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MYSTICISM: NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY?

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ABSTRACT

Robert Sharf argues that if a religious or mystical experience conveys any meaning at all, that meaning derives from shared public discourse, not from the experience as such. Sharf's argument is, or should be, unsettling for anyone who naively thinks that religious beliefs are grounded in religious experiences. In this paper I examine Sharf's arguments and suggest another way of approaching the notion of mystical or religious experience within the study of religions. Distinguishing between mystical experience and mystical teachings can help to explain how 'experience' can retain a meaningful place in mysticism.

INTRODUCTION

In his essay on 'Experience',<1> Robert Sharf argues that if a religious or mystical experience <2> conveys any meaning at all, then that meaning derives from shared public discourse; from 'the contested realm of public meanings',<3> not from an 'experience' as such. Sharf's argument is a powerful one, and unsettling for students and scholars of religion who think that (at least some) religious teachings are (somehow) grounded in religious experiences. In this paper I examine Sharf's arguments and suggest another way of looking at the notion of religious or mystical experience, one which takes into account his critique.

Sharf's chapter on 'Experience' was written for a volume of essays called 'Critical Terms for Religious Studies'. The 'Experience' essay itself derives from an earlier, lengthier article Sharf published in 'Numen' which drew more explicitly on his fieldwork-based research into modern Asian Buddhism.<4> In my own experience, relatively few students – or indeed scholars – of religion are familiar with the argument in Sharf's essay, possibly because mystical experience is not the hot theoretical topic it once was; one colleague recently joked to me that a better spelling of Mysticism would be 'Mistycism', reflecting a general scepticism about rational efforts to clarify such a topic.<5> Yet the term 'experience' has probably never been more pervasive in discussions of religion, presumably as a consequence of the 'turn to the self' characteristic of postmodernity. Interest in 'experience', however, has moved away from the paradigm of a pure, disembodied mystical experience to other and earthier notions of cultural experience and the power relations involved in these categories: experience as embodied, gendered, ethnic, near-death, past-life, queer, cyber-, and so forth.<6>

Academics who are interested in mystical experience in the more traditional sense of an unmediated revelatory state of consciousness are familiar with somewhat tired debates about a 'common core' of mysticism and the positions on either side of this debate. Scholars of mysticism are also well aware that narratives of mystical experience are invariably culturally constructed (Mexican Catholics see the Blessed Virgin Mary and speak about it in Spanish, Tibetan Buddhists see Chenrezig and describe the vision in Tibetan, etc.),<7> and that narratives about experiences are narratives, not the 'original' experience. Moreover, it is common knowledge that what is meant by 'mysticism' changes over time. A recent insightful survey of 'Mysticism and Spirituality' by Richard King<8> summarises these debates and points to the modern trend to 'privatisation' and 'psychologisation' of religion in which, as King puts it, 'ineffability in the modern study of mysticism and spirituality has become a question of the indescribable nature of intense and private experiences rather than a reflection of the traditional exploration of the transcendental majesty of God or the ultimate reality'.<9>

However, Sharf raises even more fundamental questions about the very notion of 'experience', such as whether mystical or religious experiences really do occur apart from their expression, whether such experiences are at some level sui generis (i.e. special to religion and resistant to a deconstructive or reductive analysis) and whether such experiences are therefore peculiarly suited to study by specialists in religion.

Sharf's article should, in my view, be recognised as an important contribution to debate on theory and method in the study of religion, for it is not just a study of notions of mystical or religious experience but a challenge to the very foundational myth of the modern study of religions. As we shall see below, Sharf asks: if religious experience does not exist as an object of study, what justifies the existence of the study of religions as a distinctive discipline? In writings on religion the term 'experience' is still widely used, and often unreflectively used. <10> Even if we resist Sharf's conclusion that the concept of experience has no future as an analytical category in the study of religions, reading Sharf should at least cause us to pause when we are next tempted to use the word 'experience' in a sentence about religion, mysticism or spirituality.

Among those of my acquaintance who have actually read Sharf's essay, most react somewhat negatively towards both Sharf's arguments and his conclusions<11> However, it is considerably easier to disagree with Sharf than to argue cogently against him. And why would one want to do either? There are many theorists of religion, committed to a view of religion as an entirely public, culturally and politically embedded human phenomenon, potentially fully explicable through the methods of the social, human and cognitive sciences, who would happily endorse Sharf's central conclusion that all attempts to signify 'inner experience' are destined to remain "well-meaning squirms that get us nowhere" (a phrase of Samuel Beckett).<12> Such theorists would see no need to restate - since Sharf has presented them so well - the arguments which lead to that conclusion, still less to consider counter-arguments which might bring a sui generis notion of religious experience, of the kind espoused by William James or Rudolf Otto, back into the academic conversation about religions.<13>

However, not all scholars take the view that religion, including religious experience, is explicable in purely human or materialistic terms; that it can, as it were, be explained away. Whether the wellspring of constantly-emerging human religiosity is construed as neural activity, the unconscious, cosmic energy, a higher power, Nature, God(dess), inherent enlightenment or (no-)self, many scholars who wish to preserve the dignity of religious voices in their academic work would be unwilling to concede that narratives of religious experience are merely 'squirms that get us nowhere'. The phrase is, after all, demeaning. To date, however, I have seen no convincing alternative argument about religious experience which takes Sharf's critique of experience fully into account. This article is therefore a first attempt to rehabilitate, or at least reprise<14>, 'experience' after Sharf.<15>

SHARF'S ARGUMENT

Those who are already familiar with Sharf's 'Experience' essay may wish to skip the following few sections, but since the essay in question is not available on the web, a review of the argument may be useful, though it cannot supplant the eloquence or cogency of the original. Moreover, my glosses on Sharf's argument will reveal what I understand to be the main planks in that argument; others may take a different view.

Sharf begins by observing that students (of religion) are very interested in mysticism because most if not all think that religious, especially mystical, teachings are derived from religious experiences. Sharf, however, criticises this naïve notion of the relation between 'experience' and 'religion'. He argues that, emerging from the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, William James, Rudolf Otto and others who placed experience at the heart of their analysis of religion, 'experience' has come to play a pivotal role in the modern study of religions for two main reasons. The first is that religious experience (seemingly) provides the empirical element which makes religious phenomena religious.<16> Religious experience actually happens to human beings in the world; it thus apparently confounds the sceptic's or materialist's claim that religion relies on delusory beliefs about immaterial realms. The second reason is that recognising a religious experience (across traditions) allowed liberal Western theologians to acknowledge the value, if not the ultimate truth, of non-Christian religions.<17> For many Western scholars of religion influenced by this liberal approach to religious plurality, concepts such as 'religious experience', 'the sacred', 'the holy' etc. made comparative religion and religious pluralism possible.

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE: CORE OR CONSTRUCTED?

A dominant trend of thought in the twentieth century regarded mystical experience in terms of a 'core' experience which was ultimately beyond words. Different cultural or religious factors accounted for the many different peripheral expressions of the same core experience. (A classic expression of this idea is found in Aldous Huxley's The Perennial Philosophy). The perennialist or 'common core' approach to mysticism remains extremely popular today. Supported by 'first hand' accounts of mystical or religious experiences past and present, it argues that mystics in different times and places are talking about essentially the same spiritual consummation, and essentially the same method of achieving it, albeit under different

names. Inconsistencies can be explained by cultural and linguistic variations or by the human corruption of pristine teachings.<18> Opposition to this 'common core' view (and its variants; for example that there are two, or more, 'core' types of mystical experience, or that mystical experiences bear a family resemblance to each other even though not exactly identical) came from constructivists such as Steven Katz, and latterly Grace Jantzen, who argued that we have access only to texts, narratives and accounts, not to the experiences themselves. These culture-specific narratives, moreover, do not reveal any 'common core'. In fact, as the 'core-periphery' theory itself suggests by relegating them to the periphery, they exhibit significant differences. These differences are insignificant only for those who, for one reason or another, cleave to the common core theory as a priori.<19>

From his constructivist perspective Katz argues that there is no reason to assume that a 'mystical' experience is unmediated. Nothing else that we experience is independent of our context and conditioning, even dreams, which, like chemically induced states of mind, are often used as a convenient analogue to mystical experiences. To 'remember' a dream is to recount it to ourselves or others, in words used in this world. A dream which we cannot remember at all is a non-event. For all practical purposes, Sharf points out (following Malcolm), the dream is the remembering of it, not 'the dream itself'.<20>

THE GENEALOGY OF 'EXPERIENCE'

Sharf instead wants to examine the modern genealogy of the term 'experience'. After Schleiermacher, the appeal to personal experience became a primary resource for the defence of religion against a secular/scientific critique which from the 19th century onwards threatened to destroy religion as a system of knowledge. In modern times, Asian religions in particular have been routinely represented as experience-based forms of spirituality; religions which are experientially derived (and also therefore experientially verifiable).<21> Such and such a form of religious teaching, it is said, is true not because it is revealed in a holy book or taught by an authority figure but because it originates from an authoritative spiritual experience; a special state of consciousness. However, today's 'hermeneutic of experience', Sharf argues, has no basis in real religious history. That is to say, Asian religions did not emphasise 'experience' - let alone experience as the source of religious authority - before Westerners started saying that they did. To substantiate this claim, Sharf draws on his own work on modern Asian meditation traditions (South-East Asian Vipassana and Japanese Zen). Sharf points out that in Japan the terms used for 'experience' (keiken or taiken) are both late nineteenth century neologisms used to translate the imported English and German terms for experience. No indigenous equivalent existed.<22>

Sharf writes of the situation today that:

"Contemporary accounts of Asian meditation typically presume that they are oriented towards meditative experience … [yet] even when practiced, it is by no means obvious that traditional forms of meditation were oriented toward the attainment of extraordinary 'states of consciousness'. Meditation was first and foremost a means of eliminating defilement, accumulating merit and supernatural power, invoking apotropaic deities,<23> and so forth. This is not to deny that religious practitioners had experiences in the course of their training, just that such experiences were not considered the goal of practice, were not deemed doctrinally authoritative, and did not serve as the reference points for their understanding of the path."<24>

Nowadays, observes Sharf, we find it hard to think what else Asian religions are about, if not experience,<25> but this image of Asian religion is due entirely to the impact of a handful of Western-educated or Western-influenced 19th-20th century 'representatives' of Asian religions (Sharf names Radhakrishnan, Tagore and Suzuki). All were united in making the case that Asian religion possessed the 'spirituality' and 'experience of the sacred' missing in Western externalised religiosity. In other words, a few powerful Western-oriented Asian voices promulgated a 'reversed Orientalism' in the service of Asian nationalism. Identifying religious experience (whether Zen or Vedanta) as the wellspring of Asian culture implied 'the apotheosis of an entire people'.<26> Sharf speculates that this reversed Orientalism was an attempt to balance Asian inferiority in modern scientific and technological knowledge and imperial dominance, while Richard King looks at the issue from the other side, arguing that the Western construction of the 'mystic East' facilitated a view of colonised peoples as world-denying, amoral and lacking the impulse to improve society.<27> Either way, a few Western-oriented Asian intellectuals writing in English certainly came to be regarded as authentic representatives of Asian spirituality, with profound consequences for subsequent generations of scholarly and popular interpreters of the East. There is no doubt that the initial curiosity of Western students about Asian religions has often been piqued by the presentation of these religions as the allegedly mystical, experience-based 'other' of Western credalism and externalised ritual.<28> Subsequent comparisons of 'Western' and 'Eastern' thought, says Sharf, completely failed to notice the tenuous ground on which the exchange had been built.<29>

WHAT IS EXPERIENCE?

Sharf then goes on to examine the idea of 'experience'. The problem is that while experience seems to be immediate and unmediated (and presumed pace Descartes to be immaterial), as soon as we attach any content to it we objectify it and make it part of public discourse. An

experience may be ineffable, but if it is, nothing further can be said of it. In the words of Wittgenstein's colleague Frank Ramsey, quoted by Sharf at the head of his 'Buddhist Modernisms' article, 'What we can't say we can't say, and we can't whistle either'. (The shade of Wittgenstein is felt strongly here, as throughout Sharf's argument; 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'.)<30> To know anything about an experience, even our own experience, we have to know if it is for example 'shamanic', 'mystical', a feeling of 'dependence', 'bliss', 'timelessness', and so forth, and these are publicly shared concepts, not inner experiences. To illustrate his point, Sharf refers to contemporary Vipassana meditation traditions in SE Asia. Among different teachers, accounts of inner mystical or meditational states conflict; the various accounts of what a meditator experiences constitute a contested set of textual traditions, not a reflection of common inner states. The sequence and contents vary, and more often than not the categories are in fact used to disparage competitor teachers – and the same is true in Zen. Judgements about 'experience' (as well as appointments to mastership, etc.) are actually made on the basis of public features such as authentic lineage, behaviour and vocation. The authenticity of the master's inner experience is in practice read off from the manifest fact of their appointment as a master, not the other way round. 'Experience', insofar as it has any content, is inevitably part of a hermeneutical circle.<31>

At this point, Sharf acknowledges, the vigilant reader will be objecting that surely 'something' must be going on? How can millennia of spiritual practice and mystical teachings not be based on experiences? But the idea that narratives of 'experience' originate with those 'experiences' assumes that 'mind' is separate from 'the world' in some way (as the 'mirror of nature', etc.). There is no evidence, says Sharf, that 'inner' mental (or spiritual) events point to anything beyond themselves. It is here that Sharf introduces a test case which presents a real challenge to the 'authority of experience' camp: the experience of alien abduction.

EXPERIENCE OF ALIEN ABDUCTION

Claims of abduction by alien extraterrestrials have been reported by thousands of ordinary citizens in the USA in the twentieth century. The details vary but the essentials are similar (rather like mystical experiences). The finer details of each abduction case are often revealed through priest-like therapists and hypnotists who have made a specialism out of the treatment of traumatised abductees.<32> However, Sharf reminds us, there is no corroborating evidence to show that anyone has ever in fact been abducted by space beings. There is no 'originary event'<33>, only the experience. The experiencers are (in most cases) patently sincere about what they have experienced, but their narrative is without question culturally generated; by comics, TV programmes, films and popular literature about extraterrestrials including alien abduction narratives.<34> Sharf's follow-up question is obvious: why should we believe the words of shamans, mystics and meditation masters any more than abductees? Authoritative religious teachings, supported by authoritative religious institutions, constitute the widespread, publicly mediated content of the truths perceived in religious or mystical experiences, in exactly the same way that popular science fiction discourse, including abductees' tales, provides the content of the experience of having been abducted. Why should we believe in either case that the reverse is true; that the experience proves the truth of the narrative?<35> This seems to me a very good question indeed, though I do not share Sharf's apparent confidence that it is only a rhetorical question.

Sharf argues that as scholars of religion we are never presented with unmediated 'inner' experiences but always with culturally conditioned narratives, texts, rituals and performances. Our knowledge about religion is not therefore knowledge about 'inner' experiences which require to be interpreted, even if someone may state (as part of a public discourse) that it is.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Finally, Sharf asks, why is 'experience' so extraordinarily important to us today? It is because, he says, "our last line of defence [of the personal life] has been the valorization of the 'autonomous self' construed as a unique and irreducible center of experience".<36> To abandon 'experience' (as a synonym for the inviolable inner world of one's autonomous self) might be to give ourselves up to reductionist accounts of self. Here, the modern notion of selfhood and self-determination needs to be examined. As a rule, we want to accept the irreducible selfhood of 'others' out of respect and sensitivity to others' selfhood. Behind this, no doubt, is the expectation that others will treat my own selfhood with equal respect. But when others' claims of experience contradict our own, we also want to reserve the right to look for other explanations. For example, if in our view the facts do not fit, we want to be able to say that an experience of alien abduction is just that: an experience, that it is not in fact an instance of real (by which both we and the abductee mean physical) abduction by real, physical aliens. Sharf draws the analogy with near-death experience narratives which are historically formed;<37> they are not individual self-authenticating experiences of a separate 'inner psychological world' separate from this one and accessible by phenomenological description. Sharf therefore wants to criticise constructivism (as applied to mystical experience by Katz, Jantzen et al.) as itself a wrong understanding of the relation between 'inner' mind and 'outer' world. Constructivists naïvely assume that since the historical and cultural factors giving rise to the account of an inner experience are identical to those giving rise to the experience, the account provides a 'window to' or 'mirror of' the experience. (For example, a constructivist will on the one hand assert that Catholics have visions of the Virgin Mary because the Virgin Mary

is a focus of Catholic belief, but on the other hand think of the visions as additional to the beliefs on the basis of which the vision is constructed.) This, says Sharf is to assume that mind is separate from world but can nevertheless be objectified; that is, be spoken of in the same terms as the external world. For Sharf, there are not two parallel, mirrored or mutually conjoined entities, one being inner wordless experience and the other outer public narrative. Instead, there is only the public, shared narrative. This includes in modern times a public narrative which dwells excessively (in Sharf's view) upon the notion of private 'inner' experiences that are beyond words. This narrative about ineffable experience is historically grounded in nineteenth century reversed Orientalism and, because it supports the Western ideology of the autonomous self, it is now hegemonic to the extent that it appears to us self-evident.

Sharf concludes that:
"The word 'experience', insofar as it refers to that which is given to us in the immediacy of perception, signifies that which by definition is nonobjective, that which resists all signification. In other words, the term experience cannot make ostensible something that exists in the world. The salient characteristic of private experience that distinguishes it from 'objective reality' is thus its unremitting indeterminacy. At the same time, the rhetoric of experience tacitly posits a place where signification comes to an end, variously styled 'mind', 'consciousness' the 'mirror of nature' or what have you. The category experience is, in essence, a mere placeholder that entails a substantive if indeterminate terminus for the relentless deferral of meaning. And this is precisely what makes the term experience so amenable to ideological appropriation. … All attempts to signify 'inner experience' are destined to remain 'well-meaning squirms that get us nowhere'" (quoting Samuel Beckett).<38>

MAPS AND MYSTICISM
When in 1993 I wrote a short piece for a volume called 'Mapping Invisible Worlds' I did not anticipate the critique Sharf would later offer of mystical experience, but I did pose the problem of representing mystical experience as a signified or signifying entity. My argument there, which compared mystical teachings to maps of a terrain, ran broadly as follows:

Ordinary maps are not prescriptive, or not intentionally so. For example, a road map may show that all roads lead to Rome, but it also shows that all roads lead away from Rome; it does not imply that one should go towards Rome rather than away from it.<39> By contrast, spiritual maps (that is to say, narratives, teachings and parables which purport to teach some kind of spiritual path)<40> insofar as they describe a path from A (our present state of separation, suffering, powerlessness, ignorance, unenlightenment, etc.) to Z (the desired state of love, bliss, nirvana, self-realisation, apotheosis, etc.), may appear as ordinary maps, but in fact they prescribe a journey in only one direction; from A to Z.<41> Being prescriptive as to the direction of travel, such maps inevitably describe the journey as it looks from A (here) and not as it looks from Z (there). But implicit in this asymmetry of perspective is that the terrain will be represented differently at each step. The act of following a map drawn from the standpoint of A leads to a different view of the journey at each stage (B, C, etc.) which cannot be represented on the map, since the map is drawn from the standpoint of A and the standpoint will have changed.

This characteristic of mystical maps is illustrated by reference to the story of the gnat and the wind in book three of the Mathnavi of Jallalu'ddin Rumi. The gnat appeals to Solomon for justice against the Wind, whose strength oppresses him. Solomon agrees to hear the case but only with both parties present. But as soon as the Wind arrives in court the gnat is blown away. In other words, the gnat's (the seeker's) point of view is destined to be superseded by that of the wind (God). Commenting on this parable Rumi says 'Even such is the seeker of the court of God; when God comes, the seeker is naughted'.<42> In other words, as we follow the map, the map changes.

This principle is made explicit in the Mahayana Buddhist text The Lotus Sutra, in the well-known parable of the Magic City.<43> A group of travellers is crossing a dense forest to reach the Isle of Jewels, led by a guide. Realising that the travellers are weary and despondent, the guide uses his powers to create an illusory city, much nearer than the real objective, as a place of repose. Spurred to effort, the travellers reach the city (the lesser citadel of insular nirvana) only to find that their real destination is farther on. Roger Corless says that such Mahayana teachings deconstruct notions of 'Buddha nature' and similar cognomens of 'experience', which suggests that "although Buddhism has … a good deal to say about 'innate capacity' and 'mystical experience' its ultimate goal is the deconstruction of these concepts and the phenomena they imply".<44> In much the same way, Rumi's gnat is tempted by the prospect of its day in court, only to lose its self to something greater.

According to Sharf's critique of experience, such narrative 'maps', however self-subverting, are nevertheless still public, historically and culturally conditioned narratives-in-the-world. They do not signify, reflect or correspond to any 'inner' experiences we might think they describe. Try as we might, it seems that we cannot make any meaningful one-to-one connection between these spiritual maps and any unmediated inner mystical experience to which, ostensibly, they refer. We seem to have reached an impasse. Nothing can be said about anything that is not

already sayable, visible or (as Ramsey would say) whistleable; that is, capable of being publicly represented. Meanwhile, nothing that is sayable transcends the cultural-linguistic context in which it is said. Experience signifies only insofar as it forms part of culture, but experience that forms part of culture is not unmediated, and is thus not an independent source of knowledge. Can anything be salvaged for the study of religions (assuming we wish to salvage anything) from Sharf's provocative, interesting and persuasive critical deconstruction of the notion of 'experience' and in particular of mystical experience?

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE OR MYSTICISM?

Accepting for the moment what Sharf says about the concept of mystical experience as a 'well-meaning squirm', what can be said about mysticism? I think it is helpful at this point to distinguish between on the one hand 'mysticism' as a teaching, and on the other hand the idea of 'mystical experience'. 'Mysticism'is the teaching, the tradition-in-the-world, the narrative. It may comprise many forms of communication including ritual practices, images, music, buildings, sacred places, ritual calendars, and theologies. The study of mysticism in this sense has no need to address the idea of 'mystical experience' unless the idea of such an experience is explicitly enshrined in the tradition, and if Sharf is right to say that 'experience' was not the goal of mystical religious traditions until we moderns identified it as such in the nineteenth century, this means we need not include in our study of historical mysticisms any notion of mystical experience at all. Clearing the ground of the clutter of 'experience' talk could well help us to appreciate that when past mystics and religious teachers talked of the goal of religious practice in terms of power, safety, love, detachment or purity they meant what they said. 'Mystical experience', by contrast, does figure prominently in modern public narratives about mysticism, and as King points out in relation to the 'privatisation' and 'psychologisation' of spirituality, it is now widely regarded as both the source and the goal of religious practice; the inner reality 'behind' any mystical teachings, rituals, sounds or buildings. Indeed, as Sharf insists, modern interest in mysticism tends to focus almost exclusively on the notion of 'having an experience', to the exclusion of other factors. What this suggests is that when we look at modern forms of mysticism we do have to factor in the role of 'experience', because the idea of 'mystical experience' is very likely to be enshrined in any modern mystical teaching.

At this point, it is useful to make a further distinction, this time between 'speaking' and 'teaching' religion. This is a distinction I examined at some length in relation to (a) being religious, (b) teaching religion and (c) teaching about religion in the academy, in an essay entitled 'RAP, RFL and ROL: Language and Religion in Higher Education'.<45> In that paper, I proposed an analogy between the speaking and teaching of a language (for example, English), and the 'speaking' and 'teaching' of a religion (for example, Zoroastrianism). Without wishing to push the analogy too far, I likened the ordinary adherent of a religious tradition to the casual speaker of a language; fluent, no doubt, but in most cases unable and unqualified to teach the language to someone who does not know it. In the same way, religious adherents may be comfortable in their own religious standpoint, but without developing some special skills and abilities they are hardly able to teach it to others. This is not because of any deficiency in (respectively) language ability or religious devotion, it simply reflects the fact that teaching others involves an art, a special capacity, which goes beyond the mere ability to state one's position or point of view. Religions, like schools and universities would be very different institutions if they lacked teachers, though the role of teaching is often underrated. While teaching of course presumes knowledge of content, beyond this it requires knowledge and understanding of one's audience; the ability to understand their language as well as one's own, so to say. Teaching involves far more than a simple speaking of one's mind. The idea that what we say is simply a one-to-one reflection of our inner thoughts and images is naïve, even in the case of 'ordinary' speaking; how much more so in the case of the teaching of a mystical tradition? If we don't just say whatever we think, why should we expect a gifted teacher's words to be a simple expression of what he or she thinks?

It is important therefore to recognise that mysticism, by which is meant any specific mystical tradition, is first and foremost a religious teaching. As such, it takes the form not of reports of private experience but of a memory chain or authoritative tradition, <46> as Sharf would no doubt agree.

THE SWAMI AND THE RORSCHACH

Two examples of modern writings about mysticism might help us here. The first is in a chapter by Diane Jonte-Pace entitled 'The Swami and the Rorschach: Spiritual Practice, Religious Experience and Perception'<47> Jonte-Pace reviews studies of Rorschach inkblot tests applied between 1950 and 1980 on an Indian Vedantic master (Swami Sivananda), some Apache shamans and 'pseudoshamans' and a selection of advanced Buddhist Vipassana meditators. The results demonstrated that these spiritual practitioners had incorporated their own tradition's teachings to an exceptional degree. They consistently discerned and articulated their group's teachings in the inkblot (in other words, they taught from the inkblot) and, perhaps due to the meditative/spiritual training which had attuned them to the constant flux and change of reality, they were comfortable with 'vague' and 'slippery' elements which in ordinary subjects might indicate pathology (anxiety, depression, etc.).

Jonte-Pace was unable to use her data to resolve the constructivist/decontextualist debate about mystical experiences or meditative states. This is no more than we would expect from our reading of Sharf, since there is nothing to debate beyond the public narratives. Jonte-Pace's cautious conclusion from analysis of the studies - she draws back from affirming, as some of the original investigators did, that the Rorschach tests 'confirm' descriptions of Buddhist meditative states - is that spiritual practices, as assessed by the Rorschach tests, lead to 'perceptual deautomatization'; that is, conscious awareness of processes which most of us have automatised. "But" she says "we cannot finally determine whether the practice removes cultural obstacles that previously obscured something hidden and innate. This dilemma remains undecidable". Jonte-Pace refers instead to Winnicott's formulation of the infant's first encounter with the world as simultaneously a creation and discovery; "the infant creates what is in fact … waiting to be found. …Yet the object must be found in order to be created."<48> Sharf would no doubt point out that this reciprocal creation and discovery, even in respect of mystical experience, is a process entirely 'in the world' and if anything it reinforces the argument that 'inner experience' is a concept, not a thing. What these tests do reveal however is that articulate spiritual practitioners, if immersed in a particular mystical tradition, persistently engage in teaching even while taking standardised psychological tests. Whereas ordinary subjects might see a cloud, granny's face or a map of Albania in the inkblot and be disturbed by unresolvable shapes, these teachers see only their tradition's teachings manifested in the shapes before them. The strong implication is that teachers steeped in a particular mystical tradition will automatically teach that tradition, regardless of the circumstances.

THE POISONED SWEET METHOD

The second and rather different example is of the British-born writer and broadcaster John Wren-Lewis. Narrowly escaping death after accepting a poisoned sweet from a would-be thief on a bus in Thailand, the 60-year old Wren-Lewis awoke in hospital to find that permanent 'God-consciousness' had been thrust upon him. The state he woke up with he describes as 'dazzling dark'. This state he differentiates from a Near Death Experience because (a) it had none of the classic NDE features of tunnel, light etc, and (b) it stayed with him permanently. <49>

He says "I simply entered – or rather was – a timeless, spaceless void which in some indescribable way was total aliveness – an almost palpable blackness that was yet somehow radiant. Trying to find words for it afterwards, I recalled the mysterious line of Henry Vaughan's poem The Night: 'There is in God (some say) a deep but dazzling darkness'. He continues: "An even more marked difference from the general run of near-death experiences however, was that I had absolutely no sense of regret or loss in coming back from this joy-beyond-joy, this peace past understanding, into physical life. In fact my experience as the hospital's ministrations restored the body's vital signs was nothing like a return. It was more like an act of creation whereby the timeless, spaceless dark budded out into manifestation, and what manifested was simply not the same me-experiencing-the-world that I'd known before: it was Everything that is, experiencing itself through the bodymind called John lying in a hospital bed. And the experience was indescribably wonderful. I now know exactly why the Book of Genesis says that God looked upon all that he had made, not just beautiful sunsets, but dreary hospital rooms and traumatized sixty-year old bodies, and saw that it was very good. He goes on to say that "the new consciousness has remained with me ever since"<50>

I have no doubt that Wren-Lewis is experiencing the world differently from me and differently from his former self. However it is notable that he has little or no idea what to make of his profound experience beyond describing it. He scours the mystical literature for information and finds that much of it is 'bunk'. For example, most systems say that attaining enlightenment is very difficult and only for the few, while Wren-Lewis finds his God-consciousness quintessentially ordinary. Yet he finds few who share his perception. The perspective that Wren-Lewis articulates appears to correspond quite closely to a 'cool unstructured' type of spiritual world-view<51> but Wren-Lewis insists that he is not himself a teacher: 'I had an overwhelming wish to pass on the awakening to others somehow, but had received no divine commission to be a guru, and indeed hadn't a clue what to suggest, since I could scarcely recommend taking a potentially fatal dose of poison'. He finds affinity mainly with Krishnamurti who taught that one needs no teacher.<52> Interestingly, Wren-Lewis had a long history of religious inquiry (as a devout skeptic) before the life-transforming event in Thailand<53> and simply by repeating his narrative publicly he has come to be regarded as a guru of sorts, similar to Krishnamurti or to Andrew Cohen whose message can perhaps be summarised as that there is nothing to learn, only wrong ideas to unlearn (and that spiritual teachers who claim otherwise are misleading).<54> Wren-Lewis describes no path to enlightenment because he believes there is none, and he posits no metaphysical 'other' (such as God) because in his view there is nothing beyond the right here and right now, albeit seen differently from before. Wren-Lewis is particularly hostile to teachings which outline structured spiritual paths and this appears to be because he knows what he sees, not how to teach others. What makes Wren-Lewis something of a celebrity in contemporary Western spiritual publishing circles is his narration of an unusual, enduring 'experience' (i.e. an altered state of mind) which he describes very positively and in terms which are part religious-mystical and part scientific. Reports of such private experiences, as Sharf reminds us, carry immense significance for our

modern culture<55> since they appear to confirm empirically the existence of that 'autonomous self' construed as 'a unique and irreducible centre of experience; a self which is constantly under attack from scientistic/ reductionist accounts of human Being.<56>

TEACHING AND TALKING

The fact that Wren-Lewis does not have a spiritual path to teach to others does not mean that others don't know how to teach, including at least some of those who underwent the Rorschach test, and indeed many of the modern spiritual gurus and teachers whose spiritual paths Wren-Lewis is keen to dismiss.<57> Thus, we can draw further distinctions between (a) mysticism as an outward teaching or tradition, (b) 'mystical experience' as a signifier of an autonomous inner self in contemporary discourse, (c) those who teach mysticism and (d) those who talk about 'mystical experience'. William James, Otto, Huxley, Katz, Jonte-Pace, Jantzen, King, Sharf, and all the rest (including, in this article, me) are teachers only in the sense that we talk about 'mysticism' and about 'mystical experience'. We are not teachers of mysticism. Teachers of mysticism also deal in words; they are 'out there' and as Sharf correctly observes, in premodern times they were concerned with matters such as eliminating defilment, accumulating merit, loving God, invoking apotropaic deities and acquiring supernatural powers. <58> It is we in the modern world who are interested in 'mystical experience', even though mystics generally say that such experiences are not a reliable source of knowledge, at least as compared with teachings.

MAP READING

Failing to distinguish adequately between (a) discussing mystical experience and (b) teaching mysticism is perhaps the hallmark of those who pursue MAP or Mysticism for Academic Purposes. Wren-Lewis, so far as I can tell, is a 'speaker' of mystic perception. He is a particularly articulate one, as befits a career writer and broadcaster. He cannot, however, suggest any way for others to experience his 'dazzling darkness' and he explicitly denies that he has a teaching. Other similar cases, such as the thousands of ordinary individuals who report fleeting, unsolicited experiences to research bodies such as the Alister Hardy Centre; <59> experiences which are then classified as 'mystical' or 'religious', again suggest speakers of mystical experience, not teachers of mysticism. Just as most native speakers of English have no idea how to teach the language to others because they cannot speak the other's language and have never studied applied linguistics, so, as 'speakers' of mystic perception, ordinary religious experiencers have no inkling about how to bring about their perception in others.

This leaves the gurus, roshis, meditation masters and shamans; teachers often with long experience of 'incorporating' a particular spiritual or mystical system who, as Sharf has shown, often draw on competing, inconsistent and contradictory spiritual narratives. These teaching narratives are 'maps' in which, as Sharf observes, we modern map-readers these days look only or mainly for the non-verbal 'experience' we are so keen to discover. We seek such sensations for the modern reasons Sharf has outlined, even though such experiences were historically not present in mystical discourses which focused instead on protection, power, love, detachment generosity, surrender, propitiation or knowledge. All mystical teachers, qua teachers, operate some or other such taught system of mysticism, ostensibly designed to lead us from A (no detachment, no love of God, etc.) to Z (liberation, love of God, etc.). The academic study (as opposed to the following) of these systems is MAP; mysticism for academic purposes. The naïve assumption that mystical teachings just mirror mystics' inner experiences is simply naïve MAP, as Sharf has shown.

Teachers, as teachers, do not just say what they think. (Even academics seldom do this.) An effective teacher is one who addresses a particular pupil, taking into account the pupil's situation, what s/he wants and needs, and what will bring about effective learning. Something that probably we all want is a map or narrative which shows us how to get from A (where we think we are now) to Z (where we think we want to be in future). However, the very idea of spiritual growth or development implies that the destination which attracts us from the perspective of the starting point will bear little relationship to the real destination. Rumi's gnat dreams of his day of triumph in court, not of being blown away by God's presence. Apophatic traditions, both East and West, warn that words and concepts are necessary but should not be clung to once they have outlived their usefulness.<60>

The Lotus Sutra, in its parable of the magic city, makes explicit this process by providing an example of a 'map' which is at the same time a skilful and well-intentioned deception deployed by a dedicated guide; a deception which therefore works. Mystical teachings comprise many such maps, perhaps as many as there are guides, and if my analysis of the nature of spiritual maps holds good, the implication is that the map will change as the traveller travels; as 'where I think I am now' changes, so does 'where I want to go to'. Competing maps (which appeal to different audiences) and tussles over whose map is better (success in this contest reinforces confidence in the authority of the map) would seem to be entirely consistent with the audience-dependent pedagogical character of a spiritual map.

CONCLUSIONS

Returning to our initial problem, of what can be salvaged of 'experience' after Sharf, we may make the following observations:

The fact that 'experience' (and its translations in Japanese, etc.) is a neologism in mystical contexts, that it has acquired a special value only in [post]modernity, does not render it meaningless. In fact the reverse is true. Language, like everything else, including mysticism, keeps up with the times. If, before the advent of modernity, meditation or spiritual practices (in their many forms) were conceived primarily as a means to acquire purity or power, or to submit to God, or to invoke apotropaic deities, this is because these objectives, in their cultural context, were desirable and attractive. As Sharf shows, in modernity the notion of obtaining a 'mystical experience' has largely usurped these earlier goals, and this is undoubtedly because in modernity we value above all the affirmation of an inviolable autonomous self, for all the reasons Sharf outlines. This does not, however, mean that meditational practices which previously were deemed to lead to purity, submission, love or protection now lead instead to private mystical experiences, only that the publicly articulated and shared teachings undergirding such spiritual practices have changed with the times. We seek 'experience' these days because 'experience' signifies in our modern vocabulary a very significant, perhaps even ultimate, religious goal, while 'purity' 'detachment' and 'protection' or even 'escape from rebirth' may no longer appeal in the way that they once did.

The rise and rise of 'experience' as the sole empirical guarantor of the inviolable inner self in modernity does not mean, either, that the self is in fact inviolable. Our (current) commonsense conviction that we have a self which is (a) grounded in private experience and (b) constitutes an autonomous agent, is persistently contradicted by the methodologies of the psychological, neurological and social sciences, which typically see the idea of self as a cultural or psychological variable; a construct. In fact, mystical traditions and traditional religions too have often regarded the self as less important and substantial than it appears to the common person. Mystical teachings often identify the sense of 'I-ness' as the self-perception of a limited 'lower' self; as 'no-self'; as 'mere' ego, etc.. For a contemporary teacher of mysticism to proffer 'experience' as a religious goal could indicate a naïve, modernistic over-valorisation of 'self' by that teacher, but it could equally reflect a skilful teacher's understanding that, in the world-view of modern disciples, the notion of 'self' occupies an exceedingly important, if precarious, place, and an 'experience' of self is therefore an attractive proposition.

Either way, we might legitimately expect contemporary forms of mystical teaching to refer positively and often to 'experience', simply because people these days think that is what mysticism should be about. Experience, in short, has become our magic city. This does not mean that seeking after 'experience' is somehow shallower than seeking after God, or that seeking after experience leads to experience. A map, and a journey, have to start with where we are. This of course begs some rather large questions, such as whether contemporary mystical teachings which explicitly valorise the notion of 'experience' are as authentic and reliable as mystical teachings in past contexts which did not, and whither, if followed, such modern paths might lead, if not to the 'mystical experience' which these days, and from our beginning perspective, we find so irresistible.

However, these are questions which cannot easily be answered by MAP; the academic study of mysticisms. We are confined to the study of the different mystical systems; the mysticisms available to us in the world as teaching narratives, without for a moment being able to distinguish 'good' mystical maps and guides from 'bad' ones, except of course on the basis of private judgement. This study can I think be quite adequately pursued on the basis of a multidimensional model of religion attuned to modern concerns, such as that associated with Smart's phenomenology of religion, in which the dimension of 'experience' is acknowledged where it occurs in the teaching, but is not given special priority over related elements within the mystical tradition such as 'ethics', 'symbols', 'doctrines', 'rituals' or 'myths', etc..

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NOTES

All internet sites referred to below were consulted on 8 August 2006.

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the BASR Annual Conference (Oxford) 2004, at the XIXth IAHR Congress in Tokyo (2005) and in the SOAS Staff-Postgraduate Research Seminar in London (2005). I am grateful to many colleagues for their comments; of course any mistakes and misunderstandings remain my own.

<1> Robert H. Sharf 'Experience' in Mark Taylor (ed.) Critical Terms for Religious Studies. Princeton, 1998, pp.94-116.

<2> This paper (like Sharf's) is not about the definition of 'religious' or 'mystical', but examines the widely-held assumption that a religious or mystical teaching can be understood as the outward (verbal) expression of an inner (ineffable) experience.

<3> Sharf 'Experience' p.111

<4> Robert H. Sharf, 'Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience' Numen, Vol. 42 (1995), pp.228-283.

<5> The quip was Michael Pye's. Probably the high point in theoretical studies of mysticism in the postwar period was Stephen Katz (ed.) Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis (1987) which challenged the foundational 'common core' or 'perennial philosophy' approaches found in William James, Rudolf Otto and Aldous Huxley, though as Sharf points out, scholarly articles which persist in regarding 'mystical experience' or 'meditative experience' as objective referents continue to appear on a regular basis in respected journals ('Experience', p.103).

<6> For examples of each of these see: http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~gallaghr/paris2000.html , http://www.sover.net/~sharing/gender.html , http://skepdic.com/nde.html , http://homepages.which.net/~michael.millett/index-page3.html , http://www.uucnwt.org/sermons/prideAndPrejudiceTheQueerExpToday.html , http://org.elon.edu/cyber/project.htm .

<7> See for example: on the Blessed Virgin Mary http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4468275.stm , on Chenrezig (Avalokiteshvara) http://www.gadenrelief.org/chu-fast.html . All sorts of people see Elvis: http://www.elvissightingbulletinboard.com/SightingLog.shtml .

<8> Richard King, 'Mysticism and Spirituality' in John R. Hinnells (ed) The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion, London: Routledge, 2005, pp.306-322.

<9> King, 'Mysticism and Spirituality' p.320.

<10> The current Wikipedia article on 'mysticism' provides the following routine definition of mysticism, which rests on a repeated and unexamined notion of experience: " Mysticism ('to conceal') is the pursuit of communion with, or conscious awareness of ultimate reality, the divine, spiritual truth, or God through direct, personal experience (intuition or insight) rather than rational thought. Mystics speak of the existence of realities behind external perception or intellectual apprehension that are central to being and directly accessible through personal experience. They say that such experience is a genuine and important source of knowledge." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/mysticism

<11> Common responses are that Sharf discounts religious experience because he has not had a religious experience himself, or that he is over-rationalistic. Sharf anticipates both these objections in his chapter.

<12> Sharf 'Experience' p.110. The quotation is from Beckett's novel 'Malone Dies', one of a trilogy focusing appropriately on 'the search for the self within the tragic realm of human suffering' (see http://www.britannica.com/nobel/micro/734_38.html).

<13> The emerging field of cognitive studies or cognitive science of religion represents another attempt to instate the study of religions as a 'scientific' discipline, unashamedly seeking the 'causal mechanisms or processes underlying visible manifestations of religion' (Jesper Sørensen 'Religion in Mind: A review article of the cognitive science of religion' in Numen, Vol. 52, No. 4, 2005, pp.465-494 (p.468)

<14> Dennis F. Kelley argues (in relation to Native American death customs) that continuity should not be seen in terms of an authentic originary practice identified at a certain point in history (by academic experts) which either continues (as tradition) or is disrupted (lost to modernity). Instead, he argues, a community may 'reprise' its earlier traditions after a break, just as in a piece of music a theme may be reprised, not in quite the same form as before, but not different either. Denis F. Kelley 'The Politics of Death and Burial in Native California', in Kathleen Garces-Foley (ed.) Death and Religion in a Changing World, Armonk, New York: M. F. Sharpe, 2006, pp.3-22, esp. p.20.

<15> In doing so I am building on arguments about religion and religious teachings which I have outlined in previous publications. The distinction between 'teaching' and 'speaking' in respect of religion was first discussed in a paper called 'RAP, RFL and ROL; Language and Religion in Higher Education' in Wiebe and Masefield (eds) Aspects of Religion: Essays in Honour of Ninian Smart (New York: Peter Lang, 1994) while MAP (Mysticism for Academic Purposes) was introduced in a brief paper entitled "If You Meet the Buddha on the Map: The Notion of Mapping Spiritual Paths' in Gavin Flood (ed.) Mapping Invisible Worlds. (Cosmos: Journal of the Traditional Cosmology Society, Vol 9, 1993, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1994, pp.159-162. I anticipate that both papers will be available for reference on-line in the SOAS e-print repository at http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/ (click 'search' and enter 'Bocking' in the author search box).

<16> Experience, empirical, experiment, expert (and pirate) are etymologically related, from Greek 'per' meaning trial, attempt, etc. See http://www.bartleby.com/61/roots/IE397.html

<17> Imposing the term 'religion' on a wide range of phenomena similarly made comparison (and reification) possible, as Tim Fitzgerald has argued in
The Ideology of Religious Studies, OUP, 1993 and (in this journal) 'Religious Studies as Cultural

Studies: A Philosophical and Anthropological Critique of the Concept of Religion' (DISKUS Vol.3, No.1 (1995) pp.35-47: http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/fitzgerald.html .

<18> Human failing is often cited as the 'common core' explanation for contradictions in religious teachings which originated with mystics. For example, the science and mysticism writer Brian Hines argues that: 'the same mystical truths have been known since the dawn of recorded history … and can be discerned at the core of every major religion. Unfortunately, these truths are easily forgotten or misinterpreted by those who lack the perfect mystic's direct knowledge of Ultimate Reality' (God's Whisper, Creation's Thunder: Echoes of Ultimate Reality in the New Physics. Brattleboro, Vt.:Threshold Books, 1995, p.92.

<19> Sharf 'Experience' p.97.

<20> Sharf 'Experience' p.113.

<21> Examples are legion. See for example promotional material for Transcendental Meditation at http://www.mum.edu/tm 'The Transcendental Meditation technique allows your mind to settle inward beyond thought, to experience the source of thought — transcendental consciousness. This is the most silent and peaceful level of consciousness — your innermost Self.' Or see the Elan Vital website at http://thekeys.maharaji.net/downloads/DM_en/dm_en6.html .

<22> This point may be disputed on the grounds that it is not wrong to read the notion of 'experience' into older Asian religious terms, but Sharf would argue that we do this precisely because we have bought into the view that Asian religions are centred on 'experience'.

<23> i.e. deities who ward off evil (my note).

<24> Sharf 'Experience' p.99. The argument in relation to Buddhism is elaborated in Sharf's 'Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience' referred to above.

<25> This may not of course be a view held by academic specialists versed in Asian religions, but it undoubtedly helps attract students to our classes.

<26> Sharf 'Experience' p.101.

<27> King, 2005, p.320. William James' data on spontaneous personal religious experiences in the West of course challenged this stereotype, which might help to explain why The Varieties of Religious Experience stood almost alone in its field until introspective 'experience' became revalorised in the postcolonial period as the common ground linking mind-altering drugs, meditation techniques, NDEs and past life regression, etc.

<28> We might point for example to the general lack of interest in Pure Land or Nichiren Buddhism among Western scholars throughout most of the twentieth century, compared with the plethora of works on Zen, which became the paradigmatic form of East Asian spirituality. The reason is not hard to seek; Pure Land and Nichiren Buddhism were regarded as tediously similar to Western Christianity and 'prophetic' religion, whereas Zen (according to the writings of D T Suzuki) signified a spiritual experience thrilling beyond words.

<29> Sharf p.103

<30> These aphorisms by the early Wittgenstein (from the Tractatus) and by Ramsey are cited together at http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/6s.htm#tran

<31> Sharf 'Experience' pp.105-7.

<32> See for example http://www.viewzone.com/abduct.html

<33> This is not to say that abductees have not experienced an event which is strange and otherwise inexplicable to them, the most likely being a version of sleep paralysis, which is a phenomenon interpreted differently in different cultures. However, the event is not actually abduction, examination by aliens in a spacecraft etc..

<34> Again, one may question this confident assertion of fact over myth; after all, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. But the evidence (in millions of cases; up to 33 million in the USA according to the website mentioned in the previous note) is wholly of remembered experiences, or forgotten experiences 'remembered' through therapy; there is no independent evidence that abductions have taken place.

<35> Sharf 'Experience' pp.108-110.

<36> Sharf 'Experience' p.111.

<37> The reference is to Carol Zaleski's Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Mediaeval and Modern Times, Oxford: OUP, 1987, p.203. There is a New York Times review at: http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B0DE6DC113BF934A35757C0A961948260

<38> Sharf 'Experience' pp.113-4.

<39> This is at one level of course a very naïve observation. Maps can be highly political instruments, and many land maps include caveats about unconfirmed (i.e. disputed) borders and names. All maps are projections, and inevitably emphasise or distort some features at the expense of others; in this sense no map is a 'neutral' representation. However, once a map is agreed to represent a given landscape using fixed conventions it is essentially neutral in what it then represents. For example, the same map may be used equally well for the journey from place A to place Z as from place Z to place A, if both places are represented on the same map. We do not have space here to explore Borges' telling fantasy of the map which was the same size as the empire it represented (in his story 'Of Exactitude in Science' in A Universal History of Infamy (Penguin, 1984).

<40> Spiritual maps may be visual images rather than narratives, for example, maps of the biblical underworld http://members.citynet.net/morton/images/underworld.gif , tantric maps showing chakras http://www.carla146.it/07documenti/colore/pagine/07chackra.htm , kabbala diagrams http://web.axelero.hu/dob10638/konyvtar/x.htm , etc.

<41> In doing so, in order to account for the present unhappy plight of the soul, they may also describe the 'downward' path from Z to A (i.e. how we fell into our present, unenlightened state) but a religious or mystical map never prescribes travel in this direction.

<42> Reynold A Nicholson The Mathnavi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi, Cambridge: E J W Gibb Memorial Trust, 1982 (1930), pp.258-60.

<43> Chapter 7 of The Lotus Sutra in which this parable occurs can be found at http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/lotus/lot07.htm

<44> Corless 'Parables of Deconstruction in the Lotus Sutra' in Robert Forman, ed., The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology and Philosophy, Oxford: OUP, 1998, p.83.

<45> See note 15.

<46> The reference is to James Cox's recent work on the methodology of religious studies, in which he draws on the writings of the French sociologist, Danièle Hervieu-Léger. See for example 'Religion without God: Methodological Agnosticism and the Future of Religious Studies' (Hibbert Lecture, 2003) at http://www.thehibberttrust.org.uk/documents/hibbert_lecture_2003.pdf

<47> In Robert Forman (ed.) The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology and Philosophy, Oxford: OUP, 1998, pp.137-159.

<48> Jonte-Pace 'The Swami and the Rorschach', p.157

<49> Accounts of this experience produced by Wren-Lewis are available on the web as well as in print (see next note). For example http://www.geocities.com/jiji_muge/dazzdark.html .

<50> John Wren-Lewis 'Lotus Feet of Clay: A Reluctant Mystic looks at Spiritual Movements' in David Lane (ed) Understanding Cults and Spiritual Movements. The Final Issue, Del Mar: Del Mar Press, 1988, pp.1-6, (p.2).

<51> As developed by Andrew Rawlinson for The Book of Enlightened Masters Chicago: Open Court, 1997, esp. chapter 3. In Rawlinson's schema 'hot' refers to a world-view which sees the source of divinity or enlightenment as outside the self (such as a God 'up there' or shakti bestowed the guru, etc.) while 'cool' means an inherent enlightenment or realisation; godliness as one's spiritual birthright. 'Structured' means there are stages on the path to realisation which can be taught systematically, 'unstructured' that there is no map of the terrain at all (as in the case of Wren-Lewis).

<52> Wren-Lewis, 'Lotus Feet of Clay', p.3.

<53> There are different biographical accounts; that found at http://www.capacitie.org/ presents Wren-Lewis as an international scholar of religion and science. I have not been able to locate the book entitled The 9.15 to Nirvana which Wren-Lewis has reportedly completed (see Wren-Lewis section at http://www.capacitie.org/).

<54> Cohen now edits the magazine What is Enlightenment http://www.wie.org/ , a publication which epitomises the 'privatisation' and psychologisation' of spirituality identified by

Richard King. In a recent issue Cohen writes that he has learned a great deal in the twenty years since he started as a spiritual teacher (http://www.wie.org/j32/solid-ground.asp?ifr=hp-art).

<55> They are a staple of commercial New Age spirituality publications such as What is Enlightenment, referred to above.

<56> This is not the place to debate 'reductionism', which can mean almost anything, but we may note, for example, that Wren-Lewis, in a review of Susan Blackmore's book Dying to Live agrees entirely with her robust dismissal of the metaphysical claims made for Near Death Experiences and takes issue only with a 'depressive or down-putting feeling' in her writing 'that for most readers cancels out her protestations of fully accepting the mystical message of NDE reports'. http://www.capacitie.org/ > Wren-Lewis > Archive > 'Dying to Live'.

<57> The argument in 'Lotus Feet of Clay' is that the 'quintessential ordinariness' of [Wren-Lewis'] God-consciousness suggest to him that intensive 'paths' taught by gurus etc. are completely unnecessary, and spiritual realisation cannot (contra Wilber) be compared with the achievements of master-musicians, etc. (Wren-Lewis, 'Lotus Feet of Clay', p.3). Comparisons with the utter 'ordinariness' of being able to speak one's own language, contrasted with the effort involved in teaching and learning a language one does not already know, might seem particularly apposite here.

<58> Sharf 'Experience' p.99.

<59> For an overview of the Centre's work see for example David Hay Religious Experience Today: Studying the Facts, London, Mowbray, 1990.

<60> For an excellent comparative study of apophasis in Christianity and Buddhism see Janet P. Williams, Denying Divinity: Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions, Oxford: OUP, 2000

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