Spirituality can be studied in its own terms or through the lens of an exterior discipline. In this deceptively simple statement lies a world of difference. Since the rise of modern science all that is intrinsic, personal, subtle, subjective, interior and full of meaning has subjected itself to exterior disciplines that are largely cold, mechanistic, or even – as Ricoeur puts it – a hermeneutics of suspicion, in which meaning is lost to reductionism. When spirituality is analysed under Marxist, Freudian and Darwinist lenses – to name just a few – it shrivels and dies of cold. Yet in this bleak intellectual landscape small oases of warmth have survived or sprung up, in which spirituality – often chastened or trembling to be sure – does blossom (I call such blossomings postsecular). Transpersonal psychology, including its core of transpersonal theory, is one of these oases, and so it is of great interest to study the fine collection of essays on spirituality assembled here by Ferrer and Sherman. This work is a natural extension of Ferrer’s *Revisioning Transpersonal Psychology*, in which he sets out his challenge to the perennialist tradition of studies in mysticism. The new book achieves two things: firstly it gives us a snapshot of contemporary spiritual thought, and secondly it allows us to evaluate Ferrer’s contribution to spirituality from the tradition of transpersonal psychology, or rather transpersonal theory.

The lens that Ferrer and Sherman bring to bear in commissioning these essays is that of the ‘participatory turn’. It is a development of Ferrer’s basic criticism of transpersonal theory, which is that it is dominated by three elements: experientialism, inner empiricism, and perennialism. The participatory turn for Ferrer corrects this by introducing the *interpersonal* to balance the previous overemphasis on the *intrapersonal*. Each invited author attempts to frame their specialist scholarship of the spiritual in terms of this rubric.

The introduction and Part I of the book set the scene with extensive deliberations on the participatory turn. The introduction by Ferrer and Sherman rather hedges its bets as to whether the participatory turn is a radical paradigm shift or the evolution of ‘archaic’ ideas concerning participation going back to Plato. What it most usefully does is to relate this putative turn to the linguistic turn which, it is claimed, has largely informed religious studies since the 1970s. A ‘turn’ clearly is a large-scale shift in approach to a subject, and is used mostly to describe shifts in academic philosophy. Is it spirituality itself that undergoes such turns, or is it the academic study of it that changes in this way? To what extent should developments in philosophy affect the study of spirituality? These are the questions raised by the whole approach in this book.

The authors briefly define the participatory turn in the study of religion, spirituality and mysticism as an argument for ‘an enactive understanding of the sacred, seeking to approach religious phenomena, experiences and insights as cocreated events.’ ‘Cocreated’ is perhaps Ferrer’s key term, used
to suggest a move beyond the traditional seeker of religious ‘truth’ to the seeker as an equal and ‘enactive’ participant. This is the middle ground between the so-called contextualists, who, since the linguist turn, insist that religious experience is either shaped by language or entirely produced by it, and the perennialists who insist on an independent spiritual reality waiting to be discovered. However, the moderate stance of the participatory turn should not be understood as a return to ‘Romantic or archaic styles of participatory knowing.’ This is a participatory modernity, or even postmodernity. The cocreative, enactive, participant in spiritual reality shapes that reality, an idea that is both inclusive of post-Kantian relativism, and of pre-Kantian universalism. It is spiritual pluralism arising out of individual participation. In the first essay of the book Sherman traces the spiritual history of participation back to Plato, and muses on the problems that Spinoza’s pantheism entails for the very idea of participation. Sean Kelly then explores the complexity theory of Marín and its relevance for religious studies of participation, while Ferrer rounds of Part 1 with a more detailed look at cocreation, participation, and religious plurality.

Part II then comprises eight very different essays by invited authors, presenting a rather comprehensive survey of contemporary spirituality. ‘Comprehensive’ is not of course possible in eight essays, but the different temperaments and specialisms of the authors make for a good illustration of the pluralistic aims of Ferrer and Sherman. They also illustrate, in varying degrees, that the rubric of the participatory turn might not be an all-encompassing framework. The tension between the aim and the outcome is in fact one of the joys of the book, and derives partly from the purpose of Part II, summed up in its title: ‘Surveying the Traditions: Participatory Engagements.’ How will the traditions respond to the call of a paradigm shift born out of modernity and postmodernity?

Brian L. Lancaster’s essay on Jewish mysticism makes clear that his challenge is to ‘move forward in our understanding of kabbalistic insights in relation to contemporary psychological and scientific knowledge.’ This is met through the congruence of language mysticism in the Judaic tradition with the more elastic insights of the linguistic turn, and through the core idea in Judaism of relationship with ‘God’. Lee Irwin explores the participative in the teachings of Mikhaël Aîvanhov, a disciple of the Bulgarian spiritual teacher Beinsa Duono. In emphasising the importance of imagination as a creative faculty in Aîvanhov’s teachings, Irwin has no difficulty providing a specific illustration of a cocreative spiritual path. Beverly J. Lanzetta’s essay on Teresa of Avila provides perhaps a tougher trial for the participatory turn in moving away from the Western esoteric tradition: is not Teresa’s spirituality profoundly apophatic, that is, inward, renunciative, and world-denying? Does not Teresa effectively say that to know ‘God’ is to deny ‘his’ creation? As Lanzetta points out, Teresa is deeply drawn to passive contemplation. The solution Lanzetta suggests however is that the purpose of this inward-dwelling is in the ‘birth of good works’. While Teresa is intensely relational and mostly passive in the love for her ‘God’, this translates into creative work in the world, in good works. William C. Chittick’s reflections on the Sufi Ibn al-‘Arabi returns us to a Renaissance
theme: that all things are fixed in their nature with the exception of human beings, who are ‘not yet fixed in their selfhoods, so the Mystery discloses itself within them in unpredictable ways.’ This open-ended nature of the human soul permits us to cocreate our selves and our cosmos. Using the analogy of the spectrum he says that human beings ‘are made in the form of the Formless, have no specific colour; they are simply light.’ Bruno Barnhart begins his essay by saying: ‘Christianity is originally – and essentially – a mystery of participation.’ How so? Because Christianity as an axial religion made the breakthrough of reason and personality: the goal is no longer the unitive state. ‘The journey of life has become a progressive realisation of this new identity through an existential embodiment, in the following of Christ.’ This participative quality was lost in the structures of the Church however, only to be regained in the participatory turn of contemporary theologians like Teilhard de Chardin. Robert McDermott turns to the anthroposophical work of Owen Barfield to consider the Bhagavad Gita. While the essay is a fascinating contrast of approaches to the problems of interpreting the Gita, McDermott seems to use the term ‘participatory’ rather removed from Ferrer’s conception of it. G. William Barnard returns more to Ferrer’s vision in examining the work of Henri Bergson from a cocreative perspective. Bergson’s idea is that we ‘carve out manageable islands of stability in the onrush of universal becoming by choosing to focus only on that level of experience that best serves our needs.’ While the universe has a ‘stubborn facticity’ of its own, this filtering process gives each human effectively a different world to live in. Finally Donald Rothberg looks at an ‘Extended Model of Buddhist Practice’ – similar in principle to the notion of ‘engaged Buddhism’ – in which participation becomes social in character.

So, three questions are raised by the book, beyond the valuable discussions in each essay. Firstly, is the participative turn a comprehensive enough framework to contain these essays? Well, nearly. It gives purchase on almost any spiritual tradition that is outward looking, or world-engaged, but is not so helpful perhaps with the apophatic or what is termed the ‘via negativa’. It also aligns itself best to spiritual assumptions of progress, as for example in Aurobindo. Secondly, what about the role of philosophy: should we import its landmark structures into the study of spirituality? As McDermott notes, again on Aurobindo, he was ‘oblivious to the maxim of the nineteenth and twentieth century that it is not possible to ignore Kant.’ And finally, if the study of spirituality undergoes a ‘turn’ of some kind or another, are the new Jesus- Buddha- Eckhart- and Krishna-figures of our age bound by that turn? A turn which has a profoundly democratic tenor?