Exploring Modern Asian Mysticisms

by

Paul Stange, 1995

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PREFACE
aims and limitations

This text aims to establish a framework for exploration of mystical religion in the Asian context. It is not comprehensive or representative; instead of overview introduction to the range of traditions emphasis is on a selection of recent practices. Important traditions, notably Taoism and Vajrayana, are hardly touched; those dealt with are not treated in survey fashion. As this is organised around themes, even in chapters dealing with specific practices only selected aspect of it are emphasised.

Part One establishes a framework for exploration through orientation to the anthropology of religion, the nature of mysticism, and issues which arise while exploring it as social practice. Part Two deals with a series of practices, focussing on representatives of major traditions. Part Three deals with themes which cross traditions and builds on the examples dealt with to explore wider issues. By dealing with concrete practices I believe these excursions come closer to the ground level social reality of consciousness raising practices, usually termed "meditation", than overviews of Asian religions would.

This counterpoints philosophical introductions, giving insight into what ideals mean for those committed to their realisation. The concluding thematic explorations attend to the nature of the knowledge at the heart of mystical religion, the function of techniques of meditation practice, the place of doctrines and ideologies within religion, the function of teachers and groups as vehicles of consciousness, and finally consideration of what may be changing about the ways human beings approach mystical knowledge in the contemporary context.

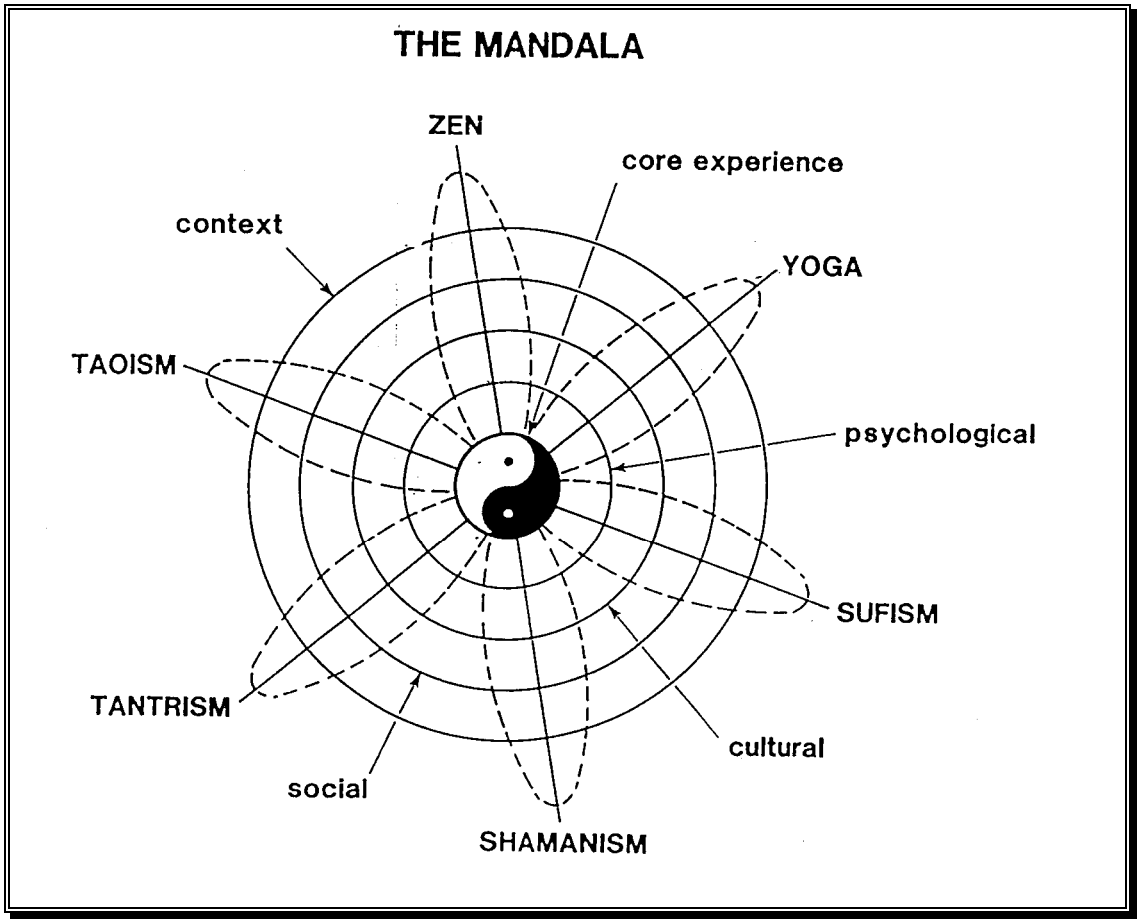
These excursions are preliminary, but underlying them is a systematic framework and together they introduce major traditions and analysis relevant to understanding all religious systems; insights are clearly relevant beyond the cases touched. This is "only one" approach and does not claim special priority against others. I invite you to bear with me, taking into account shortcomings which remain obvious, and applying the dictum Ram Dass suggested: "take what you can use and let the rest go by".

Paul Stange
May 1989

MANDALA

a conceptual framework

Mandalas are circular patterns present in the ground plan of Buddhist stupas, in Tibetan tanka paintings, in Hindu representations of correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, and in Muslim mosaics. This image is a tool, as mandalas are in meditation, for centring attention and cultivating awareness of how the issues we deal with relate systematically to others. Each point or aspect finds its meaning as part of a whole pattern, not in itself as though defined in isolation.



introduction

the inner life of Oz

The materialistic face of Australian society is counterpointed by a diverse, however publicly marginalised, spiritual life. I speak as part of the community, a migrant engaged both in meditation practice and as a professional interpreter of religion in Asia, in this instance reflecting on my home context. Mention of the prospect of testing "the spiritual pulse of Perth", in the process of hosting a forum on the subject, brought a remarkably uniform response: "it won't take long". Reflexive assumption appears to be that a spiritual pulse is so weak as to be virtually non-existent, that preoccupations are predominantly "material. Self conscious images prioritise physical pursuits. Sporting festivals, peaking with the America's Cup in 1987, bring our wildest publicly expressed enthusiasms; morality enters public debate mainly when connected to handling of money and, indeed, at first glance we appear to be complacent lotus eaters, inhabiting a "panel-van culture" of beaches, boats and barbecues.

In Western Australia the most dramatic times of population growth and public building were initiated by the Kalgoorlie gold rush of the 1880's and the boom in mineral exports from the northwest in the 1960's. European and Asian migrants alike, convict settlement aside, have been moved from the start more by the propect of material advantage than by visions of new moral or religious community. Perth has never been termed a "city of Churches", like Adelaide, and religious impetus nowhere trace into the landscape of settlement to the extent so visible in many parts of North America.

Religious and cultural concerns are certainly not prominent in the ways universities carve up knowledge or politicians appeal for votes. Pragmatic utilitarianism dominates economic planning, educational restructuring and political debate. Even excellence of intellect is virtually absent as social ideal, the central purpose of learning institutions is to "prepare us to earn", implicitly to serve "the economy" rather than "people". Educational offerings to Asia are construed as marketing, constructed to assist the balance of payments. Economic values determine the complexion of relationships among ourselves and with others.

It is worth noting these features of our environment even though my objective is not to probe why material concerns have been so prominent or why they may be growing. If public discourses and media images phrase life in increasingly materialistic idiom then economic considerations overshadow and implicitly repress other values. This recognition provides a necessary basis for reflection on spiritual life. Spirituality and religion appear marginal on the surface, but if we pause to consider the terms of our exploration, we might reconsider it as a "mode of spirituality" rather than a distraction from it. Whether we identify with it as that is another matter.

There is need to question opposition between 'material' and 'spiritual'. If it dictates a view, leading us to conclude that 'spirituality' is impoverished in our context, it is possible we are tacitly restricting ourselves to simple views of what the inner life can be, and we are likely to, as dominant public vision of spirituality is impoverished, too flat to take in the richness of an inner life only known through actively attending to nuances of experience within ourselves.

Though perhaps privately holding otherwise, in public most Australians, including academics, maintain a crude reading of what religion is. They might deny the suggestion when phrased bluntly, but 'religion' usually refers only to participation in churches and acceptance of uncritical belief; 'ritual' is understood mostly in its colloquial sense, as 'meaningless' rather than charged; and 'truth' is generally understood only a relative construct of human imaginings, not a mystically knowable absolute. Even intellectual inquiry into religion within this environment finds little credence, reflecting our leading values. Politicians and vice chancellors consider the study irrelevant; students who pursue it nonetheless find that mates ask, "what for?" Close examination of 'spirituality' should lead beyond such superficial understandings, probing practices beyond those easily recognised as 'religious'.

Spirituality relates to aspects of the inner life which are a facet of the human condition. Like the stomach in relation to material subsistence, the spirit is present even when ignored or unmentioned--it does not depend for existence on our belief. We need not be technical, it is enough to say 'spirit' is an aspect of 'life' in the body. Related commitments are in this sense expressed not only in established churches and newly imported religions but also through informal meditation groups and in unspoken ways in private

lives. We may even consider our spiritual condition as tacitly reflected through the social order--statement of materialistic conviction can be reread as a spiritual temperament.

Anthropology directs us precisely this way, to read between lines when exploring cultural practices, to interpret religion through actions rather than only by professed commitment to textually defined orthodoxies. Directing the same style of reflection to our context we can ask seriously, not just tongue in cheek, whether the America's Cup represented a 'cargo cult' in Perth, as it demonstrated how people imagine their hopes will be fulfilled. With feverish anticipation business and government focussed on the creation of marinas and hotels, convinced that these preparations provided a platform for the influx of wealth. The local capitalist Alan Bond was on the crest of a wave, he was seem as an exemplar of what could be attained, a guru at the appex of the pyramid game called capitalism.

Local superheroes, especially glamour capitalists, are easily read as cult figures. Bond & Co. inscribed their identity in popular imagination, through media their cohort controls, and on the physical landscape, through buildings, marinas and billboards. Ordinary people have often seemed as preoccupied with billionaires as they may once have been by royalty. Politicians vie for headlines and sports heroes surface momentarily, but achievement of wealth captures enduring imagination. Spiritual virtue in itself is unconceived and teachers who refer to it hardly appear in public discourse except as another kind of materialistic entrepreneur. At the same time public aspirations focus on exemplary capitalists and they may thus be the spiritual guru we tacitly really follow

Governments project futures based on mineral exports financed from abroad, conveying an engrained tradition shaped by residual colonialism. In colonial systems the arbiters of wealth and power lie outside dependent states, resting on the sanction of overseas interests, if once the queen now international financial markets. When the rituals of presentation (control of labour) are proper, all good things (our credit rating) come through the largesse (capital investment) of superior forces from 'beyond'. In government, business or universites one underlying conviction is that success depends on the magic buttons of marketing. This implicit conviction in what ultimately matters relates not just to political and economic success, but also to what people widely believe will 'work' to make life meaningful.

Anthropologists are prone to emphasise that Melanesian cargo movements failed to grasp the 'true' mechanism of capitalism, as cultists focussed on the arrival of wealth rather than its generation from a productive infrastructure. Thus it is argued they grasped only a fragment of the 'hidden secret' of European power they sought. Melanesian perceptions may strike closer to the bone than modernised people want to think--grasping our myth as we hold it rather than as we think we do.

We do respond to money at a visceral level. Theoretically we know it is a symbolic medium of exchange, but its logic is overridding, as though it is 'really real'. While we believe we are guided by rationality in organisation, efficiency in enterprise and equality and freedom in social practice, our more deeply engrained tacit beliefs in patronage ("connections") and essentially magical invocations (rituals of dress and presentation) may be what we act on as a basis for success. Most act as though money is itself 'real', they have faith in it of a sort that makes it, quite seriously, a complex of convictions which becomes our tacit religion.

In traditional Java, as in most Asian cultures, land forms and urban constructions provide clues to the spiritual values of its people. Monumental temples constituted an effort to capture natural powers, those present also in the sacred sites embedded within the landscape. Spiritual orientations were interwoven with material expression not only in ritual, text and art, but also in architecture, in the reworking of inhabitated space. Cities like Hue, Kyoto or Yogyakarta and temples like Borobudur and Angkor were statements designed to ensure convergence of temporal and spiritual power. They self-consciously wedded human social focus, material construction and spiritual purposes--as did medieval cathedrals. In Java court complexes were designed to focus and protect magical power, providing space for the sacred as a focus of social life.

In Australia's new city cores steel and glass celebrate gambling, banking and mineral exploitation. Visitors leaving Perth's airport will pass the Belmont racecourse and the first striking building in view is a gleaming casino. On the horizon the skyline of central city eagerly emulates international megalopolis--skyscrappers speaking to other urban landscapes rather than the nature they inhabit, the land they occupy or the people they serve. The immense space Australia occupies is deliberately ignored;

buildings insulate us from rather than harmonising with their environment. Our most dramatic constructions proclaim the importance of the banks and businesses which occupy them; they are testaments to the prestige of their builders, the adventure capitalists.

In Fremantle, where a settler past is evident as remnant or replica, sacred geography, especially viewed from above, is dominated by prisons. These focal constructions sit on the power points which in other contexts might be palaces, churches or, in Washington, the Pentagon. Our oldest treasured building is the Roundhouse; our most massive construction the still employed convict Goal. The 'sacred' buildings of our old city are thus walls designed to imprison--first and most shamefully, the Aboriginal population and then imported convicts. The great walls of old cities in Europe defended religious and secular privilege from populations at large; Australia's enclosed the original inhabitants to give the privilege of intercourse with the land, our sacred space, to select migrants.

Reversing materialistic image some affirm a sharpness and clarity in the spiritual atmosphere of Australia that goes along with the special lightness of its skies. This perspective on the lightness and openness of the 'feeling atmosphere' is not one we will have if we focus on church attendance or the dominant institutions of media, business and government. It is the sort of observation sensed when contrasting the charged and busy psychic atmosphere of Java or Bali with the emptiness, in positive valence openness, of Australia. Such perspectives become more apparent if we shift focus, as our forum attempted to, to spiritual activities on the ground, away from institutions.

In fact Australians do explicitly express, cultivate and maintain remarkably diverse commitments to moral, ethical, religious and mystical dimensions. As in most contemporary societies, here we find belief systems and practices originating from everywhere in the world, multiculturalism in spiritual as well as social terms. Much more of what is spiritual is located at home in quiet gatherings than in formal institutions. Thus, apart from the range of explicitly spiritual acitivities, it is possible the social movements which centre on peace, justice, morality and the environment are acting as the most dynamic new vehicles for spiritual impulses.

Inventory of local communities can only be suggestive. Anglicans and Catholics remain the largest groups of Christians, but Eastern Orthodox, Uniting, Baptist and a host of smaller denominations are active, not even only through traditional church channels. In Fremantle a major annual spring ceremony, for the blessing of the fishing fleet, brings out a depth of Italian and Portuguese Catholic commitment which demonstrates the continuing power of traditionally styled faith. Within the Christian community declining or static traditional church attendance has been partly balanced by home prayer groups, experimental theraputic sessions and born again revivalism. There has probably been more change in public perception of what is normative, as people openly admit inactivity now, than in depth of genuine popular commitment.

Established monastic communities, beginning with New Norcia, do continue to maintain Christian contemplative practices. When Father Bede Griffiths visited, expounding his synthesis of Christianity and yoga, audiences of over five hundred attended, ongoing workshops continue and a scattering of followers continue to visit his Benedictine ashram in India. In several local Anglican congregations there are followers of Muktananda's style of meditation. Fringe elements such as the Universal Brotherhood, the Church of the Mystic Christ and the Liberal Catholic Church, all essentially versions of (sometimes heretical) Christian esotericism, have been visible for decades. The picture may be far from uniform, but there is no doubt truth to the impression that the boundary between Christianity and other beliefs has softened.

'Hinduism' in this context includes more than the ritual practices of migrant South Asians, who do quietly maintain ceremonies and subsidise schools of dance. It should also bring to mind the dozens of movements which are offspring of Indian guru or yoga teachers. Followers of Sivananda's disciples, Venkatesananda and Satyanand Saraswati, have been active for several decades. In the late seventies Fremantle housed the largest community of Rajneesh disciples outside Poona and a concentration of followers remain, though now less visibly. Disciples of Ramakrishna, Sai Baba and other guru are dispersed through the community and maintain practices which are almost "normal", no longer extremely odd, as they appeared to be several decades ago.

The Islamic community is relatively small and largely, but by no means exclusively, migrant. A residue of 'Afghans' (most Punjabi), came as camel drivers during the gold rush. Malays from the Cocos Islands are visible in Port Hedland and Geraldton and have a niche in Katanning, where they prepare *halal* meat for export to the Middle East. Sufi practices may not be especially visible, but do exist. The hybrid style of Pir Vilayat Khan attracted hundred to workshops and Javanese sufi styled groups, Subud and Sumarah, have been present for several decades. Pakistani, Indian and even Sudanese based movements have orthodox offshoots and some following of local converts.

Buddhism had almost no visible following two decades ago. There are now significant organisations among migrant Vietnamese and Thai and also substantial local convert following. There are three well developed Theravada *vipassana* groups, informal Japanese styled zen groups and three different offshoots of Tibetan practice. For the most part these groups takes the form of lay practices which do not emphasise ritual engagement but temple and monastic support groups are firm. Rather than concentrating on memberships it might be more important to emphasise the dispersion of beliefs around the margin of formal membership. The wider influence of Buddhist philosophy and practices extends well beyond the sphere of those who would identify themselves as 'Buddhist'.

This point can be underlined in considering the changing nature of spiritual practices generally. A large range of groups defy categorisation. The Seeker's Centre, Mahikari, Eckenkar and others draw, like some already mentioned, from many different traditions. They would choose to identify themselves as 'spiritual', like Subud, without stressing affiliation with an institutional religious community. Assessment of spiritual activity is certainly complicated by movement away from traditional 'religious' categories into movements which equivocate about their identification with religions. This is only the first of at least three respects in which we can note a blurring of boundaries in our increasingly multicultural context.

A large percentage of the people involved with the new (to our context) practices float, moving from group to group and 'tasting'. Many never firmly identify with one, but nevertheless have been touched, and the pool of those who have engaged a range of explicitly spiritual practices is much larger than the formal membership of groups suggest. While this may

be worrisome from the vantage point of organisations, read as an indication of commitment to spiritual practices it is not.

A third factor complicates assessment of spiritual change is that many expressions are not explicitly spiritual. Daoist notions filter through accupuncture, Tai chi, or martial arts, though many who undertake them do not think of themselves as spiritual. Senators have been elected to office on their anti-nuclear stance and many supporters are explicit about spiritual concerns. The campaign to save native forests and the environmental movement generally intersect with spirituality. Obviously to guage the "spiritual pulse of Australia" we cannot confine observation to noting relative attendance at churches and casinos.

Since the seventies the atmosphere has changed; much that was problematic then now comes as second nature. Issues of spirituality as such seemed more prominent then, but substantive change percolates beneath the surface. Twenty years ago eco-activism seemed on the lunatic fringe; now it is becoming mainstream, appropriated by media and politicians. Similarly, though there is less drama associated with it, meditation can be spoken of publicly--what recently seemed "weird" has become conceivable, if not quite normal.

This is not the sort of inquiry from which conclusions can be drawn, but some observations may have relevance. The Christian community demonstrates an openness and a self critical edge, sensitivity to changing modalities of spirituality within the churches, and new respect for the integrity of spirituality beyond their spheres. Now Buddhism and Islam are mature and grounded, Australian born converts carry adopted spirituality with comfort and without the slightest sense of affectation, as there often is with acquired beliefs. Instead practices are thoroughly domesticated, interiorised rather than mouthed. The power of Aboriginal spiritual sensibility as a living presence is clearer now than it could have been some years ago, reflecting changes in idiom. The qualities of Aboriginal spirituality, long ago pronounced unreal at root or already dead, are not only transparently vital, but even beginning to reach beyond its community with lucidity.

Whatever the limitations there are grounds for an impression of increasing openness--people recognise the authenticity of practices other than their own more than they used to. Whatever the social emphasis in our

environment, there are remarkably varied and vital practices on the ground in Australia. Spirits are awake and moving, even if at times through unpredicted channels, not as uniformly asleep as initial impressions allow.

PART ONE

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

chapter l
consciousness raising practices

"Mysticism" is the key word for an understanding of Asian religions. In this context at least the term does not mean "mystification" nor does it refer especially to the magic and occultism so often associated with it. There are two aspects of mysticism which do clearly apply in this study. In the first place mysticism refers to the inner, ineffable and spiritual dimension present within all "true" religious experience. At its heart, and according to classical definitions, lies direct individual experience of or union with God or Truth, that is to say with whatever it is that is "ultimately real". Conventionally the term "mystic" is especially applied to those individuals whose spiritual life has been definitively stamped by such an experience.

At the same time the term mysticism can be applied to all people, movements and traditions which are directed toward the experience of union. In this sense the term refers not only to the extraordinary individuals or saints who we might think of as being the "superstars" of spiritual life, but also to the wide range of ordinary people who are at some level oriented toward or committed to achieving the consciousness of union which lies at the centre of mysticism. This sense of the term is the one which most aptly defines our subject. That is to say we are dealing with individuals, practices and traditions which take direct experience of the absolute as their central purpose.

To say that we are focusing on "Asian mystical religions" is in no way to suggest that mysticism is uniquely Asian, nor that mysticism in Asia is unique. Mysticism is a human phenomenon, occurring in all times and places. Yet, within specific places there are peculiar qualities and emphases, as there are within every expression of social and cultural life. To speak of mysticism is only to refer to a central element within religious life, just as we might talk of power as an aspect of politics within all societies. We will be dealing mainly with Asian examples, but there is no reason to assume that

what we touch is absent from or even necessarily different in other societies--at least not in fundamental terms. In addition, most of the cases we will focus on are relatively contemporary, from the twentieth century.

As we are dealing here with what people do in social practice and as collectives, we can distinguish this approach to religion from others which might focus on philosophical, psychological, or for that matter theological questions. Much of what has been done in the academic study of religion has been based on those angles of approach. However, this is not to say that this approach is narrowly social. As you will see my theory is that in dealing with religion we are under a very particular duress to conceptualise in holistic terms, seeing the various elements or levels as interacting dialectically in a field, rather than concentrating analysis on one dimension as though the phenomenon could be explained in terms of it. So the aspects of religion in Asia which I am concerned with cover the range of levels from experience to technique to conception to action; from mystical to psychological to cultural to social.

If this subject seems highly specialised and esoteric, at least in the sense that it deals with marginal issues of interest to only a few people, that reflects the bias of our technological culture and historical moment. To define the field as I have above is to stake out an immense territory. Mysticism has been explicitly placed at the heart of most Asian religious traditions, it has been an active objective not only for monks and ascetics, but also for large numbers of ordinary people through most of Asian history. This is not to say that everyone in those societies intensively practiced meditation. Far from it. It is to say that the values, orientation and spiritual objectives held within mystical circles were universally recognised as being central to life. It is only in the past several centuries of our own culture that the mystical has been thoroughly marginalised. To assume on this basis that it has been marginal in the past or elsewhere is a combination of historicism and ethnocentrism.

The vast potential scope of this subject can be suggested in even a cursory run-though of the major traditions which are best known to us. Within Hinduism, which is more a family of religions than a religion, we have all heard of yoga *asanas*, Vedantic philosophy, Tantrism and of the *bhakti* (devotional) movements. At any rate all of those are represented amongst the Indian movements which have been exported to the West during the past several decades. Within Buddhism we might think of the Vajrayana of Tibet,

the Chan of China and Zen of Japan, or the Vipassana practices of Theravada Southeast Asia. From Taoism we know of the philosophy of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, of medieval alchemy and magic, orthodox monasticism and a range of popular spiritist and millenarian cults. Within Sufism, in the world of Islamic mysticism, the mystical poetry of Rumi, the philosophy of Ibn al-'Arabi or al-'Ghazali and the so-called whirling dervishes are no doubt familiar.

To run through a list such as the above is to touch only on the formally developed traditions best known to us in the contemporary West. It is also to give pride of place to mysticism associated with what we have come to think of as 'world religions'. This is misleading from several points of view. Yes, mysticism has had a key place within all of the religions mentioned above; and yes we need to pay attention to and learn something about all of the above. However, we would be wrong if we associated mysticism narrowly with such formalised traditions alone. We do need to spend time on such movements, because through that we can establish the centrality of mysticism as an element within Asian religions. Mystics have not been merely isolated communities of wandering ascetics or monks, they have existed at all levels of society and their movements have been popular rather than remaining hobbies for the literati. However, even in examining the relationship between mysticism and the major Asian religions our angle of vision needs correcting. The mystical movements may be not so much off-shoots from world religions, as we are tempted from our context to conclude, but instead what we know of as the world religions have been formed afterwards, arising out of a plurality of mystical practices.

Certainly we will realise that mysticism is not the child of religion, even though both interpenetrate. In fact only a minority of mystics enter onto the historical stage by developing followings and in some case generating what becomes a religion. Others remain invisible, living humble or isolated lives or disappearing from the historical record. Others might be found within the "shamanic" label. Shamanism is a term now being used fairly loosely to cover a multitude of practices based in tribal or village life, involving spirit contacts and healing, and becoming in some instances mystical. At the same time some individuals, in Asia as elsewhere, have had experiences which are distinctly mystical, but which have not been related, even afterwards, to formal religious structures.

Mysticism, in other words, should not be seen (in the Asian or in any context) as existing only in connection with what we think of as "religions". We should, regardless of our own understanding and position, consider the suggestion of the perennial philosophers, who see mystical experience as a universal current within human life, one which surfaces and is given different names in different places. But according to that view names are simply labels after the fact for something that is fundamentally nameless and yet at the same time universally present and united. From this standpoint the subject we are studying is simply the diversity of surface expressions or manifestations of a single force or element within human existence. And why not consider this way of looking at it? Is it after all so different from suggesting that all people need food and that hence in different environments they will pursue it in one fashion or another?

If we pause to reflect, in another way, about the nature of the study we are engaging in, we need to consider what sort of discourse it is. What can we be looking for in it in this context? There are clearly very many different, perhaps even equally valid ways of approaching the subject, what is this one? Does it imply, in any sense, the necessity of practice or knowledge of a mystical sort. It has been plausibly argued that meditation practice is equivalent to laboratory work in the physical sciences. Meditation practice, in many contexts at least, does not involve *a priori* belief, it is open-ended and experimental. At the same time in mysticism nothing fundamental can be understood apart from practice. This may be so, but I nonetheless hold it would be most inappropriate to require such an approach here. Why?

Even if meditation practice is experimental and open-ended in the way scientific inquiry is also supposed to be we can distinguish the objective of meditation from the objective of academic study. Distinction is crucial to understanding this excursion--as much for those with personal spiritual interest as for those with purely intellectual interest. Meditation in the context of mysticism (which is to say not in all contexts, as meditation can be and is practiced for reasons which have nothing to do with mysticism) only makes sense as a tool for personal transformation. Whatever we think about the functions of the academy, it is defined here by focus on disciplined intellectual understanding and knowledge of a subject.

Thus the aim of this exploration is *systematic intellectual knowledge*. For those with a purely personal interest in the spiritual, with no intellectual

curiosity about its interpretation, this will offer little. On the other hand this speaks to anyone, with or without self conscious spiritual motive, interested in cultivating systematic analytical understanding about it. There are of course severe limits to what intellect can accomplish in approaching religion and mysticism. Those limits should be of as much interest to those who have and to those who have not got a personal interest in the subject. This is easily misunderstood so in addition I will follow through to another aspect of it.

Further consideration is called for because the relationship between mental forms of knowledge and the other forms, which all mystics insist are possible, is a serious issue in itself, not just an option we face as we set out. Many religious traditions hold that mental knowledge, especially in the field of mysticism, can be destructive or counterproductive. There is the very real danger that when a principal is understood as an idea a person will think that it has been comprehended, realised in full.

This is analogous in spiritual terms to the mistake of one who meets the Buddha in a vision then assuming that they occupy the same spiritual plane. Confusion between different levels of knowing is something all of us need to watch out for, and there is no doubt that the danger of that confusion is especially serious in this subject. From a different angle the relationship between intellectual and spiritual knowledge merits additional comment. Having said that the aim of this exploration is systematic intellectual understanding we may wonder where other aspects of personal knowledge fit in. Intellect is one function of the person along with others, but nonetheless clearly only one aspect.

To say that this is constructed around systematic intellectual understanding is not to say that that is all we need to be concerned with. We are also people; we are not just disembodied intellects. If we engage each other, even in a context defined by cultivation of intellect, that does not mean that we should not be also pursuing other aspects of our interest in the subject. As an analogy we might imagine that, if we were working together to prepare a meal, then cutting vegetables and cooking would be the focus around which we organised our interactions. But at the same moment we might still talk of other things and still feel and interact as people. The same is true here. It is possible in this context to cultivate our understanding of the subject without doing violence either to the subject or to ourselves. This is a

simple statement, but not one everyone would agree with, nor are its implications easily comprehended.

One way of contextualising my position is to suggest that within the traditional forms of modern academic discourse or older styles of religion, the two forms of knowledge have been seen as necessarily unconnectable. Religious knowledge has been viewed from both academic and religious points of view as depending on "faith" which cannot coexist in the same instant with "reason"; the two domains have been held apart. I am arguing that while the activities are separable in heuristic terms, that is in the way that we "think" about what we do, that actually they are simultaneous aspects of the same moment, both existing in different planes but at the same instant. Indeed I would hold that both are even always present despite the fact we do not consistently choose to be conscious of them.

To go one step farther, foreshadowing an undercurrent which will reappear frequently through these reflections, my suggestion is that both intellectual and spiritual life are moving toward a position where neither will remain possible without conscious admission of their simultaneity. This text thus begins with a posture I argue is especially characteristic of the age we live in and of the spiritual possibilities contained within it. Openness to the mystical dimensions of spirituality in and through intellect as well as intuition, movement toward simultaneous conscious functioning of both those functions, is one of the keys both to understanding of and within the spirituality of this age. If this is so then this enterpise is not just "about" the subject we engage with, but also an exemplar of it. Admission of both intellectual and intuitive functions within our discourse means that the possibility of maintaining modernist styled separation of subject and object no longer remains.

This position remains "heresy" for many religious and intellectual schools of thought, it allows a "seepage" across boundaries which are normally maintained as fixed. I expose my position to be explicit about what I also argue is constantly at issue implicitly, but in repressed form, in other discourses about these subjects. My position is that the boundaries must be breached. Breakthrough impinges on issues of human survival as a species, this is not an abstract issue of esoteric philosophy, but a profound and powerful debate about the nature of our being and our relationship as beings with other planes of being. We are not debating fine points of philosophy

only because dabbling with the esoteric, or for that matter with the intellectual, is a hobby, as many materially oriented pragmatists imagine.

The issues of how knowledge is constituted, how we relate to each other about it, how our consciousness can move toward practical realisation of our "actual" relation to other life forms on the planet is anything but only an "academic" issue. The positions we take in relation to these questions have profound ramifications through our interactions in all contexts, they are political issues of life and death. These statements are not overdramatic. At the practical level most human beings are now conscious of the precarious nature of our relationship to the planet. Most conceive of this as a material issue of physical balances, integration and social interaction. The roots of our problem are not only implicit in the physical limitations to growth of currently dominant economic systems, they are not only embedded in political economic issues of balancing abstracted social forces.

They also relate to the underlying sense of "control and management", rather than "stewardship". The assumption that we control, manipulate and resolve issues through our technical and scientific capacities is related to deeply rooted senses of what "we are". Specifically, notions of technological mastery and problem solving relate to maintenance of ego at both individual and collective levels. Rather than being "in control", from a spiritual standpoint we are "custodians", caretakers of a system. We are ourselves elements within that system rather than being apart from it. Realisation, in practical and experiential terms, of ourselves as though "bubbles on the wave of being", as components within a whole, is part of the challenge on which peaceful relations amongst us as a species and potential for balance with the physical structures of our planetary environment depend.

Returning to a lower level of discourse, in dealing mainly with modern movements we are touching those most immediately relevant both in Asian societies and to the context we live in. Most of the movements we are dealing with have off-shoots in the Western world. The teachers, teachings and practices we will be dealing with are directly relevant within our society. The organisation of this exploration is thematic rather than descriptive, but the aim includes introduction to mystical religious systems, not just abstract analysis of them. Themes dominate, as can be clarified through the cover diagram, which provides a structure for exploration, relating descriptive and thematic elements to each other.

Each of the "leaves" in the diagram represents, going from "microcosmic" to "macrocosmic": an individual, a group/movement, or a tradition. Each of the circles represents an aspect, level, or dimension which is operative within every individual, group or tradition. At the centre is the core experience of union, which is symbolically represented by the *yin/yang* symbol of Taoism (this is arbitrary, not meant to imply pride of place to the Taoist conception of the core). This forms a central point of reference for all mystics, even though it remains in important respects unspeakable, undefinable and impossible to pinpoint (hence the centre is not, in my symbolism, identified by a single sharp point).

The levels, or circles represent: the psychological level of experiences and techniques designed to alter awareness; the cultural level of symbols, doctrines or ideological systems which frame practice; the social level of interactions between individuals, teachers and pupils, monasticism or whatever; and finally the contextual level of the social and environmental setting within which a person, group or tradition exists. One of the functions of the image is to suggest how all of these elements can be seen in relation to each other, especially how we may conceive of each as finding its significance through its dialectical interplay with the other elements in the system. The themes are treated in this excursion, but not mechanically in sequence. Using the diagram as an organising structure, we can "track" the elements we deal with as they come up. The diagram does work as a framework to identify the key elements we are dealing with.

There are a number of implications to the diagram which will not be systematically explicated, but which are implicit within the discussion which follows. It is worth highlighting them here, as a background frame of reference for our approach. The first point, already fairly clear, is that the diagram implies that our efforts to understand or interpret any particular dimension of mystical religion depends on framing it by its relationship to other aspects. Thus, as I have already been suggesting, to approach mystical religion through a set of key concepts alone, as though the mental plane of ideas, philosophy, doctrines or beliefs is the subject, is to miss the core. Ideas find their meaning, the whole "cultural realm", which in this framework I am relating to ideology and thought or symbol systems in any of their manifestations, is contextualised socially and experientially. To approach

mystical religion as a set of doctrines misses the heart of it, and leads us to misread even those doctrinal elements we are emphasising.

If I had to nominate a key to determine what constitutes the "mystical", I would say it depends on relative consciousness of orientation toward the core experience of union. This implies an understanding of the "core experience" itself as something/no-thing which is both absolute and beyond any of the conceptual frameworks we could attempt to capture it in. Using William James's terms, we could say it is "ineffable". A "system" is not "mystical" unless within it there is some conscious orientation toward "the absolute which is undefinable". This brings it into the realm of "religion", in general terms, which is indeed where mysticism needs to be situated and we will turn shortly to consideration of religion and mysticism.

The spiritual teachers who are the focus of the movements we are dealing with, as examples of the traditions which are already known to us, are major figures. We are not focussing on obscure ordinary individuals, but on extraordinary people who have been widely recognised within their societies, sometimes across cultural boundaries, as exemplars of a tradition of knowledge which is highly valued. If we want analogues to them, then we must think of the superheroes within the modern cults of science and philosophy. Our focus is on people whose mastery of knowledge and stature within their systems of knowledge is equivalent to that of the leading philosophers or social scientists in our world. That we do not automatically bracket them in the same range is a reflection of both the lineages of culture we identify with and the priorities which dominate our systems of knowledge. This recognition is important to establishing the gestalt we need even in dealing with the examples we touch on.

Their traditions of knowledge are radically different from those given priority within contemporary industrial culture, relating to a different domain or sphere, one which in the map of modern priorities has been shrinking. But by affirming that those we are dealing with are experts of high standing I am also inviting consideration that we can learn from them rather than only exploring their practices as objects. If introduced to the theories of Weber we will naturally test them against empirical evidence and experiment to see whether we can gain insights for our understanding of practical issues. We can take the same view with those we engage here, entertaining their

perspectives not only as objects of study, but also as potential sources of insight into issues which concern us in our lives.

chapter 2
anthropological definition of religion as praxis

In this exploration we need to proceed carefully, considering the terms of our appoach in general before plunging into analysis of mystical traditions. Within everyday conversation the term "religion" triggers association with Christianity. Even if that religion has been marginalised in our society it has shaped the culture and remains the most visible religion in our environment. We are likely to assume, implicitly as we make the association, that the issues which preoccupy and the patterns which characterise contemporary Christianity are essential to what constitutes religion. These reflexes are entirely natural and operate with the same implications in Muslim, Buddhist or other cultures. The point is that as we begin to consider terms such as "religion", which ostensibly designate a general or universal feature of human life, perceptions and assumptions are guided and limited by specific historical and cultural forms which condition us.

This is one aspect of what anthropologists term "ethnocentrism", the tendency to view and judge other cultural systems in terms of values and categories shaped by our own. It is in this area, that of attempting to develop theories which are valid across cultures, that anthropology has made the greatest contribution to modern social scientific understandings of religion. Some have traced the intellectual roots of anthropology to the efforts of Herodotus, in the fifth century BC, to compile records of the variety of cultures known to Greeks of his day. Others suggest the first systematic comparative study of cultures was undertaken by Ibn Khaldun, the Arab historian of the 14th century.[1]

From ancient times in all literate cultures the records of early travellers and reflections of philosophers have touched on the issues which concern anthropologists today. However the roots of the modern discipline clearly lie, intertwined with those of the other social sciences, in the scientific and humanistic thought of the European Enlightenment of the 18th century. As a distinct discipline anthropology only emerged in the late 19th century, in the

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1 It takes a Middle Easterner, apparently, to notice the possibility that in Arab culture theorising predated important European efforts to think across cultures. See Fadwa El Guindi, Religion in Culture (Dubuque, 1977) pp. 6-8.

wake of Darwin's evolutionary theory, and as it is currently conceived it is very much a child of the 20th century. There is no mystery underlying the fact that anthropology is such a recent development. Thorough exploration in systematic terms of the variety of cultures in the world only became possible through the communications networks resulting from the industrial revolution.

The "closure" and intensification of cross cultural contacts which resulted has generated the need for intellectual systems which deal with humanity as a species and that impulse accounts for much of the inspiration which has produced anthropology. At the same time the preoccupations of early anthropologists were also influenced by colonial institutions and purposes--naturally as so much of European interaction with other cultures was framed by imperialism. One reflection of this is that 19th century theories of religion parallelled the social versions of Darwin's evolutionism in seeing European forms of knowledge, whether scientific or religious, as representing the highest stage of evolutionary development.

The assumption of European cultural superiority was taken as given because it existed within the context of European economic and political domination. Christians took this as meaning that their religion was at a higher evolutionary stage than primitive animism or later polytheism; rationalist believers in science commonly held that magical and religious systems, in that order, predated and were made redundant by the growth of modern science. To date both views are common in popular thinking within the ambit of European cultures, though within anthropological circles this aspect of evolutionary thinking has long been disavowed. Ironically within contemporary thinking there is often a latent evolutionary assumption that our progress over the past century has been such that earlier thinking is now irrelevant.

Early thinkers may be dismissed too easily for what we think are flaws which may only be fashion. In the process we may also lose sight of enduring aspects of their contribution. Although 19th century thinkers used words such as "primitive" and "savage" within the context of evolutionary thought which saw those as a counterpoint to "civilised", although they spoke of "spirits" and "souls" with a willingness to concede their reality that some of us may not share, they have nevertheless led us toward the enlarged sense of religion underlying social science discussion of it now.

In this introduction to the anthropology of religion we will concentrate first on the way religion has been conceived within the discipline, emphasising the general contribution it has made through this to theories of religion. Secondly we will deal with the ways in which anthropology has interpreted interaction between religion and other dimensions of social life. Finally we will explore anthropological approaches to the problem of relating internalised systems of meaning, which operate as religious structures within particular cultures, to the construction of general laws of social life.

The term "anthropology" means "the science of man" and the discipline has from the beginning explicitly foregrounded effort to construct a species-wide understanding of humanity (only since the seventies picking up on feminist concern with the biases inherent in those terms). But the discipline is far from homogeneous. Interchanges between the schools of thought in the European, American and English contexts have been active from the start but at the same time the approaches which have been characteristic within each have differed. Within the Germanic countries the term "ethnology" has been foregrounded. Ethnology is the branch of anthropology concerned with systematic and comprehensive description of patterns of cultural and social organisation within different ethnic communities.

British anthropology has been mainly social anthropology influenced by French structuralism, which foregrounds concern with structures of kinship and social interaction. In the United States the psychological and cultural sub-fields of anthropology have been emphasised in a context which sees the discipline as including physical anthropology, archaeology and linguistics. In the nineteenth century sociological and anthropological theories of religion were shaped by the framework of evolutionary thought--not only influenced by but also as a development parallel to the evolutionary theory within biological theory. It was the sociologist Herbert Spencer, not Darwin, who first popularised the term "evolution" and who introduced the phrase "survival of the fittest" to Darwin's vocabulary.[2] Spencer's work influenced the origins of both sociology and anthropology, but did not focus on theories of religion.

The most important, and still enduring, early theory of religion was proposed by Edward Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture* (1873). Tylor was

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2 See Marvin Harris, The Rise of Anthropological Theory (New York: Crowell & Co, 1968) ch 5.

concerned with the evolutionary stages of religious development and argued that in questing for the origins of religion we could identify beliefs in the "soul" and "spirit beings", which he terms "animism", as the defining feature and origin of religion. He related beliefs in spirit beings to interpretation of dream experiences as evidence for a soul which exists independently of the material body and life force. Tylor was a master of the descriptive literature, the early ethnography, which had become available by the mid-nineteenth century and he used the accounts of missionaries and travellers to back up his argument that spirit beliefs were a universal underpinning of religion. Tylor's theory, in modified forms, still has adherents and is linked to what is seen as the "intellectualist" interpretation of primitive religions which stresses that, even in the most primitive contexts, human beings use religious beliefs as a way of explaining and understanding the world around them.

Later Robert Marett, whose works appeared in the early twentieth century, suggested there was an earlier and more basic stage of "aminatism", involving belief in a more abstract *"mana". Mana* is a term for "power" or energy, almost an electrical sort of energy, derived from Polynesia. Marett argued that, rather than believing in particular spirits or hierarchies of subtle beings, primitive man held merely that there was a charge of life energy in all being, even inanimate beings (such as rocks and earth--hence the linkage of his theory to sacred sites and power objects).[3]

While Tylor emphasised belief in spirits and Marett the primitive perception of natural energies, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim defined religion as:

> ... a unified system of beliefs and practices, relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden--beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.[4]

In other words he stressed the social basis of religious thought, seeing it as a projection into the realm of culture of forces and patterns which are rooted in the interaction between groups within society, and the significance of the

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3 For a recent review of the concept see Roger Keesing, "Rethinking Mana" Journal of Anthropological Research V 40 N 1

4 Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (New York, Free Press, 1965) p. 62.

distinction between secular and sacred domains. Durkheim's theory lends itself to analysis of the ways in which religion can be used as a system of social control. It stressed the social dimension as opposed to the cultural realm of beliefs and symbols and it has been especially influential within British social anthropology.

Of early anthropological works on religion Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1911-1915) is perhaps the most famous. With erudition and literary artistry, though not (it is now generally held) theoretical rigour, Frazer produced twelve dense volumes surveying the origins and nature of magic and religion. One of his prime concerns lay in distinguishing between the two. He argued that magic was simpler than and hence historically prior to true religion - within an evolutionary sequence which leads to science. The thrust of his work was to draw on mythologies and magical beliefs from around the world to draw attention to parallels.

One of his enduring contributions lies in recognition of widespread early belief in divine kingship. With few exceptions, the American Lewis Henry Morgan being the most notable, early anthropological theories emerged from library research, from culling of travellers reports rather than from direct contact with and study of the people discussed. In the twentieth century the methodology of anthropology was revolutionised by a new emphasis on fieldwork. Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski were the principal pioneers of this strategy, both through their writings and as teachers.

Boas fathered an American school of anthropology, "historical particularism", which reacted against the sweeping generalisations of the nineteenth century with an emphasis on the often variable meaning of cultural traits within different contexts. He championed detailed empirical description based on extended contact, in the field, with the culture under study. Though originally German he shared with American liberalism the notion that such descriptions could be free of theory. By this rigorous empirical emphasis Boas hoped to put the study of man on a scientific footing and certainly his emphasis on extended field experience helped open a much more grounded phase of anthropological theory.

Many of Boas's students were more humanistically and culturally oriented and their work, which dominated American anthropology between the wars, often, as in the case of Ruth Benedict, brought emphasis on the

relationship between culture and personality, on the psychological dimension. Alfred Kroeber, another Boas student and for a long time himself doyen of the American discipline, developed the notion of culture as the "supra-organic", as an autonomous sphere separate from the social, which shapes human experience and perception.[5]

Malinowski, of Polish origin but working in England and then America, similarly put emphasis on descriptive ethnographic method as the base line of anthropological research and then theorising. His works on the Trobriand islanders of Melanesia began to appear after the First World War and are still read as models of ethnography. Malinowski argued that magical beliefs existed within cultures which were practical and pragmatic, that they were functionally related to practices of agriculture and trade. He held that like mythology, magic was structurally related to social and economic spheres. So while Tylor had seen early religion as a form of primitive philosophy and Frazer had presented it as a pre-scientific pseudo-science Malinowski held that within the context of primitive societies magical practices and mythological beliefs had a pragmatic rationale.[6]

For our purposes, and for the moment passing over many important developments within the discipline, the main point to emphasise is that after Boas and Malinowski anthropology moved away from the speculative grand theories of the nineteenth century and began to link study of religion to empirical observation, through extended fieldwork, of beliefs and practices in the context of living societies. This led to a shift away from evolutionary thinking and concern with origins, which all leading thinkers came to see as purely speculative, to a search for understanding of religion as a system of practice. Apart from the fact that anthropology has served to broaden the scope of what is considered to be religion, this emphasis on "lived systems", rather than on elements of belief or implicit philosophy, has been a consistent lesson contributing to wider understanding of religion.

As a discipline anthropology can be defined more readily by its reliance of fieldwork, participant observation and the interpretation of culture through the ways it is expressed in everyday situations, than by a

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5 For an excellent general survey of the rise of theories in anthropology see Harris, Op.Cit.

6 See Bronislaw Malinowski, Magic, Science and Religion (New York, Doubleday, 1954)

particular theory. The stock of theories it draws on is shared with those which feed into all of the social, and more recently also the humanistic, disciplines. On the other hand its methodology has drawn attention to a new sense of what religion is and that is what is most relevant to us here. Within twentieth century anthropology the ethnographic method has led toward an understanding of religion as practiced and lived rather than just as a particular form of belief or ritual practice. There is a temptation, still strong in our society, to see "religion" as referring to a particular category of belief systems, as though it is a subset of ideology or philosophy, or as referring to ritual behaviour or social institutions clearly demarcated as concerned with the sacred. These reflexes reflect the nature of Christianity in the modern era and they are related to the emphasis Tylor placed on spirit beliefs and Durkheim on social institutions. They draw attention, through the nature of our context, to a limited understanding of what religion is. But then we must ask again, what is "religion"?

It could be maintained that there is no universal definition of religion, that either explicitly or implicitly each religion defines its own sense of the term. Thus within the Semitic family of religions which includes Judaism, Christianity and Islam "true religion" must come in the form of prophetic reception of revelation from the One God which is then enshrined in holy books which make the Truth and law accessible to clearly demarcated communities of believers.

On the other hand within Indic religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism the boundaries of the religious community are not problematic in the same way and Truth is at once beyond symbolic comprehension and buried within the depths of the individual, hence liberation is achieved through a process of self realisation. Within animistic or primal religions there may be no clearly articulated tenets of faith, no way of unravelling the sphere of religion from those of cultural tradition and economic life. In effect, even if not overtly, each system is not just a variation on some general theme, but a distinct way of shaping what "is" religious.

Nevertheless most of us will still intuitively remain convinced that, however complicated, something distinctive characterises religion. For the moment we can leave aside the complex problems rising from the extent too which our personal judgements may intervene to make general conclusions difficult. In attempting to identify it we will naturally look first, as people like

Tylor did, for a common or underlying element of belief or thought. Tylor's minimal definition of religion, as involving "belief in spiritual beings", may still satisfy many people and cover most instances of religion. However in technical philosophical terms systems such as Theravada Buddhism are "a-theistic", denying the ultimate existence of either gods or self. In the end, due to the extreme diversity of belief systems and patterns of action, it is too awkward to identify religion in general with any particular cultural or social structure.

Even apart from the fact that the diversity of cultures makes the quest for a common element difficult, we must work toward a definition which takes account of the fact that religion is multidimensional. There have been students, and they can safely be called "reductionists", who have seen religion simply as a kind of thought or belief system (or for that matter as a pseudo-science), purely as the by-product of a psychological impulse, as a projection of social forces or as an instrument of social control. To the degree that followers of Freud, Durkheim or Marx, just to take prominent examples, tend to see religion in those terms, they are relating to it mainly in single dimensions. Many disagreements among those who interpret religion relate to the fact that they are focusing on different dimensions or asking different questions--rather than actually disagreeing on the same issue.

In the end the most significant and useful recent definitions are those which draw attention not to a particular structure of experience, thought or action, but rather to the nature of the linkage between them. For example Robert Bellah, an American sociologist, has spoken of religion as " ... a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence."[7] In his influential essay on "Religion as a Cultural System" Clifford Geertz, one of the leading contemporary anthropologists, defined religion more painstakingly as:

> ... a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a

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7 He uses this as his "working definition" within his essay on "Religious Evolution", which is republished in Robert Bellah, Beyond Belief (New York, Harper & Row, 1970)

> general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.[8]

Elsewhere, in his book *Islam Observed*, Geertz has been both more off-handed and elegant. There he refers to religion as:

> ... the conviction that the values one holds are grounded in the inherent structure of reality, that between the way one ought to live and the way things really are there is an unbreakable inner connection.[9]

In these definitions the stress falls on the tightness of the connection between inner experience, belief systems and actions. They suggest that if the system is one in which people experience inner conviction that their beliefs and the actions prescribed by them are rooted in self-evident reality, then the system is religious. Emphasis is placed on the nature of the dialectical interplay which links levels rather than on the content of and particular level within the system.

There are a number of clear advantages to definitions of this sort. As they are content free they allow us to see more easily how involvement in institutions such as football or ideologies such as Marxism may function in religious terms. There are serious reasons for exploring possibilities of this sort. If we limit our exploration to cases which appear to be self-evidently religious, then we are hardly testing our understanding. If we exclude Aussie Rules it should be on clear grounds. As a focus for expenditure of energy and attention, even as a context for ritual interaction, it may have replaced the Church for some subcultures.

It might be excluded on the grounds that it does not provide the ground level conviction in an "ultimate reality" that we would require of "religion". On the other hand we could decide that capitalism really does function as a religion in our society, as all but a few people actually believe, implicitly, that money is "really real". Examples like these at least highlight the possibility that systems of thought and action which are not overtly

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8 In Michael Banton, editor, Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion (London, Tavistock, 1966), p. 4.

9 Clifford Geertz, Islam Observed (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1971) p. 97.

religious may function in religious ways, at the same time this throws into a different light our consideration of overt religion.

The clearest implication, and one that has considerable effect within the anthropology of religion, is recognition that the most important elements of belief are often implicit, hidden or taken for granted. The often unstated elements of what make up a people's "world view" are at once critical to their actions in the world and distinct from the elements of belief they consciously subscribe to. So while religion may (in the case of primitive religions it may not) include explicit statements of belief, while those are likely to shape internally held views of the world, the practiced or lived religion may be quite different from formalised beliefs.

Within recent anthropological discussion of religion phrases such as "coherence systems" and "implicit meanings" signal efforts to expose underlying elements of world view which are essentially religious. We will return to identification of strategies for understanding meaning across cultures, but for now need to consider how anthropology places religion in the context of social life.

Once the ethnographic method had been established as the necessary entree to anthropological theorising one of the natural correlates was emphasis on a holistic framework. To some degree a holistic view informs all of the social sciences, but it finds special force within anthropology due to the fact that early ethnographic work tended to focus on comprehensive treatment of relatively small and mainly self-contained societies.

The holistic view implies that religion, or any other aspect of society for that matter, cannot be understood independently. Instead it must be treated as a component or aspect within a socio-cultural system within which each element not only interacts with but is defined by its relations to the whole. This essentially dialectical view suggests, as does gestalt theory, that to understand religion we must see it in the context of its social field. Though this position is often unstated and its implications all too easily ignored, it nevertheless serves as a framework within the anthropology of religion.

Elements of this emphasis are clear in Malinowski's arguments that ritual and magical practices have a functional relation to social organisation and economic exchange. In British social anthropology the dominant school of thought has been "structural-functionalism". Radcliffe-Brown and his students generally presented ethnographies with clear chapter divisions

suggesting firm distinction between the spheres of economy, kinship, ritual and cosmology (world view). They were not especially concerned with historical change, but focused instead on the integrative and functional interactions between structures at distinct levels. Rituals and beliefs in the religious sphere were presented as supporting and rationalising economic and social systems, rarely as an autonomous dimension.

A similar emphasis on the functional, and for most of the writers involved implicitly subordinate, role of religion within social life is evident in the context of "cultural ecology". As the name implies, part of the method within cultural ecology involves identification of ways in which culture and religion involve practical adaptation. Thus Marvin Harris, for example, has argued that the Hindu prohibitions making cows sacred are related to the economic significance of cows as a source of labour, fuel and milk. Cultural ecologists are not generally narrow economic determinists.[10] Julian Steward emphasises that beyond the "cultural core", the constellation of elements most closely linked to subsistence and economy, variations within the realm of religion, for example, could be considerable.[11]

Holistic and, in one sense or another, functional perspectives are pervasive within anthropology, even if only as an underlying framework and not as a constant preoccupation. Terms such as functional are clearly used in many ways and with many purposes--we have to be cautious not to assume that their use always signals a particular school of interpretation. Nevertheless it is useful to note the most general implications of ethnographic method, holistic theory and functional analysis, as much that is distinctive about anthropological approaches to religion stems from them.

If holistic and functional emphases flow most naturally from focus on relatively homogeneous and stable social systems then it is not surprising that, as anthropologists turned to the study of complex societies around the time of the Second World War, they became increasingly concerned with social conflict and historical change. In England Max Gluckman initiated a new school of thought which foregrounded the themes of dispute and conflict even within traditional societies. In the United States Robert Redfield's work explored peasant societies and highlighted the necessity of seeing the "folk tradition" of villagers as interacting dialectically with the

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10 Marvin Harris, Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches (London, Hutchinson, 1975) pp. 11-34.

11 In Julian Steward, Theory of Culture Change (Urbana, U Illinois P, 1955)

literate "high culture " of cities. In this respect his work set the frame for a new view of religions, one which drew attention to the interaction between textually defined "great traditions" of philosophy and theology and the more ritually defined and magically inclined practices of peasants.

This insight resonated at the same time with the theories of Max Weber. Weber's work, which drew special attention to the interaction between inner orientations, defined by religious ethos, and socio-economic actions, had a profound impact on American anthropology in the fifties. During that period studies of village societies within the newly independent states were often guided by an interest in determining how traditional religious orientations affected potential for modern economic development. Geertz and Bellah, whose definitions of religion were referred to earlier, were influenced by Weberian theory in their early work.

One of the by-products of anthropological concern with complex societies was that anthropologists began applying their perspective to study of world religions. Sociological and ethnographic work on world religions began at least a century ago. Scholars such as the Dutchman Snouck Hurgronje initiated a revolution in understanding of Islam by approaching it through the way it was practiced both in Mecca and in Indonesia. But exploration of world religions through ethnographic encounter has only become common during the past several decades. One of the main effects of this encounter for understanding of religion has been to shift attention from formal institutions and conceptions to practices. The recent work of Michael Gilsenan suggests that:

> ... Islam will be discussed not as a single, rigidly bounded set of structures determining or interacting with other total structures but rather as a word that identifies varying relations of practice, representation, symbol, concept, and worldview within the same society and between different societies.[12]

This view of religious systems, which roots them in praxis, is a long way from the assumption that "Islam", or any other religion, is easily defined by its own central doctrines.

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12 Michael Gilsenan, Recognizing Islam (London, Croom Helm, 1985) p. 19.

In the early decades of this century Western observers of Southeast Asian religions frequently remarked that people who claimed to be Buddhist or Muslim were secretly animists. Conclusions of this sort were based on the fact that it took only a short time to notice that many local practices had no relation to the central doctrinal tenets of Buddhism or Islam. As a result it seemed to many students that most Southeast Asians, and similar points could be made for other areas of the world, were "not really" Buddhist or Muslim, that their conversion to those systems had been nominal or, alternatively, that syncretism and mixing of beliefs had proceeded so far that the religion was not pure. Imported religions appear in these terms as a "thin veneer" above resilient local cults. Through the fifties and sixties most studies dealt with the Buddhist and animistic elements of Thai religion, for example, as though they have been separate traditions interacting. It was only in 1970 that a study by S.J. Tambiah presented them as components within a single system--implying that "Buddhism" as practice involved a complex range of cultural ideas common in its Thai context.[13]

In the Javanese case there has been a tendency to assume that the visible persistence of animistic and Hindu beliefs, at least within significant segments of the population, has meant that the Javanese are "not Muslim", or that only those who are "purist" in their approach to the faith deserve the label. This interpretation was given force by Geertz's writings and follows naturally from a view of religion which is textually based, from a perspective in which there can be no question of Islam including elements of belief which clearly preceded it.[14] But this implies a scriptural view, one Geertz himself clarified is essentially a modern phenomenon, a view facilitated by the print revolution and modern education. To assume that religions may be defined in terms of elements which easily translate into print is to limit them severely. In the end a view such as Gilsenan's is much more open-ended, more adaptable to the diversity of practices which go under the name "Islam".

If we follow the trend of recent anthropology in seeing religion not only as multidimensional, but as many-faced, as having different local meanings and manifestations, we are clearly departing from what the

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13 SJ Tambiah, Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North East Thailand (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1970)

14 Especially by the way Geertz's classic ethnography, The Religion of Java (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1976) was framed, making these elements seem quite distinct even though that was not his purpose.

orthodoxy of particular religions would accept. Whatever the realities of practice among those who call themselves Muslim, every teacher of the religion will have a clear definition and each definition will exclude many practices. To take the case in point, many Indonesian Muslims take exception to the way Western scholars interpret Islam. There is in short a tension, often severe, between the way outsiders and an academic discipline such as anthropology defines religion or a religion and the internal perspective of those who are being described. This axis of tension has been of persistent concern within anthropology.

Recognition that each religious system, like every culture, defines a "universe of meaning" in its own terms is hardly new to students of religion. Geertz's framing of the point draws our attention to the circularity of religious logic which ensures that in the end each system is only intelligible to itself. It is simply another approach to an old issue and the same could be said of his comment that it is impossible to at once objectively study and subjectively practice a religion. The insistence, within the terms of each religious system, that meaning and significance cannot be either apprehended or judged by standards which are foreign to it stands as a persistent and nagging counterpoint to efforts to construct a scientific and universal theory of religion. Few would claim to have resolved this tension and most accept that it will stand as a continuing problem within studies of religion--especially for those which cross cultural boundaries.

Here it is worth touching on a number of strands within anthropological thought which have provided a basis for interpreting meaning across cultures. Later we will test the utility of these ideas by applying them to an understanding of spirit beliefs within animistic cultures. One central message of early anthropological work that has been so thoroughly established that it goes almost without notice is the notion of "the psychic unity" of mankind. Within the mileau of early evolutionary theorising, of the ideas which often sanctioned slavery and rationalised imperialism, it was possible to argue that different races and cultures could be related to qualitative differences in human mental capacity. Implicitly some people still entertain such notions but within academic circles it is almost universally accepted that all branches of the species have essentially the same equipment. Infants from any part of the globe will fully acquire the culture of those they are reared with regardless of their biological origin.

Such differences as there are between cultures are seen as a consequence of conditioning.

This "lesson" of anthropology is so firmly accepted that it usually remains an unstated premise, though its implications are profound. It is related to the position that Geertz adopts in his comments on the debate between Levy-Bruhl and Malinowski about the nature of "primitive mentality". As he suggests, fundamentally that debate concerned the relation between "mystical" and "pragmatic" views as all humanity experience them--not the question of whether "the primitive" is qualitatively different from "the modern". In the terms of Mircea Eliade the psychic unity of mankind implies that our exploration of religious differences must be based on the understanding that all people, in any culture or time, have had access to the same range and degrees of religious experience.

At the same time studies of language and culture and of culture and personality, to refer to two major strands of anthropological work, highlight the depths of difference resulting from cultural conditioning. To the degree that issues of meaning and signification are foregrounded linguistics and psychology have naturally intersected with anthropology. Linguistics has had an especially profound influence within recent anthropology. This came first through the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, early in this century, and more recently through the way Levi-Strauss' structural anthropology has drawn on linguistic models.

The anthropologist Edward Sapir and the linguist Benjamin Whorf collaborated to focus attention on the extent to which language, clearly a key if not the primary component of culture, provides implicit cognitive maps for our view of the world. The anthropological view of human evolution suggests that speech systems evolved hand in hand with and have been fundamental to what it means to be human, thus that language is central within culture. At the same time each language clearly produces unique systems of meaning. As Whorf put it:

> ... every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of

> relationship and phenomenon, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of consciousness.[15]

To the extent that this is so it clearly implies that to become familiar with other systems we must learn the language of that system. Thus, as every student of comparative religion is aware, every religion contains both terms and patterns of thought which cannot be translated, as when that is attempted their significance is dissolved.

The strand of contemporary anthropology which arose most clearly out of this recognition has been called "ethnoscience". This "new ethnography", as it is also sometimes called, has been centrally concerned with organising and presenting understanding of other cultures through terms and categories which are central within the culture in question. This is termed an "emic" approach and contrasted with an "etic" emphasis which stresses comparative explanation. The terms are derived directly from the distinction within linguistics between the "phonemic" and "phonetic" aspects of language. From the ethnoscience perspective much of the older ethnography was flawed because it imposed terms which are central in European social thought, divisions between social, cultural, economic and political for example, on cultures which have had alternative conceptions.

Hence Michelle Rosaldo, for example, attempts to organise her description of Ilongot society on the basis of conceptions which are central within it.[16] The French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss borrowed from linguistics in a different fashion and with an emphasis on the search for cultural universals. His work, and that of many of his followers, has focused on comparative exploration of underlying organisational principles implicit within mythology and kinship systems. At its most basic level the structuralist enterprise has been concerned with uncovering categories of thought which are hidden by the diversity and particularity of mythological themes and elements. This effort led to the conclusion that, in Levi-Strauss' terms:

> The thought we call primitive is founded on this demand for order. This is equally true of all thought but it is through the properties common to all

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15 In Benjamin Whorf, Language, Thought and Reality (Cambridge, Mass, 1969)

16 Michelle Rosaldo, Knowledge and Passion (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1980)

> thought that we can most easily begin to understand forms of thought which seem very strange to us.[17]

One effect of his work has been to clarify some of the ways in which scientific and mythological or magical thought resemble each other. Another has been to highlight underlying patterns such as those which relate to distinctions within all cultures between nature and culture, in his terms "the raw and the cooked". Structuralism has been accused of over-intellectualising, of construing symbolic activity as locating meaning too much within the terms of thought itself. Recently symbolic anthropology has been moving toward a focus on "praxis", on the interactive relationship between symbolic systems and experience within both the internal, psychological, and external, sociological, domains. This discussion has touched lightly on selected schools of thought, many others would merit comment in a full discussion.

Theorising within anthropology is at its best in any event when drawing on the detailed exploration of specific cultural systems and the implications of anthropology for general understanding of religion are best brought out that way. As Tylor pointed out belief in spirits is almost universally present within primitive religions, within animism. At the same time the rationalist position characteristic of modern scientific thought discounts the reality or existence of spirits. Even the anthropologist Melford Spiro, for example, began his exploration of Burmese spirit beliefs with the premise that, "as spirits do not exist", his task was to explain "why people continue to believe in them".[18] Similar assumptions underlie the arguments of Durkheim's followers that spirit beliefs are projections into the cultural realm of patterns rooted in social relations. In one way or another most prominent Western theories translate what animists, mystics, or religious people refer to into psychological or social forces.

Even when they are not purely reductionist in doing so they reflect a popular modern assumption, implicitly we could say a religion of "scientism", which discounts the ontological status, the "beingness", of the entities animists call spirits. Following the implications of "the psychic unity of mankind", recognising that different religious languages map worldviews and noting that belief systems are woven into living practice we can come to

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17 Claude Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago, U Chicago P, 1962) p. 10.

18 Melford Spiro, Burmese Supernaturalism (Prentice-Hall, 1967)

an understanding of animistic spirit beliefs and mystical religion which does not violate, but rather exposes, the meaning of those beliefs for those who hold them.

There is no magical resolution to our problem of understanding and systematising across cultural and religious domains of meaning. But anthropology does open our attention to a dimension of the cross-cultural and cross-religious discourse that we often ignore. One lesson, especially critical in this context, is that cultures not only provide us with profoundly different mental maps but also direct human attention to different areas within the body and in interactions. All people have the same range of cognitive tools and mental capacities but different religious and cultural systems (including contrast between religious and non-religious) are not simply a matter of different systems of thought. They are also a function of different ways in which people relate to "thought" as one domain of knowledge.

chapter 3
the atomic level of social theory

Time and space are the primary dimensions of our experience. Within the sphere of conditioned awareness those become history and society, axes upon which we plot images which then assume the proportions of an absolute. Yet inwardly we know that the three dimensions of space and the fourth of time are simply expedient and even arbitrary distinctions, that the events we plot within them are relative and approximate, that the total reality we are living in extends into dimensions which remain unmapped. To enter into those further dimensions is to experience time and space from a different perspective altogether, a perspective from which they appear as fluid aspects of a field, as partners in a dance. That dance is also in the play of mass and energy, which again we experience as a dichotomy between material and spiritual.

At the final point of awareness these dichotomies of time and space, mass and energy, become revealed in living union. That is the mystical. Within the mystical there is both time and its negation, the timeless moment; there is both space and its transcendence in the universal. Whenever the mystical is projected back into the dimensions of normal discourse, it enters foreign ground and is stripped of the power and impact intrinsic to it. Projected into everyday life, it stands as a shadow of itself in the most literal sense--dimensions of it fail to appear.

There is no violation in seeing a shadow, recognising it as such, and accepting that it has been cast by something else. To do that is to participate in the religious mentality, in faith which accepts a transcendent it does not perceive directly. Even those of us who live entirely in the shadows need not presume that the only realities are those which materialise in the dimensions of our experience. It is no abuse if we restrain our assertions to comments on the features of the shadows we see. But to assert that the limits of our perception define reality is to place ourselves not just at the centre, but above and separate from other spheres of being. To do that is the ultimate egoism, the final alienation.

Precisely that alienation reflects itself in the contemporary rape of the global environment. Yet just as we toy with the forces which could destroy

the ecology of life, we show signs of awakening to a new planetary role as custodians. The process of alienation which we see in human history is not to be understood purely in the negative. This moment is not simply a near miss with total disaster--it is a seed ground for new life. Every moment in history which sees the end of one social order sets the basis for the next. This process of transformation reverberates through every aspect of contemporary life, it reflects itself in a wide array of movements. The keynotes of these movements are holism, interpenetration, and transformation. Evocative slogans such as McLuhan's "global village" and Fuller's "spaceship earth" touch our new consciousness of interdependence.

Projection of man into space has given us substantial experience rather than simply theoretical acceptance of planetary status. The ecology movement and energy crises have heightened awareness of the fragility and interdependence which underlies the human relationship to other forms of life on the planet. In politics and economics there is growing confirmation that no part of the world system can be understood autonomously, that comprehension of each part comes only through realisation of its relation to the whole. In the natural sciences research at the micro and macro levels converges in relativity and bootstrap theories grounded in holism; mass and energy, space and time stand unveiled as meaningful only in relationship. Within the human sciences holistic healing and human potential movements have surfaced and spread. New movements direct people toward re-examination of subsistence, relationship, and the earth. In whatever frontier of human exploration, those who participate in the new paradigm of unity and transformation belong to the new age.

Mystics are those who participate directly and consciously in the transcendent, experiencing a dissolution of the internal boundaries which generate the human senses of separation, isolation and ego. Their perception is not based on either understanding or faith, though it may reflect itself in those, but in experience of and participation within totality. Because it is pre-eminently experiential, the core experience of mysticism is not accessible through or to the intellect. For the same reason, its authenticity cannot be judged by the forms of its expression - it is recognisable only to itself. Those who enter into this core are united in claiming that it is a total and timeless union, that it lies at the heart and is the source of all genuine religiosity.

Finally, the experience reveals, to those who have it, that all is one and that separation and division are the illusions of conditioned awareness.

It is vital to distinguish clearly between the core and expressions of the mystical. All claims to universality refer only to the core; the expressions in form participate in all the diversity of other spheres of life. Even the first steps toward description and definition involve entry into the realm of discrimination. Having entered that realm, we are immediately dealing with the traces rather than substance of the core experience. From a mystical standpoint it is crystal clear that no form at any level *is* the ultimate. All forms through which people relate to each other or society at large are viewed as transitory expedients. From the vantage point of mystical union, there is not even any tension between universal and particulars--that tension only arises in the realms of form for those who cannot distinguish form from essence.[19]

It is precisely on this point that we can distinguish usefully between mysticism and religion. Any distinction must begin with the interpenetration which binds the two together. At one level mysticism is simply the inner dimension, present within all religious experience. There can be no rigid lines, but there are contrasting tendencies. Religiously oriented people feel that the transcendent is fused with forms, the absolute is identified with the specific structures of a particular system. Those structures may be ritual, doctrinal, philosophical, or even emotional, but in all cases they are unique and significance is attached to their uniqueness. Typically fusion is mediated by faith based on authority. Within the Indic religions the basis of that authority is supposed to be experience; within the Semitic family the source is prophetic revelation.[20] In either instance the system may work, providing access to mystical transcendence for those who accept it.

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19 There is no reason to assume it is easy to do so and I do not mean to imply that it is. Sophisticated philosophical thinkers like Steven Katz make grave errors in this respect. See his Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis (New York, OUP, 1978). In his own contribution to that volume he comments that we can begin on the assumption that there is "no unmediated experience" and sets out to orchestrate the volume to demonstrate that there is no "unity" underlying the diversity of mystical traditions. The problem is that all difference is necessarily within the realm of form which those who describe themselves as mystics say they transcend in their consciousness of union.

20 A particularly excellent probing of differences within mystical traditions between monistic (Indic) and dualistic (Semitic) is in Peter Berger, ed, The Other Side of God (New York, Anchor, 1981); Contrasts between European, usually Christian, and Asian, usually Hindu or Buddhist, mysticism has been a favourite enterprise and has produced important

Although we cannot analytically assess the fruits of religious or mystical experience, the structures which mediate experience do contrast. Mysticism lays emphasis on unmediated, direct, individual union. Within its framework all forms appear only as passageways and the absolute remains beyond definition. While religious styles of spirituality identify essence with form; mystics see essence through forms. We may not be able to evaluate the results of faith or practice, but we can identify contrasts in emphasis. By mysticism then I am referring in the first instance to the core experience and in the second to all forms of belief and practice which are directed toward it.

Having separated the core from the array of movements around it, it becomes immediately obvious that followers within mystical movements are just that too--they are seekers rather than self-proclaimed incarnate divinities. In short, they are human and distinguished from others only by the manner in which they conceive their quest. The diversity, even perversity, of the forms they participate in is as limitless as that in any other sphere of social life. Mysticism has been present as a clear stream within all of the world religious traditions, it has also manifested itself in a wide range of cults and individual practices. It has existed across time and space within all types of society and in all stages of human development. Within the primordial religions of primitive peoples mystical quest is dressed in the guise of shamanism. Sufism, Zen, Tantra, Yoga, Vedanta, Christian monasticism, Taoism, Vipassana and other traditions are all expressions of the mystical.[21]

Outside the sphere of world religious patterns there have also been a wide range of millennial and occult movements which also concern themselves with practical and experiential contact with the numinous. In the face of this extraordinary diversity I need only clarify here that I am centrally concerned here with the dimension of the mystical within which people experience or orient themselves toward union alone. Whenever movements become instrumental, in their manipulation or channeling of the powers tapped, they reflect concern not just with union, but with worldly results. this means I am taking as my point of reference not the magical and mysterious but direct and conscious quest for union with the ultimate, however that may

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works such as: Rudolf Otto, Mysticism East and West (New York, Meridian, 1957); DT Suzuki, Mysticism Christion and Buddhist (London, Unwin, 1970)

21 For a very general introduction to these traditions see Geoffrey Parrinder, Mysticism in the World's Religions (London, Sheldon, 1976)

be conceived. The relationship between quest for union and acquisition of powers is close, but the two are not the same.

Many other meanings may have currency, but classically mysticism refers to religious experiences and practices of union. It is this sense of the term, not popular usage, that I am concerned with. At the heart of mysticism lies the claim to total union with and awareness of an absolute which cannot be defined--though some call it "God". Everyone who claims this core experience stresses that it is only known to and validated by itself, that no external evidence can be a legitimate basis for judgement of it.[22] Mystics also claim that their experience is the essence of all religions, that the distinctions and dichotomies of normal consciousness dissolve in the absolute. In general religions claim the authority of revelation or experience, calling others to accept faith. Mystics, on the other hand, look to direct and experiential gnosis, pointing internally to a journey each must undertake on their own.

Naturally, such claims raise problems for those concerned with "scientific" research. At the frontiers of every discipline there is a continual challenge to adapt methods and concepts in response to new subjects and problems. Within the social sciences the study of religion raises persistent awkwardness, nowhere so sharply crystallised as in approaches to mysticism. Although increasingly in the awareness of Western peoples, mysticism remains ambiguous as a subject and problematic as a field of research. The word is commonly glossed as meaning "irrational"; it is often confused with the occult and supernatural.

Here my aim is to suggest the relevance of an analogy: namely that mysticism is to the social sciences what atomic physics is to the natural sciences. I am intentionally implying that comprehension of mystical experience may prove as fundamental to social theory as understanding of atomic structure has been to the natural sciences. I also intend to suggest that there are substantive parallels between the two fields and that some concepts rising from contemporary physics provide insights which aid exploration of the mystical.

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22 Classic recognition of this aspect of mysticism is clearly put in William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York, Mentor, 1958), who argued that mystics had the same logical grounds to stand on as any skeptical rationalist, that in each case the appeal to empirical experience was equally solid.

Capra and others have already argued that there are remarkable parallels between ancient mystical and modern scientific conceptions of the universe.[23] My point, though related, has a different focus. Here the concern lies with the conceptual and methodological problems of studying mysticism; with the effort to establish that incorporation of mysticism as a subject has fundamental implications for social science as a field. I do need to emphasise that I can make no claims to understanding of physics and that my aim is simply to point direction and stimulate reflection. I cannot claim to present a synopsis of a coherent theory.

Exploration of mysticism from the perspective of social science offers special promise and poses correlatively unique problems. Promise arises from the fact that the core experience is, according to those who claim it, a consciousness beyond cultural conditioning and accessible within any context. Inasmuch as this is the case, we have the suggestion of a constant point of reference from which we may gain insight into the social process. In his scrutiny of rites of passage the anthropologist Victor Turner has pointed to the special value of focusing

> ..attention on the phenomenon and process of mid-transition. It is these...which paradoxically expose the basic building blocks of culture just when we pass out of and before we re-enter the structural realm.[24]

Within the core experience there is not only the claim to entry into dimensions beyond structure, but also insistence that there is consciousness within those dimensions and during transitional states.

Whatever promise there may be, exploration from the social science standpoint remains tentative. I do not mean that there has been lack of interest, or even of quality to the results. Study remains tentative because so far we have been unable to construct an approach which integrates the core experience into our analysis. Coping directly with the core requires more than acknowledgement of its existence, more than treatment of mysticism as a social or cultural phenomenon. We need a methodology which allows us to take the core experience seriously and then relate it to the structured

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23 Fritz Capra, The Tao of Physics (Boulder, Shambala, 1975) initiated a range of works on this vein.

24 Victor Turner, The Forest of Symbols (Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1967) p. 110.

dimensions of social expression. Unless we find that, we are left hanging in the void between reductionist analysis and dogmatic claims.

The argument that mysticism has special status and implications is tantalising to some and infuriating to others. The crux of the problem lies in the contrast between intuitive and intellectual epistemologies. Mystics everywhere state as an axiom that the knowledge they deal in is not accessible to the intellect, that those seeking it must first enter a meditative state within which critical facilities are suspended. They further insist that no words can adequately suggest, much less define, the nature of the final consciousness reached.

As social scientists, operating in the realm of intellectual discourse, it seems that the tools of our trade preclude access to the core of mysticism. At this juncture our choice seems simple: either to forfeit our profession, becoming mystics, or to settle for analysis of those surface features of it which are accessible to the intellect. The only apparent compromise lies in alternating between roles, no fusion seems possible.

The problem requires underlining, there is a genuine dilemma. Any intellectual assessment of the "truth" of mystical claims involves a-priori dismissal of the mystical insistence that mental approaches preclude awareness of the core. Many students of mysticism give due acknowledgement to this dilemma; too many persist in building apparently sound arguments on false premises. Ultimately, intellectual arguments about the authenticity of mysticism (whether to positive or negative effect) either rest on disguised opinion or presume that the surface forms are the heart of the matter. Rational arguments may be safely applied to the phenomenal aspects of mystical expression, but the core lies invulnerable to reason. For while there is no contradiction of reason implied by acknowledging its limits; there is contradiction in building arguments against it on *a-priori* grounds.[25]

The nature of esoteric knowledge is often and easily misunderstood. It is frequently assumed that mystical knowledge is esoteric in that those with access to it refuse to divulge it openly. This sort of secrecy does apply in some traditions, but even then it has nothing to do with the fundamental nature of

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25 Effectively the German philosopher Kant clearly recognised this limitation when he argued that it was impossible to discount the existence of God on logical grounds. See Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy Vol VI (London, Burns & Oates Lted 1968) p 189.

the gnosis. At the level of the core experience it is axiomatic that gnosis is available to anyone who is truly receptive to it. The knowledge is esoteric not because mystics obscure it, but because conditioning warps our perception, because our own awareness blocks it. If this is so, then it becomes clearer why we can only approach the core of mysticism through an internally directed and experiential process. This suggests that mysticism presents us with the same difficulty psychologists since Freud have wrestled with: maintaining an objective stance when we ourselves become the subject of study.

In dealing with mysticism we encounter a unique and paradoxical resolution. The core experience is defined by passage beyond the conditioning structures which generate what we would normally consider "subjective" distortions of perception. It is defined as experience beyond ego, beyond the dichotomy between subject and object. Within the terms of mysticism itself, approach to the core is characterised by openness and awareness, not by leaps of faith or assumption.

Mysticism is itself an empirical discipline. So on the one hand it seems clear that approach to the core rooted in skepticism implies prejudgement--making it inaccessible. On the other hand, taking the core seriously on its own terms requires no violation of intellectual rigor. The resulting logic implies that any study of the core of mysticism requires taking it seriously on its own terms. Let me hasten to add that this logic only applies inasmuch as study is concerned with the core, it does not negate the validity of studies focusing on phenomenal aspects of mysticism and based on normal notions of academic distance. It does, on the other hand, clarify the limits of such studies.

At this point it is instructive to explore the analogy between the study of mysticism and atomic physics. Twentieth century research began with the Newtonian premise of a final building block, a basic particle of matter. Each technical advance revealed increasingly minute particles until finally the premise itself had to be discarded. In the process the dichotomy between mass and energy gave way, leaving us with the related formulations of relativity theory and the uncertainty principle. The first instructs us that mass and energy can only be comprehended as transformations of each other; the second that any instrument of measurement alters the nature of the subject studied. Both combine to present us with a view of reality as a field of fluidly interacting aspects, a field we can only understand by entering.

It is worth noting that these theories apply to the specific field of atomic physics. In that field Newtonian premises no longer apply, but mechanical engineers and architects, operating at a different level, can continue to work productively with the premise of solid matter and assumption of objective distance. Within science, the images emerging from the microcosmic level of atomic research converge with the concepts applying to the macrocosmic level of astronomical exploration. At that level current images suggest a time-warp, a dialectical relationship between time and space not unlike the microcosmic interplay of mass and energy. As we progress toward micro and macro levels, ordinary senses of reality give way to dynamic and holistic images.

Mysticism is pre-eminently concerned with the unity of the microcosmic and macrocosmic dimensions within the realm of individual experience. The individual may be viewed as the atom, or basic unit, of the social dimension. The core experience is presented by mystics as a realisation of the unity of essence in the microcosm with the macrocosm, a unity accessible only by entry into the consciousness within the individual.

Once we enter, a social version of the uncertainty principle applies--we can no longer distinguish subject and object rigidly, we have to acknowledge that whatever tools we apply will alter the nature of what we are studying. This is precisely why mystics insist that it is only by suspending conceptual activity that we can know the reality of the core experience. At the same time, mystical statements emphasise the undifferentiated unity of being--the release from dichotomy between material and spiritual dimensions.

The force of this analogy becomes clearer through illustration. It could be recalled that in natural science there has been debate as to whether light is a wave or particle, whether it is energy or mass. For the time being it is accepted that it can be conceived of as either, depending on the purposes of inquiry and tools of analysis. In discussions about mysticism there are recurrent arguments centring on unity and diversity.

Mystics state that the core is a consciousness beyond time and space, an awareness which is in essence the same within all cultures and historical moments. Rationalists tend to stress that all experiences differ with context, implying that there is no universal endpoint, that cultural conditioning extends into the farthest recesses of the mystical. Application of the scientific paradigm suggests resolution. As soon as we choose to view mysticism at

any form level whatsoever, it appears diverse. Inasmuch as we recognise a formless void, it is universal. Either conclusion has validity if there is explicit recognition of the aim and basis of operation.

Within the framework of this analogy there is the suggestion that dualistic conceptions of subject/object, mass/energy, time/space, and material/spiritual retain a relative usefulness within intermediate levels of reality. All of them lose validity as we approach the micro and macro levels of either natural or social reality. As we progress toward the extremities, the dualism of ordinary senses must give way increasingly to dynamic and holistic images. Paradoxically precisely as we push toward comprehension of absolutes the images used to relate to them pass beyond the rigidity of linear dichotomies, forcing us to conceptualise in fields of dialectical fusion.

It is well established in all fields of research that different methods and concepts apply within differing dimensions. This argument suggests that standard procedures of social research remain valid within the intermediate levels closest to contact with everyday social and physical realities. Just as architects need not refer to relativity theory in order to function, social scientists concerned with structures of social and political process can reasonably continue to build theories based on separation between material and spiritual, subject and object. There is no violation implied in extending those procedures to analysis of the socio-cultural level of mystical movements. A shift is required, however, if social theory attempts to integrate an understanding of the core of mysticism within larger analysis. At that point the nature of the subject matter dictates that the researcher, whatever his or her perspective, is a part of the interaction which determines conclusions.

Mysticism is not only the core experience, but also the expression of that experience through verbal symbols, in cultural rituals, and within social movements. From the standpoint of mystics the core remains the heart, without which the meaning and significance of the forms remains elusive. Although social scientists may, with caution, apply their standard tools to discussion of mystical forms, there is danger. If interpretations of the core are extracted from the forms, then social research passes beyond the boundary of its current competence: it would be as though an architect takes issue with a nuclear physicist, arguing that atoms must be solid, because the material of his trade appears to be.

At the same time, though most social scientists have no need to be concerned with the core experience of mysticism, when they turn to study of mysticism they do need to. To deal with mysticism purely in socio-cultural terms would be analogous to studying language purely as phonetics and grammar--ignoring meaning. As a result, there is a strong demand to construct paradigms for social research which integrate the core experience within analysis. In constructing the linkage between levels of analysis we need to be extremely cautious. The juncture is not simply a switch from one plane to another, it involves interplay between operational planes. This means that if we are committed to development of an integrated theory, the total framework must subsume rather than simply acknowledge its components.

Most social scientists are well aware of the limits to their field, method, and theory. Yet study of mysticism provides a challenge to expand the framework of theory, working toward a unified system which does not preclude treatment of religious subjects. It is in this sense that the study of mysticism raises fundamental challenges to anyone concerned with the total basis and framework of social inquiry.

The first clear implication of this argument is that some current epistemological postures become untenable. The narrower versions of positivistic and empiricist social science, often reflected in behaviorist schools of thought, clearly preclude treatment of subjects like the core experience of mysticism. They do so because they dogmatically refuse to acknowledge any data which cannot be treated as "matter" and as separable from the researcher. Paradoxically, it is their posture--not that of mystics--which suggests a fundamentalist style of religious commitment.

In essence the mystical outlook refuses to begin with any assumptions about the nature of existence, advising an open and empirical posture far more congenial to the notion of experimental science than that of the positivists. This argument would allow that there is a clear place for the methods and theories of positivistic social science; it would make absolutely clear at the same time that those theories can make no claim to laying the basis for a comprehensive and unified social theory. Any study of religion, to claim grasp of its substance, must cope with the internal dimension of it called mysticism.

As a result it is hardly surprising that students of religion turn most often to dialectical and phenomenological strands of social thought. Those streams do allow systematic treatment of dynamics, fluidity, and interplay. At least potentially, they provide an overall system which includes the ineffable. It is noteworthy, however, that even those streams have been entwined within a continuing debate. From their origins there have been materialistic and idealistic schools, competing to establish different claims of causality. Study of mysticism may have a substantive contribution to make to that ideological debate.

Mysticism is monistic at root, the dominant elements of Western social and religious thought are dualistic. Social science and traditional religion both have a teleological preoccupation, each is concerned with causality, even with determination of a "final" cause. From the mystical standpoint it is clear that we chase this monkey of causality only when we "reify" particular dimensions of structure--only so long as we assume the autonomous existence of different levels of reality.

The implication of monistic philosophy is that each level is simply one aspect within a unified field. Causal sequences still have significance within the relative context of interplay between particular structures, but the overriding debate fades when the dichotomy between spiritual and material dissolves. This suggests a transmutation, a fundamental shift away from the ideological wars pervading social inquiry. If the foundation of theory is unitary and holistic then the interplay between structures, including schools of thought, appears as a dance rather than a march.

Many people feel, for a wide variety of reasons, that there is no point in exploring mysticism in these terms. The feeling is as strongly rooted among mystics as among rationalists. For some this outlook merely reflects lack of interest or awareness, but for many in both camps it involves conviction that it is theoretically impossible. For the latter I do need to clarify that I am neither suggesting that mysticism can be reduced to social terms nor that the core experience can be compressed within language.

At the same time facile dichotomy between intellect and intuition belies a dance between them, a dance as fluid as that of "mass" and "energy". The interface of intellect and intuition, within social science approaches to the mystical, is a frontier of human exploration. Dogmatic positing of boundaries can only reflect static attachment to current images, refusal to entertain

expansion into new fields. The implications of this frontier are as profound for social scientists as for mystics. Exploration of mysticism as social practice tests existing paradigms, challenging the roots underlying contemporary social theory.

PART TWO

PATHS OF UNION

chapter 4
esoteric shamanism

The term "shaman" originates in Siberia, as the name of spirit healers in that context, where they were identified as a type. It is now used technically generally for those spiritual specialists who have spirit familiars and through them mediate healing contact between their societies and the spirit realms. In his definitive work on shamanism, Eliade points out that shamanism is more mystical than religious in nature. This suggestion makes sense inasmuch as the shaman is, at least in Eliade's terms, not just a believer in his cosmology nor simply a manipulator of keys to magic and the occult; rather he is experiential and practical in his orientation toward the sacred. That is to say that while ordinary people in shamanic societies participate in the divine via their belief in the three cosmic worlds of earth, sky and underworld, it is the shaman alone who "knows the mystery of the breakthrough in plane" and can therefore move freely between the worlds.[26]

Shaman come to occupy positions as healers of the spirit and body not simply by virtue of technical skills (although they have those), but by having ventured beyond the structures of culturally conditioned consciousness. Having personally confronted realms of chaos, psychosis, and divinity and then having healed themselves, they become masters of the cultural forms which prop up ordinary awareness and identity. They are the ones who participate most literally and most thoroughly in the initiatory cycles characteristic of primitive societies. They experience liminal transition in its most complete sense; they ascend in ecstasy through the seven or nine abodes of the gods in heaven; and they descend into the subterranean regions inhabited by "the cosmic snake which in the end will destroy the world".[27]

Every Asian society still contains significant groups of healers and spirit specialists who could be called "shaman", and I am using the term here in loose terms. It is necessary to distinguish between those in this category

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26 Mircea Eliade, Shamanism (New York, Pantheon Books, 1964) p. 2 59.

27 Ibid. p 268.

who might be classed as "mystics" and the larger number who are not. In the Javanese context, for example, the term *dukun* is used, like *bomoh* in Malay society or *mau* in Thai, generically. Every part of Asia has its spirit specialists in association with the underlying religious pattern of ancestral spirit cults.[28] Thus the terms in those contexts closest to "shaman" for us, cover anything from specialists in herbal medicine and healing to trance mediums and mystics.

The more important point is that in the context of animistic spirit beliefs, the substratum or layer of religious life historically underlying the world religions, and still present within contemporary social practices, there are a wide range of specialists in spiritual knowledge. These, in their mystical form, deal directly with spirits who others only believe in. It is the directness of their awareness, their conscious engagement with the psychic realities of the inner planes and spirit realms, which makes them "mystics". I thus use that term for them here for them regardless of whether they are oriented toward what they consciously conceive of themselves as an experience of "union with what is ultimately real".

One reason to pay some attention to shamanic forms of spiritual expertise, before considering mysticism in the context of recognisably "religious" systems, is to underline a point I have already noted. When we are speaking of the world religions in the Asian context, one of the most notable things about them is that in each case they arise on the ground created by a spirit culture, one concerned with ancestral and guardian spirits. That ground is not, in the first instance, even denied by the creation of the world system in question.[29]

Beyond this we could note that systems such as Taoism and Hinduism are in their origins essentially formalisations growing out of the "perennial philosophy", out of a timeless wisdom present in all social contexts. Engagement with spiritual knowledge does not depend on revealed religion,

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28 For Java see Clifford Geertz, The Religion of Java (Chicago, U Chicago P, 1976); for Malay society see R Windstedt, The Malay Magician (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951) for Thailand see SJ Tambiah, Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North East Thailand (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1970); for a more recent study Louis Golomb, An Anthropology of Curing in Multiethnic Thailand (Urbana, U Illinois P, 1985); for the Philippines, Richard Lieban, Cebuano Sorcery (Berkeley, U California P, 1967); for China, David Jordan, Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors (Berkeley, U California P, 1975); for Japan, Robert Smith, Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Japan (Stanford, Stanford UP, 1974).

29 The modern Indian saint Sri Aurobindo commented on the continuity within his own tradition in The Foundations of Indian Culture (Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1959)

though the Semitic traditions generally conceive of religion as having to.[30] Thus the shamanic sphere is the gestalt against which we should consider other systems, refiguring our perception of what "Asian religions" are in essence.

There is no doubt understanding of Asian religious realities in their historical context requires this shift in gestalt. To begin exploring Asian religious systems on the basis of assumptions formed by modern images of what religion is, especially by clearly crystallised doctrinal orthodoxies, would be to misrepresent the past. Certainly in the past, as now, there have been a wide variety of orthodoxies. Then too they were deeply engaged in dispute and enmeshed with social hierarchies.

However the general picture of religious life within traditional Asian societies was of a multiplicity of cults and practices, a rich tapestry sharing some key concepts and practices, but all framed by a common sense that the overarching enterprise was One. Disputes about doctrine or method did not negate the fact that within most camps the process of spiritual balancing and realisation contained similar elements. I am emphasising this, as a starting point, to balance the tendency to otherwise imagine that each system we engage with should be considered first as though it is distinct from the others. In fact our gestalt and approach should be through emphasising common concerns with health, balance, realisation and release.

It is true, thinking of the "shamanic" more specifically, that in that context there has been little emphasis on teleological concerns, on a final endpoint of spiritual life. Generally speaking within the shamanic context the emphasis is likely to be on health and balance rather than on achieving a final goal. Power is an object, hence the connection with the magical forms of knowledge so prevalent in shamanic culture. Shamanic practices have been profoundly interwoven with forest spirits, fertility cults, cults of the soil directed at ensuring fertility and thus regeneration, crossing the boundaries of time not by projecting the individual outside of it, as the Semitic religions do, but by working to ensure the continuing life of the community.

There are, as I am suggesting, an extraordinary range of shamanic types in the Asian context, each society possessing its own. Within each Asian context the shamanic layer of religion has interwoven deeply with

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30 The term "Perennial Philosophy" was made current by Aldous Huxley, The Perennial Philosophy (London, Chatto & Windus, 1947).

subsequent developments, so that for instance in the Japanese context we are aware that Buddhism is built on a still active Shinto base, Shinto being the formalisation in Japanese culture of the shamanic, which remains active within it in the form of rituals and folk magic.[31] In the Chinese context Taoism is known not to be simply the philosophical realisation of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, but also the wide ranging folk magical, geomancy, alchemical, traditions which have bubbled through the substratum of Chinese practice since time immemorial.[32]

In Tibet shamanism interweaves with the Tantric Buddhism of the Vajrayana school in the form of Bon, there the local version of ageless wisdom. Hinduism itself is not properly understood from the background of Shankara's ninth century formalisation of it, still less from the standpoint of the nineteenth century "Hindu renaissance". It is in its origins a family of cultic religious and ritual practices, widely varied through the spread of Sanskrit influence interacting with local traditions.

Despite the prevalence of shamanic practices, and for that matter the possibility of exploring genuinely Asiatic examples in this context, I am going to discuss an Amerindian example to open the area. It could be argued that the traditions are related, as indeed they are through the migration of Amerindians out of Asia some twenty to forty thousand years ago. But it would be stretching a point to justify inclusion of Castaneda's Don Juan on those grounds. I refer to him mainly because both the debate about Castaneda's work and the nature of his writing allow access in depth--they open up dimensions of personal interaction not readily accessible in presentations of shamanism through standard, and less controversial academic writing. Debates about Castaneda's work centre on whether he presents us with literary fantasy, a concoction of his own syncretised spirituality, or something resembling ethnographic description, itself an increasingly problematic notion. It may be that Castaneda's writings open the mystical dimension within shamanism in a way that cannot otherwise be done.[33]

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31 One modern cult deriving from this underlayer in Japan has been Mahikari. See Winston Davis, Dojo: Magic and Exorcism in Modern Japan (Stanford, Stanford UP, 1980).

32 One recent study of Taoist magic is Michael Saso, The Teachings of Taoist Master Chuang (New Have, Yale UP, 1978)

33 There are several collections of essays and books debating the veracity of Castenada's "reporting". For our immediate purpose I think these are slightly to the side, not essential, but

Although Carlos Castaneda makes no more than occasional passing reference to the historical and cultural background of his teacher Don Juan, those comments are enough to justify presenting Don Juan here as belonging to the shamanic tradition characteristic of pre-literate societies throughout the world. Don Juan belongs to the shamanic tradition with one major qualification: while ordinary shaman tend to remain principally technicians of the sacred after their induction through the terrors of liminality, Don Juan seems to have gone beyond the culturally defined role of *brujo* (sorcerer) by continuing his quest in the style of a "man of knowledge". For him this meant that although he retained the personal powers and the technical skills of a *brujo*; his prime interest shifted increasingly toward "seeing", knowledge, and direct experience of the universe in its totality.[34]

Despite constant curious probing on Carlos's part to learn details of Don Juan's personal and mystical background, the teacher remained reticent and stray comments have to be gleaned from the whole set of Castaneda's books in order to put together a sketch of the facts. Don Juan's reluctance on this point was reasoned rather than idiosyncratic. In Don Juan's words, "One day I found out that personal history was no longer necessary for me and, like drinking, I dropped it".[35] Personal history became irrelevant for Don Juan when he began to realise himself as "a human being" in the universal sense rather than as a "poor, downtrodden Yaqui" Indian, as he regretted his parents had felt themselves to be. In addition, he strongly denied the relevance of biographical detail for Carlos's or, for that matter, anyone else's spiritual growth. He stressed that every individual is unique and will therefore have to carry out his own struggle toward realisation, that:

> Every one of us is different, what you call pointers would only be what I myself did when I was learning. We are not the same we aren't even vaguely alike... My benefactor never told me what he had learned. He told me how to proceed, but never what he saw. That is only for oneself.[36]

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they may be of interest nonetheless. See: Richard de Mille, Castaneda's Journey: The Power and the Allegory (London, Abacus, 1976) and Daniel Noel, Seeing Castaneda (New York, Capricorn Books, 1976).

34 Castenada's clarified this in his interview with Sam Keen, "Visions of Power", New Age Journal V 1 N 3 (February 1975).

35 Carlos Castaneda, Journey to Ixtlan (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1972) p. 15

36 Ibid. p 112.

Absence of detailed personal data is also, no doubt, tied to Don Juan's insistence that in whatever writing Carlos would do, his identity had to remain anonymous.

Don Juan was born in the Southwestern United States in 1891 but lived in Central Mexico from 1900 until about 1940. When he was seven his mother was killed by the Mexican soldiers who came to take his people into their Central Mexican exile, his father died of wounds in the cart that took them away --Don Juan was taken care of by other members of the exiled group. For some time he worked in Southern Mexico as a labourer on the Pan American highway, then he finally resettled in the north around Sonora. For years, in fact well into the period of his sorcerer training, he bore a grudge against all Mexicans for their murder of his parents. Although his wife must have died before he became Castaneda's guide, he did raise a family and seems to have subsisted through a string of irregular jobs. It is likely, although not documented, that his prestige as a *brujo* may have been a source of subsistence at some points.

Don Juan began his sorcerer training while still young and under the guidance of a teacher and a "benefactor" (two distinct teaching functions both in Don Juan's and in Carlos's training) who were from the valley of Central Mexico. Despite absence of a documented spiritual genealogy, Don Juan affirmed several times that his teachers traced their roots back in a direct line to the pre-conquest Indian religion of Central Mexico.[37] The Catholic Church worked continually to suppress shamanic survivals among their new Indian converts, but Don Juan suggests that both the conquest and the repression functioned to strengthen and purify the sorcerers tradition he belonged to. As he explains it:

> For the sorcerer the Conquest was the challenge of a lifetime. They were the only ones who were not destroyed by it but adapted to it and used it to their ultimate advantage... After the *tonal* [roughly, outer life] of the time and the personal *tonal* of every Indian was obliterated, the sorcerers found themselves holding on to the one thing left uncontested, the *nagual* [very roughly, the spiritual life]. In other words, their tonal took refuge in the

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37 Carlos Castaneda, Tales of Power (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1974) p. 176.

> *nagual.* This couldn't have happened had it not been for the excruciating conditions of a vanquished people.[38]

Communication of the teachings, according to the pattern laid down by Don Juan's own teachers, requires intense, extended, and highly individualised instruction--the nature of the knowledge allowed for no cut-and-dried formulas or mass movements. In the twelve years of Castaneda's reported apprenticeship to Don Juan there is mention of only a few other initiates he was supervising. Carlos implies that the tradition of sorcery continued underground through centuries of Spanish Catholic repression, that the techniques transmitted are ancient.[39]

Castaneda's training involved a bewildering array of techniques and experiences ranging from sessions of psychotropic plant use (including peyote and psilocybin) through dream analysis to physical positions and exercises. It is not necessary to deal with those techniques at length because it is made very clear, especially in Castaneda's later books, that all of those techniques were nothing more than devices designed to jar him out of his normalcy and into a wider arena of consciousness. For Don Juan the task of sorcery is itself only a means toward "apprehending the world without any interpretation... pure wondering perception".[40] Among the techniques Don Juan stressed in his final summation of the course of Castaneda's apprenticeship were: stopping the internal dialogue, learning to act without expecting specific rewards, erasing personal history, assuming responsibility, and "taking death as an advisor".[41]

Perhaps the single longest fought battle in the process of Castaneda's awakening was his struggle to unseat his logical mind as sole dictator of awareness. The drug related experiences he had early in the training seem to have been principally directed at forcing him to realise that normal culturally conditioned consciousness is not the only one available. Don Juan hammered at Carlos again and again on this point:

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38 Ibid. p. 140.

39 Castaneda in interview with San Keen (op.cit. p 18)

40 Ibid. p 19.

41 The best overall summary of the teachings, which I draw on here, is in Tales of Power, pp 227-246.

> Your problem is that you want to understand everything, and that is not possible. If you insist on understanding you're not considering your entire lot as a human being. Your stumbling block is intact
>
> ....If you say you understand my knowledge, you have done nothing new.
>
> ... in essence, the world that your reason wants to sustain is the world created by a description and its dogmatic and inviolable rules, which the reason learns to accept and defend. The secret of the luminous beings is that they have another ring of power which is never used, the will.[42]

Toward the end of Carlos's training it also becomes clearer that Don Juan's intention is not simply to drive Carlos out of his ordinary mental process, but rather to allow him to use his mental facilities in order to express a wider consciousness.

It was not presented simply as an other-worldly discipline, in fact Don Juan considered the hermit life an indulgence and stressed that the appropriate field for Carlos's life struggle was in the modern urban context he came from.[43] Castaneda's compulsive note-taking, which in the early stages of his training seemed to have inhibited his development, in the end became an activity which he had mastered in the terms of sorcery. The fact that he could do it in the end without having to concentrate in a way that inhibited other awareness, made it a demonstration of the possibility of merging sorcery with worldly activity.

In Don Juan's world "a man of knowledge continues to live in the world as anyone else, and if one looks at him he is just like any ordinary man."[44] In the phase prior to Carlos's final initiation, it became clear that all along Don Juan had made careful efforts to preserve the functioning of Carlos's *tonal* to prevent it from being overpowered by the *nagual*. The goal of life appeared finally in the teachings as love, achievement of it as integration and balance, never lop-sided spirituality and occultism.[45]

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42 The first quote is from Carlos Castaneda, A Separate Reality,(New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970) p. 311 & p. 310; the last from Tales of Power p. 101.

43 A Separate Reality, p. 183.

44 Ibid. p. 107.

45 All emphasised in concluding Tales of Power, p. 285.

We should be careful, whatever we think of the mystical element within, or for that matter of the veracity of, the Don Juan teachings, to bear in mind that in strict terms there is no doubt that shamanic religion is most often best termed "religious" rather than "mystical"--at least in the terms by which I distinguish those here. Obviously I am not giving much credence to the view of shamanism as either psychosis or hoax, both widely held beliefs.

Stressing the potential shamanic systems present for consciousness realisation does not imply consistent, pervasive, authenticity. My view is that the question of authenticity within shamanic religion, one which applies to the Castaneda case, is not different from the judgement we might make of "Christians". In every case we may question, given the actions of those who profess a faith, whether they actually *live* the commitment, in the Christian case to brotherly love, implied by it. Obviously in every religious context practices in social reality do not fully embody principles.

I am clearly agreeing with Eliade in holding that in the earliest human societies, and in the still widespread patterns of religious practice arising from them, the full potential for consciousness and realisation must have been or be present. At the same time shamanic specialists themselves are most often "technicians", using techniques they have been taught to affect a cure and often, like people in our society using a car, not understanding the underlying mechanics.

I am not suggesting that all shaman are mystics any more than that every clergyman is a saint. I am only putting the possibility that the shamanic context is another one within which the process of realisation can be pursued, and noting that in some cases it clearly is actively. There are many less problematic, though also less revealing, anthropological excursions which recognise the wisdom of elders in tribal societies, so we could draw on many excellent studies and make similar points.[46]

In the end the most important point to emphasise, in having briefly considered the contours of mystical realisation as it may come into view

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46 A sampling, each in some way exposing the genuine wisdom of tribal peoples and spirit practices, could include: Victor Turner, A Forest of Symbols (Ithaca, New York, Cornell UP, 1967) pp. 131-150; AP Elkin, Aboriginal Men of High Degree (Brisbane, U Queensland P, 1977 (1945)); John Neinhardt, Black Elk Speaks (New York, Pocket Books, 1972(1932)); Frank Waters, Masked Gods (New York, Ballantine Books, 1973 (1950)); Maya Deren, The Voodoo Gods (New York, Paladin, 1975 (1953)); Sudhir Kakar, Shamans, Mystics and Doctors (London, Unwin Paperbacks, 1984); Ruth & Seth Leacock, Spirits of the Deep (New York, Anchor, 1975)

through shamanic religion, is that the "perennial philosophy" is not something we should identify only with formalised religions. Instead it is a type of knowledge, degree of realisation, which may emerge within any human system, even, we may speculate, in non religious contexts such as the present. It remains relevant to observe that in each context in which it may appear, its contours will be significantly, not just incidentally, affected by the cultural and social environment.

chapter 5
charisma in sufism

While Don Juan's historical roots fade very rapidly into shadows, Ahmad al-'Alawi's can be traced with some confidence right back to the time of the Prophet.[47] Perhaps this contrast can be explained by the fact that Don Juan was of a repressed minority of a conquered nation while Ahmad al-'Alawi is of the Sufi current of Islamic mysticism within societies where Islam has been the dominant cultural force. Despite periodic repression of Sufism by the sometimes literalist *ulama* and now modernists, Sufism seems always to have had popular roots both broad and deep enough to defend a semi-legitimacy. In any case, the fact is that Sufis stress their *silsilah* (spiritual genealogies) very heavily and as a result the family tree of Sufi schools is relatively clear.

Zaehner has argued that Sufism must have developed within Islam only after connections with India, through Persia, introduced an element of monistic thought into the primarily dualistic Islamic world. He says this happened shortly after the time of Shankara in India and via Abu Yazid.[48] The thrust of his argument is that the mystical element is foreign to Islam as a spiritual system. On this point I agree with Idries Shah, whose position is that "sufism" even predates Islam, being rooted in traditions which are essentially ageless.[49] However Shah goes too far, ending up seeing Sufism as the source of esotericism in other traditions, especially of course the European tradition. There are strong connections and good reason to see cultural transmissions as taking place across those borders in all directions, but arguments about historical derivation based on parallels are, in the case of mysticism, quite problematic--"independent invention", to use the anthropological term, is so clearly at work in this context that diffusionist explanations going in any direction are often misleading.

Clarity about historical connectedness has not meant uniformity--Sufism flowered into an amazing array of styles and practices. Like Don Juan,

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47 M Lings, A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century (Berkeley: U California P, 1971) pp 232-233.

48 RC Zaehner, Hindu and Muslim Mysticism (New York, Schocken Books, 1969) p. 109.

49 Idries Shah, The Sufis (New York, Dutton, 1971)

Ahmad al-'Alawi only evolved toward higher and purely mystical consciousness after a period of flirtation and dabbling with magic and the occult. Ahmad al-'Alawi eventually established his own *tariqah* and it developed into the most popular and influential of the Sufi brotherhoods in the Maghrib, drawing much of its support from mountain tribes of the Moroccan Rif.[50] It has been one of the strongest modern representatives of what Trimingham sees as the classical tradition within Sufism. Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawi lived from 1869 to 1934 in the Western Algerian coastal town of Mostaganem. Despite mild discouragement from his mother, he came very early in his life to value religious studies. Prior to his commitment to the Darqawi Shaikh Buzidi, he experimented with both occult and intellectualist approaches to spirituality. He gave up both under the guidance of Shaikh Buzidi, who taught him that practice of *dhikr*, Sufi meditation, brought him grasp of the essence of doctrines.

In dealing with the differing perspectives, of the Algerian Sufi Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawi, his followers, the Salafiyya, and the various academics who have commented on them, it is worth noting background factors both to provide a setting and to highlight points of contrast with other Sufi movements. Lying near the Moroccan border as it does, both the town and the Sufi *tariqahs* (brotherhoods) within it have close ties with Fez and the Moroccan Riff. In contrast with the Islam of sub-Saharan Africa, Maghribi Islam has both a more autochthonous flavour and a more thoroughly pervasive influence. As a result the major themes within it are oriented around the contrasts between urban Islam and that of the rural tribes (the urban type having more in common with the Islam of the middle East) and the tension between long established Sufi brotherhoods and the Islam of the *ulama*.[51]

As Maghribi culture came to its florescence within the model of Islam, there is no tension within it comparable to the tensions in Indonesia or West Africa between "purity" and "syncretism". Within Islam the influence of the Sufi brotherhoods is profound by all accounts, although of course impossible

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50 JS Trimingham, The Sufi Orders of Islam (Oxford: OUP, 1971) p. 111.

51 Here we are dealing with a series of different tensions all at once and could easily confuse them. Tensions between sufi and legalistic, rural and urban and Berber and Arab, all referred to in Roger le Tourneau, "North Africa" in G von Grunebaum ed. Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1955), do not correspond. In Clifford Geertz, Islam Observed (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1971) pp 43-54, there is a general overview of sufism in Morocco.

to judge precisely.[52] Historically, the *marabouts* played a major role in the Islamic conflict with the Iberians on both spiritual and military levels as well as being one of the major elements of internal Maghribi politics. Within the debates among contemporary Muslims in North Africa, the concept of *"baraka"* which is fundamental to *marabouts* and Sufis has been a turning point of endless argument.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century the most important of the brotherhoods was the Darqawi *tariqah* of which Alawiyya was to become one of the most important offshoots. Trimingham describes the Darqawi as a "popular revival" which "became the most widespread, numerous, and influential *tariqah* in North Africa".[53] The Darqawi style represented a continuation of classical Sufism growing from the Shadhili branch on the family tree and somewhat in contrast with the more reformist cast Tijanis of the same period. Although the Darqawiyya "stressed non-involvement in the affairs of the world", its strength in the mountainous tribal areas led to its role as a focal point in guerilla resistance against the French during the forty years following their conquest of Algiers, while they were trying to subdue the whole of Algeria.[54]

Although military activism runs through the history of Maghribi Sufis, the period of Ahmad al-'Alawi's life and especially the activities of his order reflect no such involvement. His order was a-political vis à vis the French, although the Shaikh himself engaged in extensive public polemics with the modernist Salafiyya. In fact the period of al-'Alawi's activity spans the time during which Algeria was politically most inert. As Gallagher puts it:

> It is probably not too much of a generalization to say that from 1871, when the last Kayla revolt was put down, until 1919 Algeria was, politically speaking, a land of silence. It had been physically broken, no indigenous political institution had survived the conquest, and the country had never

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52 Ibid. p. 250. Le Tourneau comments that "...the masses of the people are still under the domination of the marabouts and the heads of brotherhoods."

53 J S Trimingham, The Sufi Orders in Islam (Oxford: OUP, 1971) p. 111. He describes the Tijanis as downplaying the role of the esoteric and thus departing from classical sufism.

54 C Gallagher, The United States and North Africa (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1963) p. 64.

> had a traditional urban elite class of the same dimensions as Tunisia or even Morocco.[55]

Both the tone and the extent of al-'Alawi's movement were certainly influenced by the political vacuum he lived within. Morocco and Tunisia, colonised much later and moving toward independence much earlier, offered more scope for political and economic activism than was possible in the *colon* dominated Algeria of the same period.

The colonial situation had much to do with the nature of relations between mystical and scholastic versions of Islam in the Maghrib. While in West Africa the colonialists brought Christianity with them and in doing so elevated the Sufi brotherhoods to status as standard bearers of nationalism, in North Africa there was no serious Christianizing effort and the French "recognised the compliancy of the maraboutes and the independence of the *ulama*" and "made use of the former against the latter."[56] Presumably the French would have found it easier to deal with Sufis, whose principal orientation is spiritual, than with a scholastic *ulama*, whose influence and orientation lies more on the institutional and legalistic aspects of Islam.

This difference stems largely from the fact that a literal perspective on the meaning of *dar'ul-islam* , the "house of islam" places it within the temporal space the French were concerned with occupying while the mystical sense of space is in a dimension which, as far as both the French and *ulama* were concerned, did not even exist. The *dar 'ul islam* is a reference in esoteric terms to the sphere within which there is submission to Allah and in social terms to the community of people, the *ummah islam*, who enact that submission through complicity with the legal and social regulations of Islamic religion. In this there is a close parallel with the comments Castaneda's teacher Don Juan made to him about the effect on *brujos*, sorcerers, of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. In each case the colonisation, even to some extent in its religious aspects, concentrated on the outward spheres of life which most concerned ritually oriented or legalistic aspects of local religion, leaving the inner life, the aspect centrally drawing the attention of mystics, much less affected.

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55 Ibid. p 92.

56 J Berque, French North Africa (New York, 1967)) p. 76. and E Gellner, Muslim Society (Cambridge UP, 1981) pp 131-148. Gellner discusses the contrasts between north and west Africa.

At any rate, the conflict between the *ulama* and the *tariqahs* became and remains one of the most central issues of Maghribi nationalism and the principal agent of the scholastic perspective was the Salafiyya movement led by al-Fasi in Morocco and Ben Badis in Algeria. Geertz sees the Salafiyya as being a "scripturalist" prelude to political nationalism and suggests that its main historical role lay in the "ideologization of religion".[57] According to him, it is in this respect, rather than in theological or spiritual terms, that the Salafiyya was innovative. The modernists of the Salafiyya held Sufis responsible for the "stagnation" of society and for "disinterest" in nationalism so their attacks on the *tariqahs* were in Gallagher's words a "principal leitmotif of the nationalists" during the 1930s.[58] The puritan and political-rationalistic tone of the Salafis is clear in al-Fasi's statements that

> The aim of the Salafiyyah, as propounded by its founder, al-Hanbali, was the cleansing of religions from the superstitions that had crept into it and the restoration of its original purity ... Above all, the new Salafiyya rejects the idea of a secular state ... Opposition to the *shaikhs* who had benefited from the protectorate regime was foremost in their program of action.[59]

In Algeria the debates between Salafiyya and Alawiyya were carried on through the newspaper media--Ben Badis, the "first reformist", spoke through the Salafi *Ash-Shihab*; Ahman al'Alawi, the "last great *marabout*", through the Alawiyya's *Al-Balagh*.[60]

While from a social and historical point of view these interactions between Alawiyya, Salafiyya, and the French seem very important, from the interior perspective of Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawi and his followers those social events were not fundamental. Perhaps the major contribution of Martin Lings' book on Ahmad al-'Alawi is that he allows his primary sources to speak for themselves --by doing so he let the genuinely spiritual thrust of the movement show through in a way social analysis would not have permitted. In the case of Alawiyya, at any rate, it seems we have an instance of charisma

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57 C Geertz, op. cit., p 104.

58 From Trimingham, op. cit., p. 249; also see Gallagher, op. cit., p. 101.

59 'alal al-Fasi, The Independence Movements of Arab North Africa (New York, 1970) pp. 113-116.

60 Berque, op. cit., p 76. The debates are also discussed in M. Lings, A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century (Berkeley: U California P, 1971) pp 114-115.

genuinely oriented toward achievement of the spiritual goals professed rather than, as in so many supposedly Sufi movements, a case of spiritual and religious symbols being used by charismatic figures to achieve socio-economic and political ends.[61]

We learn from Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawi's autobiographical sketch that he was born into a Mostaganem family that had know better days and that as a result of financial troubles he was forced to terminate both his formal and Koranic educations at an early stage in order to supplement the family income through his chosen work as a cobbler.[62] Despite mild discouragement from his mother, he nonetheless came very early in his life to stress the importance of religious studies. Prior to his commitment to the Darqawi Shaikh Buzidi, he experimented with both occult and intellectualist approaches to spiritualism.

His involvement with occult powers came through the Isawa *tariqah*, another offshoot of the Shadhili lineage of *tariqah*, but quite in contrast with the Darqawi *tariqah* in that it emphasised skills such as fire-eating and snake-charming. Al-'Alawi became rapidly proficient in the skills taught among the Isawa and when he gradually broke off his relationship on the basis of a Koranic injunction he retained his hobby of snake-charming. Secondly and at the same time, he was involved to the point of addiction in intellectual studies of Koranic doctrine.

During his early introduction to Darqawiyya through Shaikh al-Buzidi he gave up both those habits once he had been brought to realise that they did not contribute to his spiritual advancement. Al-'Alawi was able to sacrifice snake-charming rather easily once al-Buzidi pointed out that no matter how large the snake he charmed "it was much easier than controlling the snake within himself". The intellectualism died much harder and only once he had realised that through practice of *dhikr* he could comprehend the essence of scholasticism more readily than through mental learning.

From that point on his commitment was undivided and his practice of *dhikr* evolved rapidly in line with the Darqawi tradition. Well before his

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61 This general issue is discussed clearly in L Brenner, "Separate Realities: a Review of the Literature on Sufism", The International Journal of African Historical Studies V 4 (1972) p. 654. As he puts it, "Pursuit of the Way...for ulterior political motives or to meet general societal expectations about political leadership would simply be a form of conditioning, and Sufism implies deconditioning...".

62 M Lings, op.cit., especially pages 48-78, is my source for biographical information here and in the following.

master al-Buzidi has passed away al-'Alawi had already been supervising pupils of his own. His preoccupation with spiritual practice was such that his business might have fallen apart, but for the aid of his partner, and the atmosphere of his workshop became almost like that of a *zawiyah* (Sufi meeting place). But his efforts were rewarded by rapid progress so that he had himself guided many pupils to a point of spiritual independence even before his own master died in 1909.

The death of his master, fifteen years after al-'Alawi began his apprenticeship, marked a personal crisis for him. Al-'Alawi had made plans well before his master's death to emigrate or at least to travel. His had sold his home, arranged to give up his business and received a permit to travel for both himself and his family. Just at that point, his master came down with his final illness and al-'Alawi's loyalty prevented him from going through with his planned trip. Then after foregoing his permit by default, while awaiting the older *Shaikh*'s death, al-'Alawi's wife also died.

Thus circumstances combined to leave him relieved of worldly obligations just at the point when the other elders of the *zawiyah* began pressuring him, on the basis of dream revelations of theirs, to accept the then empty position as "remembrancer" in the Mostaganem *zawiyah*. Pressured by the other elders of the *zawiyah*, al-'Alawi gave up his plans and accepted the position. For the next five years he continued to lead the *zawiyah* as a local branch of the Darqawi *tariqah*, then he broke off from it to establish his own separate order, Alawiyya.

In interpreting these circumstances, Gellner suggests that possibly the planned travel was a political ploy on al-Alawi's hand to force the issue of succession: that if there had been recalcitrants this would have forced them to make their play and that if someone else had been chosen in his stead he could have gracefully continued with his intention to emigrate and subsequently established his own *zawiyah* elsewhere.[63] While admitting this possibility, it is worth pointing out that succession to a master's role was, from the mystics perspective, not something to be done lightly. It is a role that involves very little room for self-indulgence and a heavy load of responsibility both socially and spiritually. It is very likely that al-'Alawi's desire to travel was genuine, as Lings also implies, and that it was something

63 Gellner, op.cit. pp 139-140.

of a "last stand" of his selfish desires for the liberty to be indulgent rather than accepting total spiritual surrender through service to the community of seekers.[64]

The next notable event was al-'Alawi's decision to establish the independence of his *zawiyah* and followers from the Darqawi lineage which had fathered his career. This break came five years after his succession to leadership of the *zawiyah*. One of his motives for making the break was his establishment of the practice of *khalwah* --periods of total retreat, fasting, and meditation in a cell or hermitage. In the Darqawi and Shadhili *tariqah*s the normal practice in cases of intensive retreat was to go to caves or mountains isolated from society, but al-'Alawi himself had found during his early practices that he had had trouble finding the necessary solitude (in fact he had been driven to doing his nightly *dhikr* on graveyards).

Actually as an innovation this step was no radical departure and most likely combined with tensions between al-'Alawi and other Darqawi *shaikhs* to account for the break. Al-'Alawi, like many genuine Sufis, found it hard to peaceably tolerate some of his fellow *shaikhs*, whose pretences exceeded their capacities as spiritual guides. Conversely, the *shaikh* was as often upset when outsiders passed judgement on the *tariqahs* as a whole, without taking account of the fact that there were genuine Sufis in among the pretenders.[65]

Lings reports that although ill-will was directed against the *shaikh* by a number of brotherhood leaders, that hostility does not seem to have been harboured long except in the case of a few people whose influence over their following almost disappeared. Lings also mentions that "His opponents among the Darqawis must have been somewhat disconcerted when the great grandson of Mawlay Al-'Arabi ad-Darqawi himself came from the mother *zawiyah* in Morocco and took the *shaikh* as his Master." In another context, that is in explaining the break through which the Darqawi broke off from the Shadhili, he stated that:

> The acceptance of a new name for a *tariqah* on the emergence of an eminent Master simply means that this Master has renewed or adapted the method--

64 Lings, op.cit. p 79.
65 Ibid. p 110.

> without changing the constants--in accordance with his own particular original perception of spiritual realities.[66]

On the whole *shaikh* Ahmad al-'Alawi was respected by his fellow Sufis. In fact even his most serious public opponent, Ben Badis , was favourably impressed when they met face to face.[67] From the time of his assumption of leadership in the Mostaganem *zawiyah* of his master, al-'Alawi was occupied full-time with his spiritual duties. He did make two trips overseas during his life: one to Tunis, Tripoli, and Istanbul shortly after becoming *shaikh*; another at the end of his life when he was finally able to take the pilgrimage to Mecca and in the process he also visited Medina, Jerusalem, and Damascus. Despite the brevity of his travels, Europeans who met the *shaikh* were as often impressed by the breadth and clarity of his intellect as by the immediate charisma of his presence.[68]

The tone of life within al-'Alawi's *zawiyah* seems by all accounts (or perhaps more precisely has been allowed to seem) thoroughly spiritual in orientation. The clearest glimpses we can get from the available sources come through the account of the French Dr. Carret, neither a follower of nor believer in the *Shaikh*, who attended to and knew al-'Alawi during his final decade of life. Dr. Carret leaves no doubt that the *Shaikh* was sincere and that his followers genuinely gained through the association in their spiritual growth. The *Shaikh* clarified to the doctor that although very few of his followers achieved the final liberation and realisation he was trying to guide them toward, most of them were able to reach a state of inner peace and calmness.

Like Don Juan, Ahmad al-'Alawi did not believe in wasting words or that the substance of his teaching could be communicated rationally. In answer to questions from Dr. Carret, al-'Alawi explained that:

> To be one of us and to see the Truth, you lack the desire to raise your Spirit above yourself...If you came to me as my disciple I could give you an answer. But what would be the good of satisfying an idle curiosity?...The

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66 M Lings, in his introduction to T Burckhardt, Letters of a Sufi Master (London, 1969) p vii.

67 M Lings, A Sufi Saint... (op. cit.) p 115.

68 Evident especially in the account of Dr Carret's friendship with the *shaikh*, also in the impressions of A Berque. Ibid. pp 13-33 & 79.

> study of the doctrine and meditation or intellectual contemplation...are not within the scope of everyone.[69]

It is also clear, as again with Don Juan, that the gnosis attained is essentially experiential and that it becomes available only after the "unlearning" of ordinary mental habits. According to Lings:

> One of the first things that a novice has to do in the Alawi Tariqah--and the same must be true of other paths of mysticism --is to unlearn much of the agility of profane intelligence' which an Alawi faqir once likened, for my benefit, to the antics of a monkey that is chained to a post', and to acquire an agility of a different order, comparable to that of a bird which continually changes the level of its flight.[70]

Neither can the knowledge attained through the Shaikh be characterised as religious for, as al-'Alawi explained, "for those who go further and attain self-realisation in God. Then one no longer believes because one sees." The principal technique taught within Alawiyya, as throughout Sufism, is the practice of invocation called *dhikr* and that practice could not be separate from direct supervision by a Shaikh--hence the significance of *silsilah* among Sufis. Rhythmic dancing, movement, and breath control function merely as adjuncts to the *dhikr*, which Lings so well describes:

> The invocation of the name Allah is as an intermediary which goes backwards and forwards between the glimmerings of consciousness and the dazzling splendours of the Infinite, affirming the continuity between them and knitting them ever closer and closer together in communication until they are merged in identity.[71]

Although some of Alawi's followers spent extended periods of effort directed wholly toward their spiritual growth, almost all did so only as a temporary retreat while leading normal family life. Although the training obviously involved familiarity with worlds seemingly other than that of society, the

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69 Ibid. pp 27-28.
70 Ibid. p 124.
71 Ibid. p 136.

endpoint lay in conscious realisation of all worlds simultaneously. In Ahmad al-'Alawi's own words:

> The infinite or the World of the Absolute which we conceive of as being outside us is on the contrary universal and exists within us as well as without. There is only one world and this is It. What we look on as the sensible world, the finite world of time and space, is nothing but a conglomeration of veils which hide the Real World. Those veils are our own senses...[72]

Naturally, further paralleling the lessons of Don Juan, the jarring of consciousness out of its ordinary bounds and the search for a higher equilibrium brought with it dangers of imbalance that the *Shaikh* had to constantly watch out for in his followers. Lings refers to the dangers:

> This ultimate station... is defined...as being one of inward intoxication and outward soberness, in virtue of which the mind fulfils its analytical function with perfect clarity...in the case of the mystic who, though far advanced upon the path, has not yet reached the end, other-worldly drunkenness is liable to invade the mind and make it supernaturally and unbearably active...thus throwing the soul off its balance.[73]

Once the balance has been finally achieved however, then it is as though the Sufi has "called himself to account before death does it for him". Having grasped the unity of All, he then becomes as willing to surrender to death as to anything else--because it too brings nothing new. In his time, Ahmad al-'Alawi seems to have reached a point, well before death called him to account, where he was ready for it.

Although it is impossible to know exactly what the extent of his following was, thousands of people at least experienced the initiation of being blessed and they came from all over. One group of Madani, another derivative of the Darqawi branch, who al-'Alawi met in Tripoli made the oath of allegiance to him after he had established his own order. Many Alawiyya followers came from the Riff mountains and Gellner suggests that "on the

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72 Ibid. p 136.
73 Ibid. p 57.

whole, tribesmen come to saints for political leadership rather than mystical exercises, and townsfolk for spiritual rather than political reasons."[74] The *Shaikhs*' French friend Dr. Carret leaves a feeling of purely spiritual motivation in his account:

> The way in which this *zawiyah* was built is both eloquent and typical: there was neither architect--at least not in the ordinary sense--nor master builder, and all the workmen were volunteers. The architect was the *Shaikh* himself--not that he ever drew up a plan or manipulated a set-square. He simply said what he wanted and the conception was understood by the builders. They were by no means all from that part of the country. Many had come from Morocco, especially from the Riff, and some from Tunis, all without any kind of enlistment. The news had gone around that work on the *zawiyah* could be started once more, and that was all that was needed ... They received no wages. They were fed, that was all; and they camped out in tents. But every evening, an hour before the prayer, the *Shaikh* brought them together and gave them spiritual instruction, that was their reward.[75]

As the *Shaikh* himself explained to Dr. Carret, while very few of his disciples had the drive to seek complete spiritual liberation through union in God, most of them were motivated by desire for inner peace and calmness. Whatever they came to him for, those who followed him came on their own initiative, and there was no propagandizing of the organisation.

In reviewing the broad outlines of the Alawiyya movement presented so far, I want to point to just a few themes to try to get at the difference of perspective implied in looking at Sufi movements from academic and mystical premises. The academic perspectives I will discuss are in no way comprehensive and I am only using them here because it seems to me that through them I can hint at the ontological gap of perspective I am trying to bring out. At the same time, I don't mean to imply with this discussion that academics have denied the reality or significance of the gap I am pointing to, they don't. The important thing is that this difference of perspective had not been taken account of within academic comments on the movement.

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74 Gellner, op.cit. p 147.

75 M Lings, op.cit. pp 18-19.

One very common academic perspective on mysticism is that it constitutes an escape, a refuge from problematic social conditions. Thus Berque speaks of the:

> ... fatal retreat of the *zawiyah*, of popular mysticism and xenophobic piety. This was how, in the 18th century maraboutism and the Brotherhoods had developed. They retained their vitality until 1930. Thus protected by its very remoteness, religion offered a merciful refuge to crushed resistance movements, unappeased angers and anachronistic violence. For believers, whom their sons tended increasingly to disavow, it raised a rampart against the advance of enlightenment, still identified with that of the foreigner.[76]

It would be difficult to find another statement which more precisely inverts the understandings mystics have of what they are doing; yet while Berque may have stated his perspective more strongly than most historians would care to, most share this evaluation. Even in the way that, as historians, we pose questions there is an implicit set of assumptions. For instance: "why are political and economic grievances translated into religious terms". Even in the way we phrase issues we cannot deal with religion as a positive thing in and of itself, but are always trying to see it as a reaction to or in terms of something else.

People often turn to mysticism not so much because economic and political grievances become translated into religious terms as because those social conditions make the normal complacency of everyday awareness impossible. As a result of social problems (yes, there is a connection between these things even from a mystic's perspective) people are forced to re-examine the nature and meaning of their lives at more profound levels. That exploration leads them, to explore mystical forms of spirituality not as an escape from reality, but as a way of confronting it. Modernists (here including both groups like the Salafiyya and academics) tend to term mysticism as an ostrich-like view of reality. Mystics in turn see the modern viewpoint as preoccupation with external conditions which are merely a distraction from the ultimately spiritual mission of existence.

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76 J Berque, op.cit. p 73.

Brenner, who along with a few others constitutes an exception to the general case I am making, has made the above point very clearly in a comment that leads us into a second area of difficulty, the subject of charisma or, as Sufis know it, *baraka*.

> West African upheaval provides a context in which people felt the need to seek "inward peace", a state *Shaikh* al-'Alawi ascribes to his own following. Amadu Bamba and Hamallah provided that spiritual reward in a tangible form, otherwise people would not have followed them. Few people joined the new orders to pursue the Way, but they did hope to gain spiritual peace through their association with the leader and in the sharing of his *baraka*.[77]

Baraka was at the centre of debates within Maghribi Islam between its modernist and traditionalist wings as well as some the Sufi groups. Within the Sufi groups there was no debate about whether *baraka* exists or functions, rather debate centred on its misuse. On the other hand, and as le Tourneau puts it:

> The conservatism of the *marabouts* and heads of fraternities is perhaps even stronger than that of the theologians. Everything considered, the theological education can, in theory, adjust itself to reformism, if not to modernism, at the price of a serious effort in adaptation, whereas Maghribi mysticism, such as it has manifested itself for centuries, is strictly incompatible as much with the one tendency as with the other; in fact neither modernism nor reformism admits the idea of *baraka* transmissible by heredity or by initiation, which is the very foundation of the organization of the brotherhoods and of the *zawiyah*.[78]

The impasse, as has been restated so many times, is that on the one hand *baraka* is dealt with as a concept to be debated, on the other as an experiential reality to be realised. The positions never meet because debate takes place with different assumptions from each perspective.

Another issue within which the historical and mystical perspectives differ is in the evaluation of the success or failure of a movement; in

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77 M Brenner, op.cit. p 656.

78 le Tourneau, op.cit. p 243.

assessment of the extent and nature of changes it has brought to society; in evaluation of whether a movement is progressive or reactionary. In all of these cases, the problem centres on the fact that historians view events in terms of the very externals which Sufism is dedicated to transcending. In practice mysticism refers to a temporal-spatial dimension which historians do not function within. Yet this is not to say that historians cannot speak about Sufism.

For instance one would suppose that in judging the success or failure of a millenial movement we would already be taking the movement on its own terms if we argue that the world did not come to an end, the masses within the movement were not reawakened from the dead, and the heaven predicted does not seem to have appeared. While it appears that in this judgment we are accepting the millenialist's own framework, we are still using that framework in a literal sense. In fact, the end of time and eternity of life is not something that can be envisioned in the earthbound forms which it transcends, how could it? The millenium, for those who participate in it, is not simply a different interpretation of the same reality historians judge millenialists and mysticism by, it is an ontologically separate reality and we can only deal correctly with this plane when we begin by recognising that fact and its relevance to our evaluation of events.

chapter 6
spontaneous yoga

An extended exploration of Indian spirituality, the "stuff" of lifetimes of scholarship, could become an incredible catalogue of diverse spiritual forms. As a start we would deal with Vedic scriptures, the earliest verses containing the already ageless wisdom of sages, like those of the Chinese five thousand years ago, recording kernels of wisdom linked to myth and ritual. We would touch the centrality of fire ceremonials of purification, the gradual and complex evolution of castes, communities within the same society conceived as having differential status related to degrees of purity due to past incarnations. We would speak of key concepts including *karma*, the notion that a natural law governs spiritual life and incarnation in a physical form and implying that we are in precisely the perfect position to be in to learn the lessons we need. We would explore primitive forms of *yoga,* sciences of liberation such as the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, practiced prior to his liberation.

We could go on to discuss the rise of devotional, *bhakti*, movements which became especially prominent in the period after Islam had reached the subcontinent. We would need to explore the rich textures of the great Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, as they have ramified through popular consciousness in drama and story, carrying with them core concepts of the Indian religious thought world. But it has already been emphasised that "Hinduism" ought to be viewed more, for our purposes certainly, as a "family of practices" than as a unitary orthodoxy. This is not to ignore or depreciate the coherence of central conceptual structures, the pervasiveness of caste notions, nor certain common ritual patterns.

However in the practical realisation of the essentials of the religion different guru, teachers, occupied relatively autonomous positions from early on, each expressing in sometimes radically different ways their vision of the path to liberation. Here I am guided once again by the qualities of material which allow access to specific insights. Ramana Maharshi is not presented here because he is "typical", if the word can be used at all, of the Indian or Hindu. Fundamental philosophical notions such as *karma, dharma, moksa*, and

maya, though found everywhere in Indian thought, are not given great emphasis in his instruction, but are relevant to understanding it.

Karma refers to the law of cause and effect which binds life forms to the planet. It does not mean just "fatalism", but rather refers to the ordering principle by which the cycles of life, even events within life, are regulated. *Dharma* refers to "truth" as embedded within the teachings of religion ("Hinduism" can be called *"sanhata dharma"*), not in the sense of dogmatic truth, but rather in relation to the foundation of natural law which true teachings are supposed to be related to. *Moksa* is the goal of spiritual life, meaning the absolute dissolution which releases the soul so that it need no longer return through other cycles of reincarnation, it means essentially that there is "nothing left", even in the subtle realms of the spirit, when death occurs. *Maya* is not just, as it is often translated, a statement that we live in a world of illusion, but rather a philosophical recognition that the domain of phenomenal forms which we experience through our senses as being real is all necessarily, by the limitations implied through our senses, transitory rather than absolute.

However, it seems that Ramana Maharshi's very uniqueness may make it more possible to appreciate these fundamental concepts as implicit within the Indian world, even though he made no special claim to it in scholarly terms. Instead he is presented through his own teachings and in biographies as having realised "truth" as the basis upon which he then began to understand what these terms mean. In other words the meaning, the essence contained within philosophies, became apparent in his case (perhaps in others too) *after* the fact, after he had achieved a realisation and not because he had been indoctrinated into the world of concepts.

We can assume that he learned all of the concepts as he grew up, as they were the normal vocabulary of his environment. At the same time we can accept the he claim he was not formally tutored through study of ancient texts and philosophy. In this respects his example illustrates what I have emphasised already, that "Hinduism" is a world of multiple practices which exist in their core not by the replication of ideological formulations of Hindu doctrine, though that aspect of their translation across generations cannot be ignored, but instead through a realisation which finds expression, if in the Indian context, by that vocabulary.

Although Ramana Maharshi existed within and expressed himself through the medium of Indian (and generally Yogic and Hindu) terminology, he came to self-realisation very early and very much on his own. He was not the product of a particular technique or lineage of spiritual masters. As Osborne describes it, Ramana Maharshi started doing technical readings on aspects of Indian philosophy only in order to better respond to the questions of disciples who were already influenced by such formulations. Apparently it was only after he arrived at Arunachala, when of course he was still quite young in any event, that he heard many of the scriptures read. He then says he understood what they meant because of the qualities of his own spontaneous enlightenment, rather than because of what he had learned before.[79]

In this we have evidence that, although culture may give mysticism its specific tone and form, mysticism is not dependent for its existence on a cultural tradition of mysticism, nor on influences from such a tradition. In other words, mystics are not created only because there is a "culture of mysticism", working to condition them toward becoming one, rather they become mystics out of necessity stemming from the contradictions of culture in general. At the same time it seems proper in the case of Ramana Maharshi to present him in the context of Hinduism and Yoga, even though he was not a product of them in the sense of looking to them for his original inspiration. He needs to be seen in the context of Yoga because when he came to expressing his realisation, those were the terms he used.

Ramana Maharshi, whose name had been Venkataraman during youth, was born in 1879 and died in 1950. His father was a rural lawyer in the village of Tiruchazhi in the Tamil area of South India and, although the family was Brahman, it was not wealthy. His father died when he was twelve and he went to live with a paternal uncle in the larger town of Madura. He seems not to have especially stood out in school, except perhaps for his extremely good memory, and to have mainly enjoyed athletics. The family he was growing up with does not seem to have been unusually religious, nor especially hostile to religion. His schooling was in an American run mission school, giving him some facility in English and familiarity with Christianity.[80]

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79 Arthur Osborne, Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self Knowledge (New York, Rider & Co, 1973) pp. 24, 38.

80 This and the following biographical material is from Ibid. especially pp 13-72.

Although he had not been especially religious in his early youth, he had reacted strongly on an intuitive level upon hearing the name "Arunachala", the name of a hill in South India considered to be one of the several most holy locations by Hindus. Then when he was seventeen he experienced a spontaneous awakening touched off by a sudden rush of shock and fear at the thought of death, a shock that put him into a trance or coma and drove his mind inward in a process of asking himself who he was.

When he recovered from his trance-like state he no longer felt the same likes and dislikes about food nor could he continue uninfluenced in his study and play --they had lost their grip on his heart. After a brief period while he was still at home, he set off with no more than the money to pay for his train fare and arrived without any conscious plan at the temple of Tiruvannamalai, in the town at the base of Arunachala. From 1896 until his death he remained in that immediate vicinity.

During his first three years in Tiruvannamalai he never spoke, nor did he make any efforts to provide for his own subsistence. Instead he moved through a succession of spots within the temple, then through a number of caves on the hill where he remained rapt in meditation; unresponsive for the most part to curious questioners; and subsisting only on the food sympathetic *sadhus* (seekers who have renounced worldly social life) collected for him from townspeople. Until 1922, when the number of his followers grew to demand creation of an *ashram* (spiritual community) he lived mainly in one cave on Arunachala.

Gradually during those years, he became more responsive to the questioners who came to him and the sheer silent force of his presence attracted a following despite his neutrality to their presence. Even though he began to speak more often, his principal teaching always came through the silence that enveloped those who came into his presence. In India this communication through being in the presence of an enlightened master is called *satsang*.

Not only did he remain untouched by the pleas of his family, once they had discovered his whereabouts, to return home; but eventually his mother became a follower. Osborne mentions that in 1912 Ramana Maharshi had an experience of total death, then that seems to have been the final touch in his personal spiritual evolution, after which point the function of his life was in his teaching. From the time of the *ashram*'s establishment, he spent his days

responding to questions put by those who gathered around him, doing small chores around the *ashram*, and in the silence where he was most at home.

Ramana Maharshi, although by any external standard occupying a role as *guru*, permitted considerable ambiguity about who the *guru* is. When followers of Sri Aurobindo, another contemporary Indian master, commented that Ramana Maharshi had had no *guru*, Ramana's response was: first, how could they know whether he might have had a guru during a past life; and secondly, why does a *guru* have to have an external form, couldn't he be internal.[81] Then when the Westerner Paul Brunton presented himself to Ramana asking to be taken on as a disciple, he was told:

> What is all this talk of masters and disciples? All these differences exist only from the disciples standpoint. To the one who has realised the true self there is neither master nor disciple. Such a one regards all people with equal eye.[82]

In another context he explained that:

> It is axiomatic that one who is a *guru* in this supreme sense of having realised his identity with the Absolute does not say so, inasmuch as there is no ego left to affirm the identity.[83]

When pressed hard by disciples who apparently felt the strong need to identify with a guru in human form, Ramana allowed them to see the *guru* as being within him.

There was no rigid structure for either the flow of *ashram* life or the communication of the teachings. Although the *ashram* existed within an Indic mystical world which has developed more elaborate and technical structures for approaching mystical union than any other, Ramana Maharshi used the technical language without being doctrinaire. His acquaintance with formal terminology came through reading he did after his enlightenment so that he could help explain things to his followers in words they would understand.

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81 Arthur Osborne, The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi (New York, Rider & Co., 1971) p 95.

82 Paul Brunton, A Search in Secret India (New York, Rider & Co. 1934) p 277.

83 Osborne, Ramana Maharshi...(op.cit.) p. 140.

Like Don Juan and Ahmad al-'Alawi, he saw no use in theoretical debates and would simply remain still when others tried to create them--the point of words and theory lay only in relation to practice. When asked whether his method was of value to everyone, he responded that it was the most direct method to realisation, but that not everyone is mature enough spiritually to benefit from it--they would need to go elsewhere to get instruction pitched to their specific needs. Osborne has said that

> ...although he was accessible to all alike, although questions were asked and answered in public, the guidance given to each disciple was nevertheless intensely direct and adapted to his character...[84]

He saw quite clearly that his instruction was not for the masses, that people have individual needs. Thus Ramana Maharshi explained that instruction could not be given on a mass basis and that it "...depends on the temperament and spiritual maturity of the individual."[85]

His central and most common advice to followers was to circumvent the strangulation of consciousness by mind through a strategy of turning the mind in upon itself, of asking oneself "who am I?". Through this process of self-enquiry, he suggested people could free themselves from the restrictions of ordinary intellect by removing the ego sense of self which lies at the root of all human psychic problems. He said this in many ways:

> Whether you continue in the household or renounce it and go to the jungle, it is your mind that haunts you. The ego is the source of thought. It creates the body and the world and makes you think you are a householder.
>
> ...the enquiry 'Who am I?' Though this enquiry also is a mental operation, it destroys all mental operations, including itself, just as the stick with which the funeral pyre is stirred is itself reduced to ashes after the pyre and corpses...

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84 Ibid. p. 139.
85 Ibid. p. 139.

> Self-enquiry is the one infallible means, the only direct one, to realise the unconditioned, absolute Being that you really are...The purpose of Self-enquiry is to focus the entire mind at its Source.
>
> As long as a man is the doer he also reaps the fruits of his deeds, but as soon as he realises the Self through enquiry as to who is the doer, his sense of being the doer falls away and the triple *karma* (destiny) is ended. This is the state of eternal liberation.
>
> ...instead of setting about saying there is a mind and I want to kill it, you begin to seek its source and you find it does not exist at all. The mind turned outwards results in thoughts and objects. Turned inwards it becomes itself the Self.[86]

Consistent with his recognition that some people might not benefit from immediate application of his favoured technique, Ramana Maharshi at various times approved the use of other strategies including *mantras* (that is meditation through the use of sacred phrases, somewhat resembling the use of *dhikr* (among Sufis); total surrender (either in general or through the mediation of his grace); *bhakti yoga* (that is the path of devotion, specifically as it is tied to meditation on the heart *chakra*, or centre); and *karma marga* (realisation through a life of service within society). With regard to *mantras* he did specify that in cases where they are used it was especially important that they be given by a proper teacher.[87]

Within Ramana's vision there was not the least sense of conflict between the goals of spiritual realisation and constructive social life. Although in a few instances he did not discourage renunciation of family and careers, those were exceptional and at heart he felt that:

> One who truly renounces actually merges in the world and expands his love to embrace the whole world. It would be more correct to describe the

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86 The above come from Ibid. pp. 75, 86; and Osborne, Teachings...(op.cit.) pp. 68, 113.

87 The above styles are present in his teachings as expressed in Osborne, Teachings...(op.cit.) pp 96, 69, 129, 172

> attitude of the devotee as universal love than as abandoning home to don the ochre robe.[88]

Some of his Indian followers, moved by the nationalism of the time and wondering whether spiritual work on the self was not simply an escape, were told that a self-realised being cannot help benefiting the world, "his very existence is the highest good." Similarly, his earliest Western follower was informed that "helping yourself you help the world, you are in the world, you are the world."

Underlying this insistence of Ramana Maharshi's was his persistent effort to free people from a dichotomising style of awareness which somehow considers spirituality as apart from normal life. He kept trying to bring questioners to realise that what made the two seem separate was only the dualism in the mind that raised the question. He did not condemn worldly knowledge, material wealth, or even psychic powers in themselves, he only stressed that with all three alike, the desire for them and the preoccupation with them were condemned as blinding a man and distracting him from the true goal. At root, he was working to communicate a radical monism:

> There is no such thing as the "inner" and the "outer". Both words mean the same thing or nothing at all...There are no levels of Reality; there are only levels of experience for the individual, not of Reality. If anything can be gained which was not there before, it can be lost, whereas the Absolute is eternal, here and now.[89]

In Ramana Maharshi's case one of the most important lessons for us is the reminder, consistent with the sense of mystical spirituality as "perennial philosophy", that departure onto the mystical path does not necessarily arise as a consequence of social conditioning, it is not dependent on a culture of mysticism, even if mystical perceptions are no doubt also more likely to arise in some contexts than others.

We can acknowledge that Ramana Maharshi was influenced by his environment, by the stock of concepts which are part of the Indian world, even affecting the consciousness of someone trained in a Christian school.

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88 Osborne, ...Path...(op.cit.) p. 72.

89 Osborne, Teachings...(op.cit.) pp. 35 & 177.

However there still seems to be evidence in this case that in fundamental respects the knowledge he gained came spontaneously, rather than following on its conscious cultivation. The evidence of observers, and there have been many as he became prominent and widely known among Europeans as well as in India, is consistent in this regard.

His case also suggests how, especially in the Indian context, movements, even for that matter in the end cities, arise on the basis of a quality of experience, rather than the reverse. In his case, apart from the spontaneous generation of his consciousness, the *ashram* community also seems to have formed quite apart from any will on his part. This sets a stage for insight into the nature of "teachings" in the mystical context; it suggests they do not necessarily arise from the "will" of the *guru* to transmit a message, but also from an attraction others "feel" to their condition of being. This is the basis of *satsang*, the sharing of the *guru*'s bliss, and draws attention to the individual basis of spiritual knowledge even in contexts which become institutionalised. Clearly, even within the structured environment of an *ashram*, actual consciousness raising practices vary from one individual to another, reflecting different degrees of maturity or personalities.

Apart from the general insights into spiritual practice and emphasis we gain through Ramana Maharshi's especially direct version of it, one unencumbered with ritual or abstraction, we get specific insights into the Indian world of spirituality from this example. It is obvious that in our society a person acting as he did would be labelled "catatonic" and institutionalised, there would be no reason to expect special interest beyond that. In India people "perceived" something we in our society would not.

Their sense of it was strong enough so that he acted like a magnet, drawing others who wanted to experientially soak up something of the deep peace he had achieved and they felt in him. They felt it even before he spoke, as in this case it was a considerable time before he even began to respond to the questions put to him. These aspects of his reception, and the frame that they then put on the experiences he had, are obviously significant, not just incidental. It is perhaps at this level, rather than in the formation of his consciousness as such, that "cultural" conditioning factors become powerfully operative.

It is notable in the broader Indian context that a number of important cities have grown up around *ashram* and pilgrimage centres, that the dynamic

we normally associate with urban development, in political-economic concentrations of power, can be inverted. The point which in this case could apply to the generation of kingdoms and kingship systems, at least certainly applies on the smaller scale of cult forms of organisation, which are distinctly pervasive within the Indian environment. Monism is not the exclusive frame of Indian spiritual life. The devotional, *bhakti,* movements, perhaps influenced by Sufism, are mystical and not at all levels monistic. But to a fair degree, Indian movements also, even when almost unstated as in this instance, place their emphasis on the "beingness" of those who are teachers, this is translated into notions of incarnation, the belief that those who are *guru* not only transmit something, but actually are *it*, not separate from the states referred to in the teachings. In this respect Ramana Maharshi is an excellent illustration of the monism common within the Indian environment.

chapter 7
zen disciplines

Meditation practices are more clearly central within Buddhism than in any other religion. The Buddha himself stressed that each individual had the capacity to realise directly, through their own process of enlightenment, the core truth which he came to himself. He actively discouraged metaphysical preoccupations, presenting himself more as a healer, a physician concerned more with "getting the arrow out of the wound" than pursuing speculation about how it got there. Meditation is thus central within Buddhism, whereas we might naturally think of caste and ritual as central in Hinduism or law and social regulation as more central to Islamic community. At least if we are looking at Buddhism in the ideal sense it is hard to disassociate it from meditation.

We will be aware that in Theravada Buddhism, the Buddhism of the southern school which obtains in Sri Lanka and the Southeast Asian countries of Burma, Thailand, Laos and Kampuchea most ordinary Buddhists are more actively involved with ritual practices than with active pursuit of *nirvana* (*nibbana* in Pali) enlightenment, release from the wheel of rebirth which is theoretically the central object of the religion.[90] Similarly in the Mahayana Buddhism which dominates East Asia, including Tibet, China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam popular practices emphasise the potential for salvation based in faith on the intervention of Bodhisattvas, central figures such as Kuan Yin, the goddess of mercy in Chinese folk Buddhism.[91] There too, as in devotional practices centring on Krishna in Hindu *bhakti* mysticism, or for that matter Christ in Christianity, faith in a mediating power rather than emphasis on conscious awareness achieved through meditation is the primary vehicle of common practice.

At the same time the wealth and diversity of meditation practices within Buddhism matches our expectations. Every Buddhist country has not only a clear tradition of esoteric practitioners, paralleling common ritual

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90 The best introduction to Theravada in general terms, as practice, is Robert Lester, Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 1973)

91 John Blofeld, Boddhisattva of Compassion: the Mystical Tradition of Kuan Yin (Boulder: Shambala, 1978).

religiosity, but within that category a range of types. Thus if we are to speak of the *vipassana* practices, the insight practices common within the Theravada countries, we are dealing with not one style of meditation but many, all situated originally within the *sangha*, the community of *bhikkhu*, monks, especially in the forest monasteries, the temples at the margins of densely inhabited areas and in contrast with the large urban centres. But in recent times, in the *vipassana* of modern Southeast Asia, urban lay Buddhists as well as monks practice a wide variety of meditations.[92]

In the East Asian context we encounter not only the richly embroidered world of Tibetan Buddhism, the Vajrayana Buddhism which we may know as the "way of power".[93] There Buddhism recognises the connection between wisdom and power and weaves together not only a social and spiritual system in the person of the Dalai Lama, as centre piece within the traditional religious and social orders, but also magical and meditation practices. Tibetan Buddhism is more easily misread and misunderstood than Vipassana or Zen, which we will concentrate on here, but now it is becoming much more widely known on its own terms, ironically and sadly through its partial expulsion from its homeland. In China and Japan the most widely known (in the modern West), but by no means the only, meditation tradition, has been Zen.

One of the earliest themes within it, present in the origins of Zen in China and replicated in recent American debates about it, has to do with whether enlightenment and realisation happen suddenly and spontaneously or through disciplined effort. This was one of the major themes at issue amongst the schools of thought which were taking Buddhism into the Chinese world. It became an issue again when Zen came into view actively in the English speaking world, through the interest "beat" culture expressed in it in the fifties, through the works of Jack Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. There Zen became identified with spontaneity, with emphasis on the innate quality of enlightenment. This was probably attractive in part as a

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92 An excellent down to earth selection of recent Vipassana practices is in Jack Kornfield, Living Buddhist Masters (Santa Cruz: Unity P, 1977)

93 There are now a great many excellent works on Tibet. for example, for different aspects of it, see: G. Tucci, The Religions of Tibet (Berkeley, U California P, 1980); Lama Govinda, Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism (London: Rider & Co, 1960); J Blofeld, The Way of Power (London: Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1970); S Beyer, The Cult of Tara (Berkeley: U California P, 1973).

counter to the Christian image which seemed to suggest the need for intervention from "above" or outside in order to achieve redemption.

In Buddhism there is indeed an emphasis on the innate quality of truth, on the fact that ultimate reality is implicitly already even "known", needing only to be jarred open, activated in the consciousness. Thus there have been, from early on, many stories of realisation arising in ostensibly unlikely circumstances, not as a result of what on the surface appear to be "religious" actions, but rather spontaneously, while cooking or whatever, the realisation itself being presented as a recognition of something which was already there, present even though unrecognised. This quality of innateness to the "Buddha nature" has always seemed at odds with the extraordinary discipline in fact cultivated within Zen Buddhist monastic practices.

As in the Sufism of Ahmad al-'Alawi, so in Zen there is an ancient and documented historical continuity; however, while in the Sufi case the stress lies heavily on connections between individual masters, in Zen the historical sense is tied more closely to the evolution of schools of practice and thought. While Sufism, on the other hand, may have been marginally influenced in its development by the Hindu matrix Ramana Maharshi existed in; Zen springs directly from that matrix as an offshoot of the Chinese Buddhism that originated in India as a reaction to Brahmanic religion.

Zen, known as Chan Buddhism in its Chinese place of origin, began to take shape during the Tang period in China. At its core, according to its own historical image, it remained a very direct communication of the raw experience of enlightenment between individuals, assuming some of the specific forms through which it is known now when masters of the Sung period developed the system of *koans* and began to dress practice with theory.[94] A series of Japanese students took it from China and established it in Japan during the thirteenth century. It rooted easily and eventually reached into the farthest recesses of Japanese culture. Two sects have been dominant: Soto, which stresses practice of *shikantaza* (just sitting) and Rinzai, which prefers the use of *koan*. Despite Dogen's distaste for sectarianism, the Soto sect claims him as their founder while the Rinzai sect looks back to Hakuin (1685-1768) of the Tokugawa period.[95]

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94 H. Dumoulin, A History of Zen Buddhism (Boston: Beacon, 1963) pp. 125-127.

95 Ibid. pp 75 & 86 and in P. Kapleau, The Three Pillars of Zen (Boston, Beacon, 1965) p xvi.

The sects, however, do not reflect fundamental differences but only differ in emphasis and style. Yasutani Roshi's teacher, Harada Roshi, went through training supervised by masters of both Soto and Rinzai Zen, consequently in his own teaching he blended the two. Yasutani Roshi continued that blend and with it his master's practice of offering a series of introductory talks for beginners--something Harada Roshi had begun on the basis of his feeling that modern pupils could benefit from lectures in a way more traditional pupils would not have.[96]

Yasutani Roshi was born in 1885 in a small village where his father, a pious Buddhist, owned a pastry shop. Between the ages of five and twelve he lived in a temple, at thirteen he became a novice in a large Soto temple. Then he had two years of public school education, five years of study at a Soto seminary, and a final four years of teacher training. At the age of 30 he married and began to raise a family of five children, working for ten years as a teacher and school principle.

He began practice of *zazen* when he was fifteen and continued it while living as a householder. Then at the age of 40, when he met Harada Roshi, he began to feel that real progress was possible and became a full-time temple priest. When he was 58 he was named *dharma* successor to Harada Roshi and his life during this final phase was a continuing cycle of holding *sesshin* (meditation retreats) on a monthly basis at his temple in Tokyo, writing (he produced five volumes of commentary on *koan*), and on periodic trips to lecture and lead *sesshin* on the islands of Kyushu and Hokkaido and in the United States.

D.T. Suzuki, the single most influential interpreter of Zen for the West, has described the features of Zen monastic life.[97] The Zen monastery, the *semmon dojo*, focuses on the meditation hall, the *zendo*. Initiates, if persistent enough to gain acceptance after long waiting and several refusals, enter into a life of meditation, begging for their food, chores in the monastery, recitation of Buddhist *sutras* (texts), prayer, and occasional encounters with the *Roshi* (teacher) called *sanzen*. Routine monastic life put a heavy stress on work with the idea that "a day of no work is a day of no eating", but that routine would be occasionally interrupted by week-long *sesshin* during which the activities centred almost exclusively on *zazen*. The highly disciplined structure of

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96 Kapleau, op.cit., p. 4. The following biographical sketch is from pp. 24-26.

97 DT Suzuki, The Training of the Zen Buddhist Monk (Berkeley: Wingbow P, 1974)

monastic life and the dietary rules within it were never designed to torture the body, only to reduce its needs to a minimum so that energy could flow toward higher development.

Although many followers of Zen chose to spend some extended periods in monastic withdrawal, others, like most of Yasutani Roshi's students, remained active in secular life with the exception of periodic *sesshin*. The supervision of a master whose enlightenment has been sanctioned is considered essential to Zen practice.[98] The significance of that supervision lies partly in the master's capacity to draw on his intuitive sense of the pupil's situation so as to suggest techniques and check progress. Four basic types of Zen are held to be appropriate for people at different levels of maturity.

Bompu, or ordinary Zen, works toward developing concentration and restraint of thoughts. It is characterised by emphasis on posture (especially a straight back), chanting, and counting of breath--all of which are seen strictly as means, not as ends in themselves. Secondly, *gedo* Zen is practice through cultivation of external skills. This strategy of realisation through action has been finely described by Herrigel, who studied Zen archery with the master Kenzo Awa:

> The shot will only go smoothly when it takes the archer himself by surprise... The more obstinately you try to learn how to shoot the arrow for the sake of hitting the goal, the less you will succeed... you have a much too wilful will. You think that what you do not do yourself does not happen... when the tension is fulfilled, the shot must fall from the archer like the snow from a bamboo leaf, before he even thinks of it.[99]

Thirdly, *shojo* Zen, or the small vehicle, is the stage at which effort is directed specifically at stopping thoughts.

It is this that the well known Zen *koan* is meant to do. One of the *koan* most often suggested by Yasutani Roshi, "What am I?", is essentially no different from Ramana Maharshi's "Who am I?". As Kapleau describes the function of *koan*:

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98 Kapleau, op.cit., p 18.

99 E. Herrigel, Zen (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964) p. 48, 51, 71.

> The aim of every *koan* is to liberate the mind from the snare of language... the import of every *koan* is the same: that the world is one interdependent Whole and that each separate one of us is that Whole... The great merit of *koans*...is that they compel us... to learn these doctrines not simply with our head but with our whole being, refusing to permit us to sit back and endlessly theorise about them in the abstract.

The final stage, *daijo* Zen or the great vehicle, is itself the seeing of essential nature. It is characterised by *shikantaza*. Zen practitioners reject the notion that *shikantaza* is a technique (that is a means, as the three lower levels are), instead they assert that *shikantaza* is itself the full realisation sought (at which point of course there is no more seeking.)

> In *shikantaza* you are not self-consciously striving for *satori*. Rather you are practicing *zazen* in the unswerving faith that your *zazen* is the actualisation of your intrinsically undefiled Mind
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> ... *zazen* is in fact the actualisation of the innate Buddha-nature and not merely a technique for achieving enlightenment. If *zazen* were no more than such a technique, it would follow that after *satori zazen* would be unnecessary... precisely the reverse is true; the more deeply you experience *satori*, the more you perceive the need for practice.[100]

The point of realising *satori* and *kensho* (your true nature and unity with the universe) through Zen practice is, as has been the case in all of the teachings I am discussing, not divorce from the social world but proper functioning within it. Yasutani Roshi responded much as had Ramana Maharshi when asked whether meditation might not be negative when seen from society's perspective:

> One who thinks of himself as kindhearted and sympathetic is truly neither... It is not selfishness to forget about saving others and to concentrate only on developing your own spiritual strength although it may seem to be. The

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100 Ibid. pp. 127 & 45.

> solemn truth is that you can't begin to save anybody until you yourself have become whole through the experience of Self-realisation.[101]

In Zen the ox taming pictures illustrate the same point. The pictures describe the steps seekers proceed through in their full cycle of realisation: the search for the bull, discovering the footprints, perceiving the bull, catching the bull, taming the bull, riding the bull home, the bull transcended, both bull and self transcended, reaching the source, and finally in the world "entering the market place with helping hands". Those pictures, represented frequently in handbooks of Zen, illustrate the progression in stages of consciousness a seeker will pass through.[102] They suggest, with the "bull", sometimes "ox", symbolising "suchness", "truth"--in the sense of what senses cannot know, that there is a progression of spiritual knowledge which results in the realisation of what was always present.

In the first pictures a "seeker", one who begins to suspect that there is more to the meaning of life than the obvious, is depicted as one who sees the "footprints of the bull", thus drawing the conclusion that there is evidence of something else. Secondly there is a "glimpse of the bull", as from a distance, representing the stage of actually knowing, being able to affirm, the reality. This awakening is just a starter, but already more than ordinary consciousness. Then in succession there is "catching the bull"; "taming it" and finally, implicitly meaning that truth has become integral to life, "riding the bull home". Some images of enlightenment would imply that this is the goal, that once we have "captured" and domesticated true knowledge we will have completed the quest. In the Zen imagery this stage too is illusory. Even having accustomed ourselves to a level of truth, we must transcend preoccupation with it.

Thus the pictures continue to show the seeker, "at rest at home with the bull", then "both bull and self transcended", an empty frame, and finally "back in the market place with helping hands". This final stage, of social invisibility within everyday life, but nonetheless different for having undertaken the quest, is finally the goal. Thus what Zen teaching implies, for those who fear that meditation will undermine rational functioning, is that

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101 Ibid. p. 140.

102 One version of the pictures is reproduced in Kapleau; another is in Paul Reps, Zen Flesh, Zen Bones (Tokyo: Tuttle Co, 1973)

those fears are no more than reflections of an egotistic intellect which presumes that continuance of the world is dependent on its own supremacy.

The ox-herding pictures speak indirectly to the issue of sudden and gradual approaches to enlightenment. In the final position we are in one sense back where we began, appearing from any external observing position indistinguishable from anyone else. This suggests at one level the realisation was already present within the everyday world which forms both start and finish of the path. There is nevertheless a sense of a journey leading to the point of realisation. What is conscious in the end, even at that point only apparent from a "within" which is not necessarily articulated, was not consciously present in the start. There is something everpresent and spontaneous, but also there is something of a search completed.

PART THREE

INTERPRETIVE EXCURSIONS

chapter 8
knowledge, eroticism and the body

Daunting as this topic seems at first glance, it is worth pursuing as a central issue not only in our personal lives but also for our understanding of the nature and origins of the systems of knowledge which underlie our age. The relationship between religion, eroticism and the body, is not simple. We may begin by thinking that the conjunction relates especially to the ways in which society, or institutions within it which we label "churches" and think of as religion, regulates our behaviour, especially of course in dealing with the sexual energies within and working through our bodies. That sense of the issue, on reflection, is superficial.

The underlying issues brought to our attention by considering the relationship between religion, eroticism and the body are far more pervasive and profound. We need to spend some time redefining each of our three central terms in order to highlight how our sexuality, our perception of the world, our understanding of what is real inside and outside ourselves are interwoven with the ways in which we experience our bodies. In beginning this reconsideration let me refer to Julius Evola. In his book, *The Metaphysics of Sex*, he concludes that:

> Sex is the greatest magical force in nature. An impulse acts in it which suggests the mystery of the One, even when almost everything in the relationship between man and woman deteriorates into animal embraces..... if any reflection of a transcendence actually experienced unintentionally takes form in ordinary existence, it does so through sex.... Not those who busy themselves with speculations with social or "spiritual" intellectual activities, but only those who raise themselves as high as heroic or aesthetic experience go further into the beyond. But for ordinary mankind it is sex alone which even if only in the rapture, illusion or obscure trauma of an instant, leads to some opening through and beyond the conditionalities of merely individual existence. This is the true foundation of the importance

> that love and sex have and will always have in human life, an importance unmatched by any other impulse.[103]

Evola, like many others, has a rather scathing view of the limitations of sexuality as experienced within our own era. We are reminded that the age that we live in imposes particular limits not only on the way we think about the world, but also in the way we organise, the way we receive, the way we experience knowledge of the world. He draws our attention to the fact that within early traditions and in other cultures sexuality is situated very differently than it is in our context.

It is important for us to rethink what is meant by the terms "religion", "eroticism" and the "body". When we think of "religion" our natural impulse is to identify it with the formalised "religious" structures, the organisations, the institutions, or the doctrines and ideologies that dominate our own culture--we think of the Christian Church. When we consider other religions, we also assume that religion is through all ages and in all societies as separate seeming an aspect of our existence and social life as it is now within our own society, where it is clearly demarcated apart from politics and individual every-day human experience. This is not what the term religion means.

In the fundamental sense of the term, within a variety of traditions in the world, there is a notion of something, not always conceived of as a "thing", which exists beyond structure, beyond the forms which we experience as the universe and beyond the world of the "known" in ordinary terms. In the traditions of the West, the Semitic religions which include Judaism, Christianity and Islam, this "something" is termed "God". Some "believe" in it or report their experiences, they report that they have connected with it. "Religions" are mechanisms through which people establish connection with an experience of a "Reality", one which "mystics" claim to know directly. Then the connection is with something which is directly and immediately experienced as real--not in the way that we speak of "knowledge" in intellectual terms, but in the way that we might speak of

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103 Julius Evola, The Metaphysics of Sex (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1983) p. 273.

knowledge as an experience of the whole body.[104] In these terms knowledge is an experience not of one portion of our being but of the totality of ourself.

What "religions" are to those for whom they work is not simply identified by a formalised set of institutions, or a book of revelations, or a doctrine. In the broad sense of the term religion, which comes to us through the study of the diverse manifestations of religion through history and through different human societies, we find that we cannot identify religion with belief, for example, in God. We cannot identify religion with belief even in spirits and supernatural beings. There are religions, acknowledged as religions, such as Buddhism, which, in technical terms, are "atheistic", which deny the "ultimate reality" of the phenomenal world, the world that we experience, however enlightened we may seem to be.

Religion cannot be identified simply with the forms and structures which exist in the social and cultural world. What characterises religion is that in a religious system, if it works, those who participate experience themselves as being connected to something transcendentally real and ultimately meaningful. They experience themselves as being connected to something which, even though it may be mediated by the symbols, the systems of thought, the signs, the institutions, which form the social and cultural levels of religion, is not defined by them. Clearly systems, signs and institutions are variable, what makes religious experience real for those who experience it is the fact that their symbols mediate for them an experience of what is real, of something that is beyond.

This aspect of religiosity is something which the Polish philosopher Kolakowski has drawn attention to in his book called *Religion*. He distinguishes, among other things, between scientific intellectual forms of knowledge and religious forms of knowledge. He notes that the modernists argued that science,

> ... does not deliver to us truth as we usually understand it, it is a convenient schematization of empirical data into theoretical constructs whose value is manipulative and predictive rather than cognitive, if the latter terms

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104 This relates precisely to what the term "gnosticism", a reference to mystical sects of the late Roman period in the Mediterranean, means--that is it is a reference to the forms of knowledge, especially but not even necessarily only in the religious sphere, which are based on the whole body and not just part, especially the intellectual part, of it.

> suggests a description of the world as it 'really' is. On the other hand, religious truth can never properly be crammed into intellectual forms: its basic insights are variously embodied in symbols subject to change: none of them representing an ultimate version and none being free from contingent, historical means of expression; the Scriptures are historical documents, and so are Church dogmas which are bound to evolve along with the development of civilisation. And the only reliable access to religious truth is by the way of a private experience which cannot be satisfactorily rendered in intersubjective discourse.[105]

Kolakowski is not defining religion but he does distinguish the religious field from the scientific field. He points out later that science and religion differ in almost everything: in their objects, in the ways they gain their respective knowledge, in the very meaning of the truths they claim.

I am suggesting that we cannot begin discussing the relationship between religion, eroticism and the body if we rest with an everyday assumption of what constitutes religion. In fact, it may be that within our own society if we want to speak of the most influential religious system which forms and helps contribute to our experience of sexuality in our bodies that the "religion" that is most appropriate to identify is the religion of scientism and materialism. Those pervade our thinking, leading us to feel that formalised traditional religious systems, which we no longer identify with in the way that people one hundred years may have, have manipulated and abused, warped and twisted our bodies.

Now we react against that and formulate new codes which are propagated sometimes in the form of suggestion that we are repressed if we are unable to express our sexual love with complete freedom, that we are repressed if we are unable to freely enjoy the pleasures of sexual experience with any one any time that the impulse moves us. That formulation of sexuality can become as much a "shaping ideological construct", which we mould our experiences to and subordinate ourselves to, as the older Puritan or Victorian era religious morality, which we believe channelled sexuality into the very tight constraints of a one-to-one conjugal relationship.

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105 Leszek Kolakowski, Religion, (Glasgow, Collins, 1982) p. 133.

What I am drawing attention to is that what really constitutes religion in fact is whatever we think is ultimately really real as we experience it, and if we think that what is really real is simply the emotions and impulses which move through our body in a particular moment and that following that reality is to express ourselves freely, then that too can become a repressive ideology. Ideas of sexual liberation can become repressive ideologies in the same way as the ideology of a Victorian era, impinging on other aspects of our being in the process.

If for example we "believe" that jealousy is a trivial emotion, one which we ought not to feel, that we and our partners ought to be able to share sexual pleasures with others as well, we may easily end up suppressing and denying emotions we have. Suppression in this case will not be fundamentally different from the repression of sexuality in the name of Victorian religion. In the end the issue is not just one of ideology, not one of which ideology we have, but of how ideas, whatever our ideas may be, relate to other aspects of our being--our emotions, our will, for that matter our physical body.

In considering what we mean by "eroticism" I can be more brief. Eroticism is generally understood as relating to the experience of sexual love. In the past this meant sexual relations between men and women. "Sexuality" is no longer contained simply in the notion of male/female relations, or even necessarily in a more subtle polarity of masculine and feminine aspects within both male and female. Eroticism does not refer simply to sexuality.

In the enlarged sense of eroticism it refers to the whole sphere of experience through the pleasures received in the body. I am enlarging it that way to suggest how the consideration of eroticism and sexuality within religion leads to fairly abstract, seemingly purely theological or philosophical issues, which we may not immediately identify when we think narrowly of the politics of human sexual love and sexual relations. It is only with an enlarged sense of eroticism, as the experience of pleasure through the physical body, that we are led to the wider issues which frame consideration of eroticism within the major religious traditions of the world.

If we understand eroticism as the experience of the world through our desires and through the flesh, which contains and is usually seen as forming a vehicle for those desires, it is only then that we see that the issue, as it is debated between different schools of religious thought and within major

religions in the world, of how our spiritual life relates to the physical body is actually an extended discussion of how "spirit" relates to "matter"; how other non-physical aspects of our being, whether we conceive of them as purely psychological or instinctual or whether we think in what we would think of as more religious terms of a spiritual component or soul, of how those relate to the physical dimension of our being.

The issue of eroticism is an issue of how the physical level of our being, the expression of our life through our physical actions and through the pleasures associated with those physical actions, relates to what in the religious context is seen as the "life of the soul", or to leave it more open-ended, the subtle non-purely physical aspects of what constitutes ourself. "Ourself" is also a problem, and that takes us to consideration of the body.

Because we think only very narrowly of our body, as a certain constellation or collection of physical entities, as the purely physical part of ourself, we are effectively buying a fairly distinctive, modern, reduced theory of what the body is. Whether in the classical texts of alchemists in the esoteric sphere within the European Middle Ages or in the philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism in Asia, the body is understood not purely as a physical entity, but rather as an inter-section between physical and non-physical aspects of being.[106] It contains within it all of the polarities which may be suggested to us between spiritual and material. Those are not seen as simply dichotomised.

When we speak of the body in the language of esoteric schools of religious thought, we are not speaking of what we might think of as a purely physical level of our existence. The dichotomy, which in our culture has grown so large, between physical/material and spiritual/idealistic is not so prominent in other strands of religious thinkings. If we extend ourselves into esoteric schools of thought we find that the body is an instrument of knowledge.

The body is an instrument through which consciousness, the soul, the spirit or our existence is not only manifested or reflected, but through which it grows and evolves and is transformed through interaction between what we might think of as the inner world of our experience and the outer world

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106 Evidence of such conceptions in the European context is widespread, relevant to alchemy, and recently touched on in Alex Wayman, "The Human Body as Microcosm..." in History of Religions V 22 N 2 (1982).

(insofar as we can distinguish those!) of the "phenomenon" around us. The body is not simply the physical, but we might say that it is the locus, the frame, in some imageries the carriage or the cart which holds, contains, a whole range of elements, not all of which are physical. The "knowing of ourself", and what we consider to be the body, takes us (and I find this somewhat to my surprise as I explore this subject) into the sociology of knowledge.

The modern sciences, and modern social theory, have evolved against the background of reaction against the magical esoteric schools of thought which characterised mediaeval European scholasticism. I am sure you all know that our intellectual roots are generally traced to major breaking points we associate with the Enlightenment and with the Protestant Reformation. The origins of the modern sciences, in the form we know them today, lie in a hiving off into different disciplines which began roughly five hundred years ago. The relationship between knowledge of the body and the development of science is explored by Jacob Needleman in his book, *A Sense of the Cosmos*, which is an exploration of the relationship between religion and science in a contemporary context. Needleman says that:

> ...the great discovery of modern science was that through the senses thought was humanised. Through participation of the body, through the checks and corrections of the bodily senses, ideas could be brought closer to the centre of the human organism. There could exist assent without blind faith. But I also say that in general this principle was never sufficiently valued, not even by the founders of modern science. To put it succinctly, knowledge of the universe must involve the human body as an agent of knowing in harmony with the intellect. But this is exactly the principle that separates ideas from mere concepts and explanations. The teachings of a path, spiritualised path, are so presented that they cannot be understood by a fragment of human nature, by the mind alone, or by the emotions alone. Mind, feeling and body must enter into a more harmonious relationship for these ideas to be digested. At the same time these ideas are meant to serve as guides for this process of harmonisation. What does this mean in the present context? It means that we must entertain the possibility of the sensory experience of

> universal ideas. The possibility that there exists finer levels of sensation within the human organism.[107]

He is arguing that what has happened in the evolution of modern science is effectively a process of alienation. I am using somewhat simpler terms. A process of alienation has led us to the present and we identify ourself increasingly with a small segment or portion, a small range of what constitutes the full potential of our approach to knowledge in the world.

We have tended to identify knowledge increasingly with what can be contained, what is accessible, what can be indexed and organised by a process of rational thought and that alone, and that is located in only one segment of our body. That knowledge, and the power that comes from it, are separate from the body. So we think, and I think this is a fair statement, certainly in my own everyday experience I am often finding myself functioning this way, that "I" myself am located somehow separately from the body. That is a direct reflection of an "alienated" form of consciousness. It is a reflection of identifying myself with a portion of myself.

In the psycho-analytic literature this relates to the sublimation process which led to the development of culture and civilisation as we know it. Freud suggested that the subversion, the sublimation, the channeling of our sexual energy is what has given rise to the creativity which we associate with high cultures and civilisation. Post-Freudian works elaborated on this by suggesting that a particular modern form of sexuality, which emphasises the genitals and the orgasm, has tended to concentrate our awareness of sexuality on genital sexuality. From this point of view the experience of orgasm is only a particular and reduced form of sexuality and sexual awareness, representing one of the by-products of sublimation, of repressing our sexual energy. Because it is repressed we associate sexuality just with the genitals.

This is seen within the post-Freudian literature as a form of repression, a form of alienation which is related to the fact that our attention, our awareness, has become so divorced from the totality of our body that we do not, in the terminology of a Norman O. Brown, experience "polymorphous perversity"--the multi-faceted, many formed joy, in the totality of our bodies

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107 Jacob Needleman, A Sense of the Cosmos (New York, Dutton, 1975)

and in the full range of pleasures associated with the body as an organism, through which we experience and receive awareness of the world.[108] Instead we are focused on an orgasmic climax which we associate purely with an experience of the genitals.

Within modern theories growing out of the enlightenment and within the modern sciences there is also a critique of the notion of the body that has evolved. This critique has to be situated in the context of a particular Victorian morality. Freud, important as he may have been to the growth of modern psychology, has been rejected by established professional schools of psychology. He was in many respects reacting against only one very particular ideology about sex and the relationship between sex and religion and formed his ideas at the end of the Victorian era. The images of sexuality which he worked with were created by a particular industrialised society. It was not necessarily Christianity, in the whole sweep of its tradition and ideas about the body, but by a particular Puritanical and moralistic form of sexual thinking which can be especially related to the very specific nature of the post-industrial English society. In one sense Victorian England is just one small segment of our historical map. But it is extremely significant that Victorian English morality and ideas of sexuality existed at the time that they did, in the place that they did.

An instrument called imperialism and colonialism led to a very wide dispersion, in world terms, of the ideas of sexuality which dominated Victorian English society. It has even been observed by Bharati, a student of Tantrism in the Indian context, that in the 19th century "Hindu Renaissance" the ideas of sexuality within modern India were very strongly conditioned by Britain.[109] The new ideas being formed in this seemingly remote Asian context were far from being untouched by the Victorian ideas. But at least in situating Freud's theory within Victorian Society, the background which we often think of as the immediate "target" and "enemy" in our own struggle to liberate ourselves, we note that those are historically specific, that they are

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108 Norman O Brown, Life Against Death (Middletown, Wesleyan UP, 1959)

109 Agehananada Bharati, The Light at the Center (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1976). Bharati makes these comments in the context of a scathing attack on the new wave of Hindu swamis, who, he believes, have fatally diluted and misrepresented Hinduism by their concern with purifying it, partly coming from their interest in communicating it in Western contexts, but also through the fact that many of their forbears in the late nineteenth century were already directly influenced by European sexual ideas which conditioned their perception of their own religion.

part of a particular moment in history. Not all societies, not all cultures and times have conceived of the relationship between religion and the body in the same way that our own immediate cultural background has.

This takes us to some consideration of the sweep of ideas, the sweep of forms, which have characterised human sexual experience. If we are thinking of the modern Christian context, we need to be aware that there is a profound dualism embedded within the sphere of Western, Semitic, religions. One of the underlying frames which operates within the Western tradition, going back very early, is that there is a division between spirit and matter, God and manifested being, that there is a division between the body and the soul. In the Western tradition, the lineage of ideas about sex which have led to a progressively narrower range of what we would identify as sexual experience, we are influenced by dualistic conception of body and mind. Within this dualism there is a tendency, related to the philosophy of Plato, to see "material" as something subordinate to the "spiritual"; the physical as something which needs to be moved aside so that the spiritual can develop.

In the Christian context this can be related to the complex of ideas which suggests that we need to subordinate the physical desires and drives to a spiritual purpose, that we need to sublimate and channel sexual energies, controlling them so that something "higher", which is seen as separate and "spiritual", can emerge. That opposition suggests that we need to repress, that we need to control and that we need to "put in place" the physical urges, the experience of pleasure through the body, in order to develop this higher spiritual (now in its reduced modern form "intellectual") aspect of ourself. Many traditions do not maintain this polarity in the same way.

The most complex treatment of the relationship between the physical and the non-physical aspects of our body is probably to be found in Tibetan Tantrism, a major strand of Hindu-Buddhist thinking. In Tantrism it is clear that the dualism which leads to us think of ourself as composed of separate spiritual and material elements is false.[110] In the philosophy of the Madhyamika, which is a major school of philosophy within Tibetan Buddhism, there is a thoroughly dialectical philosophy. Each aspect of being is seen as existent only in its relationship to other aspects of being. This is a

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110 For an extremely readable and direct introduction to Tibetan tantra which includes reference to its philosophical basis see Herbert Guenther, The Tantric View of Life (Berkeley, Shambala, 1972). This is also discussed at length in Evola, op. cit.

bit like saying that we cannot think of a "soul" and a "body", spiritual and material, as separate any more than we can think, in the imagery of modern physics, of mass and energy as separate. They exist only as transformations and in relationship to each other.

Buddhist philosophy goes even further than this. It is not only saying that the "self" and the physical and the material only exist as a constellation. It also is saying that fundamentally this self is not existing at all and that what exists, if you like, is like a shadow play on the surface of something incomprehensible. What we are, physically, mentally, spiritually or emotionally, is a constellation of elements at play with each other and those elements do not even have an 'ultimate existence'. We are not only 'not in a physical universe', where we might speculate about the existence of meta-physical or non-physical aspects of ourself. Neither the physical nor the non-physical exists in a pure sense; neither do they simply not exist.

The process of negation within the dialectics of Nagarjuna goes perhaps as far as we can go. It not only does not exist and exists, but it does not not exist. The main point I am drawing attention to there is that, in the underlying philosophy within this particular form of Tantrism, the whole sense of what it means to exist in the body is radically different from the underlying philosophy which is dominant in the ideology of our contemporary Western context. This very abstract philosophy is intricately bound up with questions which in the end relate also to sexuality.

Within Tantric forms of Hinduism and Buddhism there is a different view of the way sexuality relates to religious experience. We know this sometimes in fairly gross and reduced forms. What I am drawing attention to here is related to longstanding Western discussion of what Norman O. Brown also mentions in his *Life Against Death*, that there is not only the Apollonian but also the Dionysian. The former relates to energies, to the subordination of sexual impulses and the physical desires to the production, the growth of culture. But there is also the Dionysian strand, there is a strand of religious thinking which seeks the height of religious experience through the fulfilment (it would initially seem) of desires. On the Apollonian side of what Brown sets up as this difference of attitude with respect to sexuality, we have the sorts of suggestions that Freud makes about the place of Christianity within Western civilization.

We have also the more ascetic, i.e. "world renouncing", strands of yoga. They suggest that anything which has to do with satisfaction of the desires in the body will increase the bonds which tie the subtle forms of our existence to the material plane of existence, thus holding us on the "wheel of rebirth", the endless process of existing purely at the physical level. Thus in Indian thought as well we can find a strong strand of thinking which suggests that the desires (the sexual desire being the most powerful) are problematic. Desires lead to further involvement with the world, not only in leading to the production of children but also in the form of involvements, entanglements, of our subtle emotional life, with other physically manifested beings.

But at the same time within Hindu and Buddhist thinking there is a Tantric strand, sometimes called the left-handed path (it is the "left-wing" path we might think) the more radical, in Brown's terms the Dionysian. Tantrism takes the position that to realise the fullness of our potential we need to transmute rather than subordinate the energies and desires which spring naturally within us. The Tantric path is to cultivate a consciousness which we can be experiencing through the process of fulfilling desires, practices which involve not the images of ascetic yogis that we might associate with Hinduism, but images of orgies (although our reflexive have images nothing to do with the higher forms of initiation involving sexual encounter within Hindu or Buddhist Tantrism). In his book, *The Tantric View of Life*, Herbert Guenther says that

> Since Tantrism aims at bringing man closer to his being, it employs many methods of which the sex experience is only one. Because of this fact Tantrism is not a philosophy of sex. However, due to the fact that it recognises sex as a powerful means of bringing about a change in perspective, much misunderstanding has resulted. It is true that the sexual organs are a natural focus of both sensation and interest in erotic experience, but it is not so much the physiological aspect with which Tantrism is concerned, but the experience itself and the effect it has on the individual. Somehow in the course of history Western man has been led astray by his economic and biological model, so that he can hardly think of sex as anything else but the gratification of a physiological need. Consequently, the

> subtler distinction that Tantrism makes between the physiological side and its symbolic meaning is overlooked...[111]

He goes on in another context to say that what is involved in Tantric use of sexual experience, within the process of religious or spiritual realisation, is not only the physical act (which, yes, is involved in some Tantric practices) but the cultivation of a consciousness which transcends the desires which motivate the particular action.

It must be emphasised that Tantrism constitutes a discipline and a view of spirituality which sees the potential for using the full facilities of the human body as an instrument of knowledge. In approaching the whole body as a system of knowledge, Tantrism in its higher forms constitutes a very elaborate, highly disciplined set of techniques. It is not simply, as we may wish it to be. Many do attempt to use it to legitimise licentiousness and indulge what we think of as a freedom which is our birthright. Yet it is a more difficult form of sexual practice than most of us can conceive of. The danger, which Evola, Guenther and everybody else who writes about it stresses, arise from the fact that, of course, sexuality is such an incredibly powerful aspect of our being.

It has the power that Evola spoke of that, even for us ordinary mortals, it provides us glimpses of something beyond the ordinary range of experience, the range which our conditioned and socialised consciousness may channel us into. Because it has that power it is not only something that can lead to a different form of knowledge, a different form of perception of existence in general, but also involves great danger because it is easily subject to abuse. Abuses may affect not only other people in the social and moral senses that what we think of as religions suggest, but dangers for our own sanity.

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111 Guenther, op. cit.

chapter 9
techniques of meditation

The consciousness claimed by mystical traditions throughout the world lies by all accounts beyond time and space in a realm logical thought can hardly suggest, much less grasp and communicate. Nevertheless, those who experience transcendent awareness manifest and transmit it through human social, cultural, and historical forms. This implies that judgements about the essence, validity, and universality of mystical experience lie beyond the capacity of any mental system. At the same time it clarifies that social scientists do have a role to play in dealing with the dimension within which mysticism appears as a cultural mechanism, and insofar as they remain aware that the concrete events and forms they deal with are no more than the traces of a spiritual event. To presume judgements would be to discount the firmest insistence of all mystics that the realm of their experience is beyond mind.

In this context my aim is to examine how mystical techniques function vis-a-vis their cultural settings. It would be useless to argue about the differences or similarities in the consciousness achieved through these varied techniques. It would be only slightly more rewarding to compare the contents of the teachings and the nature of the techniques employed by the traditions. Comparison begins to really pay off when it is directed toward the structure and functioning of mystical techniques on culturally conditioned consciousness. Then it becomes possible to suggest that mystical training performs essentially the same function regardless of variation in styles, teachings, techniques, institutional settings, and cultural contexts.

A process of "deconditioning" and "reconditioning" is intrinsic to mystical training as the experience is transmitted from guide to initiate. Within all major traditions techniques act upon consciousness so that culturally validated and assumed reality is no longer taken for granted as "complete and total". Then training continues by re-establishing a new equilibrium, albeit sanctioning different vision, so that initiates retain or regain capacity to perform in the situations culture labels "normal". While mystical "consciousness of union" may not be "of this world" neither is it simply Dionysian or destructive. In dialectical terms it does "negate" the

world, presenting phenomenal reality as *maya*. But, again in dialectical terms, there is a negation of the negation, an affirmation.

This argument, that from the viewpoint of culture mysticism can be understood as deconditioning and reconditioning, only makes sense against the background of the notion of "conditioning" and its patterning effect on human condition. It should be clear that I am arguing in saying this that mystical practices function in a different way from most cultural systems. In general we emphasise that culture conditions awareness. This sense of what mystical practices do is emphasised by some students of esoteric religion and there is no doubt that in important respects a conditioning aspect of mystical movements does have relevance.[112] However my argument here is that what defines mystical practices is that there is a self-cancelling process through which the practice negates itself as a structure, even if not in the first instance, at least insofar as it begins to approximate its ideal.

One of the most pervasive and powerful of culture's conditioning mechanisms is language; it is at the same time one of the most difficult to appreciate subjectively. Benjamin Whorf has suggested that a change in language can transform our appreciation of the cosmos and he elaborated that:

> ...every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomenon, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness.[113]

More succinctly and generally stated in Victor Turner's application of the same concept:

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112 This aspect of mystical movements is emphasised by the sociologist, Edward Tiryakian, "Toward the Sociology of Esoteric Culture", American Journal of Sociology V 78 N 3, p. 500. He stresses the degree to which initiates into esoteric societies are "socialized" away from dominant cultures and into a subculture.

113 Benjamin Whorf, Language, Thought and Reality (Cambridge; Mass, 1969) p 252.

> As members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture.[114]

The realisation that culture conditions human consciousness and creates the diversity of world views we know today (and as a corollary that the truth as we perceive it through the lenses of our culture is relative to the culture) forms a useful basis for understanding what mystical disciplines seek to accomplish. Cognitive psychology complements the anthropological image neatly and a number of studies by psychologists have applied that understanding to mysticism. In arguing that the mystical experience is at base a "de-automatisation", Arthur Deikman explains that:

> ...development from infancy to adulthood is accompanied by an organisation of the perceptual and cognitive world that has as its price the selection of some stimuli and stimulus qualities to the exclusion of others. If the automatisation underlying that organisation is reversed, or temporarily suspended, aspects of reality that were formerly unavailable might then enter awareness.[115]

Jerome Bruner has established that what we experience is the category in our own perception rather than the event outside that might have stimulated it. Aldous Huxley has argued convincingly in *The Doors of Perception* that the senses work as data-reducing systems.[116] Robert Ornstein, in *The Psychology of Consciousness*, builds on related conclusions to integrate them with understanding how meditative traditions work to release consciousness from cultural blinders and move beyond the confines of linear thought toward direct experience of the world.[117]

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114 Victor Turner, The Forest of Symbols (Ithaca, NY, Cornell UP, 1967) p. 95. In his introduction to Castenada's The Teachings of Don Juan (New York, 1968) p. viii, Goldschmidt affirms that "The central importance of entering into worlds other than our own--and hence of anthropology itself--lies in the fact that the experience leads us to understand that our own world is also a cultural construct."

115 Arthur Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience" in Charles Tart, ed. Altered States of Consciousness (New York, John Wiley & Sons 1969) p. 39.

116 Aldous Huxley, The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971 (1954)).

117 Robert Ornstein, The Psychology of Consciousness (London, Jonathan Cape, 1975).

It is against this background of anthropological and psychological concepts that I am considering the functioning of mystical techniques. I need to stress again that I am only concerned here with the current within mystical traditions which concerns itself with consciousness of union. Although popular revivalistic movements, faith movements, and occult traditions preoccupied by power all share in the mystical to some extent, I am not dealing with them. In my understanding, the defining characteristic of mystical approaches to the divine, especially in contrast to religious stress on faith, is that mystical knowledge is directly and experientially verified by those who partake of it. In focusing on this aspect of mysticism, I am well aware that I am dealing in heuristic terms: mysticism in this sense is part of all religious traditions and experience of divinity through the vehicle of faith is equally a part of many mystical traditions. I am not trying to draw a hard and fast line as though between two objectively distinct entities.

Shamanism, Sufism, Yoga and Zen are alike in stressing that spiritual seekers require direct guidance by a fully realised master. Don Juan, Ahmad al-'Alawi, Ramana Maharshi, and Yasutani Roshi, the cases we are drawing on here, have all been fully qualified masters within their respective traditions and, although Ramana Maharshi had no human master during his life, all four stressed the importance of such guidance for their followers. The most immediate reason for this lies in the fact that the consciousness all of them worked to communicate cannot be learned literally or on the basis of logical comprehension alone. This is a hallmark of mysticism: that it must be experienced and that the experience comes only with the seeker's willingness to receive it - liberation cannot be handed over. Ramana Maharshi, whose sheer force of presence resolved the questions of many, put the matter very well:

> ...the Grace of the Guru is like an ocean. If he comes with a cup he will get only a cupful. It is no use complaining of the niggardliness of the ocean; the bigger the vessel the more he will be able to carry. It is entirely up to him.[118]

What a master apparently can, and in all of these cases did, do is to point out the next step for those who wanted to take it. These masters could not force

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118 Arthur Osborne, The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi (New York, Rider & Co. 1971) p. 105.

their students to progress any more than the pupils could demand to succeed simply on the basis of their desire to.

A second factor underlying the importance of supervision lies in the dangers of distraction into preoccupation with occult powers, delusions of greatness, and psychic imbalance that can so easily waylay seekers who lack clear intuition of their goal. It took years of Don Juan's careful supervision before Castaneda gradually realised that the value of his experiences lay less in their excitement than in their function as introductions to a more complete consciousness of everyday life. Both Don Juan and Ahmad al-'Alawi learned through their own lives that occult powers are not the aim of spiritual effort. Ramana Maharshi consistently enjoined his followers not to mind "whether there are visions or sounds or anything else or whether there is void, are you present during all this or not?"[119] In Zen these experiences are called *makyo* and students are warned never to be tempted into thinking that these phenomenon are real or that the visions themselves have any meaning, visions of Buddhas don't mean you are one.[120]

However many weird experiences mystics pass through, it is obvious in all cases that the aim is not unusual experiences so much as realisation of union. This is not an easy point to make. So much of what is called mystical involves magic and the occult that it is natural for those factors to dominate the perceptions of non-mystics. Occult phenomenon are much more readily misunderstood in logical terms than the ordinary is perceptible. The occult, though discounted by reason, is at least graspable; while the mystery within everyday life, though ever present, lies beyond reason's grasp.

In instructing their respective pupils, all four teachers have had preferred techniques and there are interesting correspondences in the nature of the directions they gave. More importantly here, each teacher felt that there is no single technique appropriate for all. This relativity of application is implicit recognition that techniques are no more than means (in this context *shikantaza* is not a technique since it is the "being" aimed at).

To be briefly suggestive rather than exhaustive: periods of intensive retreat were used by Ahmad al-'Alawi (*khalwah*) and Yasutani Roshi (*sesshin)*; breathing exercises were used by Ahmad al-'Alawi and Yasutani Roshi; chanting has been used by Sufis (*dhikr)*, in Zen (the *sutras*), and by some of

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119 Ibid. p. 132.

120 Phillip Kapleau, The Three Pillars of Zen (Boston, Beacon, 1965) p. 40.

Ramana Maharshi's followers (*mantra)*; the question "who am I?" has been used in Zen (as a *koan*), by Ramana Maharshi (as a meditation), and by Don Juan (as a provocation); and, the presence of death was used by Don Juan (as an advisor), by Yasutani Roshi (as an impetus to really do *shikantaza)*, and by Ahmad al-'Alawi (as a way of "calling the self to account").

So while the styles of these four masters differ and their preferred techniques are not identical, each had a repertoire of methods to suggest, and within that range there is quite a bit of overlap. The self-consciousness common to these four masters, about the fact that their techniques remained no more than methods, is, to my thinking, distinctive of mysticism in contrast to religion. While they have all held that the consciousness their techniques are aimed to open up is universal, none of them suggest that their way to get there is. Let me add however that while saying that "their methods were not for everyone", they did tend to put across the distinct impression that their favourite method was the most direct and complete.

Another line of comparison between the four lies in terminology. Within Don Juan's cosmology one of the basic conceptualisations is that of the *tonal* and *nagual*; similarly in Sufism there is a pairing of *lahir* and *batin*. Don Juan refers to the *tonal* as the social being, as everything that can be dealt with on normal rational terms--including abstractions. The *nagual*, on the other hand, can be witnessed, but it cannot be talked about it is "the part of us for which there is no description". In Sufism the terms *lahir* and *batin* refer somewhat more directly to the "outer being" and the "inner being". At least insofar as I have become familiar with the use of the Sufi terms, I think Don Juan's sense of the *nagual* lies deeper on the "inside" than the Sufi *batin*, which overlaps with Don Juan's *tonal*.

It is interesting to speculate on whether contrasts of this sort relate to the political, rather than necessarily doctrinal, contexts of the religions in question. It may be that "dualism" becomes a problem not only if the philosophical framework is not monistic, but perhaps only because systems are imposed on top of each other. Thus Zaehner argues that

> ...Indian mysticism is unique in that it develops freely and unhampered by an dogmatic restraints. Sufism, on the other hand, is not only hampered by a

> fundamentally uncongenial dogmatism, it is very largely an imported growth.[121]

It is certainly clear than Sufism existed for much of its heyday in uncongenial environments. It is difficult to assess the extent to which Don Juan's "dualism", if this aspect of his terminology implies that philosophically, may derive from a long oppositional positioning relative to the Catholic Church in Mexico. We do not have enough evidence to go on in this case, but there is every reason to expect that as a "subterranean" sphere of spiritual practice there would have been extra reason to see division between inner and outer.

Minor modifications aside, the concepts are comparable and, strikingly, absent from the teachings of Ramana Maharshi or Yasutani Roshi. By absent, I don't mean that it would be impossible to find the words to express them, but simply that no similar concepts occupy comparable key positions in the cosmologies. The only suggestion, and I stress that I mean it as no more than that, I have, as to why the pair are absent from Yogic and Zen terminology, is that the *tonal/nagual* and *lahir/batin* concepts are geared to address dualistic philosophical environments and that there is either no need or no desire to stress them in the monistic Yogic and Zen situations. In another respect, that is in terms of the inner psychic centre most stressed for meditation, Ramana Maharshi and Ahmad al-'Alawi both emphasise the heart while Don Juan and Yasutani Roshi emphasise the navel.

All four teachers draw from traditions which have developed an understanding of inner psychic centres (perceptual organs) which are latent in most people and activated through mystical practice. Ramana Maharshi and Yasutani Roshi both draw on the Yogic understanding of *chakras* (centres) related to the *kundalini;* Ahmad al-'Alawi from the Sufi system of *lataif* which is related to the concept of *baraka*; and Don Juan refers to eight loci of perception. There are important differences between these conceptualisations, such that they cannot be seen as direct translations of each other, but many elements and associations are the same. In general the heart centre favoured by Ahmad al-'Alawi and Ramana Maharshi is associated with love of the compassionate and universal variety; the navel

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121 RC Zaehner, Hindu and Muslim Mysticism (NY: Schocken, 1969) p. 20.

centre favoured by Don Juan and Yasutani Roshi with the will that is tied to the life force.

It is relatively easy to see Ahmad al-'Alawi and Ramana Maharshi as a pair, in fact Martin Lings does, but the radical contrast in styles of Don Juan and Yasutani Roshi makes their pairing seem awkward. The pairing on this basis, however, is not tied to superficial features or styles as much as it is to the tone of the teaching. In tone it is possible to sense a similar severity within the teachings of Don Juan and Yasutani Roshi. In Don Juan this comes through with his emphasis on "impeccability" and "the style of a warrior"; in Yasutani Roshi it comes through the overall flavour of discipline in Zen life. In this sense, Don Juan and Yasutani Roshi have a "hardness" that is in contrast to the "softness" of Ramana Maharshi and Ahmad al-'Alawi. In fact the flavour of life in the *ashram* and *zawiyah* of the "soft" pair had a distinctly relaxed and loose structuring; life in a *zendo* or in Don Juan's desert *is* harsh in comparison.

As we cross the border from concreteness into feeling and intuition, it becomes clearer that there are limits to comparison. Any similarities or differences we can see, or even those we intuit, lie in the realm of specific forms. Yet whatever unity there is at the highest level between these four masters must lie in the dimension beyond any forms or even specific feeling. As long as the unity seems to be in the world of forms we can talk about here, then that cannot be the essential unity from which all four of them based their lives. Rather than dwelling on these specific comparisons, I want to attempt an analysis of these mystical paths in terms of their functioning vis-a-vis the cultures they have existed within historically.

In setting out on this line of thought, I am pointing toward the possibility of a "cultural ecology of mysticism". As a social scientist it has seemed to me that mysticism offers a unique opportunity for general reflections about culture and historical process because the consciousness claimed by mystics is universal--that is beyond the bounds of any specific culture and consistent across diachronic and synchronic scales. On this point I am agreeing with Eliade's comment that any cultural moment whatever can provide the fullest revelation of the sacred to which the human condition is capable of acceding.[122] I began with the hope that in mystical consciousness

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122 Mircea Eliade, Shamanism (New York, Pantheon Books, 1964) p. xviii.

we could find a point which, in its constancy, allows us a base for comprehension of culture in the terms of social science. The point is there for mystics, but it remains problematic how much can be made of it from the social science perspective.

Although my initial line of reasoning has proved something of a *cul-de-sac*, it remains worth recapitulating as much for what it shows in the negative as for what it might have in the positive. My reasoning began to take shape in the course of fieldwork in Java where I focused on contemporary *kebatinan* (mystical) movements, specifically the history of Sumarah from its origins in the 1930s to the present. Within Sumarah's history it became clear that there have been distinct phases of evolution during which the consciousness professed, techniques used, conceptual terms applied, and organisation formed have all been transformed in direct relation to each other and to changes in the overall socio-cultural and political environment.

As a result I began my comparative thinking with the hypothesis that different cultural environments would have a very direct and specific relationship to the nature of mystical techniques employed within them and to the institutional forms through which those methods are communicated. My hypothesis seemed all the more reasonable when combined with the understanding that while culture conditions consciousness, mysticism first "deconditions" then "reconditions". If mystical practice works to in some sense "invert" the process of cultural conditioning it is natural to suppose that specific forms of conditioning will give rise to equally specific processes of deconditioning.

The intervening factor which upset my initial line of thought has been the fact, amply demonstrated in the cases I have outlined, that each teacher employs a range of often very different techniques depending on the personality and spiritual maturity of the pupil he is guiding. If observation is extended into discussion of mysticism in general the point becomes even stronger: the teachers I have focused on represent only one aspect of mysticism as a whole and within the mystical traditions of each of their cultures there is very broad range of practices.

It may remain possible, in fact it is still meaningful, to suggest ways in which styles such as Zen are particularly characteristic of their cultures, but that kind of observation is restricted to a realm of particulars which does not get to the fundamentals of what mysticism is or does within culture. While

this means that mystical techniques can be related to their cultures in subjective and stylistic terms, it also implies that in structural terms both technique and culture can vary without affecting the function of mystical training vis-a-vis human consciousness.

This conclusion can be clarified with the reminder that the mystics I have been talking about start the training of their followers by suggesting techniques to remove awareness from its usual mental centring in order to begin awakening of other zones of consciousness. That mental centre is at the same time the area of our consciousness most influenced by specifics of cultural conditioning. To the mystic, then, it matters little whether the mind has been conditioned into the shape of a bird or an airplane--the first step of any mystical training is to move beyond that cultured portion of consciousness, a portion we often know by the name of "ego" and think of as ourself.

Although existing within a cultural dimension and acting historically as social movements, mystical religion can be distinguished in its functioning from what we normally think of as "culture". Cultures condition human consciousness, producing the array of specific forms and pathways we think of as "reality". On the other hand, meditation practices aim to function so as to first decondition initiates from assumption that socialised consciousness is final. Finally, paralleling the most archaic patterns of ritual passage, mystical disciplines train followers to reach a reconditioned consciousness through which they can realise themselves in rather than apart from the world of men. It is in this functioning of the mystical disciplines, rather than in the forest of specific theories, practices, and styles, that we can glimpse why there are mystical traditions and what they do.

chapter 10
karma, culture and consciousness

Here I aim to test an image rather than to defend it as a theory. It is one way of seeing things, a personal synthesis of ideas worked out as I completed fieldwork on mysticism in Java. Though the ideas were formed in that context, they resonate more widely. Essentially the idea is that the personal "ego" in the microcosm is equivalent to "culture" in the social dimension of the macrocosm. Both ego and culture are the forms that our *karmic* bonds take when human desires restrict our consciousness to exterior levels of literal and material form. In reality both ego and culture are simply vehicles. Once consciousness has expanded beyond them, then they become the tools through which we express our liberation.

As long as they are independent locations for power, we are bound and restricted. When they become merely channels through which power flows, then we are free and can work toward union and peace, then both ego and culture become vehicles of communion. This correspondence can help us resolve the apparent contradiction between modernisation and the revival of interest in the most deeply personal and traditional mystical practices. Cosmopolitan and universal tendencies increasingly converge with discovery of individual and cultural roots.

I am only concerned in this discussion with mysticism in the pure sense, as an effort to cleanse the self, to achieve union with God, to expand consciousness beyond thoughts into the cosmos, to open the self up in harmony with the flowing of natural life energies. Other aspects of mysticism are no more central to a serious evaluation of it here than fanatics are to probing reflection about religion, each is a deviation from the sources of inspiration underlying the phenomenon. Deviations are natural, but if we are to be constructive they need not consume our attention. As we have seen, the contrast between mysticism and religion is a matter of emphasis not of principle--in the first emphasis is on internal realisation of initially abstract principles; in the second following teachings about the way life ought to be.

By smelling food we are certain it is real, but only after eating it do we know what it is, becoming one with it quite literally. Interior realisation, consciousness directly through personal experience, is the basic characteristic

of the mystical style of spirituality. The concept of union with God has never meant, as religious people sometimes assume, that the individual is thought of as "becoming God". Certainly it does not mean that in the way it is imagined by non-mystics, even though mystical statements do sometimes lend themselves to this interpretation. Becoming one in this sense means that there is no barrier, division, or separation between the two. In mystical terms "oneness" means that the self has become a channel which no longer resists the flow of natural life energies which are from God. "God" is the totality; man can realise the totality in the microcosm, but remains only one aspect of it.

Transformation of the individual only takes place as the individual realises that personal will is not supreme, having power only as an agent. This is a realisation that has to take place beyond the thoughts before introspection and surrender lead us to sacrifice our normally prized sense of autonomy and personal power. As long as we feel that we are in control of the situation and that the problems we deal with in the world, at whatever scale, are external, no spiritual revolution will occur. That revolution is seen as beginning when we recognise the problems inside us, in the way we are dealing with whatever the "problem" appears to be.

Within all the traditions we have explored the transformation of the self progresses through layers or dimensions in the microcosm which are as real as time and space in the macrocosm--these levels include the material, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Essentially all people are seen as consisting of assorted tools, in the Buddhist terminology 'vehicles'. These include the physical body, the five senses, different aspects of our memory, thought, minds, emotions, feeling, and desires. Normally in every society individual awareness is actively located only in the thoughts, in the mind. The thoughts note down information taken in through the body and five senses; acts then follow in terms of the desire to follow pleasant feelings, to soothe the ego. These dimensions are associated with different parts of the body, they progress from material to spiritual, from outer to inner.

These layers within the self are also the "veils" spoken of in Sufism, clouding our vision of the divine as it exists both within and beyond ourself; the extent to which they bind our awareness to material things, desires, and thoughts is the extent to which our *"karma"* binds us to the world. Liberation of the spirit is the process of becoming aware of and realising the desires and

energies restricting us to the "lower" spiritual levels or planes. Meditation, prayer, *semadi* -whatever the name or technique -all seem to me to be directed at developing openness, passivity, receptivity in the outer layers. This does not aim to lead to mindless fatalism and complacency, as those committed to action in the world so often imagine; it aims to open channels so that actions grow from the spirit, in active fashion which, in each tradition we have examined, is linked to dynamic activity within the world.

The effect of the transformation and with it another view of the contrast between religion and mysticism can be illustrated by reflecting on the reality and practice of love. Here I mean brotherly love or compassion in a Christian context, but the example applies in other religious traditions equally. As a teaching, if we are trying to *live* a loving life, the golden rule expresses how we should act: "Do unto others as you would have them do to you". At least it expresses the belief that we should act "as though others are the same as we are". But, when taken just as a teaching, even when we accept it and "believe it", we are still not necessarily "practicing". "Love" is not something we can "command" with our mind or will, not any more than we can command our feelings to be happy. Love is real only when it springs spontaneously from within.

Meditation is seen as providing entry to the reality underlying the teaching. As long as in our thoughts and feelings we are busily concerned with ourselves, we will not be very aware of what other people are saying, feeling, or needing. The more still, open, and relaxed our own thoughts and feelings are, the more clearly we will begin to know what other people need. If internally we are "clean" and pure, then when a person near us feels a need, we will feel it in ourselves just as they feel it. If so then to act in response to that need, to love or serve "another", is not an act of self denial, not a repression of personal desires on the basis of a rule or idea. Then to "act lovingly" is a fulfilment of the self-- because the boundaries of awareness of self have extended to include more than what we usually think ourselves to be as individuals. As the layers of division, which we usually call the ego, dissolve, oneness becomes experiential reality rather remaining an abstract principle we might quarrel about. As this example illustrates, mystical practices are meant to provide methods to "realise" the principles embodied in religions.

The nature of the practices by which people attempt to translate ideals into reality are at issue in the changes occurring within mystical movements. These changes are taking place in the theory and practice, in the relationship between mystical practice and the cultural setting, and within the social pattern of mystical organisations. All of the changes can be seen as a natural adjustment of mystical expression to post-modern social situations. Internally mysticism is not static, as a phenomenon it is undergoing an evolution of its own. Revisions are of method and in the nature of the connection between spiritual practices and social contexts, not in fundamental orientations, in which respect contemporary practices are remarkably consistent with those of earlier ages.

At the social level, at which teachings are passed across generations, the role of the teacher is not emphasised so much. In the past *'gurus'* have been deified, seen to embody the divinity they speak about; now emphasis is more directly on the experience of the student, the interior realisation, consciousness which in the end cannot be acquired without personal experience. In older patterns of mysticism the teachings were veiled in secrecy, open to the individual only after undergoing a gruelling series of initiations and tests. Secrecy was tied to a separation between the teachings and the ordinary social world. Students had to go through long periods of withdrawal, fasting, and physical denial. Physically initiates withdrew from the ordinary contexts of daily life to isolated temples, caves, springs, mountains and seashores. Only after these trials would the student be 'blessed' with the fortune of hearing his *guru* deliver a few prized and still usually obscurely esoteric teachings.

Now teachings are more readily available to anyone interested, secrecy and separation giving way to openness. Techniques are increasingly simplified, more directly to the point, and progress is often more rapid. Traditional patterns required mastery of elaborate techniques, now more often practices are freer of ritual and ceremony, easy to grasp even for the beginner. Simplification makes distraction into extraneous aspects of the practice less likely, focus is more firmly on the primary aim. Terminology and imagery is also more direct, less technical. Traditional teachings were buried in the culture, esoteric to all but the initiate who shared it. More generally, teachings which used to seem extremely complex are presented simply in the language of everyday speech.

Mystical experience is increasingly thought of not so much as a special peak experience in a moment of withdrawn meditation, but as a state of being during the activities of daily life. The trend toward openness and simplicity brings practices closer to the aim they have always claimed. Improvement of our spiritual state, is not necessarily connected with extraordinary experiences, but to becoming more capable of functioning usefully within society generally. Social manifestations are universalising - teachings which are simply phrased are also much easier to grasp and practice across cultural boundaries.

The illustrations I want to use to suggest the pattern of change relate to ancient issues within mystical circles, not just in Java, but all over the world: issues of magical powers and of our relationship to ancestral spirits. In each sphere it seems that the emphasis and interpretation is shifting even though the perspective being taken now is not entirely a new one. From the internal point of view there is no debate as to whether magic powers and spirits exist, but there is a shift in judgement about what is of prime importance. Magic and spirits are becoming more clearly peripheral to mystical endeavour at precisely the same moment in which they are becoming more comprehensible to ordinary understanding, this parallel is not coincidental.

"Magic" is not only an issue of the extraordinary, of phenomenon that excite the public imagination. It involves the sharpening and development of tools of awareness that all people have at their disposal even if few choose to use them. In a variety of ways and to varying degrees all magical practices involve sensitivity to and, as "power" disciplined manipulation of, vibrations which are empirically real, not imagined. They are "real" in any case in precisely the same limited sense that everything, including not only our emotions, but also our experience of "a chair" are. Just as mental activity is disciplined by "culture", producing images systematically so that we can think clearly, so our inner feeling has to become disciplined and tuned to vibrations before we can experience the reality of magical phenomenon. Most leave that innate capacity latent, but the capacity is present nevertheless, usually functioning peripherally or as part of our subconscious.

Awareness of the interplay of vibrations in this sense comes through disciplining of the inner feeling, for which the Indic concept *"rasa"* is far more adequate than the English. Once the "tool" is capable, then the process of tuning in to inner aspects of another person's experience is mechanical. It

relates to the comments about "love" earlier--our increased sensitivity and receptivity is a proof that what is going on in one of us is not "separated" and unrelated from what is going on in all of us. Manipulation of magical power is a misuse of this realisation.

Most people distinguish between black and white magic on the superficial basis of intentions and effects. If a person means well, aims to help another, or if he is defending themself, the action is taken to be "white"; if the converse, then "black". Even at first glance it should be clear that this is an "exterior" and material rather than spiritual distinction. It is based on the assumed absoluteness of our own values. From a more strictly spiritual standpoint, the distinction is not in terms of intentions we might consciously have or seemingly "good" consequences our action might lead to. As the Sumarah pamong Sudarno used to say, the pertinent distinction at root is in terms of *where the motivating energy is located* - if the directing force is *in* ego and desires it is "black"; it *from* nature or God it is "white".

This is illustrated if we reflect on the two primary ways of responding to a black magic attack. The first strategy is to gather magical powers to erect a barrier that repels the attacking force; aiming usually not only to prevent penetration, but also to reflect the attack back to the sender. Ordinary understanding would label this "white". An alternative strategy comes from the realisation that if there is no internal fear or desire, consciously or unconsciously tuning in to receive the attack, if the victim is perfectly "clean" and pure, the attack will pass right through without effect. The spiritual principle is just as in physical law - for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. If the victim provides no resistance it will be as though no force is exerted against them. To put it in more ordinary religious terms: faith in God is enough because no force can touch it.

The magical dimension is not something that exists only for those who practice in or believe in it. Like everything else it is an aspect of daily life whether we want it or not. When a magician "places a spell" it usually uses some form of "contact point"--a name, hair or fingernail - and then one of a variety of techniques to focus power and direct it at the person in mind. This is no different in structure, or often in practice, from the obsession of an ordinary person. If a man spends great time and energy thinking about a woman he wants to go to bed with he is focusing energy and, consciously or unconsciously, sending a vibration influencing the woman. The difference,

and there is one, is only a matter of the degree of power being used. Most people are much happier to settle with the conviction that the only things that matter are our external actions, that our thoughts and feelings have no impact beyond the self. This suits our natural self interest--it is extremely challenging to take responsibility for our daydreams, much less for our subconscious. But denial is an evasion of reality.

The difference of degree between ceremonial magic, where the manipulation of powers is a refined art, and the unconscious black magic of daily life is a matter of both effectiveness and raw power. A person whose mind is filled with many thoughts will not be able to put much power into any one of them. One who has "mastered stillness of the mind" and then has "one thought" can be focussing a great deal more energy through it. In the second case the power and impact are intense. Thus one principle of spiritual evolution is that "the more pure" we are in consciousness, the more power we have at our disposal. At the same time the "higher" we are "the harder we fall"--because a much more trivial action has a far greater impact. The interplay of vibrations and power between people is how we make *karma*. If one person spiritually influences another to follow their desire, then he is strengthening the bond of desire holding both to the material dimension.

From this perspective the inescapable conclusion is that magic, including black magic, is not just something that goes on secretly in the dark of night as the doings of "evil and frightening" people--it is more importantly something that we all do unconsciously every minute to whatever degree we are not surrendering our will to that of the Almighty. So if our concern with black magic has been with eliminating the practice on the assumption other people are guilty, we would do well to reconsider, turning within and beginning to eliminate our will to manipulate others. Legislation, whether by an inquisition, by governments, or by public complicity in ways of viewing the world is obviously incapable of enforcing results in such an arena--it is like attempting to outlaw selfishness by declaring it unlawful or non-existent.

The issue of relationships to ancestral spirits is even more fundamental; it is still a fundamental issue within Javanese mysticism. As we have seen, a pattern of beliefs in ancestral spirits and animism underlies the Islamic and Indic layers of belief in Java. Conviction in the continuing presence and influence of guardian spirits *(danhyang)* pervades all levels of Javanese society and is structurally elaborated in a hierarchy paralleling the

social order. These spirit beliefs centre around the courts, temple remains, graveyards, and natural features of the land such as oceans, mountains, and springs. Though the ethnic Javanese are almost all Muslims, as in predominantly Christian societies such as Australia, most Javanese wear their Islam lightly, still acting out of belief systems influenced by the underlayer of animism and tinged by the Indian thought which moulded their classical kingdoms.

In almost all strata of society, even among those who are devoted in their practice of Islam, people not only believe in but interact with spirits. Prominent among them are the ancestral spirits, *arwah nenek moyang*, who populate the spirit kingdoms. The most important spirit kingdom is that of the goddess of the South Sea, Kanjeng Ratu Kidul, but her court is thought to be related to similar kingdoms located on the sacred mountains of the island and connected to networks of sacred sites associated with important graveyards, caves or springs. According to the Javanese there are not only ancestral spirits, spirits of people who once lived, but also a wide variety of deities and nature spirits. The goddess of rice, Dewi Sri, is a major focus for agricultural ceremonies and there are spirits related to the Indian god Shiva associated with all of the volcanoes of the island. Apart from the fact that natural forces are clearly linked to gods, there are an assortment of wild forest spirits and animal spirits, some of them central within ritual performance of trance dancing.

Interaction with spirits is commonplace rather than extraordinary. At the lowest level, that is of most superficial contact, it takes place through rituals which invoke the presence of spirits through prayer, involving offerings to ensure harmonious relations between the spirit and social worlds. The spirit plane is seen as pervading visible social realities, permeating and interacting with the world we see rather than being something separate and apart. At the same time it is distinct and when relations are proper the interaction is supposed to be mediated by ritual and by the social authorities, whether village head or royal, who maintain diplomatic relations between dimensions. At times, as in ritualised trance, controlled contact brings spirits into the bodies of living people. At other times, perhaps when startled or by lapsing into a daydream, individuals may accidentally be influenced by a spirit. Health problems, whether physical or psychic, are generally related to imbalances which may result in affliction by

spirits--especially if a person is not in harmony with the "four brothers" *(sedelur papat; lima pancer)*, the spirit shadows born at the same time as the body.

It is tempting, indeed very easy, to understand these beliefs as a "projection of social realities". When people talk of their encounters with the spirit kingdoms they describe meeting spirits who are dressed in the same clothes seen on stage in performances of the *wayang* dramas. Descriptions of the organisation of the spirit kingdoms could equally be explanation of how the Indian styled kingdoms of Java were structured. In fact all of the figures who feature in the popular mythology which frames village drama are thought of as still existing in the spirit realm. From this point of view we would have to say that belief in spirits is like a memory, that Durkheim was right to see such beliefs as paralleling social realities. Yet it is one thing to say that beliefs may be closely linked to what social realities are or might have been. Does that imply that in the experiences people report they are interacting only with a mental projection? Insofar as spirits form a focus for Javanese experience in the present we must still ask, what are they?

In one sense even Javanese theories suggest that spirits may be "thought". When asked what they think spirits are the knowledgeable people in Java, *dukun* (spirit healers) or mystics, consistently explain that they are just like living people except that they have no physical body. Apart from that they have thoughts, feelings and will, just as people do. Existence in the spirit realm is seen as a transitory state between incarnations. Thus the spirits may be considered to be disembodied, sometimes amorphous and cloudy, "fields of personhood". Javanese experts have extremely refined and sophisticated theories, even explicitly elaborated apart from their complex cosmology. But if their theory tells us that thoughts and feelings may continue to exist apart from the bodies which in our culture must house them we are still likely to feel that we are confronting a foreign language.

Recourse to other concepts in Javanese culture may take us farther than answers to direct questions, farther that is toward understanding of what is meant when Javanese speak of meeting spirits. The concept of *rasa* is central within Javanese etiquette and spiritual practice as well as thought. The term is from India, but the Javanese use it distinctively. *Rasa* refers at once to physical sensations of taste and touch, to emotional feeling, to intuitive perceptions and finally also to the organ or "tool" which registers all

of those. In Javanese psychology it has the same status as "mind". So for example it is suggested that the mind is the organ within which thoughts occur and which received awareness of external, physical, realities. The *rasa* is the organ through which we register and are aware of internal and spiritual realities.

The clear implication is that the locus of focus of attention must be in *rasa* in order to register spiritual experience. This applies not only in the generalised sense that all spiritual experience relates to it, but also to the specific experience of spirits as entities. Using this as a key we may say that what Javanese people "mean" when they speak of spirit encounters or interactions is in relation to an experience in the intuitive feeling. They are not, then, speaking as though "seeing", on the plane of our physical sight, a spirit. The translation from what they mean into what might make sense for us must then take account of the fact that we are not simply working from Javanese into English as systems of words and thought, but also from or across planes of mental and emotional experience.

With a few important exceptions, these spirits are in the realm they inhabit now because they died "imperfectly". That is to say that at the moment of their death they were still clinging to, attached to what is going on in this world. As a result in death they could not dissolve completely into union *(moksa)* or return to oneness with God. Instead they are karmically "punished". Actually that word is too strong in implication--according to this logic all of us are in this category, subject to *karma* too, though in having physical bodies we have the potential to alter our level. In the case of spirits, people without physical bodies, they are left suspended in the purgatory of the spirit world. In that world they have to wait, for varying periods of time, before they can be reincarnated in human form to continue their efforts to progress toward union with God.

According to these beliefs the dilemma the spirits face is that they are just like us with the important exception that they lack a physical body. In terms of thoughts, desires, and feelings, they are equipped just as we are, but they do not have the body with which to gratify the desires they have carried with them into the "other world". This is why they have an interest in us--through contact with us, they can vicariously experience and accomplish things in the physical world. Their interest in us is not at all necessarily "evil" when judged in human terms, it is in fact no different in quality than the

continuing concern of a father or mother that their child do well in life, live comfortably, find a good job, etc.

In fact Javanese who are knowledgeable about spirit dealings emphasise that the care we should take in that realm is essentially no different than the caution we should exercise crossing busy roads or bargaining in the marketplace. There is also a traditional rationale for why we ought to be dealing with ancestral spirits. The conviction is that we are obligated to do our best to lighten the *karmic* load of our parents, and by extension ancestors. So according to traditional religious theories there are noble reasons for going to the graves of departed ancestors--to pray to God to forgive them of their sins.

Once the theory is understood, from this inner or esoteric point of view, some new perspectives come into play when we examine actual practices. The interplay involves a sending and receiving of "vibrations", just as it does in magic. According to this theory if, when a person contacts a spirit, we are in a state motivated by "compassion" and "service", then the vibration from us *will* be "lightening" the *karmic* load of the ancestral spirit; it will increase the strength of love as a force. If, on the other hand, we contact the spirit to get help in order to pass school exams or to find out the lottery number ahead of time, as is very frequently the case in Java today, then we are *strengthening* the desire binding the spirit to the physical dimension and thus also, according to esoteric logic, inhibiting its progress toward God or dissolution, however that is conceived.

Perception of this dynamic, results in the school of thought which holds that it is enough to be concerned with "cleansing the self", that this does not prevent us from doing our duty to our ancestors. We are always, intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously, karmically linked to our ancestors. This is so because they "exist" not only "outside of us" (as those who believe in spirits in a religious way would feel) or simply "inside of us" (as skeptics might argue, seeing them as projection), but *both* within and beyond the self. We do not need to *search* for contact with them outside the self. In the process of introspection, awareness and karmic cleansing within the self, we will automatically be "lightening the karmic load of our ancestors".

We carry a *karmic* inheritance from our ancestors within us in the form of our own ego, the microcosmic aspect of the culture our physical ancestors

have given us through transmissions beyond the genetic. In this sense the plunge within the self to discover a personal essence, a life force within the self that is from God, is not only parallel to but the same as, though at a different level, the cultural process through which people are exploring their own roots, re-exploring the most ancient cultural forms. "Culture", like the ancestors, is "real" both inside and outside "the self", it moulds the pattern through which our spirit struggles, it charts the *karmic* course of our lives. We are the *karmic* links our ancestors have to this world whether we choose to make a religion of the fact or not. We literally carry out the life force and shapes our ancestors began.

The conclusion I reach from these considerations is the same as in the case of magic: our connection with ancestors is with us all the time just as magic is. Correlatively, as is argued by these theories, neither magic nor our ancestors require special attention or rituals, as long as we are cleansing the self of the *karma* we carry within ourselves in any event. The more the forces passing through us are of God, nature, love, the more we will automatically be sending "good vibrations" to our ancestors and the less, at the same time, our actions could be considered "unconscious black magic". This reconfirms that our attention and effort needs only to be directed at personal cleansing, at researching out and releasing the resistance to cosmic law and natural energy flow within the self. Images of the mystical have been dominated by magical powers, strange spirit encounters, and inexplicable experiences--yet all of these are aspects of the world around us all the time.

I have touched a number of times on the relationship between *karma* and liberation. It is commonplace that *karma* is what ties us to this world, but too often *karma* is simply seen as a name for the sufferings and problems we feel our lives are too heavily laden with. *Karma* is within the self, it is the aspect of our psychological makeup which deceives us into believing that we are separate from the rest of the cosmos, an isolated unit of power. We can find close analogues to it even in Christian theology, where "sin" is defined technically as "separation from God", which is not so different from *karma* as I am understanding it here.

Normally our spiritual state is that energy is stored up separately in each of our tools, our thoughts, desires, feelings. We do not simply "see" and respond to things as they are "in reality" (*kasunyataan* in Javanese), but the separate power in each of "our tools" leads us to try to create situations in

accordance with the will of our ego. These forces of divisiveness and separation within the self are precisely what we need to become aware of and release if we are to liberate ourselves from *karmic* bonds. They are also concretely the physical and subtle tensions we carry within our body. The expansion of consciousness mystically within the self is the process of releasing *karma*, of letting go of the walls within the self which divide "inner from outer". When this has happened, the tools which have been "the cage of our spirit", which have clouded over our living experience of the divine, then are transformed into channels for an energy that is no longer "divided", but from and of one source--there is unity.

In terms of these mystical theories, the more we become purely a channel for divine energies the more we will automatically be growing to act from love toward our fellows. In "becoming one" within the self, we are one with everything outside the self--we realise the macrocosm within the microcosm. Thus the process of realisation in these "esoteric terms" is clearly no longer a question of "denying the self" in order to love and serve, as from some religious trainings we might imagine. Nor is is "selfishness" or inward obsession, as that is normally perceived. Our very selfhood, what we "know ourself to be" expands beyond the individual ego--compassion is just the overflow, the by product, a reflex when no division is maintained. "Experience of union", rather than being a slogan, is a concrete process of expanding the sphere of what is conscious within the self, and through that identification with all of being.

Within the process of expanding spiritual consciousness, at least in the terms implied by traditions committed to it, there is no inhibition in the end for the functioning of the rational mind in dealing with practical worldly issues. Expansion of awareness beyond the mind does not mean denial of it, but its *subsumption* into a wider field. Then both the senses and the mind function as receptive and responsive tools, rather than as determinants of behaviour. The less our mind wanders in memories of the past and dreams or plans of the future, the more sharply it will be tuned to the unfiltered reality of the present. As long as awareness is exclusively within the mind, we only receive words and thoughts, literal aspects of what is communicated through speech. With opening to dimensions beyond mind, then awareness registers meanings and intentions, inner purposes. If we relate to those rather than just to surface, then actions may lead toward unity.

As individual consciousness expands, releasing the *karma* which has bound it to material planes, the cosmic and natural forces working through individual and culture are transformed. The essential element of the transformation is that precisely those forms which had functioned as "cages", as barriers imposing limits on realisation of universality, become the vehicles through which unity can best express itself. An inversion takes place. This is precisely the realisation of the *tantras*, of "the way of power as transmutation", the obstacle in the end *is* the path.

If training has been exclusively of the mind, for instance, it may seem as though individuals, or at the macrocosmic level society, are hopelessly enmeshed. The stronger the mental equipment is, the harder it will be to break through to the realms of consciousness beyond. The stronger the mentality, the more it will impose its own order on experience rather than receiving the reality that is there. However conversely once the same mind is framed in a gestalt which makes it a channel for wider energies, then the stronger it is the more powerful it can be as an instrument of union.

Thus the introspective plunge of the mystic and the cultural exploration of ancient forms, however problematic in practice, is not in principle the regression that it first seem to be, especially as it appears from the standpoint of those committed to notions of progress and scientific understanding. To whatever extent mysticism as practiced leaves the individual passive and fatalistic, narrowly concerned with private feelings of calmness, it is a reflection of natural and universal human inability to embody ideals. In principle the thrust is toward passivity only of ego, which if realised will release a dynamism of life energies connecting effort to social service in the truest sense, service which at once enriches those motivated toward it.

Mystical spirituality is the inner aspect of human evolution, it is the space within which we can work toward a balance between the material and spiritual. The individual spiritual struggle leads us inexorably to tackle an ever expanding sphere of world *karma*. The cleansing of *karma* within the self and the liberation of the individual soul, is inextricably tied to the *karmic* processes of our ancestors, cultures and the world. There is only one cosmos and it is bound by a unity we only begin to perceive when we have released ourselves from attachment to the diversity of forms we imagine ourselves to be and thus commit ourselves to. The world movement toward an

international culture, toward a cultural consciousness not bounded by small communal groupings, is not just an external process of changes in the imagery by which we imagine what we are, it will also involve a change in the way we relate to the whole plane within which culture exists.

chapter 11
transmissions of void

> Throughout the history of civilization the great traditions have offered human beings a door on the other side of which there stretches the long and difficult path to self knowledge But it is said of the guides who stand behind that door that their sole task is to conduct men forward; no promise is given that those who are distracted will ever find their way back again. Legend also has it that what is nectar on the far side is poison on this side. Therefore, in the past the door has been well guarded by the institutions and forms of tradition. What does it mean, then, that these guardians seem to have vanished in the present age?[123]

In setting out to propose an answer to the question Needleman has left us with, at the end of his provocative exploration of "the encounter of modern science and ancient truth" it is my suggestion that we have a clue to the nature of contemporary spirituality within the very definition of mystical spirituality. Hence I will begin by recalling the implications of what defines mysticism, though I do not intend to belabour that. Secondly, if we turn our attention to the configuration of relationships which applied, within the classical traditions Needleman refers to, we will note the "harmonics" which links the experience (or inner psychic world) of individual seekers to the dense symbolism of the quest and then both with the social and political order they have been intertwined with.

Within this classical configuration, and cutting across the lines of major civilizations has been the fundamental recognition of man as microcosm, as Needleman and also recently Alex Wayman, have noted. That system of understanding provides us not only with a code which is essential to our interpretation of how gnosis is transmitted within each of the classical Ways, but also with a bridge which allows us to grasp something of the significance of contemporary and millenarian spirituality.

The fact that religions constitute closed realms of discourse within which meaning, symbolism and ritual "work" and beyond which the

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123 Jacob Needleman A Sense of the Cosmos (NY: 1976, p. 170).

coherence of the system is often opaque is at once one of the reasons for our interest in them and one of our principal problems in coming to grips with them. The issue is exacerbated if our attention turns from religion in general, where the boundary I am referring to is only one step away from the divisions which separate cultures, to the magical and mystical forms of spirituality which, as it is commonly recognised, emphasise the practical and experiential dimension of religiosity.

`Within esoteric styles of religion there is emphasis on direct psychic perception, consciousness of, or merging within a field of phenomena, or states of being, clearly beyond the reach of ordinary sense perception--and hence problematic for intellectuals, especially insofar as they root themselves in objective empirical method. The issue is most sharply posed if we focus on the specialists within esoteric traditions who either claim to be or are seen as masters of forces, consciousness or gnosis beyond what is accessible to the intellect as such.

When agnostic or sceptical students are dealing with most religious systems they may take some comfort in the fact that belief or faith is so often essential to the coherence and functioning of the system in question. As those usually imply *a priori* endorsement of the system the system itself presents little difficulty for social theory--it can be comprehended as logically inconsistent, but nevertheless as a functioning psychological and social closed system. Esoteric traditions often stress that, though the knowledge in question is beyond senses and intellect, progress requires only openness and willingness to apply the techniques used--verification and validation are understood as "after the fact", resting on demonstration and direct personal perception, not on faith or authority. In their own terms esoteric traditions are empirically based.

Despite the fact that esoteric spiritual traditions claim an open posture and empirical method the term esoteric itself draws immediate attention to the fact that there are insiders and outsiders. The demarcation point is neither a porous filter nor a gentle cline, but rather a sharp ontological chasm. The gulf fuels discussion and fills volumes of print from all perspectives, and has for ages, yet no attempt to deny, bridge, or map the chasm, has been convincing--the disjunction between realms of discourse remains. The fact that it persists stands as a caution to us: the issue is ontological and not one we may hope to close through symbolic artifice or philosophical reasoning. I

am drawing attention to this fundamental problem not because I want to attempt another leap across the void, but because I want to make clear what the boundaries of my exploration here are.

Attempts to interpret esoteric traditions often fall into the void, bridges lead nowhere when their foundations are on only one side, yet serious consideration of esoteric spheres must dance along the boundaries of void. If we pretend there is no problem, that our discourse is safe and straightforward, there are several possibilities: we may stick so closely to familiar ground that we explore and hence reveal nothing, we may slip unknowingly into void, or our words may be haunted by a shadow which turns theory into nonsense.

The litany I begin with then is the esoteric axiom which warns that the essentials, the essence of spiritual experience lies beyond the ken of intellect as such. So what? Hasn't this point been made *ad nausea*? Our task is to cultivate and expand intellectual and systematic understanding, not to pursue esoteric gnosis. While accepting the constraints of our discourse, it remains nonetheless crucial to acknowledge that, in attempting to expand our understanding of the transmission of esoteric gnosis, we are engaged in brinkmanship of the mind.

Having struck this strident note, one which nonetheless must be recalled, let me emphasise the defining quality of mysticism which is most relevant at once to contemporary popular and scholarly interest in it. Apart from the usual attention we must give to emphasis on direct individual experience of absolute oneness within mystical traditions, the quality of "ineffability" which William James put so much emphasis on has unexpected implications. As I understand it the fact that the essence of mysticism as such, for that matter of mystical experience if it is necessary to distinguish between them, *cannot be identified with any form.* This is simply a restatement of James' observation, but we do need to pursue its implications before I can go on.

The key which deserves more emphasis in our definition of mysticism lies in that mystical spirituality is characteristically the type which interprets all "form", structure (or Staal's "superstructures") or system as essentially only a vehicle.[124] This sort of definition is obviously and immediately more applicable to the Indic religious world, which even in its religious rather than

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124 F Staal, Exploring Mysticism (Berkeley: U California P, 1975).

mystical manifestations holds this notion as doctrine, that it is with primal (shamanic, animistic) or Semitic religions. This is fundamental to mystical consciousness of any sort, and further that the fact that Indic religious thought holds this mystical perception, in the form of a doctrine, is simply the explanation for why mysticism coexists more readily with them (or for that matter within them). This is at the same time, parenthetically, both an alternative to and convergent with emphasis on monism and dualism as an explanation for the contrasting status of mysticism within Indic and Semitic religions.

To return to my central line of argument, my next step is to consider the patterns of the path, to borrow again the wording of the perennial philosophers, within the traditional setting. The transmission of esoteric spiritual gnosis through lineages of masters and disciples occupies a critical position within a wide range of spiritual traditions. At the same time there are profound contrasts between them in the way the gnosis itself, the teachers and the process are oriented, conceived and experienced. Although setting out here to explore the variations, aspects and implication of spiritual transmission, and even while stressing the limits of possible discourse, it is worth recalling the essential simplicity at the root of the subject.

Perhaps the best known and certainly the most evocative tale of transmission is that of the Buddha's flower sermon. Within the utter silence of that event Kashyapa's reception of the transmission is supposed to mark the first link in the lineage of Chan and Zen teachings. With this image of a meeting of Mind in silence we are once again reminded that, at least in Buddhist terms, the core of the process is an unspeakable void. It lies not in any substance or form that we can claim or presume to grasp and comprehend, but is what must remain, from the standpoint of the consciousness we have and discourse we engage in, a mystery. Hence in whatever we may choose to say or think about the process, we do well to leave aside claims to comprehension of its heart.

Yet speak we do and words have their place. Even as we speak, however, there may be merit in simplicity and continuing awareness of the core we refer to. In Chogyam Trungpa's explanation of the transmission from Tilopa to Naropa he sticks to admirably direct wording:

> ...All these difficulties and different stages he went through were part of the Transmission. It is a question of building up and creating the atmosphere ... In this way the disciple will mentally open himself up ... The important thing is to create the right situation both on the Teacher's part and on the pupil's part. And when the right situation is created then suddenly the Teacher and the pupil are not there any more. The teacher acts as one entrance and the pupil acts as another, and when both doors are open there is complete Emptiness, a complete Oneness between the two ... That is Transmission - creating the right situation - that is as much as an external Guru can do ... somehow the actual moment is very simple, very direct. It is merely a a meeting of two minds. Two minds become one.[125]

The crucial moment which marks the core of transmission may be characterised in Buddhist terms as simply an opening through which two individuals become clear facing mirrors. Yet immediately, in the mythology about and attribution of significance to the transmission, we may get lost in an ornate tapestry of dense symbolism. Alternatively, in efforts to interpret the process we slip inadvertently from one dimension of discourse to another.

Trungpa's use of direct and simple language, in contrast with the rich symbolism of Vajrayana in its traditional context, is related to the fact that he was trying to communicate within a modern Western context. Hence the language of his message departs from that of his teachers. He notes himself, in contrasting Naropa's training with current practices, that "... in those days people were more patient and could afford to spend such a long time..." in spiritual training, Despite the differences, in this instance within Vajrayana but over time and between contexts, Trungpa himself was participating in the inner transmission and thus the function of his own words should be seen not only as an explanation of it, nor even only as a modern adaptation but also as the surface level of an inner process.

Although lineage assumes a special place in Vajrayana history, symbolism and practice and although there are no parallels to the Tulkus (which add another dimension altogether to consideration of the transmission of the teaching), lineage is crucial throughout Buddhism. At the

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125 Chogyam Trungpa, Meditation in Action (Berkeley: Shambala, 1970) pp 33-34.

exoteric social level within Theravada the lineages of ordination within the Sangha are highlighted whenever (which has been often) there is a renewed effort to ascertain the purity of monastic practice. Thus when there have been breaks in the continuity of the Sangha within Sri Lanka or Burma, and even in the case of extreme breaks such as that which divides contemporary Indonesian Buddhism from its historic roots, there have been exchanges of ordination.[126] More to the point, within Theravada the tradition of forest monks, which has consistently emphasised intensive *vipassana* practice, maintains an emphasis on an inner line of teachers extending back, in theory at least, to the Buddha.

As in Vajrayana and Theravada, so in Chan and Zen the lineage of Chinese Buddhist patriarchs and masters is clearly traced back again to the Buddha.[127] In the Zen case paradoxical tales consistently emphasise both that the authority of the teaching is based on clear and certifiable lines of transmission and that the process by which the flame is passed cannot be contained by expectation, logic or technique. In all cases the significance of lineage is not necessarily dependent, though some within the traditions would say it was, on the veracity of the historical linkages back to the Buddha. Within Zen the image of the "journey to the west" (parenthetically a nice inversion of our "journey to the east") serves as a metaphor as much as history.

Bishop has beautifully demonstrated that within Vajrayana the lineage tree weaves into the interior landscape of initiates. Rather than gaining its significance purely as an assertion of historical and physical continuity it finds its meaning in the interior tapestry of the seeker. Within the Sufi *tarekats* the *silsilah*, or spiritual genealogies, of the Shaikhs are traced clearly to the prophet (again in theory at least) and the Sayyids are generally seen as direct spiritual and genealogical descendants of the prophet. As within Buddhism, the genealogical trees are complex, fissions and splits much noted.

It is not necessary to catalogue. The essential point so far is that within the mystical or esoteric strands of both Islam and Buddhism there is no doubt that in their traditional setting the transmission of wisdom was seen, and for those inside experienced, as thoroughly interwoven with the elaborate

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126 R Lester, Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 1973) p. 73.

127 H Dumoulin, A History of Zen Buddhism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963) p 68.

superstructures of the civilizations in question. Tibet has become, as Bishop and others have pointed out, the archetypal image in the romantic Western mind for a society not only suffused by but also (in myth and imagination) structured according to mystical spiritual principles.[128] Leaving aside the obvious (though apparently still seductive) excesses of this romanticism, there remains a kernel of truth in the Shangrila romance. The point which remains is that from the point of view of a (tiny) spiritual minority (tiny even amongst those who ostensibly occupy 'spiritual' roles) the individual, cosmological, and social systems could mesh to provide the sort of path Needleman refers to.

Needleman himself appears to be openminded and curious as to the implications of the disintegration of the "Traditions", the term he, Schuoun, Burkhardt and their school use.[129] Schuoun and others allow their profound insight into and respect for the subtle edifice of tradition, as a vehicle for gnosis, to slide into enchantment-- hence they bemoan its loss. However even within the great synthesis of "tradition", and quite apart form the murky underside of the same structure (the shadow Bishop reminds us of) it is clear that mystical gnosis had never been purely the captive of the symbology, techniques, or monastic structures consciously conceived to house them. Alongside tales of saints such as Naropa and Milarepa, whose reception of the essential transmission came through the architecture of Tradition, there have always also been realised mystics whose liberation arrived outside, as it were, the formal edifice dedicated to it.

A hint in this direction is already to be found in the passage from Trungpa above. He comments that all the external *guru* can do is create the situation for and witness the event of the transmission. We are reminded in that comment that alongside the external *guru* there is the "inner *guru*", the teacher which, from the standpoint of most of the traditions themselves, is ultimately of a higher standing. For example in the favourite story of

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128 P Bishop, "The Lineage Tree: Continuity and Authenticity in a Spiritual System", draft manuscript, 1983.

129 A sampling of writings by members of this group, all using the term "tradition", often capitalised, as a reference to the medieval synthesis within which spirituality was central, and referring to themselves as relating to the "perennial philosophy", include: F. Schuon, The Transcendent Unity of Religions (Wheaton Illinois: Quest Books, 1984), Huston Smith, Forgotten Truth (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), Jacob Needleman, Consciousness and Tradition (New York: Crossroad, 1982), and a large number of other works by the same authors.

Javanese mystics, the Dewaruci *lakon* in the *wayang*, one of the central messages of the plot is that the "true teacher" (*guru sejati)* is the inner teacher who is only discovered when the false outer masters are discarded.

Ramana Maharshi, the noted South Indian saint who drew so many to him in the early half of this century, had no external *guru*. Though not schooled in the lineages of yoga, he was widely acclaimed, after his own spontaneous experience of enlightenment, as a realised being. After his *ashram* had grown around him, through a process of magnetism as spontaneous as his realisation, he certainly took on a role which, viewed from the outside, conformed to the notion of *guru.* At times he evidently allowed dependent followers to view him as their *guru*, and it is clear many did.

Even then, insofar as he provided them with a path it was more through his being than through systematic technique or teaching. If he had any technique it appears to have been in his version of the Zen *koan* "who am I" and he explained that though this begins as a mental process it "... destroys all mental operations, including itself, just as the stick with which the funeral pyre is stirred is itself reduced to ashes after the pyre and corpses ...".[130] His main impact appears to have been sheer presence, the atmosphere of radiating depth and peace which so many experienced in his proximity (*satsang*).

In referring to Ramana Maharshi my point is that he illustrates, even exemplifies, realisation outside the framework of the spiritual edifice of Tradition. At the same time he clearly belongs, as do many others, to the Path. Many permutations could be pursued. For example among the stories relating the "passing of the mantle" from one generation to another of Chan patriarchs, there are a number which emphasise unlikely and unexpected transmission--reception and with it the role of master passing to kitchen hands rather than senior monks, etc.

The implication of these examples is simply that transmission and the opening of consciousness is not confined to or the captive of the outward structures of the path within Tradition. This is an observation which we can relate very closely to my emphasis on the fact that mysticism as such cannot be identified with any particular form; though it may not lead all the way

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130 Osborne, op. cit. p. 86.

there, it also points to the possibility of the converse: that just as all forms are in essence only vehicles, any form may become one.

Within the Traditions and also in the less traditional statements of Trungpa and Ramana Maharshi, it is also evident that inner spaces are the locus for movement along the Path. This is to leave aside the fundamental philosophical contradiction in adopting a terminology of "inner and outer" (a contradiction Ramana Maharshi noted). In shifting to consideration of the significance of the image of "man as microcosm", as articulated in the symbology of Traditions and as a notion implicit in primal spontaneous mysticism, we note that notions of identity of microcosm, in man, and macrocosm, the cosmos, are fundamentally mystical. These notions find full coherence and articulation only within the context of unitive perception which paradoxically assert there is no "real" boundary division between "inner and outer". These concepts are a crucial key to both practical spiritual life and intellectual understanding of it.

I am assuming it is at least familiar in its essentials, that it is not necessary to expound the theory of correspondence at length. One feature that does require mention is that it is connected to, or rather implies, a hierarchy of states or levels of 'being'/ consciousness. This is not to say that it is just an elaborate cosmological device overlaying our contemporary reduced versions of the "great chain of being", though Lovejoy, in his work on "the great chain of being", has outlined the intellectual lineage which links them. Another aspect deserving comment is that as a system of thought it is thoroughly bound up with esoteric understanding of the *chakras*, as outlined in *tantra*, or of the Sufi *lataif* system. Centres of perception within the human psychic constellation relate directly to different levels of consciousness or planes of perception.

When interpreting the transmission of gnosis through the elaborate structure of traditions, the symbology refers at once to a multiplicity of levels within the range uniting microcosm and macrocosm. Bishop has provided an excellent illustration of the way in which the lineage tree structures the inner landscape. Similarly within Javanese mysticism the exchanges involved in transmission remain, as I have suggested, only comprehensible when related to inner centres. Within Javanese mystical thought it is held that individual progression through the full range of levels of consciousness leading to liberation is seen as being precisely parallel to other levels of progression

toward cosmic consciousness. This provides us with a link, for conceptual purposes, between individual and, if you like, global progressions.

The bridge between the two lies in that we can overlay individual progressions on global trajectories. In other words just as individuals progress through stages of consciousness, and as they do so themselves relate to structures in different ways at each level, so too, we can suggest, the world of human culture as a whole. If from the mystical point of view the endpoint of the transmission, whether or not the path has been through elaborate formal structures, lies in pure open meeting/oneness, then we can see that whether in the form of Sufi progression from *sarengat* to *makripat* or through *tantric* initiations, at each state the whole vista (and with it the relationship between consciousness, cultural forms, and the outer world) alters. Even familiar items appear in different forms or dimensions, different not just in the sense a symbol is from its interpretation, but different as abstraction about sweetness is from taste *(rasa)*.

If an essential quality of mysticism is that all structures are viewed as pathways or vehicles, then it is quite natural, as indicated by the teachings of Buddhism or Sufism, that once the river is crossed the boat may be left behind. To extend the imagery, we may suggest that what the modern era, with its electronic nerve system drawing us into a global village and fracturing the divisions which sustained autonomous cultural and religious worlds of thought, it no longer remains possible to sustain the same sense of certitude that one tradition, no matter how cohesive, sophisticated, and broad, serves as a vehicle for all.

Apart from those who retreat into vehement clinging to artifices which have already served their purpose, there is increasing compulsion for each to confront the inner reality directly. As with any breakthrough, just as in individual breakthroughs beyond ego, transition involves screaming pain and the strongest resistance either individuals or the species can muster.

Within the evolution of mystical forms in places like Java or Tibet we can see links to world patterns. Local events reveal the idiosyncrasies of unique history, but nevertheless express universal forces. Human spiritual evolution has involved continuous change in the nature of the relationships between individual consciousness and the collective forms of cultural and social life and it is in that level of change (in the nature of the dialectic

between levels) that we need to locate ourselves if we are to understand the meaning of the loss of Tradition.

Within isolated tribal communities of the 'primal' level in religious life the transcendent appears to work through natural forces and individuals experience themselves, at least those who are on the Path do, as bound within a magically charged universe of power. As states crystallized in the classical world, the artifice of Tradition emerged, syncretic mythology expressed and court ritual enhanced the conviction that culture and society could themselves become vehicles of the path. World religions emerged when empires created social bonds extending beyond what had been the closed worlds of god kings in their courts, and through that religious forms were articulated as systems independent of both nature and culture.

During the past five centuries physical contacts have increasingly worked to link societies throughout the planet, impelling us toward a situation in which no individual can feel, nor cultures imagine, that they are autonomous. Each human group has increasing access to at least an imaginative image of all past and present forms of religious life and as a direct consequence we can suggest that no single form can have the same force in its grip on individuals. This is to leave aside the eddies within the process - the groups or individuals who have reacted with intensified literal identification with forms, in defence against and in fear of the open world they are faced with.

Within this process there have been transformations in the way in which mysticism is expressed, not only changes in the overall religious scene. Within the ancestral spirit cultures present within peasant religious life the magical dimension remained accessible, albeit through severe initiatory structures. But the key point is that no 'separate' sense of mysticism as an enterprise existed. During the classical periods and within the edifice of Tradition the mystical element was more clearly articulated both as a system of understanding and as as set of practices, and it is from that era that our current sense of the 'mystical' mainly derives. In that era Tradition made gnosis accessible to a few; but now as we move into the modern era it is increasingly independent of the forms of Tradition.

But in essence the meaning of mysticism does not lie *in* the forms which may have sustained it at particular times. Even in the traditions themselves this message was passed. The key lies in a consciousness which

has been liberated from the realms of form. Even after being transmuted through the alchemy of individual practice, forms have their place only as passageways. People may still tend to assume that the forms which have served as passages for them may function that way for others, and to the extent that they cling to that feeling we will find what I term "religious" rather than truly mystical spirituality. Whenever particular edifices are presented as universal solutions, even if in other respects mystical, essentially we are dealing with "religion".

It is worth recapitulating conclusions in relation to the two major paradoxes we have touched, as they involve issues which engage us again in thinking of contemporary changes. Meditation is directed toward an unconditional and absolute consciousness, but has nevertheless been advanced through the form of "traditions". Bearing in mind that "culture" and "society" usually serve to "condition" and give specific shape to human experience, how can we see mystical practices as doing otherwise too? Secondly, insofar as mysticism concerns itself with an awareness which must be direct and unmediated, how can there be long lines of transmission which claim to communicate it?

In the first case it is sufficient to recall our observation that mystical movements, though functioning as traditions themselves, are "self-cancelling". By that I mean that the techniques communicated are designed above all to shift awareness *out of* conditioned zones. At certain levels of their functioning mystical movements do become conditioning mechanisms: the greater the distance from the core experience the more that will be the case. The closer we move toward the core, within any tradition, the more that tradition cancels itself out. Finally, as the time-warp dissolves at the centre, the tradition itself becomes irrelevant to the person who has passed through it.

In approaching the role of teachers within the transmission of mystical experience, it has been essential to emphasise that they do not convey "content". Instead they provide an environment and work toward openness so that the realisation arises directly within the seeker. There are significant difference between traditions in this respect. In the Indic context *guru* will be often presented as incarnations who substantively transmit, through *darshan*, a "spiritual substance" ; in Sufism the notion of *baraka* allows the same sense of some "thing" being passed; in the Zen contexts the imagery is more likely

to be one of "mirroring", as though two vacuums reveal each other through their absence.

In any event here again there is a time-warp--the farther we are from the core experience the more it will appear that the teacher transmits in the sense of apparently "giving" the experience. The closer we move toward the core, the clearer it becomes that the teacher can be no more than a catalyst. At the core itself, tradition, the mystical group, and anyone who might be conceived of as "teacher" are all dissolved and there is only that moment.

The paradox of infinite forms and archaic traditions reaching toward and serving as vehicles for the transmission of gnosis is dissolved only when it is understood that each 'works' only through negating itself, through transformation and as a gateway. Complex lineages of spiritual transmission may weave through ancient and modern movements and these are simply family trees of mysticism. Individuals and groups belong to these 'trees' in the same way they do to biological families. Uniqueness and idiosyncrasy are features of movements as of families and individuals. Group bonds often imply restrictions and experience of union is often restricted, in the social sphere at least, to feeling at one with others in the group--hence the universal has not really been met and manifested.

Groups relate to the universal in the same way individuals do: each reaches it only by moving past itself. Images do inscribe themselves on the interior landscape of individual imagination and traditions do shape experience, operating as conditioning mechanisms in some senses. But unless each moves past itself it does not become a vehicle in the truly mystical sense.

The implications of all this, at least the one I am attempting to highlight here in response to Needleman's question, is that the passing of the guardians is directly related to the global process through which experience of union and oneness is being pressed, on the outer planes of social life at least, to encompass the whole of the planet. Needleman does recognise this. The point is that whether for individuals on the path or for groups, it is less and less possible to subscribe fully to the edifice of one spiritual structure. The clearest implication I can see of this is that the mediating role of particular cultural and social structures has been undermined. Consciousness is compelled, insofar as it probes mystical gnosis, to face the One in raw directness, seeing it in all forms and everything, not only through the intricate design of one mazeway.

chapter 12
new age spirituality

We cannot fully explore the kaleidoscope permutations of mystical interplay with global traditions. In concluding this brief exploration of spiritual practices in the contemporary context I will focus on the question of change, on the extent to which the specific characteristics of our era influence the nature of mystical practices. Observation of contemporary change instructs us about the fundamental nature of mystical spirituality. At the moment, in a context of relatively extreme materialistic utilitarianism, mysticism is out of fashion, after having been briefly in vogue. However, as is often the case, surface appearances do not always reveal what is happening beneath.

In the eighties many of the perspectives which seemed like "events" when they surfaced in the sixties and seventies, are becoming part of the tapestry, components of general cultural value now. This is clearly so in the case of the ecology movement, which seemed nonsense to mainstream Western society in the sixties as it began to take shape, but which now moves in mainstream consciousness. In the case of mystical spirituality the dominant voices in the philosophy of our time pronounce it dead. I invite you to consider the paradoxical suggestion that its death may be its fulfilment. It may be precisely as the vehicles dissolve, including even the thoughts we generally have about the spiritual, that their purpose is fulfilled. The "self-cancelling" aspect of the mystical may be applicable as a concept not only in the micro level of individual consciousness progression, but also at the macro level of global historical consciousness.

Elements of paradox and time-warp persist through all levels of reflection about mysticism. Having suggested that mysticism touches a timeless and transcendent realisation, having pointed out that it has existed within all tradition, in what sense can we see it as changing? Changes can only take place in the forms of quest. The core experience, lying beyond time and space, stands untouched by history or cultural boundaries. Change and evolution occur in the structure of relationships between the core, the sects which claim to be vehicles of it, and the social world they both relate to. I want to suggest the distinctive context and characteristics of contemporary

mystical movements. In doing so it is helpful to evoke two images: on the one hand Teilhard de Chardin's radical vision of planetary evolution, on the other Krishnamurti's persistent emphasis on the timeless moment that is now. Each man at once reflects and has had great impact on contemporary spirituality.

Chardin, who died in the mid 1950s, was a French Jesuit paleontologist who spent most of his working life in China.[131] As his vision seemed too radical to the Vatican, it only began to reach audiences widely through posthumous publication. The impact of the evolutionary vista he presented reverberated into the more recent new age movements of the seventies. The power of his work is not simply that it combines mystical vision with scientific grounding, but also in a striking recasting of Christian millennial imagery. The inspiration underlying it is not merely mental eclecticism, but mystical vision rooted in merging of intellect and intuition.

His vision of planetary evolution is presented against the background of twentieth century astronomy and physics; against a sense of the minuscule scale of planetary evolution within the universe as a whole.[132] His presentation of the evolution of human life and consciousness is similarly set within the vastness of geological time and biological evolution. Yet within the vastness of his spatial and temporal referents, the significance of the present moment of human evolution expands rather than shrinking. From Chardin's vantage point it seems clear that evolutionary process has within it not only gradualistic change, but also critical points of rapid transformation.

He points to the beginnings of life, to the origins of man, and to the roots of civilisation as times of rapid transformation, rapid at least when set within the total framework of evolutionary process. He suggests that the rapidity of changes at those points is analogous to the boiling point of water--though influenced by constant heat, the change from liquid to gas occurs quickly at boiling point. While evolution involves accumulated gradual change, it also brings critical points of transformation. According to Chardin humanity is now poised at the brink of one such radical rebirth, a rebirth which can be best comprehended as entry into a new consciousness.

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131 For a full biography see Claude Cuenot Teilhard de Chardin (London, Burns & Oats, 1965)

132 The most famous of his works is Teilhard de Chardin, The Phenomenon of Man (New York, Harper & Row, 1961). It is not easy reading, but sense does come through it in glimpses which in themselves reveal a vast vision.

In Chardin's terms the earth is sheathed not only by the biosphere of organic life; but also by the noosphere, a planetary envelope of human consciousness which has been manifested through the evolution of our species. Just as the biosphere gave rise to the noosphere, the noosphere is now giving birth to what he speaks of as planetary Christ consciousness. This Christ consciousness, his version of the second coming, is a process of convergence leading toward the merging of materially manifested human consciousness with the spiritual reality of the Earth Logos. That Earth Logos is the cosmic Christ, the spiritual identity of the planet within the universe. Merging of human consciousness with it is the endpoint, the Omega point, of global evolution.

While presenting his vision as a planetary process of conscious evolution leading to a final point, Chardin affirms that consciousness of this Earth Logos has intersected with the human plane in the awareness of mystics. As a Christian he sees the historical Jesus as the first full merging of planes, as the point at which the planetary process of merging began to be effected. As a twentieth century man, he presents the two world wars, the interpenetration of cultures, the global technological network, and the population explosion as signs indicating that conditions are ripe for transformation. By establishing communications networks encircling the globe, humanity has laid the physical basis for a fusion of spiritual and material dimensions. For Chardin this point, the Omega point, involves the physical embodiment of unified planetary consciousness. It is a point of convergence of planes which is the culmination of evolutionary process on the earth.

If in Chardin's terms we stand on the verge of breakthrough, in Krishnamurti's there is neither past nor future. Krishnamurti pointed persistently to the liberation and openness which come with realisation that oneness is always the ground level reality. He refuted all suggestion that he spoke out of a long tradition, asserting that there is no point to thinking in terms of stages of spiritual development. His thought stands as the most powerful warning against fascination with the esoteric, with *gurus*, with any form of cultism or attachment. Yet he was also a perfect paradox. Though he denied the need for teachers and claimed not to be one, he spent decades of

lecturing and counseling. Although he deplored organised spirituality he cooperated with foundations and schools in his name.[133]

It is precisely by his denial of the mystical that he epitomised it; in denying the relevance of teachers he become an exemplary one. In Krishnamurti we see all the paradoxes which plague understanding of the mystical. We see them clearly because he was contemporary in style, using everyday words rather than couching his message in the imagery of esoteric tradition. It is this feature of his expression which suited him to a global audience, paradoxically making him something of the "world teacher" his mentors tried to mould. Krishnamurti's life instructs us because he stood as his own constant negation--pointing not to himself, his ideas, or the organisations he has worked through, but to "life" and "being" in all forms.

In that we find hints, echoed more explicitly elsewhere, that the spiritual teacher of humanity in this age is the universe itself; that the second coming of Christian millennial thought lies not in the rebirth of one separate being, but in the awakening of humanity as a whole to the spiritual reality of what Christians refer to as the Christ. It is at the point of that awareness that traditions merge, that we encounter Schuon's "transcendent unity of religions", that Christ, the Buddha nature, and the Hindu Avatar are manifest, that the duality of spiritual and material dissolves. This is to speak in the language of today's mystics, it is to present images with substance only to those sharing intuitive experience. If we turn now to placement of these images within the frame of history, we can begin to use them as data relevant to an understanding of contemporary process.

At the risk of violence to both men, we can identify them with global patterns through their style and emphasis. Chardin fits the Christian and hence Semitic molds both by profession and because his vision displays a concern with historical time. Both that concern and the prophetic form of its expression are profoundly rooted in all the Semitic religions. In addition, Chardin's passageway to the ultimate extends outward and through elaborate mental process before involuting and converging in the monad, the individual. In contrast, Krishnamurti exemplifies the Indic orientation by pointing inward to experiential and meditative reality. Because he directs us

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133 For biographical information on his early years, which include many dramatic events, see Mary Luytens, Krishnamurti, the Years of Awakening (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975)

beyond the time and space limits imposed by mental process, we cannot say he points to an "inward space". From the limited perspective of ordinary awareness, his emphasis does appear to fall on "a timeless space".

So while Chardin envisions convergence and the fruition of tradition in historical time; Krishnamurti begins and ends with denial of tradition. While Chardin's vision opens outward; Krishnamurti's opens inward. Though we can tentatively relate their styles to Semitic and Indic traditions, both men are mystical precisely in the sense that they go beyond "tradition". Ultimately each points beyond the axes of time and space, beyond the dichotomies of spiritual and material. Each one has been international not only through extended cosmopolitan experience of travel, but more fundamentally in that each identified with humanity as a whole rather than with nations or cultures. Both of them have also appealed to the modern intellect, though representing opposite poles in their approach to it. Finally, they converge in their sense that the endpoint is now, that in this moment all planes are merged within present reality.

Expanding on the point of convergence which unites them, I want to suggest something of the specifically new age features of spirituality. Distinctive new forms of mysticism are linked to the closure of the globe, to active interface between cultures resulting from the scientific and technological revolution. That revolution has established a world-wide network of communications, a network generating interdependence. For those most integrated within and conscious of the network, one consequence is that it is increasingly difficult to insist on the universality of any particular religion. Awareness of cultural diversity and scientific frontiers simply do not harmonise with the one-dimensional variant of religious attachment. Naturally there have been a wide variety of responses, not all of them new.

The process has led some to rediscover the mystical dimension within their established faith. For those who only know faith in one dimension the directions have been less hopeful. Many people have reacted defensively by retreating to literally conceived faith and mental closure, both of which reflect unwillingness to cope with the full implications of our situation. Oddly, skeptics, empiricists, and materialists who deny the possibility of faith reveal the same narrow notion of what it is. From the viewpoint of those who participate in new age movements, as from Chardin's, it appears that the current global crisis works to raise mystical spirituality to centre stage.

The mystical approach to religion becomes increasingly relevant precisely because it is the form of spirituality which is explicitly directed at transcendence of attachment to forms. Because the planetary context of cultural interpenetration raises our awareness beyond encapsulated traditions, no culture can maintain the grip on consciousness it could claim in the past. At the same time the patterns of recurrent crisis contingent on our situation continue to serve a longstanding function--crises force us to examine issues of ultimate meaning.

Those issues are ageless and their resolution lies at the heart of all religion, but the global context is entirely new. The new synthesis cannot base itself on the finite ground of particular traditions. The base level reference for contemporary humanity is the whole earth set as a speck within the cosmos--the physical restrictions and cultural givens of the past have been shattered. Participation in the mystical forms of spirituality which emphasise awareness unmediated by form is especially consistent with this situation.

There are endless permutations to the expression of this impulse, including an extraordinary variety of warped versions. Despite that, there are also threads, both in connections and common themes, which bind together movements spanning the globe. New age movements are on the whole more open and straightforward than mystical movements of the past.[134]

At the experiential level they stress direct awareness just as it has been emphasised within the core of all mystical tradition. But techniques of practice are simpler and more direct, rather than complex and inaccessible. Conceptions are also more straightforward, less dependent on culturally rooted jargon and esoteric symbolism. Mystical groups are more democratic in process, de-emphasising the hierarchical tendencies of the past. Practices place less emphasis on monasticism and retreat, more on integration of spirituality with everyday life. Mysticism is moving toward everyday realities and out of a traditional context in which it was buried in mythology and esoteric culture.

Paradoxically interest in the meditation also runs hand in hand with revival and resurfacing of ageless traditions. Blacks in the Americas have

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134 One of the clearest statements of "new age" philosophy is that of David Spangler, Revelation, the Birth of a New Age (Findhorn, 1976)

"rediscovered" African links; Anglo-Saxons have explore Celtic roots;[135] Germanic peoples have experienced twisted versions of their mythic ancestry; and throughout the third world newly autonomous peoples have explored sources of cultural identity which were repressed by colonialism. In the religious sphere this movement is animated partly at least by recognition that the "experiential thirst" of modern humanity touches needs which were satisfied within traditional holistic cultures. Hence the quest for renewed holism, though now occurring on the global scale, reveals depth and truth in animism and other early religious styles.

Because the context is global the movement toward a new synthesis works not only on the basis of the spatial unity of the planet, but also toward a consciousness of unity and meaning within the temporal dimension, within history. Visualised as a spiral, history has presented us with transformations of cosmology at each stage of increasing complexity in planetary evolution. Both the neolithic (agricultural) and civic (urban) revolutions brought ramifications in the sphere of culture and consciousness. The magnitude of contemporary change is planetary. Consequently the demand now is for world order synthesis, for awareness which incorporates all history and every society in one unified field of vision. This demand is evident in each frontier of human exploration; on the religious front one expression of it is through revival of interest in meditation practices. The severity of emphasis within industrialised cultures on material needs has its counterpoint in a new kind of demand in the religious sphere.

The movements which we could refer to as part of this process are rooted in local cultures and traditions, their contours thus differ with place. Transformation is by no means instantaneous, though some argue that in the microcosm of individual awareness it can be. In any case, at the "intermediate level", of human society, the process spans decades, perhaps even centuries, within which there are many minor shifts. If speaking of major transformation in evolutionary terms, we must imagine a framework of millennia, "rapid" change may then refer to those of this century, not the measuring of "time" by the scale of individual lives. "New" elements within

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135 As reflected not only in a series of movements such as Findhorn, linked to old monastic centres at Iona and Glastonbury, but more generally, as is argued in the poorly titled by interesting work of John Michell, The View over Atlantis (New York, Ballantine, 1969).

current process are new only in relative terms, only when the focus of vision lies on the social plane. Relativity and unevenness of development does not negate underlying coherence and discernible trends in global process. Comprehension of evolving spiritual patterns in one region requires recognition of their place within the frame of planetary process.

Although local events reveal the idiosyncrasies of unique histories, they also express universal forces and local circumstances are increasing interwoven with global powers; every community shares some common internal dynamics. Universal forces may be elusive, but the patterns of local expression can be linked. The strength of common patterns implicitly suggests that diverse individual and cultural forms are projections through a single kaleidoscope. Human religious evolution has been characterised by gradually changing relationships between individual consciousness and collective socio-cultural structures.

Within isolated tribal communities the transcendent appears to work through every natural force; individuals experience themselves as bound within a magical cosmos. As states crystallised and peasant cultures supported them, syncretic mythology expressed and court ritual enhanced conviction that human traditions were themselves a spiritual vehicle. World religions emerged when empires created bonds extending beyond ethnicity, articulating religiosity as a dimension separate from both nature and culture.

Within the past five centuries physical contacts have linked all societies within one system and the planet itself feels the effect of human actions. The density of interpenetration has resulted in a simultaneous extension and involution of religious structures. Increasingly each human being has access to all past and present forms of practice. However, as a result no single form retains the same force and individuals are forced to find their own way.

We are increasingly dependent on our own resources spiritually, just as we are socially. Present realities reveal not only the plurality of world religious influences, but also the degree to which current consciousness is connected to primal roots. Historical breaks have often been powerful, new stages submerging memory of earlier experience. Even in the most industrialised cultures, recent movements demonstrate determination to reactivate ancient lineages. Within most Asian religions the linkage between

ancestral wisdom and modern spirituality has been maintained actively despite the pressure of world currents.

In Java the *kebatinan* movements claim connection to the spiritual consciousness which lay at the root of Javanese tradition, but they also relate that consciousness to present social and economic realities. Ancestral traditions have been maintained within peasant society, but transmuted through the impact of courts, world religions, and modernity. To begin with spiritual quest was not so much a matter of movements as of individual shaman. In classical states spirituality was fully woven into tradition and cult practices paralleled royal rituals as a framework for individual attainment of consciousness. With the arrival of Islam mystical practices began to assume distinct and separate existence, increasingly individual practice was defined by participation in clear sects, whether Indic or Sufi in tone. With modernity, in the last century, other forces have attempted to define religion by excluding its mystical dimension.

Nevertheless, the vitality of contemporary sects is a testimony to the persistence of quest for immediate and direct awareness of the absolute, despite an increasingly material focus in social life. Within "tradition" mysticism underlay royal power, court ritual, the arts, and social etiquette, but modern movements challenged that status. Now spirituality appears as one strand in society, competing with rather than complementing other social and political forces it has become a subject of debate. Modern social forces have provided new frameworks, so mystical expression has been pressed into distinct sectarian structures, the struggle assumes new forms. Mystics in Indonesia still feel that they represent the heart of the nation, as guardians of its spiritual inner purpose. For them achievement of true national identity depends on realisation of roots.

In their terms the national quest parallels that of individuals. Just as individuals realise themselves in mystical terms only by introspection, by an opening up of inner structures which appear first as ego; the national movement toward its own essence requires unravelling of the structures resulting from historical experience. At either level the process appears to emphasise uniqueness. Individual mystics appear selfish to outsiders, the nation appears retrograde in exploring earlier cultural forms. In both cases the inner meaning of the process is only clear through practice and experience. Both levels of effort are directed beyond form and toward the

universal, though the mystical framework makes clear that that is only reached when inner and underlying structures are activated and transmuted.

Within this process there have been transformations of the forms through which mysticism is expressed. Within ancestral tradition at the peasant level all religiosity was direct. Though only specialists probed it fully, the magical dimension of reality was present for all and no separate sense of mysticism resulted. During the Indic period cult organisations, focusing on spiritual teachers, made spiritual quest more elaborate. The model of *paguron*, of guru centred and hermitage linked practice, remains as an underlayer of *kebatinan*--along with continuing practices of royal magic and village *dukun*.

With Islam the *tariqah* model of Sufi brotherhoods began to turn mysticism into just one element of the religious scene. Within Majapahit all forms of practice touched the mystical and no distinct term appeared to emphasise it. With Islam, in the Mataram period, doctrinal orthodoxy crystallised and mysticism began to appear not just as a dimension within, but as a separate strand of religious experience. Now modern organisational forms result in sectarian structures and *kebatinan* has been pressured to distinguish itself from both *kejawen* and religion. From within there remains certainty that it is fundamental to both, but political circumstances, reflecting the constellation of other powers in the environment, have worked to distinguish mysticism from traditional magic and doctrinal religion.

Outer pressures converge with inner process. The spiritual movements have experienced an inner passage toward consciousness. Emphasis fall more directly, within many sects, on inner and individual consciousness. This is to speak of what can or is emphasised on the surface of social life within the sects. It thus perhaps reflects the fact that the more objectives are articulated the less they may represent what is actually practiced. Whatever shifts in emphasis there may be outwardly, there is little doubt that in Java magical practices, as distinct from mysticism, remain incredibly powerful. Magical and millennial impulses remain, but the era has facilitated a change of gestalt.

Within "tradition" rank, power, and the occult appeared integrally bound to spiritual realisation. The democratising thrust within modernity has led to de-emphasis on status and patronage and movement away from dependence on *guru* as incarnations of divinity. The magical and esoteric undertone of mysticism have given way to greater clarity for many that

consciousness itself is the goal. Practices have been moving out of the cultural web to which they were bound. Javanese mysticism is no longer so emphatically Javanese. Tradition made mystical gnosis accessible to those within it, but gnosis is now increasingly independent of tradition. This pattern does connect directly to global process.

Tibet is a powerful counterpoint to Java, it retained characteristics like those of Majapahit until 1959. Isolation protected Tibet from the currents which have swept over Java in the past five hundred years. Tibetan society embodied much of what had characterised Majapahit. They were historically linked through Tantrism, even specifically through the teachings of Atisa, from Nalanda, the great Buddhist university in India. In both cultures Tantrism combined with ancestral magic, with Bon in the Tibetan case, and in the encapsulated traditional system mysticism appeared to seep through every pore of the collective.

That structure was shattered when China moved in, much of the monastic hierarchy physically departed, taking refuge in India and the West. The Tibetan system no longer exists as it was, but many of those trained within it have began to have an impact on the West. In surfacing they are not simply recreating monastic microcosms of their old state. Instead they have made a vast repository of spiritual teachings accessible, opening up what was once enshrined in isolation. Some have also presented their teachings in strikingly modern guise, relating their traditional mysticism to a world which seems planets away from their origins.

Elsewhere in the world variations of ancestral practice retain force within the moulds of later culture. Throughout Africa overlays of Islamic and Christian imagery have been adapted to indigenous religion. Nativistic churches refract and reshape tribal religions based on spirit contacts. In the Americas blacks continue practices rooted in Africa. Where the break with African tradition was most complete, as in the United States, revival bears the qualities of artificial resurrection. But in Brazil and the Caribbean, where continuities have been stronger, cult practices have always resonated with African roots. In Jamaica and Haiti elements of African practice are heavily filtered, though in the latter contact with ancient deities is very clear.[136] In

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136 Maya Deren, The Voodoo Gods (New York, Paladin, 1975) is a delightfully well informed and revealing work which exposes the serious side of voodoo in a way its title and cover do not suggest is likely.

Brazil Catholicism provides a context for possession cults, the ancestors have not been forgotten.[137] In North America the social and political maturation of indigenous peoples has been paralleled by new respect for the wisdom embedded within shamanic tribal religion.

Even within the sphere of European culture and its overseas extensions, the quest for spiritual roots assumes similar form. Contemporary Western spiritual movements are frequently cast in imported, often Asian moulds, but exploration of roots in ethnic terms is also strong. In Great Britain the Celtic memory stirred--forest beings, nature spirits, and power points receive new and serious attention. Esoteric, as well as fundamentalist, Christianity has been on the rise. Glastonbury and the Arthurian legend remind contemporary people of genuine quest within traditional religion. The new movements emphasise that beneath transitions, from Celtic to Roman to Christian times, there has been a continuity of lineage, an esoteric dimension.

On the surface the diversity of global movements suggest a chaotic and individual distortion, in each context movements are shaped and twisted by economic, social, cultural, and political pressures. One strand of spirituality involves the mystical sense of movement toward the universal, sometimes through meditation practices. The uniqueness of movements, the contrasts between them, even the reservations they express about each other seem to belie potential realisation of union. Participants often profess but rarely demonstrate true tolerance. However we can bear in mind, through closer examination of the paradoxical play involved within spirituality between forms and essence, that in mystical movements people are merely "directed toward" and not as though "possessed of" consciousness beyond forms.

Though many movements appear to probe roots in ancestral lineages, others appear as incongruous transplants, seeming to export culture rather than transmit universals. Contradictions and distortions exist at all levels. None of these tensions can be resolved within "form" itself. Individuals continue to seek answers in form and intellect, expecting that a universal religion will have a unitary form, assuming that their pathway can provide resolution for others.

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137 Ruth and Seth Leacock, Spirits of the Deep (New York, Anchor, 1975)

Whenever they do that, then they accept limits, identifying themselves and the universal with distinct forms. The meaning of mystical traditions and movements does not lie *in* form itself. The key lies in practice which only in some cases approximates ideals. But even after being transmuted through individual practice, forms remain only as passageways. Insofar as people assume that the pathways of their own liberation, genuine or imagined, will work for others then forms are presented as universally applicable and mysticism becomes religion.

The paradox of diverse movements claiming access to universality is only dissolved when it is understood that they touch it only through their own negation, through transformation. Each form works only as a gateway. Complex lineages of spiritual tradition weave through the contemporary movements. These are simply family trees of mysticism. Individuals belong to movements in the same way they do to biological families. Uniqueness and idiosyncrasy is a feature of every movement, as of every individual. Group bonds often appear to imply restrictions, feelings of unity are often limited by them. Fundamentally groups, nations or species relate to the universal in the same way individuals do--each reaches it by moving past itself. Images do affect practice, traditions do shape experience, but inasmuch as either becomes a vehicle of mysticism, it does so only by pointing past itself.

Even study of mysticism in the terms applied here promises no resolution of contradictions. Practice does not become mystical until it enters dimensions beyond thought and consistency in logic is neither a prerequisite for nor necessary product of mystical practice. The dualities of intellect and intuition, spiritual and material, monism and dualism, East and West, exist at all levels. Individuals experience tensions within their practice, groups adopt contrary frameworks, and cultures diverge.

Whenever there is form then there is uniqueness and distinction. Semitic traditions speak of "submission to one God" and from that standpoint the Indic ideal appears void. Monists within the Indic traditions speak of openness and "oneness" so that from their perspective union has not been achieved if there is still surrender to something else. Such contradictions are not resolved in thought. When thoughts merely meet each other, then spiritual dynamic is absent. The intellect is only relevant to practice when it connects to experience. Contradictions dissolve only when practice results in consciousness which "sees through" forms.

The principles which apply at the individual level extend with identical implications to the macrocosm. If structures at any level become ends in themselves, then limits are set and divisions result. Like the ideal of union, the hope for world peace can become crystallised into dogma, becoming meaningless when associated with rigid ideologies, political structures, or economic systems. Each of those becomes an agent of human purpose only when the focus of struggle has shifted beyond them, when they are transformed into vehicles rather than approached as ends. As long as people struggle to attain concrete goals through visible structures, harmony and peace will remain elusive ideals. When structures are transmuted into pathways, then practical realisation becomes a meaningful proposition. Practice, rather than theory, is the key: what matters is what we do rather than what we claim to adhere to.

From the perspective of new age movements global process is high drama, there is meaning within the whole and significance to distinct patterns within it. Division and union, the two and the one, material and spiritual, the dance of Shiva assumes many forms. The Semitic traditions experience global process as the war of good and evil. In the *Mahabharata* there is also a final battle, but it is understood that each actor has an essential function. For mystics the sharpness of factional identification softens and the cosmic struggle appears as a dance. Structures weave through each other. Some are fluid, some rigid. Light is reflected, refracted, filtered, and focussed. Each structure influences its expression. Mysticism itself offers only pathways of light; the study of it just shadows. But even shadows have meaning--they imply the existence of light and betray the influence of intervening forms.

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