Welcome to the Religion and Culture Web Forum's public discussion board for April 2007. In this thread you will find the invited responses from Stephen Fredman and Robert Fuller.

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Debra Erickson
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This essay evidences the wit and playfulness we have come to expect from Jeffrey Kripal's insightful scholarship. He begins by introducing us to the Esalen Institute’s role as a conduit for metaphysical spirituality over the last four decades. Then, having explored the altered categories through which Esalen constructs religion, Kripal suggests that these categories have had an important effect on the academic study of religion over these same decades.

Kripal correctly identifies the role played by “altered states of consciousness” in giving rise to the altered categories championed by Esalen. I would supplement his short essay by drawing even further attention to how altered states provided the experiential template for a new, countercultural epistemology (i.e., metapsychology gradually morphed into metaphysics). Meditation, minor or major psychedelics,
and sundry mind/body techniques provided those at Esalen an instantaneous “deconditioning agent.” These techniques dismantled the whole cognitive universe constructed by both the scientific and religious wings of American culture. These techniques deautomatize the “distance senses” such as viewing, reading, or hearing and thereby accentuate the “proximate senses” of touching and tasting. These techniques, moreover, destabilize the process whereby sensory data are connected to acquired knowledge.

As a consequence, new sensations are rapidly connected to two or more different conceptual labels. Multiple associations to the same sensory datum give experience a highly fluid, symbolic character. As a result, persons suddenly experience not just one reality, but several realities, depending on their current frame of reference. In this way many of the altered categories at the heart of metaphysical spirituality—pluralism, the symbolic nature of truth, divine immanence, mind/body connection—were born of distinctive kinds of altered states.

Kripal is certainly correct that many of us who are currently involved in the academic study of religion share the categories (i.e., pluralism, the symbolic nature of truth, divine immanence, mind/body connection, etc.) that were core features of the counterculture movement with which Esalen has been so deeply connected. Indeed, I am one who (guided by ecstatic experiences of non-psychedelic origin) embraced these categories and hoped that, as Kripal explains, they would “deny the literalisms of local truths and affirm the universality of the human ground that produces each and every one of these culturally relative expressions.”

But as I sit and type my response to Professor Kripal’s account of Esalen spirituality, my response becomes less academic and more personal. I note how much confidence I have personally lost in the altered categories of metaphysical spirituality. Indeed, Kripal himself carefully chose the words “universality of the human ground” as the stable reality to be affirmed, not the alleged “hidden dimensions” or “hidden energies” stipulated by mesmerists, spiritualists, Tantrists, parapsychologists, Couliano, and others who disparage Flatlanders. The altered categories of metaphysical spirituality bend awfully quickly when leaned or pushed against. I ask myself what forty years of Esalen seminars have actually substantiated about the physics of consciousness, life after death, or the reality of psi phenomena? I also ask myself why the rejuvenation that takes place during a week’s stay at Esalen almost always disappears by the following Tuesday?

I deeply admire Esalen for helping to construct or sustain categories that have made it possible for people like me to find some measure of good in religion, rather than permanently dismissing it as a vestige of humanity’s irrational evolutionary history. Not only have Esalen-like categories kept awe, mystery, and wonder alive in our personal lives, but they have helped us cognitively move beyond notions of “material” or “efficient” causation to consider the possible role of an “ultimate”
source of causal influence in our lives. I have, however, personally lost enthusiasm for the altered categories of scholarship that initially drew me to the field of religious studies. This is not owing to my allegiance to the canons of either biblical religion or scientific materialism, but rather because these altered categories have finally produced so little in the way of substantive knowledge. In the end, it strikes me that it is the human ground—not metaphysical energies or dimensions—that seems the most likely category in terms of which to frame the subject of religion. Perhaps a week of baths and massages with Professor Bibfelt in Big Sur could reawaken my metaphysical sensibilities.

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At the end of his paper, Jeffrey Kripal asserts that the comparative study of religion assisted in the birth of the sixties counterculture, which in turn supplied the mystical and socially activist categories driving much subsequent scholarship. If this reading of academic and social history is true—and I believe it is—then Kripal is shedding an acutely self-conscious light upon the academic study of religion. The religious studies community has already debated the epistemological status of work by “insiders” or “practitioners” as opposed to that by “outsiders,” but Kripal moves beyond that particular knot by proposing a more capacious, “cultural studies” model, in which the academic study of religion (especially of mysticism) and the social practice of religion are viewed analytically from within the same framework.

This is certainly the thrust of [i]Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism[/i] (Chicago, 2001), in which he gives hermeneutical priority to the mystical experiences of scholars of mysticism and views their work as contributing in turn to mystical practice. In his subsequent book, [i]The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion[/i] (Chicago, 2007), he takes another step forward by proposing that the study of religion is an inherently gnostic activity, in which the academic and the erotic (incorporating both sexuality and mysticism) are intimately intertwined.

By arguing for a gnostic approach to religious studies, Kripal challenges scholars to embrace in their work the entire spectrum of academic, social, and personal modes. For most of us, academic protocols, both scholarly and theoretical, function as productive and protective armor. When presented as a reader with scrupulous scholarship and theoretical acumen, I offer my provisional assent to a new thesis being advanced. If the writer ventures into uncharted territory, the correct handling of these protocols lends a reassuring probity to the argument. There is a deadening quality, though, to work that rests solely on the
protocols of the scholarly or the theoretical and does not attempt to open up new perspectives.

But where do new perspectives come from? Often, they arise from experiences beyond the academic. In my own case as a literary historian and critic, I write about American poetry of the last century as someone who underwent a long poetic apprenticeship and knew intimately a number of the figures about whom I write. The field with which I identify, “Poetics,” resides somewhere in between strictly scholarly or critical study and the creation of poetry. From this unstable location, I write facing in two directions: I want my work to be taken seriously by the academy because of its institutional power, and I also want poets to see what I do as partaking of the creative milieu in which they labor. One of the most gratifying experiences I have had is hearing from a poet that something I wrote made a difference to how he or she understood poetry and its potential.

The situation of between-ness I am outlining is not unique, of course, to scholars of mysticism or of poetry. Anthropologists, who have long been aware of occupying a liminal status, were some of the first academics to turn a self-reflexive mirror upon their practice and its presuppositions. Taking up Kripal’s “meta-suggestion,” I can imagine new modes of inquiry that move beyond a hermeneutics of self-reflexivity and take up residence instead within a space between the academic and the active. We must recognize that the boundary between the university and the larger society is not only permeable but, from the largest perspective, illusory: we all influence the realms that we study and we all carry into our academic work foundational experiences and questions from “outside.” I applaud Jeffrey Kripal for having the courage to expose this dynamic interchange within his own life and work and for drawing attention, in the present article, to the cross-fertilization that took place between scholars of mysticism and countercultural figures to create the “no religion” of Esalen.

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