ASIA, MODERNITY, AND THE PURSUIT OF THE SACRED

Gnostics, Scholars, Mystics, and Reformers

JOEL S. KAHN

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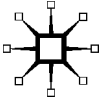## Gnostics, Scholars, Mystics, and Reformers

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For Zoë Barrett-Kahn

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Preface

Several years ago, I picked up a copy of the then recently published *A Secular Age* by the Canadian "critical" philosopher Charles Taylor (2007). I had read some of Taylor's earlier writings when trying to understand why, despite the apparently inexorable rise of techno-instrumentalist modernism, we moderns continue to be fascinated by, even obsessed with, "culture" and "difference." Most of the explanations for what had become a global discourse on culture (in the anthropological sense) involved treating it as an expression of identitarian politics and viewing it through the analytic lens of "social constructivism." I found such explanations unconvincing. If cultural identities are mere constructs, why should appealing to them arouse such passion? If cultures themselves are *invented* or *imagined*, then why, as Ben Anderson asked about nations, are people prepared to die—and to kill—for them?

In his work on Hegel and the so-called politics of recognition, Taylor offered the possibility of an alternative approach, one in which culture, and appeals to cultural distinctiveness, might be treated as something more than fantasies designed to mask underlying political (or economic) agendas. Instead, Taylor identified what he called an "expressivist" current in modern thought and culture that, while typically suppressed by modern techno-instrumental rationality, always acts as a kind of counterlogic to it. This prompted me to argue that the modern discourse on culture(s) is a manifestation of precisely such an expressivist logic, suggesting, among other things, that cultural differences run much deeper than social constructivists are willing to concede (Kahn 1995).

I therefore wondered whether Taylor's new book might be equally helpful for coming to grips with the religious revival that has taken place, not just in the non-West, but also in the very heartlands of Western (post-Protestant) modernity, leading some to speak of the dawn of a "postsecular" age. Of course Taylor's book came at a time when many others were also questioning the secularization thesis according to which modernization and religiosity are inversely correlated and that the rise of modern rationalism would ultimately put an end to irrational religious "belief," for much the same reason as religion had itself replaced magical thought. Indeed, the

wave of religious reform that has been sweeping across places like Muslim-majority Malaysia for the roughly 30 years that I have been conducting research there, coincides almost precisely with a period of rapid economic, political, and cultural modernization in the country. And the religious—broadly defined to describe not just those with a formal religious affiliation but also those who declare themselves "spiritual-not-religious"—are also a long way from being a disappearing demographic in modernity's Western heartlands. Dissatisfied with the refusal on the part of most of my fellow—Left leaning, secular, post-Marxist—intellectuals to take any manifestation of religious fervor seriously (once again contextualism and social constructivism have been the order of the day), my interest was piqued by Taylor's attempt to radically rethink our understanding of secularization by taking modern religious commitments much more seriously.

I also found Taylor's contention that the secular way of experiencing and being in the world might be somehow historically contingent—rather than being grounded in pure reason as I had been wont to assume—equally intriguing. An erstwhile poster boy for what Taylor calls "exclusive humanism," and convinced that this way of being was the only rational one (as confirmed by the findings of natural scientists), I found Taylor's description of what he calls "buffered" selfhood resonating poignantly with my own at a time of personal existential or ontic crisis, a crisis that seemed to arise directly from my own sense of isolated, autonomous being (as some put it, the self ends with the skin) "thrown" into a meaningless universe for what seems an alarmingly brief moment in the infinite flow of abstract time. Might reading Taylor, a self-confessed "believer," persuade me that religion had all along held the answer to the question of meaning, giving me another reason to take, if not Catholicism, perhaps the religion of Southeast Asians, more seriously?

But what might "taking Asian religion seriously" actually entail? Does it mean that we must fully embrace a religious worldview, either "ours" or "theirs"? Although convinced by Taylor's critique of the (classical) secular perspective, I am unable to embrace a religious one. I cannot accept that religious scripture is anything other than immanently produced or that organized religion can ever really accommodate itself to situations of "ontological" pluralism, or the (occasional) incompatibility between religious and scientific reasoning, or the patriarchal practices in which most religious authorities seem to engage, or the fact that religious communalism seems to be inevitably associated with conflict and violence (see Kripal 2006: 4). Like the postcolonial feminist scholar Lata Mani, I am persuaded by the "philosophical failure" of the secular left "to rethink its conception of religion," meaning that it can only exist in "tension with the outlook...of people...who live and act within a framework imbued with religious

modes of knowing and being" (Mani 2009: 17). At the same time, however, I have profound reservations about the religious alternative, since religion "cannot be conceived as the space of an innocent faith and devotion…its history and present are marked equally by conflict, contention and contradiction. Indeed, the dominance of Hindu fundamentalism [in India] was a defining context for these essays" (Mani 2009: 3). Neither a secular nor a religious orientation appears to help much when trying to come to grips with modern religiosity in Asia (or at home for that matter).

But maybe the secular and the religious are not incompatible after all. Perhaps we need, as Mani says, to "explore the inextricability of the sacred and secular realms of existence, the interconnectedness of the sentient and the apparently non-sentient, and the inseparability of spiritual philosophy from the practice of everyday life". Can we, in other words, entertain "the possibility that the ethical and liberatory dimensions of sacred and secular frameworks can fruitfully invigorate each other and, in turn, strengthen our ability to address the pressing issues of our time" (Mani 2009: 1)? Combining the rational-critical methods of secular enquiry with an esoteric-experiential-contemplative mode of spiritual knowing that she derives from Buddhist-inflected Hinduism, Mani proposes a kind of third way of engaging with Asian religiosity that she labels "contemplative critique."

I like to think that this book responds to Mani's invitation to explore the inextricably interconnected sacred and secular "realms of existence" through a process of contemplative critique. Like Mani, I am interested in working out an adequate rejoinder to the challenge of religious fundamentalism, in my case, in Muslim Southeast Asia (where the term is no less problematic than it is elsewhere), while also looking for an alternative to the secular ways of learning about Asian religiosity that dominate my own academic disciplines (anthropology, Asian studies). And I too have personal (ontic/existential) reasons for wanting to engage in what Alexander Riley has called an "intellectual pursuit of the sacred" (Riley 2010), many of which I suspect I share with Mani.

However, in keeping with the rather different circumstances that led me to this conclusion, I have gone about the task of formulating a contemplative critique rather differently. Similarities in our intellectual and educational backgrounds mean that Mani and I undoubtedly share the resources needed to engage in secular-immanent critique. Indeed, by exposing their underlying social and political agendas, immanent critique is probably the best way of responding to the so-called Islamist, or Islamizing, goals of the new generation of Muslim reformers in places like Malaysia and Indonesia.

However, when it comes to the claim that these goals are divinely inspired, no amount of "bracketing" them out for the purposes of "analysis,"

shifting the focus exclusively to the (immanent) contexts in which they are formed, or treating them as social constructions—all basic strategies of the secular analyst—helps us to seriously engage with them. Unlike Mani, it seems that I do not have the resources necessary for the kind of experiential-spiritual knowing that she brings to her work. While I may (increasingly) be willing to acknowledge the contingency, and the limitations, of my deeply ingrained, lived commitment to exclusive-humanism, nothing in either my fundamentally secular upbringing or my training as a Western anthropologist working in and on Southeast Asia, enables me even to contemplate the possibility that anything might exist beyond the everyday/immanent reality that is the stock-in-trade of the secular critic (the limitations of these basic strategies as they are employed by secular analysts of religion are discussed in chapter 1).

But is it really the case that there are no resources in "my own" (modern, Western) cultural and intellectual background that would allow me to take Asian spirituality, Asian forms of religious experience, and/or the ontological dimension of Asian religious traditions seriously? Am I really the only "modern" who has wanted to embark on a pursuit of the sacred by attempting to engage directly with these traditions? Clearly not. I came to adulthood during the years of the postwar "counterculture" in America and Britain when what some have called an Eastern turn in Western thought and culture was in full swing. While my sympathies at the time lay with the more politically oriented wing of the counterculture, and while I had little patience at the time for what I took to be the absurdity of at least some aspects of the pursuit of Eastern spiritual wisdom by my contemporaries, it would have been impossible to have been completely unaffected by the conviction that Asian spiritual traditions had some relevance for disaffected Westerners. Moreover, Muhammad Ali and George Harrison were, for different reasons, heroes of mine (and still are)!

But the countercultural romance of the East did not spring from nowhere as it were. There is in fact a long history of Westerners "turning to" the Orient for intellectual, cultural, ethical, and/or spiritual inspiration, a history that is perhaps as long as that of the "West" itself. In chapter 2, I provide a brief overview of this rather distinctive way of engaging with Asia. This chapter also offers a preliminary justification of my choice to follow historian of religion Jeffrey Kripal in using the term Gnostic to characterize it.

As I argue throughout the book, the Gnostic current in Western thought has been interpreted and reinterpreted, worked and reworked, in different historical contexts. Rather than discussing the history of Gnosticism from the late classical period up to today, therefore, I focus on Europe between the two World Wars when, I argue, both Gnosticism

and the Gnostic engagement with "Eastern" religious traditions—Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and Sufi—took on a distinctively modern form. And this was carried forward, for example, by many of the best known figures of the Beat Generation into the counterculture of the late 1960s/early 1970s. And it continues to influence spiritual seekers—now in both Asia *and* the West—at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

What Kripal calls Gnostic diplomacy differs in key respects from the "secular" forms of encounter that are favored by mainstream scholars in fields like anthropology, area studies, and comparative religion, and offers a way of engaging with what Mani calls the realm of the SacredSecular that neither secular nor religious scholarship can. In doing so, it also has the potential to open us up to sacred "worlds" and to provide a kind of spiritual solace in a modern world that is (only apparently) disenchanted.

Nonetheless, for an academic anthropologist and Asianist to advocate the Gnostic is to expose oneself to a range of criticisms. Those who do so inevitably stand accused, among other things, of orientalizing, exoticizing, appropriating, or otherwise misusing and distorting Asian realities; pursuing a privileged, postmodern, commodified lifestyle-spirituality; selfishness, political apathy, or worse. Therefore, while documenting the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual history of the modern, Gnostic turn to Asia, the central chapters of this book also provide an assessment of it in the light of the large number of criticisms leveled against it.

The four central chapters of the book are anchored by an exposition of the lives and writings of four influential figures in the history of the modern Gnostic engagement with Asia: French esoterist René Guénon (chapter 3), the feminist, anarchist explorer Alexandra David-Néel (chapter 4), Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger (chapter 5), and German poet and novelist Hermann Hesse (chapter 6). Each sought inspiration in one or more Eastern religious traditions: Guénon in Hinduism and Buddhism; David-Néel in Tibetan Buddhism; Schrödinger in Hinduism; and Hesse in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Each produced interpretations of these traditions that would significantly influence the ideas and practices of subsequent generations of "Gnostic" seekers in both Asia and the West. At the same time, each can, and has, been accused of the sins of orientalism, cultural appropriation, naïve universalism, and the like. I have developed each of these chapters in conversation with these critics, defending their projects in some cases and offering revisions of the Gnostic project in response to the criticisms in others. Running through these chapters is also a discussion of parallel developments in Southeast Asian Islam, demonstrating that, contra certain critics, the working and reworking of Eastern religion in response to the intellectual, ethical, and spiritual challenges of modernity has never been solely a Western project.

The final two chapters bring the discussion and assessment of the Gnostic diplomats into the twenty-first century. In them I look at the continuation of the project of contemplative critique in recent anthropology (among other things in its "ontological turn") and popular culture (chapter 7), in critical theory (comparing and contrasting Gnostic "Perennialism" with the new universalism of Źiźek and Badiou), and in new Muslim spiritual communities in Indonesia.

I conclude by arguing that, while it has been suppressed, scorned and denied by defenders of established religions and secularism alike, Gnosticism and the Gnostic engagement with Asia remains, like expressivism, a significant counterlogic of modernity.

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This book is dedicated to my wonderful granddaughter, Zoë Barrett-Kahn.

Anthropology and the Limits of Secular Reason

In a short passage in *Triste Tropiques* in which he describes a visit to a Buddhist temple while conducting fieldwork in the Chittagong Hills in the early 1950s, Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote of his acute discomfort when his Burmese companion proceeded to prostrate "himself on the ground four times before the altar" (Lévi-Strauss [1955] 1974: 411).[1] Worried that by not joining in he might offend the man, Lévi-Strauss was at the same time also reluctant to participate in a ritual that seemed to him to involve "bowing down to idols" and "acknowledging the reality of a supernatural order of things" (1974: 394). At what point, when faced with beliefs and practices with which one fundamentally disagrees, does the injunction to treat the subjects of one's anthropological research with respect turn into hypocrisy? Does the call for tolerance when encountering "other" ways of thinking, doing, and being have limits?[2] The best solution to the ethnographer's dilemma that Lévi-Strauss could come up with on that day in Asia was to maintain a kind of embarrassed silence, standing passively by during the performance of a "ritual gesture" with which he profoundly disagreed (interestingly taking his lead from his companion, who advised him: "you need not do what I am doing").

At first sight, it is hard to understand why Lévi-Strauss found it so difficult to participate in this most common of Buddhist ritual gestures.[3] As he frequently argued, most famously in *La Pensée Sauvage*, so-called savage or mythological modes of thinking—of which, presumably, "idolatry" and "supernaturalism" are good examples—are not unique to primitive (i.e., historically anterior) or non-Western peoples, being as much at home in the West as in the East. This could not therefore have been a case of an irreducible cultural difference between Lévi-Strauss and his Asian research subjects. A close reading of Lévi-Strauss's writing shows that there is no relativizing impulse at work in his approach. However,

he does maintain that there are ways of reasoning—scientific and, in a rather different way, aesthetic—that allow one to break the shackles of mythological thought, thereby maintaining that disparity between Western rationality and the beliefs of others (including Western others) that makes scientific analysis of these other forms of thought possible in the first place. In the Lévi-Straussian project, scientific knowledge of human nature, and particularly of the supposedly universal properties of the human mind/brain, grounds an analysis that uncovers the hidden structuration of all such idolatrous, supernaturalist, and mythological forms of human expression.

As it was for Lévi-Strauss among Burmese Buddhists, so it is I suspect for many academic anthropologists who have worked for any length of time in Muslim Southeast Asia.[4] Like me, they undoubtedly have also found conversations with their interlocutors frequently turning to stories of oracles, palm-reading, mental telepathy and rebirth; of the possibility of being in two places at once—or no particular place at all—by projecting consciousness outside the physical body; of the powers of individual *syech*, *kyai*, *murshid*, or *habib* (Islamic teachers and holy men), both living and dead, to affect one's life in critical ways; of the secrets hidden in particular words or phrases from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and of the remarkable powers of the breath, particularly when guided by the repeated utterance of such words and phrases; of one's ability, by good deeds in this world, to ensure not only oneself a place in heaven but also to rescue deceased parents and kin from eternal damnation. And almost as frequently, one hears of the harm of which *hantu* (ghosts, spirits), witches, and demons are capable, the powers of *bomoh* (healers), and Muslim holy men to mitigate that harm, and the protection offered by *mailaikat* or angels who are forever at one's side toting up (and recording) one's deeds, both good and bad, in preparation for the day of judgment to come. Moreover, almost universal significance is attributed to dreams as states of consciousness where the future is foretold and in which one's spirit (*ruh*) may make contact with nonhuman (or no longer human) beings. And whether or not they subscribe to such miraculous events and possibilities in the present, few if any Muslim Southeast Asians do not accept unequivocally the occurrence of at least one miraculous event in the past, namely the direct revelation of the word of God to Muhammad, the seal of his Prophets,[5] as recorded in the holiest of Muslim texts, the Qur'an.

Practitioners of a discipline that involves, indeed requires, the forging of respectful relations—often close personal relations—with their research subjects, many ethnographers of Southeast Asia are forced by such conversations to confront the fact that the majority of their research subjects do not share in their own basic ontological assumptions. Even

when these encounters are cordial, it is impossible to ignore the gulf between the ways of seeing and experiencing the world of the majority of Muslim Southeast Asians and those who study them from within academic disciplines like Asian studies, religious studies, sociology, and anthropology (which, of course, now include significant numbers of Asian scholars). And, like many—although by no means all—of my colleagues, I have tended to react to reminders of this gulf not so much by denying as by ignoring it, thereby adopting what might be described as the default mode for dealing with otherness in academic disciplines like my own in which difference is thematized. The methodological presuppositions that prevail in much mainstream, secular anthropology typically involve the adoption of a number of strategies for dealing with the kinds of difference with which I am concerned here:

1. "Suspending disbelief" of one's research subjects by "bracketing out" the apparently extraordinary construals[6] of the world and our place in it, an approach sometimes labeled "methodological agnosticism."
2. Pursuing a more or less radical contextualism/constructivism in which phenomena deemed "magical," "supernatural," or "religious" are situated in their strictly immanent—that is, biological or "bodily," linguistic, cultural, social, historical, political—contexts (some contending that there is in fact nothing *except* context) to be treated as biological, psychological, and/or social "constructions."
3. Privileging the study of practice, typically understood in opposition to ideational phenomena like texts, theological constructs, experience, and consciousness.
4. Focusing on "Little Traditions," ordinary people, subalterns, and so on rather than Great Traditions, civilizational horizons, and the religious elites who speak them.

Secular is doubtless an imprecise label for such strategies, if only because the term has such a multiplicity of meanings (see, e.g., Taylor 2007). However, the way in which they mirror political secularism's goals of banishing religious claims or considerations from the public sphere, makes secular an apt label for a scholarly methodology that requires us to bracket out religious (or perhaps better ontological) claims before exposing their constructedness. At the same time, much as political secularism has come under attack in recent years, so too has this aspect of the approach to alien belief systems in the scholarly mainstream that can also be—and increasingly has been—seen as problematic.

The Limits of Methodological Agnosticism

Although, as we have noted, Lévi-Strauss subsequently came to regret his response to the performance of Buddhist ritual—that is, standing by silently while his Buddhist companion performed obeisance to the Buddha—he, like many of his contemporaries, was following a strategy in which the magical and religious worlds of others are accommodated, rendered tolerable, even celebrated, at the same time as they are firmly situated on the other side of a divide that separates our world from theirs. The solution to the ethnographer's dilemma is a simple injunction: hands off. To quote from a more recent defense of such methodological agnosticism:

> In my view, what has often proved to be of great methodological value for anthropology, even if not unique to it, is its exhortation to balance both the willing suspension of disbelief with the pursuit of radical doubt... The orientation towards the suspension of disbelief, or bracketing out, is intended to open the anthropologist as much as possible to the habitual worlds of others. By so doing, prejudices that may block the thorough-going investigation, and thereby understanding of the phenomenon under review, may be removed. Orientations to culture and fieldwork dialectically engage the suspension of disbelief with the pursuit of radical doubt in an effort to interrogate and subvert assumptions and understandings in the realities that anthropologists study as well as in the realities, along with their theories, from which anthropologists come. (Kapferer 2001: 190–191)

Call it the "suspension of disbelief" or methodological agnosticism, accommodating what Kapferer calls the "habitual worlds of others," however extraordinary these worlds might seem to us, by remaining indifferent to the intentions of those who lay claim to them is not restricted to anthropology in the narrow sense, having, as I have noted, become something of a default mode in most academic disciplines for engaging with phenomena deemed magical and religious. In a book released to coincide with the 2005 exhibition of nineteenth-century photographs of "occult phenomena" at New York's Metropolitan Museum, for example, the curators explain their "aesthetic" approach to representations of the extraordinary in the history of art. "Of no interest to us," they write, "are the intentions of those who took the photographs," namely to value them "for what they proved—or disproved—of the reality of occult phenomena." The danger of such an approach "for today's observers," the curators tell us, "is that such a vantage point of belief or doubt would limit our understanding of the photographs themselves." Our job is not to take part in arguments over whether the photographs were a form of proof—using the latest technologies—of the existence of occult phenomena or,

by exposing the trickery involved in their production, evidence instead of the gullibility of a superstitious public. "No [such] defense or criticism of the occult will be found here," the curators write, adding "on the contrary, the traditional question of whether or not to believe in the occult will be set aside from the outset. The authors' position is precisely that of having no position…[Instead we value the photographs because] they allow us to investigate the history of human beings through the images they have made. Our approach is thus neither strictly aesthetic nor informed by belief, be it positive or negative; it is resolutely historical" (Araxine and Shmit 2005: 13–14). This pretense of "having no position" is, I would suggest, broadly typical whenever liberal intellectuals, including anthropologists, encounter those whose ontological construals they do not share.

But while bracketing out that which is ontologically alien may continue to shape academic encounters with the magical and religious worlds of others, it has come in for a good deal of criticism in recent years. If nothing else, as a growing number of critics has pointed out, methodological agnosticism may be, indeed often is, taken as condescending and insulting by those whose horizons of belief it brackets out. For what is really being conveyed by that silence in the face of ontologically alien claims of truth is something like the following: "Yes I am prepared to allow you to engage in this practice. I will not do anything to stop you. However, what you are doing is, in my view, completely irrational. See how tolerant I am? I wonder if you would be so tolerant if the circumstances were reversed?" While perhaps effective as a strategy for collecting ethnographic data in the field, this hardly seems the best way to achieve that empathic understanding of the habitual worlds of others that anthropologists seek.

Why should such problems arise? A partial answer is provided when we look more closely at what bracketing out actually entails. Engaging with those whose construals of the world differ radically from our own by in effect bracketing out the ontological horizons of experience—both ours and theirs—of course has a philosophical pedigree, the term having been borrowed from Edward Husserl. Husserl defined the philosophical approach he labeled phenomenology as a study of "things as they really are," that is, as they present to/in consciousness, a goal that can be achieved when we bracket out all a priori, everyday presuppositions (*epoché*) for the purpose of the phenomenological reduction (Moran 2001: 131–132).

However, it needs to be asked whether an approach that is explicitly designed to gain access to a first person point of view, can have any relevance in contexts when second or even third person accounts are all that is available. Unlike the former, the latter are already mediated by that which is supposed to be bracketed out. Going further, we need to question the primordial givenness of an individual subjectivity independent of the

external world that makes bracketing out that external world the primary source of eidetic truth. Husserl himself came to acknowledge the importance of intersubjectivity in the constitution of individual consciousness (see Zahavi 2001: 26–33). And of course most of his followers broke with the transcendental (Kantian) vision of the autonomous knowing subject altogether. If subjectivity is formed in a world in which other subjects are already present, it is least arguable that individual subjectivity is secondary to or derivative from that of others. More radically, as a number of Husserl's students argued more explicitly than did Husserl himself, there can be no such thing as unmediated subjectivity at all. In other words, once we bracket out the interpretations that others place on their experiences, nothing is left: there is no conscious thought without language; conscious being "is always caught up in a *world*" (Moran 2001: 233) or logos; and construals, horizons, or worlds do not so much follow on from subjective experience as they precede and shape it.[7]

Questioning the primordiality of the conscious/intentional subject serves to displace individual experience from the place that it occupies in some versions of the phenomenological project in a number of critical ways: by making it secondary to being, embodiment, intersubjectivity, language or culture; by deconstructing the notion of the autonomous self that appears to ground it; by questioning the unity and universality of the category of experience;[8] and by prioritizing precisely that which cannot be experienced.[9]

In short, bracketing out the construals of others is a deeply problematic exercise since to rigorously or radically suppress all a priori assumptions about the reality of subjective experience presumes that we can already know where the boundary between experiences and their horizons (or worlds) lies. If distinguishing between pure, primordial, or unmediated experience or consciousness on the one hand and the constituted frameworks within which that experience acquires its essential "objective" meanings (and through which these meanings are conveyed to second persons) on the other is impossible, then it is also impossible to determine where the brackets should be placed. Specifically, a contradiction between the ontological construals of Southeast Asian Muslims and the secular academics who study them gives rise to an intractable conflict, one that cannot be merely sidestepped by suspending one's disbelief.

"Practice" in the Scholarly Study of Difference

In a recent book, the eminent sociologist of religion, the late Martin Riesebrodt, offered nothing less than a universal theory of religion

(Riesebrodt 2010). And since such a theory requires a universal definition, Riesebrodt begins by defining religion as comprising those *practices* that have as their goal the propitiation of *superhuman* or *supernatural* powers or beings, practices that he suggests are universally associated with phenomena that we think of as religious.[10] Riesebrodt's bold universalism might not be widely shared by religious studies scholars.[11] But in other respects his approach is neither atypical nor even particularly original; a large number of anthropologists and comparative religionists share this commitment to privileging practice over all else.

Riesebrodt explicitly excludes experience as a proper object for a comparative study of religion because to focus on "experience of revelation" would be to ignore the fact that experience is not "primary" but "arises out of institutional realities and concrete life," and because such an approach suffers from "apologetic intentions" (Riesebrodt 2010: 53). Riesebrodt likewise rejects any direct engagement with what he calls "religious ideas." Such engagement is to be avoided because, he argues, to focus on ideas would be to ignore the pluralism that exists within religious communities, with the consequence that religion would be falsely portrayed as a systematized body of knowledge. Furthermore, this would imply, misleadingly, that ideas or beliefs precede action, and would end up privileging theology and/or the views of the inevitably small number of intellectually minded believers. To the extent that ideas deemed religious are to be taken into account, this can be done only by treating them contextually.

Riesebrodt's commitment to contextual analysis is shared with many anthropologists of religion. Consider, for example, the following account of how anthropologists should approach that system of religious ideas that we call theology:

> Religion as category or catalyst seems to remain up for grabs, emergent from and immanent within a potentially unstable relation between scholar and informant. Lived theology itself is seen as both embedded in a fieldwork context....But also able to frame the interpretations of the analyst, who attempts as far as possible to work through the categories of informants. In these terms, the separation of religion from the everyday politics of the social order is *itself* seen as a problematic (and often Western-inflected) political act...We are brought back to earth but also to a particular view of temporality: we examine the past of a religion...to appreciate its contingencies but also its ever-present links to systems of authority and governmentality—systems that are just as evident today as Christianity is "performed" by clergy, theologians, anthropologists, and various informants in the present. (Coleman 2010: 796)

Here, theology is not treated for what it purports to be, namely a system of ideas about transcendence, but as something that is *lived*, that is embedded in "everyday politics of the social order," contingent, and intimately *linked* to "systems of authority and governmentality." While theologians may address the transcendental, anthropologists must fold religious ideas back into the world as it were, analyzing them as practice or performance.

To focus on religious ideas in their own right would be a waste of time, according to Riesebrodt, because "systematized religious ideas are quite unknown to religious practitioners" and because, the assumption that even though unconscious of these ideas, "laypersons" are nonetheless mysteriously guided by them, is "metaphysical" (2010: 80–81). As we have noted, in this Riesebrodt echoes broader trends in the critical study of religion where the focus has tended increasingly to be on "ordinary believers."

In sum, an influential approach to the study of phenomena deemed magical and religious in academic disciplines like anthropology, comparative sociology, and area studies involves focusing on the contextualized practices of lay believers at the expense of both experience and religious "ideas." And this may seem, at first glance, unobjectionable. After all, are not most critical theorists correct when they maintain that whatever people might think about them, experiences are never pure or primordial, but always already constituted by language, being, culture, and/or discourse? And in the interest of democracy, should we not concern ourselves mainly with that which motivates the great majority of ordinary believers?

From Disengaged to Engaged Reason

The claim that this secular approach to phenomenon deemed religious—characterized by methodological agnosticism, a refusal to engage with experience and ideas, and an insistence on a focus on context and the practice of ordinary believers—results in a democratization (and de-essentialization) of our accounts of other ontological worlds, in reality, turns out to be not quite the innocent-sounding, disinterested analytic gesture that scholars make it out to be.

Far from opening us up to the habitual worlds of others, far from giving us access to the perspectives of ordinary believers, neglecting ideas and experience seems to have precisely the opposite effect. To refuse to engage directly with the accounts of experience offered to us by our respondents is not in fact to defer to the popular, but rather to privilege our own ideas about what religion is "really about"—our own views about

what is, and what is not, "properly religious," our own framings of experiences deemed religious—over those of our respondents.

When, for example, my Muslim respondents speak to me of experiences of precognition, of projecting their consciousness outside the physical body; or of their feelings of connection to the divine, what is gained by labeling these accounts mythic or asserting that instead "the meaning of religious action…arises out of institutional realities and concrete life" (Riesebrodt 2010: 53) and not anything that lies outside them? How democratic is such a move? According to Southeast Asian Muslims, theirs are clearly experiences that transcend history, language, and culture. Should I simply dismiss their construals as mythical or misguided? Is not the argument that there is nothing that escapes history; that there is nothing outside language, logos, and the text; that context and immanence are all just as dogmatic as insisting that transcending context is possible? Indeed how do we even know that there is a history, language, logos, or text that holds us prisoner if we too cannot transcend them? Might there not be something in the reports of extraordinary experience on the part of our research subjects? Am I in any position to deny them?

To focus on practice is, I have pointed out, to encourage forms of analysis in which *context* comes first. Many of my Muslim interlocutors claim to be able to experience extraordinary worlds that are not constrained by the ordinary. Certainly we can learn a great deal about these worlds by looking at their context or that which mediates or constitutes them: language, culture, power, the unconscious, neurons, etc. But ethnography has real problems when it comes to dealing with these worlds, or, one might rather say, with those aspects of them that appear to be irreducible to or unmediated by being in the world, the unconscious, the body, language, culture, text, performativity, history, power, or "brainhood."[12] There always seems to be something else, a kind of residue that escapes cultural, linguistic, discursive, psychoanalytic, sociological, and neurological analysis. We do not need to take the position that religious experience is ontologically sui generis, although we may be tempted to do so. But should we not at least proceed as if this were so, that is, as if there were some sort of residue that transcended all such mediating processes? This is, of course, what phenomenologists attempt to do, although as already noted, there are reasons to suspect that their methods for doing so are not directly pertinent to the practice of ethnography.

Many Southeast Asian Muslims, like their Buddhist and Taoist compatriots, engage in forms of contemplative practice which, in their view, give them access to extraordinary worlds beyond language, culture, history, and the self. Taking their claims seriously, I would argue, requires us to treat their ontological worlds—if not necessarily the ways in which

they are described to us—as though they were sui generis. Given that the practitioners of anthropology claim that it is possible to escape our world sufficiently to engage with theirs, is it not hypocritical of us to deny their claims to be able to do the same?

For scholars like Riesebrodt—who no more believe in the ontological reality of the "superhuman" entities propitiated by their research subjects than they do in the worldviews of believers in their own societies—the neglect of the ideational and experiential dimensions of religion perpetuates the view that popular religion is no more than a form of irrationalism, thereby privileging the (secular) metaphysic of the scholar. Refusing to treat experience seriously is hardly the democratizing move that Riesebrodt et al. claim it to be. And although there may be problems in the current tendency to see the will to govern everywhere, one cannot help but conclude that this is a particularly egregious example of it.

If the neglect of religious experience serves to bolster the authority of the scholar vis-à-vis the "ordinary" believer, the failure to engage with religious ideas has the same effect vis-à-vis "native" authority. There is a broader discussion to be had about the contradictions in the project by social scientists, historians, and religious studies scholars to shift the focus of their analyses away from great traditions, civilizational narratives, and the ideas of intellectual/theological elites and onto little traditions, popular religion, and the practices of ordinary (subaltern) believers. All this arises from that same apparently laudable goal, that is, to read social life against the grain of power and, again, to democratize both the practice and the outcomes of social enquiry by focusing on ordinary people. But is this in reality its effect?

Secular scholarship wants to bypass religious ideas on the grounds that to focus on them would be to privilege the views of the small number of "intellectually minded believers" over those of the broader (subaltern) mass of laypersons. And yet, are the scholarly accounts that result any more subaltern than those of the theologians and intellectually minded believers whose voices are silenced when we bypass them? Indeed, ignoring native authority actually makes it easier for the analyst to speak for and on behalf of his/her ordinary informants, who are arguably less capable of speaking back to the anthropologist or scholar of comparative religion than are more articulate and, presumably, relatively more empowered "native theologians."

Viewed in this way, the program of religious studies can be read as a scholarly claim on the authority of the theologian. From now on, it is to be scholars, rather than "religious elites," who are authorized to decide on what are—and what are not—proper forms of religiosity. Far from effacing power and opening up the lifeworlds of others to a plurality of

readings, the argument that we need to bypass ideas to focus on practice is in effect a strategy for substituting one form of governmentality for another.

Our failure to engage directly with religious ideas and texts or, more accurately, with those who are authorized to articulate and interpret them, suggests that we scholars are not as interested in democratizing knowledge production as we like to think. After all, what anthropologist or comparative religionist is willing to concede that his or her own ideas, concepts, and analyses should be ignored in favor of those of laypersons in the West? Are we afraid that our ability to determine the shape of religious argumentation might not stand up to the sorts of intellectually sophisticated critique of which a native theologian is capable? At least in engaging with the ideas of religious elites we would not be comparing apples and oranges as it were, but like with like: our intellectual systems (anthropology, comparative religion) with theirs.

Lest it be thought that the claim that anthropologists and comparative religionists, in their refusal to engage with religious ideas, are behaving as wannabe theologians is overblown, consider the extent to which the supposedly secular language of modern philosophy and the social sciences is steeped in (Christian) theological meaning.[13] As Daniel Dubuisson, among others, demonstrates, the concept of religion is a uniquely Christian one.[14] To label what Dubuisson calls Asian "cosmographic formations" like Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism as other religions, and then to mobilize them within a universal theory of religion, is to seriously misrepresent Asian realities. While in the West, religion may constitute a more or less discrete domain, one marked off from the economic, the political, and so on, the same cannot be necessarily said of other traditions. To label Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Islam *religions* in the same sense does considerable violence to the way in which, as civilizational horizons, they inflect all the domains of Asian social life, or at least did so in the past. Moreover, to presume that, like Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam are composed of a fixed number of invariant elements—theology, a priesthood, a set of specialized religious institutions beliefs and rituals—again seriously misrepresents the roles these formations played in all spheres of social, political, and economic, as well as spiritual life.

But most importantly, comparative religion presupposes the possibility of a transcendental perspective from outside religion from which all religions may be viewed, judged, and analyzed. And yet, all its terms, concepts, and analytic languages are thoroughly inflected by Christian/post-Christian understandings. This, as Dubuisson shows, is as true of our supposedly secular understandings as it is of our more obviously religious

ones: atheism in this view is just as much a product of a Christian cosmographic formation as is theism. Just such a recognition prompted Louis Buñuel's famous quip: "Thank God I'm an atheist."[15]

Finally, if our respondents insist on the (universal) truth of their extraordinary claims, then to contend that they must be treated only in their particular social, political, and historical contexts would appear to be a betrayal of that other fundamental principle of anthropological analysis, that is, that the categories of our informants should be given pride of place. This is all the more telling in a world characterized increasingly by the renewal of universalistic sensibilities, projects, and aspirations. Paradoxically, is not insisting on the contextuality instead of the universality of such respondents itself a kind of ethnocentrism?

Despite the claim that as anthropologists our main contribution to intercultural and interreligious understanding comes only when we refuse to engage with ontological truth claims—theirs as well as ours—the methodological strategies of bracketing, contextualization, focusing on practice, and so on can be seen actually to amount to a claims on behalf of the authority of anthropologists in particular, and secular academics more generally, over the construals of our interlocutors. Anthropologists and others seem, in other words, unable to grasp the fact that their academic analyses are, to borrow Courtney Bender's apt term, "entangled" with the phenomena under study. In her study of New Age practitioners in the United States, Bender demonstrates the extent to which scholars of religion have played important roles in constituting the ideas and experiences of those engaging in "spiritual" practice in the United States, arguing that

> contemporary understandings of religion, religious experience, and spirituality are not only "studied by" historians and sociologists, they are also forged in ongoing interactions between groups of scholars and laypeople. (Bender 2010: 124)

Much the same could be said of prevailing forms of scholarly engagement with the religious traditions of Asia. Their anthropological, sociological, and other academic interpreters, as we shall see, have been, and continue to be, very much entangled in the processes by which certain versions of religious belief and practice come to be validated while others have not. That this implies a particular kind of engagement on the part of scholars of religion with the objects of their analyses should come as no surprise. After all, does not the strategy of placing brackets around the ontological construals that constitute experience flow from a principle even more basic to North Atlantic modernity, namely the commitment

to maintaining a secular public sphere from which religious construals are banned? For what is involved in the project of constituting a secular public sphere if not a commitment to bracketing out the (diverse) religious values and ontological assumptions of all citizens in order to create a space between or among them for the (secular) business of arranging or managing their common affairs?

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Problematizing the scholarly encounter with the religious worlds of others draws our attention to the ethical and methodological problems to which secular reason gives rise. It is no accident that the shortcomings of secular reason have drawn the attention of a broad range of scholars in recent decades.[16] However, their implications are broader than this. They are symptomatic of a world in the throes of a religious revival that confounds not only proponents of the secularization thesis, but also those who see in the instantiation of a secular public sphere a solution to the conflicts to which competing religious commitments give rise.

In asking what the academic study of Asian magical and religious worlds might contribute to current debates over the place that religion does, or should, occupy in modern society, therefore, it would seem helpful to investigate alternatives to the secular modes of engagement with worlds deemed magical or religious that seem to predominate in scholarly discourse. Are there more cosmopolitan ways of relating across the divide that separates religious worlds than those outlined in the first part of this chapter? In what follows, I explore one such alternative, one that historian of religion Jeffrey Kripal calls "Gnostic."

2

Gnosticism and the Pursuit of the Sacred

In 1925, the year before the publication of the groundbreaking articles on wave mechanics for which he was subsequently awarded the Nobel Prize, Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger wrote a memoir titled "Seek for the Road," which he based, in part, on his readings on Indian religion.[1] In it, he described Hinduism as a metaphysical system according to which (1) the cosmos is constituted by a universal being, Brahman (who is not a thinking being but thought itself); (2) the phenomenal world is a mere illusion produced by Brahman's power (Maya); and (3) the discovery of the difference between true self and the highest self, thereby realizing identity with the Brahman, can be achieved by the practice of Veda ("devout meditation on the sutras"). Schrödinger was an active participant in the debates that took place in the 1920s among most of Europe's leading physicists (Albert Einstein, Neils Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, and others) over the philosophical and metaphysical implications of the quantum revolution in physics and what several of the participants—among them Schrödinger himself—took to be parallels between the principles of quantum mechanics and those of Eastern philosophy.

Some 20 years later, this time from Dublin, where he had moved to escape Nazism, Schrödinger returned to the theme of the parallels between Western science and Eastern religion in a short book on the nature of biological being, which is credited with having had a significant influence on the biologists who went on to discover the structure of the DNA molecule. Here, Schrödinger applied the ideas that first appeared in his 1925 memoir to the problem of consciousness, generating insights that have been immensely influential in debates over the nature of consciousness in recent years.

At almost the same time that Schrödinger was writing "Seek for the Road," the German novelist and poet Hermann Hesse began work on

Siddhartha (first published in 1922). Apart from being rather closely based on existing accounts of the life of the historical Buddha, *Siddhartha* was also inspired by Hesse's readings in Taoism and Confucianism. In the novel, Hesse struggled with issues to do with nature of modern selfhood that had concerned him so much in his previous work. This time, however, he drew on Eastern ideas about the illusory nature of the autonomous self as a way of addressing them. Hesse too was awarded a Nobel Prize, but not for this, the most Eastern of his novels, which did not attract a large readership when it first appeared. Much to Hesse's surprise *Siddhartha* enjoyed considerable success in the 1970s, particularly among the young spiritual "seekers" of the counterculture, although it is not widely read today either by scholars of Asian religion or by serious literary critics.

Shortly after the publication of *Siddhartha,* Louise Eugénie Alexandrine Marie David—later Alexandra David-Néel (born in Paris in 1868)—published the first of her books on her encounters with Tibetan Buddhism. *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (French original 1929) is an extremely accessible description of David-Néel's travels to an exotic and mysterious Tibet and includes accounts not only of "orthodox" Buddhist belief and practice based on texts and her discussions with educated Tibetan Buddhists, but also of shamanism, demonic possession, death rituals, and other extraordinary beliefs and practices that David-Néel observed in the course of what Alexander Maitland calls her "sojourns among magicians on the Roof of the World."[2] Her Tibetan adventures were front page news in France in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and she remained an iconic figure, particularly among Buddhist practitioners in France and North America in the postwar years.

Frenchman René Guénon's books on Hinduism—*Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines* and *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedanta*—were also published in the 1920s (1921 and 1925 respectively). In these texts Guénon presented the results of his esoteric reading of Hinduism as a divinely revealed system of thinking characterized by (1) a distinction between the Absolute (variously the One, the Infinite, the Eternal, Immutable, Undetermined, and Unconditional) and Relativity (in Hinduism between *Aum/Ātman* and *Brahma*); (2) a doctrine of the world (*samsara*) as consisting of not just of one but of an "endless chain of innumerable worlds which have been manifested, and of which the universe consists"; and (3) while acknowledging that Godhead is Absolute and One, envisaging an inexhaustible possibility of manifestations (*avataras*) (Lings 2009: xxi–xxii). In fact, it was his engagement with Islam rather than Hinduism for which Guénon is best known. However, he chose Hinduism as his exemplar of esoteric tradition partly because he felt that Islam and the Muslim world were, in a sense, insufficiently exotic, and,

therefore, that his message would be less likely to be favorably received were he to use Islam as its vehicle.

Guénon's writings on Eastern religion were, and are, perhaps less well-known today than those of Hesse, David-Néel, and Schrödinger. And yet he was paterfamilias to a remarkably dedicated and relatively tight-knit group of followers, including Frithjof Schuon and Mircea Eliade. Together they formed a twentieth-century school of esoteric thought that labels itself "perennialist," thereby self-consciously identifying with the perennial philosophers of the European Renaissance.

The encounters with the main Asian religious traditions on the part of Schrödinger, Guénon, David-Néel, and Hesse testify to a heretofore unprecedented level of interest in other cultures, societies, and religions in the years between the two world wars among the educated publics of Europe and North America. Writers, artists, musicians, scientists, and intellectuals like Béla Bartók and George Gershwin; B. Traven, DuBose Heyward, Vicki Baum, and Miguel Covarrubias; Pablo Picasso, Wifredo Lam and Walter Spies; and even political economists like A. V. Chayanov and Julius Hermann Boeke, were significant contributors to a new sensitivity to difference that was emerging at least in certain segments of the middle classes in the aftermath of World War I in Europe and North America (see Kahn 1995). That this period also witnessed the birth of the modern discipline of sociocultural anthropology—with Franz Boas, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Marcel Mauss breaking with the triumphalist social evolutionism of the nineteenth century and establishing a discipline that sought to engage with other cultures and societies in their own terms as it were—should not be surprising. And one has only to think of Max Weber's work on Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam to see that the broad comparisons with the non-West that continue to inform our approach to the emergence of Western modernity in the social sciences were also part of this turn to non-Western cultures and societies in the period between the two world wars.

But while Erwin Schrödinger, René Guénon, Alexandra David-Néel, and Hermann Hesse might be regarded as rather typical of an interwar generation of artists, scientists, scholars, and intellectuals newly sensitized to difference, the reasons for their interest in otherness, and the ways in which they engaged with it, were less so. Although they carried out most of the activities of their more scholarly contemporaries—reading the scholarly literature, travelling to acquire firsthand knowledge of the non-West; studying its languages; and publishing scholarly books and articles aimed at an educated public—they also had interests, and sought forms of engagement that have not been typically thought of as scholarly, at least in more recent times. Unlike many of their mainstream scholarly

contemporaries, they were primarily interested in engaging in a more or less direct way with the metaphysical or even ontological claims of these others. They were, in other words, mainly interested in cosmologies that differed radically in their basic presuppositions about the nature of being in general, and human beings in particular, from those that were dominant in the West.

The academic world, writes the historian of religion Jeffrey Kripal "is very good at . . . Culture and Cognition . . . we are very good at demonstrating that any human experience, including religious experience, can be understood and interpreted by locating it in a very particular place and time . . . In regards to Cognition, we are very good at showing how something like mythology, a religion, a piece of literature, or a language . . . is organized along particular cognitive grids and follows certain implicit rules, usually for some mundane social, economic, or political purpose" (Kripal 2012: xiii–xiv). What academics are very bad at, Kripal goes on to say, is "talking and thinking about things that exist across disparate cultures and times," things like consciousness, for example. This is because we have increasingly committed ourselves to the "impossibility of 'universals,'" since we inevitably presume that "human beings are really, at base, expressions of local cultures and particular times and should never imagine that they can transcend these local cultures and times" (Kripal 2012: xiv).

For this reason, the kinds of "objective," disinterested modes of scholarly reporting and contextual analysis that have become the hallmark of mainstream academic engagement with social and cultural otherness are not for "Gnostic diplomats," to use Kripal's term for thinkers like Schrödinger, Hesse, David-Néel, or Guénon. In turning toward the religions of the East, these thinkers were far more interested in identifying the truths that they might contain than in exploring the contexts that gave rise to them. As one of Guénon's disciples put it: "The passionless reason of . . . 'objective' scholarship applied in the study of 'what we *have* believed' is a sort of frivolity, in which the real problem, that of knowing what *should* be believed, is evaded" (Ananda Coomaraswamy cited in Oldmeadow 2005: 201, emphasis added).

Labelling these thinkers Gnostic is not to suggest a direct connection to the Jewish Hellenic-Roman world of antiquity and late antiquity. [3] Indeed as Hanegraaff points out: *Gnosticism* was originally a pejorative term, coined in the seventeenth century by the Cambridge Platonist Henry More. In adopting it as a purportedly neutral scholarly category, historians also largely took over the assumption that there had actually existed a distinct religious system which could be called Gnosticism, and which could be clearly defined in opposition to the early Christian church. In

recent decades it has become increasingly clear, however, that any such reification of "Gnosticism" is untenable and leads to historical simplification; the idea of a clear-cut opposition of Christianity versus Gnosticism in fact reflects heresiological strategies by means of which certain factions and their spokesmen sought (successfully, as it turned out) to cement their own identity as "true" Christians by construing a negative other: the adherents of "the Gnosis falsely so called," demonized as the enemies of the true faith. It is historically more accurate, however, to see the latter, who often adhered to mythological Gnostic systems, as representatives of a much broader and variegated movement or type of religiosity "characterized by a strong emphasis on esoteric knowledge (gnosis) as the only means of salvation, which implied the return to one's divine origin" (Hanegraaff 2006: vii).

Similarly, Kripal defines "Gnosis" as "a form of intuitive, visionary, or mystical knowledge that privileges the primacy of personal experience and the depths of the self over the claims of both faith and reason, traditionally in order to acquire some form of liberation or salvation from a world seen as corrupt or fallen" (2006: 4).

I am using the term Gnostic, therefore, both to describe a concept of a stream of special inner knowledge and enlightenment understood as flowing out of direct experiential encounters with the very (un)ground of being on the one hand, and to the embrace of a strategy that is typically labeled heretical by both the forces of so-called organized religion and, increasingly, also by a self-identified secular mainstream.

In this sense, Gnostic is an apt label for certain tendencies in twentieth-century thought and culture that is situated, and that typically situates itself, somewhere between "science" and "religion." For example, Benjamin Lazier uses the term to characterize developments in twentieth-century theology associated with the ideas of Barth and Rosenzweig, which were subsequently taken up by philosophers, political theorists, and others in Germany and France between the wars, the most significant of whom was Hans Jonas with his monumental work on the Gnostic tradition (Lazier 2008). And although he does not use the term, Riley identifies parallels with that "intellectual pursuit of the sacred" that characterized the work of a number of prominent post-Durkheim sociologists and anthropologists in France, a pursuit that, he argues, was taken up again by the exponents of so-called post-structuralism (Riley 2010).

But the discussion that follows is particularly indebted to the work of the historian of religion Jeffrey Kripal. Writing about the mystical adventures of some of the main twentieth-century historians of religions, for example, Kripal explains:

> There is something genuinely mystical about the work of such scholars, for their interpretations and writings issue from a peculiar kind of "hermeneutical union." They do not so much process religious data as unite with sacred realities, whether in the imagination, the hidden depths of the soul, or the very fabric of their psychosocial selves. Here in such moments...the hermeneutical understandings and insights of such scholars clearly transgress the boundaries of academic study or speculation. In their subjective poles, these understandings become personally transformative; in their objective poles, they produce genuine insights into the nature of the phenomena under study. These are types of understanding that are at once passionate and critical, personal and objective, religious and academic. Such forms of knowledge are not simply academic, although they are that as well, and rigorously so. But they are also transformative, and sometimes soteriological. In a word, the knowledge of such a historian of religions approaches a kind of gnosis...[an] academic gnosticism as it manifests itself in the twentieth-century study of mysticism. (Kripal 2001: 5)

What Kripal calls academic Gnosticism involves ways of thinking about universality and, hence, of engaging with the habitual worlds of others, very different from those that prevail in mainstream secular scholarship. Unlike the latter, "Gnostic diplomacy" is a form of engagement that is possible only when one is "ready...to take the risk of mutual contamination and transformation across worldviews" (Kripal 2004: 488). This willingness to allow for "mutual contamination" and "transformation" of world views—of both "analyst" and "analysand"—is, as we shall see, something that perhaps more than anything else marks off Gnostic from scholarly modes of engagement with otherness.

It is, in sum, precisely the Gnostic aspiration to transcend context, naturalism, and the dualisms of Western thought and to reorient oneself toward radically different metaphysical or ontological worlds that most clearly distinguishes the approach of Erwin Schrödinger, Hermann Hesse, Alexandra David-Néel, and René Guénon to Asian religions from that of most of their more scholarly contemporaries.

Asia, Religion, and "Academic Gnosticism"

Thinkers like Schrödinger, Hesse, David-Néel, and Guénon can be thought of as pioneers of what has come to be called the "Eastern turn" in Western thought and culture. Motivated typically by the conviction that the East is a source of wisdom and inspiration for a culturally, intellectually, and spiritually bankrupt West, the so-called Eastern turn is in a sense as old as the idea of a distinctive Western world itself. And certainly this kind of admiration for Eastern wisdom and spirituality has been a recurring

theme in European thought and culture from the time of the Renaissance. In his study of "encounters" between Western and Asian thought from the seventeenth century to the present, for example, J. J. Clarke describes the Eastern imaginings at work in the thinking of, among others, philosophers like Leibniz and Christian Wolff, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger; political economists like François Quesnay; the British Deists; most of the best known German romantics; British Orientalists like William Jones and Charles Wilkins; Thomas Huxley; Leo Tolstoy; the Harvard Orientalists; Richard Wagner; the American transcendentalists (Emerson and Thoreau); some of the organizers of the 1893 Congress on Religions in Chicago; Edward Arnold, Aldous Huxley,[4] W. B. Yeats, and Ezra Pound; Arnold Toynbee, H. G. Wells, Joseph Needham, Rudolf Otto, and Paul Radin; novelist Hermann Hesse; twentieth-century artists Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian; Roland Barthes and Paul Claudel; Albert Schweitzer; psychoanalysts C. K. Jung, Erich Fromm, and R. D. Lang; physicists Erwin Schrödinger, Niels Bohr, and Werner Heisenberg; theologian Paul Tillich; twentieth-century perennialists René Guénon and Mircea Eliade; philosopher Charles Hartshorne; and the writers and poets of the "Beat Generation," notably Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Alan Watts, and Gary Snyder (Clarke 1977).[5] And, of course, a Gnostic engagement with Asian religion was a key component of the countercultures of North America and the United Kingdom in the 1970s.

However, although part of a longstanding Western tradition of engaging with Eastern spirituality, in an important sense, Schrödinger's writings—along with those of Guénon, David-Néel, and Hesse—are very much of our times. In their writings, I shall argue, the Gnostic engagement with Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam (particularly Sufism), and Taoism takes on a more or less distinctively modernist form. And although the modern Gnostic engagement with Asian religion is perhaps most prominently associated with Western countercultural movements of the decades after the World War II, it has its roots in that earlier wave of Gnostic thinking that peaked in Europe in the years after World War I as part of what was arguably the first countercultural critique of Western technological, military, national, scientific, aesthetic, and religious supremacism that can be called truly modernist.

Modernism, Gnosticism, and the Pursuit of the Sacred

The cultural, intellectual and aesthetic modernisms that arose in the period between the end of World War I and the onset of the Great Depression in Europe represented a significant break in the aesthetic, intellectual, and scientific life of the West. Emerging against the backdrop

of nineteenth-century national, religious, cultural, and aesthetic trium-
phalism, this new modernist sensibility was associated with widely shared
feelings of despair in the wake of World War I and with the religious and
cultural orientations and institutions that many held responsible for it.
Painters, sculptors and musicians rejected representational styles and clas-
sical aesthetic ideals, experimenting with abstraction, the grotesque, and
the surreal. The deterministic materialism that characterized the physical
sciences was systematically challenged by the discoveries of Einstein and,
even more so, by the findings of quantum physicists. Philosophers too
were increasingly inclined to reject what they took to be the underlying
metaphysical presuppositions that had heretofore grounded Western sci-
entific and philosophical reason. Pragmatism, phenomenology, and exis-
tentialism, albeit in different ways, all contributed to the growing sense of
dissatisfaction with the certainties of nineteenth-century thought.

At the same time, there developed a marked hostility to "Western"
religion, both in its institutional forms and political involvements, as well
as in its doctrines. European theologians explored "heretical" possibili-
ties, raising doubts among other things, about the rationalization and
modernization of religion in the West.[6]

These developments occurred alongside the development, at least in
some quarters, of more positive attitudes toward the cultures of non-
Western peoples. For example, although we tend to think of the 1950s and
1960s as the main period of decolonization in Asia, stirrings of anticolo-
nial nationalism were already being felt all across Asia in the 1920s and
there was a growing recognition, even on the part of Europeans, that all
peoples, including those living under colonial rule, had a right to national
sovereignty. Equally important to this more positive attitude toward the
non-West was the growth of knowledge about other cultures and societies
in the 1920s and 1930s.[7] Travel to and from Asia was on the rise although
it certainly did not reach the levels that prevail in our own era of mass
tourism, and, in addition to the Western servants of colonial regimes,
large numbers of Western artists, writers, and scholars were indepen-
dently making the journey to India and other more "exotic" Asian locales,
often staying for extended periods. They in turn became a source of new
information about the peoples, cultures, and religions outside the West
and also became the reason for more positive attitudes toward them at
least in certain quarters. Among them, of course, was the new generation
of anthropologists, who increasingly came to stress the importance of the
firsthand knowledge and understanding of other ways of life that could
be obtained from long-term ethnographic research among non-Western
peoples. Moreover, the immigration of peoples from Western colonies
and semiperipheries—including southern and eastern Europe as well as

places like the American South—into the cities of the northern United States and northwestern Europe also increased at the beginning of the period, making encounters with actual others, Asians among them, a far more common experience.

If nineteenth-century Westerners tended to think of non-Western peoples as primitive, and hence both historically anterior as well as inferior to themselves, beginning in the early twentieth century, a relativizing critique of social Darwinism, racism, and notions of social and economic progress was coming to the fore. It is therefore no accident, that the 1920s and early 1930s also witnessed a resurgence of the sorts of engagement with Asian religions that Kripal labels Gnostic. Consider, for example, the following far from exhaustive list of important writers and thinkers who, like Schrödinger, Guénon, David-Néel, and Hesse produced Gnostically inflected texts about Asian religion and the encounter between East and West in the years between the two world wars, texts that in turn became a source of knowledge for growing numbers of educated, middle class Europeans and Americans in this period: Walter Y. Evans-Wentz who published the first edition of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in 1927; Dwight Goddard (1861–1939), an engineer who served in the American armed forces during World War I and then as a Baptist missionary in China and Japan, where he encountered Zen Buddhism and in 1927 self-published the first of a number of accounts of Buddhism titled *Was Jesus Influenced by Buddhism*, which influenced the writers of the Beat Generation;[8] philosopher Martin Heidegger, whose most famous work *Being and Time* was first published in 1927, and is said to have been significantly influenced by his readings in Hindu philosophy (Parkes 1987); psychologist Carl Jung who engaged deeply with Indian philosophy, although he remained ambivalent about its relevance to psychoanalytic theory (Coward 1985; Wasserstrom 1999); Louis Massignon, probably the leading French scholar of Islam in the period before and just after World War II, who also made a significant contribution to scholarship on Sufism, particularly with his studies of the Iraqi mystic Al Hallaj, the subject of his 1922 doctoral dissertation; Henry Corbin, French philosopher and professor of Islamic Studies at the Sorbonne, who began his monumental work on the Persian Sufi tradition in the late 1930s; Mircea Eliade, Romanian-born historian of religion whose career began with an extended period of study (and religious "enlightenment") in India in 1928; Gersholm Scholem, founder of the modern academic field of kabbalah studies, whose first piece of sustained academic writing on the subject was a 1923 doctoral dissertation written just before he emigrated to Palestine; Frithjof Schuon, follower of Guénon, who also became the leader of a Sufi order first in Morocco and then in the United States, and authored numerous books and articles on

Sufism, perennialism, and Native American spirituality; and Lutheran theologian and comparative religionist Rudolph Otto who engaged seriously with Hinduism and published his influential *Mysticism East and West* in 1932.

This book is not intended to be an encyclopedic account of the lives, thinking, writings, and impact of all the above, or of the numerous lesser known Western travelers and spiritual seekers who sought a Gnostic engagement with Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, or Taoism in the twentieth century. Rather, I have selected four different figures to anchor the discussion: Esoteric Traditionalist René Guénon; traveler, adventurer and proto feminist, Alexandra David-Néel; Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger; and German novelist Hermann Hesse. As noted, each took an interest in "oriental" religious traditions: Islam[9] and Hinduism in the case of Guénon; Buddhism (particularly Tibetan Buddhism) for David-Néel; Hinduism for Schrödinger; and Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism in Hesse's case. Each found in these religious traditions a source of spiritual as well as intellectual inspiration and solace, an alternative to the shallowness and decadence of European, "bourgeois" society and culture. Each also turned eastward at times of crisis in their personal lives.

All four had profound reservations about the beliefs and institutions of Christianity in general, and the Christian denominations in which they had been born and brought up in particular—Guénon was a Catholic philosopher and student of Jacques Maritain, only to turn against Catholicism; David-Néel's family were Huguenot; Schrödinger was a nominal Protestant in Catholic Austria whose father was a Catholic and whose mother had converted to Evangelical Lutheranism; and Hesse's parents were missionaries in India and devout Pietists. Each compared actually existing Christianity unfavorably with the religious traditions of the East, although it would be misleading to describe them all as *converts* in the normal sense of that term. Nevertheless, with the possible exception of Schrödinger, all took part in Hindu, Buddhist, or Islamic practices or rituals of one sort or another (meditation, prayer, etc.) and at least Guénon and David-Néel claimed to have undergone some form of religious initiation—into a Sufi order and Tibetan lamahood respectively (neither Schrödinger nor Hesse made any such claims).

All first learned about Asian religions by reading classical religious texts then available in translation, notably the Vedanta and the Bhagavad Gītā (of which more is mentioned later). Significantly the works of European philosophers were also influential: the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer in particular were a key influence on all four. However, with the exception of Schrödinger, their knowledge was not based solely on reading, but also from participating in esoteric, occultist, and theosophical circles in

Europe before the war; and by traveling in Asia, in some cases (Guénon and David-Néel) for quite substantial periods of time.

And each went on to play a key role in shaping the subsequent counter-cultural turn to Asia: Guénon as the intellectual/spiritual instigator of the twentieth-century revival of Perennial Philosophy; David-Néel as one of the key figures in the twentieth century's romance of Tibetan Buddhism; Erwin Schrödinger as the grandfather of mystic science; and Hermann Hesse as the precursor of the modern spiritual traveler. I use their lives and work to anchor the chapters that follow and offer an assessment of both the Eastern turn in Western thought more generally and of what, following Kripal, I am calling a Gnostic mode of engaging with other ontological worlds that is, by now, deeply embedded in modern culture.

The Eastern Turn's Discontents

But why should "we," by whom I mean those like myself who are engaged in the academic study of Asia, take an interest in figures such as these? To advocate for the Gnostic is, after all, to enter into very murky waters, at least from the point of view of much of secular academia, something that has become very apparent to me whenever I have tried to explain my interest in these figures (and in their countercultural followers). Reactions have ranged from puzzlement to outright hostility. Despite the popularity of Eastern religions in the West, the widespread influence of philosophies, religious traditions, and practices drawn from those traditions; the admiration for Asian thought expressed by a large number of Western intellectuals, scientists, and artists over the whole of the modern period, and the plethora of personal accounts by Westerners of "mystical" experience while engaged in Asian spiritual practice, there appears to be a fairly general consensus at least among contemporary liberal, progressive, and left-leaning media commentators, scientists, academics, and intellectuals that there is something embarrassing, laughable—or even sinister—about any manifestation of the Eastern turn in Western thought and culture.

Theologian Harvey Cox, who coined the term, did so in the context of his critique of the countercultural engagement with Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Sufism at the time, while Christian evangelicals have been equally hostile to Westerners (or anyone else for that matter) "turning to" Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sufism for theological or spiritual inspiration.[10] Hostility to the Eastern turn has, moreover, produced some interesting bedfellows. Alongside theologians like Cox and Ridenour, and setting aside the irony in a Marxist and self-confessed child of the Enlightenment seeking to dictate what are, and what are not, "proper"

forms of religiosity, Jürgen Habermas described such practices as part of "new, deinstitutionalized forms of a fickle religiosity that [have] withdrawn entirely into the subjective" (cited in Mendieta 2010). Not to be left out, the current darling of the European left, Slavoj Žižek, writes of "Western Buddhism" that it

> perfectly fits the fetishist mode of ideology in our allegedly "post-ideological" era, as opposed to its traditional symptomal mode, in which the ideological lie which structures our perception of reality is threatened by symptoms qua "returns of the repressed," cracks in the fabric of the ideological lie. Fetish is effectively a kind of envers (*sic*) of the symptom. (Žižek 2001)

Natural and social scientists, religious studies scholars and many others have been quick to denounce the Eastern turn as irrational, contrary to the laws of science, inauthentic, Orientalist, colonial, and overly subjectivist, while Western Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, and Sufis have been found guilty of cultural appropriation and political quietism (if not "fascism"). Their religious practices have been denounced as typical of those leading an individualistic and commodified, middle-class lifestyle and their beliefs ridiculed for their naïve universalism. And this is not to mention the perpetual widespread tendency in the media to mention cultism, fraud, and sexual misconduct whenever the doings of Buddhist, Hindu, or Sufi teachers and adepts come in for public scrutiny, especially when Westerners are involved. Consider the following extract from a report on the death of the Indian spiritual leader Sai Baba by *The Independent's* Delhi correspondent Andrew Buncombe, which is quite representative of the way the media treats the phenomenon:

> For all his followers, Sai Baba was an often controversial figure who was condemned by some as a fake and whose purported miracles, when he would apparently pull magic ash from his hair, were denounced as conjuring tricks. The man who never married and had no children, was also accused of sexually abusing some of his followers, though he claimed these allegations were propaganda designed to undermine him. (*Independent,* April 25, 2011)

Is the sort of Gnostic diplomacy of which Kripal speaks vulnerable to these sorts of critique? And how successful have more recent expressions of the Gnostic orientation toward radically different ontologies been in overcoming the problems identified in earlier attempts to engage with them?

There are clearly important issues at stake here, and I attempt to address them in the following chapters. However, it is worth remarking how curious it is that attempts to put Eastern imaginaries to work in the

West as it were should be so universally condemned, or why Western Buddhist, Sufi, Taoist, or Hindu practitioners should be so consistently ridiculed. Contrast this with the treatment accorded Christianity and Judaism—other religions of arguably Eastern origin—in secular academia these days. While undoubtedly largely critical of religious institutions, biblical literalism, fundamentalism, and the like, Western intellectuals these days are loathe to engage in wholesale dismissal or ridicule of all forms of Christian or Jewish practice. Indeed there is a strong tendency even among present-day critical theorists to find merit, even inspiration, in these very same traditions (Judaism in the case of Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida; Christianity for Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek).

Critiques of religion are a dime a dozen; but unlike the case of modern Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, these critiques are nuanced, and ridicule is less and less acceptable among serious scholars. The exceptions are mainly confined to the community of professional atheists like Richard Dawkins who, in his attacks on all religion, is at least an equal opportunity denouncer. Even as sympathetic an observer of what he calls the process of easternization that reached the farthest corners of Western culture in the aftermath of the 1960s, sociologist Colin Campbell can offer only the following rather dismissive "explanation" for the phenomenon:

> For what is now all too apparent is that the mixture of magical, irrational, and superstitious beliefs that for generations characterized the beliefs of ordinary people in the West was never effectively swept aside, either by organized religion or by modern science. It was merely swept underground, with the consequence that the demise of orthodox religion, coupled with the failure of science to fill the gap it left behind, helps to explain why superstitious belief and practice are now so widespread in modern industrial societies. This in turn helps to explain the remarkable success of the New Age, Eastern-style world view. (Campbell 2007: 374)

The days are long past when it was de rigeur for Western observers to attack Christianity in the non-West as purely alien, retrograde, and irrational. Moreover, there seem to be no obstacles to speaking of the westernization or even Christianization of Asia as a phenomenon worthy of serious study. But instances of the Asianization of the West provoke only ridicule or suspicion.

Of course, it cannot be denied that abuses frequently arise whenever Eastern imaginaries are put to work in the West. Nonetheless, that way of pursuing the sacred through engaging with Asian religious ideas and practices that Kripal includes under the heading of Gnostic diplomacy is surely deserving of more careful investigation, particularly in light of

the shortcomings of standard modes of scholarly engagement with Asia. While Colin Campbell, Harvey Cox, Jürgen Habermas, Slavoj Žižek, and friends seem largely content to operate with crude stereotypes or to focus on examples of undoubted misuse, it is surely important to examine the phenomenon of Gnostic diplomacy in greater depth in order to produce more nuanced and scholarly assessments of its claims. Without seeking to validate any particular version of Gnostic diplomacy, in what follows, I want to use the wave of criticism that it has provoked as a platform for assessing not the whole history of the West's engagement with Asia, but with the particular forms that it has taken since the time of high cultural, intellectual, artistic, and religious modernism in the West, that is, from roughly the interwar years through to the early twenty-first century.

My contention will be that, while open to all sorts of criticism, we might still have something to learn about both Asia and ourselves by taking not just the critiques of earlier attempts at Gnostic diplomacy into account in our evaluation of more recent versions of the project, but also by taking the projects of an Erwin Schrödinger, a René Guénon, an Alexandra David-Néel or a Hermann Hesse much more seriously than we currently do.

3

Traditionalism: A Dialectic of Authenticity

Traditionalism…[developed by French philosopher René Guénon]…was one of the earliest European producers of Islamic knowledge. [It] is not, however, a form of Islam, but rather a Western philosophical and religious movement that often expresses itself in Islamic terms…Early traditionalism is European in that it addresses European rather than non-European concerns.

(Sedgwick 2011: 169)

One of the most common criticisms of Western writings on Asia in general, and Asian religion in particular, is that they have less to do with "real" Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. and much more with the (modern/Western) concerns of those who author them. Western accounts of non-Western belief systems are, in other words, better seen as particular kinds of *representation* rather than descriptions of actually existing Islamic/Buddhist/Hindu/Taoist/Confucian beliefs and practices that they purport to be. In a word, although critics are increasingly hesitant to use it, these accounts are *inauthentic*. In this view, Guénon's Islam, David-Néel's Buddhism, Schrödinger's Hinduism, Hesse's Taoism/Confucianism are "constructions" that bear little or no resemblance to Islam in the Middle East (or Southeast Asia), Buddhism in Tibet, Hinduism in India, or Taoism/Confucianism in China respectively.

Is this a valid criticism of the project of those modern Gnostic diplomats who have sought to engage with the religious traditions of the East? And if so, are there other versions of the Gnostic project that manage to overcome it?

Traditionalism and Asian Religion: The Legacy of René Guénon

Of the accounts of Asian religions that appear in the novels of Herman Hesse, the memoirs of Erwin Schrödinger, the travelogues of Alexandra

David-Néel, and the esoteric writings of René Guénon, undoubtedly Guénon's account most clearly raises the question of the authenticity of Western or modern representations of non-Western religion. This is because Guénon, even more so than the others, insisted that contemporary Asia was the site of a living tradition that differed radically and absolutely from that of a West that had evolved so far from its own wellsprings of tradition that it had entirely forgotten them.

Although many details of his personal biography remain a mystery, it is known that René Guénon was born in Blois in 1886, grew up in a strict Catholic family and received a Jesuit education, but that something then prompted him to abandon both his studies and his Catholic allegiances and go to Paris. There, like a large number of those who went on to play important roles in the twentieth-century turn to Eastern religion, he "submerged himself" in the occultist, gnostic, hermetic, theosophical, spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and masonic circles that dotted the cultural and intellectual landscapes of fin-de-siècle Paris, London, and other cultural capitals of Europe (Oldmeadow 2005: 184–185).[1]

It was in Paris that Guénon probably first learned about the religious traditions of Egypt, Persia, India, and China that were proving so fascinating to so many of his contemporaries. However, he soon became disillusioned with what he took to be the superficiality of the knowledge of Oriental religious tradition that prevailed in esoteric circles. It is not entirely clear what led to this assessment. Perhaps it was his contact with Indian Hindus of the Advaita School in Paris (Oldmeadow 2005: 185); perhaps it was the influence of Ivan Aguéli—Swedish artist, practicing Sufi, and devotee of the great Islamic philosopher Ibn Arabi (Sedgwick 2011: 171); perhaps it was his marriage in 1912 to a devout Catholic (Oldmeadow 2005). Whatever the reasons, around the beginning of the second decade of the new century, Guénon "emerged from the rather subterranean world of the occultists and now moved freely in an intensely Catholic milieu," becoming a follower of the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) (Oldmeadow 2005: 185). But at the same time he also embarked on a serious study of Hinduism, reading much of the available scholarly literature on the subject available in Europe at the time.

The period from around 1905 to 1930, when he moved to Cairo (and where he spent the rest of his life) was, according to Oldmeadow, the most public phase of Guénon's career, and it is therefore no accident that his most important published work began appearing in the 1920s. Although he continued to write after the move to Cairo—where he was initiated into a Sufi order (the *Shadila*) under the name Abdul al-Wahid Yahya, married an Egyptian woman, and spoke only Arabic—he lived a life out of the French public eye while still keeping up an intense correspondence

with a small number of close followers, including Frithjof Schuon and the Englishman Martin Lings. From his base in Cairo, Guénon published numerous articles in *Le Voile d'Isis*, a theosophical journal that, under Guénon's leadership, became "the principle European forum for traditionalist thought"[2] (Oldmeadow 2005).

But it is for the publications of the 1920s that Guénon is best known and in which most of the themes of his subsequent work were first clearly articulated. These included:

1. Critiques of occultism and theosophy in texts such as: *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion* (French original 1921) and *The Spiritist Fallacy* (1923).
2. Studies of Hinduism including: *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines* (1921) and *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedanta* (1925), based on his reading of classical texts.
3. Discussions of the decline of the West and the significance of esoteric religious traditions of East and West, which can be found in the core writings on Traditionalism: *East and West* (1924) and *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1927).

Also, by the 1920s, Guénon was already well disposed towards Sufism, having been, as we have noted, introduced by his friend Ivan Aguéli to the writings of Islamic scholars, most notably the Sufi philosopher Ibn al-Arabi Ibn Arabi. Indeed he may have already have been initiated into Aguéli's Sufi order. It is, in any case, fairly clear that the main sources of Guénon's Traditionalist inspiration were Islamic rather than Hindu.

However, as we have already noted, because he felt that Islam and the Muslim world were insufficiently exotic, and, therefore, that his Traditionalist message would be less likely to be favorably received were he to use Islam as its vehicle, he turned instead to Hinduism—or to a *version* of Hinduism that was already well-known in Western philosophical, esoteric, and theosophical circles from the work of Herder, Schlegel, Hegel and Schopenhauer—to convey his esoteric, Traditionalist message.[3]

Guénon and Hinduism

According to Martin Lings, one of Guénon's most faithful disciples, there are four features of this interpretation of Hinduism that made it the perfect vehicle for Guénon's Traditionalist project. First, there is the distinction it makes between the Absolute and Relativity, a distinction rendered in English as one between Godhead and God. Second, there

is the doctrine of a world (*samsara*) that consists not just of one but of an "endless chain of innumerable worlds which have been manifested, and of which the universe consists" (Lings 2009: xxi). Third, there is the fact that the essence of the Hinduism of the Vedanta and the Bhagavad Gītā (although not necessarily of the rest of the Mahābhārata) is seen as divinely revealed, there being in these texts a clear distinction between revelation (*sruti*) and inspiration (*smriti*). And fourth, there is the fact that, at least in these texts, there is an acknowledgement that while Godhead is Absolute and One, there is an inexhaustible possibility of manifestations (*avataras*) (Lings 2009: xxi–xxii). It is this particular reading of Hinduism that allowed Guénon to argue that, although it may be the purest and most ancient form of the religion, in it one finds articulated a wisdom that is common to all of the other great religious traditions: Judaism, Islam, and the now lost religions of classical antiquity.[4] Hence, for him, the exposition of Hinduism is at the same time an exposition of knowledge that is common to all human civilizations. This is what Guénon meant when he talked of Perennial Wisdom (*Sophia Perennis*) and what his followers meant by the term "Perennial Philosophy."[5]

It is not difficult to see why a version of Hinduism based primarily on the Vedanta and the Bhagavad Gītā would have appealed to Guénon. It fit in very well with his vision of Traditionalism as a universal philosophy and, therefore, with both his criticisms of theosophy and spiritualism and his rejection of Western civilization. In an important sense, his account of Hinduism, his critique of theosophy, and his denunciation of modernity are of a piece, the strands coming together in *East and West* (1924) and then again in more complete form in *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1927).

The latter begins by reprising the argument about the opposition first set out in *East and West*. Guénon begins by describing an "unmistakable gulf between Oriental and Westerner," which is such a key feature of the modern world. This was not to deny the plurality of non-Western civilizations of very different form, but, rather, to assert that they are all "based on the same fundamental principles" and that "such divergences as may exist are merely outward and superficial," particularly when compared to the West. From this perspective it is evident, Guénon argues, that all other civilizations "have remained faithful to the traditional standard," while in the modern West we have a "veritably non-traditional civilization…which recognizes no higher principle, but is in reality only based on a negation of principles" (Guénon 1942: 32).

Something of the distinctiveness of Guénonian Traditionalism is manifested in the place occupied by the Muslim world in his schema, since, although Islam may in a certain sense be seen to stand at a midway

point between East and West, from the Traditionalist point of view, Islam "is just as opposed to [the West] as are the properly Eastern civilizations, with which … it must therefore be classed." This is so because here we have to do less with an opposition "between two more or less clearly defined geographical entities" and far more one between two *mentalités*, the one distinctly Traditional, the other Modern" (Guénon 1942: 33). The transition from tradition to modernity for Guénon therefore is a distinctive and singular transformation of mentality over time, such that the medieval world of the West must be thought of as closer to the East than it is to that of the modern West. The distinction between East and West for Guénon was therefore temporal as well as geographical, more precisely a product of a temporal cycle in which the West is seen as approaching a sort of nadir. This cyclical view of time Guénon claims to derive from Hinduism, which led him to situate Europe in Hinduism's fourth, "dark" age (*Kali-Yuga*), from which it might eventually recover. Given that according to Guénon, Hinduism preserves the Perennial Wisdom more faithfully than any other tradition, thanks largely to the survival of the caste system, studying it is merely a way of gaining access to an authentically traditional way of thinking and being that is universal as it were.

But what was the nature of that tradition that, according to Guénon, the West had lost but that was still preserved in all the great civilizations of the East? What is the "crisis" of modernity, and what needs to be done in order to put it right? Guénon's answers are elaborated in the central chapters of *The Crisis*, as well as in later publications like *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* (Guénon 1953; original 1945). These and most of his other publications from the mid-1920s until his death in 1951 were concerned mainly to flesh out the Traditionalist critique of Western civilization, and the characteristics of traditional civilization that would need to be recovered to overcome it. These are enumerated in chapters that provide detailed explication and critiques of modern values: of action, quantity, profane science, the denial of any principle transcending the individual, the restriction of civilization to purely human elements, and "a mental outlook … that consists in … putting material things and the preoccupations arising out of them in first place" (Guénon 1944: 118). All of these are contrasted with the value traditional civilizations place on knowledge, quality, sacred science, the transcendent, and the nonsensible (in *Reign* he calls it the "suprasensible") world.

In arguing for the Orient as the site of a pure—and exemplary—tradition, René Guénon parts company with the advocates of the scholarly, dispassionate, disinterested, and disengaged approach to other religious worlds. And if secular scholarship requires a suspension of disbelief in the face of alien ontologies and a refusal to engage with what sociologist

Martin Riesebrodt calls religious ideas, in insisting on the need to thoroughly embrace what he took to be the basic and enduring tenets of Eastern religion, Guénon took exactly the opposite tack. If mainstream scholarly studies of religious worlds focus almost exclusively on the magical and religious *practices* of ordinary/subaltern believers, then Guénon's explicit engagement with the *ideas* of religious intellectuals, priests, and the classical texts represents an opposing trend. Moreover, as thoroughgoing and elitist antimoderns, Guénon and his followers were marking out a terrain not just outside mainstream secular scholarship, but also, as we shall see, outside that occupied by many of their Gnostic contemporaries as well.

Any assessment of René Guénon's project to recover tradition, or what he called the "Perennial" Wisdom, through an analysis of Asian religion must involve an evaluation of the claim that grounds it, namely, that Asia provides us with a platform outside or beyond the modern West from which we may look back upon and critique it. It is therefore appropriate to start such an assessment with a criticism of all such claims, one that more than any other shapes the scholarly response to all moderns/Westerners seeking inspiration in traditional forms of Asian spirituality. This almost always comes down to the contention that such manifestations of the Eastern turn are inauthentic, because they inevitably involve distorting Asian realities and "misreading" Asia through the grid of largely Western concerns and presuppositions that are at best phantasmagorical and, at worst, racist and colonial.

To be sure, there have been different versions of this critique in recent times, ranging from the critique of Orientalism articulated in the early writings of Edward Said to the rather more nuanced criticisms of anthropologists, Asian studies academics, and postcolonial theorists more recently. The latter may be less inclined to attribute the distortion to racism toward and/or a will to "govern over" Asians on the part of those who would represent them in and to the West. But all insist nevertheless that the "Asia" of Westerners like Guénon had more to do with their own, Western concerns and preoccupations than with Asia itself.

The Orientalist Critique

At first sight, Traditionalists like René Guénon, indeed most modern advocates of the Eastern turn, would seem vulnerable to the charge of "Orientalism" understood in the negative sense that this term acquired in the aftermath of Edward Said's hugely influential critiques of the Western knowledge of the Muslim world:

> From at least the end of the eighteenth century until our own day, mod-
> ern occidental reactions to Islam have been dominated by a radically sim-
> plified type of thinking that may still be called orientalist. The general
> basis of orientalist thought is an imaginary and yet drastically polarized
> geography dividing the world into two unequal parts, the larger, "differ-
> ent" one called the Orient, the other, also known as "our" world, called the
> Occident or the West. (Said 1997: 4)

In this critical sense, Orientalism has come to be applied not just to
Western scholarship on Asia but also to a particular way of representing
the Middle East, and Asia more generally, "as an alien region of looming
threat and impenetrable mystery, a land mired in superstition and suf-
focating under the dead weight of tradition, its people cunning, dishonest
and cruel, not true individuals but numberless members of the Asiatic
hordes. Where the West saw itself as heroic, liberty-loving and dynamic,
the East was presented as despotic, stagnant and passive" (Moore 2003:
20–21). Orientalism post-Said, therefore, came to describe a set of discur-
sive and power-saturated practices by which the cultures of non-West-
ern peoples were distorted in service of imperial projects to dominate
and/or profit from them. Based on assertions such as: "[toward] the end
of the nineteenth century, as Islamic nationalism in Asia and Africa
increased…there was a widely shared view that Muslim colonies were
meant to remain under European tutelage, as much because they were
profitable as because they were underdeveloped and in need of Western
discipline" (Said 1991:14), Said was read as arguing that all Western knowl-
edge of the Orient "is, implicitly or otherwise, in essence a justification
of imperial control over [it]" (Curtis 2009: 8). And it is certainly true that
Said himself—along with his early followers—was responsible for gener-
alizing a quite tightly argued critique of particular—mainly Britain and
French—representational regimes of the peoples and cultures of specific
parts of the world—notably the Middle East and India—in a precise time
period (the latter part of the nineteenth century) to other representational
regimes in other places and other times.

Was someone like René Guénon guilty of Orientalism in this sense? As
critics like Arnason have argued, Orientalism, at least in the strong sense,
hardly seems an appropriate characterization of those who had neither
any particular stake in the British or French colonial enterprises in India
and the Middle East, nor any sympathy for the liberal and republican
civilizing mission that frequently accompanied them (Arnason 2003).
Certainly, leading figures associated with the Eastern turn in Europe
between the two world wars, including René Guénon (and his contempo-
raries Alexandra David-Néel, Erwin Schrödinger, and Hermann Hesse to

be discussed in greater detail later on) can in no simple sense be described as Orientalist in this sense. Indeed if the term refers to a version of liberal evolutionism—itself inflected by a certain Protestant or "Anglicist" sensibility[6]—used as a yardstick against which the progress of all other cultures or societies on a "modernizing" path already forged by the West are measured and, inevitably, found wanting (thereby rendering them eminently suitable for colonial guidance), then these figures are better described as anti-Orientalist. Far from propagating a view of a backward Orient in need of European guidance along the path to civilization, they were part of an altogether different kind of Orientalist discourse that celebrated the East "for its ancient wisdom and spiritual sublimity, as a rich culture far superior to our own" (Moore 2003: 21). Accordingly, most of them were, if anything, even more critical of Western notions of progress, universalism, individualism, and liberalism than an Edward Said or a Michel Foucault.

Indeed, Said himself sometimes expressed sympathy for this alternative Western discourse on the Orient, one in which the East is characterized, not by ignorance and backwardness but, in his words, by "direct experience, and in the case of poets, novelists, and scholars like Goethe, Gérard de Nerval, Richard Burton, Flaubert, and Louis Massignon…imagination and refinement" (Said 1997: 13). This alternative form of Orientalism drew on European romanticism and expressivism and often directly influenced the very tradition of Gnostic engagement with Asia that I have been discussing. That Said sees in this tradition a counter to European liberalism gives credence to the argument that the critique of Orientalism is itself part of a Western counter discourse on Asia (Mignolo 2007).

This is not to suggest of course that the Gnostic diplomats—the subjects of this book—were all anticolonial activists. Like their contemporaries, they exhibited a variety of attitudes toward European colonization in the regions of the world that most interested them, ranging from indifference to disapproval and, in some cases, advocacy for the rights of colonized peoples. Among Islamicists in the interwar years, for example, Louis Massignon expressed sympathy for the fate of the Palestinians and Ignaz Goldziher opposed foreign control of Egypt along with the general tendency in the West to denigrate Islam (Curtis 2009: 17). Alexandra David-Néel, who expressed radical anarchist sympathies for much of her life, was for some time close to the theosophist Annie Besant, one of the founders of the Indian Congress Party and a strong advocate for Indian independence. Her writings are full of unflattering portraits of India's colonial elites. A distinct distaste for European colonialism was very much part of the intellectual and spiritual context within which Guénon's views on Asia were formed.[7] Moreover, in another intriguing parallel with

postcolonial thinking, Guénon was extremely critical of Asian national-ism for being too Western.[8] Most tellingly, our modern Gnostics consis-tently held Asia up as exemplar for the West, an argument that cannot be easily described as a justification for imperial control.

In recognition of this fact, many have been rather less quick to reduce all Western knowledge of Asia—particularly that which comes out of the romantic or expressivist tradition (see Kahn 1995)—to the exigencies of colonialism. But if the hard criticism implied at times by Said hardly seems pertinent to figures like Guénon, the softer criticism seems rather more persuasive that, in trading in representations of an East not as inferior to the West but as essentially mystical, such accounts of Asia are nonetheless misleading, involving as they do significant distortions of Asian realities since they are not based on direct knowledge of the "real" Middle East, India, China, and Japan, but emerge instead from the largely Western interests, presuppositions, and preoccupations that give rise to them.

The Soft Critique

Richard King, for example, has written of a Western tendency "to empha-size the 'mystical' nature of Hindu religion by reference to the 'esoteric' literature known as Vedanta." This perception of Hinduism, which prevailed in nineteenth-century European philosophical and esoteric circles, was derived largely from reading the translations of sections of two classical texts: a translation of the Vedanta—first in Latin—by Anquetil-Duperron in the final section of the Upanishads (itself based on a Persian translation), and the Bhagavad Gītā, an English translation of a part of a much longer classical text, the Mahābhārata, by the British Orientalist William Jones in 1785. The Upanishads were composed over a period of almost 1000 years and represented a move away from ritu-alism, marking the emergence of an "allegorical interpretation of Vedic sacrificial practices." This was seized upon by many Western intellectu-als of "anti-clerical and anti-ritualistic sentiment," as well as by Christian missionaries "as evidence of an incipient monotheism" in ancient India and by liberal Christians like Max Müller because it provided a platform for "inter-faith dialogue" (King 1999: 122).[9] Buddhism was not "dis-covered" by Europeans as a world religion until later, initially through Eugene Burnouf's 1844 volume *Introduction à l'histoire du Buddhisme indien*. Moreover, as noted, some people, like Guénon, continued to see Buddhism as a version of Hinduism well into the twentieth century.

These texts, it is argued, encourage a very particular understanding of Hinduism as an ancient, monotheistic, and esoteric religious tradition

that is strongly shaped by the "reflections of a (largely male) brahmanical élite increasingly influenced by śrāmana (especially Buddhist) renunciate traditions [which]...contributed to the development of an image of the heroic and noble ascetic as representative of the core values of Hinduism" (King 1999: 123). As for Buddhism, the European texts encouraged a reading that associated Buddhist with Vedantic thought at the same time permitting direct comparison with Christian mysticism and particularly the apophatic theology of Meister Eckhart (King 1999: 125).

A similar argument can be made for Western understandings of Islam, including that of Guénon, which privilege its esoteric/Sufi traditions. Mark Sedgwick, for example, writes of what he calls the "Romantic-Deist" misreading of Sufism that appeared in Europe "after the publication in 1815 of Captain Sir John Malcolm's monumental *History of Persia,* which contains one of the earliest examinations of Sufism to be published in a European language" (Sedgwick 2011: 170). This was, in Sedgwick's strongly argued opinion, a distorted version of Islam in general and Sufism in particular, due in part to the fact that in researching his book, Malcolm: (1) did not even speak to an actual Sufi; (2) was committed to the view of Sufism "as a possible survival from the ancient Greeks"; and (3) saw in Sufism traces of the *urreligion* (the original religion) with which theosophers, and later Réné Guénon, were subsequently to become obsessed (Sedgwick 2011: 170–171).

A favorite of such European interpreters of Sufism was—and still is—the work of the medieval philosopher Ibn Arabi, a translation of whose writings first appeared in Europe in 1911.[10] In Sedgwick's view, these writings on Sufism in general, and al-'Arabi in particular, convey a very particular understanding of Islam, one that sees it as almost entirely about inner experience, with the exoteric dimensions of ritual and law stripped away. This, argues Sedgwick, is Islam, but an Islam far more European than Middle Eastern due to its focus on the internal question of union with the divine at the expense of the external ritualistic and legalistic (*sharia*, *fiqh*) dimensions that are so central to the lives of practicing Muslims, as well as being completely removed from the popular beliefs and practices that prevail throughout the Muslim world (Sedgwick 2011).

The strong version of the Orientalist critique in fact itself rests on an Orientalist division of the world between East and West, failing to notice that for many European Orientalists, Guénon among them, India was not the despised other of colonial discourse at all but in fact a close relative. We would significantly misunderstand Aryanist discourse in the nineteenth century if we were to read it through this "Orientalist" lens. But to suggest that colonial or imperial are misleading descriptors of the

representations of Eastern religion in the writings of twentieth-century Gnostics like Guénon is not to argue that they were not a product of distinctly Western concerns.

A case in point is the influence of the philosophical concerns of Arthur Schopenhauer on the Eastern imaginaries of Hermann Hesse, Erwin Schrödinger, and probably René Guénon and Alexandra David-Néel as well. Like many of their late nineteenth-century predecessors, twentieth-century Gnostics found in Schopenhauer's writings a source for their early understandings of, and profound appreciation for, Indian religious thought and its apparent relevance to their times. Yet, Schopenhauer's understandings of Hinduism and Buddhism need to be situated in an Aryanist discourse that emerged in nineteenth-century Europe, a discourse that was to be mobilized, with devastating consequences, in the twentieth. To quote one commentator:

> The profound pessimism of Schopenhauer's thought—encapsulated in his belief that this is the worst of all possible worlds—was a heady mix of Romantic "Weltschmerz" and Romantic orientalism, and, with the belated success of his philosophy in the 1850s, Buddhism became a real force in German intellectual life. It would be impossible to overestimate the extent of Schopenhauer's influence on the cultural life of the later nineteenth century—not just in his metaphysical justification of a widely felt pessimism, but in his popularization of Buddhism, and his equation of Buddhism with that pessimism. (Moore 2003: 22)

However, it is the connection between Schopenhauer's interest in Indian religious traditions and his views on Christianity that are of greater concern. As Moore, among others, has pointed out, Schopenhauer "held that Christianity—or at least the teachings first promulgated by Jesus—did not, as is commonly assumed, develop out of the Jewish religious tradition. Rather, Christianity had…an inheritance that could be seen in its family resemblance to Buddhism and Hinduism" (2003: 23; see also King, 1999). In Schopenhauer's work, as in that of other German thinkers, India, "the region geographically furthest from Germany…was seen by some not as something utterly alien, but more like a distant relative, unfamiliar perhaps, but not entirely other." Some "German writers [therefore] found their East [not in India but] elsewhere, and rather closer to home," specifically in the European Jewry. Therefore, for "Schopenhauer, a turn or rather re-turn to the Orient meant the overthrow of (Jewish) philosophical and religious verities. Despite his metaphysical pessimism, he holds out the prospect of the regeneration of the West" (Moore 2003: 23).

If Orientalism in the strong sense seems an implausible characterization of the views of Gnostic diplomats, their admiration for Hinduism nonetheless seems to stem mainly from the Aryanist, even racist, concerns of European predecessors like Schopenhauer. To what extent did the fact that Guénon, Hermann Hesse, Erwin Schrödinger, and Alexandra David-Néel based their understanding of Hinduism on nineteenth-century Western sources, including, significantly, the Aryanist writings of Schopenhauer, make their accounts inauthentic? And, more concerning, to what extent were the racist and anti-Semitic dimensions of nineteenth-century Aryanism that were carried forward into the National Socialist movement of the 1920s and 1930s present in their own representations of Eastern religion?

This is not an easy charge to assess. Unlike their contemporary Martin Heidegger, neither Schrödinger nor Hesse joined, or even seem to have expressed any real sympathy for, National Socialism in Germany or fascist movements elsewhere in Europe, although as Mark Sedgwick among others has shown, the same cannot be said of a number of René Guénon's followers and sympathizers.[11] There has been a suggestion that Hermann Hesse, while never a Nazi was, by dint of his own "Aryanist" ideas and family connections to Pietism, part of a "*völkisch*" strand in German right wing thinking (Sundberg 2008).

But to argue that admiration for Hinduism on the part of figures like Guénon, Schrödinger (who was living and working in Germany at the time of Hitler's rise to power), or Hermann Hesse (originally a German national, although he resided in Switzerland and acquired Swiss citizenship during the war) made them particularly susceptible to Aryanism and racism is a bit of a stretch. This does not mean that any of them were exemplary either in their personal or public lives. But there is little to suggest that this flowed in any direct way from their Orientalist beliefs or that they were particularly susceptible to fascist ideology because of them.

Schrödinger's sexual politics, for example, were certainly less than admirable: he was a serial polygynist with a penchant for women often considerably younger than himself.[12] He was not a man of the Left, although there were times in his life when he seemed to have expressed support for the Soviet regime. Unlike Einstein, who was exceptional among German physicists of the time for his vocal support for both pacifism and socialism, Schrödinger, who took up Max Planck's Chair of Physics in Berlin in 1927, was never a prominent public critic of National Socialism, or of their attacks on Jewish academics. During the time of Nazi street fighting and targeting of the Jews, Schrödinger "made no secret of his dislike for the Nazis and their fascist allies, but never sought in any way to oppose them

actively or to join organizations dedicated to such opposition" (Moore 1989: 262). When Einstein left Germany, resigning from the Prussian Academy of Sciences (just before Hitler became chancellor in 1933) no non-Jewish professors of physics or chemistry protested, even when it was not yet especially dangerous to do so. Indeed "very few non-Jewish professors refused to knuckle under to the Nazis" (Moore 1989: 272).

However, when money became available from the British company ICI and the Rockefeller Foundation to bring Jewish physicists to Britain, Schrödinger made it clear that, although not Jewish, he too wanted out. And although he made no overt political statement when he left to take up a fellowship at Oxford's Magdalen College, "the Nazis recognized him as an enemy," and he was entered in the Nazi records as "politically unreliable" and his name was deleted from the list of academy members (Moore 1989: 271, 273).

In 1936, Schrödinger returned to Austria as professor of physics at Graz, and in 1939 he was forced into signing a letter supporting the Anschluss, again making him a suspect in the eyes of Hitler's opponents, including Einstein and his supporters at Oxford. Despite this, the Nazis dismissed him from the university, citing his participation in anti-Nazi activities among Germans outside Germany (Moore 1989: 342–343), and he was forced to flee Austria, returning to Oxford in 1938, then to Belgium for a year before going to Dublin to take up the position of director of a new Institute for Advanced Studies created for him by the Irish prime minister De Valera.

Hermann Hesse had a somewhat more turbulent relationship with the German state. During the World War I, he published a number of widely read essays attacking German nationalism and warmongering. And although these were at first only mildly critical of the German regime, he was nonetheless pilloried in the German press for being unpatriotic and talentless, "a smirking draft evader, a cunning coward, and a renegade...a traitor to the [German] cause, and as such, [he] was unceremoniously relegated to the black list of dissenters, the enemies of the fatherland, defeatists and alarmists" (Mileck 1978: 72–74). But he fared no better in the eyes of pacifists, whose ideals he lauded but whom he also criticized for a lack of patriotism.

These sentiments reemerged in his response to the rise of National Socialism. Hesse expressed contempt for National Socialism and German anti-Semitism from as early as 1922, and he was in turn widely attacked by militarists and nationalists, causing him to acquire Swiss citizenship in 1924 (Mileck 1978: 134–136). From 1933, from his base in the Italian village of Montagnola, Hesse played "host and benefactor to a steady flow of political refugees" from the Nazis, and, unlike Schrödinger, protested

publicly against the persecution of German-speaking Jewish writers, whose works were increasingly being banned from appearing in German publications. As a consequence, Hesse's own work was also banned from German publications (except for the Jewish-owned *Neue Rondschau*), although he continued to be read by Germans who were able to get access to his writings through a Swedish magazine that was still available in Germany in the 1930s. Just as during World War I, the opponents of Nazism accused him—falsely, according to Mileck—of being a Nazi sympathizer because he wrote for a German newspaper. Immediately after the war, Hesse also published a series of articles in which he reprised the argument about the need for spiritual regeneration that he had made after the first war, calling on German youth to see in their defeat the opportunity to overcome "the megalomania of technology and that of nationalism." However, although he did receive some recognition from the postwar government—he was awarded the prestigious Goethe Prize in 1946—he concluded again, from what he took to be the lack of response on the part of German youth, that Germany had learned nothing from its experience. Once again, as Mileck puts it, Hesse was "never quite German enough for nationalists…never quite activist enough for youth." In response to what seemed to him the impossible situation for public, intellectual pronouncements, Hesse again turned inward, remaining more or less silent on events in Germany and turning to the Pietist Christianity of his youth for solace (Mileck 1978: 348–355). It was after the war that he began work on the manuscript of *The Glass Bead Game*, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize (Mileck 1978: 250–264).

Clearly, therefore, most of the modern Gnostics mentioned above derived some of their knowledge of Eastern religion from nineteenth-century European translations of selected—and perhaps unrepresentative—texts and from mainly European commentaries on Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Moreover, Guénon and his close follower Frithjof Schuon were influenced by al-'Arabi's interpretations of what they saw as the esoteric core of Islam.[13] There is little doubt that the understandings of Hinduism that prevailed in interwar France and Germany, including René Guénon's, were, at least at an early point in their careers, derived either directly from European translations of the Vedanta and the Bhagavad Gītā or from the mainly German philosophers and writers, including Schopenhauer who had interpreted them for a European audience. We know, for example, that Erwin Schrödinger's understanding of Hinduism was based mainly on his reading of English and German translations of the Vedanta and that, among the books on Indian philosophy that he studied closely, were Henry Warren's 1896 text *Buddhism in Translation*, Max Walleser's *The Philosophic Foundations of Older Buddhism* (1904), Richard Garbe's

Samkhya and Yoga (1896) and *Samkhya and Philosophy* (1894), Paul Deussen's *The System of Vedanta* (1906), Max Müller's *On the Origin and Development of Religion with Special Consideration of Religions of Ancient India* (1880), T. W. Rhys Davids's *Buddhism*, and Richard Pichel's *Life and Teaching of the Buddha* (1910) (Moore 1989: 113). And during his period of retreat in the middle of writing *Siddhartha*, we are told, Hermann Hesse engaged in an intense reading of the Upanishads, Hartmann's translation of the Bhagavad Gītā and Buddhist "scriptures," along with Hermann Oldenburg's *Buddha* (Berlin, 1881), Paul Deussen's *Sechzig Upanishad's des Veda* (Leipzig, 1897*)* and Karl E. Neumann's three volume *Gotomo Buddho's Reden* (Leipzig, 1896–1902). Alexandra David-Néel was clearly familiar with the philosophy of Schopenhauer, and is said to have been "well-versed in the literature and diverse methods of many Hindu and Buddhist traditions" (Middleton 1989: 67). She also studied carefully the thoughts and writings of "two great figures of the Hindu (Vedantic) revival—the saintly Ramakrishnan and his disciple Vivekananda, from whose examples flow most of the yoga ashrams in the West today" (Foster and Foster 1998: 59).

But if their readings on Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, etc. were not particularly associated with a will to govern over the Orient, were they instead inflected by an emergent nationalism bent on rooting out all traces of alien influence? There were undoubtedly many, often very different, reasons for the Eastern turn in interwar Europe, but two stand out in any attempt to assess the projects of the four figures being considered here. The first is especially pertinent to the project of Guénon and his followers, a project that has, as we have noted, been labeled Traditionalist.

Of the implications of the adoption of Guénonian Traditionalism by right wing movements in Western Europe in more recent times, Stéphane François writes:

Traditionalism is a radical contestation of modernity, in the sense that its adherents seek to destroy the political and social model born from this modernity, with the will to rebuild a traditional and organic society inspired by antique, ancient and medieval European societies and also by acknowledged traditional societies such as Indian ones or those of the Muslim world. This radical antimodernism reflects a fundamental cultural pessimism concerning "the modern decadence"; modernity is thus perceived as an absolute polymorphic alienation. According to these Traditionalists, the "myth of progress" would be the ultimate idol of a materialist civilization in complete spiritual decay. This antimodernism radicalizes the criticism of modernity by the fact that it sees decline in any form of progress. Therefore, what we are facing here is a deeply pessimistic philosophy that questions, or even denies, modern optimism. Indeed, the latter refuses to

rely on time, challenging the idea that the individual, as a principle and a value, has really succeeded in emancipating himself, because submission to traditional authority is being slowly replaced by socioeconomic values and the concept of mass consumption. In this respect, the New Right's traditionalism is radical, in spite of the fact it does not want to reverse society in a violent way, but rather through subversion, leading to its ultimate decay. (François 2014: 87–88)[14]

This, in my view, captures rather well the political implications of Guénonian Traditionalism. Guénon was notably interested in the so-called initiatic dimensions of Hinduism and Sufi Islam, and hence in authority structures that were distinctly un or even antidemocratic. Moreover, a number of Guénon's close associates involved themselves in Far Right politics in Europe between the wars. Julius Evola, for example, exhibited markedly fascist leanings, and Mircea Eliade took part in the activities of Far Right, nationalist, even pro-Nazi circles in Romania before World War II. There is also the fact that at least some of the Traditionalist admiration for Islam stemmed from a wish to ally with Islamic anti-Semitism.

However, there is no evidence that Guénon was himself involved in Far Right politics in Europe in the interwar years; indeed he had decamped to Cairo by 1930, withdrawing almost completely from European politics and intellectual life. Moreover, there is also the matter of Guénon's commitment both to monotheism and religious universalism, making at least his version of Traditionalism a hard sell even among members of the European New Right in more recent times, many of whom are in fact inclined towards paganism (François 2014).

Finally, whatever Guénon's reasons were for advocating Traditionalism, and whatever its political implications, these were most definitely not shared with the other three figures under consideration here. Indeed it seems unlikely that they fully explain even Guénon's project, particularly his interest in the esoteric or inner "experiential" core that, he argued, lay at the heart of all religious traditions. David-Néel, as we shall see, sought not to reject modernity, but to accommodate it with Buddhism. And like Hesse and Schrödinger, her reasons for turning to Asian religion tradition were more personal than political.

Erwin Schrödinger spoke eloquently about these personal reasons in writing about what he called the "metaphysical" crisis that was brought about by the transformation of organized religion in the West through its almost total politicization, alongside the fact that modern science now requires us to "leave aside…as altogether too naively puerile, the idea of a soul dwelling in the body as in a house, quitting it on death, and capable of existing without it" (Schrödinger 1964: 12). In a later chapter,

we will see how his personal response to this crisis was to turn to the wisdom of the Vedanta. Suffice it here to point out Schrödinger's interest in Hinduism—along with Guénon's in Islam, David-Néel's in Buddhism, and Hesse's in Buddhism and Taoism—was motivated by a "metaphysical urge" to find answers to fundamental existential questions that arise, but can no longer be answered, in the West. There is little doubt that this took place at times of fairly intense, personal, psychological—or spiritual— crisis in the lives of all four.

Revisiting the Problem of Authenticity

Does the "soft" critique outlined above invalidate these accounts of Asian religion and of the Traditionalist project tout court? One thing that the recent critiques of the Gnostic engagement with Asian spirituality fail to acknowledge is that Guénon and his contemporaries were themselves directly concerned with the question of authenticity. The example of René Guénon is instructive in this regard, since he, in fact, took great pains to authenticate his own knowledge of Hinduism and Islam by contrasting it with that of occultists and theosophies. Precisely at the point in his argument where he opens up the question of the content of Tradition, Guénon turns on the theosophical and occultist worlds from which he himself had so recently emerged, arguing that their representations of tradition were nothing more than a hodgepodge of speculation and downright "fakery."[15] He maintains, for example, that the knowledge of the ancient (Western) traditions that circulated in occultist and spiritual- ist circles consisted of nothing but fabrications "by certain occultists out of the most incongruous elements" (Guénon 1944: 36). Similarly, other Western traditions, like that of the lost civilization of Atlantis or of the ancient Celts, were fabricated out of mere "vestiges of vanished civiliza- tions." Here, a lack of authenticity is inevitable, since the only way to gain access to genuine tradition is to "establish contact with still living tradi- tions" which are "capable of being revived and can be made to live again" (Guénon 1944: 38).

Guénon went on to observe that occultist attempts to revive Western tra- dition "are almost always conceived from an attitude of more or less open hostility to the East [because they] have not perceived the fundamental identity underlying all their differences of outward form," concluding that all such "anti-modern reactions are incomplete, excellent on their critical side, but very far from constituting a restoration of true intellectuality, and flourish only within the limits of a rather narrow intellect." If this were understood, then, their "opposition to the East would thereby be resolved

and cease to exist" (Guénon 1944: 43). In *The Reign of Quantity*, Guénon makes a related critique of contemporary occultism which, in seeking justification in modern science, becomes thoroughly "penetrated" by the very materialism that it criticizes. There is, he writes, no reason "to be surprised at this, considering the extent to which all the occultist, theosophist, and other schools of that sort are fond of searching assiduously for points of approach to modern scientific theories…The 'clairvoyants' [go] so far as to see 'fluids' and 'radiations,' just as there are some, particularly among the theosophists, who see atoms and electrons" (Guénon 1953: 157).

And if what the Western occultists, hermeticists, and spiritualists produce are mere "fabrications" assembled from the "vestiges" of irretrievably lost traditions, these "compete with the no less imaginary 'Eastern tradition'" of the theosophists. He was therefore highly critical of

> Anglo-Saxon "theosophists" and all the inventors of other sects of the same kind, whose oriental terminology is no more than a mask serving to impose upon the gullible and ill-informed, and concealing ideas no less foreign to the East than they are dear to the modern West. People of this sort are more dangerous than mere philosophers, owing their pretensions to an esoterism they do not possess any more than the philosophers, but which they simulate fraudulently in order to attract persons who are in search of something better than "profane" speculations and who, in the midst of the present crisis, do not know where to turn. (Guénon 1944: 148)

Theosophy, he wrote in *The Reign of Quantity*, is simply a form of "neo-spiritualism" and theosophers are people who "react against the existing disorder, but have not the knowledge necessary to do so effectively" (Guénon 1953: 258). In a direct reference to theosophy's Madame Blavatsky, he went on to say: "To see Germans and Russians included among the representatives of the Eastern outlook would be truly ludicrous if it were not a sign of the most deplorable ignorance of all that concerns the East" (Guénon 1944: 148).

The critique concludes with the following less-than-modest claim:

> Although this compels us to speak personally, which we are not in the habit of doing, the following formal declaration is necessary: so far as we are aware there is no one else who has expounded authentic Eastern ideas in the West, and we have done so exactly as any Oriental. (Guénon 1944: 148)

Guénon's argument that the contrast between East and West was as much one of mentality as it was of geographical location led him to further conclude that the voices of "Orientals" who spoke on behalf of the East

were just as "fraudulent," because they had been thoroughly westernized through the deplorable fact of "Western encroachment" on Asia. The result is that while the "modern confusion [perpetuated by the theosophists] had its origin in the West…the confusion is now spreading everywhere, and even the East seems to be succumbing to it." These westernized Asians may, he wrote, actually come forward as the West's "opponents in the field of politics…they may wish to resist foreign domination, but to do so they must make use of Western methods," while it is in the nature of "real Orientals" to remain quiet, as indeed their tradition encourages them to do (Guénon 1944: 141). In *The Reign of Quality* he writes that "to the extent that a man 'Westernizes' himself, whatever may be his race or country, to that extent he ceases to be an Oriental spiritually and intellectually" (Guénon 1953: 16).

In short, Traditionalists like Guénon were as concerned as their recent critics with authenticity in their opposing of the anecdotes and fictions of "frauds" and "tricksters," suggesting once again that more recent iterations of the authenticity critique are part of what I want to call a dialectic of authenticity that has long characterized Western engagements with Asian religious traditions. Moreover, early twentieth-century Gnostics like René Guénon were not just critical of the appropriation and distortion of Asian esoteric traditions by their contemporaries. In seeking more authentic versions of Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism, they were not content to rely solely on translations of (parts of) classical texts or with secondhand knowledge derived from reading nineteenth-century European accounts. Instead, like their contemporaries in the discipline of anthropology, they sought the kind of authentic knowledge that only a direct experience of Asia could bring.

At the same time as anthropologists like Malinowski and his followers were advocating fieldwork as an alternative to the speculations of so-called armchair anthropologists, Gnostics like Hermann Hesse, Alexandra David-Néel, and Guénon travelled to, and lived for more or less extended periods of time in, Asia and the Middle East in order to acquire firsthand knowledge. As noted, Guénon went to live in Cairo in 1930, and there he remained—married to an Egyptian, speaking Arabic, and taking part in the life of a Sufi *tareqa* (a Sufi order)—until his death some 20 years later. Hermann Hesse went to Asia much earlier on in his career, travelling to India, Ceylon, Malaya, and parts of what was then the Dutch East Indies (including Sumatra) in the company of his friend, the artist Hans Sturzenegger. The journey was, for Hesse,

> both flight and a quest. Marriage, [domestic life in a farmhouse in] Gaienhofen [in Bad Würtenburg], and vulgar, pleasure-seeking

materialistic Europe…had become too much for him. He needed a change
of environment, and he vaguely expected to find the spirit of India [in] a
more innocent community of man, and answers to his personal problems.
(Mileck 1978: 46)

However, if he thought that direct contact with Asia would put an end to his
lifelong quest for meaning and spiritual solace, he was to be disappointed.
The real Asia was not at all to his liking. Rather he was "appalled by the
poverty and filth, and depressed by the idolatrized and commercialised
Buddhism" that he encountered in Ceylon, Sumatra, and Malaya (Mileck
1978: 46). The "soulful, searching gaze of most Indian worshipers," Hesse
wrote, "far from being an invocation to the gods, or a plea for salvation, is
simply a request for money" and "Buddhism in Ceylon is pretty to photo-
graph and to write about in the feature pages of newspapers, but, beyond
that, it is nothing more than one of the many poignant, distorted and gro-
tesque forms in which suffering humanity expresses its misery and lack of
spirit and strength."[16] Hesse failed to find authentic Hinduism or Buddhism
in Asia (while of Islam, the religion of the majority in Sumatra and Malaya,
there is no mention) and, disappointed, he returned to Europe.

If India was viewed from a distance as the "abode of the spirit" by
nineteenth-century Europeans (cf. Lopez 1998), those who travelled there
in the twentieth found something quite different: a place where spirit had
been displaced. Hesse's solution to his disappointment at discovering
that Asia was even less authentic than the West was to retreat to Europe.
However, others were determined to try harder, to find an authentic Asia
uncorrupted by commodification, colonialism, poverty, and supersti-
tion by travelling to remote and heretofore inaccessible places, setting in
motion yet another cycle of the dialectics of authenticity. One such place
was Tibet, and one such traveler was Alexandra David-Néel.

Despite the contrasts between them, to be explored more fully in the
next chapter, and in addition to their shared nationality, there are sig-
nificant parallels between the careers of Guénon and David-Néel. Both
first encountered Asia by participating in prewar theosophical circles and
both were influenced significantly by the classical Hindu texts. Both also
became increasingly critical of the dilettantism and superficiality that
prevailed in the Western theosophical and occultist circles in which they
themselves had first encountered the "wisdom of the East" and both went
on to spend extended periods of time in the Orient—Guénon in Egypt
from 1930 until 1951, David-Néel in India in the early 1890s and then
in the Himalayas (with a side trip to Japan, Korea, and China) between
1911 and 1925. Neither can therefore be accused of having relied solely on
secondary European accounts of Asia.

Both Guénon and David-Néel, as we have noted, were critical of colonialism and the cultural influence of the West on the peoples, cultures, and religious traditions of Asia and neither followed the academic career paths of many of their Orientalist contemporaries. And they both participated in Eastern religious practices: Guénon as a member of a Sufi order in France and then Cairo (although he was more attracted by Sufi initiatic traditions and Islamic ritual proprieties than with achieving the ecstatic union with God that is the goal of some Sufi practice); David-Néel, disguised as a male, in the circle of an Indian guru in Europe,[17] and then, more systematically and intensively, in Buddhist meditation in the Himalayas where she claims to have been initiated into the lamahood.

David-Néel described herself as "an advocate of the living philosophy of the East" (Foster and Foster 1998: 46), and her mission was to experience Asian religion firsthand in order "to gather manifestations of human thought, to attempt to penetrate the mystery of the world and ease man's fear of suffering and death" (cited in Middleton 1989: 175). In a sense, all of her years in Asia were part of a quest for an authentic Asia. Like Hesse's, her firsthand experiences were not always positive and she frequently expressed disgust at the filth and greed that she encountered in South Asia, the silliness of its colonial officialdom, and the negative effects of colonial rule.[18] However, convinced that an authentic East still existed in places uncorrupted by colonialism and the market, she travelled to Sikkim, Nepal and—after a visit to Japan, Korea, and China (neither of which really captured her imagination, despite an interest in Zen)—Tibet.[19] Her immensely popular accounts of her travels in Tibet and her visit, in disguise, to the "forbidden city" of Lhasa—she was forbidden from entering from India by British colonial authorities, and from the north by Chinese officialdom, whom she managed to evade—are what she was best known for back in Europe.

The accounts of her encounters with Asia are replete with criticisms of the inauthenticity of European knowledge of Asia on the one hand and attempts to validate her own on the other. The following are just a few examples of David-Néel's own claims to authenticity:

1. In her diary, of a visit to India in 1912, she wrote: "What is Shiva in Paris—even at the Musée Guimet? A name? Yesterday it was the living symbol of a living thing" (cited in Middleton 1989: 53).[20]
2. She put great store in her language-learning abilities, and never failed to draw attention to the fact that she was able to speak directly to Indians and, later on, Tibetans, in their own language, without the need for an interpreter (e.g., Middleton 1989: 53, 87).

3. After some time in Asia, she ceased wearing European clothing, and again took great care to convey to her readers that she had adopted "native dress" (e.g., Middleton 1989: 53).

4. In Kathmandu, she wrote in her diary: "Once more I turn my back on Western civilization, joyously, with a feeling of relief, of repose, of being at last unburdened" (cited in Middleton 1989: 76).

5. The account of her travels in the Himalayas begins with a description of a physical setting that is clearly set apart from the modern world (David-Néel 1967: 7).

These are just a few examples of the ways in which David-Néel's texts work to authenticate her account of Buddhism, and to criticize, at least by implication, those of her European contemporaries through the use of rhetorical devices that should be familiar to those accustomed to reading ethnography: "These places are remote/exotic," "I was there to witness these things for myself," "I spoke to them in their own language and did not need the services of interpreters," "I immersed myself in the local cultural milieu," "I was not an outsider/I became one of them."

Where Is Tradition(alism)?

In describing Western Yogic practice, Carl Jung wrote: "Yoga in Mayfair or Fifth Avenue, or in any other place which is on the telephone, is a spiritual fake" (Jung [1939] 1958: 500). Jung's lampooning of the Eastern spiritual practices of wealthy Londoners and New Yorkers is part of what Peter Bishop calls a particular "telling" about Eastern religion, one that has a long history in the West (Bishop n.d.). And, as Jung's remarks suggest, such tellings inevitably involve, not a rejection of practices as such, but instead, a denunciation of their distortions in the West. "Even a superficial acquaintance with Eastern thought," Jung wrote, "is sufficient to show that a fundamental difference divides East and West. The Christian West considers man to be wholly dependent upon the grace of God, or at least upon the Church as the exclusive and divinely sanctioned earthly instrument of man's redemption. The East, however, insists that man is the sole cause of his higher development, for it believes in 'selfliberation'" (1958: 481–482). "If we snatch these things directly from the East, we have merely indulged our Western acquisitiveness, confirming yet again that 'everything good is outside,' whence it has to be fetched and pumped into our barren souls" (1958: 483). What was then in effect a critique of his theosophical contemporaries for the inauthenticity of their interpretations of Hinduism, Jung's critique of the spiritual fakery of times was also a justification for his, more authentic version:

> Instead of learning the spiritual techniques of the East by heart and imitating them in a thoroughly Christian with a correspondingly forced attitude, it would be far more to the point to find out whether there exists in the unconscious an introverted tendency similar to that which has become the guiding spiritual principle of the East. We should then be in a position to build on our own ground with our own methods. (1958: 483)

However, in seeking an accommodation between Eastern religion and Western psychology, Jung, needless to say, laid himself open to the same charge, demonstrating that the search for genuine tradition invariably sets in motion a process of deconstruction and reconstruction that would appear to have no end, a veritable dialectic of authenticity.

Moreover, in failing to recognize that the quest for authenticity was central to the Traditionalist project, the more recent criticisms of its distortions of Asian realities serve merely to reproduce it, suggesting that far from being external to the Traditionalist project, its recent critics have merely continued it into the present. Instead, therefore, of embarking on yet another round of deconstructing and reconstructing our interpretations of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, might it not instead be better to assess the underlying assumptions that ground all such authenticity claims?

Asian religious Traditionalism in the twentieth century has rested on two claims. The first is that Asia is a space of social, cultural, economic, political, and—importantly—religious otherness that remains external to the processes set in motion by modern colonialism: state formation, cultural rationalization, capitalism, commodification, etc. And, second, encounters with that otherness give us access to knowledge that itself is genuinely other-to-the-modern, that is, knowledge that is uncorrupted by modern nationalism, rationalism, secularism, and the like. Rather than countering these presuppositions, critical scholars have tended to reproduce them to the extent that they continue to presume the existence of an authentic Asia that escapes all existing attempts to represent it. And they continue to hold out the possibility of a mode of knowing that is free of ethnocentric, Eurocentric, or logocentric assumptions and presuppositions.

However, as Peter Bishop so perceptively shows, just when Jung (who based his judgments on a reading of a traditional Tibetan text) was denouncing the appropriations of Hinduism and Buddhism in places that were "on the telephone…in accordance with the wishes of the Tibetan government, Lhasa was connected to the telegraph and…by 1940 the Dalai Lama had his own telephone" (Bishop n.d.). In other words, those places that were taken by Western observers in the 1920s to be the sites of

real tradition were in fact sites of fairly intensive modernization, and had been at least since the 1870s.

In insular and peninsular Southeast Asia, this involved large-scale land alienation and the creation of capitalist enterprises in mining and tropical agriculture; massive land development (land clearing, draining of swamps and the building of canals and irrigation works); the penetration of international, national, and regional markets and consequent commodification of local social relations; the expansion of shipping, railways, and roads; modern state- and nation-building and the spread of rational bureaucratic practice; the rise of nationalist movements; and, of particular relevance here, the regulation and rationalization of religion through the efforts of missionaries, religious reformers, and colonial states. While in some instances, these changes led to disembedding processes whereby formally localized economic, political, and religious practices were freed from their social and cultural contexts that is typically thought of as modernizing, in other places and under rather different circumstances, people were reembedded within new kinds of local "communities" and new kinds of political dependency: not traditional, therefore, but retraditionalized.[21] In sum, the notion of Asian "living traditions" uncontaminated by modernizing processes in the twentieth century is seriously flawed.

As to the assumption that Traditionalism is a form of knowledge uncorrupted by modern modes of thinking, one needs to ask whether even the most sophisticated accounts of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Sufism, including those of recent critics, are not inevitably impure and inauthentic, mediated as they inevitably are by and through the modernist cultural, intellectual, and theological contexts within which they are formed. In other words, the knowledge that emerged out of these interwar encounters with Asia was something entirely new, not the direct appearance in thought of already-existing Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, or Taoist meanings, practices, or modes of being. Traditionalist knowledge can never be authentic but is derived from interpretations of a tradition that is continually transformed as it is translated, retranslated, reinterpreted, and reconstituted in new cultural, civilizational, and historical contexts.[22] If, as Guénon argued, Asia was indeed the site of a fundamental alterity—of radically different ways of thinking about and being in the world—how would it have been possible for a Westerner even to know, much less describe, represent, translate, and/or interpret it. Were Guénon's versions of Islam and Hinduism authentic or were they, at base, mere fictions, projections onto a mythical Oriental other of Guénon's own concerns, desires, and fantasies? The question of authenticity looms particularly large in any attempt to assess Guénon's Traditionalist form of modern Gnosticism.

Perhaps we should rather ask why the processes of translation, interpretation, and reworking that have always been part of the Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, and Muslims traditions should be seen as so deeply problematic when they take place in the modern age. Just how much the assumption of the inauthenticity of modern appropriations of Buddhism (or Hinduism, Taoism and Islam) continues to shape Western discourse on Asia in the twenty-first century is manifest in Slavoj Žižek's recent remarks on Buddhism. Žižek asserts that the debate over authenticity may finally be laid to rest once it is recognized that authentic forms of Buddhism are just as foreign to modern Asia as they are to the West, rendering all authenticity claims equally moot:

> It is no longer possible to oppose…Western Buddhism to its "authentic" Oriental version; the case of Japan delivers here the conclusive evidence. Not only do we have today, among the Japanese top managers, the widespread "corporate Zen" phenomenon; in the whole of the last 150 years, Japan's rapid industrialization and militarization, with its ethics of discipline and sacrifice, was sustained by the large majority of Zen thinkers—who, today, knows that D. T. Suzuki himself, the high guru of Zen in the America of the 60s, supported in his youth, in Japan of the 30s, the spirit of utter discipline and militaristic expansion. (Žižek 2001)

But does this really close the books on the dialectics of authenticity? To be sure, Traditionalism is not distinctive to the West. At roughly the same time as European writers like Guénon were (re)discovering traditional Islam and Sufi initiatic traditions, so too were Traditionalist movements emerging among Muslims in British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. And more recently, in part as a consequence of interaction between European and Indonesian admirers of Ibn Arabi, a new wave of Sufi Traditionalism has taken took root in Indonesia, one in which the importance of Ibn Arabi's philosophy is now fully embraced.

Acknowledging the transformative effects on the Buddhist tradition of "transmission and translation," some recent scholars have coined the term *TransBuddhism* to describe Buddhism's contemporary forms (Bhushan, Garfield, and Zablocki 2009). One might also speak of TransHinduism, TransSufism, and TransTaoism to characterize other so-called Asian religious traditions in the twentieth century.[23] But does relocating authentic Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Islam from the global present to a premodern past mean that there was indeed a time when transmission and translation did not take place? Have not Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Islam always been worked and reworked by new generations of scholars, theologians, and ordinary practitioners both over time and as they spread from their places of origin to other parts of Asia and the

Middle East? Recent critics of Traditionalists such as Guénon, who claim to have discovered "real traditions" untainted by modernity, themselves seem to be trapped in a narrative of an authentic East distorted by those who would appropriate it in modern contexts, whether these be Western or Asian. Far from transcending the dialectics of authenticity, Žižek's critique of modern Buddhism is merely a further iteration of that endless regress of critique and counter critique that begins whenever an attempt is made to produce positive knowledge of Asian otherness by transcending the context within which that knowledge is produced. Far from being external to the Traditionalist project of Western engagement with Asia, Žižek's is merely the latest manifestation of it. As Žižek notes, much the same kinds of development have taken place in Asian Buddhism. This suggests that any assessment of modern/Western Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism as inauthentic is inevitably to assume an Orientalist division of the world between East and West.

Those who would advocate a Gnostic form of engagement with Asia must not, therefore, entertain the possibility of unmediated access to Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu, or Taoist traditions. How could it be otherwise, given the great diversity of Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Taoism, none more authentic than the other? Whether acknowledged by its practitioners or not, Gnostic engagement with Asia must involve not an escape from modernity but its explicit embrace.

4

Gnostics, Religion, and the (Mis)Recognition of Modernity

[In the West] Buddhism is often represented as an ancient Asian tradition that is largely free of beliefs, dogmas, and rituals; whose central form of practice is meditation; which focuses on the here and now rather than the past or the future; which has no personal deity; which is fully compatible with Jewish and Christian mysticism and, especially, with science…Each of these characteristics is historically dubious when one surveys the various forms of Buddhism that emerged across Asia over the past 2,500 years. Those characteristics, however, are all central tenets of a peculiarly western version of Buddhism that emerged out of the colonial encounter.

(Lopez 2009)

In 1929, René Guénon's countrywoman, Louise Eugénie Alexandrine Marie David (later Alexandra David-Néel), published a book on Buddhism based mainly on her travels in South Asia and particularly her trek to the "forbidden city" of Lhasa—the capital of Tibet—and her encounters with Tibetan magic and religion along the way.[1] Unlike Guénon, she was a hugely popular figure in France in the years before World War II, due among other things to an unquenchable thirst for public acknowledgement that had already manifested itself in an early career as an opera singer. Her popularity was undoubtedly also due to a far more engaging style than Guénon's. Unlike Guénon, David-Néel wrote accounts of Asian religion that were accessible to a general public eager for stories of the exotic East. And the appeal of these stories was significantly enhanced by a colorful personality, at least as it was packaged for a public who came to know her as a free-spirited and independent woman and feminist; a vociferous critic both of bourgeois pretension and of Catholicism and the Catholic church (her father's family were

Huguenots); a hashish-smoking disciple of a mysterious Indian guru; a member of an anarchist circle founded by a former Paris communard; a practitioner of tantric sex; and an intrepid and fearless explorer who was able to outwit both colonial authorities and Chinese nationalists bent on blocking her access to Tibet.[2]

Like Guénon's, David-Néel's early knowledge of Asia was acquired secondhand from participating in the spiritualist and theosophical circles that dotted the cultural landscape of early twentieth-century Europe. And like Guénon, David-Néel also became dissatisfied with the dilettantism of her fellow Gnostics and the superficiality of their understandings, decrying, for example, the fantastical nature of the Buddhism "in name only"—an "incoherent mixture of ideas borrowed from everywhere"— that circulated in theosophical circles (David-Néel 1911: 3; my translation). Like Guénon, she therefore began a serious study of the classical Hindu and Buddhist texts, the works of Western Gnostic philosophers like Arnold Schopenhauer, and, in her case, the writings of South Asian exponents of the Hindu revival like Ramakrishna and Vivekananda (Foster and Foster, 1998: 59) for more "authentic" accounts of Hinduism and Buddhism. And, again like Guénon, she decided to travel to the East to gather firsthand information about Hinduism and Buddhism; speaking to practitioners and participating herself in local religious practice. To this end, David-Néel traveled extensively in South and East Asia, beginning with a trip to India in the early 1890s and then making journeys through the Himalayas between 1911 and 1925, which culminated in the trek from China through Tibet to the Tibetan capital of Lhasa for which she is best known.

Guénon and David-Néel were, therefore, contemporaries who shared a desire to promote—what I have been calling, following Jeffrey Kripal—a Gnostic engagement with the Orient. Hardly straightforward Orientalists in the narrow, postcolonial sense, they saw Asia as in many ways superior to the West, an exemplar for a culturally and spiritually diminished Europe. Their interest lay primarily in the main religious traditions of Asia; Asia to them was an abode of the spirit. However, the similarities between Guénon and David-Néel end here. Unlike Guénon, her conservative, even "reactionary" (though, unlike some of his followers, never fascist) countryman, who admired the Orient particularly for the hierarchal and undemocratic initiatic traditions which, in his view, had been preserved in the Indian caste system, David-Néel expressed radical, anarchist, and (proto)feminist sympathies for much of her life. She was at one time close to Annie Besant—theosophist, suffragette, founding member of the Congress Party and advocate for Indian independence—and David-Néel's writings are full of unflattering portraits of India's colonial elites.

Like many young European radicals of her generation—including the Austrian anarchist who fled to Mexico, assumed the name B. Traven and became famous later on as the author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (Kahn 1995)—David-Néel was drawn to the ideas of the Young Hegelian Max Stirner, a precursor of modern anarchist thought. Moreover, her sympathy for radical left-wing causes did not decline with age: she is reported to have given her blessing to the French student uprising of 1968, the year in which she turned 100 (Foster and Foster 1998: 30).

As all this suggests, David-Néel was staunchly modernist and whole-heartedly embraced—unlike Guénon, who utterly rejected—modern rationality and modern emancipatory narratives. While she was best known for her accounts of Tibetan shamanism, magic, and demonology that appeared in the late 1920s—accounts that show her to have been ambivalent toward modernism and rationalism—in fact, her earliest systematic study of Buddhism was a book published more than a decade before the Tibetan journey. And, as its title—*Le Modernisme Bouddhiste et le Bouddhisme de Bouddha* (David-Néel 1911)—indicates, at this time in her life she was firmly committed to a modern, rationalist worldview.

As I argued in the previous chapter, what Traditionalists like René Guénon, and arguably therefore also some of his postcolonial critics, fail to acknowledge is that their Orient—an Orient that is revealed only by fully disengaging from modernist "metanarratives"—is in fact always already situated firmly *within* modernity; far from being incompatible, the modern and the traditional are already accommodated one with the other. Unlike the Traditionalists, David-Néel assumed at the outset that Buddhism and modernism were entirely compatible, making her Asia very different from that of Guénon and his colleagues.

Buddhism according to David-Néel

Le Modernisme Bouddhiste et le Bouddhisme de Bouddha presents Buddhism as consisting of a limited number of basic elements: the example of the life of Siddhārtha Gautama (the historical Buddha); the notion of "Four Noble or Eternal Truths"; the practice of meditation; the concepts of Karma and Nirvana; and the Buddhist Sangha or (monastic) community. Excluded from her consideration were the rich historical traditions of Buddhist exegesis, interpretation, and scholarship and any serious study of the early Buddhist manuscripts or of traditional Buddhist scholarship, to say nothing of the great variety of rituals and beliefs that constitute popular Buddhism in most parts of Asia. David-Néel's is, then, a good example of that modernist (re)interpretation of Buddhism in which it is

represented as a "rational way of thought" based on reason, meditation, and the rediscovery of canonical texts, and in which rituals, image worship, folk beliefs and practices are deemphasized (Bechart 1966). And, like other Buddhist modernists, she "stresses equality over hierarchy, the universal over the local, and often exalts the individual over the community" (Lopez 2002: ix).

As McMahon has suggested, in Buddhist modernism, Buddhism is seen as entirely compatible with modern historicism and scientific rationalism, a Buddhism that is produced by a number of basic, modernist interpretative strategies, namely:

1. *Detraditionalization* or a "shift of orientation from external to internal authority and the associated reorientation from institutional to privatized religion . . . [together with emphasis on] subjective experience and the authority of the individual."
2. *Demythologization*, that is, turning gods into symbols or "states of mind."
3. *Modernization*, that is the "process of attempting to extract . . . meaning that will be viable within the context of modern world views."
4. *Psychologization* whereby "ontological orders [are] reinterpreted as psychological states" (McMahon 2008: 44, 46, 53).

Finally, in David-Néel's version, Buddhism is also the source of a number of modern/ progressive ethical precepts of nonviolence and egalitarianism.

Throughout the book, David-Néel is concerned with distinguishing between what she calls real, pure, or "primitive" Buddhism from the magical and superstitious beliefs of many practicing Buddhists. Writing about Buddhist meditation, for example, she addresses the confusion that prevails in the West about the relationship between Buddhism on the one hand and Yogic practices, hypnotism, and the rituals of certain backward Buddhist sects on the other (David-Néel 1911: 131): "The strictly orthodox Buddhist does not pray: he meditates," she writes (David-Néel 1911: 130). This involves two methods, namely: (1) *Sammâsati*—"the deep reflection of things in order to penetrate nature [in order to] analyse, to dissect to the limit of our power all materiality" ("all feelings that are part of our environment or of our own individuality"); and (2) *Sammàsamâdhi*, which is about making prevalent through "the culture of mental concentration those dispositions or faculties that appear as the best" (1911: 135). Meditational practices in Buddhism, therefore, "have nothing in common with the extraordinary exercises that we generally see as defining Buddhist meditation," she maintains, thereby correcting the popular perception that meditation is some sort of magical or mystical

act. She frequently reminds her readers of this fact, that is, that Buddhists do not need any supernatural props to lean on, and that they aim for "patient study and laborious exercise" (1911: 145).

She goes on to discuss the concept of Karma, which, she writes, is also derived from an older Hindu tradition. However, once adopted by Buddhism, the more ornate, extravagant, or magical manifestations of the Karmic tradition are left behind. For Buddhists, Karma does not involve simplistic or reductive modes of explanation nor does it have anything to do with the idea of an immutable individual soul that continues to move from life to life or from body to body (1911: 160–161).[3] Rather, the Buddhist conception envisages a complex interaction of elements, causes, acts, past acts, impulsions, multiple directionalities, and dynamics. To drive home the rational, this-worldly basis of Karma, she concludes by insisting that: "A Divinity that makes beings move like puppets, assigning to each a role from birth . . . or created as elected or outcast people," as in Christianity, is an idea that "is ignored by Buddhism" (1911: 163–164, 180).

In a subsequent chapter, David-Néel debunks supernaturalist understandings of the Buddhist notion of Nirvana, even suggesting that the concept was not as important to Buddhism as Westerners seem to think: "The most ancient works rarely mention this term and then, even if it is employed, it is necessary almost always to understand it in the sense of the state of Arahat, which is to say the highest degree of sanctity-wisdom. It is a mental state realised on this earth, by a living being (Arahat), and not a Paradise that can be reached only after death" (1911: 186–187). What matters for Buddhism, she contends, "is the struggle against suffering, the search for the way that leads to release or freedom from suffering, the perseverance in this meticulous programme of mental culture . . . All the rest is speculation, spiritual game, interesting intellectual playtime" (1911: 189).

She goes to some length to distinguish the notion of Nirvana from the Christian belief in the hereafter. Nirvana, she writes, is not about "the eternal life of our individuality" (1911: 202). Rather, "Buddhism teaches formally the moral danger of hopes about the hereafter," which she describes as a "chain, that weighs us down" (1911: 189–190). Nirvana refers to nothing more than "infinite rest" and to think otherwise, to make it "an object of desire," would be wrong (1911: 190). It is certainly in a hereafter where we must search for Nirvana, she goes on, but this hereafter is not what we normally think of as that which follows death. Rather, "Nirvana is close to us, we rub shoulders with it each minute; it is a hereafter of a false conception, of a blinding that stretches out an opaque veil between universal existence and our vision shrunk or narrowed to the limits of a form and a name that each minute modifies and that we believe to be our 'I'" (1911: 204).

In the chapter on the Buddhist (monastic) community, David-Néel explains that Buddhist monasticism is linked to certain ascetic practices that are also part of an older Hindu tradition. But Buddhists, she contends, frown upon the bizarre forms of asceticism practiced by Hindus, Jains, and other "fanatics." David-Néel's discussion of Sangha also seeks to explicitly counter the view that Buddhist communities are patriarchal. On the contrary, she suggests, Buddhism entails far more egalitarian relations between men and women than those that prevail in Christian cultures. Some people, for example, have seen in Buddha's refusal to sanction women's participation in ascetic practice a sign of his contempt for women (1911: 220). However, this would be a misinterpretation, she tells us. The Buddha's refusal was rather a result of his "desire to avoid the folly of asceticism" (1911: 221–222). She goes on to point out that Buddha's wife participated fully in the sacred life; that women take part in Buddhist practices alongside men; and that when Buddhists go on retreats, their spouses accompany and engage in philosophical meditations with them. Buddha, she says, was both husband and a father who neither escaped "female society" nor sought to do so (1911: 220–221).

She also wants to counter the view that the Buddha was a prophet of unchallengeable religious authority. He should rather be thought of as the leader of a "school of philosophy" than the founder of a religious cult. His disciples chose freely to join the school, and membership was never marked by ceremony or ritual.(1911: 222). Contrary to the Western (Roman Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox) Christian churches, monastic Buddhism never involves a "vow of obedience." The true Buddhist disciple "remains a searcher for moral and philosophical truth and a master of his/her person and activity" (1911: 228). The ideal model for Buddhist congregationalism, therefore, "is not that of the anchorite, the hermit or the cleric walled up in a cloister and foreign to the world, but of the free missionary travelling alone [across the world and through life]" (1911: 224).

It is in the discussion of the Buddhist community that David-Néel broaches the subject of Buddhism and nonviolence. Unlike followers of other religions, she maintains, Buddhists remain calm, and "offer their hands with cordiality" to those who oppose them. Buddhist reformers never use "violent words" against those whose "beliefs and superstitions" they seek to correct. Unlike the adherents of the "biblical religions…Buddhists ignore violence" and "inquisitions" are entirely foreign to them. Instead, a "person manifestly not cut out for religious life will be invited to separate himself/herself from the Order and return to living in the world. He/she will be exhorted to live a virtuous life, but there will be no condemnation and no one will think of him/her as a sinner" (1911: 227–228).

David-Néel concludes her study with comments on two issues of central concern to social reformers of her time: (1) "the place occupied by women in the social life and in the spiritual life"; and (2) "the social question," by which she means the issue of inequality. In both instances her argument is that the task of reform involves less a reform of Buddhism itself than of the attitudes and practices that run counter to the teachings of pure, authentic, or, what she often calls, primitive Buddhism.

On women's position in Buddhist Asia, she maintains that while patriarchal attitudes—what she calls "contemptuousness in certain appraisals on the subject of women"—are not uncommon, in fact the status of Buddhist women is favorable compared to the West:

> A remarkable fact…is that…women have reached in the social life of Buddhist countries a place at times even superior to the one occupied by women in our European nations. The freedom and the civil capacity that certain Far Eastern women enjoy have overtaken those of French women. (David-Néel 1911: 235)

Patriarchal attitudes and practices, even when they exist, are contrary to the spirit of real Buddhism, she argues. Pointing to the example of the wise disciple Mâra, who was "troubled" by the comments of a "malicious tempter," telling her that what she expressed as a woman had "nothing in common with orthodox Buddhist doctrine…that women's intelligence is the 'size of two fingers,'" and that women are incapable of reaching "spiritual heights." The text, she argues, had been misinterpreted as suggesting that women were inferior to men. In fact, it shows that according to both the Buddha and all "enlightened Buddhists," Buddhism "is far from being hostile to those who know how to think with dignity, and that it judges people's intelligence and virtue regardless of their sex." As the sage Somâ replied to a suggestion that women are inferior to men:

> As far as this question of sexes is concerned, who we should concentrate on are those who, possessing an intrepid heart and expanding continually their knowledge, walk ceaselessly forward in the direction of the Noble Way. Of what importance could it [the alleged differences between the sexes] be to the disciple who understands the Law (the law of characteristics, of impermanence and of the material non-reality of the personality). (1911: 235)

We can see from this passage from a canonical text, that Buddhism "is far from unfavourable towards the spiritual ambitions of women" (1911: 237). In general, David-Néel observes, to "classify the reciprocal aptitudes" of males and females, that is, to declare each a "stable" and "immutable" entity, is to directly violate the basic Buddhist principle that our material

and earthly being is both "illusory and ephemeral" and that for "permanent masculine and feminine traits to exist in themselves when there is no 'I' upon which they can attach themselves" would be contradictory (1911: 239).

David-Néel's discussion of Buddhism and the "social" question is similarly modernist. Buddhism, she says, constantly emphasizes the importance of respecting human life and of not causing harm to others, and consistently values efforts to "liberate intelligence" (1911: 243–244). Buddhists "cannot but notice" the many forms of suffering, poverty, and inequality, problems that mark modern societies and modern living. They cannot but be aware of how this has turned human beings into tools, lowered their "mental levels" and hindered their intellectual and spiritual advance. And for this reason, the principles of modern Buddhism and socialism can be shown to be similar (1911: 245). In short, modern reform must be at once a movement forward into a progressive future and a return to the underlying principles laid down by the historical Buddha and his early followers.

I have presented David-Néel's text with some care in order to properly assess the criticisms of religious modernism by anthropologists, comparative religionists, and scholars of Asian studies. For hers is undoubtedly an example of those interpretations of Buddhism that, to quote one scholar, are "suspiciously amenable to a modern western liberal lifestyle [something which] gives scholars of East Asian religions fits" (Slingerland 2008). In order to demonstrate the essential compatibility of Buddhism and modernism, thinkers like David-Néel have been accused of excluding from consideration great swathes of Buddhist belief, practice, and textual interpretation, thereby producing an impoverished and historically inaccurate representation of Buddhist belief and practice in order to make it suitable for Western consumption.

In *Le Modernisme Bouddhiste et le Bouddhisme de Bouddha* we certainly find one such pared down version of a Buddhism reduced to very few basic elements. Its author is also clearly determined to exclude from consideration what she called the supernatural and magical beliefs and practices of Tibetan peasants, arguing that they are in fact survivals of the pre-Buddhist "Bon" religion of the Himalayas. She is similarly dismissive of the Buddhism followed by most Tibetan monks and lamas who, she argues, act either out of ignorance of the texts and the traditions of pure Buddhism or hypocritically ignore them in order to ingratiate themselves with the ordinary believers on whom they rely for their living. In her many subsequent accounts of her travels in the Himalayan/Buddhist world, David-Néel was forever either complaining about the ignorance and superstition of monks and lamas who *should* know better, or berating

them for their failure to point out to the peasants the error of their ways, all the while expressing her own view that "pure" Buddhism, that is, the Buddhism of Buddha, is entirely compatible with Western rationalism, an argument that we first encounter in the 1911 text.

So what of the criticisms of scholars like Slingerland, Lopez et al.? In the previous chapter, I pointed to the problematic nature of the authenticity claims on which many such criticisms rest, and of the argument that the representations of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism in the texts of Orientalists like Guénon, David-Néel et al. are mere "western inventions." If labeling David-Néel's account of Tibetan Buddhism Orientalist in the narrow sense is certainly misleading, it may nonetheless be deemed inauthentic to the extent that it is a clear distortion of Buddhist traditions. However, to argue that this makes such accounts inauthentic is in fact to say very little given that the idea of a truly authentic Buddhism (or Hinduism, Islam, Taoism) is a contradictory one, leading one into that dialectics of authenticity that seems to infect all modern projects that promise an escape into nonmodern worlds. Paradoxically, the notion of an authentic Orient located outside modernity that all existing representations have failed to capture, is itself thoroughly modernist because:

1. It arises from practices of translation, interpretation, and constitution that are themselves thoroughly modernist.
2. It is developed in thoroughly modern contexts (in both West and East). Indeed, the Asia where authentic tradition is supposed to live is itself thoroughly modernized, having been integrated into a modern, globalized world that already contains within it the East and West of Traditionalist discourse. If Asia had not somehow already become part of our world, how would we even know of its existence?

A proper assessment of Buddhist modernism can therefore begin only when we acknowledge that there are and have been diverse ways in which Buddhism has been accommodated to its historical, social, cultural, and religious contexts, including modern ones. And given that processes of modern social, cultural, economic, and political change are obviously no longer limited to the West, presuming that they ever were, it should come as no surprise that modernist religious ideas are not always, or even mostly, merely Western.[4] Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in assessing these modernist religious sensibilities, we need to pay attention just as much to their interpretations of modernity as to their representations of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. Viewed from this perspective, we may find that the real problem with Western accounts of non-Western

worlds like David-Néel's, is not that they are too modern, but rather that they may not be modern enough. In other words, they frequently involve that rather specific, typically unidimensional understanding of what it means to be modern that emerged in both Asia and the West toward the end of the nineteenth century. The trajectory of the Islamic modernist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a movement that had, and continues to have, a major impact on religious belief and practice in Muslim Southeast Asia, is a case in point.

Islamic Modernism in Southeast Asia

The critical period for the eastward spread of Islam to and within Southeast Asia was the century between 1550 and 1650. Retelling the complex regional history of Muslim conversion, the embedding of Islam in local communities and political hierarchies, and the movements for Islamic reform and revitalization, as well of the conflicts within and between Muslim communities from the sixteenth century to the present, is obviously beyond the scope of this book. However, for those whose knowledge of Islamic history derives mainly from accounts of the Arab world, it is important to recognize that it is Indonesia that is now the world's largest Muslim country; that Islam is the major religion of modern Malaysia, and that there are substantial Muslim minority populations in Thailand, Singapore, Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

While there were Muslims in the Southeast Asia before the sixteenth century—particularly in "port cities on the major trade routes" in Sumatra, peninsular Malaya, Java, and the islands of what is now eastern Indonesia—the overall numbers seem to have been relatively small; they remained a minority even in the port cities, knowledge of the religion was relatively shallow, and "no Islamic texts in Southeast Asian languages which date from before 1590 have come to light" (Reid 1993: 156).

From the middle of the sixteenth century, the situation began to change in response to the "dislocations" that affected Southeast Asia societies brought about by the "expansion and rising prices in the whole global trade system" into which Southeast Asia was increasingly being integrated. These allowed Muslim "traders, soldiers, mystics, and teachers—to begin viable Islamic communities" throughout the Malay world (Reid 1993: 161). The result was a significant increase in the numbers of Muslims in Sulawesi and Borneo (in what is now Indonesia), southern and western Indochina, the southern and northwestern districts of the Malay Peninsula, parts of Siam/Thailand, and the Philippines. And, while earlier generations of Muslim "apostles and scholars" had come to

Southeast Asia mainly from India, the "shift in trade routes made the Malay World directly accessible from Arabia" (Reid 1993: 162), meaning that the Islam of the Middle East became a much more significant influence on the development of Southeast Asian Islam after that time.[5]

Of particular importance to understanding the emergence of Islamic modernism in Southeast Asia is the relation between the trajectories and patterns of Islamization on the one hand and European colonialism on the other. The emergence of Islamic modernism, as that term has been used in Southeast Asian contexts, was closely bound up with economic, political, social and cultural transformations that took effect in the late colonial period, particularly in the borderlands and on the frontiers of the Muslim world of insular and peninsular Southeast Asia.

Modernist sensibilities were being articulated in the Malay world as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, a well-known example being the writings of Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (1797–1854). Born in Malacca and descended from a succession of marriages between Hadhrami Arab men and Tamil and "Malay" women, Munshi Abdullah as he was known, lived most of his life in the British trading centers of Malacca and Singapore. Relatively well educated by the standards of the time, he worked as a Malay-language and religious teacher and a professional letter writer before finding work with British colonial authorities, including Stamford Raffles. In his writings, Abdullah articulated many of the views that were later popularized by Egyptian modernists like Muhamad 'Abduh, including advocacy for reason and rational (European) institutions and the rule of law, criticism of the superstitious dimensions of popular Islam, the positive valuation of (Western) knowledge and education, dissatisfaction with the arbitrary authority of (despotic) "native" rulers, the desirability of standardizing linguistic usage, and an appreciation for the material advantages that would flow from following the economic lead of Europeans.[6] However, Munshi Abdullah's writings are tainted, at least in the eyes of many later Malay nationalists, because of his services to colonialism (and also, one suspects, because of his non-Malay ethnicity). While they may therefore have borrowed from him, twentieth-century Muslim modernists in British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies preferred to align themselves with modernist currents that began to flow mainly from Egypt beginning in the late nineteenth century.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Islamic modernism of figures like Muhammad 'Abduh and his student Mohamad Ridā began to compete with the interpretations of the religious scholars of the Hijaz as the key intellectual influence on a growing number of Southeast Asian Muslims, particularly Malay and

Indonesian merchants, entrepreneurs, and religious leaders in the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya. They adopted the label *Kaum Muda* (young group or generation) to distinguish themselves from the *Kaum Tua* (older generation) of religious scholars, teachers, and *ulama* (Muslim scholars and clerics) whose orientations were to Mecca rather than Cairo.[7] Along with new interpretations of Islam, modernists were also at times at the forefront of the opposition to colonialism. The Malay nationalist movement, for example, contained within it a quite radical, anticolonial current, which eventually gave rise to the Pan Malay Islamic Party (PMIP, later PAS), which broke away from the more conservative United Malay National Organization (UMNO) to whom independence was delivered by the British in 1957. Some modernists even argued for a synthesis of (modernist) Islam and Marxism, most notably in western Sumatra where the Sumatera Thawalib School in Pandang Panjang became the base for the newly formed Indonesian Communist Party, which launched a revolution against Dutch colonial rule on New Year's Day, 1927 in Silungkang.[8]

Islamic modernism in general, and the ideas of 'Abduh in particular, spread via a number of 'Abduh's key publications (notably *Risalat al-tawhid* and *Tafsir al-fatiha* published in Cairo in 1897 and 1901 respectively), which were read by members of the new generation of Muslim intellectuals in the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya. But modernist interpretations of Islam also circulated by word-of-mouth from students who had studied in Mecca and Cairo[9] and local commentaries on and interpretations of the writings of 'Abduh and other Middle Eastern modernists by Muslim intellectuals, teachers, and political activists in local periodicals as well as in public lectures (*tabligh*) and meetings addressed by visiting scholars and local proponents of modernism. There were close links between the rise of Islamic modernism in Southeast Asia and educational reform, the uptake of modernist ideas having been facilitated by a network of modernist schools (madrasah) and teacher training colleges set up by Muslim educational reformers in the early decades of the twentieth century. These offered both religious education and instruction in practical–cum-vocational subjects and the natural sciences in places where this sort of education had previously been restricted to members of the Europeanized elites.[10]

The intertwined networks of modernist religious teachers and scholars on the one hand and Muslim traders and entrepreneurs on the other also gave rise to a number of modernist Muslim organizations and political parties in Malaya and in the Dutch East Indies; the largest and most influential of these being the reformist socioreligious movement Muhammadiyah founded in 1912 by Ahmad Dahlan in Yogyakarta, Java.[11]

Modernist Imaginings

> The second part of the nineteenth century ushered in one of the most creative episodes in the history of the modern Islamic movement, when a group of Muslim scholars rigorously examined the sources of Islamic jurisprudence. The central theological problems that engaged these thinkers revolved around the validity of the knowledge derived from sources external to Islam and the methodological adequacy of the traditional sources of jurisprudence: the Quran, the dicta attributed to the Prophet (*hadith*), the consensus of the theologians (*ijma*), and juristic reasoning by analogy (*qiyas*). They resolved to reinterpret the first two sources and transform the last two in light of the standards of scientific rationality. Such prominent Islamic scholars as al-Afghani, Sayyif Ahmad Khan, Abduh, and Amir Ali, among others presented Islam in a manner consistent with modern ideas and rational sciences. They were impressed by the achievements of the West ranging from scientific and technological progress, the Newtonian conception of the universe, Spencer's sociology, and Darwinian evolutionism to Western styles of living. They all argued that Islam as a world religion was thoroughly capable of adapting itself to the changing conditions of every age, the hallmark of the perfect Muslim community being law and reason. (Moaddel 2001: 669)

Of the modernist Muslim intellectuals mentioned by Moaddel, it was probably the scholar, educator, and Muslim jurist Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1909) whose interpretations of Islam had the greatest impact on twentieth-century modernist movements in Southeast Asia. A disciple of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and, like his mentor, a lifelong Freemason, 'Abduh graduated with an *alimiyya* (Islamic sciences) degree from Cairo's al-Azhar University in 1877, where he taught philosophy, history, and social studies. Banished by Egypt's Ottoman rulers for his political activities, 'Abduh travelled to Damascus, Beirut, Paris, and England (where he met an elderly Herbert Spencer, whose work, particularly on educational reform, inspired his own). After the appointment of a British consul general in 1883, 'Abduh was free to return to Egypt where he served first as a judge in the newly instituted system of national courts, then as a member of the council instituted to reform Azhar University, and from 1899, as mufti of the Egyptian Realm. During this time, he formulated his own modernist perspective from within Islam, which he delivered through lectures, numerous articles in the Egyptian press, fatwas, and as part of his involvement in the movement for educational reform up until his death, aged 56, en route to Europe for treatment for kidney cancer.

In his teaching, writing and participation in national life, 'Abduh strongly advocated progressive/liberal European thought and scientific and technological advance on the one hand and an interpretation of Islam that was, in his view, compatible with this typically nineteenth-century understanding of modernity on the other. He criticized "despotism" in all its forms (typically for the nineteenth century this meant opposing monarchical rule) and stressed the benefits of constitutionalism, the rule of law (although not necessarily democracy), the reform of educational institutions along the lines laid out by Herbert Spencer, the emancipation of women,[12] and Western technology and science (including Darwinism). On Islamic matters, 'Abduh advocated *ijtihad* (independent, rational investigation of the sources of Islam, based on the knowledge of the Qur'an and the Sunna) as against *taqlid* (emulation of the decisions of the founding *imam*s, hence accepting authority and interpretation of the teacher), this being facilitated by the rise of print capitalism in the Muslim world at the time.[13]

His mode of argument followed a fairly well-established path, spelling out the advantages of some or other achievement of Western civilization (reason, the rule of law, etc.), followed by a demonstration of its basic compatibility with Islam. He typically established the latter by referring not to subsequent traditions of Islamic scholarship, but directly to the originary texts (the Qur'an and the Hadith). 'Abduh's methodology, therefore, involved pointing to passages in the Qur'an and the Hadith that supported his contention that Islam and modernity were entirely compatible, for example, in the critique of the "irrational" and "superstitious" beliefs and practices of peasants as instances of *bid'ah*,[14] or in the typically modernist rejection of polygyny which reads the Quranic injunctions that appear to justify it as so strict as to amount to de facto prohibition.

In this, it has been suggested that 'Abduh and his followers proceeded by seeking justification in the Islamic texts for preconceived (modernist) ideals, rather than following the "Islamic methodology," which begins with the texts (see Sedgwick 2010). Be that as it may, Muhamad 'Abduh's name came to be associated with the view that the Muslim world—characterized as it was by poverty and stagnation, outmoded social institutions, despotic political arrangements, and widespread ignorance, irrationality, and superstition—was "backward" vis-à-vis the West but that this could not be attributed to Islam itself. Indeed the Islamic world was at one time a shining example of civilizational and scientific progress, far "ahead" of the West on the civilizational ladder. Therefore, rather than being caused by Islam per se, the current predicament of Muslims was understood in terms of civilizational decline caused by the abandonment of true Islam.[15] Summing up 'Abduh's contribution, Mark Sedgwick writes:

Muhammad Abduh's liberal modernism was very much of its period, a period which was in many ways hospitable to it. [He] became the most prominent and influential representative of the liberal modernist trend within Islam because, as Mufti of the Egyptian Realm, he had more authority than any other representative of that trend…Muhammad Abduh neither revived true Islam nor proposed an alternative to it. He attempted to address the problems of Egypt through Islam, creating in the process a certain synthesis of Islam and modern thought…[that] reflected the circumstances of his age. (2010: 128)

Assessing Islamic Modernism

How is the project of religious modernists like 'Abduh—a project that, as Sedgwick argues, lost ground in the Middle East, but which remains an important force in Muslim Southeast Asia—to be assessed? Large Muslim organizations like Muhammadiyah in Indonesia continue to defend a version of Islam that is not all that different from 'Abduh's. Moreover, in recent times, there have been calls for a return to the early twentieth-century modernist interpretations of Islam on the grounds that a return to a rationalist, progressive, or even liberal version of Islam might act as a counterweight to the current wave of radical Islamism in the region.[16]

And yet, terms like progressive and liberal—or even democratic—do not seem adequate labels for the movements for religious reform to which such interpretations gave rise. Modernist Islamic reform movements in Southeast Asia often contribute to considerably elevated levels of social and religious conflict in the region. Writing about Java from the late nineteenth century, for example, Merle Ricklefs suggests:

Islam was now apparently contributing to [a] growing disunity; divisions along religious lines, both within the community of firm believers and between it and those less firm were beginning to appear…The concept of a "bad Muslim" probably grew up for the first time in this period. Some probably saw such "bad Muslims" around them and hoped to reform them. Others probably became aware that they fitted this category and were willing to be instructed. But some also knew that they were "bad Muslims" and didn't care. And a few learned they were "bad Muslims" and decided that, if this was so, they would rather not be Muslims at all. (1979: 117)

First, the very fact that modernist reform in Java was associated with increasing levels of societal and cultural differentiation, combined with the fact that the starting point for many modernist reformers was the presumption that existing social and religious practices were in some sense corrupted, meant that religious conflict was almost inevitable.[17]

Second, to think of Islamic modernism as a force for democracy is to ignore the fact that while Islamic modernists generally seek some sort of rapprochement with Western thought and culture, for them this most often means opening up to Western science and technology. At the same time, many modernists are hostile to Western culture in general, which they brand secularist, materialist, nationalist, and racist. It is important to acknowledge this link between an occidentalizing/demonizing vision of the West and the discourse of Islamic modernism, something that gave it traction in the anticolonial struggle and has more recently fed into more radical Islamic movements seeking greater Islamization of state and society in the region. However, it also renders problematic the characterization of Islamic modernism as straightforwardly "progressive" or "democratic," since reformers are as likely to reject democracy as part of a Western culture of secular materialism as to embrace it.

Third, there is the paradoxical fact that Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu modernisms have all tended toward "fundamentalism" in the sense that they favor a return to originary texts as the only sources of true religious knowledge. In order to demonstrate the compatibility between modernism on the one hand and Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism on the other, modernists (including figures as different as ʿAbduh and David-Néel) call for a return to the sources of religion (for ʿAbduh and his colleagues, this meant the Qurʾan and the Hadith; for Buddhist modernists, the pure religion of the historical Buddha), and a rejection of subsequent traditions of scholarship and interpretation. There are, of course, grounds to be wary of using the "fundamentalist" label in such circumstances.[18] However, as Aziz Al-Azmeh has persuasively argued for the case of Islamic modernism, there are also good reasons to retain it:

> I have no aversion whatsoever to using the term fundamentalism, except that fundamentalism need not be political, and could be construed as a form of rigorous personal self-discipline and renewed self-fashioning according to ritual and religio-moral requirements…[Nevertheless] fundamentalism is an attitude towards time, which it considers of no consequence, and therefore finds no problem with the absurd proposition that the initial conditions, the golden age, can be retrieved: either by going back to the texts without the mediation of traditions considered corrupt (because they represent Time between the present and its putative beginning), as with Luther and Sunni Salafism generally from ʿAbduh through Ridā and the Muslim Brothers until now, or by the re-formation of society according to primitivist models seen to be copies of practices in the golden age, as with what are recognized as fundamentalist movements…The latter are known as integrism by Catholics, but the phenomena are similar: moralization on and in religious terms of private life, authoritarian

> invigilation and management of society reformed according to institutions
> that makes this possible: Calvinism, the Bavarian…Counter-Reformation,
> Wahhabism, Khomeinism…Muslim and Protestant fundamentalism are
> so similar…that all hesitation against the use of the term fundamental-
> ism for Muslim analogues has no explanation other than sub-orientalist
> assumptions about Muslim "incommensurability." (Al-Azmeh n.d.)

As the example of Islamic modernism shows, turn of the century mod-
ernist movements had problematic consequences: exclusionary authori-
tarianism, conflict, and fundamentalism among them. And these were
at least in part a result of their tendency to read the economic, social,
political, and religious landscapes in Muslim Southeast Asia (or Buddhist
Tibet) through the grid of a very particular set of modernist assumptions
and presuppositions. It is these assumptions that gave rise to the view that
the failure to match the achievements of the West (reason, material prog-
ress, the rule of law, individual freedom, female emancipation, etc.) was
not due to their incompatibility with Islam (or Buddhism). Rather, it was
attributed to the fact that actually existing Islam (Buddhism, Hinduism
etc.) were distortions, having been perverted by despotic elites, blind sub-
mission to traditional authority, superstition, and all manner of irratio-
nality. Paradoxically, for modernists, progress could only be achieved by
recovering a glorious past in order to reform the present and purge soci-
ety of all those accretions responsible for the decline.

The problem, then, is not that these readings were Western or too mod-
ernist, but rather that, in subscribing to a unidimensional understanding
of modernity, they were not modernist enough.

David-Néel's Other Modernity

Like Islamic modernism in Southeast Asia, the Buddhist modernism for
which Alexandra David-Néel was a strong advocate, seems inevitably to
have given rise to a reformist zeal directed at a majority who, in their reli-
gious beliefs and practices, were deemed either irrational and supersti-
tious or, in the case of traditional religious authority, venal and corrupt.
Arguing not for a rejection of modernity à la Guénon, but for its embrace,
David-Néel can be seen to have been a victim of the kinds of unidimen-
sional understandings of modernity that prevailed among Buddhist,
Islamic, and Hindu modernists in Asia.

But was she really? In raising this question, I want to question the
judgment that David-Néel's was indeed a typically modernist reading of
Buddhism by turning now to another of her texts, namely, *Magic and Mystery
in Tibet*, the book that she wrote in the 1920s. As noted, in her first book

on Buddhism, David-Néel described the popular and magical versions of Buddhism as manifestations of a degraded understanding of the ideas of the historical Buddha, and of the survival of ancient ideas and practices among ordinary believers. This encouraged precisely the sort of antipopular elitism of which many contemporary modernists were guilty.

And yet, for all her modernist posturing, David-Néel's later writings permitted, even encouraged, a very different reading. It is quite easy to see why *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* had such an impact on the popular imagination in France in the interwar years, and that this had little to do with the public's interest in Buddhist modernism or religious reform. Like most of what she wrote during and after the long journey that took her from India through Sikkim to Nepal to China and from there to Lhasa, *Magic and Mystery* reads both as a memoir by an intrepid explorer of the trials and tribulations of trekking to remote and seemingly inaccessible places, and an account of the extraordinary magical world that she encountered there. Never mind that the author was a self-declared modernist, skeptical it seems of all that she reported. Although she did not completely hide her skepticism, she never allowed it to get in the way of a good story either.

Well may she have complained in a preface to a later edition of the book that: "Because I have lived in Tibet, I am assailed with demands to cause to produce extraordinary happenings" (David-Néel 1967: vii). Whether intended or not, the text seems perfectly to match the desire of a readership eager for a validation, however implicit, of their own "supernaturalist" yearnings.[19] A few examples should suffice to convey the ways in which David-Néel's text colludes with these desires of her readers.

As noted earlier, the book begins with a description of an exotic physical setting, only a short distance from "the summer resorts established by foreigners on the border of these impressive highlands…where the Western world enjoys dancing and jazz bands." This is a place "unmodified" by all that, a place where

> the primeval forest reigns shrouded in the morning fogs, [and] a fantastic army of trees, draped in vivid green mist, seems to keep watch along narrow treks, warning or threatening the traveler with enigmatic gestures…In such scenery it is fitting that sorcery should hold sway. The so-called Buddhist population is practically shamanist and a large number of mediums…of both sexes, even in the smallest of hamlets, transmit the messages of gods, demons and the dead. (David-Néel 1965: 7)

A couple of pages later she reminds us that "orthodox Buddhism strictly forbids religious rites and the learned lamas acknowledge that they cannot

bestow spiritual enlightenment, which can only be acquired by personal intellect," but immediately goes on to say that "the majority believe in the efficacy of certain ritualistic methods of the healing of the sick, securing material prosperity, the conquest of evil beings and the guidance of the spirits of the dead in the other world" (1965: 9). She then proceeds to describe the skills of Tibetan Bon sorcerers ("followers of the ancient religion of the aborigines") who are "believed to be more skillful in dealing with the demons." This is followed by a vivid description of the way in which shamans/lamas deal with the dead by "drawing the spirit out of its corporeal envelope," a practice that involves among other things vomiting blood and speaking in the voice of the deceased (1965: 10–11). Here, she brings to life the sorts of supernatural beliefs and practices described by Evans-Wentz in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which was published in the same year. Indeed, she explicitly engages with Evans-Wentz when she makes a number of critical remarks about the lama Kazi Dawa Sandup, whom she knew, and who was Evans-Wentz's main informant. It is not difficult to imagine what was of more interest to her readers: the views of "orthodox Buddhism" or the magical beliefs and practices of the broader populace.

Consider a further example: describing her negative state of mind in the period after the death of Sidkeong, the English-educated crown prince of Sikkim to whom she grew very close, she writes: "Gradually hostile forces seemed to gather around me. I seemed to be obsessed by invisible beings who incited me to leave. By a sort of clairvoyance...I saw these unknown enemies triumph[ant] and rejoicing, after my departure, at having driven me away" (1965: 39). Despite these negative feelings, she set off on another trek, a remedy, she tells us, that "proved efficacious," since it dispelled her negative mood. She concludes by observing that "whether change of place had killed the microbes of fever, or the diversion of new scenes had cured the brain fatigue, or my unyielding will-power had conquered beings of the occult world, I, at any rate, was freed from the obsessions that tortured me" (1965: 43). Again, while her skepticism may be inferred, the reader is left free to choose the Tibetan view. It is clear that it is largely because her writings satisfied a craving on the part of her readers for tales of exotic people and places and a validation of their own magical inclinations that David-Néel had such a strong impact in the West, both in the interwar years and, again, in the heyday of French and American postwar youth culture.

By succeeding, perhaps against her best intentions, in embedding the Tibetan "gods" in Western public imagination, rather than safely outside modernity in exotic Tibet, David-Néel went some way toward formulating an alternative version modernity, one in which all its "hybrids,"

"imbroglios," "networks," and "mediations" (Latour 1993) were not excluded but actively embraced.

Religion, Culture, Modernity

According to Bruno Latour, modernity is characterized by a "work of purification" and rationalist "civilizing," which is directed at everything it deems extraneous and perverse, thereby obscuring the fact that we have "never been modern." Modernity, argues Latour, in fact is always contaminated by the "impurities" that it generates itself. What we call modernity is therefore replete with internal contradictions and inconsistencies; the lack of a pure, singular trajectory; a failure to build neatly compartmentalized and differentiated spheres; and a gross misrecognition of its own internal diversity. In such a world, there is no room for purist illusions about the nature and premises of our modern "constitution." We must instead confront the internal composition of our externalities, and perhaps accept that our modernist identities are a great deal more contingent, fragile, and particularistic than we are willing to admit. To understand modernity as always "contaminated" or embedded in particularities is to go against the modernist quest for universal principles by which we must all live, and to accept that precisely because our own meanings of the modern are particularistic, they are also exclusionary, even racist (Latour 1993).

Although formulated in response to rather recent attempts to theorize the modern,[20] Latour's observations seem especially pertinent to the late nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century modernist imaginings with which we have been dealing. Central to these imaginings were precisely such puristic illusions about the nature of our modern constitution of which Latour writes and the denial of those hybrids, imbroglios, etc. that are part of modernity itself. Early twentieth-century advocates of religious modernism sought to banish them all to a world of decadence, irrationality, and superstition outside modernity, a world that they therefore worked to reform.

Muslim Southeast Asia, where modernist interpretations of Islam flourished in the early decades of the twentieth century, was one such world. As we have noted, particularly in the less densely populated Outer Island regions of the Dutch East Indies, the western coastal districts and inland valleys of British Malaya, the Mekong Delta of French Indochina, identifiably modern processes of commercialization, economic "development," bureaucratization, and modern state- and nation-building were taking hold. New kinds of colonial enterprise—large-scale, private (mainly Western-owned) mines, farms, and plantations producing commodities

for a rapidly expanding world market were on the rise. These typically employed poorly paid wage laborers brought in from the Indian subcontinent and Java, depriving locals of their lands and resources while denying them access even to wage labor in return. All this was facilitated by colonial efforts to develop, irrigate, and/or drain the land; to build modern transportation and communication networks (the coming of the telephone to Lhasa), and to facilitate the growth of modern banking, financial services, processing, and manufacturing.[21]

All this took place in the context of an expansion in the scope, intensity, and forms of "modern" (colonial) governance in the region. Historian Robert Elson describes five major ways in which the "organizational principles and practice" of the new states that began to emerge in Southeast Asia toward the end of the nineteenth century differed from those of earlier states in the region: (1) the enormous size of bureaucracies in response to the managerial requirements of the new order; (2) the expanded *scope* of bureaucracy in response to an increase in state functions; (3) an increased *intensity* of governance, with more officials doing a greater range of jobs more frequently, more regularly, and more efficiently; (4) new *styles* of governing—a move from the manipulation of personal ties and followings to administration through clearly defined, formal, and impersonal institutions; and, (5) the *centralization* of state powers (Elson 1992: 24–27).

However, the history of the economic, political, and social modernization of Southeast Asia is far from being the only story. While large-scale, Western-owned, colonial enterprises may have thrived in the favorable circumstances established by colonial regimes, a much larger number of commercially oriented, relatively small-scale enterprises—cash croppers, miners, entrepreneurs, merchants, and money lenders—were able to take advantage of the peaceful conditions and the new transportation networks and infrastructural developments—at least to eke out a living, often by competing directly with modern enterprises for the opportunities afforded by expanding local and global markets. Among them were immigrants—and the descendants of immigrants—from China, India, and the Arabian peninsula. But they also included significant numbers of Malay/Indonesian-speaking Muslim peoples, who migrated to the new commercial zones from elsewhere in the Malay archipelago. A case in point were the large numbers of small-scale Malay peasant rubber farmers who competed so successfully with the European plantations, so much so that the latter urged British colonial authorities to intervene on their behalf during periods of downturn in the world economy. Far from conforming to the prevailing stereotype of simple, subsistence-oriented, commercially naïve village dwellers, "natives," and tribal peoples, the

majority were in fact foreign-born, highly mobile, commercially oriented cash croppers, merchants, small-scale entrepreneurs, miners, money lenders and land speculators.[22]

Moreover, while colonial states sought to impose modern forms of governance in order to regulate and control the flows of peoples into and across these regions and to integrate them within rational, bureaucratic regimes, they were far from successful at doing so. Alongside the organs of the colonial state, diverse political systems emerged that were based in the authority of clan and kin group elders, political patrons and intermediaries, "ethnic" community leaders, landlords, and money lenders, as well as religious teachers and authorities.

As sites of "capitalist" development and modern state- and nation-building, the societies of insular and peninsular Southeast Asia beginning in the last few decades of the nineteenth century were unquestionably "modernized" under the influence of delocalizing, detraditionalizing, and rationalizing forces. And the colonial states sought to capture citizen-subjects within new institutions, practices, and spaces and to reembed "society's individuals into a new order—to be achieved by means of an increasing formalization of practices, their conventionalization and homogenization" (Wagner 1994: 17).

However, as we have also seen, counterprocesses that are best described as retraditionalizing and repeasantizing were also taking place, so much so that both colonial officials as well as the local elites on whom they depended began to express the view that the delocalization of colonial peoples, their separation from existing ties to social, economic, and religious communities and to traditional religiopolitical elites was leading to a crisis of manageability and intelligibility. While in the early years, modernists may have been encouraged by, and even contributed to, the erosion of existing loyalties to traditional rulers and religious authorities and of local communities, they soon came to see in all this movement, enterprise, self-interest, and dynamism a potential threat to the governability of the region's people and to their own newly found authority as native handmaidens of modernity. All those perversities and anomalies that were part and parcel of Southeast Asian modernity were now seen, not as an integral part of modern life, but as manifestations of decadence and decline, as signs of a society in need of purification and reform. This so-called modernism—one that, as I have argued, was unidimensional, purifying, reformist—now set itself up against a society that it failed to see was itself thoroughly modern. It is precisely this sort of misrecognition of the modern that seemed to characterize the imaginings of Muslim modernists in Southeast Asia, like their Hindu and Buddhist contemporaries elsewhere in Asia.

Conclusion

In their fascination with Eastern religions, our Gnostics were torn between two powerful impulses. The first is what Victoria Nelson calls an "underlying pull to believe" (Nelson 2001: 12); the second, a compulsion to situate the objects of that belief in an exotic realm somewhere outside modernity. To be sure, on the face of things, the projects of Traditionalists and modernists were rather different: for Traditionalists, it was the exotic that constituted the object of desire; for modernists, the exotic had to be purged before belief became possible. But as I have tried to show in this chapter, they were in fact not all that different. Traditionalism can never succeed in truly externalizing its others, disguising, or remaining unconscious of, the very modern character and origins of its own "will to believe." Much the same is true of modernism. It fails because it is unable to acknowledge, or even to recognize, that the irrationality that it works so hard to exclude continually manifests itself at the (supposedly rational) heart of modernity.

One thing above all else seems responsible for such a state of affairs and that is modern society's commitment to a particular understanding of "rationality" that is firmly grounded in the natural sciences. It is for this reason that Traditionalists like Guénon must argue for an overthrow of scientific naturalism and a return to "sacred" science. And it is for this reason that modernists like David-Néel cannot but insist that the gods can never be our own. Because gods are supernatural beings, they can only "belong to someone else." Any attempt to assess the possibilities of a Gnostic encounter with Asia must, therefore, come to grips with the counter claims of naturalism.

Modern Mystics: Toward a Gnostic Science

If you profess transcendence (*tanzîh),* you delimit.

If you profess immanence *(tashbîh*), you restrict.

But if you profess both, you have been shown the right way:

You are a leader in the gnostic sciences, a master.

(Ibn 'Arabî, cited in Chittick 2005: 34–35)

In 2008, the *New York Times* published an op-ed piece by David Brooks, a well-known commentator from the conservative wing of American politics. As the provocative title "The Neural Buddhists" suggests, the article made what was on the face of it the fairly extraordinary claim that the "cognitive revolution" in the biological sciences was leading to a coming together of science and Buddhism, and that the resulting synthesis would serve to transcend the apparently unbreachable divide between religious scripturalism and theism on the one hand and secularism and atheism on the other. Citing the work of Newberg, Siegel, Gazzaniga, Haidt, and Damasio on the neuroscience of meaning, belief, consciousness, and emotions, Brooks argued that their findings were leading to a rapprochement between science and Buddhism around four common principles:

1. "The self is not a fixed entity but a dynamic process of relationships."
2. Beneath the diversity of world religions there lie common/universal "moral intuitions."
3. All "people are equipped to experience the sacred, to have moments of elevated experience when they transcend boundaries and overflow with love."

4. And, finally, "God can best be conceived as the nature one expe-
   riences at those moments, the unknowable total of all there is."
   (Brooks 2008)

Like interwar thinkers such as René Guénon, Alexandra David-Néel,
Erwin Schrödinger, and Herman Hesse before him, Brooks here revealed
himself to be an advocate for that turn to Asian religious tradition that I
have been calling Gnostic.

I first read the Brooks piece when it was reprinted in Singapore's
Straits Times and my first reaction was to wonder what Singaporeans
would make of the argument. After all, Singapore is home to significant
numbers of Buddhists as well as being a place where advances in modern
science and technology are enthusiastically embraced. But here I want
to explore the reaction provoked by the Brooks article in the West. For
while there was little in the way of public response in Singapore, perhaps
surprisingly, it attracted the attention of a large number of intellectuals,
scientists, and academics particularly on those mainly American web-
sites where academics air their views on matters religious, social, and sci-
entific.[1] The great majority of these postings were extremely critical of
Brooks, demonstrating that engaging with Asian religious traditions in
ways advocated by the Gnostic diplomats of the interwar years continues
to be viewed as deeply problematic by much of the Western intelligentsia
at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Many of the posts that appeared in the wake of the publication of "The
Neural Buddhists" covered what is by now, familiar ground, criticizing
the author for distorting or misinterpreting Asian religion in order to
make it appear compatible with Western rationality; implying, more gen-
erally, that such projects were colonial, imperial, or Orientalist in Edward
Said's sense of the term; pointing to the inauthenticity of Brooks's repre-
sentations of Buddhism; and/or drawing attention to Brooks's very public
conservatism, using it to support the by now familiar (thanks particularly
to Dawkins, Hitchens et al.) critique of religion as an inevitably conser-
vative and exclusionary force. We have already had occasion to examine
some of these critiques, including the argument that such representations
of Buddhism are "suspiciously amenable to a modern western liberal
lifestyle [something which] gives scholars of East Asian religions fits"
(Slingerland 2008), and that it was "historically dubious when one sur-
veys the various forms of Buddhism that emerged across Asia over the
past 2,500 years" (Lopez 2008).

But criticisms such as these are evaluated elsewhere in the book. Here,
I want to look instead at a series of posts in which Brooks was attacked
on rather different grounds, namely, that he seemed to be trying to bring

science and religion together into a single discursive arena as it were. In fact, Brooks's column generated two rather different versions of this critique. On the one hand there were those, mainly from the natural sciences, who took Brooks to task for his "bad science," arguing that to suggest any connection between scientific and religious reasoning is to succumb to mysticism, the latter now something of a universal term of abuse for those who fail to acknowledge the preeminence of natural scientific reason.[2] Typical of such respondents was the science blogger who took issue with Brooks's rejection of "materialism" and the "dualism" that he imputed to Brooks's claim that Buddhism and science might be compatible. Labeling Brooks's position "goofy," this critic assured his readers that dualism had been definitively rejected by scientists (Rosenhouse 2008).

There are of course many who reject any concession to what they take to be religious reason, among them of course those very public atheists who are fond of asserting that there is no place anywhere in modern society for religion in any form.[3] However, the objections of a second set of critics to Brooks's argument had less to do with its supposed irrationality and more to do with its failure to draw a line between science and religion. For these critics, the problem with the Brooks piece was that it violated the principle that science and religion should be kept at arm's length from each other.

In this view, popularized by biologist Steven Jay Gould, science and religion constitute (or should constitute) "non-overlapping magisteria." In other words there is "a lack of overlap between their respective domains of professional expertise: science in the empirical constitution of the universe, and religion in the search for proper ethical values and the spiritual meaning of our lives," suggesting that modern science—along, presumably, with other modern/secular disciplines like philosophy, the social sciences and so on—proceeds, or should proceed, without reference to religious concerns and values (Gould 1997: 17).

Moreover, if Brooks can be criticized for bringing religious values, rationalities, and modes of argument into the realm of the natural sciences, then he can also be faulted for bringing scientific modes of argumentation into the religious sphere. And indeed, a number of critics made precisely this point, arguing that Brooks's project—like that of creationists, intelligent designers, Christian scientists, New Agers, and scientologists before him—was an example of the typically American attempt to naturalize religion by turning it into a branch of science. John Lardas Modern, for example, maintained that what Brooks wanted to call neural Buddhism was merely the latest version of the view that ideas, "particularly religious ideas can be seen and measured" (Modern 2008). Such a view, Modern suggested, stems from a secularizing impulse that demands

some sort of scientific justification for all religious beliefs and practices. Another critic pointed out that far from leading to a decline of theism, the attempt to ground religion in the findings of the contemporary sciences has been actively pursued by theists for a long time, and is in fact very much in keeping with the Protestant tradition of equating religiosity with the interior life. American Protestants in the nineteenth century, for example, enthused about the potential of phrenology, and subsequently the "new psychology," to validate their religious beliefs, a pattern repeated with the results of scientific "biofeedback and meditation studies in the 1960s." Such developments in science have enabled "everyday American Christians [to keep] their Christianity and harmonize…it with scientific knowledge" (White 2008). Yet another religious studies academic argued that the Brooks piece was an example of the reduction of "religious experiences to their neurological causes for the purpose either of dismissing them or confirming them," a view effectively criticized some time ago by William James (Proudfoot 2008).

These criticisms of David Brooks's notion of neural Buddhism are quite telling on the face of it. As someone brought up and educated to respect the natural sciences, I for one found them difficult to ignore. Surely there is no room in modern society for religious values and presuppositions, at least to the extent that they contradict the theories and findings of scientists. This does not necessarily lead to the view that we should place a ban on religious belief and practice. Like most Westerners of liberal upbringing, I have no interest in dictating to others what they can or should "believe." At the same time, I am equally opposed to others attempting to impose their religious views on me by allowing religious values and modes of reasoning to influence the way I conduct my own life, including my intellectual practice. Moreover, any sort of religious incursion into the way the natural sciences are practiced seems inadvisable, to say the least, since we all benefit from the advances in knowledge of the natural world produced by scientists working in an atmosphere unfettered by metaphysical presupposition.

However, without defending Brooks's particular version of the synthesis between science and Buddhism, I would like to point to some problems with these sorts of criticisms of Neural Buddhism, suggesting that they are not as fatal to the project of what might be called Gnostic science as they first appear. In order to do so, let me start with what is ostensibly the softer of the two critiques. For although it may seem at first sight less extreme in its stance toward religious rationality—and rather less naïve about the nature of religious belief and practice in the modern world—in fact, the notion of nonoverlapping magisteria may actually be more problematic than the seemingly more fundamentalist rejection of

religion tout court. I say this because describing religion and science as nonoverlapping magisteria presumes that the two indeed constitute separate and nonconflicting modes of thought and practice. And while it may be true that certain modes of thought and practice that we might label religious may comfortably coexist with scientific theory and practice, such is clearly not always the case. Citing the same papal encyclicals used by Gould to argue that there is no reason for conflict between modern biology and Catholicism, for example, philosopher Owen Flanagan neatly exposes the fundamental shortcomings of the concept of nonoverlapping magisterial, concluding in no uncertain terms that the theory of evolution is very well confirmed, and it denies or entails the denial of what you as a Roman Catholic are required to believe" (Flanagan 2007: 105). If Flanagan is correct, the idea that science and Catholicism constitute nonoverlapping magisteria needs to be fundamentally rethought.

As this suggests, far from being very different kinds of enterprise, science and religion are (or often are), as biologist J. R. Durant has convincingly argued, "strikingly similar intellectual enterprises…For both enterprises seek a knowledge of the world and our place in it, which transcends history. By speaking of a knowledge which transcends history, I mean that scientists and theologians formulate propositions about the world which purport to be true for any observer, and not merely for this or that individual, this or that society, or even…this or that species" (Durant 1990: 161). While on these grounds, Durant, like Gould, wants to argue that science and religion are not necessarily in conflict; clearly the fact that both aspire to universality makes conflict between them a distinct possibility, as Flanagan's example shows. But whether complimentary or conflictual, we can hardly maintain that the two must always be confined to separate, distinct and "non-overlapping" magisteria.

This, of course, echoes the criticisms of phenomenological bracketing, along with the related anthropological argument for suspending disbelief, canvassed in an earlier chapter. In general, these are all variations of the arguments in favor of a secular public sphere from which all religious values, construals, and identities are banished, the shortcomings of which—that the religious and the secular can only be readily separated from each other in the case of privatized or interiorized religions such as (certain forms of) Protestantism—I have already discussed.

What then of the ostensibly "harder" criticism of Brooks, namely, that in granting scientific credence to religion he is opening the door to irrationality? Those who take such a stance are fond of using examples of conflict between the forces of science and religion drawn from often quite varying historical and cultural contexts to argue their point, the conflicts between Galileo and the Catholic Church, between Darwinian

evolutionism and creationism, or between religious fundamentalism and rational scientism in the Muslim world being particular favorites. However, these diverse examples can be made relevant to the particular debate over science, dualism, and mysticism to which the Brooks column gives rise only if it is assumed that (1) science and religion are timeless categories; (2) they are always and everywhere in contradiction to each other; and (3) together they exhaust the possibilities of human thought. And of course none of these premises stands up to critical scrutiny. In fact, on closer analysis, the way in which the terms of this particular debate are deployed—terms like "science," "religion," "materialism," "dualism" and, particularly, "mysticism"—has quite a specific history, one that, as it turns out, has rather particular origins in early twentieth-century debates over the interpretation of a unique set of scientific discoveries. I am referring here to the debate that took place largely *within* the scientific community over the implications of developments in quantum mechanics, a debate which has subsequently reemerged at key moments in the twentieth century as first physicists, then biologists, and neurobiologists argued about the possibility that consciousness might play a role in the constitution of the natural world. This discussion has *not*, by and large, taken the form of a general debate over the relative merits of scientific and religious worldviews.

Einstein, for example, who was probably the originator of the critique of quantum mysticism, while a strident critic of traditional theism and the failings of blind adherence to particular creeds, was far from being antireligious. For example, he described the "fanatical atheists" of his day as slave-like "creatures who—in their grudge against traditional religion as the 'opium of the masses'—cannot hear the music of the spheres" (cited in Pruett 2012: 102). Indeed, most of those who have taken part in such debates, including Brooks himself, have been critical of religion, at least of organized, monotheistic religion in the West. Moreover, very much part of the debate have been those, also like David Brooks, who have argued for the relevance of Eastern thought to the interpretation of the findings of scientists.

Take, for example, the term "mysticism" that so frequently appears in the attacks on the scientificity of the views of figures like David Brooks. The term, of course, has a long history. However, its recent uses can be traced to Albert Einstein's criticism of Niels Bohr for interpreting the findings of quantum mechanics by advocating a "mysticism" that was, in Einstein's view, "incompatible with science" (see Marin 2009: 808). The use of the term by Brooks's critics appears to largely follow Einstein's, who was referring to the attempt to "introduce consciousness in quantum physics" as a result of the fact that the observer seems to play in role in the

creation of quantum reality. Bohr rejected the charge, and continued to do so for many years. But other key contributors to the developing understanding and interpretation of the quantum world, including physicists such as Arthur Eddington and Wolfgang Pauli, embraced it. And they did so in full recognition of the contemporary rather than historical meaning of the term.

Pauli, for example, acknowledged that his notion of mysticism was not identical with the "old form," maintaining instead that "the natural sciences will out of themselves bring forth a counter pole in their adherents, which connects to the old mystic elements" (cited in Marin 2009: 810). And while Pauli's notion of mysticism amounted to a kind of Neo-Platonism, some of the most prominent of Einstein's contemporaries were already incorporating elements of Hinduism and Buddhism into their theorization of the place of consciousness in the quantum world. The most prominent of these were Nobel Prize winners Werner Heisenberg and, coming slightly later to the debate, the Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger.

Quantum Mysticism: Erwin Schrödinger and the Vedanta

Although the Gnostic writings of Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger may have been far less influential in the 1920s then his paradigm-making work on wave mechanics, and although his name may not be widely known among today's Gnostics, the quantum revolution in theoretical physics for which Schrödinger, along with his German counterpart and close contemporary Werner Heisenberg (whose main contributions were in quantum mechanics) were primarily responsible has almost certainly had a greater impact on late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Gnosticism than the works of René Guénon, Alexandra David-Néel, or even Hermann Hesse. And this despite the fact that, although himself a great admirer of Eastern metaphysics, and although it could be argued that his knowledge of the Hindu tradition in particular may have been partly responsible for generating the mindset necessary for him to understand the extraordinary properties of the quantum world,[4] Schrödinger consistently and throughout his life denied that any philosophical or metaphysical conclusions could be drawn from his scientific discoveries.

And yet, as biographer Walter Moore has noted, Schrödinger's work, along with that of Werner Heisenberg, served to "devalue materialism"; to demonstrate that "everything is part of everything else" (i.e., that there are no boundaries in or isolable parts of the universe); to contradict any idea of determinism (even predictability); and to raise "deep questions" about the role of mind in nature (Moore 1989: 4). And one or all of these

conclusions have consistently been drawn by a succession of latter day physicists, from Eugene Wigner to Fritjof Capra.

His defense of science did not make Schrödinger a straightforward positivist or materialist; far from it. Although he always claimed to be an atheist, he also frequently made use of "religious symbolism and believed his scientific work was an approach to the godhead" (Moore 1989: 4). Moreover, he was firmly of the view that physicists, no less than anyone else in the modern West, needed metaphysics and that the world—indeed the cosmos as a whole—did not exist independently of our consciousness of it, an insight that he found to be most clearly articulated in the Hindu texts. As a result, Schrödinger rejected dualism, writing that

> if we decide to have only one sphere, then it has got to be the psychic one, since that one exists anyway (*cogitat-est*)...It seems to me that the wish to reduce the whole of reality to mental experience has much deeper foundations than a more obstinate desire to deny an idea (that of the real external world) without which we cannot achieve a single step in practical life. The *idea* is itself a mental construct and is not being questioned in the least. We are merely in the first instance setting ourselves against the assertion that there might also, externally to it or alongside it, exist an object of truth of which it is the idea and by which it is caused. For this seems to me to be a completely superfluous duplication which offends against Occam's razor. (1964 [1960]: 64)

How did Schrödinger come to these views? Unlike Guénon and David-Néel, Schrödinger—born in Vienna in 1885 and educated at "the most secular, the least religiously-oriented" of Vienna's gymnasiums, and subsequently at the University of Vienna where he obtained a doctorate in theoretical physics—appears to have had no contact with occultist and theosophical groups in his youth. He did develop fairly early on an antipathy to Lutheranism, an attitude he inherited both from his businessman (originally Catholic) father and from his own extensive reading. According to a biographer, he grew "indifferent sometimes inimical to organized religious beliefs and practices" and was distinctly "anticlerical" (though not "anti-religious") from quite an early age, mainly because of the history of what he took to be clerical attacks on science (Moore 1989: 24).

Trained as a physicist, Schrödinger's Eastern turn came about from his abiding interest in European, primarily German and Austrian, theater (Franz Grillparzer was a favorite); literature (the impact of Goethe on the "riddle of existence" and the unity of nature on all young German-speakers was incalculable); the philosophy of science (Semon, Mach); and general philosophy. And, as was the case for many of his contemporaries, Arthur Schopenhauer's work, and particularly Schopenhauer's

reading of the Vedanta, was to prove decisive in Schrödinger's own turn to Hinduism.

So deeply was Schrödinger immersed in philosophy and metaphysics that when, after a stint as an artillery officer on the Italian front during World War I, he was offered an associate professorship in physics at Czernowitz in what is now Romania, he entertained the possibility of teaching philosophy instead. The position fell through, the plan to teach philosophy with it, and, as we now know, he went on to make his most important contributions in theoretical physics. But the broader interests in philosophy, the philosophy of science and metaphysics, remained with him long after those crucial papers on wave mechanics appeared in 1926, Schrödinger's annus mirabilis.

In the previous year, Schrödinger had already written a few short chapters on metaphysics and the Vedanta, which he titled "Seek for the Road," although these were not published for another 35 years, after which they finally appeared (with a further five chapters written later on) in a book called *My View of the World* (Schrödinger 1961). The ten original chapters were based on the "notebook after notebook" that he filled with comments on "his reading of European and Eastern philosophers" immediately after the war, driven by a metaphysical crisis brought on by the official announcement of 7.5 million war deaths on both sides, and the effects of the policy of deliberate starvation of the enemy peoples of the Austro-Hungarian Empire formulated by Hoover, which was being experienced in Vienna at the time. "It was in these dying days of the Danube Empire," writes one of Schrödinger's biographers, "that he found the foundations of his philosophy, which were to remain remarkably constant all his life" (Moore 1989: 111).

As we have noted, "Seek for the Road" describes a crisis brought about by two developments: the transformation of organized religion through its almost total politicization such that it concerned itself only with the here and now; and the impossibility of believing any longer in the idea of a soul (Schrödinger 1964: 12). So much for his supposed defense of religion. Arguing that we no longer have organized religion and belief in the soul to fall back on, Schrödinger wrote, we have "accustomed ourselves to thinking (though there is nothing to prove it, and the most primitive experience demonstrates the contrary) that each person's sensation, perception and thought is a strictly segregated sphere, these spheres having nothing in common with each other, neither overlapping nor directly influencing each other, but on the contrary absolutely excluding each other" (Schrödinger 1964: 16–17). And this entirely solipsistic way of experiencing the world gives rise to what Schrödinger called a "metaphysical urge," a deep need for satisfying answers to the fundamental (ontological) questions about human existence traditionally provided by religion:

1. Does there exist a Self?
2. Does there exist a world outside the Self?
3. Does this Self cease with bodily death?
4. Does the world cease with my bodily death?

It is not entirely clear whether Schrödinger was attempting to describe a general disenchantment of the world brought about by what Weber had called the rationalization of religious institutions and beliefs, or whether he was speaking more personally. But Schrödinger was clearly no sociologist, and his numerous critical remarks about bourgeois convention suggest that the latter is more likely: only those like himself who thought deeply about existential matters were susceptible to metaphysical questioning.[5] Everyone else appeared content with the solipsistic world of separate, discrete, and temporary selfhood and the blind pursuit of personal fulfillment in this world.

However—and this is precisely where "Vedantic philosophy" came into the picture—if it were the case that everything took place, not in a multiplicity of individual consciousnesses but "in *one* consciousness, the whole situation would be extremely simple" (Schrödinger 1964: 18). It would, in other words, then be "quite easy to express the solution in words, thus: the plurality that we perceive is only *an appearance*; *it is not real*," an insight about the singularity of consciousness that is, he argues, Hinduism's "fundamental dogma." To grasp this "basic Vedanta vision...through logical thought," Schrödinger observes, "may in all probability be impossible, since logical thought itself is part of the phenomena, and wholly involved in them." Instead it "is something that needs to be experienced, not simply given a notional acknowledgement" (Schrödinger 1964: 19–20). For someone described as "more a gnostic than a mystic [since] he never displayed any inclination toward the life of asceticism and self-denial that mark the way of the religious mystic" (Moore 1989: 386), he did write a passage that seems to have been based on a personal experience that confirmed his vision of the unity of all consciousness, which is worth quoting in full if only to appreciate the lyricism of Schrödinger's Gnostic vision:

> Sitting on a bench beside a path in high mountain country [gazing on] grassy slopes, with rocks thrusting through them...[you are compelled to ask:] What is it that has called you so suddenly out of nothingness to enjoy for a brief while a spectacle which remains indifferent to you? The conditions for your existence are almost as old as the rocks. For thousands of years man has striven and suffered and begotten and women have brought forth in pain. A hundred years ago, perhaps, another man sat on this spot; like you, he was begotten of man and born of woman. He felt pain and

brief joy as you do. *Was* he someone else? Was it not you yourself? What is this self of yours? What was the necessary condition for making the conceived this time into *you*. Just *you*, and not someone else? What clearly *scientific* meaning can this "someone else" really have? If she who is now your mother cohabited with someone else and had a son by him, and your father had done likewise, would *you* have come to be? Or were you living in them, and in your father's father, thousands of years ago? And even if this is so, why are you not your brother, why is your brother not you, why are you not one of your distant cousins? What justifies you in obstinately discovering this difference between you and someone else—when objectively what is there is the *same*?…Looking and thinking in that manner you may suddenly come to see, in a flash, the profound rightness of the basic conviction in Vedanta: it is not possible that this unity of knowledge, feeling, and choice which we call *your own* should have sprung into being from nothingness at a given moment not long ago; rather this knowledge, feeling, and choice are essentially eternal and unchangeable and numerically *one* in all men, nay in all sensitive beings. (Schrödinger 1961: 19–20)

The above passage is not typical of someone whose interest in Eastern religion was merely intellectual, someone who knew "the theory but failed to achieve practical realization in his life" (Moore 1989: 114). On the contrary, Schrödinger was clearly capable of deep mystical insight. This should not be taken to mean that his arguments lacked intellectual rigor, since he also provided an extremely cogent, one might even say phenomenologically sophisticated, defense of the notion of a unitary consciousness, for example in his discussion and critique of Kant's distinction between things in and of themselves, or elsewhere in his various explications of the necessarily intersubjective quality of experience.[6]

Science and Mysticism after the War

When the province of physical theory was extended to encompass microscopic phenomena, through the creation of quantum mechanics, the concept of consciousness came to the fore again: it was not possible to formulate the laws of quantum mechanics without reference to consciousness. (Wigner 1962: 169)

As the above remark by Hungarian-born, Nobel Prize–winning physicist Eugene Wigner suggests, at least some physicists carried on the tradition of philosophical-cum-metaphysical thinking that infused prewar European physics. However, by and large, "Physicists who came of age during and after World War II crafted a rather different identity for

themselves. Watching their mentors stride through the corridors of power, advising generals, lecturing politicians, and consulting for major industries, few sought to mimic the otherworldly, detached demeanor of the prewar days" (Kaiser 2011: xiv).

However, a number of factors contributed to a reemergence of mystical thinking at least among some physicists in the 1970s. These included developments internal to physics itself, notably, to borrow Einstein's term, the discovery of further evidence of "spooky" behavior in the quantum world, particularly of nonlocality and entanglement, which came out of the pioneering work of John S. Bell. In the words of physicist Nick Herbert this gave "physical content to the mystic motto, 'we are all one'" (cited in Kaiser 2011: xxiv).

However, as the study by David Kaiser shows, declining funding for, and student enrolments in, university physics programs, together with the influence of the 1970s counterculture on the California-based physicists who met under the banner of the "Fundamental Fysics Group," also played a part, leading once again to a proliferation of mysticism among certain segments of the scientific community. Most directly relevant to our concerns was the resurgence of interest among physicists in Eastern religion, most famously exemplified in Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (Capra [1975] 1984), a book that resonated throughout the counterculture.[7] However, while Capra is perhaps the best known, Kaiser has unearthed a much larger number of mystically inclined physicists among whom speculation prevailed not just on the parallels between physics and Eastern thought, but also on the implications of entanglement and nonlocality in the quantum world for faster-than-light communication, clairvoyance, telepathy, psychokinesis, and the like. Indeed, it is Kaiser's contention that the development of quantum encryption and even work on quantum computing might not have been possible without it.

Debates among physicists over the possible role of consciousness in the constitution of (quantum) reality would, therefore, have made speculation about the relationship between Buddhism and the natural sciences unexceptional in scientific circles in prewar Europe, and in North America in the 1970s. This is not to say that all physicists approved of such mysticism even at the time, as the attitude of Albert Einstein makes clear. However, as the careers of, and recognition accorded to, the likes of Pauli, Eddington, and, particularly, Heisenberg and Schrödinger make clear, a propensity for mystical speculation did not in itself disqualify mystically inclined scientists from taking part in debates over the key scientific issues of the day. There did not seem to be a broadly held view

that such speculation was completely irrational and antiscientific or that it should be confined to a separate religious sphere.

But equally clearly, as the almost universal condemnation of the David Brooks piece by natural scientists makes clear, this is not the case in science at the turn of the twenty-first century. There no longer seem to be scientists of the stature of Erwin Schrödinger who are prepared to engage in mystical speculation. Or perhaps, since such speculation is rife in some quarters, it would be more accurate to say that it has been marginalized by mainstream academic science, dismissed not just as goofy, but as opening the door to the combined forces of antiscience.

Consciousness: Mysticism versus Naturalism

It is noteworthy that many of the most prominent scientific commentators on matters to do with consciousness these days have backgrounds in biology and neurobiology rather than physics. Moreover, given the above-noted marginalization of the sorts of mystical speculation about consciousness in which physicists engaged, this shift has coincided with the hardening of the divide between "mystics," who are inclined to assign to consciousness a role in the constitution of material reality, and self-proclaimed "materialists," "rationalists," "atheists," and "skeptics,"[8] all terms used by those who see themselves as part of a movement to rid science of all forms of religious argumentation, including mysticism. This includes the scientists cited by Brooks, most of whom would doubtless have been unhappy with the uses to which he put their discoveries. Indeed on the whole, biologists and neurobiologists, far from seeing consciousness as a sui generis phenomenon in the way Schrödinger did, either explicitly deny that it exists at all or maintain that it is purely epiphenomenal to material/physical processes. In the oft-quoted words of Francis Crick:

> "You," your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. (1994: 3)

Officially credited as codiscoverers of the structure of the DNA molecule, and hence major contributors to the development of evolutionary genetics and the human genome project, Crick and his colleague James Watson are, of course, extremely important figures in the recent history of the natural sciences, meaning among other things that the materialist or physicalist theory of consciousness advocated by Crick has become something of a core assumption in most recent work in neurobiology, which

is focused, almost to the point of obsession, on discovering the so-called neural correlates of consciousness. Little wonder, then, that the mystical ideas of Schrödinger find very few supporters among scientists these days, as demonstrated by their negative reaction to the neo-mysticism of people like David Brooks. This, however, is distinctly odd inasmuch as it was actually Schrödinger who inspired many of the pioneers of DNA research, including both Watson and Crick, to pursue their research into the structure of DNA in the first place.

Erwin Schrödinger, who had taken up a chair in theoretical physics at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies in 1939, delivered a series of public lectures in 1943 at Trinity College in which he offered some observations on the themes of heredity and the thermodynamics of living systems. These lectures were published the following year (Schrödinger 1944), and the book went on to have tremendous resonance—most notably for the generation of researchers who went on to uncover the role and structure of the DNA molecule—thereby leading to a whole new field of scientific enquiry and, more generally, the discovery of what one of them was later so bold as to call "the secret of life" (Watson 2003).

Apologizing for being a "naïve physicist," Schrödinger approached these issues as an outsider to the field of biology, bringing his own expertise in the analysis of the physical world to bear on the study of living systems (see Murphy and O'Neill 1995: 2). It was precisely this physicist's perspective that was to resonate so strongly with those like James Watson, Francis Crick, and others who were looking for the mechanism by which hereditary traits could be transmitted from one generation to the next. Looking back on the text of the lectures, which he first read as a third year student at the University of Chicago, James Watson writes: "That a great physicist had taken the time to write about biology caught my fancy. In those days, like most people, I considered chemistry and physics to be the 'real' sciences, and theoretical physicists were science's top dogs" (Watson 2003: 35). Similarly, Watson's soon-to-be coworker Francis Crick was originally a physicist whose decision to turn to biology was also motivated by reading the Schrödinger lectures (Watson 2003: 45).

In particular, and insofar as a nonexpert can understand them, it was those parts of the text that dealt with the question of how relatively simple codes embedded in molecular structures might give rise to the tremendous diversity of inherited characteristics with which geneticists since Mendel had been dealing; how such codes could be physically passed on in the process of biological reproduction; and what such structures might look like, that were to prove so influential in the development of modern molecular biology.[9]

It may not be especially surprising that as great a scientist as Erwin Schrödinger, especially one who was so used to thinking beyond the boundaries of his own discipline, should have been taken by some to have made a significant contribution to the development of biology. However, what is surprising is that these budding molecular biologists and their successors should have become the main opponents of mystical speculation in the natural sciences, given Schrödinger's own propensity to engage in it. This is doubly surprising since in *What Is Life?*, the very text credited by these biologists for pushing them toward the development of modern genetics, there is an epilogue entitled "On Determinism and Free Will" in which Schrödinger reprises the discussion in his, at the time as-yet unpublished memoir "Seek for the Road," of a singular consciousness, its determinative role in the constitution of physical reality, and the remarkable prescience of the unknown authors of the classical texts of Hinduism—a mystical position if ever there was one.

Instead, contemporary scientific circles are permeated by a "naturalistic *Weltanschauung*," that is,

> a comprehensive, speculative world picture that is reached by extrapolation from some of the discoveries of biology, chemistry, and physics … that postulates a hierarchical relation among the subjects of those sciences, and the completeness in principle of an explanation of everything in the universe through their unification. (Nagel 2012: 4)

"Such a world view," philosopher Thomas Nagel points out, "is not a necessary condition of practice of any of those sciences, and its acceptance or non-acceptance would have no effect on most scientific research. For all I know, most practicing scientists may have no opinion about the overarching cosmological questions to which this materialist reductionism provides an answer … But among scientists and philosophers who do express views about the natural order as a whole, reductive materialism is widely assumed to be the only serious possibility" (Nagel 2012: 4). It is, as we have noted, precisely such a *Weltanschauung* that shapes the contemporary natural scientific stance toward those, like Brooks, who advocate a synthesis between Western science and Eastern mysticism.

Is this Gnostic science as naïve or irrational as its critics would have us believe? There are at least two reasons for suggesting that it is not.

Mind and Cosmos

Critiques of what Karl Popper called the "promissory materialism" of the natural sciences (Popper and Eccles 1977)—the view that while materialist/physicalist explanations of all observable phenomena may not currently

be available to us, the record of the natural sciences proves that they will be so in the future—are of course quite common in religious and mystical circles. However, challenges to the position that the "mind" can be, or at least ultimately will be shown to be, reducible to physical processes have emerged recently from within secular scholarship itself. Philosopher David Chalmers is one of the pioneers of this challenge. He has argued convincingly against the view that consciousness can be reduced to physical processes taking place in the brain and, moreover, that the suggestion that consciousness, while not reducible to physical processes, is nonetheless *emergent* from them is equally problematic. Chalmers has proposed a modified form of dualism as an alternative (Chalmers 1996).

A more recent example of the critique of materialist theories of consciousness is the book *Mind and Cosmos* by Thomas Nagel, the central contention of which is neatly captured by its subtitle: *Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Nagel 2012). Here, Nagel takes on what he says is the relatively recent solution to the problem of dualism—previously, and *contra* natural scientists like Rosenhouse, it was not dualism but rather "idealism" that held sway— namely, the materialist view. For materialists "only the physical world is irreducibly real, and . . . a place must be found in it for mind," a view that "would continue the onward march of physical science, through molecular biology, to full closure by swallowing up the mind in the objective physical reality from which it was initially excluded" (2012: 37).

But physicalist/materialist arguments are flawed, Nagel argues, because:

1. They leave "out something essential that lies beyond the externally observable grounds for attributing mental states to others, namely, the aspect of mental phenomena that is evident from the first-person, inner point of view of the conscious subject" (2012: 38);
2. "[Even when] the brain is added to the picture, they clearly leave out something essential without which there would be no mind" (2012: 41); and
3. "Experience," for example of taste, can never be the same thing as a brain state, but always "seems to be something extra, contingently related to the brain state—something *produced* rather than constituted by the brain state . . . it cannot be identical with the brain state." (2012: 41)

If the materialist paradigm is unable to make sense of consciousness, we are left with three options. The first is dualism, to which, as we have noted, natural scientists seem in general to be implacably opposed.[10] The second

is eliminative materialism, that is, the suggestion "that mental events, like ghosts and Santa Claus, don't exist at all, which flies in the face of our own experience, leaving us to the third option, namely the conclusion that conscious subjects and their mental lives are inescapable components of reality not describable by the physical sciences" (2012: 41).

Nagel is not arguing from the perspective of theism, which he considers an equally unsatisfactory "response to the demand for an all-encompassing form of understanding," this time interpreting "intelligibility ultimately in terms of intention or purpose" or "some kind of mind…which is responsible for both the physical and mental character of the universe" (2012: 21). Neither materialism nor theism, he argues, provides

> a defence against radical scepticism—the possibility that our beliefs about the world are systematically false. Such a defence would [in both cases] inevitably be circular, since any confidence we could have in the truth of either a theistic or an evolutionary explanation of our cognitive capacities would have to depend on the exercise of these capacities. For theism, this is the famous Cartesian circle; but there is an analogous naturalistic circle. In addition, evolutionary naturalism offers an explanation of our knowledge that is seriously inadequate, when applied to the knowledge-generating capacities that we ourselves have. (Nagel 2012: 24)

Collective Consciousness Again?[11]

Although, there are very good philosophical reasons to doubt the natural scientific critique of the argument that consciousness might play a constitutive role in the cosmos, I want to conclude by suggesting a rather different approach to the "hard problem" of consciousness, one that involves reevaluating an earlier—and frequently discredited—idea about what might be called a transcendent mind that was at one time fairly widespread in the social sciences.

Discussing these issues with a group of colleagues well-versed in modern social, philosophical, and anthropological work on the dialogical and intersubjective negotiation or construction of meaning and modern personhood, I was struck by the ways in which, for many of us, the sticking point in arguments about materialist accounts of consciousness had to do with our resistance to the idea that there might be something, even something nondivine, which genuinely transcends the individual mind. We all expressed an overwhelming sense that the mind—if not isolated within the skull (we are after all non-Cartesians these days)—is confined within our individually embodied, organic selves (bounded by our skins

as it were). In some absolutely basic, almost instinctual way, we baulked at the contention that our own cognition, thoughts, emotions, consciousness, and the ways in which we experience the world, however much they may be influenced by social experience, could ever be anything but private, unique, and interior to our own selves. After all, it is a basic presupposition of even the most meaning-oriented student of modern cultural anthropology, a presupposition that is shared by many neuroscientists, that we can never really know what is in someone else's mind; we can never truly experience someone else's consciousness. For many, even to pose this intense private experience of selfhood as a problem in need of explanation was unproductive. It is one of those things that "just is."

The group had formed to discuss Charles Taylor's book (Taylor 2007), which contains a particularly sophisticated response to precisely this question, locating as it does the emergence of an intensely private form of selfhood in the religious and cultural transformations associated with the rise of what might be called post-Protestant modernity. Moreover, as the anthropologists among us pointed out, studies appear to show that radically different forms of personhood still prevail in other cultures. These are important arguments. They may clarify, for example, why it may be easier for people who live in small, relatively stable, face-to-face communities to think of themselves as part of something larger than it is for those who live in deterritorialized, highly differentiated "societies" where spatial mobility is the order of the day (even though research among contemporary Southeast Asian peoples has made me skeptical of the radical dichotomization of modern and nonmodern, or Western and non-Western, selfhood that such narratives take for granted).

However, it still makes as much sense to speak of such properties of mind as cognition, emotion, and even consciousness as transcending the boundary between an inner and an outer self as it does to fall back on the atomistic primacy of some supposedly private, inner experience of selfhood, an assumption be it said that pervades even such notions as "intersubjectivity," which still give priority to preformed individual subjects who only subsequently become involved in social interaction. Aware of some of the obvious problems with notions like the spirit of history, "primitive" or "group" minds, or even *conscience collective*" (which Durkheim abandoned in favor of the far more innocuous-sounding "collective representation"), I am encouraged to advocate resurrecting some notion of transcendent mind because of developments in disciplines ranging from psychology to linguistic philosophy and philosophy of mind to modern neuroscience and, even to some extent, to post-Einsteinian theoretical physics.

The argument against the notion of a mind that transcends singular persons, which many find the most persuasive, is that it seems impossible for it to have any physical or material basis. This is what permits anthropologists, for example, to dismiss Durkheim's "conscience collective" as a "reification."[12]

An expert in none of these disciplines, I have nonetheless found more than enough to counter the supposedly materialist or naturalist critiques of notions such as collective consciousness that I have heard from teachers and colleagues over the years in a large number of disciplines. In linguistics, for example, there are the critiques of the possibility of private language. There are the philosophical ideas of deconstructivists as well as externalist accounts of cognition and consciousness. In the neurosciences, there is the discovery of both the amazing "plasticity" of the brain and its sui generis rather than its genetically or otherwise predetermined qualities (as well as the failure, at least so far, to find the site of consciousness in individual brains, and hence to demonstrate at all convincingly Crick's famous assertion cited above). And in the natural sciences there has been an almost total deconstruction of Newtonian understandings of space, locality, and of abstract, homogeneous, and one-directional time (such notions being, according to Taylor, two of the central components of the experience of secular humanism).

Unfortunately, it seems that social scientists, philosophers, and natural scientists interested in such problems of mind rarely seem able to talk to each other. And when they do, anthropologists and sociologists are notably underrepresented in the discussion, as much, it seems, by choice as because they are excluded from it. If the ideas of mystic scientists, including Schrödinger, were to stimulate this kind of cross-disciplinary discussion, it would be a true tribute to the (collective) power of his thinking.

The Inner Journey of the Gnostic Self: Ethics and Politics

> Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest things among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.
>
> *(Benjamin "The Storyteller," 1968: 83)*

We have already had occasion to cite Jürgen Habermas's remarks on the "new, deinstitutionalized forms of a fickle religiosity that [have] withdrawn entirely into the subjective" (cited in Mendieta 2010), a jibe that seems to have been prompted by the "growth and increasing visibility of a demographic identifying as 'spiritual-not-religious [SPNR]' in North America,"[1] including its embrace of Eastern spirituality. In this, Habermas gives voice to a view that is quite common among Western intellectuals, namely that what they like to call "New Age" spirituality is both morally and politically bankrupt. And this stems from the judgment that all such modern/postmodern forms of spirituality involve a selfish, egocentric pursuit of authenticity on the part of individualized, New Age selves.

A fuller explication of the supposed link between New Age selfhood and the ethical and political failings of the growing numbers of people who reject traditional, institutionalized forms of religiosity while still declaring themselves spiritual, may be found in a recent column in the *New York Times* in which the authors touch upon most of the bases of the moral-cum-political critique of the New Age, arguing that it is:

1. A product of the commodified, middle-class lifestyles of citizens of "rich Western countries": "The booming self-help industry, not to mention the cash cow of New Age spirituality, has one message: be authentic!"

2. Highly individualized, selfish, and nihilistic: "Despite the frequent claim that we are living in a secular age defined by the death of God, many citizens in rich Western countries have merely switched one notion of God for another—abandoning their singular, omnipotent…deity…and replacing it with a weak but all pervasive idea of spirituality tied to a personal ethic of authenticity…At the heart of the ethic of authenticity is a profound selfishness and callous disregard of others."

3. Contemptible, even laughable, in its embrace of Eastern spirituality (often, as here, with an appeal to more authentic Western sources, the authors' preference being for Shakespeare and Herman Melville): "alienation…must be eliminated, most notably through yoga practice after a long day of mind-numbing work…We may even say a little prayer to an obscure but benign Eastern goddess and feel some weak spiritual energy connecting everything…This is the phenomenon that one might call…passive nihilism…As the ever wise Buddha said, 'You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.'"

And therefore both:

4. Morally and ethically bankrupt: "Traditional forms of morality that required extensive social cooperation in relation to a harsh reality…have largely collapsed and been replaced with this New Age therapeutic culture of well-being that does not require obedience or even faith—and certainly not feelings of guilt."

And:

5. Politically quietest: "In a seemingly meaningless, inauthentic world awash in non-stop news reports of war, violence and inequality, we close our eyes and turn ourselves into islands." (Critchley and Webster 2013)

There are certainly many whose beliefs and practices get labeled New Age who are caught up in modern consumerism and/or the pursuit of postmodern lifestyles. And doubtless too, the rapidly growing spiritual not religious demographic includes many whose ethical and political behavior may be deemed selfish and politically apathetic (or both) despite the gross inequalities, patriarchal practices, poverty, racism, environmental destruction, and violence that characterize our times. And yet, are such sweeping, and almost completely unsubstantiated critical generalizations justified? Are the ethical and political shortcomings identified

by the critics specific to the so-called New Age? And is the critical account of New Age spirituality—called "self-spirituality" by anthropologist Adrian Ivakhiv—adequate to understanding the forms of selfhood that prevail in what I have been calling modern Gnosticism?

Ivakhiv among others has called into question such sweeping assessments of contemporary spirituality in the West, basing his call for more nuanced understandings on empirical studies of New Age practitioners. Reporting on his own research on pilgrimages to natural "power places" like Sedona in Arizona, Ivakhiv concludes that in fact "New Age pilgrimage…runs counter to such a subject…New Age spirituality may appear to be a 'self-spirituality' for a variety of reasons: for instance, because its carriers tend to be more mobile and less traditional in their family and community than the average, and because [their] sense of community is a relatively weak one," he writes. However, he goes on to argue, this "mobility and sense of community…can [in fact] result in the development of new communities and new sacred spaces…[and] spiritual practice…[and] often results in mixed and ambivalent, rather than an obviously complimentary relationship with consumerist trends" (Ivakhiv 2003: 93, 113). And, in response to the argument that the "kinds of 'postmodern' notions of self, subjectivity and personhood found in New Age spirituality may be causally linked in a political economy of consumer capitalism," Ivakhiv determines instead that "they are sometimes in a way explicitly intended to counter the commodificatory impulses of consumer capitalism," concluding that "New Age spirituality is much more complex than is allowed for in the writings of its academic critics" (Ivakhiv 2003: 113).

The forms of Gnostic engagement with Asia that emerged in the years after World War I—and that reemerged in somewhat altered form in the countercultural movements of the postwar period—similarly need to be reassessed by heeding Ivakhiv's call for more nuanced understandings of the forms of selfhood, and hence of the ethical and political sensibilities to which such engagement has given rise. Like Ivakhiv, I want to question the simplistic critique that appears so prevalent in academic analyses of New Age spirituality. In so doing, I will scrutinize the suggestion of an identity between Gnostic and existential forms of selfhood, before turning to the relationship between New Age and postmodern selfhoods.

Gnosticism and Modern Subjectivity

If one were to look for a prototype of the modern New Age traveler, none would be better than the figure of the German, later Swiss, writer and poet Hermann Hesse. The grandson of a Pietist missionary and Indologist from Stuttgart who was fluent in a number of Indian languages, the son of Pietist missionaries to Malabar in India and of a man who read widely

in Greek philosophy, Latin literature and Oriental religions, Hermann
Hesse (1877–1962) was more or less born into a deep engagement with
Asia in general, and Asian spiritualities in particular. And as "a man who
sought himself [over] 85 years of the most disastrous events of our age"
(Casebeer 1972: 20). Hesse's may rightly be considered the prototype of
the modern "spiritual journey."

Hesse had good reason to seek solace in Asian religion. According to
one biographer, Hesse wrestled with feelings of parental rejection that
left him subject to headaches, insomnia, and depression for much of his
life. He was a "hypersensitive, lively, and extremely headstrong child [and
a] constant source of annoyance and despair to his parents and teach-
ers" who, at the age of 15 "began to inveigh against the establishment,
his father, adult authority, and religion" (Mileck 1978: 5–10). Hesse
eschewed university studies in favor of a career in bookselling until 1904,
after which he was able to earn a living as a full-time writer. But he hung
around university students, and read widely and deeply, his early passion
being for the work of Nietzsche and Jacob Burkhardt, as well as Arthur
Schopenhauer, whose writings, as we have seen, were a formative influ-
ence on many of Europe's Gnostics in the interwar years.

Although he was already reading Schopenhauer by the time he was
15, his interest was "reawakened" in 1904 when he again became "preoc-
cupied with the religions of India." For a time he became a follower of one
Gustav Gräser—artist, theosopher, student of yoga and Eastern religion,
nudist and a "prophet in tunic and sandals" (Mileck 1978: 45). During
this time, he also discovered Taoism and Confucianism, which he was
ultimately to find more to his taste than Hinduism and Buddhism, which
in his view overvalued the ascetic life.[2]

This second phase of Hesse's on-again off-again spiritual relation-
ship with the East culminated in a journey to Asia in the company of
his friend, the artist Hans Sturzenegger. As noted above, the journey was
disappointing. Hesse was, as we have noted, "appalled by the poverty and
filth, and depressed by the idolatized and commercialised Buddhism"
that he encountered in Ceylon, Sumatra, and Malaya (Mileck 1978: 46).[3]
As for Islam, the major religion in Sumatra and Malaya, there is no men-
tion. As should be evident already, far from seeking some sort of accom-
modation with the capitalist market, Hesse had already come to the view
that the market was a destroyer of genuine spirituality.

So he turned his back on Asia, looking closer to home for a means
of achieving "self-realization." Given that Hesse was at this point—as
he was for most of his life—concerned with his own, inner state more
than with that of any collectivity (class, nation, society), it is perhaps not
surprising that his next great passion would be for the emerging field

of psychoanalysis. And, as he did with everything else that held out the promise of a means of achieving a measure of inner peace, in 1914 he threw himself into the task of reading the work of Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung—he expressed clear preference for the former—subsequently undergoing electroshock therapy and then a period of fairly intensive psychoanalysis with one of Jung's students. To quote from Mileck's biography again:

> [Psychoanalysis] provided him with the incentive necessary to appraise himself and his adjustment to life, and afforded him the insights needed to begin his long inward path…Introspection, once primarily a blissful ignorance, soon became a merciless self-analysis. (Mileck 1978: 67)[4]

Hesse's preoccupation with psychoanalysis was to last for almost ten years, although it was punctuated by World War I and several bouts of critical engagement with German chauvinism and war mongering that ended up making him unpopular with nationalists and pacifists alike. However, after the war, and just as he seems to have done with each of his previous enthusiasms, he began to grow disillusioned with psychoanalysis, prompted in particular by his disdain for those who would reduce aesthetics to the dreams, fantasies, and psychological states of individual artists. Once again the idea of an autonomous, inner self that was to have a significant effect on twentieth-century notions of personhood was found wanting.

The rejection of Freud seems to have cleared the way for a third bout of engagement with Asian religion, perhaps his most profound. This included returning to Schopenhauer, whose work began to have a real "impact upon Hesse's thought and life" (Mileck 1978: 28) just as it did for Erwin Schrödinger in the postwar period. But the years between, roughly, 1919 and 1922 were characterized above all by a deep engagement with Asian spirituality, both in his reading and also in his spiritual practice (Mileck 1978: 46–47). This was the period during which he wrote *Siddhartha*, which was published in 1926.

On the surface at least, *Siddhartha* was the most Asian of Hesse's novels. Unusually for Hesse, who usually wrote rather quickly, the book took several years to complete, although the first two parts were finished in short order. In them, Hesse employed a neither/nor logic to contrast two journeys of the self: the first, inward-looking and ascetic, the second, outward-oriented and worldly. Up to the section titled "At the River," the novel follows the path already traced out in previous novels like *Demian* and *Klingsors Letzter Sommer*, although this time the setting is not a European but a South Asian one. Its narrator, Siddhartha, the

son of a Brahmin, becomes restless and unhappy with the comfortable life of a Hindu Brahmin and, with his friend Govinda, joins up with the "Samanas," a band of wandering Hindu ascetics. This part of the novel contains an account of Siddhartha's attempt to follow their inner path by retreating from the everyday world (*samsara*), the world of the desiring/ grasping self, a world of appearances, to find an inner world "empty" of all the urges and desires that constitute modern selfhood. During his time with the Samanas "Siddhartha had one single goal—to become empty, to become empty of thirst, desire, dreams, pleasure and sorrow—to let the Self die" (Hesse 1951: 11).

Not unexpectedly, Siddhartha soon grows unhappy and restless, dissatisfied with the life of the Hindu ascetic, and hence with what Hesse took to be the fundamental principles of other-worldly selfhood that he considered the goal of Hindu ascetic practice:

> Although Siddhartha fled from the self a thousand times, dwelt in nothing, dwelt in animal and stone, the return was inevitable; the hour was inevitable when he would again find himself, in sunshine or in moonlight, in shadow or in rain, and was again Self and Siddhartha. (Hesse 1951: 12)

At this point in the story, Siddhartha hears rumors of a person who has truly "conquered in himself the sorrows of the world and had brought to a standstill the cycle of rebirth," namely Gotama (*sic*) the Illustrious, the Buddha (Hesse 1951: 16), construed by Hesse here as an exemplary Hindu ascetic (which accorded with the views of many contemporary Hindu scholars). Siddhartha goes to see the Buddha, although not primarily to listen to his teachings—"He didn't think they would teach him anything new"—but instead just to see the man in person. However, while the Buddha's appearance led Siddhartha "to esteem and love the man more than any other" (Hesse 1951: 23), he chose not to join his band of followers, explaining to the Buddha that his "doctrine of rising above the world" causes the system to break down. Seeking to follow the ascetic life, Siddhartha explains, "I wished to destroy myself, to get away from myself, in order to find in the unknown innermost, the nucleus of all things, Atman, Life, the Divine, the Absolute." However, in doing so, he says, "I lost myself on the way" (Hesse 1951: 31).

Accordingly, he takes leave of Govinda, now a loyal follower of the Buddha, and sets off again, once more in a crisis of doubt and unhappiness. He is no longer what he was—priest, Brahmin, or ascetic. So: "Where did he belong? Whose life would he share? What language would he speak?" (1951: 34). If in the first part of the book Siddhartha follows an inward path, in response to this second crisis he ends up embracing

its opposite, the life of the sensual world, and in so doing, embracing his worldly self. But this strategy also ends in crisis, another failure of self-realization.

Part 2 begins with a description of Siddhartha's initial feeling of liberation at being able, once again, to embrace and take pleasure in the world of the senses. He meets Kamala, a courtesan, and from her learns the art of love. Apart from pleasing her as a lover, he also discovers that in order to earn her love he must shave his beard, cut his hair, and acquire money so that he may give her gifts. This requires him to learn to excel in business, and to do so he becomes apprenticed to the richest merchant in town, one Kamaswami.

For a time Siddhartha is again ecstatically happy. He is able to please Kamala, to love and be loved in return, and to become a good business-man, acquiring worldly wealth and respectability. And he is able to do so without negative effects; he excels at business without making it "an end in itself," never angering "if business was going badly." In other words, for a time he is able to live "the life of the world, without belonging to it" (Hesse 1951: 56, 60).

However, before too long, this happiness passes, he finds himself valuing money for its own sake, gambling, even dreaming of money, and frequently becoming angry and jealous. He notices "that the bright and clear inward voice, that had once awakened in him and had always guided him in his finest hours, had become silent," and he "felt himself dying, withering, finishing" (Hesse 1951: 66–67). He had become "deeply entangled in Samsara . . . full of ennui, full of misery, full of death; there was nothing left in the world that could attract him, that could give him pleasure and solace" (Hesse 1951: 70). Once again, Siddhartha is in crisis, this time not from being detached from the world and the self but from being too completely immersed in them. What to do? What was left for him?

If any further proof that Hesse's writing was a way of working through his own spiritual-cum-existential crises is necessary, then the fact that Siddhartha's dilemma caused Hesse to break off the writing of the novel at precisely this point and to enter into "months of hermetic living, of meditation, and of intensive preoccupation with the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita,* and with Buddhistic scriptures" is it. A childhood interest in the East, followed by an intellectual interest in Indian religion had "now become a profound spiritual experience" (Mileck 1978: 160), and it was only after a prolonged period of reengaging with both literature and spiritual practice that Hesse felt able to return to his writing, completing the manuscript with a longish section in which he offered some sort of resolution to Siddhartha's dilemma.

Self, Personhood, and Consciousness in Siddhartha

In what ways does *Siddhartha* constitute a genuine engagement on Hesse's part with the Hindu and Buddhist notions of personhood that appear to be its main theme, and to what extent are its overtly Hindu and Buddhist themes only a thin veil thrown across a very European set of concerns, as some have suggested? Mileck is firmly of the latter view contending, for example, that *Siddhartha*'s resolution is a very "western" one and that "despite the Orient's strong attraction, Hesse remained a Westerner…[being firmly of the view that while] the Orient can help Western man solve some of his problems [it] cannot solve them for him" (Mileck 1978: 165).

It is certainly possible to detect, even in this most Asian of his novels, themes that were of urgent concern to many of Hesse's European contemporaries, not just poets and novelists but social and natural scientists, psychologists, philosophers, and theologians as well. These include, of course, the implications of the Freudian revolution in psychology which, as we have already noted, was a major interest of Hesse's for a time (although one from which he had already moved on when it came to writing *Siddhartha*).

An intellectual pursuit of the sacred by those for whom organized religion was seen as increasingly problematic was also manifest more widely in the interwar years. It was clearly present, for example, among those who took part in the debate over what Wasserstrom calls "religion after religion" on the occasions of the Eranos seminars that were held at Lake Maggiore between 1933 and 1969. Originally convened by Carl Jung, these seminars were attended at one time or another by figures as diverse as Erwin Schrödinger, Paul Radin, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Mircea Eliade, Henry Courbin, Gersholm Sholem, Rhys Davids and D. T. Suzuki (Clarke 1997: 139–140; Riley 2010; Wasserstrom 1999). Like many of his contemporaries, in other words, Hesse's was part of a much broader spiritual search by intellectuals, artists, and scientists for new ways of experiencing and new forms of religiosity in the light of their disenchantment not only with organized religion, but also with the occultism, spiritualism, and theosophy that were so popular among European seekers in the decades before World War I. Hesse, like other key participants in the postwar Eastern turn, including René Guénon and Alexandra David-Néel (who had only recently disengaged themselves from theosophical and occultist circles), had himself dabbled in theosophy. Moreover, he would also have been aware of contemporary theological debates over the shortcomings of liberal/historical theology, involving prominent "neo-Gnostics" like Barth and Rosenzweig (see Moyn 2005; Lazier 2008) on

the one hand and Rudolf Otto and Henrik Kramer who adopted quite different positions on the nature of religious experience (experience of the sacred or numinous) on the other.

Some have seen in all of this the emergence of a broad "existentialist" sensibility that drew on the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard. If by this is meant the view that (1) "Everyday life is at best banal and at worst absurd and meaningless"; (2) "Anxiety in the face of death can disclose to us the banality or absurdity of life; hence, there is a constant motivation to flee from anxiety back into conformism and a reaffirmation of everyday life"; (3) "The most pressing…task is to help us cope with anxiety and despair in such a way that we can affirm this life in all its absurdity"; and (4) "The ideal human life will be authentic, that is, accept responsibility for the exercise of freedom" (Wrathall and Dreyfus 2006: 5–6), then Hesse may rightly be considered a precursor of existentialism. As Mileck argues, *Siddhartha*, like almost everything else that Hesse wrote, was "confessional in form and therapeutic in function," it "scrutinizes and finds wanting" everything that Hesse had written previously about what would constitute a "better possibility" in the future and it "terminates on its own upbeat of new hope" (Mileck 1978: xi). In other words, *Siddhartha* can be seen to be in part a distinctly European search for a form of authentic modern selfhood. But does this make Hesse's inner journey primarily a European existentialist one rather than that of someone who was seriously engaging with non-European traditions?

The issue that seems to run through all of this, one that is addressed not just by Hesse and many of his European contemporaries, but which is also central to Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and Sufi traditions, is the nature of human (self) consciousness. And Hesse, along with many of his neo-Gnostic contemporaries, also drew on Asian religious ideas and practices—Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and/or Sufi—to address the issue in a distinctively nonexistentialist way. This does not make Hesse a Buddhist or a Hindu—he never made that claim, and indeed the completion of *Siddhartha* marked the end of any further deep engagement with Asia on Hesse's part. Nonetheless, this period in Hesse's life can be seen as a time when certain concepts drawn from Asian religious traditions were brought into the heart of a conversation about consciousness and the self that was taking place around him.

To see the distinctiveness of Hesse's Gnostic voice, we can contrast the way in which he addressed these issues with the views of his less spiritually oriented contemporaries. And rather than focusing on psychoanalysis, particularly its Freudian variant, which doubtless posed a significant alternative to Gnostic notions of self and consciousness, I want to, instead, contrast his views with those that were emerging in the

philosophical tradition that gave rise to existentialism, beginning with the ideas of Edward Husserl. For, while no doubt exerting a major influence on intellectual life in the twentieth century, psychoanalytic theory had already been found wanting by Hesse and many others for its reductionist tendencies, that is, for its propensity to bypass the problematic of consciousness, self, and spirit, thereby sidestepping, if not dismissing altogether, the spiritual concerns of Hesse and his fellow Gnostics.

Husserl, unlike Hesse, was firmly of the view that Asian philosophical traditions had nothing important to contribute to modern self-understanding, since in his firm opinion "only the form of philosophy developed within modern European humanity can be said to be genuine philosophy…All other forms of philosophy are either derivative or inauthentic" (Lau n.d.: 2). If indeed Husserl's way of addressing the problematic of self/experience/consciousness owed nothing to Asian philosophy, then his approach, and particularly his ideas on selfhood, provide a useful contrast with those whose did.

Phenomenology and Modern Subjectivity

Phenomenology, as we have argued, tends to place an autonomous self at the heart of investigation, even if it does not necessarily treat the self as primordial or transcendent in the Kantian sense. It does so because the only knowledge that is self-evidently true is that which is derived from pure experience, that is, knowledge of things as they are given to individual consciousness. All other kinds of knowledge are in some sense derivative, built up from or "constituted" out of pure experience. This is true, I would argue, even when it is acknowledged that selves are not primordial or transcendent, that is, even when it is accepted that selves are intersubjectively constituted.

Knowing this self for Husserl required gaining access to apodictic knowledge by means of a process that he called the phenomenological "reduction," "an internal originary intuition through which the [individual] mind gets acquainted with non-natural individual objects" (see Petiot et al. 1999: 29). Husserl denied that reduction was simply a matter of intuition, insisting that it was "a slow, hard-won procedure of evident insight acquired by reflection" in which the knowing subject brackets out all everyday assumptions about reality (epoché, that is "common sense-based and 'naturalistic' presuppositions and the like") (Moran 2001: 136).

How one would actually go about obtaining access to "pure (self) experience" remains something of a mystery. Broadly sympathetic to the Husserlian project, Petiot et al. have argued convincingly that we would

need to be much more explicit about the sorts of training that might be required to prepare ourselves for the phenomenological reduction if we were really to access our primary experience, suggesting at the same time—and very much against the grain of Husserl's project—that certain forms of Eastern religious practice, particularly meditation, might actually provide us with a means of accessing this pure consciousness, a view to which Hesse also seems to have come in his *Siddhartha* years.

Unlike a number of his Gnostic contemporaries, Hesse may not have been familiar with Husserl's writings. However, the problematic nature of a transcendental self is clearly the sort of issue with which he was wrestling in his lifelong search for self-realization. And rather than taking the path of Husserl and his followers, a path that was to lead to existentialism, in *Siddhartha*, particularly in the book's concluding chapter, Hesse offers a resolution that at least in his view was essentially an Eastern one. For example, in suggesting that the truth of the Buddha's message gets lost when the wisdom of the Buddha is translated into mere words ("the wisdom which a wise man tries to communicate always sounds foolish") (Hesse 1951: 115), he was moving away from any existential notion of selfhood, particularly as it came to be constituted by Sartre. Moreover, in the concluding section, when describing Siddhartha's return to the place where his journey back into the world began, reestablishing his connection with the ferryman from whose wisdom he had then benefited, and meeting Kamala again (who dies in his arms leaving him with a headstrong son), Siddhartha(Hesse) observes the diversity of peoples he takes across the river. Letting his son go while thinking of his own father when he had left home all those years ago, he comes to the realization that all humans are "intimately related in a harmonious and glorious timeless otherness" (Mileck 1978: 167–168). Siddhartha realizes that they all belonged to each other…they were all interwoven and interlocked, entwined in a thousand ways…All of them together was the world." And with this acknowledgement, Siddhartha "ceased to fight against his destiny…in harmony with the stream of events…full of sympathy and compassion…belonging to the unity of all things" (Hesse 1951: 111), and, having become aware of this oneness, brings his journey to an end.

As Siddhartha explains to his old friend Govinda—whom he meets again at the ferry crossing—what he has learned is that the division with which he had been operating between this world (*samsara*) and the inner world of the ascetic, is itself an illusion:

> When the illustrious Buddha taught about the world, he had to divide it into Samsara and Nirvana, into illusion and truth, into suffering and salvation. One cannot do otherwise, there is no other method for those who

teach. But the world itself, being in and around us, is never one-sided … [It] only seems so because we suffer the illusion that time is something real. Time is not real … the dividing line that seems to lie between this world and eternity, between suffering and bliss, between good and evil, is also an illusion. (Hesse 1951: 115)

Whether or not this is an authentically Buddhist insight, even were there such a thing, here Hesse shows himself to be neither ignorant of nor unaffected by his encounter with Asian religious traditions—not just Hinduism and (Indian) Buddhism, but also Taoism and Confucianism. And, unlike Europe's existentialists like Sartre, whose "inward journeys" exposed a nothingness at the very heart of human existence, in *Siddhartha* Hesse arrived at something like the "emptiness" that is the goal of Buddhist practice.[5] If Hesse is to be thought of an existentialist, then his existentialism was clearly, at the very least, *inflected* by readings in Asian religion.

Consider for example the parallels between Hesse's critique of either: or logic in Siddhartha and the following comment of Nāgārjuna's:

Nothing of samsāra is different from nirvāna, nothing of nirvāna is different from samsāra. That which is the limit of nirvāna is also the limit of samsāra; there is not the slightest difference between the two. (Nāgārjuna, *Middle Way Verses*, cited in Loy 1983: 355)

Hesse may not have been familiar with the thinking of Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 AD), the great Indian philosopher and founder of the "Middle Way."[6] However, his position comes closer to the Mahayana tradition than it does to that of existentialists like Sartre.

Hesse's Heirs: Gnosticism, Existentialism, and the Counterculture

Why was *Siddhartha* (and to a slightly lesser extent *The Steppenwolf*)—rather than say *The Glass Bead Game*, the work for which Hesse was most admired in literary circles and which won him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946—the book that achieved the greatest popularity among American spiritual seekers in the postwar period? [7] Part of the answer must lie in the already noted fact that *Siddhartha* is, on the surface at least, the most Eastern of Hesse's novels, and it was clearly read as such by members of a counterculture dissatisfied not just with the American cultural mainstream but also with the nihilism of its existentialist critics.

That *Siddhartha* was in fact considered as offering an Eastern alternative to existentialism is evident in the way it was read in the American counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s: this despite the fact that

Hesse was convinced that his books were destined to remain unread in America, a country for which he often expressed contempt. In this he proved to be spectacularly wrong. Although the New Directions paperback version of *Siddhartha* sold very few copies when it was first released in 1957, by 1972 it had run through 19 printings, and become a kind of a bible for the American counterculture. What was it that so enthused young Americans in the late 1960s about this little book?

In remarks published in 1972, Edwin Casebeer, himself presumably one of those college students attracted to the San Francisco North Beach "Beat" movement among which the themes of *Siddhartha* seemed to resonate most strongly, suggests that one reason that Hesse was so popular was that he seemed to believe that "the universe makes sense," something sorely in need of "affirmation today." But maybe even more important was that Hesse also believed that the best way to discover this sense,

> is to realize yourself. It is that obligation that brings the young…into conflict with their more conforming elders and rulers. Self-realization requires great freedom and great tolerance of differences…Hermann Hesse gives them the assurance and guidance of a man who sought himself [over] 85 years of the most disastrous events of our age…[The work of Hesse was read as one of the few] affirmations in a society dominated by pessimism and hyperrationalism [and the view that] the universe was absurd, man and society were fragmented, institutions were empty of relevant content. The only demonstrable facts were that each of us is isolated from the other and that all of us are subject to death, facts that rendered meaningless all that we did, individually or collectively. (Casebeer 1972: 20)

In the face of all this, the "inner path" chosen by Hesse was seen by many, not as a version of existentialism, but as the only alternative to the "suicidal nihilism" that existentialism seemed to be offering at the time (Casebeer 1972: 20, 24).

In this regard, it is interesting to note that dissatisfaction with existentialist "nihilism" was already being expressed by those American Beats who were advocating engagement with Eastern spirituality, well before the hippies and the New Agers. The Zen imaginings of prominent Beat poets and writers like Allen Ginsberg, Alan Watts, Jack Kerouac, and, particularly, Gary Snyder are well known; but the fact that it was their unease at existentialist nihilism that gave rise to them in the first place is less often acknowledged. Consider, for example, a less well-known member of early Beat circles: Alvin Schwartz, a comic book artist who would later confess to the view that at least his version of the Marvel character Superman was a *tulpa* (a Tibetan mind creation).[8]

In 1948, Schwartz published a little known piece of "hardboiled" fiction[9] that is said to have greatly influenced several of the more prominent Beats, notably Jack Kerouac, whom Schwartz had met at Columbia just after World War II. The book was described in the *Saturday Review* at the time as a mystery in which "sudden death of a reefer seller in Greenwich Village saloon mildly interests police and dislocates lives of pedlar's acquaintances," the reviewer going on to say that this "routine" crime "is basis of penetrating and well-written analysis of several depressing but amply realized characters, 'artistic' and otherwise."[10]

According to its author, *The Blowtop*, later marketed as "the book that sparked the Beat Generation,"[11] "came out of the personal experience that encountered very directly the kind of Bohemia that flourished in the forties, and most powerfully immediately after the war" and, like abstract expressionism (one of the main characters was based on the artist Attilio Salemme, called Giordano in the novel, and not Jackson Pollack, whom Schwartz also knew) was "a way of absorbing the personal detritus the war had left" (Schwartz 2001: xii). In his later introduction, Schwartz describes the book as a work of existentialism, but goes on to contrast his version of existentialism with that of Sartre (whose work was very influential in postwar intellectual circles) on the grounds that his (Schwartz's) was a search for the transcendent ("the things that are left over") (Schwartz 2001: xiii). For example, when telling a friend about the death of the drug peddler in a bar in Greenwich Village, the book's main character, Archie, says:

> I just can't tell you. There isn't any way of making you understand what it was like. Because no matter how clearly I give you the details, there'd still have to be something left over that couldn't be talked about. And that's the very part that makes me feel the way I do. (Schwartz 2001: 25–26)

Later, when viewing a painting by the murder suspect, Giordano, Archie wonders:

> In what way did [the painting] lift one out of oneself? What made it greater than life? Death could terminate life. Was death therefore the greater? Water was greater than fire. No, the thought was absurd. But did not the wild, explosive swirl of the canvas imply the possibility of murder? Archie gradually convinced himself that the painting and the murder…were related. (Schwartz 2001: 52)

And again, when following Giordano, followed in turn by the police detective, Archie comes to the realization that both were outside of life, dedicated, each

in his own way, to the principle of order, like monks wedded to an absolute law, to God, to a selflessness that eschewed any of the personal problems of belonging to the world. His quest became, consequently, in the sense of Giordano's remarks about art, something beyond life, a search for truth that transcended personal fears. This idea, in spite of its haziness, gave Archie a moment of exaltation. He was convinced that he stood on the verge of some vast insight. Momentarily, he expected to be transformed" (Schwartz 2001: 104).

Finally, when contemplating the possibility of his own death (when faced with arrest as an accessory to the murder):

> It began to occur to him that every act made a difference. The step he took towards the chair, the movement from the door, each had its profound effect on every subsequent act. Life was shaped instantly and continuously. Perhaps then the answer to death not being the end was in this—his match stick. One could not choose one's death, but one might, if every act were taken seriously, be able to influence one's dying. Death could not be deferred, but it could be shaped. Thus, it could become bearable. (Schwartz 2001: 14)

The book contains no references to Buddhist notions of selfhood, consciousness, life, and death, although they seem to be at work in Schwartz's singularly Eastern take on existentialism. The reason becomes evident only when one reads Schwartz's later autobiographical writings, which contain an extended description of an encounter with a *tulpa*, published well after *The Blowtop*. From these, it is evident that Schwartz, as well as others around him at the time (including Jackson Pollock), were already familiar with certain Hindu and, in Schwartz's case at least, Tibetan Buddhist ideas, and that their encounters with these were important to the ways in which they tackled some of the central questions posed by existentialism. It seems unlikely that they would have been familiar with Hesse's Eastern novels, but equally likely that they would have been sympathetic to the ideas about consciousness and personhood contained within them.

Postmodern Gnostics?

> *There are NO pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences.* Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication or any grounds for believing that they are unmediated. That is to say, *all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty. (Katz 1978: 26)

> [As to the possible influence of Derrida on my work] I don't know
> whether to be pleased or offended by this [suggestion], as, frankly, I don't
> understand Derrida. He was never a major influence on my thought.... In
> my own mind…, I mean to signal a both-and logic, a dwelling in the mid-
> dle of two possible readings, neither of which are really adequate and sat-
> isfying. I mean to signal a refusal to land or close the question. In terms of
> possible philosophical influences, I have read and absorbed a good share of
> Bataille since my graduate days at Chicago, where I studied Christian mys-
> ticism with Bernie McGinn. So maybe that is the closer source. Bataille,
> yes; Derrida, no—not yet, anyway. (Kripal 2011)

If there is a rather large gulf between the underlying notions of selfhood
and authenticity propounded by existentialists on the one hand and our
Gnostic diplomats on the other, the same can be said of the relationship
between Gnosticism and postmodernism. Regardless of the fact that it has
been said to have provided some sort of opening out to the sacred,[12] post-
modernism can also be seen to be modernism's last ditch attempt to close
the door to it, an intuition that, despite some conciliatory words about not
wishing to misrepresent the ideas of someone whose work he has not read
carefully, Kripal seems to share. As perhaps the most articulate contempo-
rary academic spokesman for modern Gnostic diplomacy (a term that he
coined), Kripal is in my view quite right to distance himself from Derridian
deconstructionism in particular and postmodern/poststructuralist think-
ing in general. Instead, just as Hesse should be properly thought of as a
counter-existentialist, late twentieth/early twenty-first-century Gnostics
need to be seen as living in tension with postmodernism and poststruc-
turalism. How else can we understand the fact that most of what passes for
critical scholarship remains implacably hostile to the kinds of engagement
with Asian religions with which we have been concerned?

The source of this tension becomes evident when we acknowledge that
"postmodernism" has its origins in a critique of phenomenology, in par-
ticular in the argument that the world is always already intersubjectively
constituted, and, hence, prior to the experience of any individual subject.
Contra Sartre et al., this leads to a view of the absolute inseparability of
"experience" and "construal." Although Husserl may have acknowledged
the role of intersubjectivity in the framing of experience, the problematic
nature of the distinction between apodictic and secondary knowledge was
exposed by those like Heidegger, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida
who followed in his footsteps. As we have already noted, their criticisms
were predicated on Wittgenstein's argument that there can be no con-
scious thought without language (Candlish and Wrisley 2014); as well as
the notion that conscious being "is always caught up in a *world*" (Moran
2001: 233). Some have seen in this, grounds for arguing that there has

been some sort of rapprochement between this post-phenomenological thought in the West and certain tendencies in eastern religious traditions, notably Buddhist and Sufi ones. Is the Gnostic spiritual self, therefore, merely a form of postmodern selfhood as the critics have suggested?

Postmodernism, Buddhism, and Sufism

It is increasingly common these days to read of the elective affinities between certain "Buddhisms" on the one hand and "Deconstructions" on the other (Park 2006). Unlike the critics of New Age spirituality with which we began, these authors do not see evidence of a rapprochement with the spirit of "late capitalism" in either. But like them, they point to parallels between certain forms of Buddhist spirituality and the new philosophies of the post. Ian Mabbet, the eminent India historian, for example, has pointed out the similarities between Derridian deconstructionism on the one hand and the ideas of Nāgārjuna on the other. The two, he argues are alike in their questioning of determinate reality; their views of the interdependency of beings ("things are not intrinsically real but exist only in relation to other things"); their vision of emptiness as neither being nor nothingness; their "four cornered logic of indeterminacy"; their conviction that there are of two levels of truth (conventional and higher); and, of direct relevance to our argument here, their "dismantling of the self" (Mabbett 2006: 26–33).

In similar vein, philosopher Zong-gi Cai has compared Derridian and Mādhyamika Buddhist theories of deconstruction and finds that they are "based on similar ideas of *différance* and differentiation and seek to nullify the logos and the name of Non-Existence reified by Western idealist and Buddhist essentialists." Both "apply the same theories of meaning to deconstruct Matter and existence . . . [and both] conceive of their double negation as an exercise of neither/nor logic and set forth their deconstructive formulas in similar terms" (Zong-gi 2006: 47). And Loy has remarked on the parallels between Mahayana's "refutation of self-existence" and Derrida's "critique of self-presence," and between postmodern views of selfhood and the Buddhist belief that the self is "completely grounded . . . in the whole web of interdependent relations . . . without any self-being to protect, and without the impending threat of non-being to evade" (Loy 2006: 68–71).[13]

Such observations are not limited to the parallels between Buddhism and postmodernism. Philosopher Ian Almond, for example, compares Sufism and Deconstruction by reading Derrida in the context of the Sufi philosopher Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), noting parallels in their "opposition

to rational thought," the meaning they attribute to infinity, mystery, and the meaning of the secret (including the illusion of selfhood):

> This emphasis on opening in both deconstructive and Sufi epistemologies forms the most thematic—and yet the clearest—link between two writers who, in their own original way, make us realize that what we call "God" may not always be God; that what we call "truth" may not always be true. (Almond 2004: 133)

But such parallels do not mean that the widespread adoption of critical culture theory does not create obstacles to the Gnostic engagement with Asia. Obviously not all of these can be laid at the door of Foucault, Derrida, Bhabha, and friends; many arise less from reading this literature than from misreading it, or not reading it at all (there is certainly a good deal of theoretical confusion and misunderstanding out there in the field of Asian studies). But a project that aims, over and over again, to purge academic discourse of the last remnants of ethnocentrism, essentialism, and logocentrism; to throw off all vestiges of power/knowledge and take that final step toward the decolonization of all knowledge must inevitably come into conflict with the pursuit of radically different forms of ontic engagement. It is here that the connection between modern Gnosticism and postmodernism comes unstuck.

Consider the gap that separates the contextualism of the post-phenomenologist with the universalizing sensibility of Benjamin's "The Storyteller" with which this chapter began. Certainly there are parallels between postmodernism and modern Gnosticism: both radically question the givenness of reality, and both work toward deconstructing the self. And yet one does so from the perspective of an absolute contextualism, the other from a universalizing impulse toward what may, or may not, best be called the Divine (the word obviously works better in the case of Ibn Arabi than it does for Nāgārjuna).

Reading Derrida and Ibn Arabi (or Derrida and Nāgārjuna) together does not result in identity. Rather:

> Perhaps…the most interesting consequence of reading French sixties deconstruction in the rather strange context of medieval Sufism is the oddly mystical meaning which many of Derrida's terms take on—infinity, endless play, the unnameable, the trace, the elusive force which is "older" than being itself. Of course, there is no God—not even a *deus absconditus*—in Derrida's universe which would give these terms the kind of meaning compatible with a "mysticism." Derrida's infinite text…springs from an infinite emptiness, not an infinite Mind; the Derridean unthinkable likes in the relentless play of differences within the text, and not

some epistemologically ungraspable notion of the Divine. Neverthess it is interesting to see how the use of such terms cannot escape the echoes of God, cannot elude the ghost of the divine, how even remarks concerning "the consciousness of nothing, upon which all consciousness of something enriches itself...seem to push difference—as Derrida has already feared—in the direction of the non-present, eternally generative God of negative theology. Derrida's protestations to the contrary resemble all too well the cries of the author who wishes his text to wander in one direction, instead of another. (Almond 2005: 132–133)

A small difference or a yawning gulf? With regard to this, it is worthwhile reminding ourselves of postmodernism's implacable hostility to all forms of universalism, including the so-called Perennialism that grounds modern Gnosticism. For Guénon, Perennial Wisdom (*Sophia Perennis*) is that which constitutes the esoteric core of all of the world's great religious traditions. Although not a traditionalist in the strict sense, Aldous Huxley produced what is perhaps the best known account in English of perennialism. For Huxley perennialism is the "wisdom" common to all "preceding and subsequent theologies... [and] every religious tradition... [including] the traditionary lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world." It "finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal" (Huxley 1944: vii). Access to this wisdom is therefore universally available, although only to the very few whom we designate as "'saint' or 'prophet,' 'sage' or 'enlightened one,'...who have made themselves loving, pure in heart and poor in spirit" (Huxley 1944: ix-x). We, who are not one of the aforementioned few, will base our knowledge of the wisdom "upon the direct experience of those who have fulfilled the necessary conditions of such knowledge" (Huxley 1944: 1–2). As this indicates, Huxley builds up his description from a great variety of authorities—Hindu, Taoist, Mahayanna, Sufi, Hellenistic, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Christian mystic, seventeenth-century Quaker, Platonist and Neo-Platonist, Maori and Native American. But as diverse as such sources are, at heart they all give fundamentally the same answer: "The divine Ground of all existence is a spiritual Absolute, ineffable in terms of discursive thought, but (in certain circumstances) susceptible of being directly experienced and realized by the human being" (1944: 21). For Huxley, then, all mystical experiences are the same.

To the extent that the universality of Perennial Wisdom is thought to ground the Gnostic's search of truth and self-realization, it is easy to see why postmodern philosophers should be so critical of it. Perennialism appears to violate all of the basic principles of post-phenomenological thought: its

insistence on context and the particular, its distrust of the category of experience, its rejection of elite metanarratives, etc. The postmodern case against Perennialism has been made most influentially by philosopher Steven T. Katz, who rejects even the modified, "more sophisticated" argument that "all mystical experiences are the same but the mystics *reports about* their experiences are culturally-bound" (Katz 1978: 24) on the grounds that such a formulation: (1) is "reductive and inflexible, forcing multifarious and extremely variegated forms of mystical experience into improper interpretive categories which lose sight of the fundamentally important differences between the data studied" (1978: 25); (2) there is no such thing as "pure," that is, unmediated experience; (3) "the forms of consciousness which the mystic brings to experience set structured and limiting parameters on what the experience will be" (1978: 26); (4) "even the plurality of experience found in Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist mystical traditions, etc., have to be broken down into smaller units" (1978: 27); (5) "classical mystics do not talk about the abstraction 'mysticism'; they talk only about their tradition, their 'way', their 'goal': they do not recognize the legitimacy of any other. The ecumenical overtones associated with mysticism have come primarily from non-mystics of recent vintage for their own purposes" (1978: 46); (6) "what appear to be similar-sounding descriptions are not similar descriptions and do *not* indicate the same/experience. They do not because language is itself contextual and words 'mean' only in contexts" (1978: 46–47); (7) "There is no substantive evidence to suggest that there is any pure consciousness *per se* achieved by these various, common mystical practices" (1978: 57); and (8) "there is no evidence that there is any 'given' which can be disclosed without the imposition of the mediating conditions of the knower" (1978: 59).

But one wonders whether such an apparently infinite regression of critique and counter critique can lead to the more cosmopolitan form of engagement with Asia that Gnostics are seeking. Or is the result instead a kind of parochialism, even solipsism, where nothing remains but the (transcendental) "critical" ego?[14] Consider, for example, the implication of Katz's contention that there are radical differences between the experiences of Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, and Sufi mystics, indeed that "even the plurality of experience found in Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist mystical traditions, etc., have to be broken down into smaller units" (1978: 27). Is not the claim that such experiences differ as much an article of faith than the claim that they have something in common? And why stop here? Surely the logical endpoint of "breaking down" the categories is the claim that no two individual experiences are the same. The assumption of the ineffability of the experience of the other must ultimately lead us back to existentialism's solipsistic self.

Similarly, critical culture theory seems to resurrect that essentializing dialectic of authenticity that characterized earlier scholarly discourses on the ineffable otherness of the non-West discussed in previous chapters. Katz's description of the distinctiveness of *the* Jewish or Buddhist or Sufi mystical experience is again a nice illustration of the way in which the postmodern critique of universalism leads to the idea that languages, cultures, and religions are hermetically walled off one from another. If this were really so, how could Katz himself transcend his own particular language, culture, or ontology so as to allow him to know the otherness of the other?

My aim throughout has not been to defend the project of Gnostic engagement with Asian religion tout court against the criticisms that have been leveled against it by its mainly secular academic opponents. There is no doubt that those Westerners who have oriented themselves toward the spiritual traditions of the East are, and have frequently been, guilty of many of the sins of which they stand accused in the court of scholarly opinion. My concern, however, has been to counter the sorts of sweeping judgments with which I began this chapter, to demonstrate, in other words, that the negative views so frequently articulated by scholars are all too often remarkably unscholarly.

In this chapter I have sought in particular to demonstrate that the too easy identification of modern Gnosticism with existentialism and post-modernism and the contention that all are equally wanting, is sloppy to say the least. In this, Gnosticism's critics have been guilty of fundamentally misunderstanding the call on the part of at least some modern Gnostics to "first know thyself." This misunderstanding has no doubt been encouraged by the ideas and practices of many New Age practitioners; there are many Western Buddhists, Sufis, and Hindus who cling to a Kantian (or Sartrian) self, being entirely caught up with their own achievement and enrichment. However, as the story of Siddhartha's/Hesse's inward journey so clearly shows, there is a fundamental difference between the self that is revealed to the Gnostic traveler and the one that is the object of modern and postmodern projects of self-cultivation. What Siddhartha finds after all his searching is not a solipsistic, primordial, and autonomous self alone in a meaningless universe. Nor is it a postmodern self that needs to be rewarded (or, even more odiously, "pampered"). Rather—like Schrödinger on that mountain path—Siddhartha discovers a self that merges into, and is therefore responsible for, all others. Hermann Hesse's call for a period of introspection in the wake of World War I that invoked the ire of German nationalists and their socialist opponents alike, must *not* be seen as a morally and politically irresponsible gesture. Rather, it must be seen to be part of a principled stand against the capacity for

exclusion and violence that exists in all of us: nothing is to be gained by countering violence with violence, and hatred with love of all things German. Read from the perspective of Gnosticism, Hesse's call on his fellow Germans to follow Siddhartha by "first knowing themselves" turns out to be not only deeply moral but, in anticipating the consequences of the failure of both Left and Right to do so in the years between the two world wars, remarkably prescient as well.

Other Worlds or Ours? Sacred/Secular/Gnostic/ Modern

One might be forgiven for thinking that the likes of Hermann Hesse, Erwin Schrödinger, Alexandra David-Néel, and René Guénon are of no interest today, at least to serious scholars in fields in which the study and analysis of human difference is explicitly thematized. In mainstream anthropology, one certainly gets the impression that any attempt to revive their project of Gnostic engagement with radically different "beliefs" about the nature of reality is regarded as embarrassing, if not worthy of ridicule, the example of Carlos Castaneda's "fraudulent" claims almost inevitably being trotted out any time someone seems to be crossing the line. And they are rarely if ever included among the intellectual ancestors of contemporary students of Asian religion, being mentioned, if at all, only as purveyors of Orientalist fantasies that have long since been eradicated from the field. It would, of course, be impossible to erase Schrödinger's name from the histories of twentieth-century physics. But metaphysical musings on the scientific relevance of Eastern philosophy, or speculations on the unitary nature of consciousness are, as we have noted, predictably dismissed as mystical by most natural scientists these days. And, as we have noted, Hermann Hesse's Eastern writings are rarely read today by serious literary critics and theorists at least in the Anglophone world.

There has been at least one period in the more recent cultural history of the West when the interwar project of Gnostic diplomacy looked to be experiencing something of a revival. I am thinking of course of the counterculture, when Hesse's *Siddhartha* was avidly consumed by young countercultural seekers; Fritjof Capra's book *The Tao of Physics*, among others, seemed to point to a revival of something of the mystical ideas of the pioneers of quantum physicists; and a renewal of Western Buddhism, Hinduism, and

Sufism seemed to be underway, often by or in the name of interwar figures like Guénon, Schuon, David-Néel, Suzuki, and the early twentieth-century philosophers of the Hindu revival. However, the Gnostic elements of the counterculture either fairly quickly drained away into New Age "lifestyle spiritualism" or were ignored by critical scholars who opted to side with its apparently more political wing. The mystics of the counterculture were either too critical for their spiritual heirs or too mystical for the critical/Left-leaning intellectuals of the 1970s and 1980s. All this probably accounts for the low regard in which such figures are held these days.

And yet, while they were in some ways misguided, and while there is no doubt that there have been numerous instances of fraud, patriarchy, and sexual misconduct on the part of the leaders of religious cults inspired by the Eastern turn that they pioneered, many of the attacks (for the sins of orientalism, appropriation, mysticism, hyper-individualism, and patriarchy) prove, on closer examination, to miss the mark. Given in particular the current expressions of dissatisfaction with received (secular) modes of academic analysis, and with secularism more broadly—a dissatisfaction that our interwar Gnostics undoubtedly shared—perhaps the time is ripe for a more nuanced assessment of figures like Hesse, Schrödinger, David-Néel, and Guénon and for a revival, if necessarily in altered form, of their intellectual-cum-spiritual projects.

Indeed, there are signs of precisely such a revival. Has there, then, been a revival of Gnosticism in the early twenty-first century and does it pave a way out of the dilemmas of secularist projects without at the same time succumbing to the essentializing, orientalizing tendencies that marred those earlier Gnostic encounters with the other-to-the modern worlds of non-Western peoples? In particular, are they able to meet the fundamental objection that has been raised time and time again to the Gnostic "readings" of non-Western cultures, religious traditions, and metaphysical systems, namely that they are fabrications that are shaped more by the concerns, aspirations, and desires of those doing the representing and interpreting than by the realities they seek to represent and interpret.

Anthropology and Ontology

Take, for example, the recent, ontological turn in anthropology. Although this has not led to the emergence of "a unified subfield" in the discipline, nor does it necessarily constitute a "self-conscious movement," there are nonetheless observable "affinities" in the work of anthropologists like Martin Holbraad, Tim Ingold, Bruno Latour, Morton Axel Pedersen, Debra Bird Rose, Marilyn Strathern, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Roy

Wagner, and Philippe Descola that arise from a shared commitment to a concept of ontological multiplicity, that is, to the idea that there exists a diversity of other "worlds" rather than merely different ways of representing a single one (Scott 2013). As a result, their goals seem to parallel those of our Gnostic diplomats, suggesting among other things that far from collapsing under the weight of academic criticism, the project of Gnostic engagement with radically (ontologically) different worlds may again be on the agenda.

As Vivieros de Castro, Pedersen, and Holbraad explain, the anthropological concept of ontology differs from both "the traditional philosophical concept" and its "'sociological critique." In the former, ontology implies singularity: "a single absolute truth about *how things are*." Contrastingly, the latter, "consists in sceptically debunking all ontological projects [by] reveal[ing] their insidiously political nature." For ontology's sociological critics, manifestations of difference are to be treated in their social context, that is, as social "constructions." By contrast, the new anthropology of ontology postulates a "multiplicity of forms of existence enacted in concrete practices" (Holbraad et al. 2014),[1] and, rejecting the universalization of the "Euro-American or modern ontology" that it imputes to "conventional anthropology," promises to open up a terrain of otherness "beyond nature and culture" (Descola 2014), that would allow us to transcend the limits of mainstream anthropological analysis of difference. If most anthropologists construe difference in cultural terms, for the new ontologists, differences conjure up multiple realities (Venkatesan 2010: 153).

In their rejection of the ontological singularism of philosophical and mainstream anthropological thinking, ontological anthropologists are once more envisaging a form of scholarly practice that differs quite radically from the dispassionate, disinterested, and disengaged pursuit of knowledge that still shapes the approach to difference in modern academia. In refuting "social constructivism," they offer an alternative to the methodologically agnostic, contextualizing strategies of the anthropologists of "praxis" that have dominated the discipline in recent decades (Ortner 1984), once again giving rise to the call to take the ontological claims of others seriously.[2]

However, in the ways of its parting with the aspirations, goals, and practices of mainstream (secular) anthropology, can the project of ontological anthropology avoid falling into what I have been calling a dialectic of authenticity?[3] In responding to this question, one cannot help but notice that the current interest in ontological otherness, as well as the search for new ways of engaging other worlds, is not restricted to the discipline of anthropology. An increasing number of scholars in area studies, comparative sociology, social theory, and postcolonial studies,

for example, also now see themselves as working at the interface of different ontological domains, at the same time also voicing profound reservations about received (secular) modes of engaging with them. Strategies like the suspension of disbelief, focusing on the "practices" of ordinary people, refusing to take the experiential and ontological claims of others seriously, and constructivism in its various guises are being pronounced inadequate by many scholars whose research involves them with subjects who "live and act within…framework[s] imbued with religious modes of knowing and being" (Mani, 2009: 170).

Anthropologist Tanya Luhrman, for example, emphasizes the radical otherness of the beliefs of her research subjects, charismatic Christians and Pentecostals in North America (Luhrman 2010). These beliefs may be found in places that are closer to home than those of the "indigenous" peoples on whom much ontological anthropology is focused. But they are just as ontologically other to those of the scholar.

Luhrman also points to the shortcomings of constructivist accounts of difference, although for her it is the approach of evolutionary psychologists that comes under fire. Criticizing the evolutionists' argument that the "supernatural…idea of God [arises] out of [an] evolved tendency to attribute intention to an inanimate world," and the accompanying, sometimes unstated, assumption "that anyone with logical training and a good education should be an atheist," she argues that evolutionists are being shortsighted since they are looking "only at part of the puzzle." Evolutionary constructivism "describes the way our intuitions evolved and explains why claims about invisible agents seem plausible, and why certain ideas about God are found more often in the world than others." But it can never "explain how God remains real for modern doubters" (Luhrman 2012: xii).

Perhaps surprisingly, because of the traditional link between secularism and the Left, among these recent advocates for ontological multiplicity are a number of well-known critical scholars. Consider for example the words of postcolonial scholar Lata Mani cited at the beginning of this book on the need for a better way of engaging the sacred:

> The secularism of the Left [in India] is in tension with the outlook of the majority of people in the subcontinent who live and act within a framework imbued with religious modes of knowing and being. From a Left perspective those who are not secular are intelligible in terms of their objective conditions but not their subjective formation…This leaves little room…to do anything other than adopt a reactive stance in matters pertaining to religion or deemed religious….
>
> [This failure]…is not unique to Indian Marxism. If we contemplate the situation in Europe and the United States we notice that when confronted

with the twin forces of religious fundamentalism on the one side and a resurgent Eurocentric liberalism on the other, even the postmodern Left with its erstwhile trenchant critique of liberal humanism was found to be taking shelter in a liberal discourse of individual rights, freedom of expression, etc.…. Its incapacity in this regard cannot be attributed to practical considerations. It is also the consequence of a philosophical failure to rethink its conception of religion…an insurmountable divide can be seen to exist between sacred and secular frameworks…This is a loss we can ill afford. (Mani 2009: 17–21 *passim*)

Is not the divide between sacred and secular of which Lata Mani speaks an *ontological* one, a divide between radically different worlds? Moreover, like the anthropologists of ontology, Mani is troubled by constructivism, this time the contextualizing constructivism that is the Left's favorite tool for analyzing beliefs deemed magical or religious.

Renowned social critic Barbara Ehrenreich's rather surprising confession to having had a life-changing, mystical experience when she was 17 is another example of a Left-leaning, erstwhile secularist who also claims to have discovered an ontologically other world. Describing herself as a "hardcore atheist and rationalist" by upbringing, and hence presumably not unfavorably disposed to Euro-American ontological naturalism, she writes about the difficulty she has had in accommodating her mystical experience with the explanations favored by psychiatrists who typically assume that "all such experiences" are to be "seen as symptoms of one sort or another." Ehrenreich dismisses this form of (mental) constructivism, insisting instead that her experience was a real encounter with what "may be beings of some kind, ordinarily invisible to us and our instruments. Or it could be that the universe is itself pulsing with a kind of life, and capable of bursting into something that looks to us momentarily like the flame" (Ehrenreich 2014). Surely a world that contains "other kinds of beings" is no less ontologically alien than the "animist" worlds imputed to indigenous peoples by anthropologists like Vivieros de Castro, Ingold, and Descola.

And on the subject of universes, it may not be too much of a stretch to suggest that there are also parallels between anthropological notions of ontological multiplicity and the speculations of theoretical physicists, notably those of string theorists who, while claiming that their theory might lead to the unification of the apparently contradictory realities uncovered by quantum and relativity theory, do so only by positing multiple universes, each with its own fundamental laws and constants.

But it is in arts and literature, and especially their popular forms, that notions of ontological otherness are most prevalent these days, a consequence perhaps of the fact that these are fields in which heresy may be more

freely entertained than those in which a fundamentalist naturalism holds sway. In a wide ranging study of the roots of "gothicka" in contemporary Anglo-American popular culture, for example, Victoria Nelson describes the "endless permutations of horror stories linked with supernaturalism (including tales of vampires, werewolves, and other imaginary denizens of the dark side that were first introduced as fictional characters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries)" that circulate in popular literature, comics, graphic novels, cinema, television, online gaming, and the like at the turn of the twenty-first century (Nelson 2012: 7). She traces the roots of this kind of storytelling to the Medieval era "whose denizens believed in a material world deeply penetrated by the supernatural as manifested in everyday miracles, saints with superpowers, a feminine divine embodied in the Virgin Mary, a devil with a real tail, and an array of hybrid monsters," which both provides the "subtext" for much of "Anglo-American popular culture" today and a "past as other" that continues to fascinate (Nelson 2012).

In his reading of the "Super-Story" that "lie[s] at the base of a vast array of American popular culture," Jeffrey Kripal shows how much an idea of radically different worlds permeates modern science fiction stories and superhero comics, as well as UFO cults and the like (Kripal 2011: 26). Like the animist worlds of indigenous peoples—and the sacred world of medieval Europeans—the other worlds postulated by writers and readers of science fiction and superhero stories are populated by a great variety of beings—human, nonhuman (aliens), and hybrid (superheroes)—all interacting with each other. To be sure, these worlds differ from the former in what Kripal calls their "orientation," that is they are no longer situated in the past or in geographically remote parts of our world. Instead:

> The Orientations that ultimately came to define modern science fiction and fantasy literature…were outer space and the idea of future worlds…Other dimensions…would also soon be entertained, as would, most recently, parallel universes, multiple dimensions, and now entire universes being born like soap bubbles from the interaction of immense cosmic waves that modern cosmologists call "branes" interacting within a higher-dimensional superspace called the "bulk." Enter the multiverse. (2011: 41)

And, as in animist and sacred ontologies, in these future worlds and other universes "super-naturalism" reigns. To be sure, the authors and readers of science fiction and superhero stories typically adopt a rather different stance vis-à-vis the "laws of nature." They do not so much reject the universalistic pretensions of ontological naturalism as they extend or extrapolate from scientific discoveries (particularly in physics and biology) to incorporate happenings and phenomena that are "impossible"

following natural scientific convention. Such ontologies, then, may not best be labeled sacred or supernatural but should rather be called "paranormal," a term coined in the early years of the nineteenth century to describe phenomena outside the range of normal experience, which cannot (yet) be explained by the natural sciences. To borrow Kripal's description of them, theirs are worlds in which the paranormal has *become* normal (2011: 54).

Clearly, then, the new anthropology of ontology is not alone in taking the possibility of a multiplicity of ontologies seriously; or in attacking a scholarly mainstream in which alien ontological claims are treated as (mere) constructions, fictions, or fantasies; or in rejecting the universalizing pretensions of ontological naturalism. I would argue instead that it might be seen as a particular iteration of a broader current, tendency, or impulse that originates from somewhere *inside* our own world. In other words, the depictions of other worlds offered by ontologically oriented anthropologists do not come from nowhere as it were. This is not a particularly surprising discovery. However, it does mean that properly assessing such depictions requires us to situate them in our world as much as in theirs.

If the recent representations of ontologically other worlds are in fact outgrowths of our own, where in our world do they come from? Some have suggested that it is a renewed religious sensibility in the West that gives rise to them, further proof, if any were needed, that, far from disappearing, religion continues to occupy a significant place in the modern lifeworld. In an overview of the ontological turn in anthropology, for example, Michael Scott writes:

> The central observation I wish to make is that something arguably religious runs through much of this anthropology of ontology. This type of anthropology is not only an aspect of the anthropology *of* religion; it is often also the anthropology of religion *as* religion—a new kind of religious study of religion. (Scott 2013: 159)

In a similar vein, in arguing that scholars should no longer treat the beliefs of their respondents as a "no fly zone," something to be "bracketed out" and explained away as mere constructions, Tanya Luhrman also frames the issue by contrasting religious and nonreligious world views (Luhrman 2010). Victoria Nelson draws attention to the similarities between everyday religious belief and practice in the Middle Ages and the stories of vampires, werewolves, and zombies that are so popular today. According to Nelson, these constitute a kind of religion for our times, defining religion along with William James, as "belief in the reality of unseen forces" (Nelson 2012: 8).

And while some have characterized the goals of ontological anthropology are inherently political, Matei Candea also points to their possible religious overtones:

Consider how different the conversation would sound if, for instance, one asked…about the religion rather than the politics of the ontological turn —that conversation might shake things up rather more and bring its own problems. But it would certainly provide a purview from which the political could emerge as just one topic among others. Perhaps we do sometimes need to suspend (however briefly) the question of the politics of ontological difference to genuinely bring into view the question of the ontological difference of politics. By this I mean both the possibility of an "other" politics and the possibility of there being things other than politics. To ask about this is to ask, in other words, how "other" the otherwise can be. (Candea 2014)

However, one wonders whether religious is the best way of characterizing this multi-ontological sensibility. The term, after all, inevitably conjures up a way of thinking about oneself and the world through doctrines "based on revelation and the authoritative creeds of religious communities" (Kripal 2007: 4). The demonstrable constructedness of religious scripture; the failure of most, if not all religions to accommodate the radical pluralism that defines our times; the incompatibility of particular religiosities and science; the patriarchal tendencies of organized religion; and the links between religious authority, community, and violence (Kripal 2006: 4) all make the religious uneasy bedfellows for those of a (multi)ontological persuasion. The exclusionary character of fundamentalist Hinduism in India, to which Lata Mani draws attention, is typical of the ways in which organized religion in fact works to close down spaces for ontological otherness rather than opening up to them.

If the current concern with ontological otherness is to be labeled religious, then, as Hage observes, it is in the religious "tradition of the renaissance perspectivists…who in opposition to those who saw in perspective a capturing of the perfection of God, saw themselves as always aiming to be in touch with the mystery of God" that it sits most comfortably (Hage 2014). Here, then, we have to do not so much with religion per se as with an intention-impulse to seek an opening into "unseen" and "impossible worlds," to encounter and understand sacred or nonordinary realities from within, or even at one with them.

This modern desire to connect directly with a sacred world, as one might suspect, seems to be paralleled by the declining popularity of institutionalized religion in the West among members of a spiritual-not-religious demographic. As noted above, surveys show that, despite a decline in formalized religious affiliation, the numbers of people labeling themselves "atheist" or "agnostic" have not increased significantly, with large numbers of respondents describing themselves as spiritually inclined.[4] What, in pointing to the religious tendencies in the recent anthropology of ontology, Michael Scott calls a pursuit of "open-ended wonder" (Scott 2013) seems also to apply to many of these new spirituals who are searching for a

thaumatographic mode of engaging with other worlds that does not refuse knowing through the mind's eye as it were.

Therefore, understanding the shared, if unacknowledged or even unrecognized, aspirations of most contemporary advocates for ontological otherness can come about not by labeling them religious, but rather by situating them in that current in modern thought that I have been calling Gnostic. In the field of contemporary popular culture, the links between notions of ontological otherness and modern Gnosticism are quite clear. Victoria Nelson, for example, shows how the sensibilities of the authors and readers of modern horror and the endless recycling of stories about monsters, vampires, werewolves, zombies, demons, and exorcism in modern popular culture, while perhaps harking back to the medieval era, are "filtered through" the "medievalisms" of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries; the "post-Enlightenment framework of the Gothick"; and the "fear or terror produced by the sublime" that was revived precisely in the context of the modern retreat of God from "immediate participation in the experience of men." "This was the moment," Nelson argues, "when transcendence shifted from being an attribute of God to being an attribute of nature, with the suggestion that humans having this experience in consciousness were able to connect with a desacralized transcendent themselves" (2012: 15). All that was required to complete the story was "a kind of unconscious imperative to transform this dark template [of terror] into a sunnier, more all-embracing spiritual framework" (2012: 17). Therefore, it is not religion that provides the context for modern gothicka, but a new version of that Gnostic "heresy" that we found being articulated by many Europeans searching for the spirit of the East in the interwar years.

The genealogical connection with modern Gnosticism is even more explicit in the case of many of the writers of the "Super-Story" that "lie[s] at the base of a vast array of" popular science fiction writing and superhero stories. Building both on his own research and that of others into the history of these genres, Kripal finds not just parallels but explicit genealogical connections between their authors and late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century Rosicrucianism, theosophy, and occultistm As Kripal shows, "comic book writers and artists commonly invoke [this category of Gnosticism] to describe their work and worldview." From them, they adopted the view that

> the human spirit is trapped, as it were, under water living a kind of half-life, ignorant of the fact that the sunlight and air of the true spirit are overhead. If knowledge (or *gnosis*) can make people aware of this, they will make the effort to swim upward and be reunited with their real element. (Kripal 2012: 42–43)

And from these modern Gnostic movements they also incorporated into their own stories: the "mytheme" of Orientation, that is, of other worlds radically different from our own; "the notion of alien intervention in human evolution"; ideas about "the powers latent in man"; spiritual energy; the para-normal; and a whole host of concepts and ideas that they projected into their other worlds. Again, ideas about the existence of ontologically other worlds in contemporary popular culture can be seen to have emerged directly, not from Western religious thinking but from those same Gnostic, occultist, esoterist, and theosophical currents in which the ideas of Hesse, Guénon, David-Néel, and (to a lesser extent) Erwin Schrödinger were formed.

A genealogy of anthropological thought that might expose its own indebt-edness to theosophical, esoterist, and occultist imaginings has yet to be writ-ten. We know that E. B. Tylor, whose name "has been indissolubly linked with the concept of 'animism' in the collective memory of anthropology" (a concept, moreover, that is central to much recent work in ontologically oriented anthropology) derived his own concept, not from "tribal" or indig-enous peoples, but from late nineteenth-century Anglo-American spiritual-ism, which in his social evolutionary schema he interpreted as the "survival" into the modern age of a primitive Urreligion. More than this, Tylor attended séances run by some of the most prominent spiritualist mediums of his day in order to assess their claims about being able to make contact with the spirits of the dead. While he denounced a number of them as frauds, in the case of a number of others, he was much less certain and remained open to the possi-ble reality of a world populated by the spirits of the deceased (Stocking 1971). Similarly, as we have noted, some of the key members of the Durkheimian circle (Durkheim himself, Marcel Mauss, and Robert Hertz among the best known) who were widely read by British social anthropologists (Hertz's work on sacrifice and left:right symbolism was still required reading when I was studying social anthropology in London in the early 1970s) were engaged in a kind of "quasi-religious" quest for the sacred as much as they were interested in objective ethnographic reporting. This quasi-religious project was carried forward into work of post-structuralists like Bataille and Foucault (Foucault's celebration of the Iranian Islamic revolution as a sort of sacred break with modernity, however misguided, is a good example of what Alexander Riley calls an "intellectual pursuit of the sacred" by French intellectuals in the twentieth century) (Riley 2010). Or, one could point to the work of Margaret Murray on paganism and witchcraft (the latter an important influence on the Wikka movement in Britain) which, while subsequently discredited by mainstream anthropologists, was at one time firmly within that scholarly mainstream in Britain, or to the fact that the Gnostic writings of Alexandra David-Néel on Tibetan shamanism were included in ethnographic antholo-gies edited by the likes of Margret Mead.

As for the postwar period, one need think only of the possible influence of the writings of the Beats or the easternized spiritual imaginings of the1960s counterculture on individual anthropologists. Carlos Castaneda, whose mystical writings were favorably received in the discipline until he was found to have fabricated at least parts of the story of his encounter with a Native American shaman, is one such example. However, there were undoubtedly many others like Angeles Arrien, Felicitas Goodman, Evie Turner, and Michael Harner who deserve to be recognized as precursors of anthropology's recent ontological turn (Glass-Coffin and Kiisketum 2012; Harner 1982, 2005). Moreover, while the links between modern theosophy, occultism, and esoterism on the one hand and recent anthropological thought on the other, might not be direct, anthropologists who lived through the counterculture were at the very least aware of, even if many went on to turn their backs on, its Gnostic proclivities.

But whether directly "influenced" by Gnosticism or not, the ontologically oriented anthropologists share in a key assumption that "may be considered normative for all Gnostic teachers and groups," and this more than anything else establishes the affinities between them. This is the notion that

> within each natural man is an "inner man," a fallen spark of the divine substance. Since this exists in each man, we have the possibility of awakening from our stupefaction...[And] what effects the awakening is not obedience, faith, or good works, but knowledge. (Hoeller 1992)

It is the presumption of such an "inner spark" that enables the Gnostic to access (through meditation, ascetic practice, and the like) an otherwise unseen world which, at least in this life, can only be inhabited temporarily. And it is this that makes the anthropologist of animism a Gnostic rather than an animist. In the same way that the Gnostic access to unseen worlds is enabled by the spark of divinity in each of us, so also does the ontologically attuned ethnographer gain access to the ontologically other (animist) worlds of her research subjects. And, insofar as most ethnographers subsequently return to the academic world from which they came, they too can inhabit that other world only temporarily.

Other Worlds or Ours?

That there are such clear affinities between the presuppositions and practices of an ontologically attuned anthropology and this broader Gnostic current in Western thought gives us good reason to concur with some of its critics that the anthropology of ontology is not about other worlds at

all. Its "other worlds," it turns out, are really our own. As Victoria Nelson puts it in her critique of "the twentieth-century Western fascination with the religions of pretechnological cultures around the world":

> Th[e] trend of displaced scholarly cultism peaked in the pursuit of what might be called the "colonized transcendent"…amounted to an allow-able means by which to experience vicariously one's inclination toward the holy. Though (to put it mildly) such romanticizing efforts provided a much-needed corrective to the cultural imperialism that preceded them, many anthropologists and their audiences did not always appear conscious of their own underlying pull to *believe*, rather than simply understand, the religious systems of the "natives" under scrutiny. As long as we maintain that the gods belong to someone else, the religious impulse stays safely exoticized in the realm of the other, the not-us. But much as we might like to ignore the fact, the gods are ours. (Nelson 2001: 12)

That anthropology's other worlds may turn out in fact to be outgrowths of our own comes as no surprise. The "entanglement" of modern scholarly subjects in the worlds that they study means that scholarly representations of these worlds must at least be inflected by intellectual, cultural, and historical sensibilities that prevail in our own (if they are not in fact produced by them). This is sometimes acknowledged by ontological anthropologists themselves (see, e.g., Kohn 2014; Crook 2014; and Jensen 2014).

Are the metaphysical (and ontological) claims that we impute to others inevitably our own? If the other worlds that are revealed in the doing of anthropology are really not other after all—if "their gods" are really ours—what then? Must we plunge ourselves back into that dialectic of authenticity from which we thought we had finally escaped? Is the current Gnostic revival as deeply problematic as the earlier one?

In concluding this survey of the recent advocacy for a Gnostic engagement with other worlds, I want to propose an alternative, one that arises from revisiting the issues surrounding ethnographic encounters with which I began. In so doing, I will suggest that, while we might be justified in asserting, with Victoria Nelson, that "their gods are ours," it would be wrong to imply that they are also not theirs. While the notion of other ontological worlds may well be unsustainable, a concept of ontological otherness is certainly not.

The Spirit of Depok

If ontological anthropologists are correct in their contention that human beings are "relational forms" and hence both "subjects and actants" (Scott

2013: 862–863), then this must hold for the practice of ethnography itself. And if ethnography is a relational practice, then to talk of radically other worlds makes little sense. If the worlds of ethnographers and their "interlocutors" were indeed radically other-to-each other, then how could there be ethnographic encounters between them in the first place?

It is precisely the relationality at the heart of ethnographic practice that makes all those essentialized oppositions—between East and West, modern and nonmodern, sacred and secular, "us" and "them"—so problematic since it means that otherness exists in a world that is both ours and theirs at the same time. Take, for example, the sacred worlds inhabited by (some) Southeast Asian Muslims.

I have recently begun researching new forms of Islamic spirituality in Southeast Asia, beginning with an investigation of what seems to be a Sufi revival in the Indonesian municipality of Depok, a city of some two million people located on the southern fringe of the Jakarta metropolitan area.[5] During the course of the investigation, my coresearchers and I have found that support for a fundamentalist project of Islamic reform (see Ricklefs 2007, 2012) runs quite high in Depok, where, at least according to the results of recent elections, one of the main drivers of the Islamization process, namely the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS, the Prosperous Justice Party), is quite popular. However, contrary to those who see in Islamization a project of reform that aims solely at bringing the "external" lives of Muslims more closely into line with the basic tenets of Islam (as revealed in the Qur'an and the Hadith) and imposing a more overtly Islamic form of governance, we have been finding that, for relatively large numbers of Muslims in and around Depok, being Islamic is not about, or more accurately not *primarily* or *only* about, engaging in projects to impose Islamic law or Islamic forms of governance, or, more clearly, signaling an Islamic identity. For most of our respondents, Islamization is instead also, or even mainly, about a search for a closer relationship to and/or experience of, God.

Situated in the Province of West Java, Depok is one of five municipalities that together make up the Greater Jakarta metropolitan region (Jabodetabek). In fact Depok is a Christian settlement by origin. In the early seventeenth century, Cornelis Chastelein, an official of the Dutch East India Company, bought a large amount of land in what is now Depok, and brought in 150 slaves from elsewhere in the archipelago to work it. A devout Protestant, Chastelein established an organization to teach his slaves to speak Dutch and convert them to Christianity—De Eerste Protestante Organisatie van Christenen or "DEPOC,"—which is said to have lent its name to the settlement. According to the provisions of Chastelein's will, on his death, the slaves were set free and inherited the land.[6]

Although there are still Protestants descended from Chastelein's slaves living there today, Depok is now a Muslim-majority city, thanks to the large numbers of migrants from other parts of Indonesia, who began coming to Depok in the last few decades of the twentieth century. As late as the mid-1970s, Depok (then a subdistrict of Bogor) had only about 100,000 residents, many of whom grew fruit and nuts for the Jakarta market. Thereafter, stimulated by rapid urban expansion during the Suharto era, the population began to increase rapidly such that by the late 1990s, when the subdistrict was excised from Bogor municipality, it had reached one million.[7]

By the late 1990s, Depok had become a satellite city with a population of more than 1.3 million people, rising to just under two million in 2012. And a workforce, that had consisted mostly of agriculturalists, shopkeepers, small-scale manufacturers, and petty traders, many of them self-employed or working in family businesses, had grown to 728,675, 62.67 percent of whom were now working as wage laborers, government servants (*pegawai*), and employees of large companies (*karyawan*). Agriculture has all but disappeared from Depok and the proportion of the workforce describing themselves as self-employed has now fallen to just 20 percent. The development of new housing estates and shopping malls has continued apace, leading one observer to describe modern Depok as a "concrete rainforest."[8]

These changes are reflected in the changing religious landscape of the municipality. In 2012, of the approximately two million Depok residents, 1,245,169 were Muslim; 59,926 Protestant; 65,765 Catholic; 9,663 Hindu; and 11,057 Buddhist; and there were 670 mosques compared to only 104 Protestant churches (the latter mainly serving the Chinese Christian community).[9]

In carrying out our research we have been making contact and speaking with a diversity of people as well as attending a variety of Islamic events—*pengajian* (sermons) and revival meetings as well as musical performances, art exhibitions, lectures, seminars, and the like. And whenever the opportunity to do so has arisen, we have participated in religious practices (like prayer and remembrance services), and talked informally with our fellow participants. Although we have focused on Depok itself, we have also spoken with people and attended events elsewhere in the greater Jakarta region and, more recently, in parts of central Java as well.

There are obviously significant challenges to carrying out ethnographic research in urban environments like Depok's compared to the village communities in Indonesia and Malaysia in which I began my career as an ethnographer of Southeast Asia. These arise mainly when selecting and contacting "informants," as well as finding situations and occasions for interacting with them. It is therefore important to point out that, although

we have remained fairly open to the possibility that a chance encounter might provide us with useful insights, we have mostly had to rely on contacts, suggestions, and introductions provided by people known to us, and then use these to provide us with further contacts. This means that the knowledge that we have of Islam in Depok is far from comprehensive, or even representative of the great diversity of Islamic belief and practice there. As is doubtless the case for most ethnographers, we set out with a particular set of interests and concerns which guided our choice of research subjects. Influenced in part by the writings of scholars like Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Howell (see Howell 2011; Bruinessen and Howell 2007; Bruinessen 2011), I was interested—for reasons that should by now be evident—mainly in searching out self-identified Sufi groups in and around Depok.

Of course, as numerous scholars have pointed out, the term "Sufism"—to say nothing of "urban Sufism," "neo-Sufism," and the like, which are in frequent use in Indonesia today—is an imprecise, ambiguous, and contested one (see Ernst 2003, among others). Certainly the academics and students who we initially approached for advice did not always know which Muslims were Sufis and which were not. Neither did the teachers, adepts, and practitioners with whom we subsequently talked agree on a clear definition of the term, nor always agree about who was and who was not a "real" Sufi, a real Sufi teacher, leader, etc. Ernst suggests that the term should be used "to cover all the external social and historical manifestations associated with Sufi orders, saints, and the interior practice of Islam" (2003: 110). According to these criteria, some of the individuals and groups we encountered can be fairly unambiguously designated Sufi, notably those with an affiliation to one or other of the large *tarekat* (Sufi orders) represented in Indonesia (including Naqsyabandiyah, Qadiriyya, Shattariyya) and especially those who have sworn an oath of allegiance (*bayat*) to a recognized Sufi *kyai* or *syech*. However, when we expanded the scope of our enquiries to take in what Ernst calls the "interior" practices of Islam, the problem of classification became more difficult, so much so that separating Sufis from non-Sufis ultimately became impossible.

Instead, we chose to focus more generally on "interiorized" forms of Islamic religiosity, for which, influenced by the reading I had been doing before commencing the research, it became clear that Gnostic was an apt label. This label seemed appropriate for the kinds of religiosity we were encountering not just because Gnosis is the term most frequently used to translate the Arabic/Indonesian words for the kinds of esoteric knowledge ('*ilm* in Arabic, *ilmu* in Indonesian, or sometimes its near synonym *ma'rifa*) that were used by our informants to describe what they were looking for, but also because it captures the sense of special inner knowledge

and enlightenment shared by most of those with whom we had spoken, understood as flowing out of direct experiential encounters with the one God as the very ground of all being. Along with the European seekers of Eastern spirituality discussed in previous chapters, the modern Muslims we were meeting by and large shared their intention-impulse to seek out an opening into unseen and impossible other worlds, to encounter, experience, and understand sacred or nonordinary worlds or realities from within, or even at one with them. And, like all modern Gnostics, they are not attempting or are not able to inhabit these worlds on any kind of permanent basis, at least in this life. What they are seeking, rather, is a (momentary) glimpse of them. Whether or not we label them Sufis, then, for these groups and individuals, being a Muslim is not *primarily* or *only* about imposing Islamic law or signaling a religious identity. Rather, they are most concerned about promoting a personal relationship with and an experience of God in their daily lives.

The pursuit of mystical experience is, of course, nothing new in Indonesia. However, historically, it has tended to be restricted to specialists (*dukun*, *syech*, *kyai* and those who dedicate themselves to an ascetic life) and been mediated by traditional Indonesian (*kebatinan*, *kejawen* or animistic) idioms. What makes the form of religiosity that we were encountering distinctive is that in its pursuit of the interior or spiritual dimension of Islam, it manifests a desire (1) to experience the sacred in or through an explicitly Islamic medium or idiom; and (2) to do so directly, personally, and for oneself. Moreover, although particularly among the members of the two intentional spiritual communities we studied, some sought to create earthly worlds that mirrored the sacred. None could be said to be living their everyday lives in anything approaching permanent union with God.

Apart from being committed to a self-consciously orthodox Muslim religiosity, then, the groups and individuals on whom our research was focused share the desire to personally experience God by taking part in emotionally charged collective prayer (*doa*) and repentance (*tobat*); the practice of "remembrance" (*dhikr*) by means of a rhythmic and repetitive chanting of the name(s) of God; by touching or being touched by holy men and healers; and so on. Additionally, those whom we encountered also sought a relationship with the Divine in less orthodox—but in their (and my own) experience sometimes more "effective"—ways: musical groups, poets, and painters, through music, poetry, and art; others "lose themselves" in physical activity, like the followers of another Ustaz (teacher) who participate in a fortnightly futsal game that he organizes after the prayer and remembrance service he leads at a nearby mosque. Some experience Divine energy/light (*cahaya*) while undergoing healing.

And some insist that all that meditation, chanting, and dancing in which more orthodox Sufis indulge is a waste time, and that the sacred can only be experienced by laboring in and on behalf of a spiritual community. "Who knows whether we go to Heaven after we die?" a member of one Sufi-oriented community told me. "We can make sure, through our own efforts that we will be in heaven when we are still alive." To be sure, the activities and performances we took part in mostly began with sermons (*pengajian*, *ceramah*) or some other form of rationalist explication and exegesis. But *their* raison d'être—what seemed to appeal to most participants—were the emotionally charged, spirit-enhancing practices that followed.

This is not the place for detailed descriptions of all those individuals we have met, the groups and organizations to which they belong, or the full range of beliefs and practices that we have encountered in the course of the research. Instead I want to return to the question of whether or not we have to do here with an ontologically other world. To borrow Victoria Nelson's phrasing again, are the "gods" that we are talking about here ours or theirs?

There can be no doubt that the world of Gnostic Muslims in contemporary Indonesia is, to a considerable extent, a "constructed" one that emerges not just out of our own research but also—since an individual act of ethnography is necessarily formed in broader cultural, religious, and intellectual contexts—of a whole concatenation of interests, concerns, and desires which could be labeled Western. Indeed this point is so obvious that one need hardly belabor it here. My decision to focus on Sufi belief and practice in Depok is sufficient on its own to demonstrate that any account of Muslim religiosity that I might offer would be at the very least shaped by the preexisting—modern—ways of engaging with and representing religious, cultural, and ontological otherness that I have drawn both from my own discipline and now, also, from those thinkers like Alexandra David-Néel, Erwin Schrödinger, Hermann Hesse, and, to a lesser extent, René Guénon. Moreover, like them, I also have other reasons for wanting to find out more about this particular aspect of Islamic belief and practice. As I explained to most of my informants, I wanted to learn more about Sufism as much for personal (Schrödinger's metaphysical urge seems an apt description) as for academic or intellectual reasons.

But before jumping to the conclusion that the accounts of Indonesian Islam that we produce are nothing more than constructions or fantasies (that is that these gods/sacred worlds are ours not theirs), before calling for a renewed effort to further purge them of Orientalist, ethnocentric and/or Eurocentric bias (*pace* Vivieros de Castro's call for yet another round of intellectual "decolonization" so that the gods may really be

theirs), I want to offer a third option according to which this sacred world may be seen as *both* ours *and* theirs at the same time.

To assume that the accounts of otherness to which the practice of ethnography gives rise are merely constructions that bear no relation to the realities of the situations in which that practice takes place would be to assume that we could somehow remain unaffected by the attempt to study them, in other words, that our accounts are totally closed to it. However, as should now be obvious, a relationality lies at the heart of our ethnographic practice such that our understandings—and subsequent representations—of Islamic religiosity in contemporary Indonesia has and is being shaped, not just by the interest and presuppositions that we bring to it but also by our interaction with what anthropologists once called "key informants." In my case, these include employees of the government body responsible for vetting proposals by foreign researchers in Indonesia, the academic sponsors that I am required to have, and the friends and colleagues who have provided me both with information and many of our initial contacts. Particularly important are my sponsor, Professor Yekti Maunti of the Indonesian Academy of Sciences, as well as a number of academics at Universitas Indonesia, notably Dr. Siti Rohmah Soekarba, Professor Melani Budianta, and Dr. Tommy Christomy of the Fakultas Ilmu Pengetahuan Budaya (Cultural Studies Faculty). Dr. Soekarba in particular, a noted scholar of Indonesian Sufism, has had a major impact on my understanding (although obviously she is not responsible for everything that I write).

However, as the research evolved, we of course have had to rely heavily on a large number of informants, respondents, and interlocutors from the world of Gnostic Islam itself. Among others, these include Pak Abdul Latif,[10] a prominent Muslim intellectual, artist, poet, novelist, and publisher from East Java who now lives in Depok. He was first suggested to us as a contact by a lecturer at the main (Depok) campus of the University of Indonesia (Universitas Indonesia), and we first met him at his office in South Jakarta. Pak Abdul Latif is an active member of one of Indonesia's largest Sufi orders and conducts *pengajian* and *dhikr* at his home mosque in Depok, on a weekly basis at a mosque in central Jakarta, and, by invitation, in mosques throughout Indonesia. He is also regularly asked to deliver "spiritual training" to the employees of a number of government departments. Although a well-known religious teacher, he does not call himself Ustaz because, acting on principle, he refuses to declare the customary oath of allegiance to the spiritual leader of his *tarekat*.

Another who has shaped our understanding of contemporary Muslim religiosity is Pak Manzur, a practitioner of Islamic medicine (*pengobatan alternatif*) and head of a practice founded by his parents that operates out of a foundation headquartered in central Jakarta. Pak Manzur and his staff

offer treatment for a wide range of ailments, many of their patients seeking them out when more orthodox medical treatments have failed, as a supplement to other forms of medical treatment, or for a variety of mental, psychological, and/or spiritual problems. The foundation also conducts a variety of individual and group activities and courses such as *dhikr*, *buka aura* ("opening" the aura), and different kinds of *terapi* (therapy).

I first learned about their activities from a book by a Malaysian journalist in which she described her attendance at one of their courses on a visit to Jakarta (this kind of heterodox, Sufi-inflected healing is discouraged by the Malaysian authorities). On arriving in Jakarta, I got the address from the foundation's website and enrolled in a three-day one-on-one *terapi* session with Manzur.

Also important are the members of a quite well-known Sufi music group-cum-rock band who are also members of an "intentional" religious community led by an American-born Muslim convert, one Syech Ibrahim. Our contact with the group came from another academic at Universitas Indonesia. We phoned their manager who cordially invited us to a performance for friends and family of the group at the site of another urban commune in Depok that was scheduled for that very night. We spoke to the manager and several members of the band after the performance and subsequently on a number of other occasions. The spiritual community to which the musicians belonged was founded in the United States in the 1970s by a *syech* of Middle Eastern origin who, before his death, designated Ibrahim as his spiritual successor. It was Ibrahim who decided to move the group to Indonesia in the early 2000s. When they first arrived, they lived in a large house provided by a wealthy Indonesian patron. They now live in close proximity to each other in a South Jakarta neighborhood. Many residents, including the members of the band, earn a living selling nutritional supplements through a multilevel marketing operation headquartered in the United States. But the core band members—sons of the syech and now naturalized citizens, all of whom speak excellent Indonesian—are also paid for their musical performances. They perform—usually by invitation—a rousing, even rocking form of what some of them call "Sufi Music" (with others denying there is any such thing) on both Western (electric guitar, drums) and Middle Eastern (flute, zither, drums) instruments with mainly Indonesian and English (but also Arabic, Persian, and even Chinese) lyrics (all written by the Syech himself).

Other sources include Oom and Tante, autodidact Sufis and husband and wife founders and leaders of a very successful (it has a per capita GNP "higher than Malaysia's"), environmentally oriented urban agricultural commune based in Depok (one of the few parts of the city where agriculture is still practiced). Here, community members raise cattle, goats,

and fish and grow organic rice and other agricultural products for sale, allocating the proceeds to community members according to their needs. They also organize weekly musical performances (rock, jazz, blues, and Sufi music), at one of which we had our first meeting with the followers of Syech Ibrahim mentioned above.

Next is Raharjo, a well-known, South Jakarta–based, self-identified Sufi (although not associated with a particular *tarekat*) journalist and short story writer who now, aged in his mid-70s, earns his living selling paintings of Angels (*malaikat*). Having already read some of his writings, we were given his contact details by a friend in Jakarta and arranged to interview him at some length over coffee and cakes at a Starbucks in South Jakarta where he likes to hang out.

Finally, I should mention Ustaz Ahmad, the leader and teacher of a large and highly visible *dakwah* (missionary) organization, who has made, and continues to make, frequent television appearances and whose "revival" meetings both in his former home mosque in Depok and elsewhere throughout the archipelago attract thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of participants. He was first suggested to us by an Islamic studies academic and, despite his great fame making it seem unlikely that he would agree to meet us, we phoned his headquarters. One of his followers who answered the phone not only invited us to visit him at his new headquarters outside Jakarta, but when we arrived, we were almost instantly escorted to his private chamber where, despite the fact that he was very busy hosting a delegation from a well-known Islamist organization, he talked with us freely, amusingly, and at great length about his life, family, and fame, all the while flicking through photographs of his wives, his meetings with famous people, and of himself addressing huge crowds of followers in different parts of Indonesia on his iPad.

The Ustaz subsequently invited us to spend the weekend at the mosque complex to attend a huge revival ceremony with attendants numbering in their thousands, an invitation we accepted. It did, however, became evident that there were strings attached to his generous hospitality, since he never stopped asking me whether I was prepared to have him publically convert me to Islam, making further face-to-face meetings with him too awkward to contemplate.

While numerous other examples could be given, this is sufficient to show how our understandings of the "world" of Gnostically oriented Indonesian Muslims are being shaped by encounters with those who inhabit it. These key informants were unfailingly and without exception hospitable, open, and happy to talk, often at great length, about the issues that interested us, typically and interestingly with very little prompting on our part (a far cry, incidentally, from the suspicion with which all such requests are met in

neighboring Malaysia where many more Muslims have been bitten by the reformist bug). With a single exception, none seemed the least bit concerned that I was not a Muslim (although it helped that the research assistant was), many in fact, and again with no prompting, voicing Perennialist sentiments to the effect that "we are all people of the book" or, "it doesn't matter if you are a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist or some other religion" (and, in some cases, if you have no formal religion at all). Ustaz Ahmad was the only one who showed any interest in converting me to Islam. Moreover, they all, and without hesitation, responded favorably to our requests to attend, and, where appropriate, take part in activities (and for us to take photographs or audio recordings) ranging from semiprivate musical performances to futsal and badminton games to daily community activities and religious practices like healing ceremonies, *pengajian*, *tobat*, and *dhikr*.

The picture of Islamic belief and practice that we build up as the research progresses, is being continually shaped, inflected, and mediated by characters like these. It is they who make it possible for us to gain access to events, performances, and practices. They provide many of the explanations, illustrations, and referents that we find most useful when it comes to writing up the results of our research. In a fundamental sense, any account that we might produce of the world of Gnostic Muslims in Indonesia will be something new, constructed by both ourselves and our key informants. It is neither a complete fabrication on our part nor a description of a world that preexisted our encounter with it; it is neither solely our account nor solely theirs. As Scott observes, "when writing ethnographic accounts of such encounters anthropologists should not pretend to be able to represent others as if they were simply given in the world." Ethnography is instead "a non-equivalent 'translation,' a new creation that matches neither the world of the ethnographer nor the world of the others involved" (2013: 865).[11] Because it is relational, this world is both ours and theirs at the same time.

And this relationality is not just a matter of representation. The world of Muslim Gnostics in Indonesia is fundamentally relational in its very formation. Consider again the figures of Pak Abdul Latif, Pak Manzur, Syech Ibrahim, Oom and Tante, Raharjo, and Ustaz Ahmad. Indeed, they play an important role in the representation of their world to the odd ethnographer interested in them. Probably more than most other inhabitants of this world, they also shape or even constitute them. They provide the religious interpretations, the guidelines for practice, the advice on a whole range of matters from the purely spiritual to the conduct of everyday life that are undoubtedly more influential than any others. The world-constitutive or formative role of the leaders of the intentional communities—Syech Ibrahim on the one hand and Oom and Tante on the other—is obvious. But it would be a mistake to underestimate the

extent to which the understandings of Islam that prevail among such Gnostic Muslims and the ways in which they conduct their daily lives is also formed by attending the sermons that they deliver, looking at the art that they produce, reading or listening to the devotional poetry that they write, listening to the devotional music that they perform, experiencing their healing, and, perhaps most importantly, engaging in worship and remembrance under their guidance.

In other words, such figures all play significant roles in the constitution of Gnostic worlds for Indonesian Muslims. And they do so not just in their relationships with the "inhabitants" of these worlds but also in relation to many others who are not. This is because Indonesia's Gnostically inclined Muslims do not inhabit a world that is hermetically sealed off. It is instead a world that is embedded in what is always already a diversity of worlds both local and global—the worlds of Islamic reformers; of Christians, Buddhists and Hindus; or secularists and liberals; and so on. And this is to say nothing of a universe that may or may not also be "inhabited" by, or "suffused" with the energy and oneness (*tawhid*) of, something that they call "God" (or "whatever you want to call it," as many of them hastened to add, presumably for my benefit). Our key informants are not just world-constituters in their relations with their "followers" but they embody a multiplicity of ontological worlds in themselves.

This is manifest in their educational backgrounds: none are products of the traditional Islamic educational system in Indonesia, several in fact having obtained degrees from secular Universities in Indonesia (Oom studied archaeology at Universitas Indonesia) and the West (Abdul Latif pursued doctoral studies in Paris, Syech Ibrahim studied Asian studies at a State University in the United States). It is also evident in the widespread use of television, the Internet, and social media both as sources of information and as a way of delivering their message. The musical and artistic styles that some of them have adopted in what is in effect a kind of aesthetic-*dakwah* also testifies to the eclecticism of these new forms of Indonesian Sufism. For example, the band plays an Islamic devotional music which has recognizable roots in American '60s and '70s rock and pop; Oom is partial to the Rolling Stones whom he references almost as much as the Qur'an; Abdul Latif's paintings combine Arabic calligraphy with French surrealism; and Raharjo confessed that he was inspired to paint angels after seeing reproductions of North American angelography). Similarly, the practice of Islamic healers like Pak Manzur combines elements from a wide range of sources: Sufi, Javanist-animist, Hindu, and Western (like Abdul Latif's spiritual training programs, the structure and contents of Manzur's therapy sessions owes a great deal to American transpersonal psychology and EQ (Emotional Intelligence Quotient), both clearly having been influenced by

the training programs developed by the Indonesian management consultant Ary Ginanjar Agustian. Agustian's book (English edition titled *The Islamic Guide to Developing ESQ: Emotional Spiritual Quotient*) combines American ESQ with traditional Islamic spirituality and, I was told, was all the rage in Indonesian human resources circles several years ago (Agustian 2005). Moreover, it would be a mistake to assume that Indonesian Sufism is unique in this respect. It is widely acknowledged in Indonesia, for example, that the Islamic groups most committed to the implementation of Islamic forms of law and governance originated in student organizations on the campuses of Indonesia's secular, rather than its Islamic, university system. And, on the whole, support for these movements remains strong among students and academic staff in engineering, computing, and health and the natural sciences—in other words, in fields where one would assume a modern naturalist ontology would be most firmly embedded.

Nor should one assume that the "persistence" of more distinctively Javanist animistic traditions testifies to the existence of the sort of other worlds inhabited by the indigenous or tribal peoples that are the object of the anthropology of ontology. As our research among self-styled *Kejawen* practitioners and priests in central Java shows, these traditions are also being formalized, interpreted, standardized, and aestheticized in distinctly modern contexts. Indeed there are very few Indonesians today who could reasonably be said to be trapped inside localized other worlds sealed off from all outside relations and influences.

Finally, and bringing the argument full circle as it were, the seemingly unconnected lifeworlds of Gnostic Muslims in modern Indonesia and those of the Eastern-oriented, European Gnostics discussed in previous chapters are themselves intertwined. Pak Raharjo, for example, turns out to be a devotee of European Perennialism, while a number of our key informants studied Sufism at Paramadina, a foundation established during the Suharto years to promote understanding of *tassawuf* (Sufi philosophy). Among other things, Paramadina has offered courses in the study of the works of Ibn Arabi, the twelfth-century Andalusian philosopher whose works were so important to European Perrenialists like Guénon and Schuon. And Paramadina, in its efforts to introduce the ideas of Ibn Arabi to Indonesia, made use of its connections with the Ibn Arabi society, which was established by British Sufis in the 1970s.

Similarly, as a young man, Syech Ibrahim was a rather typical North American countercultural seeker in the 1970s who discovered Sufism while studying at an American university (and only after it turned out that Japanese/Buddhist studies were not taught there). At the same time Subud, a spiritual organization founded by a Javanese mystic in the colonial period, subsequently became a global spiritual movement, its

membership peaking in the 1960s and 1970s. And it still has devotees and branches in most countries in Europe and the Americas.

In sum, like Guénon, David-Néel, Schrödinger, and Hesse, Gnostic Muslims in contemporary Indonesia contribute to the creation or constitution of sacred worlds by reworking the Islamic tradition in a distinctively modern context. This means that they are not sealed off from, but are inevitably in conversation with, a diversity of other worlds, Islamic and non-Islamic: the worlds of Muslim reformers, Javanist-animists, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians (and Jews) as well as, importantly, of self-styled secularists, rationalists, humanists, and naturalists. Like the accounts of Islam produced by anthropologists, their particular version of Islam is a "new creation," a "non-equivalent translation" of an (ever changing) Islamic tradition and not something that is "simply given in the world" (Scott 2013: 865).

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There is a strong sense in the new anthropology of ontology that if we fail to maintain the separation between their (ontological) worlds and ours, we will end up trading away the great richness of human creativity for sterile and pared back explanations that reduce everything to a single and all-encompassing metanarrative. In my view, this fear is based on an insidious assumption, namely, that once drawn into our world, the other becomes incapable of innovation, doomed to dwell forever in our disenchanted, environmentally destructive and violent world.

Yet, surely modern Asians are just as capable of cultural, intellectual, and spiritual creativity as anyone else, perhaps more so. Just because they too have become enmeshed in processes of commodification and rationalization does not mean that they lose the ability to respond creatively to the conditions of modern life. Might they not in fact offer solutions to some of the worst excesses of modernity—emptiness and disenchantment, communal violence, ultra-nationalism, environmental destruction, and material deprivation? Clearly one of the problems with the classical form of anthropological critique was that its proponents had very little idea of how a modern America might somehow be transformed into a premodern Samoa. This was utopianism at its worst. Perhaps the newly constructed sacred worlds of Gnostic Muslims in Indonesia provide us with exemplars that are in fact achievable.

Despite the oft-repeated argument that, what I have been calling, modern Gnosticism gives rise to political apathy (or even, in some cases, fascist sympathies), patriarchy, and the selfish pursuit of postmodern lifestyles, I have pointed to the potential of Hesse's call to first know thyself, David-Néel's anticolonialism, Schrödinger's ideas about the oneness of consciousness, even René Guénon's Perennialism, to offer us ways of thinking, acting,

and being modern that are characterized by openness and responsibility for others, nonviolence, and respect for the natural world. What of the Gnostic inclinations of Indonesia's interior Muslims?

Julia Howell, probably the foremost scholar of Indonesian Sufism today, has suggested that Sufism has the potential to carve out spaces where the conflicts between Islamic reformers on the one hand and non-Muslims (and, one might add, marginalized Muslims) on the other continually threaten the peace in places like Indonesia and Malaysia:

> Sufism has…contributed to the softening of contrasts in religiosity associated with Islamic Traditionalism and Modernism [in Indonesia] and therefore helped create the common ground in civil society upon which political tensions, so acute in the period since the fall of the Suharto regime, can, it is hoped, be resolved. Neo-Sufism in particular is strongly linked with Neo-Modernist liberalism, not only because it is often espoused by the same thinkers, but because Neo-Sufi practice, with its emphasis on felt connection with the Divine as a basis for ethical social prescriptions, strongly reinforces tolerance for religious pluralism. (Howell 2001: 722)

Howell's suggestion was one we sought to assess in the field, and we found numerous indications of the potential of interior Islam for greater inclusivity, respect, and responsibility both toward others and the natural world. It is, however, necessary to place two caveats on this finding. First, because our methods have been mainly anthropological/ethnographic, it is not possible to say anything definitive about the representativeness of our sample. Further research, and research of a rather different kind, would be needed before we could say whether the groups and individuals that we encountered do, or do not, constitute a significant proportion of Indonesian Muslims. However, the very fact that we found it so easy to find examples of this alternative religiosity, especially in a place known for its support of Islamic reformism, suggests at the very least that the unidimensional—and, be it said, rather alarmist—accounts of Islamization and its negative implications for democracy, human rights, and inter- (and intra) religious dialogue in Indonesia need to be taken with a grain of salt. And it does raise the possibility that an alternative to "fundamentalisms"—religious and secular—is emerging in contemporary Indonesia, creating the sorts of alternative spaces for negotiation and dialogue among different religions, and between the religious and the secular envisaged by Goh Beng Lan in the Malaysian context (Goh 2011: 255).

Second, and to further complicate matters, this Gnostically oriented Islamic religiosity is not always a separate and identifiable religious *form*, but, more often, a *facet* of Islamic belief and practice. It would be misleading to draw a clear line dividing Gnostic, spiritually oriented, inner-directed,

esoteric, and/or Sufistically inclined Muslims on the one hand and outwardly directed, exoteric, or Sharia-oriented reformers on the other, as some observers have been inclined to do. At least among the inner-directed Muslim individuals and groups that we have encountered, there is considerable variation in attitude toward and support for that exoterically oriented religiosity typically imputed to Islamizers. Some were more sympathetic than others to the latter and some were even members of parties like the PKS and other organizations generally thought to be prime movers in the current drive to reform the "outer" lives of Indonesian Muslims (much to our alarm, in one case cited by Howell, a pact had only recently been forged with the radical Front Pembela Islam). But while open support for this kind of radical and exclusionary reformism was otherwise rare, none rejected altogether the external, this-worldly, and ritualistic facets of their religion. Nonetheless, almost all of our respondents were on the whole more concerned with the inner, experiential, sacred dimensions of Muslim belief and practice, and therefore, in one way or another, with forging a closer relationship with God than with imposing the particular exoteric manifestations of Islamic practice, ritual, and identity on others. Many were explicit in opposing the reformist drive to impose a particular version of Islam on the wider Islamic community and quite a number expressed the view that all religions were by and large the same and equally deserving of respect. And we were commonly told, without prompting, that instead of preaching to or denouncing the perceived evils of others (*nahi munkar*) one should instead join (or, as several of them put it, practice or embody) the good oneself (*amar ma'ruf*).[12]

It is impossible to say with any certainty whether the Gnostic worlds of Indonesian Muslims will continue to create such spaces in the future. However, there is also little doubt that they at least have a potential that more classic liberalism and secularism seem currently to lack, to provoke greater spiritual awareness and greater respect and responsibility in this world at the same time. And it does this precisely because their worlds and ours are so thoroughly entangled one with the other in the first place.

8

What if Culture Did Not Matter? Asian Studies and the New Universalism(s)

Let me be clear about the reason I have chosen to conclude this book by asking about the significance of cultural difference. To ask whether culture matters is not to imply that there are no differences among human beings, much less that difference should not be acknowledged, even at times celebrated. It is not to propose that knowledge production or ethical and political thinking should proceed as if culture and difference did not *exist*, but rather as if they did not *matter*. It is to suggest that we need to seek forms of encounter with others that, to quote Alain Badiou, are "indifferent to difference" (Badiou 2003).

Influenced by what I have called the post-phenomenological turn in Western thought, a kind of postmodern sensibility has become all-pervasive in fields like anthropology and area studies in which difference is explicitly thematized. This is partly because the ideas of critical theorists like Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan, as well as Said, Bhabha, and Spivak seemed to offer their practitioners a positive rationale for their inclination to take seriously the specificities of locality, region, and area, an inclination that classical Orientalist scholarship, wedded as it was to divisions of the world that were either arbitrary or, worse, outgrowths of colonial, imperial, and subsequently Cold War (and post–Cold War) strategic interests seemed to lack. This sense of the arbitrariness of the areas chosen for study has been particularly acute in the field of Southeast Asian studies, which continues to be plagued by questions about what it is, if anything, that makes Southeast Asia a meaningful object of analysis. Although critical culture theory may not provide an answer, it does at least give us reasons to prioritize the study of regions in all their distinctiveness. Critical theory has therefore has been productive to the extent that it has brought a greater appreciation of and attention to difference, which requires

analysis in its own right rather than as mere exemplification of broader global trends or case studies of the impact of processes originating from outside. And with this also comes a greater respect for local scholarship—Asian studies in Asia as it were—the need to engage with it qua scholarship rather than as further empirical grist for (Western) theory mills.

But while the shift may be partially explained by cultural, intellectual, and political influences emanating from the non-West, it cannot be denied that it has also been the consequence of intellectual developments in Europe and North America. Like it or not, much of what passes for gospel in critical area studies these days has come about through the adoption of a postmodern sensibility that has its origins in the West.

The impact of critical culture theory on Asian studies scholarship has been dramatic, most evident these days in the postcolonial search for subaltern voices that frames so much of the contemporary critical study of (and in) Asia. Paradoxically, however, while postcolonial scholarship may place a premium on listening to Asian voices, it is probably more indebted to Western ones, including those of the likes of Heidegger, Althusser, Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida. Indeed the prominence of Western theorists has led at least one prominent proponent of cultural and intellectual decolonization in the "global South" to argue that the postcolonial critique is itself a northern one (Mignolo 2007).

The influence of critical culture theory in Asian studies runs even deeper than this. The preponderance of critical work in the field now takes the form of a double move: first, exposing the contradictions between the universalistic claims of those in power (in imperial, state-based, or micro constellations of power) along with the violence, racism, and exclusion that the exercise of such universalizing power seems inevitably to entail; and, second, highlighting expressions or manifestations of "resistance" to it. Much of what passes for critical Asian studies scholarship these days involves an analysis of the processes of identification and subjectivation (including self-identification and "techniques" of selfhood) that underpin the forms of modern "governmentality" in the region on the one hand and of the formation of, and struggle for recognition of, alternative "cultural," "sexual," or "racial" identities that "resist" these forms on the other.

Consequently, most of those in the critical wing of area studies subscribe to pretty much the same mantra: truth is relative; ethics and politics must always promote a total respect for difference; the self is a modern construction; emancipation is not just a false dream but a dangerous one; resistance should be celebrated; and the universalistic project of modernity does not just have a dark side. Its darkest deeds—colonialism, exclusion, war, and genocide—must always be kept at the forefront of our analyses. And this work is very much indebted to the postmodern critiques of liberal universalism

articulated within European critical theory in the work of Michel Foucault on power/knowledge, governmentality, the techniques of modern selfhood and resistance; Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence and his way of reading cultural phenomena as texts full of unconscious contradictions and aporia; Lyotard's attack on modernity's universalizing, emancipatory metanarratives; Ernesto Laclau's post-Marxist particularism; Jacques Lacan's exposure of the unconscious relationality that lies at the heart of identity construction—along, of course, with the exposure of the imperial imaginings underlying modern discourse on the Orient by Said, Bhabha, Spivak and friends. And if only because these analyses expose the contradictions in all existing claims to knowledge about Asia—its religions, philosophies, cultures, and civilizations—we can ill afford to ignore them.

But what if all this talk of culture, context, and difference were nothing but a sideshow? What if in the end all this difference in fact did not matter? Whatever the merits of the particularizing and contextualizing ways of thinking that have come to frame interactions across cultural/civilizational/ontological boundaries in the modern world, critical theory is itself in the throes of a reaction against that obsessive concern with culture, difference, and context that characterized the work of scholars like Foucault, Derrida, Said et al.

"What if," writes Slavoj Žižek—beginning what one observer calls another "crescendo of *ad hominem* insinuations" (Bowman 2006: 171) of which Žižek seems so fond—"what if the field of Cultural Studies, far from actually threatening today's global relations of domination, fit their framework perfectly, just as sexuality and the 'repressive' discourse that regulates it are fully complementary? What if the criticism of patriarchal/identitarian ideology betrays an ambiguous fascination with it, rather than an actual will to undermine it?" (cited in Bowman 2006: 170). It is with statements such as these that Žižek declares war on precisely those particularizing theoretical trends that have so captivated critical area studies scholars in recent decades.

Alain Badiou has similarly described our world as one characterized by two processes that are "perfectly intertwined": the first "an extension of the automatisms of capital [through which] the world has finally *configured*, but as a market, as a world market"; the second "a process of fragmentation into closed identities, and the culturalist and relativist ideology that accompanies that fragmentation" (Badiou 2003: 9–10). Apart from these perfectly intertwined economic and cultural processes, Badiou gives equal weight to a political one, namely the "communitarianization of the public sphere: the Pétainization of the state" (after Marshall Pétain, chief of state of Vichy France between 1940 and 1944). This he sees being played out in the rise to prominence of the French far right whose "unique maxim" Badiou tells us is "France for the French." This Pétainization of political discourse

gives rise to that "noxious question" continually posed in the public sphere: "What is a French person?" "Everyone knows," Badiou goes on, that "there is no tenable answer to this question other than through the persecution of those people arbitrarily designated as non-French…[Nonetheless] the word 'French'…is upheld as a founding category of the State [with the] insistent installation of relentlessly discriminatory measures targeting people who are, or who are trying to live here…[Here] foreigners are only tolerated so long as they 'integrate' themselves into the magnificent model presented to them by our pure institutions, our astonishing systems of education and representation.…What is being constructed before our very eyes is the communitarianization of the public sphere, the renunciation of law's transcendent neutrality" (2003: 8–9).

Badiou has declared himself implacably opposed to the postmodern play of difference, arguing that there is an intimate relationship between capitalist expansion and what he calls the "identitarian and cultural logics" that it celebrates:

> There is nothing more captive, so far as commercial investment is concerned, nothing more *amenable* to the intervention of new figures of monetary homogeneity, than a community and its territory or territories…Capital demands a permanent creation of subjective and territorial identities in order for its principle of movement to homogenize its space of action; identities, moreover, that never demand anything but the right to be exposed in the same way as others to the uniform prerogatives of the market. The capitalist logic of the general equivalent and the identitarian and cultural logic of communities or minorities form an articulated whole. (2003: 10–11)

This hostility to prioritizing difference stems from a rejection of the postmodern diagnosis of universalistic thinking. For postmodern philosophers, universalism in all its forms, along with the ethical and political projects that flow from it, is not universal at all, instead containing within itself the cultural and historical circumstances in which it is formed. Following Marx's critique of the false universalism of liberal ideology (false because it actually contains or represents the particular interests of the bourgeoisie), postmodern thinkers unanimously agree that particularism lies not just at the heart of liberalism, but of universalistic thinking tout court, including (or even especially) Marxism itself, for which the particular interests of the—male, white, heteronormative—working class are similarly universalized. It is quite easy to see how this historicist critique of universalism leads to those very forms of particularistic intellectual, ethical, and political critiques that have become so prevalent in Asian studies. But can the universal really be reduced to the context within which it is formed?

Consider Badiou's response to the suggestion that, in seeing universalism in the actions of Saint Paul after his experience on the road to Damascus, he is associating truth with something that is a mere fable, in this case the "fable" of Christ's resurrection. Badiou's answer? Fable, yes, but "that the content of the fable must be abandoned leaves as its reminder the form of these conditions and, in particular, the ruin of every attempt to assign the discourse of truth to preconstituted historical aggregates…What is essential…is that [the] paradoxical connection between a subject without identity and a law without support provides the foundation for the possibility of a universal teaching within history itself" (2003: 5–6). What Badiou takes from Paul is his total rejection of all difference—between master and slave, man and woman, or "Greek" or "Jew"—as having anything to do with truth. Elsewhere, asked to explain his concept of universality, Badiou says:

> Paul, of course, knows perfectly well that there are people who are Jews and people who are Greeks. But the new truth exceeds the evident difference between the Jew and the Greek. We can only completely receive a new truth by going beyond such differences…[T]his does not mean for Paul that they need to change their customs and practices. Instead, there is a becoming indifferent to this difference…Universalism is always the result of a great process that opens with an event. To create something universal is to go beyond evident differences and separations. This is, in my conviction, the great difference between my conception of universality (which, of course, is not *only* my conception) and some traditional conceptions of universality. It is also the difference between a grammatical conception of truth and my conception of truth as a creation, a process, an event. (Miller 2005)

Žižek goes about the task of dismantling the historicist critique differently, condemning what he calls "the standard postmodern, antiessentialist position, a kind of political version of Foucault's notion of sex as generated by the multitude of practices of sexuality. [In this view] 'man,' the bearer of human rights is generated by a set of political practices that materialize citizenship; human rights are as such a false ideological universality that masks and legitimizes a concrete Western imperialism and domination, legitimizing military intervention and neocolonialism." But, Žižek asks, is this analysis enough? No, he replies, since the "identification of the particular content that hegemonizes the universal form is…only half the story; its other, crucial half consists in asking a much more difficult supplementary question, that of the emergence of the very form of universality. How…does the abstraction of universality itself become a fact of (social) life? In what conditions do individuals experience themselves as subjects of universal human rights?" (Žižek 2008: 668):

> The key moment of any theoretical (and ethical, and political, and…even aesthetic) struggle is the rise of universality out of the particular lifeworld. [But] the commonplace according to which we are all irreducibly grounded in a particular…lifeworld, so that all universality is irreducibly colored by [it]…should be turned around; the authentic moment of discovery, the breakthrough, occurs when a properly universal dimension explodes from within a particular context and becomes for-itself, directly experienced as…(the universal). (2008: 670)

Just as a work of art can only be very partially understood in terms of its historical context, and can only be truly understood when we "abstract from such historical trivia, decontextualise the work, tear it from the context in which it was originally embedded," so too a universalistic political claim cannot be equated with the context out of which it arises, since it is "never a mere form, but involves a dynamics of its own that has traces in the materiality of social life." It has an "effectivity of its own, which allows it to set in motion the process of the rearticulation of actual socioeconomic relations" (2008: 669). The demand for universal suffrage may originate from men, and hence from circumstances where women are thought to be incompletely human in their capacity for reason. But it easily leads to the further question: "Why shouldn't women also vote?" One must "resist the properly cynical temptation of reducing it to a mere illusion that conceals a different actuality." Why otherwise, asks Žižek, was Stalin so frightened of what he called "merely formal" bourgeois freedom? "If it is merely formal and doesn't disturb the true relations of power, why, then, doesn't the Stalinist regime allow it? What is it so afraid of?'" (2008: 669–670).

This gives a flavor of Žižek's seductive—if at times infuriating—brand of cultural critique. But more than that, it shows the extent to which critical theory has moved on from the celebration of culture and difference and the constant contextualization that seems to have taken anthropology and area studies by storm. More than this, the work of theorists like Badiou and Žižek suggest that it might after all be possible to dedicate ourselves to universalistic projects, despite the different cultural, civilizational, or philosophical contexts that always seem to prevent us from doing so.

And yet, while the new critical philosophy of Badiou, Žižek, and friends may help open our eyes to the possibility of a renewed universalism, in thinking about encounters between East and West, North and South, Buddhism (or Islam) and secularity, their approach generates a certain unease. For all their supposed antifoundationalism, it does not seem as though this new universalism actually enables a more serious engagement with the non-West than did the classical, foundational, formulations of it. Indeed even a hardened liberal or Marxist might be taken aback by the almost unseemly haste with which Badiou—a self-declared atheist despite his flirtation with

Christian universalism—dismisses key aspects of Saint Paul's story as "fabulous," making it impossible for him adequately to respond to its own (equally universalistic) truth claims. And this in a time of global religious revival, which is similarly oriented toward the universal.[1] The failure on the part of resolutely secular European philosophers to engage with the competing universalisms of global Islam and Christianity has the effect of strengthening the perception of civilizations in conflict in both Asia and the West.

According to Joel Robbins, the subject of Badiou's universal event "will always have to struggle against the particularities defined by the situations in which it lives and against its own investment in them. Indeed, this struggle itself motivates fidelity to the universal, since a universalist stance can be known and valued only in relation to the particularities it overcomes" (Engelke and Robbins 2010: 647). This suggests a rather different kind of universalism, not the abstract universalism of the philosophical anthropologists, but one that is forged in encounters between grounded subjectivities that are always already divided. In this, our twentieth-century Gnostics turn out to have been remarkably prescient, not only for having proposed an alternative to the universalization of a secular-modernist worldview, but also for having done by so drawing on non-Western religious traditions. They were able to do so because, unlike Badiou and Žižek, they did not insist on maintaining the purity of their preformed (Western) assumptions, but rather, in drawing on a rather different—call it Renaissance rather than Enlightenment—universalistic sensibility, they acted as Gnostic diplomats, willing "to take the risk of mutual contamination and transformation across [these very different] worldviews" (Kripal 2004: 488).[2]

Moreover, despite all the sins (real as well as imagined) of which they have stood accused, our Gnostic diplomats were also prescient in having anticipated that Asianized version of the "project of modernity" that now seems to be coming into its own. For it is not only Westerners who are reworking these Asian traditions in modern contexts, assuming that it ever was. Consider, for example, the distinctive contribution made by Japanese scientists to the development of modern biology. The work of Professor Akiyoshi Wada of Tokyo University has been in the development of automation "protocols used in the sequencing of DNA in molecular biology" and "in building machines that automated DNA analysis including, for example, machines for separation, sequencing, and frame reading, robotics for chemical reactions, and informatics hardware and software tools. His idea was that these machines should be assembled together to facilitate scientific production in a manner similar to the factory production of automobiles" (Fujimara 2000: 76).

Fujimara traces the impact of Wada's work on the development of the Human Genome Project, both in the United States (where he traveled to promote it), and globally. And, far from merely replicating and

applying scientific breakthroughs that occurred first in the United States and Europe, Wada and his colleagues have made decisive contributions to the development of the project itself.[3]

The originality of the Japanese contribution, Fujimara argues, was partly due to the fact that they were better able than their Western counterparts to see the relevance of new developments in artificial intelligence ("dry research") to the "wet" forms of biological research undertaken in the West. And this in turn may be the consequence of a religious, cultural, or civilizational outlook that is distinctively Asian. This was explained by another Japanese biologist whom Fujimara interviewed. I want to quote him in full because he makes the point far better than I could:

> The most interesting [aspect] of the human genome project…is in helping to understand life, helping to understand what man [sic] is. We are collecting huge amounts of information on the genome which is the record of our history, and similarly, records of the histories of plants, animals, fish and insects. We'll be able to understand our past history by analyzing genomes…
>
> The important [thing] in the Human Genome Project is that the concept of humans will slowly be changed as we understand more about the histories written in the human genome. I think people will share a sense [of our place in nature] and forget about human dignity. Too much stress has been placed on human dignity [in the West]. It's much easier for us [in Asia] to accept [man's place in nature] because we have not been brought up under the influence of Christianity.
>
> [Asians have a] much cooler concept of man. We look at man as one [among other] living creatures. By slowly changing the concept of life, I think…our attitudes toward technology [and toward] making use of the human genome project will be slowly changed, particularly in Asian countries where the majority of people are not living under the influence of Christianity…
>
> Everybody's bound to the contrast [with one God] in the Christian community. You don't have to change this [Christian] social contract. But you do have to get better views on what man is by taking the flow of information from the human genome project and extend the thought on evolution to man, that a man is a result of a process of nature, has very close ties with other living things, and has to live together [with them] on earth. Culture plays the most important role in accepting evolution and the life of man among other lives. (cited in Fujimara 2000: 80)

Although, as Fujimara points out, science in Japan is "located within a complex web of relations that have links to the history of Japan as a country occupied militarily by the United States and maintained until today as an ally and military base," and although Japan has "played the little brother to the American big brother, the feminine to the American masculine in

a kind of global, and local, orientalist discourse," when it comes to science, the "genesis and circulation of genomic science is a multidirectional process, and Japanese scientists and publics are major participants in [its] production" (Fujimara 2000). Here, then, is an example where Asia, far from being a passive receiver of a hegemonic, universalistic Western scientific knowledge/practice, is actually a significant participant in the making of the science in question—and it at least claims to do so on the basis of a Japanese (Asian?) worldview that is more compatible with scientific progress than that of the (post)Christian West.[4] Among other things, this gives quite a different twist both to the project of intellectual decolonization as well as the new universalism.

Presuming spirits are capable of such things, I would like to think this would make Schrödinger smile.

Notes

1 Anthropology and the Limits of Secular Reason

1. See also Claude Lévi-Strauss. 1952. "Kinship Systems of Three Chittagong Hill Tribes (Pakistan)," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 8 (1): 40–51; Claude Lévi-Strauss. 1952. "Le syncretisme réligieux d'un village mɔg du Territoire de Chittagong," *Revue de l'Histoire des Réligions* 141: 202–237.

2. As Slavoj Žižek asks, does the general principle of tolerating the construals of others mean that we are required also to tolerate intolerance? See Slavoj Žižek. 2008. "Tolerance as an Ideological Category," *Critical Inquiry* 34: 660–682.

3. Recalling this rather negative response on that day in Burma, later on in the book he went on to observe that there is in fact no real gap between Buddhism and Western science and philosophy, writing that: "Between that form of [Buddhist] worship and myself there was no misunderstanding to get in the way. It was not a question of bowing down to idols, or of adoring a supposedly supernatural order of things, but simply of paying homage to decisive reflections which had been formed twenty-five centuries earlier…To those reflections my civilization could only contribute by confirming them…For what, after all, have I learnt from the masters I have listened to, the philosophers I have read, the societies I have investigated, and that very Science in which the West takes such pride? Simply a fragmentary lesson or two which, if laid end to end, could reconstitute the meditations of the Sage at the foot of his tree" (Claude Lévi-Strauss. 1974. *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman. New York: Atheneum, 394). I will return to this alternative strategy for dealing with such encounters below.

4. There are majority Muslim populations in Indonesia and Malaysia, significant Muslim minorities in Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand, and smaller minorities in Vietnam and Cambodia. Among these Muslim populations and groups, there are immigrants and their descendants from South Asia and the Middle East—but the largest part are Austronesian-language-speaking peoples of Southeast Asia who have styled themselves as "indigenous" groups like the Malays, Javanese, Sundanese, Minangkabau, Acehnese, Moro, and Cham. For a study of the dynamics of religious, ethnic, indigenous, national (and cosmopolitan) identities and sensibilities in insular and peninsular Southeast Asia, see Joel S. Kahn. 2006. *Other Malays:*

Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World. Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with Singapore University Press (Singapore) and NIAS Press (Copenhagen) (published in the United States by University of Hawaii Press).

5. Khatam an-Nabiyyin (Arabic: خاتم النبيين, khātam an-nabīyīn; or Khātim an-Nabīyīn), usually translated as Seal of the Prophets, is a title used in the Qur'an to designate the Islamic prophet Muhammad. It is synonymous with the term "Khātam al-Anbiyā'" (Arabic: خاتم الأنبياء; or Khātim al-Anbiyā'). With the exception of Ahmadi Muslims, it is regarded by Muslims to mean that Muhammad was the last of the prophets sent by God.

6. My use of the term is derived from Charles Taylor's discussion of the phenomenology of belief (and unbelief). See Charles Taylor. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard.

7. In his critique of phenomenology Derrida argues, for example, that: "in phenomenology there is never a constitution of horizon [after experience], but [only] horizons of constitution" (Jacques Derrida. 1978. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 120). In this view, phenomenology (although it is arguable whether Husserl was indeed guilty of this) posits as primordial something that is inevitably grounded in something else, which it cannot itself question or talk about (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 157–159).

8. For example, as Anthony Steinbock has argued, most phenomenologists accept only one kind of givenness, that which Husserl calls "presentation." Although horizontality may be expanded in post-Husserlian phenomenology to include that which cannot be experienced, Steinbock's argument is that experience/nonexperience may take place on an altogether different—vertical—plane, and that this is the case particularly with what is typically labeled mystical experience (see Anthony J. Steinbock. 2007. *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience*. Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion. Bloomington: Indiana University Press). For a good discussion of the requirements of a phenomenology of religious experience, see also Jeffrey Wattles. 2006. "Husserl and the Phenomenology of Religious Experience," in Eric Chelsom (ed.), *Being Amongst Others: Phenomenological Reflections of the Life-World*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press.

9. The other person; the infinite (which can be experienced only through a sense of the "overflowing of experience"); see Emmanuel Lévinas 1998. "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press; and Michael L. Morgan. 2007. *Discovering Levinas*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 88–94); and, of course, for believers in the divine. This critique of experience was shared with interwar crisis theologians like Barth and Rosenzweig, a connection to be explored later on. See Samuel Moyn. 2005. *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; and Benjamin Lazier. 2008. *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination between the World War*. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

10. Unlike many anthropologists, Riesebrodt is not especially concerned with defending this definition against the criticism that the distinction between natural and supernatural is a Western one, and makes little sense in other cultural contexts. For a critique of exactly such unproblematic dichotomizing presented by an earlier anthropologist, see Melford E. Spiro. 2004. "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in Michael Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*. London and New York: Routledge, 85–126. I will set this objection to one side for the moment, returning to it later on.

11. Neither is Riesebrodt especially concerned with the argument that religion may not be a universal category, a criticism one might expect from those of a genealogical bent; for an author who develops this theme, see Daniel Dubuisson. 2003. *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers. Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press. I will also set this objection to one side for the moment to focus on the form of scholarly engagement to which Riesebrodt's approach gives rise.

12. I am referring here to the reductionist tendencies in ontology, psychoanalysis, theories of embodiment, linguistics, cultural anthropology, historicism, Gramcian-Foucauldian theory, and the neurosciences respectively. The term "brainhood" is borrowed from Fernando Vidal's perceptive critique of the individualist ontology that underpins much of the contemporary neurosciences (Fernando Vidal. 2009. "Brainhood, Anthropological Figure of Modernity." *History of the Human Sciences* 22(1): 5–36).

13. See, for example, Moyn, *Origins of the Other*; Lazier, *God Interrupted*.

14. See Dubuisson, *Western Construction of Religion*. He develops, without referring to them, some of the arguments previously advanced by Talal Asad on the Christian roots of the concept of religion (Talal Asad. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).

15. See: http://aphelis.net/luis-bunuels-aphorism-god-im-atheist/. Accessed July 24, 2015.

16. These shortcomings are identified, for example, in the recent "genealogical" critique of secularity, in which the possibility of a secular public sphere from which all religious values, construals, and identities have been banished has been questioned. See, for example, Asad *Formations of the Secular*; Judith Butler et al. 2011 *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. New York: Columbia University Press; Saba Mahmood. 2006. "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation." *Public Culture* 18(2): 323–347; and Armando Salvatore. 2007. "The Exit from a Westphalian Framing of Political Space and the Emergence of a Transnational Islamic Public." *Theory, Culture & Society* 24(4): 45–52, among others.

2   Gnosticism and the Pursuit of the Sacred

1. The memoir was not published at the time, but appeared later in Erwin Schrödinger 1961. *My View of the World*, translated from the original German version of 1960 by Cecily Hastings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schrödinger's main source was George Thibaut's version of the Śankara which was published in Max Müller's 50-volume collection, *The Sacred Books of the East*, published between 1879 and 1910 (pp. 782–820).

2. See Alexander Maitland, "An Undeceived Eye: The Adventurous Life of Alexandra David-Neel (1868–1969)." Public lecture given at The Buddhist Society, London. Wednesday, November 6, 2013. Available at: http://www.thebuddhistsociety.org/event/an-undeceived-eye/. Accessed April 7, 2014.

3. Apart from quoted sources, my discussion of modern Gnosticism here also draws on an unpublished paper ("Anthropology's Gnostic Heritage" by Francesco Formosa and Joel S. Kahn).

4. See B. L. Chakoo. 1981. *Aldous Huxley and Eastern Wisdom*. Delhi: Atma Ram and Dana Sawyer. 2002. *Aldous Huxley: A Biography*. New York: Crossroad.

5. Many other prominent Western scholars and intellectuals, artists, writers, and musicians clearly fall under the heading, some of whom are discussed more or less extensively, for example, in Mark Sedgwick's highly critical history of "Traditionalism" Mark Sedgwick. 2004. *Against the Modern World*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press; and Harry Oldmeadow's rather more sympathetic account (Harry Oldmeadow. 2005. *Journey's East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions*. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom). See also Thomas A. Tweed and Stephen Prothero, eds. 1999. *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

6. See Steven M. Wasserstrom. 1999. *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Samuel Moyn. 2005. *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; and Benjamin Lazier. 2008. *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination between the World War*. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, among others.

7. While they may have subsequently become disillusioned with the Soviet Union, many saw in the Russian Revolution the promise of an alternative, less alienating, form of the "project of modernity."

8. *The Buddhist Bible* (first published in 1932) went on to have a significant impact on the writers of the American Beat Generation (Dwight Goddard. 1930. *Buddha's Golden Path: A Manual of Practical Buddhism Based on the Teachings and Practices of the Zen Sect, and Interpreted and Adapted to Modern Conditions*. London: Luzac; Dwight Goddard. 1952. *Buddhist Bible*. New York: Dutton.

9. The reason for including Islam will become evident further on.

10. See, for example, Franz Ridenour. 2001. *So What's the Difference?* Ventura, CA: Regal Books.

3   Traditionalism: A Dialectic of Authenticity

1. For an excellent study of the British occultist/theosophical/hermetic scene of the 1890s, see Alex Owen. 2004. *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago

Press. For a shorter but equally important study, because it contains a discussion of Guénon's relationship to the contemporary occultist scene in Paris, see Mircea Eliade. 1976. *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

2. The name was changed to *Études Traditionelles* in 1937 (Harry Oldmeadow. 2005. *Journey's East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions*. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 185).

3. The approach of Guénon and his followers is typically designated "Traditionalist" (with a capital 'T') to distinguish it from the broader understandings of tradition found in the writings of other twentieth-century Gnostics who were also interested in Eastern religion.

4. At this time Guénon did not acknowledge Buddhism as a world religion, or even as separate from Hinduism. In this, he was following the lead of contemporary Hindu scholars, for whom the Buddha was at best merely an avatar of Shiva. He was persuaded later on to amend this judgment, and grant Buddhism a status equal to Hinduism, Judaism, and the religions of classical antiquity.

5. Although not a Traditionalist in the strict sense, Aldous Huxley produced what is perhaps the best known account in English of Perennialism (Aldous Huxley. 1944. *The Perennial Philosophy*. New York: HarperCollins).

6. See Thomas Trautmann's discussion of nineteenth-century "Anglicism" among British writers and writings on India (Thomas R. Trautmann. 1997. *Aryans and British India*. Berkeley: University of California Press).

7. Anticolonial sentiments were prominent in theosophical circles. And Count Albert de Pourville (who sometimes wrote under the nom de plume Mat-Gioi), foreign legion deserter in Indochina and author of a number of works on Taoism, which Guénon admired, and which contributed to his own Traditionalist outlook, wrote some influential critiques of French colonialism, warning of the impending decline of the white race unless it took to defend itself from the "yellow race" by "securing western control of Chinese philosophical and sociological resources" (Mark Sedgwick. 2004. *Against the Modern World*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 58). This may explain in part why, as a leading conservative French Islamicist in the early part of the twentieth century, Guénon was not singled out by Said for criticism.

8. I have in mind here Chatterjee's postcolonial critique of Indian nationalism as being a discourse of largely Western origin (Partha Chatterjee. 1993. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

9. King argues that these texts encourage a very particular understanding of Hinduism as an ancient, monotheistic, and esoteric religious tradition that is strongly shaped by the "reflections of a (largely male) brahmanical élite increasingly influenced by śrāmana (especially Buddhist) renunciate traditions [which] . . . contributed to the development of an image of the heroic and noble ascetic as representative of the core values of Hinduism" (Richard King. 1999. *Orientalism and Religion, Postcolonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East."* London: Routledge, 123). Apart from King's, the criticisms of this very particular European version of Hinduism are now legion (for a summary of many

of these objections, see the work of anthropologist Daniel Dubuisson (Daniel Dubuisson. 2003. *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers. Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press). For a comprehensive study of the history of the European representations of Hinduism and India, particularly in German romanticism, see the book by Wilhelm Halbfass. 1988. *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*. Albany: SUNY Press.

10. See, for example, http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/afteribnarabi.html.

11. Julius Evola, a close follower of Guénon, was an admirer of Mussolini and there has been considerable debate over what appears to have been the fascist sympathies of Mircea Eliade before he left Romania (Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*). Moreover, Werner Heisenberg, Schrödinger's fellow quantum physicist and amateur Orientalist, is said to have been "moderately pro-Nazi" (Walter Moore. 1989. *Schrödinger: Life and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 266). There are also suggestions that both Carl Jung and Henry Corbin were guilty of anti-Semitism (Steven M. Wasserstrom. 1999. *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

12. One biographer describes him as having a Lolita complex (Moore, *Schrödinger*, 363–364).

13. Although in 1948 the two clashed over the importance of *sharia*, Guénon took Schuon to task on a number of occasions for the latter's attempts to accommodate Islam to modern life by abandoning Islam's ritual obligations, which in Guénon's opinion were an absolutely essential part of Islam (see Sedgwick *Against the Modern World*, 124).

14. For a more comprehensive critical account of the conservative implications of Traditionalism, see Sedgwick's study (Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*).

15. As Eliade points out, it is noteworthy that the harshest criticism of occultism and theosophy came not from "rationalists," but from the insider René Guénon, "the foremost representative of modern esoterism" (Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft*, 65).

16. Cited in a review of Gunner Decker's Hermann Hesse biography (Gunner Decker. 2012. *Hermann Hesse: Der Wanderer und sein Schatten*. Munich: Hanser).

17. Sri Ananda Saraswati, whose cult engaged in hashish smoking "for the purpose of obtaining visions in astral travel" (Barbara Foster and Michael Foster. 1998. *The Secret Lives of Alexandra David-Neel*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 32).

18. She is said to have continually "railed against the Europeans [in India], whether theosophists, officials, or missionaries" (Foster and Foster, *Secret* Lives, 56).

19. Japan "was, on the whole, a place too civilized and occidental for her taste, too 'tame'" (Ruth Middleton. 1989. *Alexandra David-Néel: Portrait of an Adventurer*. Boston, MA and Shaftesbury: Shambhala, 112).

20. David-Néel's first encounter with Hinduism was during visits she paid as a young woman to the Musée Guimet in Paris where she would sit for extended periods in front of a statue of Shiva.

21. This is not the place to repeat arguments made elsewhere. For more detailed accounts of such "retraditionalizing" processes in colonial Indonesia and Malaya See, respectively, Joel S. Kahn. 1993. *Constituting the Minangkabau: Peasants, Culture and Modernity in Colonial Indonesia*. Oxford and Providence: Berg; and Joel S. Kahn. 2006. *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*. Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with Singapore University Press (Singapore) and NIAS Press (Copenhagen) (published in the United States by University of Hawaii Press).

22. Like Traditionalist critics before him, from René Guénon and Carl Jung to Edward Said, Lopez is unable to resist privileging his own account from the stereotypes that have imprisoned us heretofore, for example when he suggests that "hidden" in his book "some may find a file with which to begin the slow work of sawing through the bars" that make us all "prisoners of Shangri La" (Donald S. Lopez Jr. 1998. *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 13).

23. One wonders whether Buddhism, for example, has not in fact been TransBuddhist from the beginning. Surely it became so as it spread from South to Central and then to East Asia.

4 Gnostics, Religion, and the (Mis)Recognition of Modernity

1. Alexandra David-Néel. 1967. *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*. London: Souvenir Press (French original 1929). The book was first published in English in 1931 under the title *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet*, and has since gone through a large number of printings and editions.

2. The account of her life is drawn both from David-Néel's own writings and the biographies by the Fosters (Barbara Foster and Michael Foster. 1998. *The Secret Lives of Alexandra David-Neel*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press) and Middleton (Ruth Middleton. 1989. *Alexandra David-Néel: Portrait of an Adventurer*. Boston, MA and Shaftesbury: Shambhala). While both are written by admirers, the former is much better sourced and documented.

3. "Buddhist doctrine does not admit the transmigration of the soul nor of any form of personality" (Alexandra David-Néel. 1911. *Le Modernisme Bouddhiste et le Bouddhisme de Bouddha*. Paris: Librarie Félix Alcan, 170).

4. Indeed: (1) many of the key figures in the production of Western Buddhism, for example—D. T. Suzuki, Anagarika Dharmapala, and, recently, the fourteenth Dalai Lama among others—were Asians not Westerners; and, therefore, (2) the reworking of Asian religious traditions in modern circumstances is clearly not confined to the West. In an influential paper published in 1966 for example, Heinz Bechart argued that Buddhist modernism emerged in the context of the twentieth-century Buddhist revival, which was linked in turn to social reformist and nationalist movements in Ceylon and Burma.

5. See Michael Francis Laffan. 2003. *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma below the Winds*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon.

6. The main source for Abdullah's ideas is his "autobiography," *The Hikayat Abdullah*, published in Malay in the mid-nineteenth century. For an annotated English translation see Abdullah bin Kadir. 1969. *The Hikayat Abdullah*, trans. A. H. Hill. Singapore: Oxford University Press. For a more recent analysis see Sanjay Krishnan. 2007. "Native Agent: Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir's Global Perspective," in Sanjay Krishnan, *Reading the Global: Troubling Perspectives on Britain's Empire in Asia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 95–132.

7. The connections between the Cairene modernism of 'Abduh and Ridā, the Islamic reform in the Malay world, and the role played in the spread of reformism from the Middle East into that world is documented in Taufik Abdullah. 1971. *Schools and Politics: The Kaum Muda Movement in West Sumatra (1927–1933)*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, Cornell University; William R. Roff. 1967. *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; and Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood*, among others. The classic account of the modernist movement in Indonesia is Noer's (Deliar Noer. 1973. *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia, 1900–1940*. Singapore and Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press).

8. See Joel S. Kahn. 1984. "Peasant Political Consciousness in West Sumatra: A Reanalysis of the Communist Uprising of 1927," in A. Turton and S. Tanabe (eds.), *History and Peasant Consciousness in Southeast Asia*. Osaka: Senri Ethnological Studies.

9. Attracted by the new religious sensibilities and ideas being fostered by 'Abduh and his colleagues in Cairo, young Muslims from the Malay world—Sumatra, Borneo, the Malay Peninsula, the Straits Settlements, Southern Siam, and French Indochina—increasingly travelled to Egypt rather than Mecca to pursue their religious studies in the early twentieth century. This was associated in turn with the growing influence of modernism back home, propagated by returning students (see William R. Roff. 1970. "Indonesian and Malay Students in Cairo in the 1920s," *Indonesia* 9 (April): 73–87; Mona Abaza. 1994. *Indonesian Students in Cairo: Islamic Education; Perceptions and Exchanges*. PhD diss., University of Bielefeld; Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood*).

10. For a history of modernist educational institutions in Sumatra, see the seminal work of Taufik Abdullah (Abdullah, *Schools and Politics*). A useful study of the spread of modernist madrasah, and the role of modernist Muslims in early Malay nationalism is by Firdaus (see Firdaus bin Haji Abdullah. 1985. *Radical Malay Politics: Its Origins and Early Development*. Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk). Some information on madrasah in southern Thailand is contained in Hasan Madmarn. 2002. *The Pondok and Madrasah in Patani*. Bangi, Selangor: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

11. Non-Indonesianists are most likely to have read about modernist Muslims in Indonesia in Clifford Geertz. *Religion of Java*. 1976. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. However, the term that he uses to describe them (*santri*, a term that refers to students in religious schools) actually conflates modernist and Traditionalist Muslims (see Merle C. Ricklefs. 1979. "Six Centuries of Islamization in Java," in Nehemia Levtzion (ed.), *Conversion to Islam*. New

York and London: Holmes & Meier, 100–128). The literature on the history of Islamization in Indonesia is very large. The most comprehensive accounts in English are those by historian Ricklefs (see Merle C. Ricklefs. 2006. *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries*. White Plains, NY: EastBridge; Merle C. Ricklefs. 2007. *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions, 1830–1930*. Singapore: NUS Press; Leiden: Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde). For a description of these modernist networks in colonial Sumatra and British Malaya, see Joel S. Kahn. 2006. *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*. Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with Singapore University Press (Singapore) and NIAS Press (Copenhagen) (published in the United States by University of Hawaii Press).

12. For an example of a modernist argument in favor of women's emancipation by a contemporary of 'Abduh's, see Qasim Amin. 2002. "The Emancipation of Woman and the New Woman." In Charles Kurzman (ed.), *Modernist Islam, 1840–1940: A Sourcebook*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 61–69.

13. As Eickelman points out, the printing industry (embraced by modernists from early on), and hence the "textualisation" of Islam associated with modernist reform, made it possible for the first time for Muslims to have direct access to Islamic arguments without any intervening religious authority—making it at least potentially possible for the reader to exercise "authoritative immediacy" (see Dale F. Eickelman. 2000. "Islam and the Languages of Modernity." *Daedalus*, 129(1): 119–135). It is therefore suggested that Islamic modernists opposed all forms of religious authority, leaving it to individual believers to produce their own interpretations of the originary texts. However, as is the case with all self-consciously "rationalist" ideologies, modernism does not dispense with authority altogether, since it is generally recognized that linguistic and religious expertise is required before one can produce *ijtihad*; hence the important role of religious education/certification in the production of modernist authority. For a critique of the argument that print capitalism facilitates autonomy of individual believers to make their own interpretations, see Reinhard Schulze. 1987. "Mass Culture and Islamic Cultural Production in 19th century Middle East," in Georg Stauth and Sami Zubaida (eds.), *Mass Culture, Popular Culture, and Social Life in the Middle East*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag; Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

14. *Bid'ah*, which is forbidden in the Qur'an, is usually glossed by the English word "innovation." Ironically, the accusation of *bid'ah* in contemporary Southeast Asia is often directed at what are taken to be modernist reinterpretations of classical texts.

15. A useful discussion of the intellectual influences on Islamic modernism, including the influence of European social evolutionists (Comte, and especially Herbert Spencer) is found in A. Al-Azmeh. 1993. *Islam and Modernities*. London: Verso.

16. For a Malaysian example, see Farish A. Noor. 2004. "The Challenges and Prospects for 'Progressive Islam' in Southeast Asia: Reclaiming the Faith in the

Age of George Bush and Osama ben Laden," *ICIP Journal* 1(1): 1–30. In a similar vein, Weiss maintains that a "progressive Islam," associated with the discourse on the "presumed compatibility of Islam and democracy … dates back to the late nineteenth-century reform movements in Malaysia and Indonesia." See Meredith L. Weiss. 2004. "The Changing Shape of Islamic Politics in Malaysia," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 4(1): 142.

17. As already noted, Geertz's tripartite classification of Javanese into *santri, abangan,* and *priyayi* (pious Muslims, syncretic/peasant Muslims, and Javanese "aristocrats" respectively) has come in for criticism. Ricklefs in the same article offers a more satisfactory classificatory schema, one that with a little modification can also be applied in the Malayan context that divides Javanese society along a vertical (class) axis, a horizontal (religious) axis, and a third axis (from *kolot* or "old-fashioned" to *moderen* or modern). This better captures the kinds of classification of religious believers that developed in many parts of Muslim Southeast Asia in response to modernist reform movements.

18. Avoidance is a common strategy. But for more explicit critiques of the use of the term "fundamentalist" to describe Islamic movements in Malaysia, see Guilain Denoueux. 2002. "The Forgotten Swamp: Navigating Political Islam," *Middle East Policy* 9(2): 56–82; Chandra Muzaffar. 1987. *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia*. Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Penerbit Fajar Bakti; and Judith A. Nagata. 2001. "Beyond Theology: Toward an Anthropology of 'Fundamentalism,'" *American Anthropologist* 103(2): 481–498.

19. What constitutes supernaturalism, of course, is in the eye of the beholder. In a later introduction, she writes in a way that seems to contradict the "rationalism" of a lifelong commitment to Buddhist modernism, that "Tibetans do not believe in *miracles*, that is to say in supernatural happenings. They consider the extraordinary facts which astonish us to be the work of *natural* energies which come into action in exceptional circumstances, or, sometimes, through the agency of an individual who unknowingly combines within himself the elements apt to move certain material or mental mechanisms which produce extraordinary phenomenon … The Tibetans also tend to believe that everything which one imagines can be realized" (David-Néel, *Magic and Mystery*, vii).

20. For a fuller list of references see Joel S. Kahn. 2008. "Culture and Modernities," in Tony Bennett and John Frow (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Cultural Analysis*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, and Singapore: Sage, 338–358.

21. The discussion of social, economic, and political change provided in this chapter summarizes what is a very large literature on the modern (late nineteenth- and early twentieth- century) history of Southeast Asia. For a list of the sources on which it is based, see Joel S. Kahn. 2012. "Islam and Capitalism in the Frontiers and Borderlands of the Modern Malay World," in Wendy Mee and Joel S. Kahn (eds.), *Questioning Modernity in Indonesia and Malaysia*. Kyoto: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 48.

22. For a more detailed account of this process, see Joel S. Kahn. 1993. *Constituting the Minangkabau: Peasants, Culture and Modernity in Colonial Indonesia*. Oxford and Providence: Berg; Joel S. Kahn. *Other Malays*, on West Sumatra and peninsular Malaya respectively.

5   Modern Mystics: Toward a
Gnostic Science

1. See, in particular, reactions to the Brooks piece on the SSRC's "Immanent Frame" website: http://blogs.ssrc.org.

2. In this regard, it is interesting to note that even though he has been a long-time critic of religion—and recently a vituperative critic of Islam—in the scientistic/rationalist mode, the biologist and very public atheist Sam Harris is nonetheless frequently denounced as a mystic or commented upon in mixed ways in various science blogs and online posts for having said positive things about practices like meditation and for his recent reconsiderations of spirituality and mystical experiences (which is formally presented in a book published in September 2014 titled *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*). For two examples of such mixed or hostile online comments, see: (a) http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2014/01/29/sam-harris-announces-his-next-book-its-about-spirituality-without-religion/. Accessed June 18, 2014; (b) http://www.christianpost.com/news/atheist-author-sam-harris-to-publish-guide-to-spirituality-without-religion-113688/cpt. Accessed June 18, 2014.

3. Similarly, there are of course religious believers who reject science—and secularism—out of hand or reject the caveat that their beliefs must not intrude on either.

4. "It would be simplistic to suggest that there is a direct causal link between his religious beliefs and his discoveries in theoretical physics, yet the unity and continuity of Vedanta are reflected in the unity and continuity of wave mechanics" (Walter Moore. 1989. *Schrödinger: Life and Thought.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 173). In a similar vein, Gimbel has revisited the question of the relationship between Einstein's physics and his own religious (Jewish) background (Steven Gimbel. 2012. *Einstein's Jewish Science: Physics at the Intersection of Politics and Religion.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press).

5. There is the suggestion that the 1920s was for Schrödinger a time of deep spiritual crisis, a time of "heart-constricting solitude and emptiness" (Moore, *Schrödinger*, 19), making it more likely that his Eastern turn was less a response to a social and more to a personal, existential crisis.

6. See, for example, his discussion of the intersubjective constitution of objects (1961: 16–17) and the extremely perceptive remark that "shared thoughts, with several people really thinking the same thing—which happens far more often in practical life than, say, in science—really are thoughts in common, and they are *single* occurrences," which counters an article of faith that persists to this day about the absolute uniqueness of individual experience. One is tempted to see in Schrödinger's writings on consciousness an extremely effective rebuttal of transcendental phenomenology, although it is difficult to know if he was familiar with the work of its best-known exponent, Edward Husserl (who was hostile to those who expressed admiration for Eastern philosophy). It is intriguing to note that Schrödinger's close friend Hermann Weyl had been influenced by Husserl and Weyl's wife, Helene Joseph, had been Husserl's student in Göttingen (Moore, *Schrödinger*, 155–156).

7. And, just as in the 1920s, and in the more recent critique of David Brooks, there were also plenty of sceptics. Capra's book, for example, has been widely criticised both by fellow scientists for its mysticism and by comparative religionists for misinterpreting "Asian religions and cultures on almost every page" (Andrea Grace Diem and James R. Lewis, cited in David Kaiser. 2011. *How the Hippies Saved Physics: Science, Counterculture, and the Quantum Revival*. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 304n). Capra himself backed away from the main argument of the earlier book when he wrote that there could be no synthesis between science and mysticism, that the two approaches were "entirely different," and that the relationship between them was, to be thought of as at best "complementary" (Fritjof Capra. 1996. *The Web of Life: A New Synthesis of Mind and Matter*. New York: Doubleday).

8. It is interesting to see how "skepticism" has been appropriated by those who use the term now to mean precisely the opposite of the "world denying" speculations of Descartes.

9. Less influential were his thoughts on the relationship between thermodynamics and biology, although at least one biologist has suggested that they might become so in the future (see Manfred Eigen. 1995. "What Will Endure of 20th Century Biology?" In Michael P. Murphy and Luke A. J. O'Neill (eds.), *What is Life? The Next Fifty Years: Speculations on the Future of Biology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 5–24). Although Watson, Crick, and others were inspired by Schrödinger's text, there is clearly a difference of opinion among biologists as to the significance of *What Is Life?*—a debate which, as a nonbiologist, I am not qualified to assess. See various contributors to Michael P. Murphy and Luke A. J. O'Neill, eds. 1995. *What Is Life? The Next Fifty Years: Speculations on the Future of Biology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

10. For a qualified defense of dualism, see David J.Chalmers. 1996. *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

11. See: http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/2008/01/28/going-beyond/#comments.

12. For a version of this critique, see Anthony B. Cohen and Nigel Rapport. 1995. "Introduction: Consciousness in Anthropology," in Anthony P. Cohen (ed.), *Questions of Consciousness*. Florence, KY: Routledge, 1–18.

6   The Inner Journey of the Gnostic Self: Ethics and Politics

1. The quote comes from a discussion of some of the key issues raised by the "discovery" of this spiritual not religious demographic on the website of the SSRC project, "Spirituality, Political Engagement and Public Life," http://www.ssrc.org/programs/spirituality-political-engagement-and-public-life/. Accessed August 25, 2011.

2. Although there is no evidence that Hesse read him, it is interesting to compare this assessment with Max Weber's who contrasted the religions of India

and China in very similar terms, a parallel that probably springs from the fact that they were reading the same sources. The original versions of Weber *The Religion of China* and *The Religion of India* appeared in 1915 and 1916 respectively. See Max Weber. 1958. *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press; and Max Weber. 1964. *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, trans. Hans H. Gerth (ed.), with an introduction by C. K. Yang. New York: Macmillan.

3. The "soulful, searching gaze of most Indian worshipers," he wrote, "far from being an invocation to the gods, or a plea for salvation, is simply a request for money," and "Buddhism in Ceylon is pretty to photograph and to write about in the feature pages of newspapers, but, beyond that, it is nothing more than one of the many poignant, distorted and grotesque forms in which suffering humanity expresses its misery and lack of spirit and strength" (cited in a review of Decker's Hermann Hesse biography, Gunner Decker. 2012. *Hermann Hesse: Der Wanderer und sein Schatten*. Munich: Hanser), http://en.qantara.de/The-Whole-East-Breathes-Religion/19628c20877i1p501/index.html. Accessed November 15, 2012.

4. Hesse's passion for psychoanalysis was perhaps most clearly manifest in the novels *Rosshalde* and *Demian* (1919), written in this period.

5. This distinction is the subject of some debate among scholars of Buddhism and existentialism. The position adopted here is influenced by the writings of a number of the contributors to a volume on *Buddhisms and Deconstructions* (Jin Y. Park, ed. 2006. *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), particularly those by Mabbet and Magliola.

6. See Jay L. Garfield. 1995. *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakāri*. New York: Oxford University Press; and Teed Rockwell. 2009. "Minds, Intrinsic Properties and Madhyamaka Buddhism." *Zygon(r)* 44(3): 659–674.

7. In fact, *Siddhartha*'s popularity in North America waxed and waned with the counterculture although, intriguingly, interest in Hesse's writings in Japan, Italy, and in the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking worlds has been more constant.

8. See Schwartz's two volume "autobiography" (Alvin Schwartz. 2006. *An Unlikely Prophet: A Metaphysical Memoir by the Legendary Writer of Superman and Batman*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books; and Alvin Schwartz. 2007. *A Gathering of Selves: The Spiritual Journey of the Legendary Writer of Superman and Batman*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books).

9. A translation, titled *Le Cinglé*, was published in 1950 in France where it was a best seller.

10. Cited in the author's introduction to the 2001 edition. See Alvin Schwartz. 2001. *The Blowtop*. Chicago: Olmstead Press, ix (originally published by The Dial Press, New York).

11. From dust jacket of the 2011 edition of Schwartz, *Blowtop*.

12. See Lieven Boeve. 2006. "Negative Theology and Theological Hermeneutics: The Particularity of Naming God." *Philosophy and Scripture* 3(2): 1–12; Arthur Bradley. 2008. "'Mystic Atheism': Julia Kristeva's Negative Theology." *Theology and Sexuality* 14(3): 279–292; John D. Caputo. 2001. *On Religion*. New York: Routledge; Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, eds. 1998. *Religion*.

Cambridge: Polity; John Milbank. 1991. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell; and Gianni Vattimo. 2002. *After Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press.

13. Although he also maintains that Buddhism goes beyond Derrida by suggesting that meditation promises to take us beyond or outside the logos.

14. This is not to mention the widespread adoption of a similarly particularistic and contextualist "Asian values" discourse by political regimes, indicating that anti-Western parochialism can just as easily be mobilized in defense of authoritarianism as it can by those who would oppose it.

7   Other Worlds or Ours?
Sacred/Secular/Gnostic/Modern

1. Ontology "as far as anthropology in our understanding is concerned, is the comparative, ethnographically-grounded transcendental deduction of Being (the oxymoron is deliberate) as that which differs from itself (ditto)—being-as-other as immanent to being-as-such. The anthropology *of* ontology is anthropology *as* ontology; not the comparison of ontologies, but comparison as ontology" (Martin Holbraad et al. 2014. "The Politics of Ontology: Anthropological Positions," Fieldsights—Theorizing the Contemporary, *Cultural Anthropology Online*, January 13. Available at: http://culanth.org/fieldsights/462-the-politics-of-ontology-anthropological-positions. Accessed June 9, 2014).

2. For a telling critique of "that favorite metaphysical master concept of anthropology: practice," see Peter Skafish. 2014. "Anthropological Metaphysics/Philosophical Resistance," Fieldsights—Theorizing the Contemporary, *Cultural Anthropology Online*, January 13. Available at: http://culanth.org/fieldsights/464-anthropological-metaphysics-philosophical-resistance. Accessed June 11, 2014.

3. Not unexpectedly, there are now those who are criticizing ontological anthropologists for the sin of "appropriation," echoing that longstanding tradition of critique and countercritique that I have labeled the dialectics of authenticity (see Bonnie Glass-Coffin and Kiiskeentum. 2012. "The Future of a Discipline: Considering the Ontological/Methodological Future of the Anthropology of Consciousness, Part IV: Ontological Relativism or Ontological Relevance: An Essay in Honor of Michael Harner," *Anthropology of Consciousness* 23(2): 113–126.

4. For discussion and analysis of these new forms of Western spirituality, see "Spirituality, Political Engagement and Public Life," http://www.ssrc.org/programs/spirituality-political-engagement-and-public-life/. Accessed August 25, 2011. For some of the, mainly North America-based, research on the phenomenon see P. Heelas and L. Woodhead. 2005. *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Malden, MA: Blackwell; Robert C. Fuller. 2001. *Spiritual, but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press; Ruth Frankenberg. 2004. *Living Spirit, Living Practice: Poetics, Politics, Epistemology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Courtney Bender. 2010. *The New Metaphysicals*.

Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press; and Laura R. Olson. 2010. "Who Are the 'Spiritual but Not Religious,'" http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/08/04/who-are-the-spiritual/. Accessed August 25, 2011.

5. The research in Indonesia is at an early stage and my remarks need therefore to be treated as preliminary. I would like to acknowledge The Australian Research Council for funding the overall comparative project on "New Spiritualities in Southeast Asia" (University of Melbourne, Ethics ID: 1339258), which involves research in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. I am also grateful for the support, advice, and friendship of Professor Yekti Maunati of LIPI, my sponsor in Indonesia; Dr. Siti Rohmah Soekarba, Professor Melani Budianta, and Dr. Tommy Christomy of the Fakultas Ilmu Pengetahuan Budaya, Universitas Indonesia who have helped me in innumerable ways; my fellow researchers, Dr. Bryan Rochelle and Mr. Thigor Anugrah Harahap; and all those who generously gave of their time to helping us understand what being a Muslim was all about.

6. Jakarta Globe, Tasa Nugraza Barley. 2010. "Who Are the Real Belanda Depok?" *Jakarta Globe,* August 26, 2010, http://thejakartaglobe.beritasatu.com/archive/who-are-the-real-belanda-depok/ Accessed April 8, 2014.

7. This increase was driven by the growth of Jakarta as a whole, and real estate speculators and property developers cashing in on an increased demand for land for housing and residential property on the urban fringe; by businesses catering to rising consumer demand; and, from the mid-1970s, by the implementation of policies favorable to peri-urban development. Also, the main campus of the University of Indonesia was relocated to Depok in the late 1970s by an authoritarian regime bent on shifting the sources of student radicalism from the city center to the urban fringe.

8. "Depok City History" 2010. http://www.bubblews.com/news/2015020-depok-city-history. Accessed April 8, 2014.

9. Figures from Bapeda Kota Depok and Badan Pusat Statistik. 2012. *Kota Depok Dalam Angka 2012*.

10. Following ethical guidelines laid down by my home institution, I have not used their real names, even though none of them expressed even the slightest desire that anonymity be maintained.

11. As Tony Crook puts it, every "ethnographic description is equally a description of the anthropology producing it" (Tony Crook. 2014. "Onto-Methodology," Fieldsights—Theorizing the Contemporary, *Cultural Anthropology Online*, January 13. Available at: http://culanth.org/fieldsights/468-anthropology-as-ontology-is-comparison-as-ontology. Accessed June 9, 2014), while Casper Jensen admits that anthropologists "are invariably part of ontological politics, but not of any politics given by the ontologies of those we study or work with" (Casper Bruun Jensen. 2014. "Practical Ontologies," Fieldsights—Theorizing the Contemporary, *Cultural Anthropology Online*, January 13. Available at: http://culanth.org/fieldsights/466-practical-ontologies. Accessed June 12, 2014). Similarly, Eduardo Kohn describes the goals of his "ethnographic/ontographic exploration of how certain humans, the Amazonian Runa, relate to the beings—animals, ghosts, and spirits—of a tropical forest" as an attempt at "a kind engagement with Runa thinking with thinking forests such that this sort of sylvan thinking (which is no longer human, and

therefore not just Runa or mine) can think itself through us—making us over in ways that could make us otherwise" (Eduardo Kohn. 2014. "What an Ontological Anthropology Might Mean," Fieldsights—Theorizing the Contemporary, *Cultural Anthropology Online*, January 13. Available at http://culanth.org/fieldsights/463-what-an-ontological-anthropology-might-mean. Accessed June 12, 2014).

12. This was the way many of our informants interpreted the Quranic injunction to both enjoin good and forbid wrong (*al-amr bi 'l-ma'ruf wa 'n-nahy 'an al-munkar*).

8   What if Culture Did Not Matter? Asian Studies and the New Universalism(s)

1. For a discussion of the universalizing aspirations of global Christianity, see Matthew Engelke and Joel Robbins, eds. 2010. "Global Christianity, Global Critique." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109(4): 623–829. That this has been mirrored by developments in global Islam is evident, for example, from the work of Olivier Roy (Oliver Roy. 2004. *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. New York: Columbia University Press). Opinions are divided on the question of whether there is any relationship between the actually existing global Christianities and the neo-universalism of critical theorists like Badiou, Žižek, and Agamben.

2. The so-called "Perennial Philosophy" as we have noted drew not on Enlightenment notions of universalism but on those of Renaissance philosophers of the "Christian Kabbalah," "a notable, original effort at the outset of modernity to address the emerging question of religious diversity. There was not one revelation, but many, and, conversely, there were not many truths, but one original source of truth…Religious multiplicity, by any definition, was the social reality to which Christian Kabbalah responded. Esotericism, insofar as it posited a transcendent unity to world religions, in this light is linked, historically speaking, to the rise of comparative religion. Both sought solutions to the problem of revelational diversity" (Steven M. Wasserstrom. 1999. *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 49–50).

3. An interesting side effect was that he became caught up in a discourse of national rivalry in the United States promoted by American scientists who used his work as evidence in their case for greater support on the grounds that Japan would otherwise have the lead (reprising the funding of NASDA in response to the earlier Soviet success with satellites).

4. One is reminded of the claim often advanced on behalf of Japanese physics, that Japanese scientists have made important contributions in modern physics, and particularly in quantum physics, because the hard and fast distinction between subject and object upon which Western science is ultimately based is absent in Buddhist philosophy.

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