

# *Beyond Perennialist and Participatory Spiritualities: Transformation and Culture*

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**Abstract:** A comparison of perennialism, participatory spirituality, and Gebser's structures of consciousness demonstrates how deeper inquiry is required to understand how perennialism and participatory spirituality would address the relationship between individuals and culture with regard to how transformation happens. By reviewing how each of these philosophies approach context, the interpersonal, transformation, cultural relativity, pluralism, and multiplicity, the article identifies ambiguities that offer perennialism and participatory spirituality scholars the opportunity to explore their suppositions about spirituality more deeply.

**Keywords:** perennialism, participatory spirituality, Gebser, structures of consciousness, consciousness, spirituality, transformation, culture.

## **Perennial and Participatory Spirituality**

When compared, perennialist and participatory spiritualities are often seen as being at odds with each other.

The idea of perennialism traverses a long philosophical history and many sociological perspectives. Generally, perennialism is a philosophy with a foundation in morality and linearity that sees ultimate morality residing in a far, transcendent pole from an unexplored existence that is driven by destructive motives (Burtch, 2016). A core belief of perennialism is that, while the particular approaches to and descriptions of spirituality may come and go, the ultimate, transcendent reality remains the same.

The definition of participatory spirituality differs depending on the scholar, but the approaches that

have been discussed in recent years generally agree that participatory spirituality is the idea of creative union between the human and the divine where the human has agency (Ferrer, 2002; Heron, 1998, Tarnas, 1991). Further, participatory spirituality asserts that spiritual development should not be determined by comparison to doctrine because the risk is too great that unique differences in identity, such as gender or culture, may be unaccounted for by a culturally-specific viewpoint (Ferrer, 2002; Heron, 1998).

A common argument between perennialism and participatory spirituality is around the idea of *individual agency*, with perennialists arguing that participatory *agency* is an idea that can be held only before one realizes the absolute. After one realizes the absolute, the idea of *individual agency* no longer makes

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sense. To this critique, Ferrer (2011) responds that this view is a result of holding on to perennialist assumptions about there being only one way to understand the Mystery. He argues instead for the metaphor of the Mystery being one ocean with many shores (Ferrer, 2002). The idea here is though everyone may be looking at the mysterious, the Mystery itself is undefinable and therefore can only be talked about relative to the way individual cultures perceive it.

While it may seem that there is little ground here for agreement, a deeper look at the ideas posed by both philosophies suggests that not only is there some unremarked agreement, but that both philosophies could benefit from inquiring more deeply into their own assumptions (Burtch, 2016). To address either/or questions, sometimes it helps to take a step back to see if there's a larger context that might shed some light on the possibility of a less dualistic approach. Jean Gebser's theories on structures of consciousness provide just this kind of broader perspective on the topic of the transcendent and the immanent.

While his theories touch on matters of immanence and transcendence, these are perspectives found within a larger framework of ways in which humans have experienced reality throughout our existence. The type of questions asked in the debate between perennialism and participatory spirituality are typical of Gebser's mental structure of consciousness, which is only one of five structures that his theory addresses. Through Gebser's lens, the question of transcendence and immanence is not an either/or proposition, but a conundrum which is inherent to the nature of his mental structure of consciousness. With the mutation from mental to integral consciousness, the human experience changes so dramatically that the debate is no longer meaningful. It is for this reason that contrast Gebser's structures of consciousness with perennialism and with participatory spirituality.

Through the comparison of ontologies, I draw out areas of ambiguity and neglect between these philosophies that point to some areas of interest for exploration with regard to deepening the academic conversation about spirituality. In particular, by looking at how each of these philosophies approach context, the interpersonal, transformation, cultural relativity, pluralism, and multiplicity, meaningful questions arise about how each of these philosophies might address the relationship between individuals and culture with regard to how transformation works. Answering questions such as these can deepen how each philosophy approaches spirituality.

### **Context and the Interpersonal**

Besides Wilber (2006), few perennialist scholars have taken up the challenge of describing inter-subjectivity in spiritual terms. In an article that predates Wilber's (2006) book on spirituality, Hargens (2001) illuminates Wilber's thoughts on inter-subjectivity by outlining ways in which he believes that another scholar, de Quincey (2000), has misunderstood Wilber's (2000) approaches. In short, Hargens (2001) points out that Wilber's interpretation of intersubjectivity is not two subjective individuals having a conversation. Rather, the form that a relationship takes is largely due to the context of the situation (p. 56). There is not a "you" and a "me" in conversation; there is a relationship taking place without the distinction of individuals. Hargens (2001) summarizes, "...what Wilber is suggesting is radical to many people. He is claiming that intersubjectivity represents a valid form of truth to be found nowhere else and irreducible to any other type or approach to truth" (p. 57). Reminiscent of Buber's (1923/1958) work,

these ideas suggest that it is the context, the relationship, which arises as the inter-subjectivity.

Presumably, the context also supports the arising of relationship in Wilber's (2006) definitions of how spirit appears. For Wilber (2006), the spiritual experience of the first person is the witness (Chapter 7, Spirit in 2<sup>nd</sup> Person, para. 2). The spiritual experience of the second person, or the interpersonal, is the beloved, "before whom I must surrender in love and devotion and sacrifice and release" (Wilber, 2006, Chapter 7, Spirit in 2<sup>nd</sup> Person, para. 3). Spirit in the third person is the great system of life (Wilber, 2006, Chapter 7, Spirit in 2<sup>nd</sup> Person, para. 4). These are not relationships of duality, but rather co-arising relationships driven by context.

Finally, both Wilber (2006) and Smith (1982) offer that spiritual pursuit is not enough on its own; spirituality's ongoing development is dependent on personal development in the social sphere as well (Smith, 1982, Chapter 9, Section II, para. 2; Wilber, 2006, Chapter 5, What Should I Do, para. 5). Spiritual growth is stunted without social development.

Participatory spirituality scholars take a similar approach to the topic of inter-subjectivity. Perennialist and participatory spirituality arguments agree that social development is important along with spiritual development. Further, Ferrer (2002) argues that a tendency to focus on spirituality as an individual pursuit leads to narcissism (p. 145), and he suggests instead that the locus of transformative spirituality be an event rather than an experience. Similar to the way in which Wilber (2000) (as cited by Hargens, 2001) uses context to frame an interaction, Ferrer's (2002) transformative event can take place within the context of "an individual, a relationship, a community, a collective identity, or a place" (p. 137). This reframing from experience to event intends to place the locus of the event

beyond only the individual for the purpose of lessening the tendency of an individual to believe that he is achieving something due to his own unique specialness (Ferrer, 2002, p. 145). These events arise, and the individual participates in them, finding himself transformed (p. 141). The distinction between the perennialist and participatory spirituality views here is, again, the idea in participatory spirituality that the individual has creative agency. In Wilber's interpretation, the relationship itself is the focus.

Heron's (1998) participatory view of the spiritual interpersonal also suggests this idea of context as the means through which spiritual relationship exists.

The attuned human group, whose members resonate empathically with each other in an experience of mutual presence, can become consciously holonomic, both in a spiritual and subtle sense...when our brain waves oscillate in unison, then it is experientially as if we participate in the sacred space of the universe (Heron, 1998, p. 205).

Heron's (1998) sacred space of the universe could be equated with either Wilber's (as cited in Hargens, 2001) relational context or with Ferrer's (2002) transformative event.

Gebser (1949/1985), too, would agree in locating the interpersonal in the context rather than in individual locations. Pointing to the need to lose the illusion of separation, Gebser (1949/1985) contrasts ideas about individualism and collectivism with what seems, by the capitalization of "Thou," likely to be Buber's conception of I-Thou: an all-encompassing state of relating that includes all material form and manifestations of time

(p. 4). With the loss of the sense of separation, the idea of an “individual” becomes irrelevant.

While I have demonstrated a thread of similarity here between each philosophy with regard to the idea of context and the interpersonal, this is not a topic often discussed by the scholars of the philosophies themselves. It's possible that a conversation on this topic might open up further inquiry about areas of discovery between the philosophies.

### **Transformation**

Transformation in the perennialist sense is the development of the individual toward awareness of divine reality, the realization of non-conceptual reality being the key transformation.

For example, for Guénon (1925/2007), the sign that the final transformation has occurred is the realization of timelessness: “he is nevertheless freed from time and the apparent succession of things is transformed for him into simultaneity; he consciously possesses a faculty which is unknown to the ordinary man and which one might call the ‘sense of eternity’” (p. 103).

On the other hand, Wilber (2006) ties “the most effective personal transformation” (Introduction, Integral Life Practice, para. 3) to mastery of each of his four quadrants – the interior individual quadrant relating to perennialism being only one of the four. The others are 1) the second person internal, which relates to the internal relationship between the “I” and the “we”, another group of people, or the totality of other people; 2) the first person external, which relates to the external relationship between the “I” and the other, as is studied in science; and 3) the second person external, which relates to the external relationship of the “we” to the systems of the larger community, such as the national or global community (Wilber, 1997).

Other perennialist-oriented thinkers have their own stages of development that lead to the ultimate realization. For examples, see Plotinus and Plato (Hixon, 1978).

Heron's (1998) view of participatory spirituality sees transformation as the result of a kind of hybrid between transcendent and immanent approaches, offering that his ideas are not to be taken authoritatively or linearly, but “Rather, it will modestly presuppose that what is going on in our cosmos is an undetermined, innovative process of divine becoming in which we are all immersed” (p. 86). Ferrer's (2002) view of participatory spirituality prefers to envision transformation in the sense of psychological characteristics, such as narcissism. Here, transformation takes on the same meaning as it does with perennialism and with Heron (1998) in the sense that the individual's characteristics change – namely decreases in narcissism and self-centeredness. The difference between these two participatory spirituality approaches and that of perennialism as a whole lies in the participatory spirituality belief that the transformation must take place in relationship to “wider ethical and social contexts” (Ferrer, 2002, p. 58; Heron, 1998, p. 101). This is similar to Wilber's (2006) claim that real transformation is development upon all of his four quadrants, including the interior and exterior social. In participatory spirituality, though, adherence to religious doctrine, most closely related to Wilber's first quadrant, is seen as a limiting factor to the individual's integration with society (Ferrer, 2002, pp. 57-58). This proposal for social integration is likely where his development measure for dissociation comes from.

For Gebser (1949/1985), the idea of transformation is less developmental and more in line with his idea about *mutation*. As

stated earlier, each of his structures of consciousness represents a different *mutation* of consciousness in which some aspects of awareness are *latent* and some are *transparent* to origin. In this sense, all aspects of consciousness are always present and nothing is lost in the mutation. This differs from the idea of development or progress in that the idea of progress includes the loss of some characteristics and the gain of others over the course of progress. For example, development in perennialism hopes to leave behind immoral behavior just as Ferrer's (2002) participatory spirituality hopes to leave behind narcissism.

It could be said that the various changes that happen within the course of the exploration of a given structure of consciousness— such as the *magical consciousness* transition from seeing self as universe to seeing self as clan — are developmental transformations, but given Gebser's (1949/1985) overall distaste for “such misleading notions as ‘development’” (p. 37), it seems more likely that Gebser would see these as cultural mutations rather than individual transformations.

For perennialism, the transformation that results from touching non-conceptual reality is presented as the summit of a mountain, a far-off goal. Participatory spirituality theorists tend to think of transformation as an ongoing immanent process, and Gebser (1949/1985) sees transformation as cultural alterations akin to a murmuration that seems to shift according to the mysterious patterns of some larger system. It is tempting to throw away the comparison of perennialist and participatory spirituality transformation to Gebser's (1949/1985) idea of mutation on the basis that the first two transformations are located in the individual and the third is cultural. However, there is an important ambiguity here in the space between. What is the larger system that drives individuals toward transformation? What is

the human relationship to the divine that reveals the intersection of the individual and culture, that shares the need or the tendency to transform?

### **Cultural Relativity, Pluralism, and Multiplicity**

The well-known sentiment of perennialists with regard to the relationship between culture and Truth is that Truth is universal, whereas cultures come and go. While interpretations of the path toward non-conceptual reality and the description of non-conceptual reality's realization will always vary depending on the historical and cultural context of the belief system, non-conceptual reality, itself, remains the same. It is something indescribable, that, when encountered through an experience or an event, reveals the inherent unification (to borrow a term from James (1902)) of life. Some spiritual systems consider this the pinnacle and the end of spiritual development, and some continue development toward the integration of this realization with the world of form, but in either case, the realization of non-conceptual reality is the same. Pluralism and multiplicity in the perennialist sense, then, is the seeming difference of form that emanates from what is truly One.

The participatory spirituality approach to the relationship between culture and the Mystery is slightly different depending on the scholar. In general, the idea is that spiritual meaning transcends the subject/object divide because it is co-created in relationship between the human and the cosmos (Tarnas, 1991).

With spirituality set up in an individual context like this, Ferrer (2011) states that each person's spiritual revelation is interpreted to be a unique revelation of the divine: an

“indefinite number of ultimate self-disclosures of reality” (p. 6).

Heron (1998), on the other hand, points to sociological factors leading to the trend of individualization of spirituality, though the actionable outcome is similar: a world where “each human [is] a responsible co-creator of their domain within the universal estate, in relation with others similarly engaged” (p. 3). Heron does not, however, disagree with the possibility of a non-conceptual knowing (p. 89). His pluralism is in regard to the right to individual spiritual development without authoritarian oppression, not in denial of a non-conceptual truth.

Pluralism and multiplicity in the participatory spirituality sense, then, come from the focus on the individual as the immanent source of her own spiritual transformation; it comes from the wish to nurture unique development free from the potentially conformist requirement of an authoritarian system.

Cultural relativity, pluralism, and multiplicity have little meaning to Gebser’s (1949/1985) philosophy because his structures apply to the entirety of human history. He does state that some cultures may experience mutations at different times than other cultures.

Here again, there is a distinction between the perennialist and participatory spirituality focus on the individual and Gebser’s focus on culture as the determiner of perspective which might lead one to consider this topic as one for which dialogue is unproductive. However, as mentioned earlier, there is an opportunity in the distinction which offers a possibility for conversation about the relationship of individual to cultural drives with regard to these views. What aspects of the philosophies are culturally determined, and which are located in the individual sphere of interaction? What is the human relationship to the divine that reveals the intersection of the individual and

culture? Inquiry in to these relationships may reveal a deeper understanding within each philosophy.

### **Transformation, Individuals, and Culture**

Noting the relationship of ideas about interpersonal relationships to the dynamics of context, I demonstrated a thread of similarity between each philosophy with regard to the importance of the idea of context with regard to the interpersonal. This is not a topic that is deeply discussed by the scholars of the philosophies themselves. It’s possible that a conversation on the nature of relationship context might open up further inquiry about areas of discovery between the philosophies. Further, a look in to the relationship of context to the relationship between individual and culture with regard to conceptualizations transformation and cultural relativity may also prove generative.

Smith & Berg (1987) explore the idea of the relationship of the individual to the group from a psychological perspective at great length. They characterize the seeming difficulties in working relationships as paradoxes that arise from relegating conflict to the shadow of the group entity. Taking this approach another step further, Smith & Berg (1987) outline how importing conflicts from existing cultural frames of reference, such as race or gender, serve to further bury conflict in the shadow by providing a familiar explanation that does not necessarily address the specific conflict (p. 173).

While this article is not about group conflict, Smith & Berg’s (1987) idea of importing and exporting concepts from and to cultural frames of reference provides a helpful psychological framework for understanding one way of defining how the individual and

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the culture relate to each other with regard to change. In short, their idea is that, if a group in conflict can avoid importing existing cultural frames, such as race and gender, along with the attending “acceptable” cultural approaches to working within these frames, and if they can instead address their own specific needs, the group can then export their approach to the culture, enabling cultural change (Smith & Berg, 1987, p. 173).

This same model could be used to illustrate how the transformation of consciousness happens on an individual and cultural level. The seeming safety valve of cultural importation provides a false sense of security in changing times. Until the unique and native concerns of individuals are addressed within the changed context, turbulence still occurs. When the turbulence begins to stabilize on a larger scale, a cultural transformation may have occurred.

Gebser (1949/1985), himself, points out that shifts in the structure of consciousness is accompanied by turbulent times. As with group conflict, the cultural conflict can lead to the reach toward comfortable and familiar sources of meaning. However, as familiar cultural contexts fail to meet the needs of the unique conflicts of the times, the very real problems manifested at every level, from the personal to the cultural, must be addressed in the uniqueness of their nature and context. Gebser (1949/1985) sums up this idea as follows:

We try to adapt or assimilate the new into the old, at the expense of course of the integrity and verity of the new. It is such attempts at explaining the new on the basis of the old, using old concepts rather than allowing the new to stand out in its originality against the old background, that give rise to the misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and objections (p. 37).

This coming to terms with what is really happening vs. what is being relegated to pre-established mindsets produces a different way of interacting and seeing the world, a *mutation*, with implications in the person and cultural contexts.

Another way to look at the relationship between the individual and culture with regard to transformation is through the lens of Swimme’s (2004) framework for thinking about astrophysics as a model that explains human interaction dynamics. As a more streamlined approach to the dynamic relationship between the individual and culture, Swimme’s (2004) universal powers are those cosmic forces that underlie all context and relationship. From the smallest material presence to the dynamics of the universe itself, all relationships are seen as subject to these dynamics. So with the relationships between the individual and culture with regard to spiritual transformation, the dynamics would be the same, reflected in varying scales.

Perennialism and participatory spirituality see the locus of spiritual transformation in the individual, and Gebser finds it in the cultural context. While perennialism and participatory spirituality each nod to the impact of culture on the individual pursuit, they do little to tie the dynamics of culture to the individual experience. Whether by a psychological perspective like Smith & Berg (1987) or a scientific perspective like Swimme (2004), within this relationship between individual and culture lies great potential for further exploration that could inform an understanding the respective characterizations of human relationships to the divine.

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