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From Philosophy to Phenomenology: The Argument for a "Soft" Perennialism

Steve Taylor

Leeds Beckett University, West Yorkshire, UK

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This paper argues for a soft perennialism, distinct from the hard perennialism which suggests that spiritual and religious traditions are expressions of the same underlying spiritual realities. There are two reasons why it is necessary to think in terms of a soft perennial model: firstly, because of a number of important common themes or trends across spiritual traditions; and secondly (and most importantly) because when the process of expansion of being or awakening occurs outside the context of spiritual traditions, broadly the same themes and tendencies appear, suggesting that there is a common landscape of experience which precedes interpretation and conceptualization by spiritual traditions. This applies to the perception of an all-pervading spiritual energy or force which may—in some traditions—become conceptualized as an allegedly ultimate reality but is not necessarily seen in those terms. It is suggested that transpersonal psychology would benefit from loosening its association with spiritual traditions and focusing more on studying expansive states of being in a non-traditional, secular context.

Keywords: Perennialism, awakening, expansion of being, all-pervading spiritual force, participatory philosophy, Ferrer

Religious scholars such as Frithjof Schuon (1984), Huston Smith (1987) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1993) conceived of an underlying religion or spiritual core that external religious traditions interpret and express in different ways. According to this *perennial philosophy*, religious traditions have the same transcendent origin and share the same metaphysical principles with commonalities that are more fundamental and significant than their exoteric differences (Smith, 1987). There is a hierarchical chain of being ranging from insentient matter to pure spirit, with a hierarchy of different levels of development between them (Wilber, 1997). Human development proceeds along a common path towards what is conceived of as the goal of union with a spiritual absolute.

Different traditions conceive of this absolute in slightly different ways, but refer to the same essential reality. Concepts such as a personal God, an impersonal brahman, sunyata (emptiness), the Void, the Dao, the Godhead, pure consciousness, and so forth, are simply different signs or concepts to describe the same transcendent absolute. Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) have summarized what Ferrer (2002) has identified as the basic perennialist approach: "Spiritual traditions use culturally diverse language and symbols to present what is essential the journey to a single spiritual ultimate … there is only one path and one goal for spiritual development" (p. 189).

Earlier transpersonal psychologists tended to ally themselves with the perennial view. Maslow (1970), for example, believed that the peak experience, interpreted in a religious context, was the source of all religions, and formed a common core within them: "To the extent that all mystical or peak experiences are the same in their essence and have always been the same, all religions are the same in their essence and always have been the same" (p. 20). Grof (2000) has made a similar distinction between what he considered the superficial externalities of religion and their mystical core: "Genuine religion is universal, all-inclusive, and all-encompassing. It has to transcend specific culture-bound archetypal images and focus on the ultimate source of all forms" (p. 24). Indeed, some earlier transpersonal psychologists viewed the field as deeply rooted in—and strongly associated with—the perennial philosophy (Rothberg, 1986). They saw transpersonal psychology's role in terms of presenting and exploring the perennial philosophy, and integrating

its principles and insights with modern psychology and consciousness studies (e.g., Vaughan, 1982; Wittine, 1989; Grof, 1998).

In Ferrer (2000), five forms of perennialism were identified. There is the basic and most simple form, which holds that "there is only one path and one goal for spiritual development" (p. 10). Then there is the esotericist form (as espoused by Schuon, 1984, and Smith, 1987), which holds that, although there is only one common goal across traditions, there are many possible paths of spiritual development leading to it. Thirdly, the perspectivist form of perennialism accepts that there are many goals in mysticism, but holds that these are simply different interpretations or manifestations of the same Ultimate Reality. Fourthly, Ferrer has highlighted the typological form of perennialism—a form of perspectivist perennialism that focuses upon the different types and categories of mysticism occurring across traditions, as "diverse expressions or manifestations a single kind of spiritual experience or ultimate reality" (Ferrer, 2000, p. 12; Stace's 1964 distinction between introvertive and extravertive mystical experiences is an example of this.) Finally, there is the structuralist form, which sees spiritual development across traditions as unfolding through a common hierarchy of deep structures and levels. Wilber's developmental model is the most obvious example of this.

Wilber (e.g., 1997) has certainly been an enthusiastic advocate of the perennial approach, describing it as "the most accurate reflection of reality yet to appear" (p. 39) and a "fountain of unsurpassed wisdom" (Wilber, 2001, p. 158). Wilber (1979) has spoken of the perennial philosophy's "central claim … that men and women can grow and develop (or evolve) all the way up the hierarchy to Spirit itself, therein to realize a 'supreme identity' with Godhead—the *ens perfectissimum* toward which all growth and evolution yearns" (p. 39). Wilber's own model clearly conforms to this description, with its structuralist perennial depiction of hierarchical levels of development, involving pregiven structures of consciousness (each of which transcends and includes the previous), moving towards his subtle, causal, and finally nondual levels. The nondual is understood as the end point of human development, the culmination of the evolution of consciousness, where the subject and object become fused, and there is an ecstatic state of oneness with the universe.

Despite this, Wilber's later works have voiced some misgivings about the perennial approach. For example, he has stated that he does not subscribe to certain aspects of traditional perennialism, such as the notions of "unchanging archetypes, involution and evolution as fixed and predetermined, the strictly hierarchical (as opposed to holonic/quadratic) nature of reality" (Wilber, 2001, p. 158). He emphasized that the perennial philosophy was a premodern phenomenon that needs to be integrated with modern and postmodern insights, and saw himself as offering a neoperennial approach, which provides such integration (Wilber, 2000). Nevertheless, the basis of his model is still clearly heavily informed by the perennial philosophy. For example, he has stated that the "great nest of being is the backbone of the perennial philosophy, and it would therefore be a crucial ingredient of any truly integral philosophy" (Wilber, 2000, p. 6). As Hartelius (2015a) has noted, his model is still founded upon "a single nondual ultimate that … is very much identical with a perennialist ultimate" which is "the only final or complete destination from all humankind, even if most spiritual traditions remain unaware of this" (p. 28).

Ferrer's Arguments Against Perennialism

Within the transpersonal community there has recently been some debate on the perennial philosophy, from the perspective of Ferrer's *participatory spirituality* and Wilber's allegedly perennial perspective (e.g., Abramson, 2014, 2015; Hartelius, 2015a, 2015b). Ferrer (2000, 2002) has contended that the perennial philosophy is flawed for a number of reasons. He charged perennialism with objectivism, the belief in a detached and objective reality, because it posits a "pre-given ultimate reality that can be objectively known by the human intellect" (p. 90). If this spiritual absolute is expressed in different forms in different traditions, it must preexist them, unaffected by the interpretations of the spiritual seeker or their culture. This leads to what Ferrer has called *subtle Cartesianism*. As an objective reality, this spiritual absolute must be essentially other to us, so that there is a Cartesian duality between subject and object (Ferrer, 2000, 2002).

Ferrer has also stated that the essentialism of the perennial position is problematic. The belief that there is a single spiritual truth underlying different traditions leads to an intolerant and exclusivist attitude, particularly to conventional or external religion. This is why, according to Ferrer, there is no evidence that perennialism brings a transcendence of dogma, and a more tolerant and

ecumenical outlook. As he wrote, "For every ecumenically oriented mystic (actually the exception to the rule), there are dozens of notably exclusivist figures" (Ferrer, 2002, p. 94)

Katz (1983) held that spiritual and mystical traditions are culturally derived, and that each one is fundamentally different. According to his constructivist (or contextualist, to apply the term he himself preferred) approach, it is meaningless to speak of mysticism in itself, since there are only types of mysticism developed by different traditions. Thus, it is only meaningful to speak of Jewish mysticism or Christian mysticism (Katz, 1983). Like Katz, Ferrer (2002) has held that similarities between different traditions are mainly the result of contact and influence: "Spiritual doctrines and intuitions affected, shaped and transformed each other … this mutual influence led to the unfolding of a variety of metaphysical worlds—rather than one metaphysic and different languages" (pp. 93–94).

Ferrer's participatory philosophy has been (with validity, in my view) viewed as a healthy alternative to the perennial perspective that was dominant within transpersonal psychology until the end of the 20th century (Ferrer, 2011b; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013; Hartelius, 2015a). Participatory philosophy sees the world as a dynamic open ended system in which there is no duality between subject and object, and in which the human mind and the natural world are of the same nature. Consciousness is not just a human phenomenon; the whole world is in some way sentient, even the most basic particles of matter. From the perspective of participatory philosophy, individuals do not have private spiritual experiences—these are participatory events cocreated by the individual and the world, according to the principle of participatory enaction (Ferrer, 2002, 2008b: Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013).

Although he has disputed the notions of pregiven stages of development (as posited by structuralist perennialism) or an overarching spiritual absolute, Ferrer has offered a number of general themes shared by different traditions, principles which spiritual systems might ideally follow. One of these is a movement beyond self-centeredness towards connection with something greater—that is, a movement beyond egocentrism (Ferrer, 2002). Another is that they should decrease or transcend disassociation, developing the whole person, the body as well as the mind, leading to a balanced and integrated sense of being—which inevitably

recalls Wilber's (2000) integral theory. Finally, Ferrer has suggested that spiritual systems should enable a movement beyond ecosocial injustice, leading to a more empathic and responsible attitude to the natural world, and a compassionate and altruistic attitude to social and global problems (Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013). Ferrer (2011a) also proposed that it is legitimate to speak of "shared spiritual power" in the sense of the "generative power of life, the cosmos and/or the spirit" (p. 127), while at the same time remaining free of ontological objectivity and without assuming the existence of any pregiven ultimate reality (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008a).[1]

A "Soft" Perennial Model

However, in my view—which I will set out and substantiate in the rest of this essay—it is necessary to adopt a softer form of perennialism which accepts that the claims of traditional perennialism are too extreme, while at the same time acknowledges that the relativistic standpoint of Ferrer does not adequately account for the strength of some of the basic commonalities within certain spiritual traditions. Ferrer (2002) has stated that affirming "many viable spiritual paths and goals does not preclude the possibility of equivalent or common elements among them" (pp. 148–149) but it is likely that his position is still too relativistic. I believe that some form of perennialism is necessary, but that traditional perennialism is too rigid, too metaphysically oriented, and makes truth claims about the nature of reality that are unwarranted. In terms of Ferrer's (2000) typology, the approach I am advocating is a form of soft perspectivist perennialism.

In what follows, my approach is primarily phenomenological—that is, it is based on the study of experience from the perspective of the individual. As a researcher, I am primarily interested in experiences of expanded states of being that occur outside the context of spiritual traditions, amongst people who have no background in or not even any knowledge of spiritual traditions. In other words, the approach I advocate does not derive from an analysis of religious or spiritual traditions, but primarily from an analysis of individual experiences. If there are any metaphysical speculations to be made, they are secondary, deriving from this phenomenological analysis. As Daniels (2005) has stated, it is possible to examine transpersonal or spiritual experiences without engaging in metaphysical speculation. In this sense, it is possible to advocate a softer form of perennialist

approach without necessarily positing or adhering to a clearly defined metaphysical system. (Nevertheless, later I will suggest some ontological elements that appear to emerge from my phenomenological analysis.)

One can view the perennialism which has been so frequently opposed by Ferrer, Hartelius, and others as a hard perennialism of absolutes, ontological objectivities, and pregiven structures (in the structuralist form) which does not adequately account for the variety and plurality of approaches in different traditions. But it is possible to conceive of a softer perennialism which does not posit a nondual spiritual absolute, a transcendent objective domain of reality that is fundamentally other to us, or pregiven structures of consciousness, and does not believe that spiritual traditions embody or express exactly the same basic concepts or experiences. It accepts and allows for significant contextual differences between different traditions.

This soft perennialism does not posit an absolute which is transcendentally objective and fundamentally other, as other forms of perennialism do. It only posits an immanent all-pervading force which is not other to human beings because it constitutes our own nature, and pervades the physical stuff of our bodies. It is more accurate to conceive of this force as fundamental or essential rather than transcendent. (This is one way in which it differs from the form of perspectivist perennialism critiqued by Ferrer.) Soft perennialism does not hold that all human beings in every spiritual traditions progress through the same stages towards the same absolute goal of oneness, as Wilber's structuralist perennialism does. It does not hold that development is rigidly hierarchical in nature, with clearly demarcated stages of development, only that there are different degrees and varying intensities of awareness and expansiveness (which can actually be experienced at different stages of development—including during infancy—rather than belonging simply to a so called transegoic stage.). Rather than speaking in terms of characteristics and stages, it speaks in a more qualified way of trends and tendencies. (These assertions will be explained in more detail later.)

At the same time, however, this approach accepts that there is a common psychological or experiential realm underlying spiritual traditions, and which can exist outside them. These are ranges of expanded and intensified experience that lie beyond the limitations of one's normal state. These ranges of experience are potentially accessible to all human beings, and may be glimpsed in childhood (Taylor, 2009, 2013b). They may be experienced temporarily in the form of awakening experiences, when the individual undergoes certain psychological or ontological changes, leading to a softening of the boundaries of the normal self-system, and a deautomatization of perception (Deikman, 1963, Taylor, 2010, 2012b, 2016a). They may also be experienced in a stable, ongoing form.

One of Maslow's great insights was that what he called the peak experience was fundamentally a psychological experience that could be interpreted in religious or spiritual terms, but could also exist outside such interpretations. As he put it, peak experiences can be likened to "raw materials which can be used for different styles of structures, as the same bricks and mortar and lumber would be built into different kinds of houses by a Frenchman, a Japanese, or a Tahitian" (Maslow, 1994, p. 73). In a similar sense, spiritual traditions can be seen as being informed by—and as interpreting and conceptualizing—a range of psychological experience that is collectively shared by human beings, and that is potentially accessible to all human beings, although it may not actually be experienced by many (at least on a stable, ongoing basis). One of the important points of this essay is to illustrate that this range of experience is not necessarily the preserve of spiritual traditions, that it exists outside them, and can therefore be considered more fundamental than them (although not necessarily fundamental *per se*).

One could compare these ranges of expansive and intensified experience to a landscape. This landscape is vast, intricate and complex, and different cultures and traditions (as well as different individuals) explore it in different ways, see it from different vantage points, and interpret and conceptualize it in different ways.

Picture a vast natural landscape—for example, a large lake surrounded by mountains, with waterfalls running down, woods on the side of the lake, and endless varieties of flora and fauna. There are different groups of people—corresponding to different spiritual traditions—exploring different areas of the landscape, moving across different sides of the mountainside. They all have different vantage points and a different perspectives, and they all experience and interact with the landscape in different ways, from their own viewpoints. Some of their interpretations may differ markedly, because of their different views and their different modes of exploration. Even within the different groups,

individual psychological differences may lead to different experiences and different interpretations. But despite these differences of perspective and interpretation, it is still essentially the same landscape. In other words, these ranges of potential psychological experience provide the "raw material" (in Maslow's analogy) from which different cultures build their mystical or spiritual systems. (How this relates to metaphysical and ontological issues will be discussed in more detail later.)

This does not mean that the development of every individual in every tradition unfolds in essentially the same way. As the landscape is so vast and intricate, there are many different possibilities and types of development. There are certainly clearly mapped stages of hierarchical development within specific traditions (e.g., the eight limbed path of Yoga or the ladder of the sefirot in Kabbalah [Lancaster, 2005]) but it is more problematic to clearly demarcate specific phases or stages of development from an intratraditional perspective (as Wilber has attempted to do), partly because of the discrepancies between the developmental hierarchies of different traditions. From a soft perennial perspective, it might be more valid to suggest that there is simply a basic tendency or common general direction in different people's—or different traditions'—exploration of these ranges of experience. In fact, this can be seen as the essential commonality between all spiritual traditions: they all involve a movement towards an increased expansiveness of being, towards an increased openness, an enhanced awareness, an increased sense of connection and a more authentic and meaningful existence. This goes together with a shared recognition that normal human consensus reality is in some ways limited and aberrational, and that it is possible to consciously cultivate a more expansive, higher functioning state of being—not merely as a temporary experience but as an ongoing, stable state.[2]

This movement towards a more expansive or connective state begins once the limitations of one's ordinary state of being fall away. In terms of Friedman's concept of self-expansiveness, "the self-concept can expand from a narrow individualistic identification to wider social, ecological, temporal, and biological identifications to very expansive transpersonal identifications" (Pappas & Friedman, 2007, p. 323). Daniels (2005) has similarly suggested that the "transpersonal is precisely about the expansion and extension of our sense of self—about the transformation of the self beyond its relatively

enclosed and impermeable egoic boundary" (p. 229). (Significantly, Daniels [2005] has also noted that this "notion of transformation, or of transcendence in the broad sense, makes no assumption whatsoever about the metaphysical existence of a spiritual or transcendental reality" [p. 323].)

The cultivation of this ongoing, stable expanded state can be seen as the main aim of the different traditions, the common general direction of their many paths. This can be seen as—and is often interpreted by spiritual traditions as—a process of opening or awakening. It is possible to highlight different aspects of the process (as I will attempt to shortly), which can be expressed to a greater or lesser degree, though not uniformly or invariantly.

Note that a general direction does not necessarily entail a single goal or destination. The process of awakening may not necessarily lead to a single point of wakefulness, or a final destination of enlightenment. It is a process that may not have any destination. From the soft perennial perspective, there is no end point of development, no spiritual absolute to which humanity is heading. The landscape may be unending.

Another point to bear in mind in the following discussion is that the term perennial philosophy may not be suitable to describe this range of potential collective experience that underlies and informs different traditions. The term philosophy suggests a formalized set of fixed principles, an overarching conceptual system which has been carefully structured and applies in all cases. However, as has been noted, the soft perennial approach is primarily phenomenological rather than philosophical or conceptual. So when the term perennialism is used from this point on, it should not necessarily be thought of in terms of a philosophy. Indeed, it might be more accurate to think in terms of a perennial phenomenology.

Common Themes
in the Process of Awakening or Opening

The first (although not primary) reason why I believe some form of perennialism is necessary is because of the commonalities between different traditions' conceptions of this movement towards increased expansiveness of being. Here, as a way of illustrating these—and of offering an overview of the ranges of potential psychological experience which both underlie and permeate spiritual traditions—a brief summary will be provided, showing how different traditions conceive

of the process of opening or awakening. The aim of this is to show that there are general themes and trends across different traditions that are much stronger than suggested by Ferrer and other nonperennialists (Katz, 1983; Ferrer, 2002; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013). These themes overlap to some degree with the three themes or principles identified by Ferrer (summarized above), but also go beyond them.

In this discussion, I will avoid the term enlightenment, which in my view is an unfortunate translation of the Buddhist term *bodhi*, whose actual meaning is closer to awakening (derived from the Pali root verb *budh*, which means to awaken). Enlightenment has unfortunately become much more generally used as a catch-all term for a spiritual goal of ultimate realization and fulfillment. It has connotations of stasis and finality that might fit with the hard perennialist concept but not with a more fluid and open soft perennial perspective.

A survey of the different depictions of awakening across different spiritual traditions in Taylor (2013a) showed a number significant similarities. These are described below mainly in terms of processes that form different elements of a general movement in the direction of increased expansiveness and opening. I will highlight seven of these.

1. At the most fundamental level, awakening is seen across traditions as a process of increasing and intensifying awareness, of gaining a deeper, wider and intensified experience of reality. The world as perceived through our normal consciousness is considered illusory, or at least only a partial awareness. This is often depicted—as in *bodhi*—in terms of awakening from a state of sleep. In the words of the Sufi mystic al-Ghazali, this is a state "whose relation to your waking consciousness is analogous to the relation of the latter to dreaming. In comparison with this state your waking consciousness would be like dreaming!" (quoted in Scharfstein, 1973, p. 28).

In Vedantic terms, the illusion of *maya* is uncovered, revealing a world of unity in place of an illusory world of duality and separateness (Feuerstein, 1990). While in the Christian *mystic way* as delineated by Underhill (1960), the first stage of development is the awakening of the self, when a person first becomes conscious of what is designated as divine reality, present within the world. The second stage is purgation, when the person realizes his or her "own finiteness and imperfection" (Underhill, 1960, p. 169) and undergoes a process of self discipline and purification in order to transcend these limits. This leads to the third stage of illumination, when the original stage of awakening returns, but more intensely. There is a heightened awareness of the phenomenal world, a vision of all-pervading divine presence and an inner joy or ecstasy.

2. Equally fundamentally, traditions conceive of the process of awakening as a movement beyond separateness and (with the exception of Theravada Buddhism) towards connection and union. The greatest obstacle to this connection is the powerful sense of ego or self, whose strong boundaries create a sense of being enclosed within one's own mental space, in separation from the world. All traditions emphasize the need to undo this sense of separateness, so that a person's center of gravity—or sense of identity—can shift away from their own narrow personal self, and become part of a wider and deeper expanse of being, without duality or separation. In Sufism and Jewish mysticism, this process is described as *self-annihilation*, while Christian mystics it as *self-naughting*. In the Taoist tradition, the term *ming* has connotations of illumination and awakening. It is used to describe a state in which the individual no longer experiences duality and separation, and realizes their true nature as Dao, and so becomes one with it (Spencer, 1963).

When separateness is transcended, there is an experience of union, of the fusion of subject and object, variously described in terms of *baqa*, *devekut*, deification or becoming one with the Dao. In the *Visuddhimagga* (or The Path of Purification), the 5th century CE Buddhist teacher Buddhaghosa described wakefulness as a state of *vinnanam anidassanaam*—consciousness in its undivided purity, no longer split into subject and object (Lama Anagarika Govinda, 1983). While as the Upanishads conceive it, awakening equates with the union of the individual self, the *atman*, with the spiritual force which pervades the universe, *brahman*. Awakening means transcending the seeming duality between the self and the world, and the seeming separateness of phenomena in the world (Feuerstein, 1990).

In spiritual and mystical traditions allied with monotheistic religious faiths, this union is interpreted in terms of becoming one with God.

In Jewish Hasidism, this is described as a process of becoming "absorbed into" God (Hoffman, 2007). Similarly, the anonymous author of the 14th century Christian text, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, described the experience of becoming "Oned with God" (Spencer, 1963, p. 237); in Sufism, the term *baqa* describes a permanent state of "abiding in God" (p. 323).

3. A third commonality is that all traditions—to a greater or lesser degree—equate awakening with a process of cultivating inner stillness and emptiness. Stillness is an essential prerequisite of connection and union (or in Theravadic terms, an essential prerequisite of self-dissolution). Saso (2015) has noted that spiritual practices of emptying and stilling the mind are common across cultures, including indigenous shamanic cultures. He has referred to these collectively as apophasis, and concluded that "the achieving of union occurs only after emptying the mind of judgements and images, and the self-centred will of all kinds of desire" (p. 18). As Patanjali wrote in the Yoga Sutras, the state of union can only arise once one has calmed "the whirls of consciousness" (Feuerstein, 1990, p. 171). While the Buddhist Lankavatara Sutra defined wakefulness as a state in which "all passions have subsided, and all mental hindrances have been cleared away" (van de Weyer, 2000, p. 8/10). In the Christian mystical tradition, the stages of contemplation, and the degrees of prayer, are also conceived as leading to greater stillness and emptiness. Through the stages of deepening contemplation and concentration, "a communion is established between the seer and what is seen," (Happold, 1986, p. 70) and "polar opposites of normal thought and perception fade away" (p. 71). At the highest stage of contemplation, in the words of St. John of the Cross, the soul lives in a "dark silence" (Happold, 1986, p. 86) in oneness with God.

Similarly, in the Jewish kabbalistic tradition, *devekut* is described as a state of mental stillness and emptiness, and of ecstasy and awe, in which "through calming the whirl of thoughts that is our ordinary mind, we open a door that leads to an exalted awareness of the wonder of the entire cosmos" (Hoffman. 2007, p. 75). Similarly, in Daoism, the follower of the Dao must empty out themselves, until they are no longer an individual, and no longer experience separation. As Chuang-tzu, advocated, "be empty: that is all. The perfect man's use of his mind is like a mirror" (quoted in Spencer, 1963, p. 101). At the same time as being empty, the sage's mind is also completely still: "To a mind that is still the whole universe surrenders" (quoted in Spencer, 1963, p. 101).

4. A fourth common theme—particularly strong in Buddhism—is that awakening entails the development of increased inner stability, self-sufficiency and equanimity. The Heart Sutra summarises this very clearly: "In their indifference to personal attainment, and their lack of desire for self-justification, enlightened men and women can never be humiliated or upset by others" (van de Weyer, 2000, p. 7/17) While the Bhagavad Gita describes the awakened person as being "the same in pleasure and pain; to whom gold or stones or earth are one, and what is pleasing or displeasing leaves him in peace" (Mascaro, 1988, p. 68). Similarly, according to the Daoist tradition, when a person attains union with Dao, he or she accepts all events with equanimity. They are neither moved to joy by positive events or to despair by tragic events. They lose fear of death—indeed, it is said that Chuang-tzu did not mourn even when his wife died (Spencer, 1963). The distinction between life and death no longer has any meaning, together with other distinctions such as me-you and I-it. In the Christian mystical tradition, Meister Eckhart expressed this theme in terms of his concept of *abgeschiedenheit* (usually translated as *detachment*), which he defined as follows: "True detachment is nothing other than this: the spirit stands as immovable in all the assaults of joy or sorrow, honour, disgrace or shame, as a mountain of lead stands immovable against a small wind. This immovable detachment brings about in man the greatest similarity with God" (Meister Eckhart, 1996, p. 112).

5. A fifth common theme is that, across traditions, awakening is generally seen as a movement towards increased empathy, compassion, and altruism. Partly because their own ambitions and desires are no longer so important to them, awakening individuals are depicted as feeling a strong impulse to serve others and practice kindness and generosity. This altruistic emphasis is particularly strong in Jewish and Sufi mysticism. Lancaster (2005) has noted

that the real objective of the Kabbalah is not merely individual transformation, but transformation on behalf of—and for the benefit of—the whole of humanity. Its purpose is to promote *tikkun olam*, the healing of the world. Similarly, in Sufism an awakened person is obliged to return into the world of time and space from the emptiness of absorption in the divine. The world of time and space is seen as a sacred manifestation of the divine, so the adept has to share in its divinity, and manifest it to others (Spencer, 1963).

Compassion is also a strong theme in Buddhism. In Theravada Buddhism, three of the *four immeasurables* or *four virtues* are related to empathy and compassion: loving kindness or benevolence, compassion itself, and empathetic joy. (The other virtue or immeasurable is equanimity.) While in Mahayana Buddhism, the importance of the *bodhisattva* ideal reflects a similar sense of collective responsibility to the Kabbalah, showing a strong emphasis on compassion and love, and on collective rather than individual enlightenment (Suzuki, 1956).

6. A sixth common theme of spiritual traditions (related to the second theme of a movement beyond separateness) is the relinquishing of personal agency. This is usually accompanied with a sense of becoming the expression or instrument of a transcendent power. This is a particularly strong theme in the Daoist tradition. When a person realizes their true nature as Dao and follows the *wu-wei chih-Dao*, all of their actions are an expression of the Dao, rather than of their personal will (Spencer, 1963). Similarly, in the Bhagavad Gita, a great deal of emphasis is placed on unattached action—acting without being concerned about results, simply doing what is right and appropriate, in accordance with natural and divine law (Feuerstein, 1990). In Sikhism, the goal of spiritual development is the state of *sahaj*, or union with God, at which point the individual transcends self-centeredness (*haumai*) and lives purely according to—and in harmony with—the will of God (the *hukam*; Oliver, 2009).

In Sufism, one of the characteristics of *baqa* is that the person has no will of their own, but lives in and through God. The person no longer has a sense of planning their own life, or making things happen. Life unfolds naturally and spontaneously through them, by virtue of divine power (Spencer, 1963). The unification of the human will with divine will is also an essential aspect of spiritual development as envisaged by the Kabbalah. The human will is raised until it becomes one with *En Sof*, the divine principle (or God) which paradoxically both pervades and transcends the world (Lancaster, 2005, p. 190). When one aligns their personal will with God's will, they become agents of that divine will. A powerful, transformational energy begins to flow through them, with which they can help heal the world (Kaplan, 1990). In a similar fashion, Meister Eckhart spoke of the importance of surrendering the "creaturely will" so that God can begin to work through the human being. As he put it aphoristically, "What God wills is that we should give up willing" (Meister Eckhart, 1996, p. 22).

7. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, awakening is seen across traditions as a movement towards enhanced wellbeing. Every tradition agrees that to wake up means to transcend anxiety and fear and attain a sense of greater serenity and/or bliss. In Buddhism, *bodhi* entails a cessation of suffering. In Taoism, *ming* means living with spontaneous ease. In Vedanta, bliss is a fundamental quality of consciousness itself, as in satcitananda (being-consciousness-bliss). The essence of Brahman itself is joy: "Brahman is joy: for from joy all beings have come, by joy they all live, and unto joy they all return" (Mascaro, 1988, p. 111). So self realization is literally an awakening into bliss.

Christian mystics are very clear that awakening brings a permanent state of joy or wellbeing. Underhill (1960) noted that inner joy or ecstasy is a characteristic of the stage of illumination, while Happold (1986) stated that during the phase of recollection (one of the stages of contemplation) the soul is filled with a deep inner peace. Similarly, in Jewish spirituality, *devekut* is described as a state of joy and exaltation (Hoffman, 2007; Lancaster, 2005), as is the Sufi state of *baqa* (Azeemi, 2005).

When considering the above seven themes, it is important to point out again that these are not rigid characteristics that unfold over fixed lines or stages of development, only general trends. These themes are certainly emphasized to different degrees in certain traditions—for example, as has already been pointed out, the collective altruistic

aspect of awakening is strongly emphasized in Jewish and Sufi mysticism, while the cultivation of equanimity and self-sufficiency is strongly emphasized in Buddhism. At the same time, the aspect of relinquishing one's personal agency is strongly emphasized in Daoism. There is clearly room for a good deal of variation amongst the traditions, which is exactly what one would expect from a soft perennial perspective, where one speaks of tendencies rather than rigid characteristics.

Differences Between Traditions

The survey of different conceptions of the process of opening or awakening undertaken in Taylor (2013a) also showed some significant differences, beyond the variations just described. Although it is clear that many traditions place a great deal of emphasis on union, this does not feature in Theravada Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism—and perhaps Buddhism in general—places more emphasis on cultivating equanimity and selflessness than on attaining union. The goal of the Theravadin approach is not union but self-extinction.

This highlights the difficulty of positing a common goal across different traditions (as implied by the basic, esotericist, and structuralist forms of perennialism [Ferrer, 2000]). In fact, contra the traditional perennialist approach, not all traditions do posit a specific destination to the process of awakening. The Theravadin concept of *bodhi* certainly does seems to refer to a culmination, a specific point at which the individual becomes liberated from *samsara* and will no longer be reborn. The Christian concept of deification—the final stage of the mystical path, according to Underhill (1960)—also implies finality. However, other concepts—such as the Daoist concept of *ming*, or the Sufi concept of *baqa*, and the Zen concept of *kensho*—are more open ended, without implying a culmination or destination. In Zen, *kensho* is conceived as a new beginning rather than an endpoint. Suzuki (1994) described it as "the opening of satori" and the "acquiring of a new point of view in our dealings with life and the world" (p. 229). (This open ended nature of awakening is emphasized when the process occurs outside the context of spiritual traditions, as will be shown later.)

There are also differences between the spiritual ultimates that different traditions conceive of. There are clearly significant differences between Brahman and the Dao, for instance. Brahman has a static and neutral quality which differs from the more energetic and tangible qualities of the Dao. In Hindu Vedanta, the aim of spiritual development is union with *brahman*, whereas in Daoism the aim of development is attain harmony with the Dao in one's life and activities—again, a more dynamic conception. In Theravada Buddhism, meanwhile, the concept of an all-pervading spiritual force or energy is absent altogether. There have been attempts—for example, by Murti (2013)—to interpret *sunyata* in such terms, but these are questionable. The Mahayana concepts of the *dharmakaya* and the *tathagatagarbha* are certainly closer to the concept of all-pervading spiritual force, although at the same time this highlights the significant differences in conception that can occur within traditions, not just between them.

Such differences illustrate the shortcomings of traditional perennialism, particularly (in reference to Ferrer's [2000] typology) in its basic, esotericist, and structuralist forms. There is a failure to take account of the multiplicity and plurality of mystical systems. These differences illustrate the difficulty of postulating a generic form of mysticism with a common goal (Ferrer, 2002). However, the soft perennial perspective offers room for such divergence.

Awakening Outside Spiritual Traditions (Extratraditional Awakening Experiences)

Nevertheless, the common themes of conceptions of the process of awakening amongst different traditions are very strong, appearing to refute Hartelius and Ferrer's assertion that "the more closely accounts from different mystical traditions are compared, the more they can be seen to differ" (2013, p. 190). These commonalities need to be accounted for. One way of doing this is to relate them to a range of psychological experience that underlies and informs spiritual traditions, and therefore precedes them. If such a range of experience exists, it should exist outside the context of spiritual traditions, in a more fundamental form.

This brings the second—and major—reason why I believe some form of perennialism is necessary: because these themes also occur outside of those traditions. So much dialogue within the transpersonal psychology community is framed in terms of spiritual traditions—including the debate on perennialism amongst Wilber, Ferrer, Abramson, Hartelius, and others—that it is sometimes easy to forget that the process of awakening does not necessarily take place within a traditionally spiritual context. One of the consequences of transpersonal psychology's historic close

affiliation with spiritual traditions such as Buddhism and Vedanta is that it has tended to neglect forms of transpersonal experience that occur in a secular, nontraditional context. These might be termed *extratraditional transpersonal experiences* or *extratraditional awakening experiences*. In terms of the analogy used earlier, one could say that psychological ranges of potential expansive experience may be framed and conceptualized in terms of religious or spiritual traditions, and may form the basis of metaphysical or philosophical systems, but this is not necessarily the case. Particularly when such experiences take place within the context of contemporary secular culture, they may not be interpreted in traditionally spiritual or religious terms at all.

In the following section, I will discuss two studies of individuals who have reported a shift into an ongoing expanded, higher functioning state that is similar to the expanded states described in spiritual traditions (Taylor, 2011, 2012a, 2013a). However, these experiences did not take place within spiritual traditions—in fact, the great majority of the individuals did not have any knowledge of spiritual traditions or practices at the time when their shifts occurred. In many cases, this initially caused some confusion, since the individuals did not have an intellectual framework to make sense of their new ongoing state of being. Even afterwards, once they had begun to recognize the basic elements of their experience within spiritual texts and teachings (and so begun to understand their new state), they did not become affiliated with any particular tradition. (In some cases, they only gained a very rudimentary knowledge of spiritual traditions and practices.) The main findings of these studies will now be summarized.

In one qualitative phenomenological study, 32 individuals who reported positive psychological transformation following periods of intense turmoil and trauma were interviewed (Taylor, 2011, 2012a). The types of turmoil and trauma included serious illness (most commonly cancer), intense stress, disability, bereavement, depression, and alcoholism. Eight of the experiences were reported as being temporary. That is, the turmoil and trauma the participants underwent triggered intense or expanded states of consciousness lasting for periods of between a few seconds to a few days. However, most of the participants—24 out of 32—felt that they had undergone a permanent shift into an expanded or awakened state. They reported feeling that they had taken on a different identity, with a different perception of and relationship to the world, a different attitude to life, new values and perspectives and different relationships. Some of them initially expected this transformation to fade, but it had not done so. In some cases, it had been decades since their shift, with no reported diminishing of its effects. For example, one person's transformation happened 25 years prior to the interview; for another participant the shift was 30 years in the past; longest of all, in the case of an 89 year old man, the change had happened 60 years ago.

Following a thematic analysis of interviews with the participants, a number of primary themes emerged. One was a heightened sense of connection. One participant described this as a "knowing that you are a part of something far more wonderful, far more mysterious" (Taylor, 2011, p. 9). Another participant—who experienced transformation after being diagnosed with cancer—described an "inner connectedness with other people, with the whole universe, this sense of how we're all related" (p. 183). Another participant described a powerful sense of connection to nature—in her words, "a really strong connection with nature, feeling a part of it for the first time ever. It felt joyous to be outside" (p. 35).

Another major theme—reported by all participants—was "intensified perception." The participants described a heightened sense of beauty, a sense that the world around them had become much more real and vivid. One person who survived a close encounter with death reported, "Everything I look at has this beautiful and uncanny clarity." Another person who was diagnosed with breast cancer described how "vibrant and vivid" everything appeared to her (Taylor, 2011, p. 182).

Another strong theme was increased focus on the present. Participants were less interested in the future or the past. They focused less on future plans or hopes, spent less time ruminating over past events and gave correspondingly more attention to the present. One participant had recovered from Hodgkin's disease over 40 years ago—after being diagnosed in his mid-20s—but still felt that the disease was a powerful positive influence in his life. He described how it "continues to bring me back to the present, makes me feel that I have to live in the now, to focus on what's really important" (Taylor, 2011, p. 143).

Enhanced wellbeing was another major theme. Many participants described this in terms of an intense sense of appreciation and gratitude. They felt grateful

just to be alive, and felt able to appreciate aspects of life that they used to take for granted, such as their health, their friends, nature and simple pleasures such as eating and walking. For example, one participant described a sense of being "so fortunate to be alive on this planet … I just feel so privileged to be on this earth and to have been given this awareness" (Taylor, 2011, p. 145).

Other prevalent themes were a less materialistic attitude, increased altruism, decreased cognitive activity, a reduced fear of death, incomprehension (from relatives and friends) and a form of lettng go or stepping back in which the person was no longer pushing to make things happen. With regard to the latter theme, this was described in terms of a more effortless, trusting way of living, with a lesser sense of personal agency. One person described this as "not trying so hard, it's letting things happen" (Taylor, 2012a, p. 16). Another person described an "understanding that there is something working on a higher level than you are. You don't have anything to worry about" (p. 16).

In a further study (Taylor, 2013a) purposive sampling was used to find a group of individuals who reported having undergone an experience they considered to be spiritual awakening. Twenty-five participants were interviewed, in a phenomenological investigation into the causes and characteristics of reported cases of spiritual awakening. All 25 participants reported a shift into a new psychological state, with a new sense of identity that they believed was permanent, or at least ongoing.

For 12 participants there was a clear cut and sudden moment of transformation (in most cases triggered by intense psychological turmoil). Seven participants reported moments of sudden transformation that followed previous awakening experiences and/or gradual spiritual development. For six participants transformation was wholly gradual, and apparently generated by long term spiritual practice. All of the participants who experienced sudden and dramatic awakening—and three of those who reported both a gradual and sudden transformation—reported little or no prior knowledge of spirituality at the time their transformational process began (Taylor, 2013a).

A thematic analysis showed very similar themes to the previous study (Taylor, 2012a). The most prevalent themes—reported by between 20 and 25 participants—were "wellbeing/positive affective states," "increased present-ness/ability to live in the present" (both of these were reported by all 25 participants); "reduced cognitive activity/less identification with thoughts," "reduced/disappearance of fear of death," "decreased sense of group identity/need for belonging"[4] and "sense of connection." Other themes reported by 18–19 participants included "intensified perception," "increased altruism" and "enhanced relationships." The theme of "acceptance/letting go" was mentioned by 13 participants.

The findings of these two studies show a strong similarity to the summary of the common themes of awakening as defined by spiritual traditions, provided earlier. In fact, six of the seven themes identified in that summary emerged as major themes in both studies: heightened awareness or intensified perception (a process of increasing and intensifying awareness), an increased sense of connection (a movement beyond separateness towards connection and union), reduced cognitive activity with less identification with thoughts (a process of cultivating inner stillness and emptiness), increased altruism (a movement towards increased empathy, compassion and altruism), "stepping back" or "acceptance/letting go" (corresponding to the relinquishing of personal agency) and enhanced wellbeing. This certainly adds validity to claims of fundamental commonalities across spiritual traditions.

The one crosstraditional theme that did not emerge strongly from the studies was developing increased inner stability, self-sufficiency and equanimity. However, to some extent this was implied by other themes. For example, in the second study, the theme of "acceptance/letting go" included a sense of acceptance of negative life situations and events, while the less prevalent theme (shared by eight participants) of "authenticity" partly referred to a sense of inner security and stability that remained constant in the face of different life events. (One participant desired this as "a stable authentic sense of who I am, independent of what's going on in my life [Taylor, 2013a, p. 283]).

One pertinent question here is whether the participants of both of these studies underwent genuine spiritually transformative experiences, or whether they were simply presenting a constructed narrative of spiritual awakening, or experiencing self delusion. Since many participants did eventually become familiar with spiritual traditions to some degree (in the aftermath of their transformational experiences), it is possible that the knowledge they gained helped them to construct a narrative and a new sense of identity, to help them make sense of their experiences.

Narrative theorists such as Sarbin (1986) and Bruner (1991) have suggested that the impulse to bring order to chaotic experience by forming narratives is fundamental to human beings. Individuals impose narratives on events—or re-narrate them—so that they can process and understand them, and maintain a sense of identity (Mathieson & Stam, 1995; McAdams, 1993). This might seem to apply especially to individuals who have suffered from intense psychological turmoil, as was the case with most of the participants of these studies. Taylor and Brown (1988) have suggested that self deceptive strategies are commonly used to deal with negative life events that emphasise the unpredictability of events and suggest a potentially bleak future. Cognitive dissonance and positive illusion may be employed to cope with traumatic experiences, causing individuals them to believe that they have undergone *posttraumatic growth* (Taylor, 1983).

However, there are some strong indications that this may not apply to many of the participants, at least to a large extent (obviously it is possible that the experiences were partly the result of narrative construction or self delusion). Some of the participants reported clearly that the basic psychological characteristics of their shift were established immediately. It was only a long time afterwards (several years in some cases) that they recognized the same basic characteristics in spiritual traditions and teachings. For example, one person experienced a profound transformation in 1950, at a time when there was little knowledge of spiritual traditions in Western Europe, where he lived. He described a shift into an ongoing state of inner quietness, with a falling away of anger and frustration, and a sense that all things were part of the same underlying energy or consciousness, including his own being. Feeling that he had undergone an important realization that he should share with others, he tried to talk to people—including several churchmen—about what happened to him, but met with complete incomprehension. The churchmen told him he was being blasphemous, and other people thought he was mad. After seven years, he had a chance meeting with a member of a Buddhist society in London, who was able to make sense of the basic elements of his experience (Taylor, 2011). As mentioned above, other participants only gained a passing familiarity with spiritual traditions, without investigating them in any depth or detail. It therefore seems unlikely that they were constructing a narrative of awakening based on their knowledge of spiritual traditions.

The possibility of significant narrative construction and self delusion is also mitigated by the major changes that most participants made to their lifestyles, including changing careers, hobbies and interests, and even ending relationships with partners. In many cases, they reported that their spouses, family, and friends recognized that they had changed fundamentally, and that this had led to divisions and the breakdown of relationships. Of course, there is a possibility that these changes could have stemmed from narrative construction or self delusion too, but they imply a more fundamental, deep-rooted change than merely a cognitive one.

The long term nature of most of the participants' transformations implies this too. The mean length of time since the participants' transformational experiences in Taylor (2013a) was 9.6 years; four participants underwent their shift more than 15 years ago. One could argue that a shift that stemmed largely from cognitive constructs (rather than deep-rooted changes to one's self-system or psychological structure) would be less stable and long lasting, and more likely to fade away and be replaced by new schemata.

Another important factor is that self delusion implies a retreat from reality, whereas the participants of these studies appear to have become more intensely engaged with reality. They generally reported a more intense awareness of their surroundings, a lesser degree of self centeredness, a higher degree of altruism and empathy, with deeper and more authentic relationships, and so on. This suggests decreased narcissism and greater engagement, rather than escapist self delusion.

Finally, the difficulties some of the participants faced after awakening, including a sense of confusion, is another possible indication that they were not deluding themselves. After all, if they wanted to escape into a self-delusory state of wellbeing, it is likely that they would have excluded these difficulties from their experience.

Awakening Experiences

Bearing these factors in mind, the commonality between the findings of these studies and the themes of awakening as depicted by spiritual traditions is striking. It suggests that awakening is a phenomenon that can (and frequently does) occur outside the context of spiritual traditions, and does not necessarily have to be interpreted in terms of them. This suggests that some form of perennialist perspective—a concept of a more fundamental range of psychological experience

that underlies and informs spiritual traditions and is responsible for the commonalities amongst them—is valid. It is impossible to account for these commonalities without such a perspective.

In the light of this, arguments about whether mystical or spiritual experiences are "perennial" or contextualized or constructed (Katz, 1983) become less significant. Experiences that happen outside the context of religious or spiritual traditions—to people who had little or no knowledge of these traditions—can hardly be viewed as constructed by them, even if there might be some degree of *post hoc* interpretation in terms of knowledge gained at a later stage. It is also significant that all of the participants of the two studies reported above lived in secular Western cultures whose materialist worldview does not support or encourage awareness of such transpersonal states. This makes it unlikely that the experiences were culturally constructed in a wider sense.

A similar argument can be made in relation to temporary awakening experiences. Research suggests that a high proportion of temporary awakening experiences occur outside the context of spiritual practices, to people who are not affiliated to any particular spiritual tradition and have little knowledge of spirituality in general (Taylor, 2012b). Again, it is difficult to argue that such experiences were constructed when they did not occur in any spiritual or religious context.

Research has also shown that temporary awakening experiences occur regularly during childhood. Robinson (1977) and Hoffman (1992) have both found that spiritual experiences could occur as early as 3 years old, although they were most common between the ages of 5 and 15. Robinson (1977) studied 600 childhood spiritual experiences, and found that 10% occurred before the age of 5, 70% between 5 and 15 and 19% after the age of 15. While of the 123 experiences collected by Hoffman (1992), 23% occurred before the age of 5, and 77% between 5 and 15. It is difficult to see how such experiences could be constructed by religious or spiritual traditions, when a significant proportion of them occurred before cultural conditioning could have fully informed a child's outlook. (Of course, again, it is possible that there was some degree of post hoc construction in adulthood. For a discussion of the validity of recollections of childhood spiritual experiences later in life, see Taylor, 2009.)

Forman (1999) has put forward similar arguments in relation to what he has termed the "pure consciousness event," noting that this experience of contentless wakeful consciousness can be experienced by neophytes—including children—as well as by experienced spiritual practitioners. (In addition, Forman has argued that the ubiquity of descriptions of this experience across cultures is evidence of perennialism, and that it is meaningless to to speak of the cultural construction of an experience which has no conceptual content.)

An All-Pervading Spiritual Force, But Not Necessarily an Absolute

There is one further commonality amongst spiritual traditions—not in terms of their conceptions of a process of awakening, but in relation to their metaphysical systems—that requires discussion: their concepts of some form of ultimate or underlying reality. As has been seen, perennialists tend to suggest that there is one single ultimate reality which is essentially the same in all traditions, although it may be conceived of in slightly different terms. The following quote from Bede Griffiths (1976) typifies this attitude:

> This is the great Dao … It is the nirguna brahman … It is the "Dharmakaya" of the Buddha, the "body of reality" … It is the One of Plotinus which is beyond the Mind (the Nous) and can only be known in ecstasy. In Christian terms it is the abyss of the Godhead, the "divine darkness" of Dionysus, which "exceeds all existence" and cannot be named, of which the Persons of the Godhead are the manifestations. (p. 25)

This approach seems to ignore some of the differences in these conceptions—for example, the difference noted above between *brahman* and the Dao, and the lack of such a concept in Theravada Buddhism. Nonperennialists suggest that it is more valid to think in terms of a multiplicity of absolutes rather than just a single, just as it is more valid to speak of different types of mystical experience, rather than one generic mystical experience (Ferrer, 2002).

However, there are clearly strong similarities between these concepts as well as differences. The basic commonality between all of them is that they refer to an all-pervading spiritual force of some form—an energy or force which pervades all things and the spaces between all things. This force or energy may appear to underlie the whole phenomenal world, in such a way that the phenomenal world may appear to arise from it. That is,

the phenomenal world may appear to be an emanation or manifestation of this force. In monotheistic spiritual traditions, this all-pervading force or energy is often associated with God, as in the godhead or divine darkness of Christian mystics. Even in association with monotheistic traditions, however, the concepts are still depicted in terms of formless impersonality (Underhill, 1960; Happold, 1986).

Because it appears to underlie and pervade all things, the force may be described as conferring unity to all things, as if it folds them all into its oneness. It is frequently depicted as having qualities of radiance and bliss (as in the Vedantic concept of *satchitananda*, or being-consciousness-bliss). In the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, *brahman* is often compared to the sun—for example, as the Gita states, "If the light of a thousand suns suddenly arose in the sky, that splendour might be compared to the radiance of the Supreme Spirit" (Mascaro, 1988, p. 53). The Jewish term Zohar can be translated as *splendor* or *brilliance*, and the Zohar itself—the text—describes the universe as pervaded with translucent light (Hoffman, 2007).

Significantly—as with the common of themes of the process of awakening described above—conceptions and experiences of an all-pervading spiritual energy are by no means confined to spiritual traditions or to mystics. Descriptions of such a force or presence sometimes feature in reports of temporary awakening experiences from individuals who are not affiliated with any particular spiritual traditions, and who would certainly not consider themselves mystics. For example, one person described an experienced of sitting on a mountaintop, in which his vision of his surroundings was transformed and he was aware of an "immensely powerful benign force" pervading his surroundings (in Hay, 1987, p. 143). Another man described an awareness of a "sweet, cool presence" around him that seemed to intensify or weaken in different circumstances: "About three times it has intensified into what I suppose could be called a mystical experience—a pinkish golden light which was in everything, was love and made everything look beautiful, even council houses and a Corporation bus" (quoted in Hardy, 1979, p. 64) Similarly, a person described his constant awareness of a "vast presence which is just infinite and pretty mind-blowing. Especially in nature, or even at times when I'm in London walking to my clinic. But it's so much easier in nature because nature is the perfect embodiment of presence" (Taylor, 2013a, p. 113).

There are also many descriptions of an all-pervading spiritual force in poetry—for example, in William Wordsworth's (1950) poem "Tintern Abbey," where the poet described his sense of "something far more deeply interfused/ Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,/ And the round ocean and the living air … A motion and a spirit, that impels/All thinking things, all objects of all thoughts,/ And rolls through all things" (p. 71) Wordsworth was unfamiliar with the Indian Upanishads, or any other Eastern philosophies, so the similarity of his phrasing to theirs is striking. Compare, for example, the Chandogya Upanishad's description of *brahman* as "an invisible and subtle essence [which] is the Spirit of the universe" (Mascaro, 1988, p. 117). The author D. H. Lawrence (1993) also wrote many poetic descriptions of an all-pervading spiritual force, describing it as a "the presence that makes the air so still and lovely to me" (p. 652).

There are also many tribal indigenous groups who have concepts of a spirit-force that pervades the whole of the phenomenal world. To give just a few examples, in America, the Hopi Indians call this spirit-force *maasauu* (Heinberg, 1989), and the Lakota call it *wakan-tanka* (literally, the "force which moves all things"; Eliade, 1967). The Ainu of Japan call it *ramut* (Monro, 1962), while in parts of New Guinea it is called *imunu* (Levy-Bruhl, 1965). In Africa the Nuer call it *kwoth* (Evans-Pritchard, 1967) and the Mbuti call it *pepo* (Turnbull, 1993). The Ufaina Indians (of the Amazon Rain Forest) call it *fufaka* (Hildebrand, 1988; see Taylor, 2005, for further examples).

All of these concepts refer to an impersonal force that pervades all space and all objects and beings. The early German anthropologist, R. Neuhaus (speaking of the indigenous peoples of New Guinea) used the term "soul stuff," while the British missionary J. H. Holmes translated *imunu* as "universal soul." Holmes described it as "the soul of things ... It was intangible, but like air, wind, it could manifest its presence" (quoted in Levy-Bruhl, 1965, p. 17) The anthropologist Gordon Monro (1962) described the Ainu's concept of *ramut* as a force that is "all-pervading and indestructible" and compared it with Wordsworth's description of spirit in Tintern Abbey. Wordsworth's description of "something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns" is also close to the description of *tirawa* by a member of the Pawnee tribe, as a force which "is in everything and…moves upon the darkness, the night,

and causes her to bring forth the dawn. It is the breath of the new-born dawn" (quoted in Eliade, 1967, p. 13).

All of this suggests that one is dealing with a certain quality that may become apparent in an expanded state of being. Once one moves beyond the limitations of an ordinary state of being, and once perceptions become de-automatized and intensified, this quality may become evident, whether one considers themselves mystics or not, and whether one is affiliated with a particular spiritual tradition or not (Deikman, 1963; Taylor, 2010, 2012b). This quality may be conceived as a fundamental aspect of the universe, similar to how Chalmers (1996) has described consciousness as a fundamental force that pervades the whole universe and was embedded in it from its inception, similar to other fundamental forces such as gravity and mass. This quality relates to the concept of a "consciousness [that] in some form penetrates through all physicality" (Hartelius, 2015, p. 26) that is an aspect of Ferrer's participatory philosophy.

Spiritual traditions' concepts of an underlying or ultimate reality (such as *brahman*, Dao or En Sof) can be seen as different interpretations and conceptualizations of this fundamental quality. Different aspects may be emphasised in terms of preexisting conceptual frameworks or different metaphysical systems. As Loy (2016) has suggested in relation to the differences and similarities between Samkhya-Yoga, Advaita Vedanta and Theravada Buddhism, "It seems more likely that various characteristics are stressed because of the differing metaphysical systems within which enlightenment occurs." For example, in Daoism, the dynamic and energetic aspects of this all-pervading force are stressed; whereas in Vedanta its quality of radiance and its "underpinning" and infusing of the phenomenal world are stressed.

When integrated into a metaphysical system, the quality may be interpreted in absolutist terms, it may become conceptualized as a transcendent and objective domain of reality—a "nondual monist metaphysic" or "a single, timeless and formless reality hidden beneath the apparentness of the world" (Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013, p. 190). For mystics affiliated with monotheistic traditions such as Christianity or Judaism, it would have seemed logical to conflate this all-pervading spiritual force with the concept of God within their traditions. In Taylor (2015), it is suggested that the concept of a personal God who overlooks the world and controls its events is essentially a psychological construct that provides compensation for a highly individuated ego's sense of aloneness and separateness, and for the social chaos and suffering linked to this highly individuated ego. In itself, this concept of a personal God has no connection to the transpersonal. In Wilber's (2001) terms, it is translative rather than transformative—that is, it supports and consoles the ego, rather than facilitates its transcendence. But when individuals from such monotheistic cultures experienced an all-pervading spiritual force, they may well have interpreted it in terms of their Judeo-Christian notions of God, and ascribed qualities of transcendent absoluteness and stasis to it.

However, many indigenous tribal peoples do not associate this force with—or conceive of it as—a deity, and do not ascribe ultimate or transcendent qualities to it (Eliade, 1967). For indigenous peoples, this force is not transcendent or objective because it pervades the whole natural world, including their own being. It is not metaphysical because it pervades the physical world. It is not other to the physical world or to the body—it is the essence of them. It is not transcendent but immanent. In other words, this all-pervading force does not have to be interpreted as a transcendent other, and is only done so when such an interpretation accords with metaphysical and religious systems.

In the same way, union with this force may be envisaged as a goal and end point of development, and stages of development towards the goal may be demarcated. In progressivist models of development, such as the eight limbed path of Yoga or the Christian mystical path, it seems logical—and perhaps helpful—to assume a final goal of development. But this is not a necessary or inevitable conclusion. Again, indigenous peoples generally do not formulate paths of development that lead to union with this force. To them it is a simply a phenomenal reality that is neither mysterious nor inaccessible.

It is also significant that individuals who experience a process of awakening outside spiritual traditions generally do not speak of their experience in absolutist or final terms. They generally report a sense of open endedness, a sense that they are still in process, without having arrived at a particular destination (Taylor, 2012a; 2013a). For example, one person reported that, although she felt she had undergone a shift into a new state of being, "I feel like I am in a growing developing phase at the moment. It's not over yet" (Taylor, 2013a, p. 96). Or as another person described her shift into an

expanded state: "I think it's kind of raised me up a level if you like. It's really a building block for me to move up from" (p. 98). The person mentioned earlier who reported a spiritual awakening in 1950, described a state of wakefulness that had persisted for over six decades. He reported the state as a continually evolving one, which was still changing and developing even at the time of the interview. As he reported, "Over the years, new things have emerged, and I've begun to see in greater depth. One begins to look into more profound areas, to reach realms which one never knew were there, or to see the same thing but with more clarity. There's always something beyond. I'm beginning to wonder if there will ever be an end" (Williams, 2015, p. 149)

In essence, therefore, this all-pervading force need not be viewed as a metaphysical, transcendent other, although it may become conceptualized in those terms (including as a divine force or God itself). It is not mysterious or intangible—or "inaccessible to public observation" (Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013, p.190)—but a quality which can be readily experienced in expanded states of being (I have experienced in many times myself!). It also need not be viewed as an absolute that the individual seeks to become with, with such oneness representing the culmination of spiritual development.

In my view, rather than conceiving of this force as transcendent, it is more valid to see it as fundamental or essential. I would argue that the term transcendent is unsatisfactory because of its connotations of otherness (as identified by Ferrer's "subtle Cartesianism") and ontological superiority, suggesting a realm beyond and higher than the phenomenal world. This force should not be conceived of as other to human beings, because we are its manifestations; it constitutes the essence of our being, and pervades our whole being. It can be seen as the source of the phenomenal world (and of our own being), but not as an absolute that lies beyond it. This force is embedded in everything that is, as the fabric of reality, or a fundamental universal force. There is no otherness because there is no distinction between us and it. It is not ontologically superior to us, or to the phenomenal world, because it is us. (Again, this resembles the participatory philosophy's concept of a consciousness that "penetrates through all physicality" [Hartelius, 2015, p. 26]).

From the perspective of monotheistic religions, it may make sense to conceive of this force as both immanent and transcendent. This accords with the conception of an ineffable divine absolute that is fundamentally beyond the phenomenal world—a noumenonal realm, in Kantian terms. But from a soft perennial perspective, it is more accurate to conceive of this force as fundamental (or essential) and immanent. One experiences it not in the form of an encounter with "the numinous" (in Otto's 1970 phrase) or with a transcendent absolute, but in the form of an experience of one's own essence and source, and of the essence and source of everything that exists.[5]

Ontological Issues

Daniels (2005) has criticized transpersonal psychology for being too concerned with metaphysical or ontological issues rather than with the phenomenology of transpersonal experiences. In his view—which I share—transpersonal psychology should be primarily phenomenological. In line with this—and as stated earlier—I do not believe that it is wholly necessary to ascribe an ontology to a soft perennial perspective. For me, it is enough to suggest that the underlying range of experience I am speaking of is fundamental in a psychological sense, without necessarily being ontologically fundamental. This range of experience is more fundamental rather than claiming to be fundamental *per se.*

Having said this, as Ferrer (2002) has noted, phenomenology implies ontology; the latter emerges from the former. An analysis of experience inevitably implies a certain view of reality. Friedman (2002) has suggested that transpersonal psychology should dispense with metaphysical ideas altogether, but this seems extreme. It is surely appropriate to consider such ideas, providing they emerge organically from phenomenological experience, rather than being based on abstract analyses of spiritual traditions, or on theoretical speculation (Daniels, 2005).

So according to this principle, here I will tentatively—without forgetting that this ontology is secondary and perhaps not even strictly necessary—suggest some ontological features that seem to emerge from what I have called a perennial phenomenology.

As such, it appears to be a part of many indigenous peoples' common experience. However, it does not appear to be a common feature of the experience of most members of modern secular Western cultures. This may be due to the automatization or perception identified by Deikman (1963) or the process of desensitization and perceptual adaptation discussed

in Taylor (2010, 2012b). This is the process by which human beings become habituated (or desensitized) to phenomena after they have been exposed to them for a period. Perception becomes automatized, as an energy-conserving mechanism, which means that the phenomenal world becomes less vivid. But as has been seen, when the limitations of one's normal state of being fall away—when self boundaries become more fluid and perception becomes deautomatized—and one experiences a more expansive state, one may become aware of this force.

If one assumes that this force or energy is ontologically real, then it implies other ontological aspects. For example, if all phenomena of the world are pervaded with a spiritual force or energy then in some sense all phenomena are spiritually alive. That is, in Chalmers' (1996) terms, if consciousness is a fundamental and universal quality then all things are— at least potentially—conscious. Or again, as participatory philosophy suggests, consciousness is not just a human phenomenon; it imbues the tiniest particles of matter. (There are, of course, issues here with the use of the term consciousness, but I think it is reasonable to suggest that the all-pervading consciousness described by both Chalmers and Ferrer is closely related—if not essentially equivalent—to the all-pervading energy or force described in indigenous cultures.) In other words, even biologically inanimate phenomena are in some sense animated with consciousness or spirit-force.

This certainly fits with many indigenous views of the world. As the contemporary anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000) has written, for hunter-gatherer groups, the environment is "saturated with personal powers of one kind of another. It is alive" (p. 67). Or as the Cherokee Indian scholar Rebecca Adamson (2008) has pointed out, for indigenous peoples "the environment is perceived as a sensate, conscious entity suffused with spiritual powers through which the human understanding is only realized in perfect humility before the sacred whole" (p. 34).

This sense of the animacy and connectedness of the phenomenal world is not confined solely to hunter-gatherer groups either. According to the Japanese anthropologist Iwata (1989), the Japanese, together with most South East Asian cultures, have a fundamental sense of animism. In Japanese culture, the phenomenal world is alive with *kami*, nonphysical forces (sometimes translated as "spirits") that are manifestations of *musubi*, the interconnecting creative spiritual force of the universe.

The indigenous shamanic tradition of Korea, Muism or Sinism, is similar to the Japanese Shinto. In Korean, the term *shin* refers to spirits or divine beings (similar to *kami*) while the term *haneullim* or *hwanin* is similar to the Japanese *musubi*, referring to an all-pervading divine force or principle. (Literally, *haneullim* means "source of all being"; Baker, 2008). Of course, many tribal indigenous cultures conceive of the existence of spirits too, as energy forms which interact with and inhabit natural phenomena.[6]

Another implied ontological aspect (hinted at above) is the connectedness and interdependence of phenomena. If this all-pervading energy pervades all things, then all things share the same basic essence, and are therefore interconnected. The universe is a great *web of being*, and human beings are a part of this dynamic interdependence. This is what enables the sense of connection and union that is associated with expanded states: the transcendence of dualism, the sense of no longer being separate. It also enables the intense empathy and altruism of expanded states. Empathy and altruism occur when we experience our connectedness. Humans become able to sense one another's suffering, and feel an impulse to alleviate it. As Schopenhauer (2005) suggested, the root of compassion is our fundamental oneness.

Again, this sense of interconnection and nonseparateness is a strong feature of indigenous worldviews. Many anthropologists have spoken of indigenous tribal groups or hunter-gatherer groups as having a more permeable sense of individuality, with a sense of identity that is inseparable from their community and also their land (e.g., Werner, 1957; Levy-Bruhl, 1965; Silberbauer, 1981; Boydell, 2001).

Following from this, because spirit force is the essence of one's own being, in states of deep meditation —or mental emptiness—one may be able to sense it as a pure consciousness. This is what Forman (1999) has referred to as the *pure consciousness event*—a wakeful, contentless state of consciousness in which one senses one's being as pure energetic awareness that is simultaneously part of a deep, dynamic field of wider awareness which seems spaceless and timeless. Saso (2015) has used the term apophatic union for this state, and suggested that the use of practices to generate the state is a fundamental commonality amongst diverse spiritual traditions such as indigenous shamanism, Daoism, Buddhism, mystical Christianity, and Judaism. Again, in soft perennial

terms, this should not be seen as an encounter with a transcendent absolute or other, but with a fundamental aspect of reality, the essence and source of one's own being and of the whole phenomenal world.

Let me state again though that because soft perennialism is phenomenological rather than philosophical—or experiential rather than conceptual—these ontological issues are secondary. Soft perennialism can exist with validity without an ontological foundation, although it clearly implies certain ontological features.

The Nature of Soft Perennialism

To summarize, there are a number of clear differences between the soft perennial perspective and traditional hard perennialism—or, to put it another way, between a perennial philosophy and what I have called a perennial phenomenology.

In soft perennialism, there is no transcendent ultimate reality that exists apart from human beings, only an all-pervading spiritual force that constitutes the essence of one's being and of everything else that exists. This force is not a transcendent other, although it could be described as fundamental. It is, as it were, built into the fabric of reality, as a universal force.

In this way, the soft perennial model offers the same insights as participatory philosophy: that there is no duality between subject or object, and that the whole universe is conscious, not just human beings. Spiritual experiences occur not when one encounters or experiences a transcendent absolute, but when one transcends the separateness and automatized perception of one's normal state of being, and experiences a world that is radiantly alive with spirit-force, and sense that one shares their being with everything around and with the force itself.

In other words, the criticism of objectivism that Ferrer (2002) has made of the perennial philosophy—and the related criticism of subtle Cartesianism—does not apply to soft perennialism. This force is not a detached and objective reality; it is the source and essence of all things, including one's own being. It makes no sense to conceive it as an absolute other that can exist apart from human beings, in a Kantian duality. As I have already stated, it is not immanent and transcendent, but immanent and fundamental.

Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) have suggested that perennialism posits an invariable absolute which must, by its nature, be objective and separate from the "differently-conditioned subjectivities of spiritual seekers" otherwise it "cannot be the object of inner empirical inquiry" (p. 190). However, this all-pervading spiritual force is neither absolute or invariable—and it is primarily experienced extravertively, through direct awareness of the phenomenal world rather than through the above-termed inner empirical inquiry—and so these criticisms do not apply to soft perennialism.

Perhaps Ferrer's related criticism of essentialism does hold against the soft perennial approach to a degree, because of the implication that spirit-force is an essential ontological reality, with attendant ontological features such as connection and aliveness of the phenomenal world (although this is not the nondual metaphysical construct at which Ferrer's criticism is specifically directed). However, I would point out again that this ontology is implied by phenomenology rather than being a theoretical or metaphysical construct. In addition, this essentialism does not lead to exclusivism or dogmatism. Unlike traditional perennialism, soft perennialism is primarily experiential rather than conceptual, phenomenological rather than philosophical, and does not need to be framed in terms of spiritual traditions, and interpreted through preexisting metaphysical systems. As a result, there is a lack of the exclusivism that Ferrer (2002) has suggested characterizes traditional perennialism. In soft perennialism, there is only a range of expansive experience that is explored and interpreted in different ways, all of which are equally valid.

In relation to this, from the soft perennial perspective, the direction of spiritual or transpersonal development is not necessarily transcendence but expansion and extension: an expansion of identity and awareness, an increasing sense of connection, and an increasing intensity of perception. Soft perennialism points towards a deepening of one's experience of and relationship to the phenomenal world rather than a transcendence of it.

Another significant difference between the soft and hard perennial perspectives is that for the former this process is not predicated upon a specific goal, but is an open ended process. There is no end point of union or complete fulfilment. Even if one gains an ongoing awareness of spirit-force, pervading the whole world and one's own being, there is no point at which the process of awakening culminates. Such awareness may only lead to new experiential adventures, into ever more expansive and deeper areas.

From the soft perennial perspective, it is unnecessary to claim that all spiritual states and stages of development are essentially equivalent, only that they are different aspects and perspectives of the ranges of potential expansive psychological experience beyond the limitations of one's normal state. This gives the soft perennial perspective more leeway to account for the differences across spiritual traditions, often downplayed in hard perennialism.

In a similar way, the soft perennial perspective does not attempt to demarcate specific stages of development, although it certainly allows for degrees or intensities of expansiveness or awakening. For example, since the following are some of the main characteristics of the expansive or awakened state, one could speak in terms of greater degrees of connection, and varying degrees of perceptual intensity, of compassion and altruism, or inner quietness, and so forth.

Although this suggests what Daniels (2005) has referred to in relation to his own model of mystical experience as "an implicit developmental sequence or hierarchy" (p. 259), the soft perennial perspective is nonhierarchical in the sense that it does not privilege post-axial spiritual traditions over pre-axial ones (Hick, 1989). As the above analysis shows, the soft perennial perspective honors the spirituality of indigenous cultures, without denigrating them as pre-egoic or immaturely spiritual. The spirituality of post-axial cultures is not higher or superior to pre-axial ones. In fact, the soft perennial perspective offers a return to the concept of a web of being that Hick believed characterized pre-axial cultures, rather than a great chain of being. Also, unlike Wilber's hierarchical model, soft perennialism incorporates the possibility of an authentic childhood spirituality (Taylor, 2009).

I have already stated that, in relation to Ferrer's typology of perennial perspectives, the approach I am advocating is a form of perspectivist perennialism. Soft perennialism differs from the basic and esotericist forms of perennialism in that it does not posit a common path or a common goal to spiritual development. It differs from the structuralist form in that it does not posit pregiven or fundamental structures of consciousness that determine development. But the soft perennial notion of a fundamental spiritual force that is the source of crosstraditional spiritual goals clearly accords with Ferrer's depiction of perspectivist perennialism as offering "different perspectives, dimensions, or manifestations of the same Ground of Being" (Ferrer, 2002, p. 78).

However, the soft perennial model differs from traditional perspectivist perennialism in a number of important ways. It differs in its open enededness—that is, its lack of a conception of a specific end point to spiritual development. It differs in its view of spiritual development as a deepening and expansion of one's relationship with the phenomenal world rather than a transcendence of it. It differs in its primary ontological feature of an all-pervading spiritual force that is fundamental rather than a transcendent and ultimate other. Because soft perennialism views spiritual development as a process of awakening or opening to vast ranges of more expansive experience rather than in terms of encountering or experiencing a differently conceived spiritual absolute, this allows for a great deal more plurality than the traditional perspectivist approach.

In these ways, the soft perennial model can be seen as a valid alternative to the hard perennialism that was traditionally associated with transpersonal psychology. Soft perennialism offers an immanent, integrated spirituality that is free of the patriarchal and strongly hierarchical tendencies of the traditional forms of perennialism (Daniels, 2005). Ferrer's participatory philosophy also offers such an alternative, of course. However, despite all that it has to commend it, Ferrer's model is unable to account for the strong similarities between spiritual traditions' conceptions of the process of awakening or expansion. It is also largely a theoretical construct, rather than being grounded in, and emerging from, phenomenology. Like so much discussion in transpersonal psychology, it is largely framed in terms of spiritual traditions, without taking sufficient account of research into awakening or expansive states that occur outside the context of the traditions.

These extratraditional experiences are important because they seem to reveal ranges of potential expansive experience prior to interpretation by spiritual or religious traditions. This does not mean that such experiences are wholly unmediated, of course. No experience can exist without some degree of interpretation and conceptualization, via both the individual and his or her culture. But there are degrees of mediation, and without the overlying conceptual frameworks of spiritual traditions or metaphysical systems, in extratraditional experiences, these ranges of experience can be viewed in a more fundamental form. (At the same time, this does not mean that extratraditional experiences are more valid. They are simply a different but equally valid form

Soft Perennialism

of expression.) As Maslow suggested of peak experiences, extratraditional awakening experiences show the raw material from which spiritual traditions construct their metaphysical systems. Of course, the fact that these experiences express broadly similar themes to the main themes of spiritual traditions supports the idea that the latter are interlinked, and informed by the same ranges of potential experience.[8]

Perhaps more than anything else, the soft perennial model highlights the importance of studying expanded states of being outside the context of spiritual traditions. Hartelius (2013) has made the point that transpersonal psychology's movement away from a Wilberian perennialist model towards a participatory spirituality will increase the field's viability and validity. This is probably true, but in my view there are two things that will increase the field's validity even more: firstly, a movement away from metaphysics and theory towards a more phenomenological research-based approach, and second (following on from the first point), a greater focus on expansive states of being as they occur outside the context of spiritual traditions—in environments where, ironically, discussions about the validity of a perennial philosophy actually have little significance.

Notes

1. With his use of such terms as "shared spiritual power" and "the mystery" some authors (e.g., Adams, 2011; Abramson, 2015) have suggested that Ferrer actually does have a perspectival perennial model. However, Ferrer has argued that this is not the case, because unlike traditional perennial approaches, participatory philosophy rejects the myth of the given, has an "enactive paradigm of cognition," and involves the "overcoming of the dualism of the mystery and its actions" (in Hartelius, 2015, p. 51).

2. Note that when I use the term "state" in the sense of "expanded state of being," I am not following Wilber's distinction between states and stages. Despite Wilber's terminology, I find it perfectly acceptable to refer to an ongoing or permanent experience of "expansiveness" as a state. After all, the term state relates to stasis—that is, to continuity and stability. (In linguistics a stative verb is one that describes a state of being.) Maslow (1970) used the term *plateau experience* in a similar sense. My preferred terminology is to refer to temporary

awakenings (which Wilber might refer to as states of consciousness) as experiences, and an ongoing, stable form of wakefulness as a state.

3. In transpersonal psychology, this theme appears as Assagioli's (1994) concept of the *transpersonal will*. This is where the individual will becomes allied with the person's higher or transpersonal self and the manifestation of the *universal will*. As Assagioli put it, "the willer is so identified … with the Universal Will, that his activities are accomplished with free spontaneity, a state in which he feels himself to be a willing channel into and through which powerful energies flow" (p. 21). This theme also relates to the concept of "transpersonal purpose," when the individual moves beyond consciously directed types of purpose such as survival or a person-accumulative purpose, and allows their life to become the expression of a purpose greater than them as individuals (Taylor, 2016b).

4. This theme is significant because it suggests that awakening might mean moving beyond the need to affiliate oneself with particular spiritual traditions. In Taylor (2013a) this theme was exemplified by two participants who used to be fervent fans of soccer teams. After their transformation, they found that they no longer felt the need to support their teams, although they still experienced enjoyment of the game itself. One of them reported, "Even my love of football has waned. It was a massive part of my life but that desire to belong has pretty much gone. Everyone seems to need to belong to a particular group but I don't need that anymore" (p. 296). Similarly, the other participant reported that, "I don't support a football club anymore—I used to support QPR. Now I just watch football matches and I just think 'I hope they all win.' I enjoy the game for its own sake" (p. 237).

This potentially contrasts with Ferrer's view that there is no evidence that mystical awakening brings a more tolerant and ecumenical outlook. For a person who experiences awakening within the context of a particular spiritual or religious tradition, a reduced need for group identity and belonging would presumably equate to becoming less affiliated to their tradition or more open to other traditions. And this has certainly been true of many apparently awakened individuals (e.g. Ramakrishna, Gandhi, or Bede Griffiths), even if there have been exceptions.

5. One relevant point here is how the concept of an all-pervading spiritual force relates to what Ferrer (e.g. 2002) refers to as the "mystery." Is it possible that they are equivalent terms?

    Ferrer sometimes speaks of the mystery in terms that resemble a spiritual source or essence, or all-pervading force. For example, he has described it as "a common spiritual dynamism underlying the plurality of spiritual insights and ultimates" (Ferrer, 2002, p. 190) and referred to the "unfolding life of the mystery here on earth" (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008a, p. 9). He has described it as a dynamic force with creative and spiritual power that equates to the "generative power of life" (p. 2). He has also described it as "underlying" and as having immanent and transcendent dimensions, resembling the concept of God or spirit as both immanent and transcendent in some mystical traditions. Human beings are "embodiments of the mystery" (Ferrer, & Sherman, p. 6) and it is the source "out of which everything arises" (Ferrer, 2011b, p. 22). At other times, Ferrer's depiction of the mystery is more oblique. He has referred to it as "indeterminate" (Ferrer, 2002) or "undetermined" (Ferrer, 2011b) and it is described poetically as "the irrepressible mystery that urges itself into manifestation through a thousand forms" (Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013, p. 196).

    All of these descriptions would fit well with the depictions of all-pervading spiritual force I have provided. One obvious difference between the mystery and a perennial absolute is that experiences of the former are cocreative and participatory, rather than encounters with an objective other. However, as we have seen, this accords with my conception of an all-pervading spiritual force too.

    One problem here though is that, as illustrated above, Ferrer's descriptions of what he means by the mystery are rather vague. Indeed, he has stated that this vagueness is intentional: "We deliberately use this conceptually vague, open ended, and ambiguous term" as a way of avoiding "claims or insinuations of dogmatic certainty and associated religious exclusivisms" (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008a, p. 64). However, surely if the mystery is not in itself an essentialist or exclusivist concept then greater explication would clarify this and make such interpretations less likely. Surely Ferrer's vagueness and ambiguity actually makes the mystery more susceptible to misinterpretation. At any rate, for a concept which is so central to his philosophy, it is disappointing that it is not described more clearly. It would be helpful if Ferrer provided further elucidation, partly so that one can see how similar it is to the concept of an all-pervading spiritual force.

6. In Taylor (2005) it is suggested that these conceptions of individual spirits form part of a strategy to explain natural phenomena. Since their whole world was pervaded with spirit-force, many indigenous groups saw phenomena as individually alive too. Every tree, rock or river was alive with spirit-force, and had its own soul or being. And perhaps, in order to explain natural processes, primal peoples came to believe that things were not just alive in this general sense, but also in the sense of being active autonomous forces. Spirit became individuated into spirits, which had control over different natural processes.

7. Hartelius (2015) has suggested that a perennialist model requires an objective, transcendent ultimate which is the common goal of all traditions, but I hope I have shown that, from the soft perennial perspective, this is not necessarily the case. The perennialism of the "soft perennial" model is based on an exploration of common ranges of potential experience, including experience of an all-pervading spiritual force that constitutes the essence of our being, along with everything else which exists. This model does not require a spiritual absolute or ultimate. From this point of view, Ferrer's participatory philosophy could be considered a form of perspectival perennialism too, although while his conception of the mystery remains so vague such a strong assertion would be unwarranted.

(8) It could be argued that to study expansive states of being outside the context of spiritual traditions may prove problematic because of a lack of conceptual frameworks (as provided by the traditions) to facilitate understanding and interpretation. But surely—in the same way that ontology emerges from phenomenology, as described above—such a conceptual framework will emerge naturally from the phenomenological study of such states. In fact, it could be argued that a tentative typology and taxonomy of expanded or awakened states has emerged already, through studies of temporary expansive experiences outside the context of spiritual traditions (e.g. Hoffman, 1992; Marom,

2004; Taylor, 2012; Wade, 2000; White & Brown, 2016), studies of cases of spiritual crisis or spiritual emergence (e.g. Clarke, 2010; Grof, 2000) and studies of ongoing states of spiritual transformation or wakefulness (e.g. Miller & de Baca, 2001; Taylor, 2012a, 2016a). In fact, this approach may have more empirical validity, since it means allowing a conceptual framework to emerge organically from the study of experience rather than interpreting experiences in terms of a preexisting framework.

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

Steve Taylor, PhD, is a senior lecturer in psychology at Leeds Beckett University, UK. He also teaches on the MSc in Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychology distance-learning course, through the University of Middlesex. His previous papers have been published in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, and the *Transpersonal Psychology Review*. His books include *The Fall, Waking From Sleep, Out of the Darkness and The Calm Center: Reflections and Meditations for Spiritual Awakening*. His next book, *The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening*, will be published in Spring 2017 by New World Library, as an Eckhart Tolle Edition. Website: www.stevenmtaylor.com

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