

What's wrong with the Perennial Philosophy?

 philosophyforlife.org/exploring-the-multiverse-of-spiritual-pluralism/

In [my review of Sam Harris' Waking Up](#) two weeks ago, I wrote this sentence: "Spiritual experiences tell us something about the cosmos, ...the experience of infinite loving-consciousness is a glimpse of the very ground of being, also sometimes called God, Brahman, Allah, the Logos, the Tao, the Buddha-realm."

This sentence seemed to surprise some people – one reader asked what it was exactly I believed, while another reader who said reading my blog helped bring him back to Christianity promptly cancelled his subscription!

So what is behind that statement? Well, it's a classic expression of something called the Perennial Philosophy, which is the belief that at the core of all the great religions and wisdom traditions is the same mystical experience of Ultimate Reality. All the surface disagreements, different names for Ultimate Reality, different myths etc are just window-dressing.

The Perennial Philosophy has its historical roots in the syncretism of Renaissance humanists like Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, who suggested that Plato, Jesus, Hermes Trismegistus and the Kabbalah were all pointing to the same God (they were almost excommunicated as a result). Leibniz also championed the *philosophia perennis*. You can see it flourishing in the transcendentalism of Emerson, Coleridge and Thoreau.

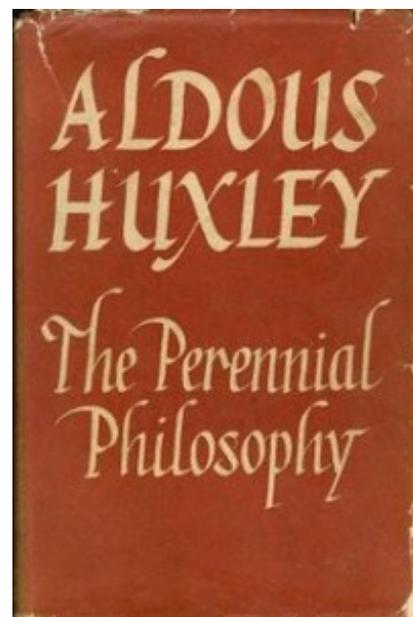
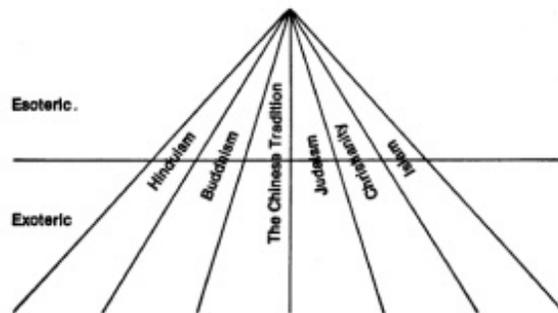
The idea then reached a mass-market through Aldous Huxley's 1945 book, *The Perennial Philosophy*, and then in the 1960s it became almost the foundational idea of the New Age, spread through centres like Esalen, the California spiritual community that developed the 'religion of no religion'.

I'd suggest the *Perennial Philosophy* is in some ways the ruling spiritual philosophy of our time, including in its ranks everyone from Sam Harris to Abraham Maslow to Ken Wilber to Prince Charles – yes, the future defender of the Anglican faith is a devotee of Perennialism (read [this fascinating speech](#) he gave about it).

'One mountain, many paths.' It's the philosophy I grew up in, as did all of my friends. We loved the Upanishads, Rumi, the I-Ching, Walt Whitman, Carlos Castaneda, Chang-Tzu, Marcus Aurelius, the Dhammapada (we tended to give the Bible a wide berth, like an ex at a cocktail party).

The Perennial Philosophy is a much more natural attitude to me than the exclusivism and tribalism of Christianity, which I find strange and incredible. While my adventures in Christianity of the last two years introduced me for the first time to Christian wisdom and grace, I still have a deep sense of the richness of other traditions. And when I meet evangelical Christians who believe any other faith is demonic, I think they're mental.

What I have been developing, this year, is something called the Wisdom Approach, which teaches ideas, practices and values from various different wisdom traditions. I think the idea of healing wisdom – Sophia – connects all the great wisdom traditions, including atheist ones like Epicureanism and Buddhism. The courses I run try to explore this common ground while also exploring the different destinations they attempt to reach.



What's wrong with the Perennial Philosophy?

This week, I read a book which made some trenchant criticisms of the Perennial Philosophy. The book's called [Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality](#), by Jorge Ferrer, a professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies.

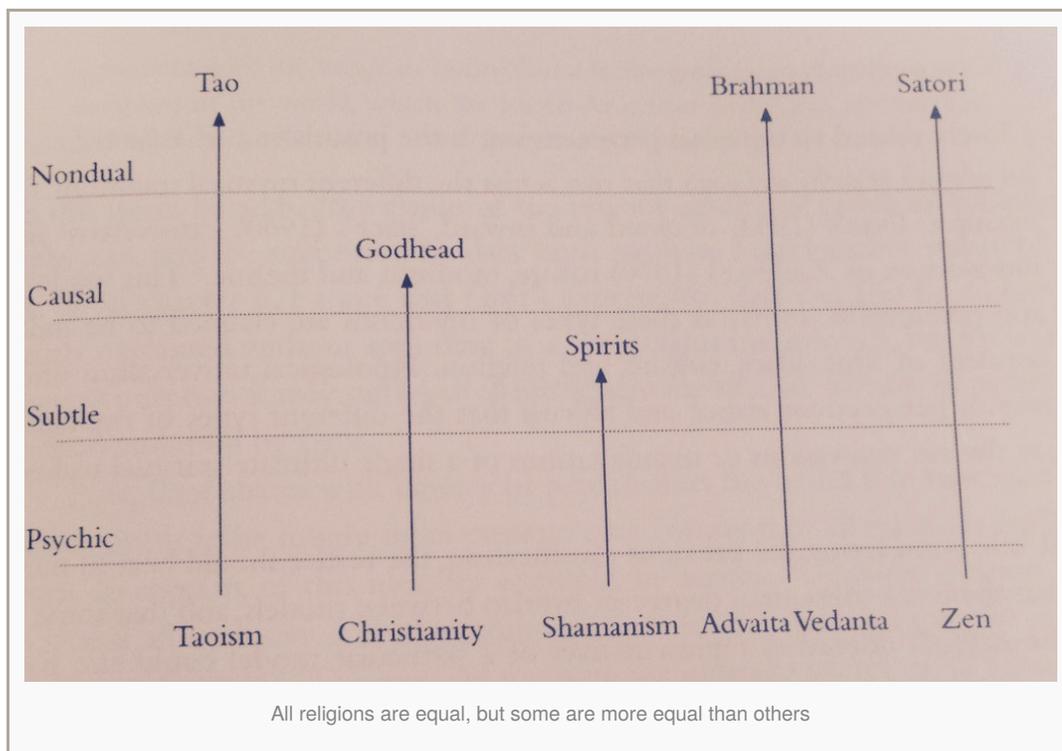
Ferrer makes three main criticisms of the Perennial Philosophy approach:

1) All religions are not the same

The Perennial Philosophy, by being so universalist and essentialist, ends up doing violence to the traditions it tries to cohere. The Tao is not the same as the Christian God (the Tao cares nothing for individuals, as Lao Tzu says), nor are either the same as Buddhist sunyata or emptiness. The eternal now of Buddhism or Stoicism is fundamentally different to Christianity's radical hope for the future. The mystics themselves do not agree that all religions are talking about the same ultimate reality.

2) Perennialists tend to rank religions hierarchically

All religions are equal, but some are more equal than others. Perennialists tend to rank religions, and even sects within religions. Shamanism is the lowest, then monotheisms like Christianity, Judaism and Islam, then mystics within these traditions (Rumi is better than Mohammad, Meister Eckhart is better than Jesus), then Buddhism and Hinduism, and the peak of the mountain is non-dualist philosophies of emptiness like Advaita and Tibetan Buddhism's Dzogchen.



Christianity is usually near or at the bottom – Sam Harris says it has basically nothing useful to say about the human condition, Aldous Huxley said the Bible was an obstacle to evolution – and Tibetan Buddhism is at the top. Look at the [Contemplative Studies conference](#) I'm going to in Boston this month – I'd estimate 90% of the speakers are western Buddhists, hardly any are Christians, and the key-note speaker is, obviously, the Dalai Lama.

Perennialists tend to be western and tend to have rejected their Judeo-Christian background, and therefore rank Christianity low in their wisdom rankings. And of course Christianity, like Islam and Judaism, fits uneasily within a Perennial framework, with their tribal eschatologies and their faith in their unique revelation.

3) Perennialism often tends to the tyranny of empiricism and Cartesian reductionism

Perennialists like Huxley, Maslow, Wilber or Sam Harris tend to describe the Perennial Philosophy as a 'science of consciousness', providing empirical certainty for some of the claims of the mystics. Your mind is the laboratory, in which you can go and check these facts for yourself. This attitude, while understandable in its attempt to validate spiritual experiences within a hostile scientific materialist environment, tends to reduce such experiences to subjective occurrences in the individual brain.

Towards a participatory spirituality

So what is Ferrer's alternative? He suggests that Perennialism often succumbs to an outdated 'mental representation' model of cognition: Divine Reality exists out there, and we experience it in our minds, like a camera taking a photo. Instead, he suggests a more participatory form of knowing. Our consciousness and imagination helps to create the reality we experience.

This is a somewhat trippy idea, but I've come across it in the last year through the writings of two interesting religious scholars – [Tanya Luhrmann](#) and [Jeffrey Kripal](#). Both suggest that our relationship with Being is reciprocal, it responds to how we relate to it, manifesting in the attitudes or stories we project, playing with them, making them real. This reminds me a bit of Andrei Tarkovsky's idea of Solaris or The Zone – the magical force that projects our dreams back to us.

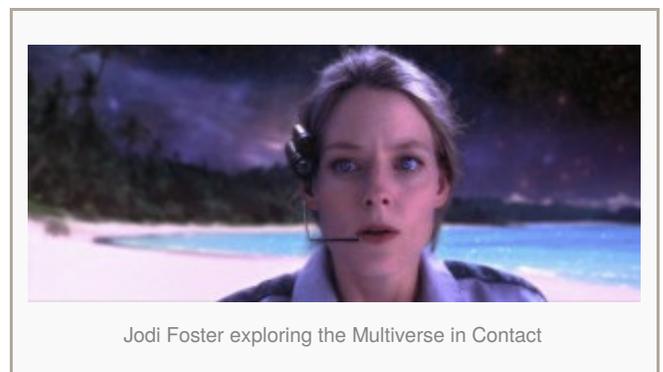
Kripal calls the intermediary between us and Being 'the Imaginal' – an idea with its roots in Plato, in Sufism, in the creative transcendentalism of Coleridge and the Inklings (CS Lewis, Tolkien, Barfield), and more explicitly in the psychology of Frederick Myers. Being responds to the stories we project onto it – this is why Kripal believes the humanities are fundamental to the study of consciousness (here's a [video of him](#) talking about the Imaginal at Queen Mary, University of London earlier this year).

Ferrer's 'participatory knowing' can be both individual or collective – we bring forth a special manifestation of Being collectively. We open a portal together, as the apostles did at the Pentecost. It's not an individual experience so much as an event in which we participate.

Rather than the 'one mountain many paths' metaphor, Ferrer suggests 'one ocean many shores'. The ocean is the starting point, which most great wisdom traditions share – the belief that we can liberate ourselves from our ego and connect to a more expanded consciousness and reality. However, from that ocean, we can reach many different shores. These will involve different spiritual experiences, and even (Ferrer suggests) different metaphysical realities.

That metaphor doesn't quite work for me, because we tend to think of the ocean as the end-point, not the starting-point. Let me suggest this – one rocket launch-pad, many different destinations. The rocket launch-pad of spiritual traditions tend to be similar ethical practices to go beyond the ego. However, spiritual astronauts then reach different planets, different space stations, different universes, where perhaps they encounter different beings (or manifestations of Being).

This seems to be more or less the position that William James reached – he coined the term 'multiverse' and



suggested a 'pluralist mysticism' in an essay on the 19th-century psychonaut Benjamin Blood, who wrote: "Variety, not uniformity, is more likely to be the key to progress. The genius of being is whimsical rather than consistent." Through spiritual practice we reach 'new worlds', new manifestations of Being – and they may be places that humans have not yet reached. The Spirit is dynamic, ever-changing, playful.



I wonder if this idea of the multiverse is there in the multiple worlds of science fiction writers like CS Lewis or Philip Pullman, both of whom describe portals through which one can reach other worlds or universes, in which the Spirit will take different forms.

I wonder even if this is what the Bishop of London meant, when I asked him if one could get to God through other faiths. He [replied](#):

You can't to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's not to say there are other ways to different destinations. There is only one Way to God as Jesus Christ has revealed Him, and that way is by feeding on His word and as part of His community and His sacraments. When you come into the presence of God, by this portal – there are other portals which may take you to different places – you come through a passage of self-sacrifice and giving oneself away, which paradoxically does not result in obliteration, but in the most extreme ecstasy and joy at the discovery which lies at the end of all this – that one is fearfully and wonderfully made, one is a unique and beloved child of God.

There are other portals which may take you to different places...

But here are my questions for Ferrer's spiritual pluralism, which perhaps Professor Ferrer can respond to, if he has the time.

If he believes there are different metaphysical realities, does that mean there are different destinies after death? That a Buddhist experiences reincarnation, while the Christian gets physical resurrection? Does he believe there are multiple eschatologies – in some realities Christ comes back, in others Valhalla burns, and so on? Are there multiple Gods, or is it rather that Spirit / Being is One but responds differently according to our different approaches? Is there one sort of ethical law or *Logos* for all the metaphysical realities, or might they have radically different ethical laws??

While Ferrer hopes spiritual pluralism will allow a more fruitful and respectful dialogue between faiths (and he may well be right), I wonder if Tanya Luhrmann has a point, when she suggests the real conclusion of this view is rather melancholy – we're not just living in different belief-systems, we're actually living in different universes.

But – more optimistically – these realities, these universes, aren't discrete. They're not hermetically sealed off from

each other. They interconnect. They overlap. Perhaps in some way they connect together into a grand symphony. This is one reason not everyone in the west should become a Buddhist – it would be like everyone singing the same part in the symphony. We need some singing bass, some singing alto, and Richard Dawkins on kazoo.