

Relational Spirituality, Part 1

Paradise Unbound: Cosmic Hybridity and Spiritual Narcissism in the “One Truth” of New Age Transpersonalism

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Cosmological hybridization, a process in which spiritual paradises are bound together, is highly active in American religious culture. Beginning with an early Christianized version of the Buddha, this religious Creolization gathered speed after WWII and peaked during the Vietnam War, leading to a complex spiritual revolution in which transcendence became an all important orientation. This revolution set the scene for the emergence of a non-relational transpersonal psychology in which Americanized nondualism gained ascendancy. It is argued here that popular New Age transpersonalism traps the spirit, breeding a self-serving, Self-as-everything form of spiritual narcissism. Given that some are calling the New Age the religion of global capitalism, a more relational spirituality may be a vital intervention into transpersonalism's self-centeredness and a salve for a world in Creolization.

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In the Prison Notebooks Gramsci says: The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and [this] knowing 'thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces without leaving an inventory... therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory

—Edward Said, 1979/1995, p. 25

As the corpse of Baron De Palm burst into flames in the Presbyterian town of Washington, Pennsylvania, 135 years ago, it was hailed as the first ever cremation on American soil.¹ But that was not all; as the Austrian born Baron (and born again Theosophist) went up in smoke that December morning, a triumphant blow was struck by America's nascent cremation movement—a blow that signaled the overturning of thousands of years of Christian burial custom.² Early Christianity had done away with the ancient Greek and Roman practice of burning the dead on a funeral-pyre. Reinforcing the Christian custom of burial was a belief in the resurrection of the physical body, a belief that was at odds with the practice of cremation (Prothero, 1997, pp. 94-95). Indeed, the rhetoric used against the cremationists was that theirs was a “pagan custom” practiced only in the “heathen” Orient (p. 95). Conversely, in resisting the claims of the anti-cremationists, the fiery speeches of the reformers claimed that Greek, Roman, and Hindu

peoples were “as intelligent, refined and worshipful” (p. 95) in their funerary practices as any American. Indeed the cremationists sought to restore to America what they saw as the grandeur that was Greece, Rome, and Asia.

While the new cremation was hailed as thoroughly modern, scientific, and secular, the movement envisioned itself as having spiritual import. It pressed its cause with Pentecostal fervor, referring to its work as “the gospel of incineration” and its labor as “missionary work” (Prothero, 1997, p. 97). Women's rights activists were drawn to the burning movement, and cremationists seem also to have carried the cultural “evolutionary” sentiments of the time (p. 107) to the good fight, seeing it as their sacred duty to raise the masses up to a “higher level of ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’” (p. 97). The site of the cremation was the home of Dr. Francis Le Moyne, a physician and committed abolitionist—a home that had also served as a stop on the Underground Railroad (a network to free black slaves). The rite was carried out by

none other than Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, who a year earlier had co-founded Theosophy with Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the famous Russian occultist.³

The newly converted De Palm had befriended Olcott (and Theosophy) and had instructed him to arrange a funeral befitting his new and novel faith. Specifically, he requested that it be performed “in a fashion that would illustrate the Eastern notions of death and immortality” (Prothero, 1997, p. 99), and that his body be cremated. Theosophists believed that cremation could liberate the spirit and “loosen the astral body” from the so-called “grossness of matter” and the “irksome” body (p. 108). The ideas that reduce the human body to a prison in which the spirit is trapped are ancient and most likely inherited from Christianity, Hinduism, and the Greek traditions. Thus De Palm’s death was shrouded in a cloth cut from Western spiritualism, Theosophy, and Christian and Asian spiritualities.

Olcott collected De Palm’s ashes in what the New York Times called a “Hindoo cremation urn... decorated with Hindoo characters and devices” (Prothero, 1997, p. 104) and is said to have taken the ashes to the Theosophical Society Headquarters in New York. Later, before departing for his new life in India, he scattered his friend’s ashes over the waters of that city’s harbor during a simple ceremony (p. 102). Soon after he would migrate to India and become the first American to formally convert to Buddhism on Asian soil (p. 99).

Cremation has of course, to echo the words of one early cremationist, “taken perennial root” in America (Prothero, 1997, p. 106)—a claim given credence, perhaps, in the funerary ceremonies of the ‘60s countercultural icon Jerry Garcia. When Garcia, the founder of the famed San Francisco band The Grateful Dead died in 1995, half of his ashes were spread under the Golden Gate Bridge, while the rest were transported to India and poured into the River Ganges on the Buddha’s birthday (Fields, 1996). The Dead Buddhists of America (an allusion to his band which had been strongly associated with psychedelics such as LSD in the 1960s and after) held a meditation for him, that of *Chenrezi*, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In the middle of the meditation everyone was instructed to see Jerry as the bodhisattva, “merging with the lights of the Buddhmind in the journey through the bardos” (pp. 46-47).

The head Dead’s funerary services seems to have an intriguing resonance with that of the theosophically oriented De Palm: they both embraced the religions that

flowed from the River Ganges (on whose banks are the burning funeral ghats). They both had their ashes poured onto water, and each played his part in the social and cultural revolutions of their day—but they may share in something even more intriguing than the flames of the funeral pyre or a coincidental embrace of Asian religion. Robert Orsi (1997) claimed that De Palm’s cremation proves once again how creative and wildly innovative religion is in America, but also noted that Stephen Prothero’s study showed the rite to be neither Christian nor secular but something else, something related to the ambiguities of *religious hybridity*—a process for which a whole new language would need to be invented (p. 11). The scattering of Jerry Garcia’s ashes on two continents—Asia and America—is something related not only to the afterlife but to this life and a globalizing fusion of East and West—a symbolic spiritual and cultural process that has been occurring in America for well over 150 years. In death, Garcia—the acid-rock-country-bluegrass-bluesman of the Grateful Dead—has a foot in two continents—one Christian, the other Hindu-Buddhist.

The Way of the Hybrid

In terms of Orsi’s new language, words such as *Creolization*, *Orientalization*, *Easternization*, *Africanization*, *crossover*, and *cosmological hybridization* are being employed to understand what happens when cultures meet in war and peace, trade or migration, colonization, and globalization (cf. Lahood, 2008). Hybridity concerns the ambiguous mixture of things, processes, and phenomena that are thought to be unlike, different, separate, disparate, and unequal—into novel cultural and religious forms. Entering social science under the guise of syncretism in the anthropology of religion (Pieterse, 2004, p. 90), hybridity suggests the “fusion of religious forms” often functioning as a mask “behind which non-Christian forms of worship are practiced” (p. 72).

However, in his study of the trial of Seberina Candelaria, a young woman priestess accused of witchcraft in early 19th century Philippines, Gregg Bankoff (1999) noted that the symbols of Christianity could also be “appropriated and incorporated” into a new and seemingly bizarre religious formation, the result of which “was neither wholly indigenous nor wholly exotic but the formation of a hybrid cosmology” (p. 49). Thus religious hybridizations can occur when beliefs Christian and secular or “Christian and native” are

merged, engendering a sort of “third religion” (Pieterse 2004, p. 73)—and the same is true of non-Christian hybridizations such as those created in the global propagations of Buddhism and Islam. For example, with the spread of Greek culture into India through the military conquests of Alexander the Great statues of the Buddha were carved in the gesture of peripatetic philosophers wearing togas and adorned with the sacred grapes of the sacrificial demi-god Dionysus.

I argue here that transpersonal psychology also came to be a kind of third religion, an Orientalized hybrid cosmology, and it began to crystallize in San Francisco in the heyday of the psychedelic ‘60s along with Garcia and The Grateful Dead, the Vietnam War, and a widespread religious awakening that involved communal living, changes in clothing, values, music, drugs, psychotherapy, and a host of other counter-cultural innovations. More importantly, transpersonalism’s search for a presumed inner truth may well be the skeletal structure around which the New Age has clothed itself—with a hybrid paradise.

Central to this project was a series of strange marriages, amalgamations, juxtapositions, and cultural borrowings largely between the mysticism of the East and the psychology of West—between America and Asia.⁴ These included, the American Transcendentalists’ embrace of the Vedas, Mahatma Gandhi with Henry David Thoreau, Nashida Kitaro with William James, D. T. Suzuki’s Zen with Romantic Nature worship, Aldous Huxley with Vedanta, Allan Watts with the Tao, Zen, Advaita Vedanta, the Beat poets Jack Kerouac, Alan Ginsburg, and Gary Snyder with Buddhism and Peyote, Timothy Leary with LSD and Tibetan Buddhism, Ram Dass with Hinduism, the Beatles with LSD and with the Maharishi, George Harrison with the Hari Krishna Movement, John Lennon with Yoko Ono, Fritz Perls’ Gestalt therapy with Mahayana Buddhism, Eric Fromm’s psychoanalysis and Abraham Maslow’s human potential with Zen Buddhism, and Stanislav Grof with psychoanalysis, LSD, and Kashmir Shaivism. This long cultural procession of religious blending is the fertile cultural *mélange* out of which Ken Wilber’s influential ladder of consciousness grew: a hybrid cosmos of Neo-Platonism and Neo-Advaita Vedanta (which as will be shown is also the backbone of the New Age movement).

The characteristic blend of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, and the dominating spiritual hierarchy that runs through Wilber’s worldview (and the New Age)

are due in large part to the strange force of hybridity long alive in the religious imagination of America. I have suggested elsewhere (Lahood, 2008)⁵ that Wilber’s Orientalized cosmology is the inevitable outcome of religious globalization and the civil strife occurring in the 1960s in which religions of the East and West were brought together in America in a psychedelically informed subaltern resistance culture. The religious symbolism of this culture and its postulated *cosmic consciousness* reveal not some ultimate perennial postulate beyond culture, nor yet a One Truth coming from all directions, but a hybridized postulate springing from the complex matrix of a culture embroiled in war in South East Asia and an internal civil revolution, and gripped by an effervescent religious outpouring bent on the creation of a zealously enacted counter-reality.

This paper will further explore the procession of cosmological hybridizations that came together in the American context and show how this amalgamation of religious flavors began to favor a somewhat disembodied, non-relational, patriarchal and authoritarian One-Truth religion—one that came to overvalue individual transcendence at the expense of relationship. It is my belief that relational spirituality is the key to undoing the associated spiritual narcissism that plagues contemporary Western spiritual culture (cf. Ferrer 2002, 2009).

Transcendentalism’s Holy Trinity

One can pick up the threads of the hybridizing process with the American Transcendentalists. They are the ancestor of a blending religious style that will eventually blossom in the religious counter-culture of the 1960s. Rebellious and ruggedly individualistic, this group of New England intellectuals, artists, writers, and poets began as a reform movement within the Christian Unitarian Church, seeking to exchange empirical knowledge and bone dry tradition for direct spiritual intuition, the emotions stirred by nature, and mystical contact with an indwelling god. Emerson (1849), the most influential of this group, claimed that Unitarian theology and ritual was a “corpse cold”:

Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? (p. 1)

Why not indeed! Yet Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Margaret Fuller, Henry James Senior

and Henry David Thoreau, were well versed in the sacred texts of various religious traditions (Heelas, 1996, p. 55) and regularly bathed their lofty minds in the Indic Vedas. Emerson, in a creative response to Eastern thought, especially the Bhagavad Gita, penned such poems as Brahma and Maya (Paglia, 2003, p. 9). He also met with one Swami Jogut Sangooly, a “real live Brahmin, brought up a priest to Kreeshna,” in 1858, according to his daughter (Prince, 1974, p. 258). Henry David Thoreau (1849/2008) authored *Civil Disobedience*, a tract which inspired Mahatma Gandhi to oppose Britain’s brutal colonialism in India with non-violence (and which would come around again with complex ferocity in the 1960s)—a curious two-way religious borrowing between India and America synonymous with religious globalization.

Thoreau’s (1854/1899) *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, a journal of his experiment in monastic living in the woods near Boston in which the writer/sage developed an almost St. Francis-like relationship to animals and nature, became a canonical text for the hippies of the 1960s (nor should one forget that natureloving St. Francis is the patron saint of San Francisco). In the words of Thoreau:

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavat Geeta,... in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial.... I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas.... I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges. (p. 209)

One can see in the last line of Thoreau’s mystical prose yet another curious mixing—in this overlapping of two discrete things (a device common to poets): the waters of two different continents, one Christian the other Hindu, are carefully mingled creating a liminal, third space (cf. Bhabha, 1994), an American blend reminiscent of Garcia’s hybridizing funeral ceremony which also overlapped the waters of Ganges with those of the San Francisco Bay.

Anthropologist Fredrick Turner (1987) noted that Thoreau stood at a point when, “through immigration,

economic expansion, the influence of Europe and forces inherent in its own constitution, the narrow Puritanism of New England had given way among the intellectuals to a variety of lofty theisms” (p. 85). In fact the mystical writings of Swedenborg (who, in a mystical awakening, was commanded by God to pen a heavenly doctrine with which to revive Christianity), pantheism, monism, and Emerson and Whitman’s Romantic nature worship were mixed with Eastern constellations (cf. Prince, 1974; Paglia, 2003). The Hindu *gharba* (luminous cosmic womb) was somehow joined with the Buddhist sunyata (void) which had been imported into America by early Hindu and Buddhist missionaries coupled with a hundred years of South East Asian migrant laborers, and later, with returning soldiers from wars with Japan, Korea, and Vietnam (Damon, 1996, p. 144).

This movement not only pre-figured the beats’ and hippies’ interests in Hinduism, Buddhism, social experimentation/community living, ethnic freedom, civil rights, vegetarianism, and nature-worship, but also the blending of religion and cosmology visible in Walt Whitman’s (1855/2008) “The Song of Myself”—the poem itself a site of religious globalization:

My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths.
Enclosing worship ancient and modern and all between ancient and modern,
Believing I shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years,
Waiting response from oracles, honoring the gods, saluting the sun,
Making a fetish of the first rock or stump, pow-wow with sticks
in the circle of obis,
Helping the Lama or Brahman as he trims the lamps of the idols,
Dancing through the streets in a phallic procession, rapt and austere,
in the woods a gymnosophist,
Drinking mead from the skull cap, to Shastas and Vedas admiring,
Minding the Koran...
(p. 55)

The poet’s character clothed in a single coat of many colors—religious bricolage. The synthesizing and Orientalizing spirit here is undeniable. Yet for Emerson and his contemporaries Buddhism was a little too alien

and their deepest Oriental influence and appreciation was in Advaita Vedanta (Hanegraaff, 1996, p. 460).

According to Rick Fields, in his study of Buddhism in America, it was through Edwin Arnold's (1879/1885) *The Light of Asia*, "more than any other book that Americans first learned the story and the teachings of the Buddha" (Fields, 1992, p. 69). Poet Oliver Wendell Holmes was "wildly enthusiastic" about the work lauding the poem as being "so lofty that there is nothing with which to compare it but the New Testament" (p. 68; a potent East/West juxtaposition). The book was immensely popular, with 80 editions and sales up to a million copies. In it the story of the Buddha was poetically retold as something of a Romantic hero and it popularized an attractive version of *nirvana*—perhaps a re-telling more palatable for Western/Christian tastes:

He is one with life
Yet lives not. He is blest, ceasing to be
OM MANI PADME, OM! The Dewdrop
slips
Into the shining sea!
(Arnold, 1879/1885, p. 275)

Here one sees a cultural and religious phenomenon crucial to the formation of New Age transpersonalism; Fields (1992) was careful to point out that this imagery of a dew drop slipping into the shining sea does not really fit with traditional Buddhism, with its concept of *anatta* and *nirvana* as extinction; rather, he said, it sounds more like a mixture of Hinduism and Christianity, with the *atman* or soul reuniting with its eternal Godhead (p. 69).

Indeed both Orientalist scholars and devout Christians were uneasy with the subtle hybridizing of *Shakyamuni* Buddha with Jesus of Nazareth—as Robert Young (1995) wrote, hybrids create "unsettling perplexities generated out of their 'disjunctive liminal space'" (p. 23). It is important to note, however, that in the mind-worlds and belief systems of many 19th century Americans the Holy Trinity of Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism were beginning to blend, their boundaries blurring—and this blasphemous breaking, joining, and blending of cosmologies in the American religious imagination, as will be shown, will eventually become the so-called esoteric core of the transpersonal movement and the New Age.

However, before the formal birth of the transpersonal movement the Transcendentalists' flair

for spontaneous mystical intuitions would powerfully reproduce in the informal consciousness-expanding movement that preceded it—as would this curious Holy Trinity of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity—as would the Romantic emphasis on the sacralisation of self, the sacralisation of nature, the sacralisation of human kindness, and the celebration of life (Heelas, 1996, p. 42). The Transcendentalists' individualist and rebellious spirit would echo resoundingly in the religious and cultural revolution that defined the 1960s and 1970s.

The Neo-Transcendentalists

The hybridizing ancestry seen in the American Romantic movement would gain huge popularity with Aldous Huxley's (1946) *The Perennial Philosophy*, in which he claimed perennialism as "immemorial and universal" (p. 9). In this book the novelist was a bit lean on theological discrimination but not on poetic license. As Brian Morris (2006) pointed out, "Aldous Huxley's famous study of mysticism... includes many references to the Buddha"; he also noted that the early Buddhist translator Edward Conze, "opens his discussion with the statement that Buddhism is a form of spirituality that is identical with other mystical teachings," a statement which Morris claimed is "extremely misleading" because Buddhism "fits uneasily into a theistic definition" (p. 45).

Nevertheless Huxley's (1946) little book has been hugely influential. A devout pacifist, he had immigrated to America just before WWII and published *The Perennial Philosophy* just at the end of that global conflict—which ended in the atomic bombing of Zen Buddhist Japan. His reputation as a sophisticated modern novelist gave impetus to widespread interest in his perennializing breakthrough. Perhaps it offered hope for a brave new world of spirit and a new dawn of human realization, after the prolonged darkness and horrors of war. Be that as it might, the universalizing seed in Huxley's vision fell onto ground well tilled by the Transcendentalists—and on either account the book became very popular and the idea of transcendental unity of religious traditions (including atheistic Buddhism) gained further impetus.

Huxley was one of two figures who stood out as seminal architects of what anthropologist Raymond Prince (1974) called "Neo-Transcendentalism" (p. 261); the other was another Englishman and émigré, theologian Allen Watts. These two mystical intellectuals had set themselves a religious task that was "one of

synthesis and assimilation,” to quote eco-psychologist Theodore Roszak (1968, p. 157). Roszak wrote that,

In much the same spirit in which Freud had set out to reclaim the dream as a form of evidence that could bear the weight of scientific speculation, Watts and Huxley wanted to recapture the value of neglected cultural traditions for which no disciplined method of study existed. The method they proposed was the systematic cultivation of states of abnormal consciousness that approached these traditions by outflanking the discursive, and logic chopping intellect. (p. 158)⁶

It is in the slippery occult space between these “neglected cultural traditions” and the states of consciousness that “approached these traditions” (p. 158) where I believe one will find the strange hybridities that beget transpersonal psychology’s so-called esoteric core. From its educated, academic, and mainstream beginnings this was an effort to out-contextualize the West’s rationalism but it soon became synonymous with a wider grass-roots spiritual/psychedelic movement that was also something of a cultural critique of Cartesian dualism and a rejection of mainstream materialistic American culture (cf. Lahood, 2008). At its center it was an individual therapeutic project that became a widespread consciousness expanding movement—and it spread like wildfire.

The consciousness expanding movement overlapped with the Beats. Beatniks (from the expression, beatific vision, the ecstatic Christian vision of God after death) were an alternative, artistic, underground movement simmering in the ‘50s that would pre-figure the ‘60s counter-culture in several important ways. With roots in the Bohemians of the 1920s some of its important literary heroes such as Allan Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Gary Snyder were influenced by the New England Romantics (Transcendentalists), with Ginsberg even evoking the Oriental style of Whitman’s (2008) epic poem, “Leaves of Grass,” in his own poem “Howl” (1956/2000; Pagalia 2003). The Beats were concerned with pushing the limits of consciousness with a blend of Buddhism and rebellion that become known as Beat Zen. As an example of this brew, the title of one of Gary Snyder’s (1957) books was *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes and Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries*.

Influenced by the somewhat non-traditional Zen of émigré D.T. Suzuki (cf. Lahood, 2008; Cunningham, 2004) Ginsberg had wanted to create a form of

“American compassion” as part of a “Western *sadhana* or ‘way’” (Heelas, 1996, p. 50). While they certainly carried forward the syncretistic Orientalizing tradition of their Transcendentalist ancestors the Beatniks added an important botanical dimension to potentate their road—the use of the entheogenic peyote cactus to catalyze their beatific visions. What these neo-Bohemians pursued through peyote was a form of psychedelic Neo-Transcendental-Bodhi-shamanism. But theirs was also an attempt to restore a relationship with “the great unknown and undiscovered peoples” (Philips, 1996, p. 28) and cannabis smoking became a way of life for many, a practice originally drawn from Afro-American jazz and blues musicians who had their own history of hybridizations such as Vodou, involving French Catholicism and African religion. In the words of Turner (1987):

For the first time since the Renaissance, when the societies of pagan antiquity had come to serve as models in the initiation of the elite, the West had grasped alien cultures as being possibly exemplary or superior to its own. The *profound Orientalizing* of our poetry, architecture, religion, and cuisine and our attempt to imitate imagined Amerindian virtues in our personal relations, dress and recreation, is a consequence of this remarkable nineteenth-century movement [Transcendentalism]. Castaneda’s Don Juan has New England ancestry. (p. 86, emphasis supplied).

The Beat was a wanderer who eschewed family and work, one who had dropped out of life for the tentative life on the road (think Kerouac); a “dharma bum” (Prince, 1974, p. 264), he lived in poverty claiming the right not to raise a family. Both Hinduism and Buddhism offered the Neo-transcendentalist (the Beat and later the Hippie) not only a religiosity based in so-called direct experience, but also something of a social model for protest and civil disobedience:

Buddhist teachings always held the potential to inspire an inner quest for salvation, rejecting in principle the legitimacy of social constraints on individual action and replacing them with the discipline of the monk’s life outside the jurisdiction of political institutions” (Mabbett, 1998, p. 19).

Also imported into the Californian psyche was the image of the unfettered Hindu *sadhu*, the “wandering holy man (*sannyasin*) who lives in complete freedom from

the normal claims of society, was fundamental to Indian religious thought” (Mabbett, 1998, p. 27). Allen Ginsberg and Ram Dass, both of Jewish heritage, donned Hindu robes and prayer beads, with the later calling himself a Hinjew—there is perhaps by now small need to point out that this linguistic carnivalesque and magical hybridity (cf. Bakhtin, 1981) is a sacrilegious blending of two hopelessly disparate religions in the American context.

According to philosopher Donald Rothberg, psychedelic substances have played a pivotal role in the recent renewal of spirituality in North America and Western Europe—but this role has gone largely unacknowledged (1993, p. 109). These substances with extremely powerful psychotropic properties were only discovered recently by the Western world and released into a somewhat virginal Western psyche. They were to spread rapidly into the seventy-million-strong Baby Boom generation affecting music, dress-style, psychology, and religious values at a time when the American psyche was bogged down in a highly (one might say devoutly) contested war in South East Asia. This unusual situation promoted what Robert Bellah (1976) described as a complex cultural and religious revolution (p. 78). In the words of Beatle John Lennon:

You say you want a revolution
Well, you know
We all want to change the world
You tell me that it's evolution
Well, you know
We all want to change the world....

You say you'll change a constitution
Well, you know
We all want to change your head
You tell me it's the institution
Well, you know
You better free your mind instead
(Lennon & McCartney, 1968, as quoted in Aldridge, 1969, p. 104)

Freeing your mind became the mantra for this inner revolution and was an allusion to Western understandings of Eastern religious ideas of transcendence, sacramental drug use, and the imperative of attaining so-called higher or cosmic consciousness (equated with peace and love as opposed to violent revolution—for which the time was also ripe according to the Rolling Stones (cf. Wyman & Coleman, 1990). It was here in the fiery crucible between

1963 when America entered the war in Vietnam, and 1974 when that war ended in America's defeat, that New Age transpersonalism was shaped. In the protesting counter-culture one finds a dizzying level of cosmological hybridization, juxtaposition, intermixing, adhesion, linkage, and the tactical blurring of boundaries between the psychotropic drug experience with multiple conjoined religious liberations (cf. Lahood, 2008).

What began simply enough with Aldous Huxley's (1954/2009) blending of mescaline with Christianity—“all I am suggesting is that the mescaline experience is what Catholic theologians call a ‘gratuitous grace’” (p. 73)—would become a frenzy of religious syncretism and hybridization. The counter-culture would affect the transgressive reality shaping act of fusing not two, but *multiple* cosmologies together and this, I would argue, ended up as American nondualism or, in other words, Wilber's (1976) perennial postulate. Robert Elwood (1973), in his classic study of magic and the occult in modern America, confirmed that while they drew from archaic symbols, the charismatic leaders in the psychedelic movement described an “innovative constellation with a life of its own” (p. 18).

James Slotkin (1956/1975) in his conversion to the Native American Church, a religion that fused ritual peyote eating with a blend of Aztec and Christian elements (Burkholder, 1974) claimed, “This concept of salvation by knowledge, to be achieved through revelation ... through Peyote ... is a doctrine similar to that of early Middle Eastern Gnosticism” (p. 100). Slotkin wrote that peyote was a sacrament that could induce mystical awareness for hours rather than moments. His early work was glowingly incorporated into Huxley's (1954) *The Doors of Perception*, in which Huxley blended the mescaline experience with the cosmological postulate *dharmakaya*—the void of Tibetan Buddhism—and Christian Grace.

In 1957 *Life* magazine printed a 17-page promotion of the visionary magic mushroom called by the Aztecs *teonanacatl* (Flesh of the Gods) hinting that the visions of poet William Blake would become available to one and all. Theologian Allan Watts in his 1962 work *Joyous Cosmology*, specifically related the suspension of the subject/object dichotomy in LSD use with the immediate awareness promoted in Zen Buddhism, considering it commensurate with the Buddhist void (p. 91) and with Richard Bucke's notion of cosmic consciousness (p. 17). Richard Bucke in 1901 had published his influential study of comparative mysticism, *Cosmic Consciousness*:

A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind, in which he held that Christ, Buddha, Plotinus, Meister Eckhart, Muhammad, and William Blake shared the same pinnacle of consciousness. Timothy Leary (1963) in *The Psychedelic Experience* categorically equated the peak of the drug experience to the Clear Light or the Void of Tibetan Buddhism.

Gestalt psychologists were also involved in psychedelic work, among them Claudio Naranjo (1973). California had seen a gestalt boom in the '50s and '60s and the Esalen Institute became the seat of the counter-culture's global therapeutic project. It is widely acknowledged that gestalt was strongly influenced by Buddhism in the form of Zen (Clarkson, 1989, p. 12). The ultimate goal of Zen (connected to the doctrine of no-self) was joined with the gestalt aim of integration of the whole personality (which again, is not really a very Zen pursuit). Buddhist terms such as emptiness, the fertile or pregnant void, and *satori* were appropriated and blended with gestalt practice (cf. Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman 1951, pp. 358-359; Van Dusen, 1975, p. 90).

Stanislav Grof (1998), an émigré and psychoanalyst from Czechoslovakia and one of the co-founders of transpersonal psychology along with Maslow, strongly paralleled his LSD cosmology and ontology with Kashmir Shaivism and evoked the Hindu concept of the *satchitananda* (p. 117) to describe what he also called the void, absolute consciousness, and the pregnant void. Grof (1977) also linked his cosmology to Maslow's peak experience (p. 158). Maslow's (1964) self-actualization theory emerged in tandem with psychedelics and he made several references to LSD and psilocybin as useful for people who could not have a peak experience otherwise (pp. 27, 80). In *Be Here Now*, a best-selling book by Tim Leary's collaborator and Hindu convert, Ram Dass (1971b) claimed access to cosmic consciousness as commensurate with the Christian idea of the kingdom of God, the Hindu notion of *satchitananda*, and the Buddhist notion of the void (p. 16).

Again, what is present in all this is a unique form of cosmic hybridity, the almost impossible joining and mixing together of diverse and divergent cosmological postulates in America brought into being largely in the American religious counter-culture. This hybridization of various religious postulates with the drug experience has a history that begins roughly in the late 1950s, and this appears to be the invisible hand that shaped what 20 years later would come to be called the New Age. As

the author of *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*, Jay Stevens (1987) had it:

Certainly the variety of interests that groups itself under the rubric "the New Age" is largely an outgrowth of the psychedelic movement, although just as an oak is much more than the seed it springs from, the New Age is far more complex and impressive than anyone could have guessed back in 1967, when the hippies thought they were creating a new world with nothing more than Love and LSD. (p. 495)

The transpersonal movement, it is to be remembered, sprang from that very same seed, as did religious or spiritual feminism (Spretnak, 1982, p. xii).⁷

The notion of consciousness evolution was also a familiar and positive trope in the religious counterculture. To quote Stevens (1987) again,

we are doomed unless a way can be found to speed up evolution, to consciously push the smart monkey to a higher level, to renew the assault on the gods, which was the secret purpose of all religions. But can we consciously evolve ourselves? LSD... was the hippie sacrament, a consciousness-expander, a tool that would push us up the evolutionary ladder." (p. 5)

The rhetoric of evolution is still very much a central trope in what religious historian Wouter Hanegraaff (1996) called "New Age perennialism" (p. 329), and in Ken Wilber's evolutionary ladder-of-consciousness transpersonalism.⁸

New Age-Transpersonalism

The transpersonal movement has substantially changed the religious menu of the Western world. Furthermore, the counter-cultural psychologies of the humanistic and transpersonal movements were "a key influence in the emergence of New Age as a social phenomena" (Morris, 2006, p. 305). But even more importantly the New Age's mystical occultism has been called the religion of postmodern globalization—which is to say that transpersonalism is either tacitly informing the religion of globalization or it *is* the unseen religion of global capitalism.

The New Age is mostly a religion for white people (Hanegraaff, 2003, p. 23) and has been called "the secret religion of the educated class" (Heelas, 1996, p. 124). It is so secret in fact that many a person apparently has no idea that he or she is part of it. Indeed many a

soul engaged in the widespread channeling phenomena, many a person practicing shamanism, many a yoga teacher and her students, many a religious tourist on his pilgrimage, or many a Western tantric practitioner, may be completely unaware that they are part of a globalizing religion with roots in the '60s consciousness-expanding movement. Often an examination of the belief systems of people who do not identify themselves with the New Age reveals deposits of New Age transpersonalism in their psychic inventories. Furthermore, and this is the thesis of the present paper, the New Age may well be contributing to the great spiritual malady of our times—spiritual narcissism.

But just what beliefs do have currency in New Age transpersonalism? This is a very difficult question to answer, but very briefly, two anthropologists David Young and Jean-Guy Goulet (1994), suggested that the New Age *is* a religion and it tends to “view reality in terms of different dimensions, and enlightenment as a movement to ever higher dimensions [of consciousness], either in this life or in lives to come” (p. 8). “Reality, according to the perennial philosophy” wrote Ken Wilber (1997), “is composed of several different but continuous dimensions” (p. 39).

New Age religion joins psychology with religion and with a millenarian impulse (the coming of: a New Age of Aquarius, Total Bliss, the Cosmic Christ, twentytwelve, etc.) and an evolutionary design—the result is a self-oriented spirituality in which the transformation of, or the attainment of, a higher inner self is of paramount importance. Furthermore, for many, the action of expanding one's consciousness is deemed an activity that can save the planet (this means of course that everyone on the planet must participate in the consciousness-raising). New Age religion advocates a perennial philosophy stressing the transcendent unity of all religions although it expresses a religious metaphysic that reflects a Hindu/Gnostic, impersonal, nondual transcendentalism (Cortright, 1997).

Likewise the transpersonal psychology movement has been called “an openly religionist psychology” (Hanegraaff, 1996, p. 51) because it has the perennial philosophy—that is, esoteric unity—as its foundation (Wulff 2000). The perennial construct is imagined as a universal spiritual reality that “strikingly resembles the Neo-Platonic Godhead or Advaitin Brahman” (Ferrer, 2002, p. 89). Like the New Age, transpersonal psychology's interests are defined by a mingling of

psychology and religion. Interest in peak experiences and expanded consciousness resulted in a strong focus on self-spirituality—the sacralisation of the inner self (Heelas, 1996). For roughly 20 years transpersonalism was dominated by, and conflated with, the religious and psychological worldview of Ken Wilber. Wilber joined the perennial philosophy with an evolutionary telos and a ladder of consciousness design with Hindu/Gnostic impersonal nondualism as end-state enlightenment.

Thus the New Age and Wilber's transpersonalism deeply mirror each other in basic structure. The basic metaphysic structuring its beliefs and practices is Eastern/Gnostic in flavor in that it holds everything is God without beginning or end, and the ultimate purpose of life is to transcend the individual self and merge with the Divine (Hollick, 2006). The Upanishads and the Vedic writings of ancient India conceive of Brahman as an impersonal world-spirit, sustaining but beyond the phenomenal world. The individual soul or *atman* is considered a manifestation of Brahman—and the Vedantic system of Shankara developed the concept of liberation (*moksha*) from the world.

An organic hybridity can easily occur between the East and West through Gnosticism and Vedanta. Morris (2006) has pointed out that Oriental religious traditions are generally seen to be different from Christianity and Occidental thought; however, the Upanishadic doctrine has close affinities with early Gnostic doctrines (p. 119). Gnostic Christians held an “absolute division between an evil material world and a good spiritual realm” (Tarnas, 1991, p. 141). Man could escape his entrapment in the gross material world through an esoteric knowledge gleaned from spiritual intuition. But, wrote Morris (2006), “in its stress on the concept of salvation by knowledge (Greek *gnosis*), in its devaluation of the mundane world as a realm of “unreality,” and in its advocacy of mystical union between the individual (soul) and this transcendental realm the Upanishadic doctrine... resembles that of Gnostic religion” (p. 119).

I would take this insight a step further and say these two religions (Western esoteric Christianity and Eastern Vedantic mysticism) have found hybridized expression in the New Age, and that this is mirrored in Wilber's transpersonalism; indeed, Jorge Ferrer (2002) claimed Wilber's transpersonal psychology is “a hybrid of Neo-Platonism and Neo-Advaita” (p. 65). Thus it can be said that the New Age and transpersonalism have historically tended to value Eastern/Gnostic ideals

of transcendence over a devalued phenomenal world for identification with a metaphysical Big Self. Such identification is traditionally based on the yogic impulse to yoke the soul to the spirit by cutting the bonds and severing the ties to the world, severing the so-called limiting desires that connect one to the world—and severing the bonds that sustain and renew relationship.

The human potential and transpersonal movements (e.g., Perls, Maslow) have also been important foundations in the materialization and affirmation of what has been called self-spirituality, an internalized form of religiosity (Heelas, 1996). The touchstones of self-spirituality were about getting in touch with inner divinity and self actualization through consciousness-expanding techniques that could deliver a peak experience and enable the aspirant to attain higher levels of consciousness—this was favorably seen as consciousness evolution (Heelas, 1996; Hanegraaff, 1996; Morris, 2006). However, it is this very program that brings us inevitably to self-spirituality's inherent problem—and what is perhaps the foundation of a growing spiritual malady in these globalizing times—that New Age transpersonalism is prone to breeding an overt focus on only one half of what could be a more relational spirituality. Put crudely, its concern is with a highly *individual* self and not with the Other.

New Age Narcissism

The foundations of this self-oriented spirituality in transpersonal psychology were laid by its founding father Abraham Maslow, who brought together Western psychology and mystical states (the term he favored was “peak-experiences”; cf. Maslow, 1964, 1968, 1969). In terms of psychology, Maslow wanted freedom from the Freudian obsession with psychopathology and a new focus on maximized psychological health or selfactualization. In terms of religion, Maslow believed that traditional religious contexts obscured or retarded a universal core experience and skewed the potential of the peak experiences, and he wanted to “dissociate such [peak states] from their traditional religious contexts” (Wulff, 2000, pp. 422-423). Maslow is undoubtedly an important pioneer—but there is a danger here because in Maslow's peak experiences the emphasis was on “the individual's experience over, if not to the exclusion of, the reality that is encountered” (Wulff, 2000, p. 397). This sounds quite similar to Donald Evans' (1993) description of monistic subjectivity as a narcissistic mode of consciousness: “In general, everything outside of me

has significance only in relation to me; what concerns me is not this or that reality but my experience of it” (p. 42). In a discussion of justice in Maslow's motivational model, Anthony Taylor (2006) pointed out that “the state of self actualization or psychological perfection that Maslow outlined, was supremely self-centered” (p. 184):

Maslow described self-actualization in “ethereal terms, showing a benign indifference to the outer world of reality while fostering internally a state of Nirvana of sublime spirituality... such a state of existential withdrawal... cannot be construed has anything but a major symptom of avoidance, inadequacy, and selfishness that is uncharacteristic in mature people. (2006, p. 185)⁹

Self-spirituality emerged in Western culture where the ego is historically “constructed dissociatively from nature, community, ancestors” (Kremer, 1996, p. 46) and, as such, is an ego already prone to rigid dualism, isolation, solipsism, and self-centeredness. Self-spirituality coupled with the logic of “individual competitiveness and consumer capitalism” can result in what is called “spiritual narcissism” (Ferrer, 2002, pp. 34-36)—in other words, extreme egocentrism spiritualized.

The New Age has been described as spiritual consumerism (Arweck, 2002) in a pick-and-mix spiritual marketplace (Roof, 1999). Once counter-cultural, the New Age sanctifies capitalism (Heelas, 1996) and promulgates a search or journey for prosperity and a means to wealth (Morris, 2006). Spirituality has in a sense become a commodity, a fetish linked to purchasing power and economically based self-esteem. Lavish spending on spiritual commodities (e.g., expensive New Age group events, spiritual tourism, or showy donations to Gurus buy prestige and *participation mystique*, without the transmutative suffering required to reduce narcissistic alienation). This kind of conspicuous consumption may also be intended to create envy in others; there is perhaps nothing of more value to the spiritual egoist than the envy of others.

Using Donald Evans' (1993) account of spirituality as “a basic transformative process in which we uncover and let go of our narcissism so as to surrender into the Mystery out of which everything continually arises” (p. 4), Ferrer (2002) argued that “narcissistic modes of consciousness... preclude a genuine availability to others” (p. 36). To quote Evans (1993), “Where love

inclines and enables us to engage in the mutual giving and receiving of 'I-Thou' encounters with other human beings, narcissism's self-enclosure precludes such intimate encounters" (p. 207).

The problem is self-centeredness, and the inability to care about the other—but the paradox here is that immersion in self-spirituality can fail to transform these dynamic defenses and spiritual growth simply becomes another narcissistic activity. Inner spiritual experiences and practices (sought for therapeutic ends) are easily appropriated by the ego in a form of narcissistic survival (Ferrer, 2002) in what has been called spiritual materialism (cf. Cortright, 1997). Here the person dons the spiritual garb and talks the spiritual language but ducks the appropriate transmutitive suffering—her self-serving continues—a wolf in lamb's clothing. Ultimately, this means her self-denial and suffering are *prolonged* rather than transformed because the spiritual aspirant mistakes "spiritualized self-gratification" for authentic self-fulfillment (Battista, 1996, p. 255) which is the opposite of authentic spirituality.¹⁰

Narcissistic spirituality, then, is the use of an inflated spiritual persona which claims itself to be spiritually developed (evolved, advanced, or higher) as a means of constraining, controlling, and exploiting other persons (Battista, 1996), a dynamic which others naturally feel as oppressive and in my opinion should rightly oppose with healthy human anger.¹¹ Adherents of the New Age claim they are overcoming "attachment to self" for altruistic purposes, but this "defense allows an apologist for 'higher consciousness'" (p. 255) with its implicit claim to psychological superiority. The New Age votary, self-elevated in this way, has trouble recognizing, owning, and working through her subtly manipulative, deceptive, and dominating side. Another related defense is spiritual bypass or transpersonal rationalization wherein the person reframes his compulsive self-serving behaviors in spiritual terms (Cortright, 1997). A similar strategy is to invent a spiritual facade, and cleave to it, in the hope of annihilating inner suffering.

The New Ager's psychological narcissism (a result of primal repression [cf. Washburn, 1995] or lack of mirroring [cf. Kohut, 1971]) is accentuated through: (1) perennialism: the notion of an inner esoteric core truth (Self, essence, etc.) that resides at the heart of all religions—a hybridity that allows the New Ager to claim spiritual authority for herself; (2) New Age ethnocentrism—a conviction of cultural superiority; and closely related (3)

religious narcissism—religious traditions almost always raise their aspired states over other systems, and this is adapted into a form of narcissism where the New Ager mimics the authoritarianism within myriad traditions by elevating his cult, group, guru, tradition, or practice as higher up the chain of consciousness than others. This threefold structuring builds a spiritual facade trapping the authentic person and *participatory consciousness* itself within an alienating, self-separating shell.¹² In the following section I explore how the New Age spiritual ego comes into being.¹³

Cosmological Détente¹⁴

According to Christopher Lasch (1978) in his well known work, *The Culture of Narcissism*, increasing hopelessness in the face of the global disasters of our times has produced a form of narcissistic selfpreoccupation (Ferrer, 2002, p. 35). During the past 100 years the Western "trust in human progress, as a way toward universal peace and happiness, was progressively abandoned due to its empirical disconfirmation by a number of bloody wars" (Introigne, 2003, p. 65). If two world wars, ongoing wars against communism and now terrorism, and the shadow of a horrific third world war destroyed the notion of a utopian paradise of universal peace and prosperity through progress, it also gave birth to a more individualized, personalized, and privatized utopia. After WWI it was held that positive thinking might still win the day through the attainment of a "higher state of peace" (p. 65). Massimo Introigne pointed out that while all this could be easily be construed as wishful thinking, a convergence of Christian New Thought and secular positive thinking coalesced in the work, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, by Norman Vincent Peale (1952), which turned out to be one of the best-sellers of the 20th century—and positive thinking is now a central dogma of the New Age.

For the 1960s religious counter-culture the American Dream, messianic and unchallenged as it was (Bellah, 1976), had dissipated into an apocalyptic nightmare of Biblical proportions. For many the wisdom of putting blind faith or trust in dualistic science and exclusivist Christianity had also been disconfirmed in an atmosphere of moral turmoil, rampant materialism, and violence both internal and external. According to the eminent sociologist Robert Bellah (1976), the "counter cultural criticism of American society is related to a belief in *nondualism*" (p. 347, emphasis supplied). As one researcher into the emerging new religious consciousness

put it, “previous beliefs had not worked; people were searching for a *spiritual absolute* that would lead them beyond war, strife and chaos” (Johnson, 1976, p. 34, emphasis supplied).¹⁵

If the counter-public of America (and beyond) could find this spiritual absolute, then a New Age of peace and love might dawn, but only if the people could awaken from their dualistic dream—a seemingly commendable desire. The coming New Age would be a psychological one arriving through the “transformed consciousness of millions of people” (Johnson, 1976, p. 34). Thus, if the counter-culture was unified at all, it was in an “obsession with personal experience... each individual was urged to pursue freely a personal state of ecstasy” (p. 42), and this program would, so the dual logic went, end the war and save the planet. Yet this cherished spiritual absolute would have to be found in an amalgamating inclusivity, a hybrid—One absolute Truth—to avoid the chimera of exclusivism that was and is central to Christianity. It would somehow have to be inclusive of all truths, and this amalgamation would be billed as arriving through consciousness evolution. In this one arrives at the basic formula of the New Age:

The two main tenets of “classic” New Age were, firstly, that a golden age of higher consciousness was manifesting itself on Planet earth; and secondly, that it was possible to co-operate with this happy manifestation without the need for a dogmatic creed or formal structures. (Introvigne, 2003, p. 60)

Or as Paul Heelas (1996) put it:

New Agers are averse to traditions, with their dogmas, doctrines and moralities. Yet New Agers continually draw on traditions—shamanic to Buddhist. The solution to this seeming paradox lies in the fact that New Agers are perennialists. Before explaining this apparent paradox, let us dwell for a moment on the perennialized nature of the New Age. Unity firmly prevails over diversity. Having little or no faith in the external realm of traditional belief, New Agers can ignore apparently significant differences between religious traditions, dismissing them as due to historical contingencies and ego-operations. But they do have faith in that wisdom which is experienced as lying at the heart of the religious domain as a whole. From the detraditionalized stance of the New Age what matters is the “arcane,” the “esoteric,” the

“hidden wisdom,” the “inner or secret tradition,” the “ancient wisdom.” And, it can be added, New Agers attach equal importance—because it is an aspect of the spiritual realm as a whole—to the essential unity of the human species, scorning nationality or ethnically differentiated modes of being. (p. 27)

Now it is possible to return to Abraham Maslow the founding father of the self-spirituality movements (humanistic and transpersonal) for the similarities:

Among humanistic perspectives on mystical experience, no others are as well known as Maslow’s (1964, 1968). In the course of his famous studies of self-actualizing persons, Maslow noticed that it was common for these exceptional individuals to report having had mystical experiences.... Maslow called them peak experiences, a term that other psychologists have adopted as well. In describing peak experiences, Maslow reiterated the ecstatic feelings of egoless fusion with the world, of wholeness and integration, and of effortless existence in the here and now.... Eager to make such experiences and their putative benefits widely available in an increasingly secular world, Maslow argued (1964) that the traditional religious contextualizations of this intrinsic core of experience serve not only to distort and suppress it but also to create divisiveness where otherwise there might be profound accord. According to Maslow, by studying and promoting this core outside of its traditional contexts, humanistic psychology could revolutionize human existence by making the peak experience and its values the ultimate goals of education, if not of every other social institution as well. (Wulff 2000, 422-423, emphasis supplied).

For Maslow religious traditions created divisiveness, even war—it is to be remembered that some of Maslow’s most influential works (e.g., 1964, 1968, 1971) were created during the Vietnam War years; in fact Maslow (1908-1970) published throughout WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. At the Esalen Institute in California during a seminar there Maslow declared that he had “the feeling of historical urgency... that there’s a fire that we have to put out. The world is burning. It’s literally possible there [will be] atom bombs next week” (Hoffman, 1988, p. 293). Maslow (1964) urged his readers toward an individual, inner, privatized

religious experience that went beyond, but included, all traditions—in his words,

this private religious experience is shared by all the great world religious traditions including the atheistic ones like Buddhism, Taoism, Humanism, or Confucianism. (p. 28)

Ferrer (2002) in his important deconstruction of subtle Cartesian dualism in transpersonal theory (specifically Maslow's perennialism) wrote: "To *lump* together these different awarenesses into one spiritual liberation or referent reachable by all traditions may be profoundly distorting" (p. 148, emphasis supplied). Ferrer's argument ostensibly has to do with Buddhism but it is very much applicable to the more pertinent theme he is tackling—the validity of Maslow's presumed core. From a contextual position (e.g., Katz, 1978) this conflation is profoundly distorting, on one level, but this term "lump together," while certainly not very elegant, points to a much stranger, trickster-like cultural and religious process in the American context—one of hybridization and amalgamation—which, I believe, had an egalitarian, anti-racist, anti-hegemonic, anti-essentialist intention. It is a conflation based on respect for other traditions and a desire to join with them. I believe this amalgam/hybridity was originally used as an occult fetish with which to democratize religious traditions. The process of hybridization, wrote Nestor Garcia Canclini (2005), "can serve to work democratically with differences, so that history is not reduced to wars between cultures.... We can choose to live in a state of war or in a state of hybridization" (p. xxxi).

American One-Truthism, in reality an unrecognized and complex religious hybridization glossed as perennialism (Lahood, 2008), gained acceptance and popularity because, at face value, it was a defense (by amalgamation) against the force of religious exclusivism, ideological domination, and what Ferrer (2002) has called spiritual ranking (pp. 159-162): the way religious traditions, groups, or creeds subtly belittle one-another by placing their aspired ultimate states above others. According to Ferrer (2009), the elevation of "one's favored tradition or spiritual choice as superior" is itself a form of "spiritual narcissism" (p. 140) and which appears to be inculcated into religious cultures as ethnocentrism (a cultural version of egocentrism). Americanized One-Truthism was/is cherished by hippies, transpersonalists, New Agers,

and contemporary, grass-roots Western Buddhists alike because it was also seen as a simple solution to spiritual competition and one-up-manship (cf. Cortright, 1997, p. 31). If it is believed (and performed) that all religions are inherently the same—that all religions are rivers running into the same transcendental ocean—then this promotes the relaxing and easing of tensions between competing groups or even warring religions (Lahood, 2008).

Eternal Fascism

There are many examples of this subversive credo, for example, Roman Catholic Trappist monk and anti-war peace activist Thomas Merton, who nicknamed himself Rabbi Vedanta (another Hinxew hybrid), "argued that Zen meditation shatters the false self and restores us to our paradisiacal innocence which preceded the fall of man" (Lipski, 1985, p. 243). The terror of deconstructive agency is apparent in Merton's speech act—it is a form of sorcery (or shamanism), the term Rabbi Vedanta itself an impossible mix, discombobulating yet joining Catholicism, Judaism, and Hinduism—his person becomes the bi-polar trickster, the disjunctive, liminal, shamanistic space.

To take another example, here again is theologian Alan Watts (1961) in *Psychotherapy East and West*:

Ideally and theoretically the church as the Body of Christ is the entire universe, and because in Christ "there is neither Greek nor Jew, bond nor free" [Galatians 3:28], membership in Christ could mean liberation from maya and its categories. It could mean that one's conventional definition and classification is not one's real self, that "I live, yet no longer I; but Christ lives in me." (p. 12)

This is a Christian-Hinduism which erases and assimilates the "Greek" and the "Jew" while exploding the borders of Hinduism and Christianity by forcing/marrying them together. Underlying these subversive and universalizing tactics, were, I believe, sincere attempts at a kind of mystical democratization, a leveler of the spiritual playing field, and a disavowal of privileged, namely Christian, religious perspectives. On these grounds there seems to be something inherently well intentioned behind the unifying mind. However, if tilted toward the direction of one absolute or universal spiritual strand, then it may also point to the resurgence of spiritual ethnocentrism, essentialism, narcissism, and

totalitarianism seemingly inherent in human beings and their religious traditions or formulations.

The statements above by Merton and Watts deserve careful scrutiny because buried within their hybridity may be the seeds of what semiotician and anthropologist Umberto Eco (1995) has called Eternal Fascism. Taking Merton's example: Zen meditation returns his readers to the state of prelapsarian purity (cf. Lahood, 2008) in a Catholic-Zen hybrid cosmology—the marriage of Zen practice with Christian soteriology. In a sense this throws traditional Zen—with its emptiness, void, nirvana, sunyata—and Catholicism—with its theistic cosmos, eternal soul, and triune godhead—into disarray, yet binds the two traditions as if they were one. It is this kind of joining toward which Eco expressed suspicion. He wrote:

In spite of some fuzziness regarding the difference between various historical forms of fascism, I think it is possible to outline a list of features that are typical of what I would like to call Ur-Fascism, or Eternal Fascism. These features cannot be organized into a system; many of them contradict each other, and are also typical of other kinds of despotism or fanaticism. But it is enough that one of them be present to allow fascism to coagulate around it.

Traditionalism is of course much older than fascism. Not only was it typical of counterrevolutionary Catholic thought after the French revolution, but it was born in the late Hellenistic era, as a reaction to classical Greek rationalism. In the Mediterranean basin, people of different religions (most of the faiths indulgently accepted by the Roman pantheon) started dreaming of a revelation received at the dawn of human history. This revelation, according to the traditionalist mystique, had remained for a long time concealed under the veil of forgotten languages—in Egyptian hieroglyphs, in the Celtic runes, in the scrolls of the little-known religions of Asia.

This new culture had to be *syncretistic*. Syncretism is not only, as the dictionary says, “the combination of different forms of belief or practice;” such a combination must tolerate contradictions. Each of the original messages contains a sliver of wisdom, and although they seem to say different or incompatible things, they all are nevertheless alluding, allegorically, to the same primeval truth.

As a consequence, there can be no advancement of learning. Truth already has been spelled out once and for all, and we can only keep interpreting its obscure message.

If you browse in the shelves that, in American bookstores, are labeled New Age, you can find there even Saint Augustine, who, as far as I know, was not a fascist. But combining Saint Augustine and Stonehenge—that is a symptom of Ur-Fascism. (pp. 57-59)

The question is this: in their attempts to combine and join these religions together do Watts, Merton, and Ram Dass, with the help of many others, unwittingly plant the seed of spiritual fascism? New Age perennialism flourishes because it is a source of visible and invisible hybridization—a process that can exhaust the authoritative voice within each tradition by a complex process of joining and cancellation. But each hybrid also carries the forces of totalitarianism, essentialism, and resistance—and power configurations arise, assimilate, and re-assert. For example, *A Course in Miracles* (Anonymous, 1976/1992), something of a New Age gospel or Bible (rightly appraised as Christianized Vedanta and a form of nondual perennialism) extolled a blatant assimilation/colonization process with all the arrogance and gusto of 19th century Christian missionaries:

The Name of Jesus Christ as such is but a symbol. But it stands for love that it is not of this world. It is a symbol that is safely used *as a replacement for the many names of all the gods* to which you pray. (Manual for Teachers, p. 59, emphasis supplied)

One can only wonder how the Muslim or Buddhist populations would respond to this teaching. This appears to be a thinly disguised form of spiritual totalitarianism and New Age imperialism, carefully removing itself from its culturally relative context and human responsibility by claiming metaphysical authority, while brutally effacing all other gods—the term “safely” brimming with conceit and subterfuge.

The Course's spiritual imperialism is anticipated in Rudolf Steiner (2010), who, in a public lecture on July 13, 1914, said of his self-proclaimed spiritual science:

Thus it becomes clear to us through spiritual science that the being whom we call Christ is to be recognized as the center of life on earth, that

the Christian religion is the ultimate religion for the earth's whole future. Spiritual science shows us particularly that the pre-Christian religions outgrow their one-sidedness and come together in the Christian faith. (n.p.)

Or as Wilber would have it—all religions will eventually outgrow themselves and alight at the station of neo-Advaitin nondualism. Or as the Dalai Lama would have it—emptiness, sunyata, or final spiritual enlightenment can only be attained within his *dGe lugs* school of Tibetan Buddhism (D'Costa, 2000)—“a view that he believes all other Buddhists and religious people will eventually accept” (Ferrer, 2009, p. 140).

Nestor Canclini (1995/2005) observed that in the vertigo inducing worlds of hybridization the human imagination becomes “afraid of losing itself” and historical movements, both hegemonic and subaltern, “time and again institute essentializations of a particular state of hybridization” (p. xxii). This leads inevitably to Ken Wilber's ethnocentric paradise, and may explain Wilber's break from the more relaxed universalism of Huxley, Watts, Maslow, Grof, Ram Dass, and others in early psychedelic/transpersonal movement, to his more essentialized, hierarchical hybrid in which he ranked his nondualism above the other contenders. Malcolm Hollick in his *Science of Oneness* (2006) explained:

The perennial philosophy claims to be tolerant and inclusive of all religions. Yet it establishes a single spiritual truth against which all traditions are judged. Those that do not match its criteria are rejected as inauthentic, merely exoteric, or as representing lower levels of spiritual insight. For instance, according to Ken Wilber's influential ladder of consciousness development, the Eastern concept of nonduality is the highest form of spirituality, whereas the Sufi and Christian traditions of union with an impersonal One come a rung lower at the Causal level. Platonic archetypes and Christian gnosis are a further rung down at the Subtle level, while the mystery religions and many indigenous faiths are relegated to the Psychic. (p. 341)

It is because of this tilt toward assimilationist and totalitarian one-truthism that I suggest the One-Truth of New Age transpersonalism and its spiritual ego be gently but firmly consigned to the funeral pyre in the hope that from the ashes a more relational cosmos will emerge.

Relational Spirituality, Part 2

Uncooked Seeds

Ultimately, with Eastern nondualism occupying the top rung of consciousness evolution according to Ken Wilber and the New Age, one ends up with a very conservative religion which eradicates the many spiritual tastes in the name of the One—a religion that smothers diversity, ceases to evolve or change, and a religious vision which is already prescribed by world-denying Eastern mystics (Lahood, 2008; Hanegraaff, 2003; Heron, 1998). As Hanegraaff (2003) concluded, the New Age begins to look like a replica of the exclusivist, dominating, one-way Christian religion it was trying to escape (2003). Again, the seeds of this psycho-spiritual malady were sown in the religious counter culture that gave birth to transpersonal psychology and the New Age. Let me present here a small case study of one of the most beloved sons of this movement and an important proponent of naive universalism: Baba Ram Dass.

Richard Alpert (Ram Dass) had been a teacher of psychology at Harvard and along with Dr. Timothy Leary began research into psychedelics there in 1961. After being relieved of his post there he eventually travelled to India in 1967 and came under the tutelage of a Hindu guru Neem Karoli Baba, after which he wrote a best-selling book *Be Here Now* (1971b). In this book the term cosmic consciousness joined Christianity's kingdom of heaven with the satchitananda of Hinduism and the void of Buddhism as something that could be realized through various catalysts or practices:

Unless you start again, become that trusting, open surrendered being the energy can't come in, that is in the Kingdom of Heaven. The Energy, it is the same thing—Cosmic Consciousness...its all the same trip, its all the same and any trip you want to take leads to the same place...you can get there by tuning in...you can get there by turning on...you can get there by having baby. (p. 16)

Ram Dass was not only an important charismatic leader in the American psychedelic movement, he was an early contributor to the transpersonal psychology movement, and he can be seen to represent the Easternizing spirit of America in these times—he has been credited as “one of the most influential spiritual teachers of our time” (Walsh & Grob, 2005, p. 207). Here is Ram Dass (1974) as he spoke of his religious evolution and the emergence of what appears to be a curious universal amalgam—an

amalgam that, seemingly, will become the problematic esoteric core of the New Age:

I am not a Hindu. I am a Western, Jewish boy from Boston who has studied Hinduism. I also find the same thing in the Greek Orthodox Christians and in the Hasidic movement in Judaism. I find it in all mystical traditions: in the Sufi, in the Egyptian, and certainly in St. Teresa and St. John and so on. So that, I find it is in a way the amalgam of all this stuff that is allowing me to be what I am doing right at this moment. (p. 54, emphasis supplied)

One hears an echo of Whitman's joyous poet (in the woods, trimming the lamps, shatas admirant... minding the Koran). However, it is important to note carefully that with Ram Dass's globalizing statements and the subtle marriage of Judaism with Hinduism, with Greek Orthodoxy, Sufism, Egyptian, Christian mysticism, and Buddhism, that a third space of enunciation (cf. Bhabha, 1994) is articulated in the form of an esoteric amalgam. Ram Dass' simple synopsis was presented at the Menninger Foundation in 1970 during talks on LSD and spirituality. These talks were published in early volumes of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (1970, 1971a). Later they were published in a book, *The Only Dance There Is* (1974), with an image of the Dancing Shiva Nataraj on the front cover. Two editors wrote in an opening statement:

Historically, one spiritual system after another has been assimilated in another culture in such a way as to modify the form of discipline without diminishing its essence. In this respect, Ram Dass has been especially effective in helping Americans and other Westerners feel "at home" in what has been considered a "foreign" tradition. (Sutich & Fadiman, 1974)

If I understand this statement correctly, Americans (nominally Judeo-Christians) and other Westerners are to be assimilated into Hinduism—or is it an Americanization/Christianization of Hinduism? Slippery stuff this hybridity. Nevertheless, out of all of these religions—monistic, theistic and atheistic—Ram Dass is adamant that "higher consciousness is a state of unity" (p. 8), and that this unity must be nondual: "The goal of these efforts [practices] is a nondualistic state. That is, the place you are reaching for is a state where there is only one. Not one versus anything else; just one. It all is.

It's one. A nondualistic state" (p. 31). This seems to be the cherished spiritual absolute sought by the counterculture—One Truthism.

Certainly with Ram Dass one senses a great appreciation of the other culture's mysticism and a respect and celebratory approach to non-Western cultures. Yet this very act can suggest an appropriation, assimilation, and colonization (Lahood, 2008; Hanegraaff, 2003). In the following passage Ram Dass spoke in his open hearted and enthusiastic way of a cultural joining between hippies and Hopi Indians:

I went as a representative of the hippie community of San Francisco to meet the Hopi Indian elders to arrange a Hopi-Hippie Be-In in Grand Canyon. We wanted to honor their tradition and affirm our common respect for the land. As you can guess, this was during the sixties. (Ram Dass & Gorman, 2005, p. 7)

He then wrote that the Hopi did not want to be honored by them and, according to the *Berkeley Barb*, "the Indians were not impressed and the tribal spokesman brushed them off" (Matusow, 1984, p. 298).

Scholar of Native North American religions Luan Fautack Makes Marks (2007) pointed out in her discussion of the Mysterious *Wakan Tanka* and its conflation with a Western concept the Great Spirit, that "perennialist scholars seized on the opportunity to emphasize Wakan Tanka as monolithic Great Spirit. This provided more respectability for the Lakota religion, but conflated the manifold mysterious into the One" (p. 34). This is exactly the problem that besets the New Age: by perennializing their cosmos and consciousness (one truth, essential-self, etc.) the world's colorful religious cultures are co-opted into one monolithic nondual ocean—drowning the many multi-hued mysteries in a spiritually imperialistic One-ness. It is little wonder that the Hopi would not join with the Hippie and that the Lakota Indians published a declaration of war on the New Age in 1993 for disrespecting its traditions (Hanegraaff, 2003, pp. 22-23).

Thus it would seem that dedicated and intelligent therapists, spiritual healers, and important charismatic spokesmen for the transpersonal psychology movement such as Ram Dass or Stanislav Grof seem to be convinced that unity is to be preferred over diversity.¹⁶ Here is an example of perennialist Grof chastising Ken Wilber for what he appeared to perceive as the mistake of cultural specificity:

In his account of cosmogenesis or consciousness involution, Ken closely follows the highly culturespecific archetypal map from the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Bardo Thodol (Evans & Wentz, 1960), rather than creating a more general and universal description that would be applicable in any cultural and historical context. (Grof, 1998, p. 90)

Grof seems wholly correct in criticizing Wilber for his attempt to reduce the world's religions to Tibetan culture's view of cosmogenesis and to privilege it above others. But he then makes a plea for a universal cosmic schemata, one that can cover, as it were, the whole of the world's religious history—and here Grof falls into the trap of subtle universalism because while such a scheme eradicates Wilber's spiritual ranking and undermines his basic culturecentric claim (which holds up Tibetan culture as a model for all cultures), it at the same time ends up calling for yet another species of ethnocentrism and another form of totalitarianism.

New Age Authoritarianism

One inherent problem with the universalizing tactic is that it feeds spiritual narcissism and New Age ethnocentrism: it sets up the New Ager to feel as if she has evolved beyond the older traditions. Thus, Hanegraaff (1996) wrote that the New Ager can “reject all exoteric religions... because they *fall short of universal esoteric wisdom*” (p. 328). In doing so she sees herself, paradoxically, as more advanced than traditional religions by laying claim to a superior vision of spiritual wholeness (see Lahood, 2008; Hanegraaff, 2003). This can create for the New Age global villager a somewhat ethnocentric and conceited spiritual outlook. Sociologist Paul Heelas (1996) has observed:

So, what has perennialization to do with how New Agers treat religious traditions? The perennialized viewpoint involves going beyond traditions as normally conceived, going beyond differences to find—by way of experience—the inner, esoteric core. This means that New Agers can “draw” on tradition whilst bypassing their explicit, authoritative doctrines and dogmas, and moral codes. Instead, in detraditionalized fashion, they can discern—by way of their own experience, their gnosis or experiential knowledge—those spiritual truths that lie at the heart of, say, Vedanta or shamanism. And although these truths—by virtue

of their intrinsic nature—exercise authority, they do not curtail the authority of the New Ager's Self: the truths within the “traditions” and within the New Ager are the same. (p. 28)¹⁷

Participatory theorist John Heron (1998, 2006) has placed careful and useful emphasis on what he calls *authoritarian religion* and its correlate, *spiritual projection* (onto external authority/s) within religious traditions. However, Heron does not attend specifically to the non-traditional New Age spiritual ego and its unique brand of religious authoritarianism. Heron's (1998) claim, for example, that the current (perennialist) Hindu-Buddhist cosmology is nothing beyond a “revelation only relevant to its original context” (p. 12) does not seem to recognize the emergence of a novel and complex religious formation (Lahood, 2008 p. 166). No doubt many in the New Age run spiritual projections on traditions, or cults, or leading lights (e.g., the Dalai Lama, Rajneesh, or Eckhart Tolle) as suggested in Heron's thesis. However New Agers typically do not stay long in authoritarian or traditional groups—and a central aspect of the New Age and contemporary spirituality its antiauthoritarian stance (Morris, 2006; Heelas, 1996; Hanegraaff, 1996).¹⁸ Indeed, according to sociologist Donald Stone (1976) in times of rapid change such as the current globalization, people join these religious groups in a maneuver that enables them to assume the “special status” of a “member of the elect” (p. 114)—in the New Age it is thus perhaps less a case of spiritual projection than it is a form of spiritual elitism.¹⁹

There is nothing unusual, said Stone (1976), for people to seek a new authority to compensate when their worlds are dislocated—a term often used to describe the effect of globalization. What is new, and perhaps crucial, is the reliance on an “authoritative basis of direct experience” without reference to an outside power (p. 113). This trend is an epochal revolutionary movement away from conformity to an external higher truth toward what is instead held to be a subjective turn (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Thus the New Ager does not really go in for tradition. Hanegraaff (1996) stated for example that

Although New Age adherents tend to have a positive view of enlightened “masters” or gurus who impart insights to their pupils, the idea of being dependent of somebody else (rather than on

one's own inner self) for spiritual illumination is not congenial to New Age individualism. (p. 400)

As Heelas (1996) has pointed out, the New Ager largely *bypasses* tradition (p. 28) giving herself an unassailable position of spiritual authority and superiority by drawing on the religious capital within each so-named ancient tradition while at the same time disavowing traditional authority. This means the New Ager does *not* project onto religious authority—he *is* the authority. He will not claim membership with religious institutions but rather with “Shelley’s ‘white radiance’, which transmitted through ‘the dome of many-colored glass’ expresses itself in the world in the multifarious imagery of the institutionalized religions” (Prince, 1974, p. 256). Nevertheless, this white person’s light supposedly shining through all religions is still a culturally relative position brought about by globalization, and, as has been seen, it was not only the light that gained ascendancy in transpersonal New Ageism but a particular species of Easternized nondualism. Thomas Dean (1984), reviewing the perennialist position wrote:

A transcendent referent nondualistically conceived (with the help of language drawn from Hindu, Buddhist, or mystical traditions), in which all culturally derived religious differences are ultimately transcended.... This transcendent reality is what is already and always there, and our knowing of it, which involves a mode of thinking that transcends our ordinary mode of cognition, is similarly a knowledge (gnosis) that is “already there.” Knowing is primarily a matter of clarifying, of “removing the veil of darkness that obscures,” this primordial truth. (p. 213)

The dichotomy between light and darkness can very easily translate into New Age hubris. If I do not locate myself in what might be called a dissociated nirvanic defense, if I refuse to pay cult to the esoteric light of New Age Oneness/nondualism, or if I am critical thereof, then I can be swiftly relegated to some dark/samsaric/unawakened realm—such is the nature of interpersonal one-upping.

This hybrid esoteric core garners some of its emotional power and authoritative force by proclaiming that its One Truth is a pure, pre-existing or given truth, a truth always already there—in life and presumably in

death—awaiting our evolutionary arrival. Charismatic authority is also secured through the idea that it is a truth that blows in from every direction, that it represents the world’s great wisdom traditions (Hammer, 2003). By way of example, consider the following proclamation by perennialist philosopher Georg Feuerstein in a work on Tantric yoga:

As the great spiritual traditions of the world affirm, truth is always one, though there are many pathways to it. Truth is Reality, which is singular, what is relative are our angles of perception and comprehension (Feuerstein 1998, 42-43).²⁰

Affirmations of this perspectivist version of perennialism (Ferrer 2002) are numerous among New Agers and transpersonalists. Feuerstein’s perspective, like Shelley’s, is nevertheless relative to its context which is, inescapably, a product of globalization. Feuerstein’s claim on the nature of Truth gains authoritative power not only from its proclaimed source in the juxtaposition of great wisdom traditions, but also in the subtle promotion that this One-Truth reality comes from all around the globe.

A consideration of the religious theme of life after death can serve to outline how perennialism comes into being. Adopting a contextualist position (cf. Katz, 1978), Olav Hammer (2003) noted that the more one looks at “the structures, interpretations, ideological uses and narrative details of the various speculations on life after death the more they appear to be unique. Hindu reincarnation is not the same as kabbalistic reincarnation” (p. 52), and so on.²¹ “However,” he continued, “for a synthesizing mind intent on finding a perennial philosophy underlying the divergent traditions, there is ample material from which to synthesize, and every opportunity to claim that the divergences are insignificant details” (p. 52). This act also leads to the disembedding of the wisdom traditions:

Bits and pieces of non-Western traditions are disembedded from their original religious contexts. Through an incessant bricolage carried out by leading religious virtuosi, these fragments are reembedded in a modern, Western esoteric religious setting. The principal mechanism of doing this, is by forcing these exotic elements into a fairly rigid, pre-existing interpretive mould. Thereby, to the

believer, the same message does indeed seem to come from everywhere. (p. 56)

This act of forcing together is cosmological hybridization. In the writings of Ken Wilber (1996), whom many see as the leading transpersonal-perennialnondual virtuoso, one finds exactly this procedure:

This is the phenomenon of transcendence—or enlightenment, or liberation, or *moskha*, or *wu* or *satori*. This is what Plato meant by stepping out of the cave of shadows and finding the Light of Being; for Einstein’s “escaping the delusion of separateness.” This is the aim of Buddhist meditation, of Hindu Yoga and Christian mystical contemplation.... there is nothing spooky, occult or strange in any of this—and this is the perennial philosophy. (p. 9)

If Wilber’s perennial philosophy is a site for disembedded and re-embedded spiritual objects (cf. Giddens, 1991), it is also a product of what Hammer called *synonymization*, a process which lends the writer a mask of authority. Synonymization is linked to a psychological process in which one is invited to “return to the trust in experts” (Hammer, 2003, p. 55). The crafty use of exotic words (e.g., *moksha*, *wu*, *satori*) in English texts expresses a double meaning and gives an “air of authenticity” hinting that the author is “cognizant with the writings of an exotic culture” (or many cultures) or at the least a grasp of “specialized and arcane vocabulary” (p. 55) not accessible to the layperson. Hammer pointed out that

the sheer incomprehensibility and untranslatability of the terminology ensures that the reader will have little choice but to accept the interpretations of the writer. To what extent is it reasonable to claim that *mana* equals *prana*? The average reader has little possibility to evaluate the author’s claims” (pp. 55-56).

This all goes to the securing of charismatic, religious, and esoteric authority.

The supposed esoteric core of perennialist transpersonal psychology is thus exposed as more of a trick of the light or sleight of hand than an eternal truth—a religious globalization, a One-Truthism that has more in common with authoritarian religion than it does with an envisioned New Age paradise. Yet even if perennialism is thrown onto the philosophical funeral pyre, this cultural tradition of cosmological hybridization runs deep in America’s cultural psyche (and

beyond), and many remain bound to it. Nevertheless, with New Age transpersonalism’s paradise unbound, spiritual alternatives become available to the grassroots contemporary spiritual community which are perhaps closer to the original New Age values that existed before the upsurge of its more narcissistic or totalitarian elaborations—values such as collaboration, healing, and participation in divinity. The recovery of Martin Buber’s relational spirituality becomes a possible alternative—perhaps even a crucial one.

The Participatory Turn and Relational Spirituality

Recently, with what has been called the participatory turn in transpersonal psychology (e.g., Ferrer 2002; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008; Heron, 1992, 1998, 2006; Lahood, 2007), there has been a call for a more relational spirituality in transpersonalism in which human needs, interests, and identity—is the *linga franca*.

Prior to this proposed participatory turn Brant Cortright (1997) was straightforward about the transpersonal cosmos:

The fundamental assumption of transpersonal psychology is that our true identity is more than a psychological ego or self but a spiritual being. This spiritual context, founded on the two perennial traditions of theism and nondualism see the psychological healing and growth of this self as part of its journey toward realizing its identity with its spiritual source. (p. 230)

Here, according to this statement, the axiomatic, fundamental, and first principle of transpersonal psychology is perennialism—even though the theistic branch has received less emphasis (e.g., Washburn, 1996). Much of current transpersonal therapy and inquiry are bound to the idea that eventually one will come to know the Real, our True Self, or, as the Zen Buddhist puts it, our Original Face... before we were born.

The scope of this turn should not be underestimated, as it stands to change the original face of transpersonal theory—and potentially New Age thinking—beyond recognition. This radical restructuring of relationships and spirituality without fealty to the assumptions inherent in a New Age perennial overseer or idealized nondual Eastern religions heralds a major rebirth. Such a project is more than a rebranding of transpersonalism; it is a reordering of the transpersonal cosmos, nearer to what Peter Berger

(1967) called “cosmization,” which is the “enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established” (p. 25). In this case the older perennial cosmos is being contested by a participatory cosmos, one that may lead to genuinely new spiritual shores (cf. Ferrer, 2002). This thesis is discussed more fully in “Relational Spirituality, Part 2. The Belief in Others as a Hindrance to Enlightenment: Narcissism and the Denigration of Relationship within Transpersonal Psychology and the New Age” (in this issue).

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Notes

1. Prothero (1997) noted that this is in fact not true—various American Indian tribes had practiced cremation.
2. I am much indebted to Prothero's (1997) excellent study entitled, "Lived Religion and the Dead: the Cremation Movement in Gilded Age America."
3. Olcott and Blavatsky constructed a lineage of multiple sources, an early example of the Western esoteric tradition as a "locus of massive globalization" (Hammer, 2001, p. 50).
4. This paper is not an attempt to theorize hybridity (see Lahood, 2008) nor is it an attempt at an exhaustive account of the hybridities blending on the ground in the transpersonal and New Age imagination; because of space limitations I will focus on the blend of Asian and Christian religion in America as it pertains to transpersonal psychology. Left out of this version is the important African-American hybrid cosmology that grew from slavery, Christianity, and African religion, which bred a powerful religious ethos with resilience and resistance at its heart (Akinyele, 2003)—an ethos in many ways adopted by the counter-culture. Another important cosmological hybrid (also to be elaborated on at a later date) is the peyote religion with its blend of Aztec, Christian, and sacred (psychotropic) plant elements. This religion spread rapidly in the 1890s and came to exert a profound influence in the world view and religious imagination of the 1960s counterculture. It is perhaps no surprise that young Americans of the time, in their resistance of materialist America, found their patterns of religion and psychedelic drug taking from two peoples oppressed by European colonization: African Americans and American Indians.
5. Author's Note: *Paradise Bound* was published with several mistakes made during the typesetting phase of publication. The publishers agreed to reset a version without the mistakes and this can be found at www.relationalspirit.com
6. In Huxley and Watts one can see what are perhaps the first sprouts of the discipline that came to be the transpersonal movement and eventually the

New Age; indeed Anthony Sutich (1969) defined the transpersonal movement some years later as "a group... who are interested in those ultimate human capacities and potentialities that have no systematic place in positivistic or behaviorist theory" (p. 15, emphasis in original). The description of the transpersonal movement's interests that followed has been called "one of the earliest descriptions of what would later become the New Age" (Drury, 1989, pp. 38-39); this description listed, among others, the following topics: "individual and species-wide metaneeds, ultimate values, unitive consciousness, peak experiences, B-values, ecstasy, mystical experiences, awe, being, self-actualization, essence, bliss, wonder, ultimate meaning, transcendence of self, spirit, oneness, cosmic awareness... maximum interpersonal encounter" (Sutich, 1969, p. 16).

7. Here are Spretnak's (1982) observations:

From the overtly political dimension of the sixties, we carried forth an awareness of power dynamics and structures of dominance within religious and other institutions. From the counterculture dimension of the sixties came additional political challenges to deeply held assumptions. A range of exploratory experiences had peeled back the tightly proscribed "normalcy" to reveal unimagined richness and depth of being. A number of experiential awakenings lingered well into the seventies: the honoring of the body; the revelation of an expansive spirituality; the realization of human embeddedness in nature and in the dynamics of the cosmos; the liberty of nonrigid, egalitarian social forms; and the confidence to create such forms and practices according to personal and communal needs, dreams and desires. (p. xii)

8. In my opinion notions of higher or evolved consciousness are easily adopted (introjected) and become spiritual defenses.
9. This will be here referred to as the nirvanic defense.
10. Another popular perennial system, Hameed Ali's diamond approach (1996), requires some comment on the subject of narcissism and perennialism. It is an Americanized hybrid blend of Western object relations with Sufism and gestalt awareness (Cortright, 1997, p. 91). Interestingly, Heron (1998) has identified Hameed Ali's work as Western

Buddhism (p. 109). This perhaps points to the slippery nature of hybridity. According to Cortright (1997), the founder of the approach “positions himself in the nondual tradition with its accompanying biases and accepts the Buddhist notion of no self, yet speaks of essence as something that mediates between the individual and the Absolute” (p. 94). Thus his praxis appears to be a version of Americanized One-Truthism (which as I am suggesting here as deep implications in the creation of narcissistic modes of consciousness).

Narcissism is the dominant leitmotif in this system but, according to Heron (1998), there is a problem here relating to

the Western Buddhist’s definition of narcissism as contraction upon the separate self and alienation from the presence of Being (Almaas, 1996). If a person is defined in theory and represented in spiritual practice as *nothing but* a separate self, then... it is an open question as to what degree the various forms of higher narcissism—supposedly a reaction to spiritual transformation... are themselves the product of the restrictive nature of the definition and the practice.... To raise the question certainly not to deny the pronounced tendency of a person to contract into an egoic and separate self-sense (p. 109).

With nondual traditions everything but the Atman-Brahman or Buddha-mind is defined as nothing but egoic clinging—which means that any attachment to the world would be deemed narcissistic including the person’s relationships. Indeed Cortright (1997) noted that in Hameed Ali’s practice “the focus on inner states neglects the reality of interpersonal relationships [and] keeping an intra-psyche focus downplays the importance of the inter-subjective field” (p. 94)—another non-relational, one-sided self spirituality.

Grof’s holotropic breathwork also falls into this category. It is practiced under a nondual perennial umbrella within what Jorge Ferrer (2002) has called perspectivist perennialism (p. 81). According to Ferrer, Grof’s transpersonalism is a brand of neo-Vedanta and he has pointed out that Grof’s writings repeatedly devalues the “material world as illusory, imperfect or even defiled (p. 82). Almost 20 years

ago Richard Tarnas (1991) placed Grof’s findings into a more participatory framework, yet a strong perennial message is still foundational in Grof’s transpersonal training, coupled and with a strong emphasis on inner states and individually-focused vertical spirituality. For all its merits (see Lahood, 2008), Grof’s holotropic breathwork—lying on a mat couch with eyes closed, or at times used as an adjunct to Buddhist vipassana meditation (sitting with no eye contact)—is a non-relational practice.

Breathwork can also be conducted in a more collaborative/action research approach which can also serve to bypass the subtle Oriental authoritarianism inherent in perennial/evolutionary schemes. Heron (1998) has pointed out that Grof’s work is not entirely free from Oriental authority. I recently attended two Grof transpersonal training and noted that the head trainer on both occasions recommended the approach of Buddhist teacher Tsultrim Allione (2008) which advocates a strong disembodied nondual message. She wrote for example that the value of her practice comes from “dissolving our own bodies... and the experience of non-dual meditative awareness that occurs in the final step of this process” (Lahood, 2008, p. 7).

11. Interestingly, Maslow appears to have been either confused or conflicted about the nature of or validity of personhood and in his writings he swings from person-centered views to cosmos-centric views of personhood and reality (Taylor, 2006). According to Maslow (1968) in the healthier person “anger is reactive (to a present situation) rather than a characterological reservoir from the past... it is realistic effective response to something real in the present, for instance to injustice, exploitation or attack, it takes the form of decisiveness, selfaffirmation, self-protection, justified indignation, fighting against evil or the like” (p. 62). Evil, according to Evans (1993), amounts to self-deceptive “hidden narcissism” (p. 200); thus when someone enacts the New Age nirvanic or yogic defense, that is, the self inflating claim to higher consciousness, they are in my opinion, more often than not, trafficking in something akin to evil. In my opinion it is right and proper in the immediate present experience to confront and oppose this narcissistic spirituality with healthy human anger. However, nirvanic defenders will then claim that this simply shows

them how unevolved the angry respondent really is because spiritual people do not get angry (cf. Batista 1996). This partly because spiritual defenses justify and constrain parts of the self including healthy feelings and affect. It is also in part due to the fact that many of the mindfulness practices characteristic of the New Age and/or contemporary Western spirituality derive from Buddhism, and according to Robert Masters, there has been an unfortunate and unquestioned adoption of Buddhist views in the development of a Western spirituality that is uncomfortable with anger (2000). The term, anger, is often conflated with such terms as hostile, vicious, nasty, hateful, and malicious without any real discrimination. In Buddhism anger is generally conceived as an unwholesome and afflicted state devoid of morality and skill (Nhat Hanh, 1998, p. 92). Masters (2000) has pointed out that the predominate way anger is handled is to unskillfully push it into a subterranean realm where it really does become malignant and rank (2000). This congealed excrement in the basement then pushes the spiritual nose too high air (cf. Heron, 1992) again promoting a form of spiritual narcissism fuelled by unprocessed distress.

12. Support is not generally given to the inflated shell with its self-entitlement but to the authentic person imprisoned inside it who felt unlovable and unworthy and erected the shell in the first place: "This does not mean protecting the person from disappointment by supporting the outer compensatory self (Batista, 1996, p. 258). The outer shell needs "disconfirmations... which manage to break in and poke holes in one's inflated system" (Rosenthal, 1987, p. 312) until the structure dissipates and the person opens to more authentic relational modes of being. Collaborative inquiry (see Lahood, 2010, the second part of the current paper, in this issue) could certainly be used as a process to reduce narcissism, with some important caveats: personal psychodynamics can be so entwined with her false spiritual persona that it can be difficult for her to participate relationally. It is difficult to confront such a person about her entitlement because this is met with deep hurt, rage, and withdrawal—if not en-guard the whole inquiry runs the risk of being tilted toward a private therapy session—still focused on her. Secondly, cooperative inquiry is not to be

mistaken for psychotherapy for while some skill in co-handling unfinished business stirred in the inquiry is important and warranted (Heron, 1998), fundamentally collaborative inquiry is a series of inquiry cycles oriented toward transformation, self-transfiguration, and the co-creation of a social/spiritual event; it is categorically not psychotherapy, although it does have transfiguring power for those who are fortunate enough to get beyond the breakers of self-centeredness. In such a situation the helpful thing to do is sensitively suggest that she or he seek some solid psychotherapy, but of course this is to risk upsetting the whole applecart even further. Chakra balancing, tantric sex, and singing in Aramaic, while potentially enjoyable New Age pastimes, are not quite the same as those processes that can break down and reduce self-centeredness.

13. I do not mean to imply that it is only New Agers who traffic in spiritual ethnocentricity and narcissism.
14. *Détente* is a French word meaning to relax or ease tensions between rivals, a term that came into vogue in the 1970s with Cold War diplomacy.
15. With the failure of Western religion and secular materialism, some drew a parallel with what Hindu religion described as the age of *Kali-yuga* (not to be confused with the destructive dance of the Goddess Kali). The Kali-Yuga is the last of four millennium cycles or yugas (a cosmic saga in complexity and temporal scope which dwarfed Christianity) in which civilization and spiritually were held to degenerate into a Dark Age in which people would turn away from God, and eventually the world would be enveloped in a fire that would destroy all evil and give birth to a new age.
16. However, for sociologists, there is a problem with this position. As Heelas (1996) has pointed out, in New Age religion *unity firmly prevails over diversity*. Wouter Hanegraaff (2003) has argued that this creates an underlying incoherence in New Age perennialism (wholeness/unity/one-truthism) which has serious implications for other cultures and the state of mind of the New Ager herself. New Age Unity, he said, must inevitably translate into a form of spiritual totalitarianism. He argued that New Age spirituality is more appropriately seen as an aspect of the global Americanization. American values of democracy and religious freedom are intimately linked with the New Age phenomenon

of a spiritual supermarket. According to Hanegraaff the problem lies at the heart of the primary New Age mission: that of healing the world from global fragmentation which the New Age envisions as a movement toward global wholeness, and to “bring the cultures and religions of the world together by overcoming dogmatic differences and emphasizing universal wisdom traditions common to all of them” (p. 16). But this in itself, while an understandable and commendable sentiment, is a form of ethnocentrism, which while attempting to go beyond the dualism and exclusivism of Christianity falls into the same trap. The logic is simple but usually unquestioned by New Agers who tend to think that thinking itself, particularly critical thinking, is seen as negative and therefore part of the problem.

17. Shamanism, now an important part of the New Age, is another area that can potentially breed spiritual narcissism.
18. Commenting on an earlier draft of this paper, Heron believed his spiritual projection theory could, in principle, apply to the New Age scenario and argued that “New Agers have culturally soaked up Orientalized nondualism with its authoritarianism and projected their innate spiritual authority onto their internalized beliefs—resulting in the unaware giving away of their spiritual autonomy” (personal communication, December 17, 2010).

However, I do not think it is common to project onto unconsciously internalized beliefs. Rather, I hold these as introjections—which is to say, unawarely internalized cultural beliefs and fantasies, along with the authority, meaning, and charisma that they have come to embody and which they pass on to others in speech acts. Examining these internalized beliefs to find out where they help or hinder one’s spiritual development is the important issue. But here readers must discern for themselves.

19. Persons claiming elite membership in globalizing religious groups with the special status apportioned to Oriental enlightenment (in the form of masters and gurus) can, in my observation, use this membership as a source of narcissistic supply.
20. Just as the afterlife is imagined differently, so do the ultimate mystical goals of different cultures and traditions differ. Wulff (2000) here summed up the contextualist position:

The Jewish “preexperiential” or “conditioning pattern,” Katz pointed out in illustration, includes the teaching that experiences of unity with the divine do not happen, given the Jewish conception of God as radically Other and the principles traditionally recommended for reaching the mystic goal. The result is that ecstatic, self-forgetting moments of unity, of absorption into God, are rare among Jewish mystics, who are far more likely to experience “the Divine Throne, or the angel Metatron, or aspects of the *Sefiroth* [Divine Emanations], or the heavenly court and palaces, or the Hidden Torah, or God’s secret Names” (Katz, 1978, p. 34). The complex Buddhist preconditioning, in contrast, prepares the Buddhist mystic for a rather different experience, *nirvana*, a state not of relationship but apparently of selfless tranquility. (p. 426; italics in original).

21. Ken Ring (2000) has noted in *Religious Wars in the NDE Movement*, the attempt by various religious groups including A Course in Miracles, Theosophists, Anthroposophists, and certain Tibetan Buddhists, among others, to annex and co-opt the near-death experience (NDE) territory. Soteriologically speaking, each religion offers different perspectives on the afterlife. To unify religion with a transcendental unity is again to relax these tensions.

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