An English rendering of the Latin word “translation” is “transformation.” Translation occurs in a context, a context in which people hope to understand each other, and perhaps themselves as well, since all relationships effect change, however minutely. In the context of academic study, researchers and those being researched may hope for a minimum of “transformation” in their translations when the aim is to represent accurately a particular theory, view, or analysis. Why engage with a point of view that someone never actually put forward, but has been mistranslated or “transformed” in the translation process? Well, sometimes it is a fruitful exercise even if the original scholar’s ideas have been mistranslated or transformed!

As we have learned, from science as elsewhere, the very act of observation changes the observer and what is being observed. The scholar “translates” a theory in her analysis of that theory, transforming and being transformed in the process. The changes inevitably wrought by translation can be desirable, for the knowing process requires new ideas and these can appear through one scholar’s “translation” of another’s work.

The oftentimes-invisible dynamics of “translation transformation” take on the quality of an underlying bass-line played loudly in the symphony of spirituality. A scholar can “translate” a particular spirituality in such a way that all spiritualities can seem to translate each other, to be the same spirituality in different cultural languages, or the same melody in different keys. This view is associated with William James,1 Aldous Huxley,2 and Robert Forman,3 and has been termed the “common core” or “perennial” theory. Alternatively, a scholar can “translate” spirituality in such a way that all spiritualities can seem incapable of any dialogue with each other at all, a discordant caco-

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phony. This view is often identified with Stephen Katz, and modified versions with others like Wayne Proudfoot. Underlying these views is the challenge of how to relate the particular and universal claims inherent in each spirituality to such claims in other spiritualities, and to do so without mis-translations. In trying to relate different spiritualities to each other, are spirituality scholars trying to relate jazz to opera, or jazz to bebop? It might be argued that jazz and bebop are more similar than jazz and opera. If scholars of spirituality are relating jazz to bebop, then perhaps they are relating different forms of the common core music. If they are relating jazz to opera, then they are still relating different forms of music to each other, but perhaps music is not a common core as much as a common category, like religion or spirituality. If the notes translate from one genre to another, does that translation reveal an underlying universality or shared particulars? Does a translation between musical genres transform the notes so that they are no longer jazz, but opera, or uncover the transformation effected in operatic composition itself? If spiritual practices appear in both Christian and Hindu spirituality, then do they reveal a common spiritual core or the particular transformations effected in each tradition’s spirituality? The permutations could be endless.

In the field of spirituality, this debate sounds like an orchestra tuning up as each section runs through the scales and adjusts its pitch, each readying to approach the music according to its own sound. Those blowing the French horn, bowing the violin, and shaking the tambourine each express the music through the instrument’s design. One issue in the debate involves whether or not theological considerations are inherent to the understanding of spirituality. Can the orchestra perform better without one section so that it interprets music differently from an orchestra? By “better,” perhaps the value is for inter-disciplinary research or inter-faith discussion. No one denies the possible relevance of theology, but many question its inherent relevance, even its contribution to inter-disciplinary and inter-faith contexts, and opt for an understanding of spirituality as a human phenomenon that may or may not involve theology. Whether one shares the views of William James and his descendants, translating all spiritualities into one melody sung in different keys, or those of Stephen Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London, 1978), pp. 22-74.