

FROM ALTERED STATES TO ALTERED CATEGORIES
(AND BACK AGAIN):
ACADEMIC METHOD AND THE HUMAN POTENTIAL MOVEMENT

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Round about the accredited and orderly facts of every science there ever floats a sort of dust-cloud of exceptional observations, of occurrences minute and irregular and seldom met with, which it always proves more easy to ignore than to attend to. . . . No part of the unclassified residuum has usually been treated with a more contemptuous scientific disregard than the mass of phenomena generally called *mystical*. . . . All the while, however, the phenomena are there, lying broadcast over the surface of history. . . . if there is anything which human history demonstrates, it is the extreme slowness with which the ordinary academic and critical mind acknowledges facts to exist which present themselves as wild facts with no stall or pigeonhole, or as facts which threaten to break up the accepted system.

William James, "What Psychical Research Has Accomplished"

Categories are containers for storing experience in symbolic form.

John Heider in his Esalen journals, 1968-1971

A Sighting

I am honored to write this piece, although I am not sure what sparked the invitation. Perhaps it was because last fall I sent a letter to *Criterion* in which I claimed to have spotted Swift Hall's legendary theologian, Franz Bibfeldt, in the hot springs baths of the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. And why not? Esalen, since its founding in the fall of 1962, has been one of the undisputed hotspots of religious experimentation in America, and liberal Protestant theology has played its own minor supporting role in these ventures. Paul Tillich, Harvey Cox, and Sam Keen were all there in the late 60s

(Keen is still a regular), and Bishop James Pike was a key reason Esalen started its San Francisco Center about the same time. So no, I was not completely surprised to see Prof. Bibfeldt in the baths. If that was him. It was dark. Really dark. And my glasses were all steamy. And off.

But, alas, I am not here to reflect on Prof. Bibfeldt or to attempt more local humor, poorly. I am here to reflect on the encounter of one historian of religions with contemporary American metaphysical culture, with the human potential movement to be more precise, and with what we might call the magic of history. More specifically, I want to summarize the content and conclusions of my most recent book, *Esalen*; reflect for a moment on two of its central “altered categories”; and then offer a single meta-suggestion that, for me anyway, has bubbled up, like the hot springs themselves, from the subterranean geology of this seven-year project. That idea is still bubbling in my brain, so perhaps it is time to let it out. This seems as good a place as any.

The Historiographical Challenge

Esalen is about, well, Esalen. More specifically, it is about how the institute has functioned as a kind of focusing prism for any number of colorful themes within what Catherine Albanese has recently identified as the third major stream of American religious history (with evangelical Protestantism and mainline denominationalism as the other two), that is, American metaphysical religion.¹ Albanese outlines four central themes within this core metaphysical tradition: an emphasis on Mind as a type of transcendent consciousness (the Emersonian Over-Soul, for example); magical thinking and experience expressed through micro-macro correspondences (the Jungian category of

¹ Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

synchronicity, for example); a strong emphasis on energy as a defining religious metaphor or actual physical experience (think Swedenborg's *influx*, the Mesmerist's "animal magnetism," or Reich's orgone); and a practical concern with physical and psychological healing as a kind of this-worldly salvation.

I consider *Esalen*, as both book and place, to be a very clear confirmation of Albanese's eloquent model. All four of her metaphysical themes, after all, are central to my own book and its defining patterns. These patterns include: (1) a bipolar, dialectical metaphysic of Consciousness and Energy that provided the indigenous ground for the assimilation and transformation of the metaphysical structures of any number of Asian Tantric traditions (which also happen to be structured by a very similar metaphysic); (2) a basic psychology of occult energy derived from the earlier streams of Mesmerism and Spiritualism, the later streams of what I, following Paul Robinson, call the Freudian Left (think Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body*), and the later influx of, again, Asian Tantric traditions; (3) a re-visioning of mind-body relations around this same Consciousness/Energy dialectic and a subsequent foregrounding of healing practices, from alternative medicine and emotional healing to contemplative massage and Rolfing; (4) various creative syntheses of traditional mystical systems and modern science (particularly evolutionary biology and quantum physics); (5) the celebration and practice of psychology and religion (really psychology as religion); and (6) the careful, critical affirmation of what are variously called psychical, paranormal, or occult phenomena but which an anthropologist or historian of religions might see, with Albanese, as modern instantiations of magical thought and experience. Synchronicity, for example, is not just a Jungian category or topic of dinner conversation for Esalen actors; it is a way of ordering

history, of guiding one's spiritual life, and of speculating about the correspondences between mind and matter. Metaphysical mind, magical correspondences, occult energy, and psychospiritual healing—yes, these are also the terms of Esalen.

We could also draw here on the excellent work of Wade Clark Roof and his study of how the baby boomers refashioned the sacred itself through models of personal selection and creative freedom; of Christopher Partridge and his poetic notion of “occulture” as a way of making some positive sense of the stunning bricolage of modern forms of the mystical life; or of Leigh Eric Schmidt's welcome historical reminder that the history of American liberal spirituality runs very deep indeed, that the unchurched seeker is quintessentially “American” too.² So the historiographic challenge does not consist in a lack of adequate models at our disposal. It is more a matter of sheer detail, of an almost hallucinogenic riot of color, character, story, and what William James called in our opening epigraph the “wild facts” of religious history. I will get to the challenge of those wild facts soon enough. For now, a quick trip through the history of Esalen and a few of its more well known characters seems in order.

Big Sur was a literary mecca before it became a religious phenomenon. Both Jack Kerouac and Henry Miller used the baths at Esalen before there was an Esalen. Kerouac composed *Big Sur* to capture his own experience of the place, and Miller penned a beautiful narrative on his life in Big Sur and his experiences of occult dictation there, his *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*. Richard Price and Michael Murphy, two Stanford graduates from Chicago and Salinas, respectively, founded Esalen in the fall of

² Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Volume 1 (London: T & T Clark, 2004); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality, From Emerson to Oprah* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

1962. They were inspired partly by another writer, Aldous Huxley, particularly his notions of the “human potentialities” and the “nonverbal humanities.” Price and Murphy had corresponded with Huxley, and Huxley himself visited the property in the winter of 1962, a little over a year and a half before he died on November 22, 1963. An earthquake struck Big Sur that day.

The institute was founded on the Murphy family property. It had been purchased in 1910 by Michael’s grandfather, Henry Murphy, a doctor from Salinas who was looking to start a European-style spa. As a young man, Michael played ping-pong with Henry Miller in Big Sur, and his brother Dennis was mentored by John Steinbeck, whom their grandfather had delivered in a Salinas hospital. But it was Price who more or less ran the place from the mid-1960s until the mid-80s, when he was killed by a crashing boulder in a freak hiking accident in 1985. His was a Taoist and Buddhist spirituality of natural simplicity and presence, of consciousness in the here and now, and of what he called his “gestalt practice,” a kind of psychological therapy as spiritual practice and healing that he learned from Fritz Perls and the altered states of his (Price’s) own psychological suffering, meditative gifts, and psychedelic voyaging.

Murphy is still alive and active. Inspired by the Indian metaphysician Sri Aurobindo and his evolutionary mysticism, William James’s radical empiricism and its commitment to the wild facts of religious experience, and the psychical research of the nineteenth-century classicist F. W. H. Myers, Murphy’s is an occult vision of evolution and of “the future of the body” (which also happens to be the title of his magnum opus³). It was Murphy who first contacted me in 1998, after reading my book *Kali’s Child* and

³ Michael Murphy, *The Future of the Body: Explorations into the Further Evolution of Human Nature* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1992).

seeing in it familiar reflections of his own metaphysical vision for Esalen (these reflections are not surprising, as Aurobindo developed and Westernized the Bengali Tantric tradition of Consciousness and Energy, of Shiva and Shakti, that was the focus of that first book—Murphy was seeing correctly).⁴

It was this same “Bengali connection” that led me to a series of insights into the panentheistic theological structures of Esalen. The latter in turn guided my reading, archival research, and interviewing for the last seven years. That research was mostly text-based (the literature that has gathered around Esalen is immense), but there was also a heavy oral component both in terms of the audio recordings I studied and the living human beings I engaged—from California to Kansas—as historical actors, colleagues, and friends.

What I quickly learned was that the founding fall of 1962 brought in its wake a dizzying display of names and ideas: Alan Watts, Hunter Thompson (who guarded the property before he was fired by Murphy’s grandmother, Bunny), Gerald Heard, Joan Baez, Ansel Adams, Fritz Perls, Abraham Maslow, Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert (who would become Ram Dass), Ken Kesey, J. B. Rhine, B. F. Skinner, Carl Rogers, Rollo May, Ida Rolf, Buckminster Fuller, and Richard Baker Roshi, to name just a few. While he was there in 1964, Paul Tillich remarked to founder Michael Murphy that he saw Esalen’s vision of an “integral” East-West synthesis as a crucial part of the theological future. It was now time, he thought, to bring together the linearity of Western theology and the circularity of Eastern mysticism—time and eternity, immanence and

⁴ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Kali’s Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, second edition).

transcendence—into a more adequate spiral-like worldview.⁵ This was an excessively hopeful and progressive thought and certainly too simplistic, as we now realize, but it remains an understandable one.

Things at Esalen were not always so theological, of course. Many believe, with good reason, that the Nixon administration tried to bring the institute down by linking it to the Charles Manson murders. Abigail Folger, the coffee heiress who was among the murdered, had attended an Esalen seminar, and Sharon Tate happened to be at Esalen the night before the gruesome events. But there certainly was no causal link between Esalen and the Manson crimes. Indeed, if the memory of one Esalen staff member is correct, Manson himself had been refused entrance to the grounds a few weeks before the events unfolded.

The White House changed its mind about Esalen in the late 1970s and 80s. Both the Carter and the Reagan administrations supported Esalen's diplomatic efforts with the Soviet Union, if always behind the scenes. Initially drawn to the Soviet Union for its psychological research (the occult again), these Esalen figures quickly learned that they could do things that official governments could not. They could engage in psychic experiments with their Russian friends, uniting in Mind what had become separated by national politics. They could live in Moscow as guests and neighbors. They could bring high-ranking Russians to America to see for themselves that Americans were not all evil imperialists. They could even host rock concerts. In 1982, for example, Esalen figures worked with Stephen Wozniak, co-founder of Apple Computers, in order to employ satellite communication technology to pioneer the first spacebridge communications

⁵ My source here is multiple conversations with Murphy on his memories of Tillich's visit, particularly a conversation I had with him on 1 April 2004.

between Americans and Soviets. The occasion, on Labor Day weekend, was a rock-and-roll concert. American and Russian bands and ecstatic youth in San Bernardino and Moscow screamed, grinned, and danced to each other's music as they watched one another on large screens. To the astonishment of everyone, Soviet television showed clips of the event on the evening news, partly no doubt because the organizers had cleverly booked the Australian band "Men at Work" to fit the Labor Day theme and the official Russian sensibilities.

It was moments of pure diplomatic genius (and political humor) like this one that gave Esalen a reputation for creative political strategies in both Moscow and Washington. Hence when Stephen Rhinesmith was appointed by President Reagan in 1986 to facilitate Russian-American exchanges, he was told immediately that he needed to go to Esalen, as that was where the real action was. Rhinesmith was very clear with a group of us meeting at Esalen last spring that President Reagan knew about the institute and was supportive of its diplomatic initiatives, often over the loud objections of some of his own more hawkish cabinet members.

Such efforts bore dramatic fruit in 1989, when Esalen sponsored Boris Yeltsin's trip to America, where the politician was converted to capitalism in a Houston mega-grocery store. There the last remnant of his Bolshevism dissolved before a plethora of brightly lit fruits, vegetables, meats, and a single shopping woman who answered his polite questions about how much of her monthly income she spent on such spectacular groceries (Yeltsin realized immediately that her answer represented a fraction of what Russians were spending on very poor food in very long lines back home). Yeltsin quit the Party after that American visit and that grocery store. His stereotypes of both America

and capitalism had been completely shattered. He had been told, for example, that the Statue of Liberty looked like a witch, and that people in New York lived in crime-ridden slums. But the Lady, it turned out, was quite beautiful (he flew around her in a helicopter); the New York streets were friendly and bright; and even its slums, Boris commented, could pass for decent housing in the Soviet Union. Within two years, Boris Yeltsin was standing on a tank in front of the Russian parliament building. The rest is, as we say, history.

But the history hardly ended there. Esalen or Esalen-related figures spent over thirty years in high-level diplomatic ventures with the Russians, adventures which involved people like John Denver, Billy Joel, Kermit the Frog, and Mikhail Gorbachev (although Kermit, I suppose, is technically more a persona than a person). They also dedicated significant resources to ecological concerns, intellectual freedom for writers in the Soviet Union, potential nuclear crises, racism, even issues regarding what we would today call feminism and gay rights (and they were doing this in the late 1960s and early 70s). In recent years, they have turned their classical “citizen diplomacy” tradition toward Islam and are attempting transformative encounters with liberal Muslims from the Middle East and the former Soviet Union. Esalen, for example, co-sponsored former Iranian President Khatami’s speech in the National Cathedral last year.

NASA, the CIA, the KGB, the NFL, and the PGA all also figure into this story within a wild ride of a plot that turns from federally funded psychic espionage or “remote viewing,” to the cultural history of the psychedelic counterculture (the CIA played a major, if unintended, role in introducing LSD into the higher echelons of academia in the

early 60s),⁶ to the occult dimensions of sport. The latter topic is of particular interest and charm. Esalen figure George Leonard, for example, became a well-known American aikido sensei and developed this traditional martial art into a new American spirituality. For his part, Murphy co-authored (with Rhea White) a book on the psychic dimensions of sport, *In the Zone*, and wrote an occult novel (one largely about occult or psychical powers) on the game of golf, *Golf in the Kingdom*, that sold over one million copies and is now something of a cult classic among both amateur and professional golfers. The novel's party scene (modeled on Plato's *Symposium*) has been staged at Pebble Beach, just down Highway 1 from Esalen.

The Religion of No Religion and the Altered States of History

How exactly does one tell such a story and, more to the point, make some sense of it as a historian of religions? How does one relate golf and Gorbachev, psychology, psychics, and psychedelics? Can one *really* understand Esalen's fantastically successful diplomatic ventures with the Russians without taking into consideration the initial occult inspirations of those meetings? How, for example, does one understand the top American diplomat meeting with a Russian psychic and being told about a plate in his upper arm from a childhood accident that no one, not even his wife, knew about? What was the diplomatic effect of *that*? And what are we to make of an Apollo astronaut sitting down for a photo op with Leonid Brezhnev's personal faith healer, the lovely Dzhuna Davitashvili? A painting of Davitashvili herself hangs behind the pair. Her palms are

⁶ For this story, see John Marks, *The Search for the "Manchurian Candidate": The CIA and Mind Control* (New York: Times Books, 1979). Marks would later come to Esalen, have a series of life-changing experiences there, and dedicate his life to peace-making. He went on to found Search for Common Ground, the world's largest conflict resolution NGO that specializes in political reconciliation and creative public policy initiatives.

extended in the mysterious image, suffusing the entire scene with a certain magical, spell-like charm.⁷

This was my challenge. My sources and stories were awash in such Jamesian wild facts. I often felt rather like the Italian historian of religions, Ernesto De Martino, whom Mircea Eliade cites in his interview in *Ordeal by Labyrinth*. De Martino realized that the data of ethnography and folklore, and now of psychical research, strongly suggest “the paradox of a *culturally-conditioned* nature, and all its embarrassing implications.” He realized, that is, that magic plays “a role in history.”⁸ Eliade had argued much the same in his “Folklore as an Instrument of Knowledge,” where he suggested that historians are often faithful to historical data only as long as those data do not challenge their own models of reality.⁹ I could relate to de Martino and Eliade, deeply. I was metaphysically embarrassed (if also somewhat pleurably astonished) by all these wild facts. And I certainly no longer knew what counted as real “history.”

I never, of course, came to terms with my metaphysical embarrassment. But I learned to see it as an opening rather than as a closing of intellectual possibilities. I thus came to what I call four “altered categories,” so named because each of them, or so I suggest, is a linguistic crystallization of countless altered states of consciousness and energy collected and processed over many decades within American culture. These four altered categories are: (1) the religion of no religion; (2) the altered states of history; (3) the Tantric transmission; and (4) the enlightenment of the body. I have written elsewhere

⁷ For this painted charm, see Kripal, *Esalen*, figure 26.

⁸ Ernesto De Martino, *Primitive Magic: The Psychic Powers of Shamans and Sorcerers* (Bridport, Great Britain: Prism Press, 1988), 63. For Eliade’s reference to this text, see Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth: Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 146-147.

Eliade’s answer to Rocquet’s question of whether similar “transhuman experiences that we are forced to accept as facts” had happened to him is worth quoting: “I hesitate to answer that” (*ibid.*, 147).

⁹ This essay was only recently translated from the Romanian by Mac Linscott Ricketts for Bryan Rennie, ed., *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader* (London: Equinox, 2006).

about the third category, the Tantric transmission, which involves a certain meta-theory about the way that the American embrace of Asian religions privileged ascetic, transcendent, idealist forms like Advaita Vedanta in the first half of the twentieth century and then flipped over, in the second half, to erotic and dialectical Tantric forms, like Vajrayana Buddhism, Taoism, Zen Buddhism, and Westernized forms of Shakta Tantra.¹⁰ The fourth, the enlightenment of the body, involves Esalen's insistence that truly mature forms of enlightenment must also involve embodiment; that the body shares in the glories of the spirit; that mind and matter, spirit and sex, soul and body can never really be separated.¹¹ It is essentially a re-visioning of the erotic as this phenomenon is commonly expressed in mystical literature.¹² I want to focus here only on the first two.

The religion of no religion—the phrase was coined by Murphy's mentor at Stanford University in the early 1950s, Frederic Spiegelberg. Spiegelberg was a friend of both Tillich and Heidegger. He also knew Jung, participated in the Eranos symposia series Jung presided over, and traveled to Zurich on a regular basis to give lectures in Jung's institute there. It was Tillich who helped get Spiegelberg to the States (Tillich had fled shortly before him). It was Tillich who introduced Spiegelberg to his future wife. It was Tillich again who gave Spiegelberg his signature theological language of the astonishing Ground of Being beyond the gods. Spiegelberg fled Nazi Germany in 1937, shortly after he attended an academic conference that he had been warned about (Nazi thought police were there). He returned to his university to the news that he had been

¹⁰ Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Remembering Ourselves: Notes on Some Countercultural Echoes of Contemporary Tantric Studies," in *Journal of Religions of South Asia* 1/1, forthcoming.

¹¹ This category, although developed independently, nicely mirrors Catherine Albanese's notion of the enlightened body-self that came to define American appropriations of yoga.

¹² I defined and developed my own uses of the term in *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and developed it further in *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

fired. He fled to the States, where he eventually taught Asian religions with a classical comparative focus at Stanford.

Spiegelberg's phrase "the religion of no religion" had deep existential roots. It was based on a mystical encounter with the natural world he experienced as a young theology student. He was walking in a wheat field on a bright day when, quite suddenly, his ego vanished and what he calls the Self appeared. Through this altered perspective, he began to see that God was shining through everything in the world, that everything was divine, that there was nothing *but* holiness. As he reveled in this revelation, he came around a corner and found himself confronting a gray church. He was horrified. How, he asked himself, could such a building claim to hold something more sacred, more divine, than what he had just experienced in the poppies, birds, and sky of the now divinized cosmos? It all seemed preposterous, utterly preposterous, to him. From the theological scandal of this initial altered state, Spiegelberg developed and theorized what was essentially (or non-essentially) an apophatic mystical theology that approaches religious language, symbol, and myth as non-literal projective expressions of some deeper metaphysical truth that, paradoxically, is simultaneously immanent and transcendent—a kind of dialectical or mystical humanism, if you will. It was just such a comparative mystical theology grounded in the natural world, and just such a critical but deep engagement with the religious traditions of the world, that inspired Murphy and his colleagues in their new venture. There were other currents, of course, but this was an important one that was eventually captured in two common Esalen maxims: "No one captures the flag," that is, there will be no orthodoxy, no creed at Esalen; and "We hold our dogmas lightly," which needs no comment.

The Altered States of History

The expression *altered states* finds its most relevant historical origins in the writings of psychical researcher, Esalen regular, and psychologist Charles Tart, who brought the expression into public use in the early 1970s, mostly through his edited collection, *Altered States of Consciousness*.¹³ I adopt it in the present book to take up a line of thought that Ioan Couliano first suggested. In my original Introduction to *Esalen*, I discussed Couliano's thought at some length. That Introduction, however, was massively cut to get the book down to its present 500 pages. I would like to take this opportunity to publish those original "cut" paragraphs here.

Shortly before he was murdered in the second floor bathroom of Swift Hall on a sad spring day in 1991, Couliano tried to ask and then answer a crucial methodological question in his study of gnosticism, that strange and largely ignored book, *The Tree of Gnosis*.¹⁴ Essentially, the question goes like this: if we are now living in an Einsteinian space-time continuum determined by three extended dimensions and a fourth of time, the intimate participation of consciousness, and the metaphysical identity of energy and matter, themselves likely continuously created by utterly bizarre quantum processes and multiple dimensions (eleven, if some of the string theorists are right), most of which seem to be wrapped up in tiny unseen particles that more or less destroy any stable notions of linear causality, time, locality, and independent existence, why are we still writing history as if we only inhabited a simple three-dimensional cosmos, lived in a neat linear time, and existed as so many disconnected billiard balls in a world of Newtonian causality,

¹³ See Charles Tart, "States of Consciousness and State-Specific Sciences," *Science* 176 (1972): 1203-1210; and *Altered States of Consciousness* (El Cerrito, CA: Psychological Processes, 1983).

¹⁴ Ioan P. Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

collisions and reactions? If the world is so utterly bizarre, why do we pretend it is so simple? And if we now know that the universe is most certainly *not* a three-dimensional box or pool table, why do we keep writing history as if it were? Why, in other words, cannot we re-imagine history (and hence ourselves) “outside the box” of Newtonian modernity?

Good questions. Couliano tried to bring us up to speed through his historical method of morphodynamics. Couliano’s morphodynamic historiography is essentially about taking seriously the possibilities that religious systems function as archetypal forms (*morpho-*) that exist in a dimension outside the four of space-time, and that these can and do interact (*dynamic*) historically within the four dimensions of our perceived world in ways that appear strange and random but in fact are structurally organized and essentially meaningful.

To explain such altered states of history, Couliano turned to Edwin Abbot, that imaginative British theologian whom Albert Einstein had previously invoked in order to explain his own theory of general relativity and its mind-blowing image of the universe as the hypersurface of a hypersphere. In his *Flatland* (1883), Abbot had introduced the idea of the Flatlanders, two-dimensional beings who can only experience the intervention of a third dimension as hopelessly confusing or inexplicable, that is, as “miraculous.”

Couliano invokes the same Flatland to describe how the history of religions can be imagined as “a sequential interaction of multiple systems of thought.” Couliano explains:

Let us suppose a two-dimensional world, like an infinitely thin sheet of paper, in which completely flat beings live. Imagine further that this film would let a solid object pass through it without the film breaking. Now let us indeed move a solid object through it, for instance a fork. What would a two dimensional inhabitant of Flatland *see*? S/he would see a disparate set of phenomena: first four rounding lines, recognized as being circles, without connection between them,

corresponding to the four prongs of the fork; then a line whose size varies incessantly, corresponding to the base and handle of the fork; eventually the line will disappear from sight. Obviously, the fork would appear to the Flatlander as a sequence of disparate phenomena in time. One more dimension is needed in order to perceive it as a single solid.¹⁵

So too with systems of thought, which exist in their own logical dimension: “They interact with history at every moment, and the chronological sequence they form is a sort of sequential puzzle, like the four prongs of the fork viewed from the perspective of the Flatlander.” What Couliano proposes, then, is that we begin to study history as a similar interaction, that we “study systems of thought in their own dimension” and “recognize the fork for what it is: an object coming *from outside* and crossing our space in an apparently disconnected way, in which there is a hidden logic which we can only reveal *if we are able to move out of our space.*”¹⁶ In other words, we cannot properly interpret religious systems and their appearance in time because we assume that the three (or four) dimensions we routinely experience exhaust the possible, when in fact we live in a universe of multiple dimensions whose astonishing complexity and “strangeness” the history of religions, and particularly the history of gnosticism and mysticism, gives abundant witness to.

Not surprisingly, Ioan Couliano was ignored. The implications of what he was trying to say are simply too deep and disturbing to the neat rational lines of modernity and the normally linear modes of writing history. His ideas would have shattered our little box.

¹⁵ Ioan P. Couliano, “System and History,” *Incognita*, 6. See also his “A Historian’s Kit to the Fourth Dimension,” *Incognita* 1 (1990), 113-29, and his *Out of This World: A History of Otherworldly Journey and Out-of-Body Experiences, from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein* (Boston: Shambalah, 1991).

¹⁶ Couliano, “System and History,” 9.

I do not claim to know whether Couliano's particular model of the altered states of history is an accurate or even a plausible one. That is not my point here. What I do know—and this *is* my point—is that any ordinary history of religions that relies exclusively on social-scientific or political analyses (from Foucauldian constructionism to postcolonial theory) is woefully inadequate to the task of understanding and interpreting a place like Esalen, where individuals routinely and positively experience noumenal energies and life-transforming altered states of consciousness precisely across and between cultural boundaries, and where brave thought experiments like Couliano's are playfully common, particularly surrounding the hyper-dimensionality of UFOs and the possibility that these are fundamentally religious phenomena, trickster-like “fishermen,” if you will, from another dimension baiting and occasionally hooking us from above the four-dimensional waters of space-time.¹⁷

And this is before we even get to what Esalen calls “the physics of consciousness,” a ten-year symposia series (1976-1985) that turned to quantum physics to ask very serious ontological questions about time, causality, and the hermeneutical nature of reality itself. Then there is the still running Survival Seminar, which brings together psychotherapists, psychologists, and a physicist to study anomalous “rogue” phenomena (multiple personality disorders, near-death experiences, past-life memories, telepathic cognition) in order to examine the nature of consciousness and its relationship to the brain, which this group sees not as a biological producer of ephemeral consciousness, but as a culturally and neurologically complex “filter” of “irreducible mind” (Albanese's

¹⁷ I derive the image from Michael Murphy's occult novel, *An End to Ordinary History* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1982). For what one might call the standard Esalen reading of UFOs as modern religious phenomena, see Keith Thompson, *Angels and Aliens: UFOs and the Mythic Imagination* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1991).

metaphysical Mind again).¹⁸ To explain all of this metaphysical activity through an invocation of social structures (a white upper-middle-class base), psychological dynamics (altered states as pathological dissociation), economic forces (the spiritual marketplace) or colonial patterns (the ethical issue of appropriation) certainly has its value and place, but to imagine that such methods really get at what makes Esalen, Esalen is as risible as it is (meta)physically passé.¹⁹ Esalen intellectuals can often be heard invoking a very specific description for the hard-nose skeptics who insist on dismissing altered states of consciousness and energy as meaningless outside their own box-like paradigms: they are “the Flatlanders.” Still, Flatlanders have their roles to play. So too do the Esalen intellectuals. I have done my best to listen to them all, writing out Esalen’s altered states of history not simply through the traditional (or expected) means of arranging my chapters more or less chronologically and using the standard social-scientific and historical-critical methods of the ordinary historian of religions, but also by allowing those mystical, psychical, psychedelic, and gnostic systems that in fact form the deepest meanings of that history for those who have lived the wild facts of this history to guide my own narrative and analysis. If psychologists can speak of altered states of consciousness, certainly the historian of religions can speak of altered states of history and wonder about how these altered states inform and guide linear history.

¹⁸ This group has recently published a massive record of its work as Edward F. Kelly, Emily Williams Kelly, Adam Crabtree, Alan Gauld, Michael Grosso, and C. Bruce Greyson, *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology of the 21st Century* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

¹⁹ The situation is complicated here, and in sometimes surprising ways. Take reincarnation theory, for example. Such a theory relativizes *and* radicalizes the contextualist/constructivist paradigm to the extent that it posits a type of human consciousness that is not bound to any local culture, language, or religious system but that is, at the same time, profoundly influenced and shaped by all previous cultural, linguistic, and religious experience. In a sense, then, reincarnation theory is *more* contextualist and *more* constructivist than our contemporary social-scientific models, which restrict these local influences to a single life-cycle.

A Final Flip of the Coin

Finally, I have a kind of meta-suggestion that I would like to put on the table. My suggestion is in some ways a simple one, namely, that the human potential movement and the comparative study of religion—the history of religions, as we say at Chicago—are two sides of the same cultural coin, and, moreover, that that coin is constantly flipping.

For those of us who do comparative work, Esalen looks very familiar. It does to me anyway. I doubt very much that this is simple projection on my part. After all, Esalen's relationship to the university has always been a very intimate one. Its very first seminars were completely dominated by academics. Only later did the seminars turn to more and more experiential themes, only later, that is, did Dionysus take over from Apollo, as they say at Esalen (they have read their Nietzsche too). And even then, the Dionysian seminar leaders were often also doctors trained in Apollonian ways. The Ph.D. is as common on the property as flowing water, which is everywhere. In some sense, then, the story of Esalen can be read as a living out in the realm of social history and popular culture some of the deepest implications of what many academics have long taught and thought in their classrooms and books. The Esalen "story" (or *mythos*), in other words, encodes and expresses the intellectual "theory" (or *logos*), if not always in exactly the way that this or that academic might prefer. Put too simply (but instructively), they listen to scholars of religion, they believe us, and then they turn what we think into stable social forms (or unstable social forms).

This is especially true with respect to the comparative study of religion, whose methods possess at least a potential apophatic function, to the extent that they dialectically 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.²⁰ Esalen's religion of no religion is a perfect example of this. The method was derived largely from Spiegelberg's comparative religion courses, whose basic spirit flowed quite directly from his own natural mystical experience in the Dutch wheat field and his existential collision with the gray church. Just as that ordinary experience both denied the literal local church and affirmed the deeper metaphysical ground of divinity in the human and natural world, so too did his later comparative method. And so too did Esalen. It was in this way that Spiegelberg's own altered states helped produce the altered categories of his comparative method, which in turn supplied an intellectual frame for the altered states of the human potential movement.

The human potential movement in turn helped supply a social and political base for the altered categories of future academic method. Much of the modern study of religion can be thought of as a rationalized expression or secular sublimation of the kinds of social activisms and counter-cultural mysticisms that have flowed through American life in the last fifty years. In effect, the altered states of the counterculture became the altered categories of the university. It is no accident, for example, that the explosion of "comparative religion" in American universities coincided *exactly* with the counterculture and its famous turn East. The AAR was founded in 1964, two years after Esalen and just as the counterculture was getting off the ground. David Haberman has published a powerful essay on this same idea.²¹ And Sanskritists have long noted the presence of "the seeker" students in their classrooms. Nor is it an accident that race, class,

²⁰ I have developed this line of thought further in my *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). See chapter 3, "Comparative Mystics."

²¹ David Haberman, "Religious Studies 2000," The Lester Lecture on the Study of Religion, Department of Religious Studies, University of Colorado, 1999.

and gender have come to define much of the field. These, after all, were *precisely* the concerns of the 1960s via the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, the prominence of Marxist thought in the 1960s, and the definitive birth of feminist and gay consciousness in that still reverberating decade. To the extent that intellectuals still insist on placing these forms of thought at the very heart of their critical thinking, they still inhabit what is essentially a countercultural state of consciousness.

Academic method, it turns out, is as indebted to the countercultural surround of the human potential movement as the human potential movement is indebted to the academic world. The altered states of the human potential movement have become the altered categories of scholarship, just as the altered states of comparative scholarship helped inspire and guide their own altered states of consciousness. The comparative coin keeps flipping.

That anyway is my suggestion. I hope there is something worthy of my readers' consideration here. In the meantime, if any of you see Professor Bibfeldt, please tell him that I am still looking for him, and waiting for him down at the baths.