

RESTING IN ONENESS:
CONCEPTIONS OF REALITY
IN THE TEACHINGS OF BALANCED VIEW

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Abstract. *Perceptions of reality and the pursuit of truth are central concerns in Balanced View, a contemporary movement that perceives itself as a unique philosophical approach to inquiries concerning the nature of reality itself. Balanced View is a philosophical, spiritual, and educational movement aiming for the ultimate in personal development, that is, “complete mental and emotional stability and profound peace” and “total life-satisfaction and flourishing”. On a greater scale, Balanced View points towards the ontogenetic and phylogenetic prospects of an evolutionary imperative calling humanity to a greater pilgrimage towards an era of peace. This paper will explore the mental maps and metaphoric routes proposed by Balanced View and raise the question as to whether these central concepts are as radically new as suggested. Whereas Balanced View rejects traditional spiritual and religious terminologies, this paper will suggest that a closer look reveals important resonances with older religious and philosophical systems.*

Keywords: *Pilgrimage, mysticism, spirituality, Balanced View.*

Perceptions of reality and the pursuit of truth are central concerns in Balanced View, a contemporary movement that presents itself as a unique philosophic approach to inquiries concerning the nature of reality itself. Balanced View could be seen as a philosophical, spiritual, and educational movement that purports to teach us how to remove the real roots of suffering and arrive at inner peace, balance, and stability (even though we cannot exactly ‘arrive’, since we are always already there). Initially spoken of as the Great Freedom Teachings, Balanced View presents itself as a “worldwide community of people thriving with life satisfaction”, “a global grassroots movement empowering people to use their innate power for the benefit of all” in order to reach the “complete mental and emotional stability and profound peace” and “total life-satisfaction and flourishing” that is within everybody’s reach (Balanced View website). On a greater scale, Balanced View

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Pol. Sc. Int. Rel., XIII, 2, pp. 71–80, Bucharest, 2016.

points to the ontogenetic and phylogenetic prospects of an evolutionary imperative calling humanity to move forward to an era of peace.

From several points of view, Balanced View presents itself as a radically different philosophy, beyond the limitations of other spiritual, religious, or philosophical systems. Firstly, most religious and philosophical systems (as well as contemporary philosophies of personal development) demand some kind of change or improvement. Something is wrong and needs to be fixed or eliminated. In Christianity there is original sin; in the psychology of positive thinking ‘negative’ thoughts need to be replaced by ‘positive’ thoughts; in psychotherapy, problems need to be diagnosed, worked through, and set right. In the philosophy of Balanced View, to the contrary, nothing needs to be fixed, or not in that sense. Secondly, even if ancient systems of spiritual practice do exist, they have been virtually inaccessible for all but a select few who had to give up years of their lives to arrive at illumination. Balanced View suggests that this is no longer necessary. Illumination is within everybody’s reach, and through the method proposed one can “[l]ive with ease, confidence and complete stability no matter what happens in [one’s] life”, “[e]njoy a consistent sense of ease and life-satisfaction in all experiences”, and “[d]iscover and use [one’s] unique strengths, gifts and talents in a totally beneficial way” (Balanced View website). Other differences that will not be examined here concern O’Denver’s use of the axiom of reductibility, the application of algorithms, and the “precise levels of organization and explanation used in computer science to arrive at specific results in the philosophy of mind” (Balanced View website).

Since Balanced View is a growing movement (in over 65 countries) with an evolving system of thought, teaching, and organization whose adherents testify to having found something unique; and since its texts, arising from the awakening of its founder, Candice O’Denver, and seemingly lacking antecedents, purport to describe the ultimate reality, it is interesting to compare its tenets to other approaches that theorize the nature of reality, consciousness, and the pursuit of truth. Balanced View could be seen as a movement for nontheistic spiritual enlightenment. Spiritual and religious terminology is avoided, primarily because of a wish to reach out to the greatest possible number of people. There is thus a missionary aspect. Although there are a few passages in the writings of Candice O’Denver and Balanced View that point to similarities with other religions and spiritual world views (mention is made of Tibetan monks, for example), no specific references are given, and no direct comparisons are made¹. Whereas the “important shift” that we are living today “can be related to the experiences of many historical figures”, it is underlined that “it’s not attached to any specific historical figure. There is no need to create a dogma or a world religion or anything

¹ Balanced View website states that “Candice is a formal lineage holder of the Nyingma Dzogchen lineage. Nyingma is the preservation of the Ancient Translation School of the Sanskrit and Tibetan texts on the beneficial nature of all. These are considered to be great texts on the most skillful means to benefit all. The Ancient School texts are lengthy, authorless and most are unavailable to the public, as Dzogchen is the actual pith of the Ancient Translation School, and is the result of a wordless language of communication called ‘transmission’. Candice’s root teachers: H.H. Minling Trichen Rimpoche and Venerable Wangdor Rimpoche”.

of that kind” (*Clarity* 20). The ideal form of knowledge, instead, is “a form of knowledge that isn’t constantly referring back to past knowledge in order to verify itself” (*Clarity* 22).

This paper will propose that, on the contrary, it is highly relevant and interesting to refer back to past knowledge since such references can tell us if the ideas presented by Candice O’Denver and Balanced View are in fact radically new or if they resemble other religious or philosophic systems; and if they do, what the similarities and differences might be. Entering into any spiritual or religious world requires time, effort, and commitment (as well as expense), so it would seem to be of utmost importance to decide why one should choose to adhere to the tenets of Balanced View rather than Abrahamic monotheistic religion, Buddhism, Hinduism, or any other religion or spiritual practice (which is not to say that other religions and spiritualities would necessarily be incompatible with the practices of Balanced View).

In what follows, an outline of the core ideas of Balanced View will be offered, and an attempt will be made to place this movement within a comparative spiritual and philosophical framework. The inquiry will move down three paths. First, could the ideas and community of Balanced View be seen as an answer to recent proposals made by religious atheism regarding the role of religion and spirituality for individuals and communities? Or, second, could the central concepts and methods of Balanced View, on the contrary, be understood as a new way of visualizing and relating to God, a God partially hidden behind the clouds of secular terminology? Third, could the ideas and methods be related to the understandings of left and right brain activity and the suggestion that ‘nirvana’ is found in the consciousness of our right hemisphere presented by the neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor in her book *My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist’s Personal Journey*?

First, an outline of the ideas of Balanced View. Proposing that theoretical, encyclopedic and abstract forms of knowledge tend to lack transformative power, Balanced View instead presents a practical philosophy, a direct, phenomenological approach examining reality and experience itself, and an education whose non-dualistic insights purport to bring an equanimity and authenticity that will empower anyone regardless of their life situation. ‘Awareness,’ ‘clarity,’ and ‘open intelligence’ are terms that are used to pinpoint a reality that is underlying, embracing, or infusing everything, a vast expanse of unchanging space that is non-produced, indescribable, and naturally present; and from whose vantage point we see things as they really are instead of remaining myopically involved with and attached to ‘data streams’ or ‘points of view’. The concept of open intelligence is posited as the most comprehensive level of reality at the same time as it aligns us with fundamental reality. In Balanced View one is not so much encouraged to abandon the data of nitty-gritty everyday experience (thoughts, events, feelings) as to shift the emphasis toward ‘clarity’ or ‘open intelligence’, that is, a dimension that is always present, a dimension of perfection where nothing needs to be changed: “the clarity that is the essence of all experience” (*Clarity* v). “Relying on clarity”, O’Denver says, “is the core principle of basing one’s experience in clarity rather than reifying the passing phenomena” (*Clarity* vi).

Even though the spiritual transformation is said to be a ‘simple change’ (as one of the book titles has it), it nevertheless takes practice, repetition, and commitment if one wants to sense and experience the vast infinity of clarity or open intelligence. As Candice O’Denver puts it: “we can’t arrive at this confidence intellectually; it has to be arrived at instinctively. It is instinctive because it is beyond thought and reason. We can understand it intellectually, but that won’t take us all the way” (9)². Terms like ‘enlightenment’ and ‘God’ are avoided in *Balanced View* so that secular seekers will not be put off, and the same goes for terms such as sin, karma, and reincarnation, terms that are similarly avoided. According to the writings of *Balanced View*, it is of paramount importance to define the key concepts relied upon. In the Editor’s Introduction to *Clarity in Everyday Life*, we read: “It is very important to define the various words that are used in the text. The most important term is *clarity*, which is used very often throughout the book. Other terms that refer to the same essence pinpointed by clarity include *awareness, the basic state, the fundamental nature of our being, natural perfection, total perfection, intelligent space, super-intelligence, super-completeness, self-perfected reality, wisdom awareness, natural intelligence and the view* (vi)”.

Since it does not wish to have any religious labels stuck upon its theory and praxis, should we see *Balanced View* as a form of humanism, a religion without God? Humanism, as Karen Armstrong claims in *A History of God: From Abraham to the Present: the 4000-year Quest for God* (1993) “is itself a religion without God” (4). In *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer’s Guide to the Uses of Religion* (2012), Alain de Botton proposes that “[r]eligions are intermittently too useful, effective and intelligent to be abandoned to the religious alone” (312). Since there are needs that our secular society has failed to meet or offer answers to, de Botton proposes that we reject religion as such but return to and recycle concepts and rituals stemming from religion, since religions are “repositories of a myriad ingenious concepts with which we can try to assuage a few of the most persistent and unattended ills of secular life” (13). A reappropriation of religion is proposed in *Religion for Atheists*, where de Botton argues that the church has managed to claim a sort of monopoly on life’s most pressing questions and that there has been a process of religious colonization that needs to be reversed (15). The church has understood the difficulties of life and offered solace, something secular society has failed to do. Atheists, says de Botton, “have allowed religion to claim as its exclusive dominion areas of experience which should rightfully belong to all mankind – and which we should feel unembarrassed about reappropriating for the secular realm” (15). Indeed, the church has done many things very well: it has created a sense of community that goes beyond that of the family in embracing kith and kin in managing to “[shift] us at least fractionally

² “It’s not possible to use dualistic language systems to describe something that is beyond description. This is why the instinctive recognition of the basic state is so important: unless there is instinctive recognition in relation to one’s own experience, it is impossible to gain access to the intelligence of the basic state” (*Clarity* 27). This means that this paper cannot give any real knowledge or insight into open intelligence, since “The basic state can never be adequately described in the scholarly or academic language that currently exists today, because that language can never awaken the instinctive recognition of the basic state” (*Clarity* 28).

off our accustomed egocentric axes” and in successfully choreographing activities that are better engaged in communally than individually (37). If, as de Botton suggests, mainstream secular institutions have failed to teach us how to live, could Balanced View be seen as a secular institution dedicated to a reappropriation of religion that, in its refusal of a religious terminology, participates in the reversal of religious colonization called for by religious atheism? Balanced View does aim to provide answers to life’s most pressing questions, and there is a strong emphasis on community. Participation in meetings and contact with a ‘trainer’ are required, otherwise the practice will not be effective (*Open Intelligence* 4).

Religious atheism, in Alain de Botton’s vision, is inspired by Auguste Comte’s Religion of Humanity. Comte’s religion of Humanity was not a virgin birth but consisted of parts taken from old religions, most notably from Catholicism. Similar claims could be made about Balanced View, as it appears to draw on older religions after all, such as Catholicism, the faith in which the founder of Balanced View, Candice O’Denver, was raised. One key aspect of the method proposed by Balanced View, the path to open intelligence, involves *repetition*. The method is to rely on open intelligence, “short moments, many times, until clarity is continuous” (v) (the terminology has changed; earlier texts recommended resting as awareness or clarity). Whereas the practice of taking short moments is, of course, a thoroughly secular method that we could compare to meditation or the practice of mindfulness, it could also be compared to prayer. Both methods aim toward a sense of trust: in open intelligence in the one case, in God, in the other. Like short moments, prayer is a clearing in the space of phenomena, focusing attention on the vast, ineffable infinity of divinity while not suppressing or denying the phenomenal world of matter. Short moments of prayer, too, may be expanded into a continuous focus on and dialogue with God. Thus, in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of the Second Vatican, for example, it is stated (Chapter 12) that a Christian should pray without ceasing, something that closely resembles the method in Balanced advising one to rely on open intelligence “short moments, many times, until clarity is continuous”. In the history of mysticism unceasing prayer, further, has been said to lead to mystic experiences. From this perspective, the experience of continuous open intelligence could be compared to a transcendent encounter with divinity that is blissfully prolonged.

“The basic state” (another synonym for open intelligence), according to Candice O’Denver, “is beyond all phenomenal appearances. As points of view are only expressions of the basic state itself, they have no independent or individual substantiality, identity or existence other than the basic state”, a basic state that is always “already absolutely present” (25, 101). It is a “vast unknowable expanse that is the natural order of everything . . . an immense power and force of creativity . . . something that is utterly indescribable” (40). It is a “super-intelligence that is at the basis of everything and which has power over everything” (98). In this description of a “super-intelligence that is at the basis of everything and which has power over everything”, one might hear an echo from Catholic faith in a God that (as stated in Catholic catechism) is “the supreme Spirit, who alone exists of Himself, and is infinite in all perfections”; “God had no beginning; He

always was, He is, He always will be. God is everywhere". As already mentioned, Candice O'Denver was raised a Catholic, and even though she has given up her faith in all religious, spiritual, and psychological methods, echoes and influences from Catholicism may have influenced her thought. The method proposed by Balanced View could be seen as a form of everyday mysticism, a meditation leading to a mystic experience of spiritual transcendence or to what Candice O'Denver has called the "Great Outshining". The oneness visualized in Balanced View as a changeless realm of 'open intelligence' within which all 'data' or 'points of view' arise could be compared to Christian conceptions of the oneness of God.

Thus, the idea of resting in the oneness of open intelligence could be seen as a form of everyday mysticism. Karen Armstrong has emphasized that "human experience of transcendence has been a fact of life" and that all religions have found "that it is impossible to describe this transcendence in normal conceptual language. Monotheists have called this transcendence 'God'" (6). Exploring the nature of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Sholem argues that mysticism appears at a certain point in the development of religion. In earliest times, when no abyss had opened up between the human and the divine, there could be no mysticism. At that time, he says, you were able to meet God and petition him directly. There was an immediate consciousness of universal unity, which is not the same thing as mysticism. It was the arrival of religion in its classical forms that opened up an absolute divide between the infinity of God and the finiteness of humanity. In what Sholem calls the romantic period of religion, mystics would take this great abyss as their point of departure, from which they attempted to bridge the gap and restore the lost unity. The mystic experience is at the center of conceptualizations of God and at the center of religion, as William James argues in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James writes that "[t]he overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness" (325). The knowledge and profound insight reached in states of mystic experience is first and foremost a sense of "reconciliation" – "as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity" (James 301). Such a sense of a reconciliation overcoming of dualistic thought resembles the open intelligence of Balanced View. "Mystical experiences", as defined by Andrew Newberg in *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*, further, "is nothing more or less than an uplifting sense of genuine spiritual union with something larger than the self" (101). According to Ken Wilber, finally, "*different modes of knowing correspond to different levels of consciousness*", whereby a "dualistic mode of knowing" "separates the knowing subject from the known object" (85) while "it is the nature of the nondual mode of knowing to be one with what it knows" (86). Indeed, "knowing and the Real coalesce in Primal Experience" (86). "*Reality is what is revealed from the nondual level of consciousness that we have termed the Mind*" (86). Such a state of nondual consciousness has a strong resemblance to the notions of clarity and open intelligence.

“One of the reasons why religion seems irrelevant today”, as Karen Armstrong observes, “is that many of us no longer have the sense that we are surrounded by the unseen. Our scientific culture educates us to focus our attention on the physical and material world in front of us” (10). Although clarity is not visualized as a supernatural spirit in Balanced view, it *is* said to ‘unseen’ in the sense that most of us *do* “focus our attention on the physical and material world in front of us”, or, in the terminology of Balanced View, on ‘data’ or ‘points of view.’ In Balanced View, one is encouraged not to abandon data, but to shift emphasis towards clarity or open intelligence, that is, towards the dimension that is always there, the dimension of perfection where nothing needs to be changed and which is the essence of all experience.

The idea of letting everything be as it is and of resting in a powerful super-intelligence that is at the basis of everything resembles Christian notions of detachment, surrender, and oneness. It also has similarities to notions of non-attachment in Buddhism and the notion of letting go of resistance to the present delineated in the writings of Eckhart Tolle. Tolle speaks of “consciousness in its pure state prior to identification with form” (3), something that is our “natural state of *felt* oneness with Being. It is a state of connectedness with something immeasurable and indestructible, something that, almost paradoxically, is essentially you and yet is much greater than you” (10) – a description that closely echoes the ideas of Balanced View.

If the method of Balanced View of ‘taking short moments’ and ‘relying upon awareness’ or open intelligence could be seen as a form of mindfulness, meditation, or mystic experience involving a transcendent encounter with something greater, could the notion of open intelligence be regarded as another way of conceptualizing God? In the canon of Balanced View’s texts, the word God is hardly used at all. In one passage I have come across, however, it is stated that open intelligence *is* inseparable from God: “Inseparable from clarity is the heart; inseparable from clarity is love; and inseparable from clarity is God. In this training we use the word ‘clarity’ instead of ‘God’ or ‘consciousness’ because clarity is a word that beings [*sic*] can easily understand” (*One Simple Change* 111). Here it is stated clearly that clarity or open intelligence *is* the same thing as God and that it is inseparable from God. Elsewhere in Balanced View, however, the word God is consciously avoided. This is said to be for the sake of simplicity: open intelligence, it is suggested, is easier to understand than God.

Ultimately, however, the open intelligence posited by Balanced View may be no easier to understand than Ken Wilber’s ‘unity consciousness’, Eckhart Tolle’s ‘Being’, or ‘God’. We could compare the concept of open intelligence to unity consciousness, something that is not a final stage in one’s development because it is not a stage at all, but rather a consciousness that is always already there, globally accessible even though we tend to be oblivious to it because we are incessantly busy with the details of life, focused on data and engaged in points of view as if mesmerized by the points in the pointillist paintings of our lives rather than taking in the whole picture.

My third line of comparison will be the ideas presented in Jill Bolte Taylor's autobiography, *My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey*. At the age of thirty-seven, Taylor, a neuroanatomist, had a stroke. During her stroke she lost important left-brain capacities such as language, mathematics, and spatial orientation and could no longer experience three-dimensionality or see color. Reality gradually looked very different as the solidity of her own body dissolved into a boundaryless fluidity that was euphoric and wonderfully expansive: "I felt like a genie liberated from its bottle", Taylor writes: "The energy of my spirit seemed to flow like a great whale gliding through a sea of silent euphoria. Finer than the finest of pleasures we can experience as physical beings, this absence of physical boundaries was one of glorious bliss. As my consciousness dwelled in a flow of sweet tranquility, it was obvious to me that I would never be able to squeeze the enormity of my spirit back inside this tiny cellular matrix" (67). Recalling the experiences of mystics, Taylor felt completely at peace and at one with the universe. An "unforgettable sense of peace" pervaded her whole being, and the state was so blissful that she hesitated about reintegrating the left-brain hemisphere capabilities: "In the absence of my left hemisphere's negative judgment, I perceived myself as perfect, whole, and beautiful just the way I was" (Taylor 70, 71). She also became more empathic towards other people and more able to pick up on body language and nonverbal communication, and her right mind "accurately decode[d] emotion" (Taylor 140). Taylor suggests that anyone can access this 'nirvana' since it "exists in the consciousness of our right hemisphere": "at any moment, we can choose to hook into that part of our brain" (111).

Taylor explains that we have two separate brain hemispheres with very different functions. Whereas the left mind is often dominated by incessant chatter, with the right hemisphere we take in the whole picture. Although *My Stroke of Insight* suggests that we lighten the dominance of the left brain, it does not suggest that its rational and logical propensities are negative. After all, it was thanks to the intermittent clarity of her left brain that Taylor understood that she was having a stroke and was able to seek help. Instead, what Taylor comes to realize is to what extent her left brain hemisphere has dominated her life with its tendency towards nitpicking, obsessive concern with details, organizing lists, ego-centered emotional reactivity, negativity, fear-based hostility, competitiveness, and an orientation toward *doing* rather than *being*. In the end, then, it is not a matter of turning the tables and increasing right-brain activities at the expense of left-brain activities but of ameliorating the collaboration between the two. After her stroke which made this so clear, Jill Bolte Taylor feels that she can *decide* how to feel regardless of circumstance. She does not need to meditate; she can just decide to 'step to the right'. Taylor's 'stroke of insight' is that "*peace is only a thought away, and all we have to do to access it is silence the voice of our dominating left mind*" (111, italics in original).

This recalls the recommendations of Balanced view, where it is suggested that at any time you can choose to press a 're-set' button to access 'open intelligence'. The recipe proposed by Balanced view recalls Taylor's words: "Learning to

listen to your brain from the position of a nonjudgmental witness may take some practice and patience, but once you master this awareness, you become free to step beyond the worrisome drama and trauma of your story-teller" (151). Could the notions of Balanced View be related to the ideas of left and right brain activity presented by Taylor, then? Perhaps in the end Taylor's 'stepping to the right' and Balanced View's 'pressing the re-set button' amount to the same thing.

Balanced View presents itself as a radically new and different path to inner peace and balance on individual and global levels, but how radically new is it? Personal comments on the movement are found on the website *extrafilespace* which poses the question: "Is Candice O'Denver's Balanced View/Great Freedom a sect or a cult?" Many responses and opinions are given. While some are lyrical and enthusiastic, others see Balanced View as "pseudo spiritual financially motivated brainwash" by a movement that "could be classed as a cult" "with Candice as the narcissistic cult leader". "Everyone is told what to believe in a very systematic way and there is absolutely no room for any other opinion other than the party line handed down by Candice and parroted by her syncophatic [sic] 'trainers', the most brainwashed of the bunch". The key idea of taking 'short moments' has, according to one comment, been formulated in books by Tibetan Lamas, and O'Denver "obviously also took a great many other distinctively unique and iconic perspectives, images, concepts, terms, metaphors that were virtually unique to Dzogchen texts, and presented them as her own work, from 2007 on". Another comment: "The original BV teachings are pretty much all stolen from Dzogchen, making the BV teachings essentially a deceitful cut and paste operation. The more modern teachings penned by Candice herself are an exercise in complete un-understandable modern day spiritual technobabble". Finally, someone describes the website of Balanced View as aimed towards "the 18 to 35 year age group. The typical image is of a smiling twenty-something year-old with dreadlocks and an apple mac".

The ideal form of knowledge proposed by Balanced View is "a form of knowledge that isn't constantly referring back to past knowledge in order to verify itself" (*Clarity* 22). But is Balanced View itself "constantly referring back to past knowledge", without giving any references or pointing to the sources of wisdom relied upon? While Balanced View rejects traditional spiritual and religious terminologies, a closer look shows, as has been suggested here, that there are important resonances with older religions and philosophic systems, such as Catholicism and Buddhism. The core of its teaching could be seen as a form of monistic idealism. In the presentation of Candice O'Denver on Balanced View's website, her "firmly held belief that everything is beneficial by nature" is emphasized. The view that nothing needs to be improved resembles the notions found in Buddhism stating that liberation above all means liberation from the craving for a better life or an improved self. As has been suggested, then, the key ideas of Balanced View are not radically new. Nor is the method unique, since it recalls elements of repetition that are central in both prayer and meditation. Further, Taylor's 'stepping to the right' and Balanced View's 'pressing the re-set button', might be pretty much the same thing. Salvation, as

visualized in *My Stroke of Insight* – the positive, forgiving, and compassionate spirituality predominantly located in the right brain hemisphere – resonates well with the views of Balanced View. The ideas of Balanced View could also be understood as a form of mindfulness aiming for a non-evaluating sense of presence in the present moment. Or, it could be described as a form of Zen light. As to whether or not the method of ‘taking short moments’ is the best path to permanent inner peace is a question that will have to be left open.

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