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The Future of Religion: Four Scenarios, One Dream

by Jorge N. Ferrer

The Future of Religion

Religious globalization, new religious movements, transnational religions, global proselytism, multiple religious identities, ecumenical services, religious syncretism, secular and postsecular spiritualities—all these are among the many remarkable trends that shape the religious landscape of the beginning of the twenty-first century. Despite the rampant materialism still dominant in an increasingly technocratic world, it is clear that we live in times of rich spiritual diversity, proliferation and innovation. For instance, when David B. Barrett was asked almost ten years ago what he had learned about religious change in the world after several decades of research, he responded, “We have identified 9,900 distinct and separate religions in the world, increasing by two or three religions every day.”

Although there may be something to celebrate in this spiritual cornucopia, this apotheosis of the religious imagination can also be the source of profound uncertainty and confusion. Where is the world heading, religiously speaking? Will humanity ultimately converge into one single religious credo? Or will it continue to diversify into countless forms of spiritual expression often at odds with one another? Alternatively, can we envision

a middle path capable of reconciling the human longing for spiritual unity, on the one hand, and the developmental and evolutionary pulls toward spiritual individuation and differentiation, on the other? I believe that we can, and in this essay I offer the contours of such a vision after considering four other scenarios for the future of world religion. As we go through them, I invite you to consider not only their plausibility but also inquire into what scenario you feel is the most desirable: what would you like to see happening?

Religion in the Global Village: Four Scenarios

The first scenario portrays the emergence of a global religion or single world faith for humankind. This global religion may stem from either the triumph of one spiritual tradition over the rest (e.g., Catholic Christianity or the Dalai Lama’s school of Tibetan Buddhism) or a synthesis of many or most traditions (e.g., the Baha’i faith or New Age spiritual universalism). The former possibility, historically the ambition of most religions, entails the wildly unlikely prospect that religious practitioners, except those

from the ‘winning’ tradition, would recognize the erroneous or partial nature of their beliefs and embrace the superior truth of an already existent tradition. The latter means that most traditions would ultimately come together or be integrated into one world faith embraced by all religious people, perhaps as the ultimate upshot of increased interreligious interaction. The dream of a global spirituality—however ecumenically or ideologically conceived—inspires spiritual sensibilities at work in such diverse spheres as interfaith dialogue, transpersonal psychology and integral theory, and many new religious movements.

In the second scenario, which we may call the mutual transformation of religions, spiritual traditions conserve their identity but are deeply and endlessly transformed through a variety of interreligious exchanges and interactions. The distinctive feature here is that, as Teilhard de Chardin believed, religious cross-pollination will

“... can we envision a middle path capable of reconciling the human longing for spiritual unity, on the one hand, and the developmental and evolutionary pulls toward spiritual individuation and differentiation on the other?”

lead to spiritual creative unions in which diversity is not erased but rather intensified. This vision is consistent with not only the adoption of practices from other traditions by members of different faith communities, but also the deepening or re-envisioning of one’s own tradition in light of other religious perspectives—a situation that, when mutual, was aptly described by Arvind Sharma as ‘reciprocal illumination.’ A historical pre-

cursor of this possibility can be found in religious syncretism (i.e., the mixture of two or more traditions), such as the Haitian Vodou’s blending of Christianity and African traditions or the Brazilian Santo Daime Church’s incorporation of the indigenous use of ayahuasca into a Christian container. Today this religious cross-fertilization is visibly taking place in interfaith dialogue, the New Age movement and a multitude of eclectic and integrative spiritual groups.

Within this scenario I would also locate the growing phenomenon of ‘multiple religious participation,’ in which an individual partakes in the practices and belief systems of more than one tradition, leading to a ‘multiple’ or ‘hyphenated’ religious identity, such as Jewish-Buddhist, Hindu-Christian, Buddhist-Taoist and so forth. Also related to this picture is the ongoing renewal of many religious traditions through cross-cultural encounters—a trend that can be clearly discerned in contemporary American Buddhism, Neo-Hindu applied spiritualities, and the novel social understandings of salvation in Asia influenced by Western values. An increasingly fashionable way to speak of all these richly transformative interactions, taken today by many to be historically

normative, is in terms of a 'cosmological hybridization' that is not only doctrinal (of spiritual teaching and beliefs), but also sometimes practical (of spiritual techniques) and even visionary (of spiritual ontologies and cosmologies). "We are all hybrids" is the new motto of this emerging spiritual ethos.

A third scenario stems from the affirmation of an interspiritual wisdom or a number of spiritual principles, teachings and values endorsed by all religious groups and traditions. Hans Kung's proposal for a global ethics heralded this possibility, but it was the late Christian author Wayne Teasdale who offered its most compelling articulation in terms of a universal mysticism grounded in the practice of 'interspirituality,' or the sharing of ultimate experiences across traditions. Specifically, Teasdale identified nine elements of such interspiritual wisdom: moral capacity, solidarity with all living beings, deep nonviolence, spiritual practice, humility, mature self knowledge, simplicity of life, selfless service and compassionate action, and prophetic voice. Developing a similar intuition is Beverly Lanzetta's proposal for an 'intercontemplative' global spirituality that affirms the interdependence of spiritual principles and can give birth to new spiritual paths. Also related is Robert Forman's articulation of a 'trans-traditional spirituality' that feeds on the teachings of all religious traditions, but is not restricted by the confines of any particular credo.

The last scenario, spirituality without religion, comprises an impressive number of contemporary developments—from secular to postmodern and from naturalistic to New Age spiritualities—that advocate for the cultivation of a spiritual life free from traditional religious dogmas and/or transcendent or supernatural beliefs. Two prominent trends here are postmodern spiritualities and the New Age movement. Though the former reject or remain agnostic about supernatural or transcendent sources of religion and the latter tends to uncritically accept them, both join hands in their affirmation of the primacy of individual choice and experience, as well as in their criticism of many received religious doctrines and authoritarian institutions. Calls for a democratization of spirit, a direct path to the divine, or the reclaiming of the individual's inner spiritual authority are intimately linked with this scenario. We could also situate here most forms of religious naturalism, modern religious quests, secular surrogates for religion, and postsecular spiritualities. Expressions such as 'spiritual but not religious,' 'religion without religion,' and 'believing without belonging' capture well the essential character of this orientation.

A Participatory Dream

As should be obvious, with the possible exception of a hegemonic global religion, the above scenarios are not mutually exclusive, and it is likely that they will all shape the future of world religion in the twenty-first century. And yet, there is something intuitively appealing in the search for spiritual unity, and here I would like to outline how a participatory perspective addresses this concern without hampering the arguably wholesome impulses

toward religious diversification and spiritual individuation at play in our times.

Participatory approaches understand religious worlds and experiences as co-created events emerging from the interaction of the entire range of human faculties (the rational, imaginal, somatic, erotic, aesthetic and so forth) and a dynamic and undetermined mystery, spiritual power and/or generative force of life or the cosmos. To embrace our participatory role in spiritual knowing may lead to a shift from searching for spiritual unity in a global religion organized around a single vision to recognizing an already existent spiritual human family that branches out in numerous directions from the same creative source. In other words, religious people may be able to find their longed-for unity not so much in an all encompassing megasystem or superreligion, but in their common roots—that is, in that deep bond constituted by the undetermined creative power of spirit, life and/or the cosmos in which all traditions participate in the bringing forth of their spiritual insights and cosmologies. The recognition of these shared roots naturally paves the way for a global approach to religious diversity that preserves a deep sense of communion across differences.

An important practical consequence of this approach is that, if religious people were to adopt it, they could then, like members of a healthy family, stop attempting to impose their particular beliefs on others and might instead become a supportive force for practitioners' spiritual individuation both within and outside their traditions. This mutual empowerment of spiritual creativity may lead to the emergence not only of a human community formed by fully differentiated spiritual individuals, but also of a rich variety of coherent spiritual perspectives that can be (potentially) equally aligned to the mystery. In this context, different spiritual perspectives can mutually illuminate and transform one another through unlimited doctrinal, practical and visionary hybridizations. And this access to an increased number of spiritual insights, practices and visionary worlds may in turn foster further human spiritual individuation as it expands the range of choices available for individuals in the co-creation of their spiritual paths.

It is important here to distinguish sharply between the modern hyperindividualistic mental ego and the participatory selfhood forged in the sacred fire of spiritual individuation. Whereas the disembodied modern self is plagued by alienation, dissociation and narcissism, a spiritually individuated person has an embodied, integrated, connected, and permeable identity whose high degree of differentiation, far from being isolating, actually allows him or her to enter into a deeply conscious communion with others, nature and the multidimensional cosmos.

In this scenario, it will no longer be a contested issue whether practitioners endorse a theistic, nondual or naturalistic account of the mystery, or whether their chosen path of spiritual cultivation is meditation, social engagement, conscious parenting, entheogenic shamanism or communion with nature. (Of course, it may be desirable to complement each pathway with practices that



Graffiti writer Revok and fine artist Jim Darling painstakingly assembled this installation inside the sanctuary of a gutted church in Detroit.

cultivate other human potentials.) The new spiritual bottom line, in contrast, will be the degree into which each spiritual path fosters both an overcoming of self-centeredness and a fully embodied integration that make us not only more sensitive to the needs of others, nature and the world, but also more effective agents of cultural and planetary transformation in whatever contexts and measure life or spirit calls us to work.

The affirmation of our shared spiritual family naturally calls for the articulation of a common—nonabsolutist and contextually sensitive—global ethics. This global ethics, however, cannot arise exclusively out of our highly ambiguous moral religious past, but needs to be crafted in the tapestry of contemporary interfaith interactions, comparative religious ethics, cross-cultural dialogue on global human rights, and cooperative spiritual inquiry. In other words, it is likely that any viable future global ethics will be grounded not only in our spiritual history, but also in our critical reflection on such history in the context of our present-day moral intuitions (for example, about the pitfalls of religious dogmatism, fanaticism, narcissism and dissociation). Besides its obvious relevance for regulating cross-cultural and interreligious conflicts, the adoption of global guidelines—including guidelines for dealing with disagreement—seems crucial to address some of the most challenging issues of our global village, such as the exploitation of women and children, the increasing polarization of rich and poor, the environmental crisis, xenophobic responses to cultural and ethnic diversity, and unfairness in international business.

Let me draw this essay to a close with the following: situated at the creative nexus between the mystery's generative power and our own psycho-cultural dispositions, spiritually individuated persons might become unique embodiments of the mystery, capable of co-creating novel spiritual understandings, practices, and even expanded states of freedom. If we accept this approach, it is plausible to conjecture that our religious future may bear witness to a greater-than-ever plurality of visionary and existential developments grounded in a deeply felt sense of spiritual unity. Such spiritual unity, however, may not be found in the heavens (i.e., in mental, visionary or even mystical visions) but deep down into the earth (i.e., in our embodied creative connection with our shared roots). This account would be consistent with a view of the mystery, the cosmos and/or spirit as moving from a primordial state of undifferentiated unity toward one of infinite differentiation-in-communion.

If you let me wear my visionary hat just a bit longer, I would say that the future of world religion will be shaped by spiritually individuated persons engaged in processes of cosmological hybridization in the context of a common spiritual family that honors a global order of respect and civility. This is the scenario I would personally like to see emerging in the world and that I am committed to help actualize.

Endnotes

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Embodied Spirituality—continued from page 62

Second, in this essay I have explored how a more embodied spiritual life can emerge today from our participatory engagement with both the energy of consciousness and the sensuous energies of the body. Ultimately, embodied spirituality seeks to catalyze the emergence of complete human beings—beings who, while remaining rooted in their bodies, earth and immanent spiritual life, have made all their attributes permeable to transcendent spiritual energies, and who cooperate in solidarity with others in the spiritual transformation of self, community and world. In short, a complete human being is firmly grounded in Spirit-Within, fully open to Spirit-Beyond, and in transformative communion with Spirit-In-Between.

Finally, embodied spirituality can access many spiritually significant revelations of self and world, some of which have been described by the world contemplative traditions, and others whose novel quality may require a more creative engagement to be brought forth. In this context, the emerging embodied spirituality in the West can be seen as a modern exploration of an 'incarnational spiritual praxis' in the sense that it seeks the creative transformation of the embodied person and the world, the spiritualization of matter and the sensuous grounding of Spirit and, ultimately, the bringing together of heaven and earth. Who knows, perhaps as human beings gradually embody both transcendent and immanent spiritual energies—a twofold incarnation, so to speak—they can then realize that it is here, in this plane of concrete physical reality, that the cutting edge of spiritual transformation and evolution is taking place. For then the planet earth may gradually turn into an embodied heaven, a perhaps unique place in the cosmos where beings can learn to express and receive embodied love in all its forms.

Endnotes

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2. The chakras (or cakras), whose number varies across the traditions, are the living body's subtle energetic centers that store and channel the vital force (pranasakti) of the individual. The Indian tantric tradition identifies six of these centers, located respectively at the base of the spine (muladhara), the pelvic sexual area (svadhisthana), the solar plexus (manipura), the heart (anahata), the throat (visuddha), and in the center of the eyebrows or 'third eye' (ajna) (Basu, 1986). Whereas all these centers were considered in many religious practices, the overriding tendency has been to transmute the primary expressions of the vital force—connected to the lower chakras—into the subtle qualities and ecstasies of the heart and consciousness—connected to the higher chakras. If we accept the Indian account of the primordial vital force (sakti) as feminine and of consciousness (shiva) as masculine, traditional tantric practice can be seen as a kind of 'internalized patriarchy' in which feminine energies are used at the service of masculine goals and expressions.



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