultimate reality in terms of Pure Consciousness or Primordial Awareness (e.g., Manjusrimitra, 1987) were historically influenced by Hindu traditions such as Advaita Vedanta and Kashmir Saivism, bringing Dzogchen closer to those traditions than to canonical Buddhist teachings (e.g., Bauer, 2013; Dorje, 1996; Jackson, 2021). In any event, whereas engaging in religious apologetics might be a legitimate—if rarely

fertile—stance in interreligious encounters (see Griffiths, 1991), I respectfully question its place in scholarly debates. As Kripal (2019) put it, the fundamentalist “presumes a specific religious universal nature (its own) and argues, implicitly or explicitly, that our shared humanity is either secondary or unimportant compared to whatever particular religious identity they happen to be privileging. In short, the conservative religious mind works in the opposite direction than that of the liberal humanities” (p. 183). This is precisely on point.

11. My minimalism differs from Daniels’s (2022) “*hermeneutic strategy* that prefers ‘bottom up’ rather than ‘top-down’ interpretation” (p. 61). “In practice,” he added, “this means that if phenomena can be sufficiently explained using naturalistic or psychological concepts, we should generally *prefer* such explanation rather than jumping to metaphysical conclusions” (p. 61). Though I believe that such an approach is salutary in many cases (e.g., why appeal to evil eyes to explain a common flu infection?), I also concur with Taylor’s (2022) remark that in other cases it may be seen as biased toward scientific naturalism and materialism. Paving a middle way between naturalistic (Daniels) and post-materialistic (Taylor) preferences, I submit that, particularly when studying transpersonal and spiritual phenomena, we should keep both options open and at the same level. For example, a fully integral inquiry into the ontological nature of ayahuasca visions may need to be *equally* open to psychophysiological (e.g., the impact of DMT on the human brain; individual biographical factors) and potential supernormal nonphysical factors (e.g., the possible influence of subtle energies or entities; see Barnard, 2022; Ferrer, 2017a). Each case, of course, should be examined independently.
12. By the term *subtle* I refer to any possible coexisting or enacted worlds of energy and consciousness outside the scope of what contemporary scientific naturalism accepts as real or empirically researchable, as well as phenomena or entities associated with these worlds. While in my work I retained the term *immanent* to describe spiritual/creative sources located within—or emerging from—physical matter, body, sexuality, life, and nature, I postulate no ontological gap or dualism between the immanent and the subtle (for discussion, see Ferrer, 2017a).
13. I believe this account also answers Stoeber’s (2015) critical question about the participatory approach: “Can it make intelligible sense even to speak of an undetermined generative source . . . without postulating something like a divine noumenon in Hick’s sense of the dynamic or a super ontological principle in Guénon’s sense of divine Absolute?” (p. 19).
14. This simplified account of cosmic evolution does not necessarily presume the validity of the still widely accepted Big Bang theory, which today faces a number of serious explanatory challenges (see Ekeberg, 2019). To mention just one alternative theory, Steinhardt and Turok (2007) posited that the Big Bang was not the beginning of the universe but the bridge to a past filled with endlessly repeating cycles of cosmic expansion and contraction (cf. Gould, 2019; Penrose’s [2012] Big Bounce theory). Whereas this article is not the place to review this debate, I find it fascinating to note how the conflict between religious worldviews is coming alive in modern cosmology: The Big Bang theory was always extremely convenient for Christian creationists (e.g., Magoon, 2018), and the Endless Universes and Big Bounce theories appear to better fit the Hindu notion of Brahman’s (or Maha Vishnu’s, in some accounts) breath eternally creating and destroying universes in never-ending cyclical rhythms (see Steinhardt & Turok, 2007). In any case, none of these alternative models changes the fact that we should somehow account for—or at least refer to—the process, force, or energy propelling such a creative cosmic unfolding.
15. This cosmologization of the human is not equivalent to Kripal’s (2019) “cosmic humanism,” which not only adheres to panpsychism but also—in striking contradiction to his earlier writings—appears to support a perennialist monistic metaphysics: “Indeed, if there is any

common message in the mystical literature, it its [sic] that everything is one thing, that ‘all is One’” (p. 160).

16. For a thorough discussion of metaphysical and existentialist accounts of subtle psychological energies such as libido, psychic energy, or the Chinese vital force (*de qi*), see Da and Hartelius (2024).
17. For a related account of ordinary perception as “controlled hallucination” and hallucinations as “uncontrolled perception,” see Seth (2021). Also see Hoffman (2019) for a wider account of how evolution’s focus on fitness produced sensory organs and brains that discard a vast amount of information.
18. Open-ended agnosticism, then, should be sharply distinguished from metaphysical and methodological agnosticism, the first of which ideologically denies the existence of any entity or force other than material ones and the second of which a priori excludes any appeal to them in scientific research (see Ferrer, 2014, 2017a). In contrast, as I understand it, open-ended agnosticism is simply a humble declaration of not-knowing and openness to various explanatory possibilities about phenomena for which there are insufficient data or conflicting claims.
19. For discussions of the so-called “ontological turn” in modern anthropology launched by Descola and Viveiros de Castro, see Cabot (2018), Paleček and Risjord (2013), Sivado (2015), and Holbraad and Pedersen (2017).
20. As we have seen, even the Dalai Lama contends that final spiritual liberation can only be achieved through the emptiness practices of his own Gelukpa school of Tibetan Buddhism (Tenzin Gyatso, 1988; for critical discussion, see D’Costa, 2000). That the Dalai Lama himself, arguably a paragon of humility and open-mindedness, holds this view strongly suggests that spiritual narcissism is not necessarily associated with a narcissistic personality (although the latter can obviously magnify the former). Beyond the natural human tendency to favor what has been most fruitful or liberating for oneself, spiritual narcissism appears thus to be a deeply seated

ethnocentric tendency buried in the collective realms of the human unconscious.

21. It is important to add that certain forms of dissociation may be temporarily fruitful (think of ketamine’s dissociative positive impact on treatment-resistant depression; Vazquez et al., 2020) and a transitory spiritual inflation may play a role in the context of certain spiritual processes (e.g., Almaas, 1996; Blumenthal, 1986). That said, I believe that it would be extremely hard to argue for the psychospiritual wholesomeness of turning dissociation and inflation (to say nothing of any form of oppression) into permanent spiritual goals—especially when contrasted with the regulative ideal of a “socially responsible integrated selflessness” (Ferrer, 2017a, p. 19).

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### About the Author

**Jorge N. Ferrer, PhD.**, is a clinical psychologist, author, and educator. He was a professor of psychology for more than 20 years at California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, where he also served as chair of the Department of East-West Psychology. He is the author of *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* (2001), *Participation and the Mystery: Transpersonal Essays in Psychology, Education, and Religion* (2017), and *Love and Freedom: Transcending Monogamy and Polyamory* (2022), as well as the co-editor of *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies* (2008). He was a member of the Esalen Institute's Center for Theory and Research and an advisor to Religions for Peace at the United Nations. Website: [www.jorgenferrer.com](http://www.jorgenferrer.com).

### About the Journal

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a Scopus listed peer-reviewed academic journal, and the largest and most accessible scholarly periodical in the transpersonal field. IJTS has been in print since 1981, is published by Floragrades Foundation, sponsored in part by Attention Strategies Institute, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at [www.transpersonalstudies.org](http://www.transpersonalstudies.org), and in print through [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) (search for IJTS).