The Participatory Turn and the Transpersonal Movement:

A Brief Introduction

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To turn, turn will be our delight, `Til by turning, turning we come round right. (Shaker dance song)

In this issue, ReVision offers the first of a two-part monograph devoted to the further emergence of the participatory worldview within the transpersonal movement. These two issues also roughly coincide with the publication of Jorge Ferrer and Jacob Sherman’s anthology The Participatory Turn in Spirituality, Mysticism, and Religious Studies (forthcoming). Whereas Ferrer and Sherman’s anthology focuses on the implications of participatory thinking for religious studies, ReVision’s double monograph explores the participatory turn in a wider canvas, addressing questions concerning participatory theology, cooperative inquiry, sacred maps and journeys, indigenous studies, Native North American religious visions, and the anthropology of consciousness.

The participatory turn can be seen as the second turn in the transpersonal movement’s theoretical commitments. The first turn began with the formalizing of transpersonal psychology in the late 1960s. The first turn or intervention was always concerned with weighty issues—the borders of the human psyche, the more-than-human potentials of that psyche, the origins (and later the evolution) of consciousness, and the levels of overlap between diverse religious cosmologies.

Partly formed in the ferment of ‘60s counter-culture, the transpersonal movement was launched in San Francisco in 1968, a decade after the introduction, and subsequent banning in 1967, of potent psychotropic substances into Western cultures. The historical emergence of the first-turn transpersonal mind–world cannot be dissociated from the heady mélange of social upheaval, activism, civil rights crusades, and radical protest movements. This mix also included the outbreak of war in Southeast Asia, transnational Eastern religious flows into the West, the explosion of the human potential movement, and a widespread spiritual awakening. Although it is more than this, the first turn can be defined as an attempt to integrate psychologies East and West; an attempt to map the farthest shores of consciousness (where it found its sense of cosmological unity); and the merging of pragmatic science with spiritual concerns.

The first turn’s intervention was largely epistemological and aimed at releasing the Cartesian grip on the world (as the way of grasping) and complementing the human condition with far-reaching spiritual potentials. Transpersonalism also sought to construct coherent models and maps of the psyche’s expanding terrains and radical techniques for the health and healing of such a person. The fourth force growing out of the behaviorist, psychoanalytic, and humanistic movements was always grounded in a strong therapeutic and soteriological impulse and has been particularly concerned with alleviating suffering on individual, social, and ecological dimensions (see McDermott 1993).

This intervention was a revolution within the human sciences because it embraced nonordinary states of consciousness as a legitimate field of study. Previous research epochs had driven the sacred from the field, but a “distinguishing characteristic” of the movement “has been a keen desire, even an urgency, to integrate learnings and spiritual practices of indigenous and ancient spiritual traditions” (Anderson 1998, xxi). Although many currents

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crystallized in this moment, the first turn can be traced to Abraham Maslow’s groundbreaking studies of peak experiences (e.g., Maslow 1998) and Stanislav Grof’s phenomenological taxonomy of psychedelic and holotropic consciousness (1975). Grof’s uncovering of the tabooed womb in all its multivalent and unstable glory and his integrative presentation of the perinatal as a meeting house for Sigmund Freud’s biological psychology and Carl Jung’s archetypal psychology has had, and will continue to have, far-reaching ramifications. To be sure, the question of worldviews is a central hub around which much of the movement’s theorizing wheels.

Worldviews among West African people, for example, are often depicted as a sacred egg, a womblike world that envelops and gives life and rhythm to the people’s eternally returning journey into being in time and space (Kalu 2001). Ogbu Kalu writes that such worldviews are “precarious” visions that are at once “fragile, enfolding, and nurturing” (228). Grounded in sacred origins, they imbue an almost numinous order that, when properly followed and understood, can “ensure a miracle, namely that this seemingly fragile frame has the capacity to sustain so many and so much activity” (228–29).

The first turn, in the name of sustainability and unity and in an attempt to reframe the modernist cosmos—the mechanistic or Newtonian–Cartesian paradigm—spun a precarious worldview into being that would need to have the miraculous capacity to enfold, nurture, and sustain not just a single people but, rather, the many peoples, cultures, and worldviews often in tragic collision with each other now and for thousands of years past.

Transpersonal psychology’s initial force was potentized by (what has become a two-way borrowing from) multiple sources: historical, personal, cultural, scientific, religious, past, and present. Questions at the heart of the movement have been the ontological status of the person-in-the-world, that person’s psychospiritual development, and that person’s encounter with death and its incorporeal dimensions—the socially imaged spaces at the conclusion of our embodied lives.

These familiar tropes, while continuing, have recently led to important questions about the role of gender in transpersonalism, the genealogies of power enshrined in religious systems, the subtle modernist foundations of transpersonal science (and soon, I should think, the therapeutic problems thrown up by the recognition of Métissage, Creole, and Orientalized identities shaped by colonialism, globalization, and the magical force of hybridity), and the participatory nature of spirituality. These criticisms have sought to disrupt the first turn’s homage to perennialism or religious universalism—the unexamined effigy at the heart of the movement to which some anthropologists may say cult was paid.

Colonial expansion, trade, war, and migration bring cultures into contact with each other. This contact was originally thought to lead to a process of cultural assimilation whereby a weaker, poorer, or less technologically developed culture was absorbed by the more dominant and powerful culture. This idea has since given way to cultural diversity as it was learned that, despite the pressure to assimilate, the smaller cultural group maintained many of its features (Kirmayer 2006). Cultural contact can also bring about what Fritjof Schuon (1975) called spiritual universalism, or perennialism, which is activated only after contact with another civilization (34).

Although it does not intend consciousness colonization (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2002), the transpersonal movement’s perennializing of the cosmos can carry an assimilationist tendency and draw the transpersonal raft perilously close to the shoals of spiritual imperialism. However, many cultural theorists now recognize the contact zone between cultures as a potent, trickster-like liminal space, “a third space of enunciation” (Bhabha 1994, 209). Rather than universalism, mutating religious formations in the contact zone between two or more cultures are now referred to as hybridity, Creolization, and Orientalization.

The first turn is also where the formidable works of Ken Wilber can be located (although some may argue that he deserves a turn of his own). Wilber joined the scene in the mid-1970s and became a dominant force; his books The Atman Project (1980) and Up from Eden (1981) were heralded as breakthroughs by the movement. Wilber’s voluminous and magisterial reorderings of transpersonal psychology and the perennial philosophy into an evolutionary teleology with an Oriental finale, or a climactic, nondual end state, has been the grit around which much debate among transpersonal scholars has formed a contested pearl of wisdom (both for and against; see Rothberg and Kelly 1998). Wilber’s schemata have been questioned by feminist, anthropological, and psychoanalytic commentators. Furthermore, for the participatory turn to thrive in transpersonal thinking, a basic requirement is that it emancipate itself from Wilber’s structural evolutionary version of perennialism (see Ferrer 2002; Heron 1998).

Fresh anthropological insights from postcolonial and poststructural theory regarding the reappraisal of magic and sorcery and their novel mutations may shed further light on the perennial tradi-
One could argue that perennialism (after Huxley [1945] but before Wilber’s work in the mid-1970s) in the American context was largely embedded by the psychedelic movement (roughly late '50s to late '60s) and potentially represents an unseen process of cosmological hybridization. Hybridization in this context is a process in which “two cosmological systems are brought into contact” and broken and joined simultaneously in a bizarre binary operation (Brendbekken 2003, 38). This hybridizing force is associated with a kind of sorcery—one freed from Eurocentric hubris and rationalism that, along with Christianity and anthropology, has tended to demonize the categories related to sorcery and magic. Bruce Kapferer writes of this type of magical practice:

In this sense, magical practices and the conceptions and practices of sorcery and witchcraft constitute metacosmologies, that is, methods of patterning or bringing together acts, events or practices that may normally be expected to exist in different or separate cosmological frames. Their metacosmology is one that bridges or crosses different registers of meaning and practice (their hybridizing energy) and frequently is a dynamic of negation. Much sorcery, for example, gathers its force by systematically negating dominant cosmological forms (the terror of its destructive agency) or else by breaking apart elements of other cosmological schemes in order to effect unions and crossovers that might otherwise be impossible. (2003, 20–21)

The psychedelic experience may have been pragmatically and tactically blurred with the religious postulates of various religious traditions and the perennial philosophy in an effort to survive and transform or subvert these dominant religious forms. The perennial tradition may have been originally deployed, perhaps unconsciously, as a masking device, or a prestigious, protective, and seemingly authoritative sacred canopy with which to wheel a marginal, subversive, and unimaginably anomalous psychadelic epistemology into the heart of what William Blake called Newton’s sleep, or the hyperrational West. As Jay Stevens (1987) observes:

Since the death of the psychedelic movement, the “bad science” of the LSD researchers has now been resurrected in the guise of a new branch of psychology, transpersonal psychology. (500)

Thus, the subtle appeal to the authority vested in each religious tradition—reticulating into the perennial philosophy—may have been a way to midwife a postrational mind–world into a materialist and secular society. The early transpersonal movement’s emic fealty to the construct of perennial philosophy (again, before Wilber) and its universal correlate, cosmic consciousness, was, at an important symbolic level, a process of breaking and simultaneous blending cosmological postulates and what postcolonial theorists call cosmological hybridity: the Creolization of cosmological designs—an act of postrational sorcery (see Kapferer 2003).

The transpersonal movement has been and is still evolving through a major conceptual crisis in its worldview. This period of chaos and revisionist frenzy was perhaps inevitable with the rise of feminism and postmodernism and because the movement carried forward an echo from the Enlightenment’s philosophy of reason (Ferrer 2002). Not surprisingly, this echo is found “at the root of all dominant post-Enlightenment enquiry in the sciences and humanities” (Kapferer 2003, 2). The crisis is therefore shared by the human sciences.

This second turn is seen by some as crucial to the development, and perhaps the survival, of the transpersonal impulse in science. Philosopher Rick Tarnas (2002) writes that a new revolution in science or the launch of a new paradigm is bound to be incomplete and can carry unseen or unacknowledged assumptions from the older paradigm that continue to mire the new in the mud of the old. These unseen assumptions make the paradigm shift possible because it cannot make too radical a break from the past without losing support from the previous epoch. Yet these unconscious holdovers can also “weaken the power of the new paradigm” to such a degree that they can actually “threaten to destroy” (Tarnas 2002) the new vision:

Eventually, a crisis is reached. It may then happen that a second intervention will take place, a second conceptual break-through virtually as essential as the first, which will emancipate the original revolution from its unconscious limitations and allow the full paradigm shift to be realized. (vii)

Many authors have contributed important theoretical works to this second moment. I believe the three authors who ushered the participatory worldview into transpersonal theory most cogently are Richard Tarnas (1991), John Heron (1992, 1998), and Jorge Ferrer (2002). Of these seminal works, Ferrer’s careful attention to the internal structure of transpersonal theory has been pivotal in tipping the transpersonal movement further into its second turn. In particular, Ferrer’s articulation of the transpersonal event has become a useful and important pivot to the sacred (to paraphrase van Gennep) and, as is evident throughout this monograph, many scholars use it.

The second turn does not suggest complete dissociation from the first turn, but reevaluation, revision, and perhaps revalorization (to use Rita Gross’s [1993] terminology):

In feminist theology in general, the task of “revalorization” involves working with the categories and concepts of traditional religion in the light of feminist values. This task is double-edged, for, on the one hand, feminist analysis of any major world religion reveals massive undercurrents of sexism and prejudice against women, especially in realms of religious praxis. On the other hand, the very term “revalorization” contains an implicit judgment. To revalorize is to have determined that, however sexist a religious tradition may be, it is not irreparably so. Revalorizing is,
Nevertheless, this shift in transpersonal worldview is a serious departure from transpersonal psychology’s almost religious fealty to the perennial philosophy. Thus, positing and elaborating new participatory worldviews and cultivating the necessary perspectives and practices required to engage in their revelation are central to the movement’s second turn.

For example, an important aspect of the second turn is the inclusion of action research in transpersonal studies. One can argue that action research is a spiritual practice (Heron and Lahood forthcoming). However, the difficulty in construing action research as a spiritual practice for transpersonalists is the subtle Cartesianism pervading first-turn transpersonal studies (Ferrer 2002). The first turn can tacitly assume that spirituality is a subjective experience, within a nonspatial individual consciousness, of transpersonal objects that transcend the everyday public space of social interactions.

In contrast, Heron, myself, and the authors in this issue have a non-Cartesian view of spirituality as an embodied and shared transformative event, or a shared occasion of enhanced human flourishing. It is generated by collaborative action for change taken together, and the action helps shape and disclose the reality of the relational event. By this account, spirituality is manifest in flourishing and liberating participatory events which persons-in-relation cocreate with the reality of the presence between them in their situation (Heron and Lahood forthcoming).

The public event may be a shared transformation of behavior into resonance with the presence of the between or a shared transformation of behavior into greater organizational inclusiveness and empowerment, as in other kinds of action research. From this perspective, action research approaches may be nascent and widely divergent approaches within a non-Cartesian spirituality of participatory events. All action research may be implicitly co-creative in various liberating ways, with the reality of the presence between all the persons involved in the situation (Heron and Lahood).

The second problem associated with action research and first-turn transpersonalism is the potential for unaware spiritual projection onto spiritually ranked transpersonal objects. Eastern mystical traditions dominate by ranking their own aspirated states over others (see Winkelman 1993, 5), and many in the transpersonal movement, in the wider New Age proliferation, and among Western spiritual seekers may have introduced such ideas. This can lead to the habitual displacing of spiritual lights, charisma, and internal authority onto idealized sages, gurus, traditional figures, places, masters (ascended or otherwise), or even onto transpersonal objects, such as nondualism masquerading as the ultimate spiritual authority in every direction (Heron 1998). Furthermore, a growing interest in embodied spirituality (see Rothberg 1986; Washburn 2003) and the sensitivities of the human body and environment as the locus of spiritual knowledge, following the feminist affirmation of sensuality and the erotic, contradict the notion that Eastern enlightenment precepts are paradigmatic for all spiritual endeavors.

For example, in pan-Hindu traditions such as Advaita Vedanta, the small self’s (small s) body and person are usually discussed only long enough to denigrate them and reject their ontological and empirical status (Klass 1995). The self (small s) is, at best, assimilated to a theological construct that is granted ontological status; in other words, the person is identified with a metaphysical Self (big S) with no mortal remains. As Agehananda Bharati (1985) writes, “The self as a basis for such important human achievements as scholarship, artistic skill, etc. . . . [is] totally ignored in Indian philosophical texts” (189). The following description of a practitioner’s experience with the Advaita Vedanta teacher Poonja speaks to the disembodiment validated in satsang practices:

Papaji’s words were heard, but there was no one left to whom he could address them. The speaking and the hearing were occurring as one single, impersonal event. (Blackstone 2006, 27)

Following his master’s voice, the practitioners, who must reproduce the master’s disembodied, impersonal Self (big S), strive to reject their embodied and potentially divine personhoods in the name of enlightenment and mystical participation with the master. This kind of impersonal nondualism may cast a long and conflicted shadow (after Jung) into the practitioner’s psyche through the master’s and student’s unaware participation in projective identification (a psychoanalytic term). This can cause the practitioner to unconsciously identify with the master’s disowned and conflicted body and personhood and the meaning attributed to them (i.e., illusion) and to fall into a self-loathing that dictates further compulsive strivings in dissociation.

Franz Fanon (1968) outlined a similar process in regard to psychic colonialism. He writes:

The white man has woven me out of a thousand details. . . . I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects. (112)
Jürgen Kremer (1996) uses the term *projective identification* with regard to Wilber’s evolutionary hierarchical nondu- alism, suggesting that “we need to ban the concept of progress in descriptions of evo- lution in consciousness and civilizations, because they are entirely Eurocentric” (46). Kremer believes that projective identification may be an apt term for describing the psychoemotional process of coloniza- tion. He suggests that “other people are made to feel the highly conflicted and split-off material dominant cultures inject into them, so they feel and experience it as their own ... as self hatred” (46).

It may be overstating the point to sug- gest that something like this happens to all Western adherents of nondual trad- itions. However, it is worth raising the question in the name of liberated spiritual inquiry. Action research methods such as co-operative inquiry (Heron 1998) that combine radical critical subjectivity, emo- tional intelligence, and the ability to handle projective processes may be the only way to explore these questions freely outside a tradition’s hierarchy of charisma. Thus, in contrast with authoritarian traditions, collaborative inquiry among charismatic peers who are engaged in their embodied lives, decolonizing their indigenous selves (after Kremer 2003) and busy retracting their projections reduces the potential for psychic splitting and enables peer collabora- tors to inquire freely into the charismatic power relations between people, without defaulting to internalized external author- ity, in the spirit of transpersonal thriving.

This issue of *ReVision* includes arti- cles by Randy Conner, John Heron, Luan Makes Marks, and myself. The articles are divergent in style and content, but they are united by their affirma- tion of the participatory turn.

**NOTES**

1. Psychoanalytic theorists assume that early childhood experiences can cause trauma and neurosis. Melanie Klein (1949) explored this idea further by looking at pre- oedipal states of human development. With transpersonal psychology, the search for trauma and self is pushed further back along the ontogenetic pathway to the experience of birth and beyond. This beyond has some par- allels to the Jungian collective unconscious. Stanislav Grof (1985) argues that an echo of these earliest states is found in adult spiritual states of consciousness but that they can have traumatic and pathological elements.

2. The no-self, or anatta, in Hinayana Bud- dhism does not have the ontological status of the Godheads of Brahmanism or in Jainism (Klass 1995).


**REFERENCES**


