

**Worlds of Experience**  
**Contemporary Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination**

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I walked quickly down Quincy Street in Harvard Square on a cold night in January 2002, heading toward a meeting of the Mystical Experiences Discussion Group that met bi-weekly at the Swedenborgian Chapel. I was headed there as part of my fieldwork, which at that point was about half finished, with contemporary mystics in Cambridge Massachusetts. I walked on Quincy almost every day, always on the same side of the street, barely registering my surroundings save when the maples were at their full color in the fall or lilacs in bloom in May. On this bitter night, however, I unexpectedly found myself walking with heightened, uncommon awareness.

That day had been a busy one. I had talked for an hour with one of my students about Menand's *Metaphysical Club*, reread a few sections from James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* for a talk I was giving the following week, and had transcribed part of an interview I had conducted with a man who called himself an "energy intuitive," and who at the end of our interview had "read" my energy by placing his hand on my wrist. Now, even though I was running late for the meeting, I took note as if for the first time this particular street's history and its resonance with my research on spiritual life in America. Walking past the markers for William James' and Oliver Wendell Holmes' family residences, I realized that those were the very buildings where many of the central ideas and arguments I had been reading about had been first been argued and penned. It occurred to me that on this very evening a conversation about many of the same topics would continue in the parlor of the Swedenborgian Chapel. Despite my tardiness and the bitter wind, I paused for a moment to take in the unobstructed view of the architectural juxtaposition before me. The tidy, gothic Swedenborgian Chapel sat in the shadows of Harvard's brutalist skyscraper, William James Hall, an arrangement that gave metaphorical shape to the ways that Swedenborg's rational scientific mysticism (espoused by William James' father, Henry Sr., and other Cantabridgian luminaries) has been cast in the shadows by liberal definitions of religious experience espoused by James and his contemporaries. Despite these shadows, however,

conversations and controversies about what religious experience is, how or whether it can be pursued, and how union with the divine changes the self and its relations continue at the Chapel and at myriad other places in Cambridge. At that moment my interests and focus began to shift away from tracking the social location of spiritual practice and spiritual groups to better understanding the central place of religious experience within contemporary American spirituality, including the fascinating and perplexing tangle of relationships between contemporary expressions and early twentieth century definitions of religious experience.

*Worlds of Experience* is a book about the presence and persistence of religious experiences within the cultures of American “alternative” spirituality, and argues that contemporary spiritual practitioners are less orphans of fragmented postmodern worlds than heirs to longstanding American desires and religious currents. It investigates how people experience and embody experiences, the institutions, histories, and technologies that shape them, and the questions that such encounters prompt about the “nature” of scientific inquiry, human bodies and souls, the arc of history, and God.

Placing religious experience at the center of an analysis challenges common sociological wisdom about contemporary spirituality’s history, social location and impact in American social life. Most recent treatments of spirituality, in fact, ignore the persistent and central role of religious experiences, and typically call attention instead to contemporary spirituality’s surfeit of individualistic practices, calling its practitioners “seekers” or “consumers” within a marketplace of spiritual goods and services. While these designations have some merit, the sociological emphasis on individuals’ journeys and the consumer goods they employ nonetheless displaces attention from the shaping power of religious experiences in constructing religious individualism. Putting religious experiences at the center of this study sheds new light on modern mystics’ lived desires for contact or union with the divine, and also illuminates the curious absence of “religious experience” in sociologies of religion, prompting new questions about the impact of such absence on recent developments in the field.

#### EXPERIENCING *EXPERIENCE*

I started the research for this book in 2002 with the goal of learning how, or where, people become religious individualists. The social locations of alternative spiritual practice in the United States were, and remain, relatively unexplored. With the exception of a few studies of new

age “sacred sites” (for example, Ivakhiv’s 2001 study of Sedona)<sup>1</sup> we know little about the institutions and organizations where spiritual identities develop. Most sociological work investigating spirituality focuses exclusively on individual-based interview and survey data, which only rarely highlights the religious groups or communities within their self-formation. (Ironically, this research trajectory is largely the consequence of common wisdom that alternative spirituality practitioners are not connected in meaningful, lasting communities.)

With these gaps in the literature in mind, I embarked on ethnographic research with spirituality practitioners in Cambridge Massachusetts. Building on the research methods and practices I developed while researching *Heaven’s Kitchen* (2003) I set out to first document the groups, sites and businesses where people and gather, shop, take classes, and participate in spirituality events, and visiting and participating in them where possible. Cambridge was a good site for several reasons, including practical ones. Cambridge has a proud tradition of harboring free-thinkers and progressives, including Swedenborgians and early leaders of Transcendentalism, Spiritualism, Christian Science, Mind Cure, Human Potential, Vedanta and other religious “movements.” Cambridge is still called the “People’s Republic” by many locals, and remains the home to off-beat and intellectually and politically progressive types. Within a few months of starting field work, I had a working outline of several of the spiritual worlds and networks in Cambridge (I continued observations in some of these settings for close to twelve months), and began to meet with many mystics, amassing more than sixty interviews with various practitioners who worked or practiced in Cambridge.

In interviews I began to learn about the shaping power of religious experiences, and the ways that controversies and questions surrounding “experience” marked my respondents’ discourses and practices. Although the various people I met thought about, experienced, and sought after experiences in many ways, the centrality of “experience” in their spiritual worlds (indeed, the way that the “spiritual” was shaped around experience) was inescapably present.

Experience worked in these networks in specific ways. To begin, individuals’ experiences added additional socially articulated layers of networks and relations to the mundane map of networks and groups that I had initially tracked. Out of body experiences, past-life memories, near death experiences, channeled spirits and entities opened up realms of identity and self-expression. They similarly added additional layers of connections, as individuals recognized

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<sup>1</sup> This is in contrast to the growing body of research on the communities of neo-pagans (Pike 2001). In this book, I distinguish “new age” groups and individual practice from “neo-pagan” communities, focusing on the former. While the exact boundaries are a bit fuzzy, the distinction is consistent with recent literature (York 1995, Pike 2001) and with how informants in Cambridge understood differences between groups.

long-lost ‘soul mates’ in their current family members and friendships. The importance of experience similarly pressed individuals to cultivate experiences, and to search out and discuss the ways that experiences could best be affected (and indeed, if they could at all). Although the mystics I met talked incessantly about experience, they also practiced experience, working to embody and engender felicitous circumstances for experience. In doing so, they engaged in debates about how, or whether, experience can be practiced or initiated through individuals’ actions. In so doing, they participated in conversations and practices that shared much with similar controversies ongoing in Cambridge, Boston, and elsewhere over one hundred years ago, when American harmonial religious traditions (including “Mind Cure,” Christian Science, Spiritualism, and others) were beginning to fall from their height of popularity.

In short, the central importance of religious experiences to the people I met in Cambridge, and the comparative absence of experience in recent treatments of contemporary spirituality suggested that I need not only to pay attention to the way that those people I worked with lived religious experiences, but also to the reasons behind (and the consequences of) experience’s absence in studies of contemporary spirituality. Sociologists of religion do not speak much of the religious experiences identified by William James and others as numinous, personal, private, and transcendent: such personal experiences are often (if not usually) understood as topics better studied by psychologists of religion, particularly if such experiences “happen” to people who are not members of specific, traditionally defined religious groups. This elision has had a shaping effect on the discipline, running at times to the heart of the definitions of religion that orient sociologists to our otherwise self-evident domain. Listening to mystics in Cambridge and participating as much as an outsider can within their worlds pushed me to pay closer attention to the borders of multiple worlds (academic and lay, spiritual and daily, remembered and imagined) and the ways that they are constructed and shaped by mystics and academics.

I did not arrive all at once at these positions. But as I talked and listened to mystics and participated in their worlds, it became easier for me to think in terms of experience. Over time, I also began to construct a story about how I came to bring experience back in to my project (as a historically meaningful, multivocal, and open ended questions). Like many stories of experience, this one condenses some of the central thematic issues and tensions that I discuss in this book, arranging them in ways that juxtapose the intellectual lineages of “religious experience” with contemporary spiritual practice in a novel way, and that raises questions of its own about the continued importance of contacting the divine in modern America, and its consequences both for individual experiencers and the worlds in which they live. For the brief moment when I tell the

story about a cold winter's night on Quincy Street, history, landscape, emotion and intellect converge in a way that still feels new and unique, pointing toward something promising and that has yet to be said.

#### MODERN MYSTICS AND CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY

I met hundreds of people, and interviewed sixty-seven of them in the course of my field work. Most of the people I met knew each other or participated in the same networks of ritual events, talks, lectures, and practices. Despite their basic familiarity with the same groups and persons, none of these people thought of themselves as a group, and they did not claim an identity in any corporate sense. All of them had different ways to talk about what they did, and I pay close attention to this in the body of the book. All the same, in talking and writing about this loosely confederated network, I was often at a loss for how to designate them. Given that there was no native term, I decided quite consciously to call the people I met mystics, fully aware of how this designation would invite questions and perhaps controversies of their own.

In naming the people I met mystics, I hope to call attention, first, to the fact that most of my respondents, and most contemporary spirituality, is centrally engaged with a variety of issues related to religious experience. These include questions about the relationships between divine and earthly planes, and issues relating to their reality and validity, and the degree to which people can learn to be mystics and train themselves to have such experiences. Second, I hope to call attention to the ways that modern mystics' self definitions and understandings of "experience" are connected to the vibrant if troubled intellectual histories of the term "mysticism" and ideas of religious experience. Recent scholarship has fully historicized both our understanding of "mysticism" and "religious experience," demonstrating its nostalgic, imperialist, and rationalist bases. The people I met and worked are the honest heirs of this checkered lineage, and live it out in consequential ways. Calling my respondents mystics couples recent critical attention to the history of religious experience as a concept to the lived religious experiences of people in whom these notions take root.

My questions are shaped by engaging in, and paying attention to, tensions surrounding representation and definition of religion and spirituality as it is felt and practiced by scholars of religion and practitioners of "mysticism." Over the last decade, numerous religious studies scholars historicized our understanding of the idea of "religious experience," and we no longer view the classical definitions as natural categories. We now are fully aware that personal, transcendent, noetic "religious experience" is a "relatively late and distinctively Western" idea

(Sharf 1998:98), albeit a powerful one that has had a hand in shaping transnationally defined distinctions between religion and science, “Western” and “Eastern” religions, and pre-modern and modern Christianity (Taves 1999, Sharf 1995, Jantzen 1995).

The burgeoning research on the history and consequences of “religious experience” developed in the wake of philosophical arguments made in the 1980’s about the conceptual and philosophical impossibility of pre-culturally experienced religious experiences. Constructivist arguments (Proudfoot 1985) emphasized the formative and shaping effects of culture on experiences *and* their accountings, opening the way for studies that located these individual experiences within particular social and cultural worlds. Stories of religious experience (if not the experiences themselves) become sites where scholars can analyze how culturally shared formations of self, theology, and bodily comportment shape religious experiences and their accountings (Cain 1998, Lawless 1991, Csordas 1990).

Modern mystics in Cambridge are mystics insofar as they participate in recognizable, historically meaningful definitions of experience and mysticism. Using Cambridge as a case study of a larger phenomenon, but also calling attention to its specific role in shaping these cultures, I argue that contemporary spirituality and the “new age” is shaped as much by participation in developments in American religious thought of the turn of the last century as by developments in the “me” generation. That said, the entanglements of popular and academic expressions of religious experience do not end with recognition of the “historical origins” or “social constructedness” of a particular set of concepts and practices. In experiencing experiences, modern mystics shape selves, histories, theologies and rules for the body and for the emotions, and in so doing speak back to scholars about the complicated and fascinating lived realities of the transcendent in American life.

#### ENTANGLEMENTS: A PRELIMINARY COMMENT ON APPROACHES TO CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY

Defining “spirituality” and locating it within social life is notoriously difficult. Much like “experience,” spirituality is bedeviled not by a lack of specific definitions but by an almost endless proliferation (Jay 2005). As with definitions of “experience,” most definitions of the “spiritual” serve to protect, defend, debunk, or claim certain territory for the spiritual: most definitions of recent vintage suffer, I believe, by defining spirituality as a distinct category of action and participation that serves to extract something from the many varied social locations in

which it is played out in contemporary American society. We might be better served, particularly at this moment, by acknowledging that what people call and define as spirituality is complexly entangled in numerous institutions and intellectual frameworks, including medical, mainstream religious, and artistic practices, organizations, and discourses. These entanglements are at least partially constitutive: extracting ‘spirituality’ or ‘mysticism’ from the institutions where it is lived out both distorts and mischaracterizes the phenomena.

The value of beginning with the view that spirituality is entangled (but no less “real” because of its embeddedness) became evident soon after I started charting where people go to practice spirituality. In Cambridge, the world of spiritual organizations included a few stand-alone “alternative” institutions and groups. But most groups were tied in one way or another to mainstream religious groups and congregations, to doctor’s offices, spas or alternative health clinics, or to local artists networks and gallery spaces. Boundaries and distinctions were indeed important on the ground, but they were rarely drawn or redrawn as “oppositional” to any of these mainstream institutions, but rather participated in and also reshaped the boundaries of some artistic, religious, and medical institutions.

It has become easier to articulate a theoretical and methodological approach to culture as entangled in recent years, as sociologists and historians develop approaches to “culture” and social groups that depend less on defining or articulating whole, bounded, totalizing cultures, and pay more attention to cultures as changing, loosely bounded, common but not homogeneous practices, scripts, discourses and powers. This approach, articulated in Sewell 1998, Swidler 2001, Bender 2005, and elsewhere emphasizes both theories and methods through which we can study religious cultures as they are developed within pluralistic, heterogeneous and un-unified social worlds.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

### **Introduction: Long Shadows**

The book opens with a walk down Quincy Street in Harvard Square and a meeting of the “Mystical Experiences Discussion Group” that gathers every other week in the Swedenborgian Chapel. The Chapel sits literally in the shadows of William James Hall; these literal shadows allow me to address in the introduction some of the figurative shadows that follow research on American spirituality. I explain how my interest in studying the “new age” or “contemporary spirituality” transformed into a more specific quest to understand the place, meaning, and built authority of individual religious experiences in contemporary American religions, the ways that terms and ideas of religious experience and “mysticism” are variously reproduced and reimagined in this setting, and how this fraught and fascinating story might alter sociologists’ of religion understanding of religious experience and its (often absent) place in the field.

### **2. Shamans in the Meetinghouse**

*My early field work took me to the biannual Boston Whole Health Expo, where I spent several hours walking through the exhibition hall, talking to Theosophists, Reiki practitioners, and holistic nutritionists. During my time there a short bespectacled man caught my arm and asked:*

“Hello, would you like some free meditation? It’s free, by the Joh Rei Fellowship” I look behind him and saw four people sit on stools, eyes closed; four women sit on chairs facing them, with hands held in front of them in various positions. “What is joh rei meditation, I ask, feeling the words in my mouth. “It’s a form of meditation that – heals you, makes you healthy. Most people who try it say that it really is relaxing ....

After talking with the Joh Rei meditators a bit more (and, taking them up on their offer), I talk for some time to Cynthia at the Christian Science table. “Take this book, it will change your life,” she says, pressing a copy of Mary Baker Eddy’s *Science and Health* and a sheaf of articles published by Harvard’s Body-Mind Institute. “We started this all, “ she says, gesturing to the large exhibition hall and all of the booths when I tell her about my research. We exchange cards, and I drag my bag, filled with papers, studies, and advertisements, to the next booth, a bookstore. I look through the books on shamanism, feng shui, the power of positive thinking, and the Yoga Sutras, the many tarot decks and angel cards, and guided visualization audiotapes. Soon, I notice a lone woman in a business suit at a small booth for the “Integrated Medical Association.” I introduce myself, and Trudy explains that she represents a network for practitioners a go-between between the alternative and regular health communities. She asks if I am a practitioner, and not knowing exactly what she means, I say that I am a sociologist. “My business is to make connections,” she says. The doctors don’t know anything about alternative therapies that their patients do. “There is a need for a link.” I ask how she is finding the Expo. Are people interested? She laughs, and says she finds the crowd to be a bit less mainstream than she had expected. ...

This chapter sketches the organizational landscape of contemporary spirituality and mysticism in Cambridge, and seeks to explain some of the (complementary and disparate) ways that contemporary spirituality is located in groups and institutions, tracking the ways that contemporary spirituality and mystical groups maintain existence within the fields of alternative health, mainstream and alternative religious organizations, and local artists groups and collectives. In short, this chapter is about the locations of religious experience and the communities that organize around these experiences and their various technologies.

Several things become apparent as I map these groups. First, contemporary spirituality is entangled within three institutional fields, and sustains itself within those more than it does as an alternative, “shadow” or counter-cultural set of organizations. Contemporary spirituality in Cambridge is learned, taught, and practiced within mainstream religious organizations and settings, in visual and performing arts groups and galleries, and within the developing field of integrative and alternative medicine. Spirituality groups and practitioners variously develop (and are somewhat isomorphic with) the institutional shapes of these groups (for example, in mystical choirs, mystical arts concerts, in client-patient relations in shiatsu massage or homeopathic clinics, and in yoga courses taught in Protestant churches).

These links and connections suggest rethinking the ways that contemporary mysticism is organized and embedded within non-religious fields, and in turn the ways that people become mystics. The question of how people become mystics, and with what tools and experiences, is the topic of the chapter that follows.

### **3. Becoming a mystic**

*Eric, an organizer of spiritual arts shows told me about how he learned that he was the reincarnation of Hildegard of Bingen:*

... I'm taking a bus back home from there, and reading the newspaper. There is a preview, explaining that 1998 was going to be the 900th anniversary of Hildegard of Bingen's birth. ... And something happened inside of me where I just burst into tears and I was just crying and crying. And I just felt like this was the pivotal moment, and I didn't know what to do with it, but I knew that Hildegard of Bingen was alive, and really important to me. And I started to have all these memories, of, hearing her name at other times in my life, and each time having a reaction, but kind of not enough context to know what to do with it. One time in, in the 1980's I was working in a liquor store and I heard a - somebody on the radio mentioned her name after the song, and I remember going into a trance ... this room in the liquor store faded away, and what was more real was being in a woman's body and kneeling and praying in this little room....

If “speaking is believing” for Christian fundamentalists (Harding 2001) then “speaking is experiencing” for contemporary mystics. In this chapter I turn to the experience accounts and

personal narratives of several of the over fifty individuals I interviewed in Cambridge, paying specific attention to the ways that they build legitimate and verifiable religious experiences. Narratives do much more (and at times, much less) than present coherent identities: in this case, I expand upon how the genres of mystical experiences also shape selves and relations with others. One way that they do so, for example, is in cutting social ties and occluding involvement in groups where they might learn how to tell such stories. Indeed, the emphasis on the ineffable, non-culturally or socially suggested, personal experience is so great that the authenticity of such stories is often contingent on its lack of social context (or, context is organized as meaningful coincidences coordinated by divine forces). While having this awareness does not allow me to “recover” the social context that is missing, the ways individuals’ experiences orchestrate others’ voices and speakers suggest that there are lived social worlds that are much more rich than those that can be related through legitimate genres of mystical experience.

#### **4. Karmic laundry: imagining and embodying spiritual histories**

*Two weeks before Christmas, Cathy invited me and the rest of the regulars of the Mystical Experiences Discussion Group to her house for an “ornament manifestation” and cookie swap. When I arrive with my chocolate chip cookies Cathy and Lisa are already there, and the three of us settle down to have tea in Cathy’s living room and start making glass beaded ornaments. The conversation soon turns to Annette, who is sick with the flu. “Maybe we’ll take some cookies to her later,” Cathy says, pausing for a moment to wave goodbye to her husband and son, who are on their way to see the latest Harry Potter movie again. “I saw her on Wednesday when she brought her laundry over. I’ve told her to bring her laundry over, because I owe her a lot of karmic laundry,” she says, laughing. I can’t quite follow what she means, and ask what karmic laundry is. Lisa interjects somewhat impatiently, “Don’t you know? Cathy thinks that Annette was Fritz’s wife.” I look over at Cathy who nods. “Wow, how did you figure that out?” I ask, immediately interested wishing that Annette wasn’t sick, so I could meet the woman whom Cathy has identified as her wife in her former life, when she was a German émigré scientist.*

Mystical experiences did much more than engage individuals in discussions and ideas of validity and legitimacy, and much more than break or rupture relations to daily life. Talking about, living through, and embodying these experiences situated those who participated in them within expansive spiritual landscapes, geographies, and histories. Many of the people I met not only believed in reincarnation, but also worked to determine who they, and current family and friends, had been in their previous lives. Notions of reincarnation and the “karma” that attends to a life provide ways for mystics to both creatively imagine and redraw the worlds and relationships in which they currently live, providing explanations for problematic relationships, for surprising serendipities, and life’s purposes. I focus in this chapter in particular on one cluster of individuals I met who continued to work out how they were connected in this life and in the

past. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1981) understanding of the "chronotope," I discuss how their practices of investigating and discussing (and in some senses living) in multiple times and places simultaneously reorders and marks relationships and selves in particularly meaningful ways.

The issues raised in these mystics' work in understanding themselves through links to the past prompts further attention to the ways that other histories, in particular the histories of particular strains of American mystical religious traditions, appear or fail to appear in the lives of contemporary mystics. In the second half of this chapter, I further pursue the possibilities and problems (methodological and theoretical) that attend placing contemporary mystics "within" a religious or intellectual tradition or history.

## **5. Chronotopic appropriations: Being the Other**

*Julia, a 60 year old "spiritual belly dancer" and political organizer, told me about how she first encountered belly dance and how it was significant to her:*

... After I got back from the South -- I mean I loved dancing to black music but I knew it wasn't mine. It was more like, I was borrowing someone else's culture. I was grateful but it wasn't mine. And I was looking for, sort of, what was my culture? And, I was looking looking looking. And I never sort of found it. And I liked ... for example I loved women who were wearing Indian saris, but that wasn't mine either, I knew it wasn't right. And I kept looking for what is mine. And again, talking about that sense of something from beyond, not this present time but something, ancestral. I don't think I knew the concept of past lives then, but [I was looking for] something that went historically back. And -- in 1967, or 1968, one of my roommates invited me to a party with some Arabic people that she knew. And they were playing Arabic music and -- it was mostly guys. And they would get down on their knees and they would dance on their knees like this. And then a woman who was actually a white woman, was a belly dancer, and she came - she was wearing a dress, she wasn't wearing a costume. But I just said, this is it! This is the culture, I just sensed it. There was something about the music, and the sound of the music and the rhythms, and even the way they were moving. I said this is, *this is it*.

Continuing the themes of the previous chapter, I analyze how individuals imagine and live out relationships to non-U.S. cultures and practices. One of the hallmarks of contemporary spirituality is the often wanton misappropriation and mischaracterization of the "mystic East," "Oriental" medicines and cultures, Native American religions, Celtic "history," premodern European shamanism, and so on. As claims for cultural distinctiveness and appropriation become more heated within the worlds in which contemporary spirituality practitioners work, embodied experiences, dreams, recognitions of past lives contribute to strategies of claiming "others'" histories. Bodily memories that transcend and extend beyond particular bodies both confirm, and problematize, ideas of ownership.

## **6. Tuning the body: experiential technologies**

Mystics told stories of experience that focused on their specific ineffable and numinous qualities, and through which they imagined and lived in overlapping, often imagined relations and experiences. But mystics were not consigned, as were James and others, to “desires” for ineffable, mystic, and private experiences. Indeed, as much as the mystics I met were heirs to these discourses and narratives, they are also active producers of religious experiences, and masters of the many embodied technologies that allow these experiences to be had again and again. In other words, mystics I met spent countless hours talking about, learning, and engaging in the right practices that would tune their bodies to the divine, or channel its energies through them in effective ways. Mystics in Cambridge were deeply invested in multiple practices of experience. Meetings of mystics were generally meetings to learn about, talk about, or practically experience experiences. In short, these experiential technologies not only connected mystics to the divine but, through these activities, also connected them within live conversations that focused on those experiences.

This chapter focuses on the experiential technologies through which mystics tuned their bodies and importantly, how these conversations and practices call into being complex understandings of the relations of bodies to mystical and “out of body” realities. In many cases, the body is talked about as a vessel or empty channel through which energy moves, but in others, the body becomes the all important location of and setting for divine energies, or rather, the site in which divine realities take certain shape. The questions and consequences of these practices, namely, whether experience can be “learned,” whether it has the same status and presence in the world as “scientifically proven” forces like gravity, echo questions in the late nineteenth century about the power of mesmeric forces, Mind Cure, and Christian Science.

## **Conclusion “... But you are the music while the music lasts”**

... But to apprehend  
The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint --  
No occupation, either, but something given  
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,  
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.  
For most of us, there is only the unattended  
Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning  
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply

That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
While the music lasts.

(T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*)

In concluding the book, I tie together some of the major themes from each of the chapters, emphasizing the social locatedness and historical embeddedness of contemporary religious experiences, the ways that mystical identities and experiences are caught up in alternative histories, and imaginative evaluations of daily realities. I turn to questions of where sociologists of religion might engage a historically sensitive sociology of religious experience, and, how, in so doing, ethnographic tropes of experience (and experiences “themselves”) are implicated within these studies.

## MARKET AND COMPETING VOLUMES

There are numerous volumes on the new age and contemporary spirituality, but few address the central role of religious experiences within them. *Worlds of Experience* presents a new take on this field in several respects.

First, it takes the study of contemporary spirituality to a specific community, and seeks to understand how it works through ethnographic research. As such, *Worlds of Experience* extends and challenges studies that draw primarily or only on contemporary texts and interviews (Roof 1999, Wuthnow 1998, Heelas 1996, but see Sutcliffe 2003). It furthermore expands and complicates the few studies of the organizational contours of spiritual groups (York 1995), including those that suggest or state that “alternative spirituality” exists as a clearly bounded culture (Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000). Locating this book in one setting allows me to be attentive to the consumer and for-profit aspects of contemporary spirituality without collapsing the story into one about the “spiritual marketplace” of eclectic shoppers (Lau 2000, Cimino and Lattin 1998). This a case study has case study has the added benefit of allowing me to situate some of the more shocking and titillating aspects of contemporary spirituality within the lives of the people who take them seriously.

Second, *Worlds of Experience* places into dialogue the growing body of research on American “harmonial” religious traditions and the wide-ranging swath of Protestant spiritualities that flourished at the turn of the previous century with what is happening on the ground now. Several historical studies have called our attention to history of “American spirituality” that extends well prior to the emergence of the “new age” in the 1960’s and 1970’s (for example Albanese 1990, Whorton 2002, Porterfield 2001, Taylor 1999). Nevertheless, as much of this research is focused on telling a larger historical narrative, few of these address the particular ways that the past does, or doesn’t, influence the present. Those that do so track the relations through the texts and writings of national spirituality leaders and gurus.

Third, *Worlds of Experience* situates “religious experience,” and all of its problems and complexities, at the center of the study of contemporary spirituality. There are

remarkably few sustained discussions of religious experience within the sociology of religion; those that have studied “experience” largely focus on the constructed and narrative elements of experience as they are cultivated within religious community (Lawless 1991, Neitz 1987, Yamane 2000). We have very few studies of the impact of James’ and others’ definitions of religious experience on the lived manifestations of religious experience: those few who draw upon James do not take into the growing body of critical and historically sensitive literature addressing this topic.

As a revisionist (but not apologist) study of American spirituality, this book shares some common themes and interests with recent work in American religious history and the “history of the history of religions” that have focused on the origins of modern “religious experience.” For instance, as it focuses on how scholars and laypersons defined and constitute ‘religious experience,’ it shares some common themes with Ann Taves’ *Fits, Trances and Visions* (1999), and Leigh Schmidt’s *Hearing Things* (2000). These exemplary volumes place ideas of religious experience in history, demonstrating the important convergences of academic and religious depictions of experience in these periods. *Worlds of Experience* brings a similar set of interests to understanding how religious experience continues as a lived aspect of American religions.

The mystics I knew in Cambridge bear, wear, and imagine their places within time and space in ways that organize their bodies and beings in multiple histories and relationships. As such, their practices and experiences bring to mind questions about how personal and collective memories are embodied and imagined. With this in mind, this volume will likely also draw on recent anthropological studies that have analyzed how histories are born in and through bodily action, including Csordas’ studies of charismatic Christianity (1994) and Lambek’s study of spirit possession and history in Madagascar (2002). Similar issues have been taken up from time to time by scholars focusing on specific new age practices, including Brown’s superlative anthropological study on channeling (1997), Zaleski’s historical-comparative study of near death experiences (1987).

Studying contemporary spirituality on the ground, paying close attention to participants’ work to create religious and spiritual identities and practice and engaging recent theories of culture establishes both a new understanding of contemporary spirituality and presents a “new” way of evaluating and understanding religion sociologically. The “case” of Cambridge Massachusetts invites comparison with other settings, locations, and experiences; in this way, *Worlds of Experience* will serve as a model of and for future sociological studies of religion.

#### MANUSCRIPT SPECIFICATIONS

The projected manuscript will be roughly 350 pages (inclusive of endnotes and bibliography). With several chapters currently in draft or underway, I expect to have the full manuscript drafted and ready for review by early fall 2006.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Courtney Bender is an assistant professor in the Departments of Religion and Sociology at Columbia University. She is the author of *Heaven's Kitchen: Living Religion at God's Love We Deliver* (Chicago 2003) and numerous articles on contemporary American religion.

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