ABSTRACT

EMBRACING REVERENCE FOR LIFE:

A CRITIQUE OF ASCETIC PRACTICE

By

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Because ecstasy and visions often result from ascetic practices, they have been used to gain access to the divine. An alternative view, backed by scientific evidence, is that these are natural phenomenon. The body reacts to pain by producing endorphins, which relieve pain, and to sensory deprivation by creating its own sensory stimuli. From this perspective, ascetic practice can be viewed as a masochistic form of auto-eroticism. It is no accident that mystics often describe their experiences in sexual terms. The body is made to experience pleasure. Pain is a signal that something is wrong. Rather than punish the body for its ability to feel pleasure through the senses, positive ways of experiencing pleasure should be encouraged; for it is in engaging with the physical world and its inhabitants that we develop our moral sense. This is backed by scientific evidence as well.

EMBRACING REVERENCE FOR LIFE:

A CRITIQUE OF ASCETIC PRACTICE

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Jon R. Stone was also very encouraging. He was also responsible for one of the references that I used. He was giving away some journal and I found an article about Gandhi by Veena Howard in an issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* which I used.

Benjamin J. Hubbard, one of my professors from California State University at Fullerton, has always been supportive of me and my writing and I had to have him on my committee. I was happy to learn that Albert Schweitzer, whose philosophy of ethical mysticism, I base the second part of this thesis on, was a "personal hero" of his. He suggested that I do some rewriting of chapter 6 to make it fit better with the other chapters. Following his suggestion made my concluding chapter better.

I also want to thank Paul J. Levesque, another one of my professors from California State University at Fullerton, for the initial proofreading of chapter 6. I sent

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It was very important to me that this thesis be my own work. Therefore I was a bit resistant to suggestions to make changes, but the suggestions always proved to be good ones which made this work better.

IN MEMORY OF MY MOTHER

IRENE C. DE WITTE

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INTRODUCTION

This work is about religion and violence. But it is not about the violence that religious people inflict on others. It is about the violence that some religious people inflict on themselves, asceticism. Asceticism has many forms. There are mild forms of asceticism such as occasional fasting or daily meditation. There are also sacrifices that people make for others out of kindness and love. These are mentioned in this work but the focus will be on severe forms of asceticism, physical or psychological torture that some devotees inflict on themselves.

Asceticism has been viewed by some as a pathway to union with God, the sacred, or some kind of ultimate reality. The thesis of this work is that this is unhealthy and that the ultimate reality that mystics experience is an illusion. Mystical experiences brought about through extreme ascetic practices do not come from some other world but from our own brains. These experiences are linked to the reward system in the brain. This is our nature. These are natural phenomena.

Our brains are wired to reward us for life enhancing experiences. But the reward system in the brain also becomes active when the body is harmed or feels threatened. Our body produces pain as a warning but at the same time it also produces pain relievers called endorphins. Masochists have learned to use pain as a way of experiencing intense pleasure. Mystics have also done so. But since they do not stimulate their genitals, they have believed that their experience of pleasure is a reward for their self-denial and

renunciation of the world and the body. Ascetic practices are not only masochistic but may also set up a cycle of addiction.

Chapter Review

Chapter 1: "The Roots of Asceticism," gives a very brief outline of the evolution of ascetic practices. It looks at how humans developed knowledge of the body's response to pain. Andrzej Wiecinski, tells us in "On the Origin of Shamanism," that rituals of torture were part of hunting cultures. These rituals were felt to be a way of preparing young men to be hunters and warriors. The experiences that often resulted from these rituals were sometimes interpreted in a spiritual way and this developed into religious ascetic practices. The methods of obtaining what believers felt to be an entry into a world of the spirit were passed down to Western as well as Eastern religions.

In chapter 2, "The Neurophysiology of Mystical Experience," Oliver Sacks, Harry T. Hunt, J. David Lewis-Williams and Andrew Newberg explain the evolution and the neurophysiology of spiritual experience. Kevin Nelson makes a connection between the mystical experience and the reward system. Gabor Mate explains the connection between the reward system in the brain and addiction. He explains how the brains of addicts develop under stress which makes them more susceptible to addiction. In this chapter a connection is also made between asceticism and addiction. Extreme forms of asceticism can be considered masochistic and masochism can be thought of as a kind of addiction.

Chapter 3, "The Mystical Experience," begins with two examples of mystics: Teresa of Avila, a woman from the Western tradition of Catholicism, and Gopi Krishna, a man from the Eastern tradition of Hinduism. These examples will help to explain the

mystical experience as a function of the reward system in the brain. This chapter will explain more fully the connection between asceticism and masochism.

Chapter 4: "Reverence for Life," begins the second part of this work. It will offer the Ethical Mysticism of Albert Schweitzer as an alternative to ascetic practice and give some evidence that his philosophy can be backed up by science. Our moral sense comes from our connection to others and has been inherited from our animal ancestors.

Chapter 5: "Reverence for Life in Our Own Time," takes a look at the positive side of the reward system in the brain. It is normal and good for all creatures, including humans, to desire pleasure and happiness. For humans there is the added need for meaning. In the end, what matters most for us humans is the meaning we give to our experiences. Meaning can come from ordinary activities. We have the option of pursuing more positive paths to holiness and closeness to God than torturing ourselves. In fact, our connection to each other and all living creatures may be more holy than "spiritual orgasms" derived from pain.

The title of chapter 6, "The Future of Religion," was inspired by two books: one by Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith*, the other by Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*. Both Cox and Bass see the meaning of faith as something that goes beyond religion. Our need for meaning is something innate in us. Harvey Cox sees religion moving away from dogma towards faith. He defines faith not as something that is believed but as something "more primordial than belief." "Faith," says Cox, "is about deep seated confidence." "We place our faith only in something that is vital for the way

we live."[1] Chris Stedman will be given as an example of a person who, though nonreligious, fits this new definition of faith. Stedman is a person who desires meaning, purpose and service to others in his life. It is interesting to note that Stedman gives the title *Faitheist* to his own book.

The Afterword sums things up. It links asceticism to the human tendency to perceive humankind as separate and even superior to other forms of life. This tendency has caused us to renounce the world we live in, in the hope of finding a better world that is beyond this world. But it is our connection to this world that truly makes us better people.

The Afterword ends with a personal story which explains the reason for my interest in this topic and the dedicated of this work to my mother.

[1]. Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 3-4.

CHAPTER 1

THE ROOTS OF ASCETICISM

Asceticism, in the Christian tradition, stems from the belief that the soul is a separate entity from the body. Gregory J. Riley describes the evolution of this idea in *The River of God*. In chapter 5, "Keeping the Soul Separate from the Body," Riley quotes the apostle Paul, who says, in Romans 7: 14-24, "I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin …. Who will rescue me from this body of death?" He compares this scripture with passages from Plato's *Phaedo,* one of the works that Plato wrote concerning the lasts days of Socrates.[1] In the *Phaedo*, Socrates is telling his friends that his soul will survive the death of his body. In one passage translated by Christopher Rowe, Socrates says:

> If we're ever going to have pure knowledge of anything, we've got to separate ourselves from the body and observe things by themselves by means of the soul by itself; and as our argument indicates, we'll only achieve that separation when we die—it's then, it seems, that we'll have what we desire, what we say we're lovers of, namely wisdom, not while we're alive …. even while we are alive, it seems, the way we'll come closest to knowledge will be by having as little to do with the body as possible, doing nothing in association with it unless we simply can't avoid

[1]. Gregory J. Riley, *The River of God: A New History of Christian Origins* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 150.

it. Not letting it infect us with the kind of thing it is. But purifying ourselves from its influence – until such time that the gods themselves set us free (*Phaedo* 66e-67a).[2]

In the third century, the church father Origen sounds like Plato as well. Peter Brown explains that for Origen, there was a third element of being. Body and soul were inferior to the spirit. The spirit was the true self which was part of "the original unity of the world of Ideas."[3] The senses of the body were "dull" compared to the ability of the spirit to "capture the sharp delights of another more intensely joyful world."[4] The way to return to this intense joy was through "a discipline of the senses." Though Origen thought of the sexual union of married people as an "echo" of the spiritual union with God, he believed that sexual union "actually coarsened the spirit."[5] It was virginity "that reflected without distortion the purity of the spiritual world."[6]

The Platonic thought of Greek culture helped the third century Christian fathers to solve theological problems such as "the relations among the three persons of the trinity." This was especially true of "the Alexandrian fathers Origen and Clement," according to

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[2]. Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Christopher Rowe (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 66e-67a, p. 99.

[3]. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 163.

[4]. Ibid., 172.

[5]. Ibid., 173.

[6]. Ibid., 174.

Talcott Parsons."[7] But the ideal of virginity and the holiness of suffering were also related to the refashioning of Plato's ideas into the neo-Platonic philosophy. And for some suffering was even more important than virginity. The church father Cyprian, for example, preached the ideal of virginity but what was more important to him was suffering. Following Christ "was nothing less than a daily martyrdom."[8]

Asceticism was also practiced in early Eastern traditions. Hinduism, for example, taught its followers to deny the world for what was believed to be a more real state of being.[9] Buddha taught a "middle way" but Buddhist monks were ascetics nonetheless.[10] This becomes evident when we look at early Indian Buddhist traditional stories.

According to "traditional accounts," Buddha was born of the virgin Maya to King Suddhodana.[11] Siddhartha, the given name of Buddha, lived the life of a prince.[12] But when he became aware of the suffering in the world, he decided to "pursue the religious life."[13] He studied under several teachers and finally found his own path which he decided to teach to others. The middle path which Buddha taught was a strict discipline and there was in ancient Indian Buddhism a distaste for the body that was

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[7]. Talcott Parsons, *The Evolution of Societies,* ed. Toby Jackson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977), 117.

[8]. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, 195.

[9]. John Powers, *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex and the Body in Indian Buddhism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 99.

[10]. Ibid., 48-49.

[11]. Ibid., 27-29.

[12]. Ibid., 31-32.

[13]. Ibid., 36-37.

similar to that which was in ancient Christianity. Buddhist monks were taught to "overcome attachment to and excessive concern with their physical form." They were taught to "discipline, restrain and control their bodies." The body was an alien thing that "leak[ed] various liquid substances."[14]

The denial of the physical world and the view of the body as something vile that must be restrained is not where asceticism began, however. There are earlier traditions in which these ascetic practices had a different purpose. According to Andrzej Wiercinski, ascetic practices became part of youth initiation rituals. In order to become an "efficient" hunter a youth was required to "endure physical exhaustion, thermal extremities, hunger, pain, fear, etc." To become a useful member of a community youths were taught "self-sacrificing cooperation." Ascetic practices like fasting and enduring suffering, as well as the discovery and use of hallucinogens lead to the "Shamanic model of the world and man."[15]

Ake Hultkrantz agrees that Shamanism is "a heritage from the ancient hunting culture." It seems that Shamanism evolved over thousands of years into the modern religions that we know of today. Hultkrantz sees this development clearly with respect to the Eastern religious traditions. He says that, "through the entrance door of Yoga Shamanic techniques of ecstasy paved the way for meditation religions in India, and later for Buddhist meditation in India, Tibet, Mongolia, the Far East and Southeast Asia." He

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[14]. John Powers, *A Bull of a Man*, 113.

[15]. Andrzej Wiercinski, "The Origin of Shamanism," in *Shamanism Past and Present Part 1*, ed. Mihaly Hoppal and Otto von Sadovszky (Budapest: Ethnographic Institute Hungarian Academy of Science Los Angeles/Fullerton International Society for Trans-Oceanic Research, 1989), 21-22.

also says that some scholars such as E.R. Dodds and Daniel Merkur see a relationship between Shamanism and the traditions of the West. These scholars believe that the philosophies of Pythagoras and Plato developed from Shamanism.[16]

Wiercinski's view is that humans began seeing themselves as separate from nature as their self-awareness developed. He says that "during the late phase of the Lower Paleolithic" humans were a "polarized" species. There were "the psycho-corporeal animal side" and "the psycho-cerebral potential" side.[17] From this point on humans seemed to have moved farther and farther away from their natural roots. As populations grew, hunting cultures became war cultures. And the meaning of self-sacrifice was expanded.

The sociologist Talcott Parsons lists four "evolutionary breakthroughs" that transform small societies into larger more modern cultures: stratification, "legitimizing myths that account for differentials in wealth, prestige and power," "generalized legal systems" and "the institution of the authority of office."[18] Whereas tribal cultures can often be egalitarian, in a war culture, society is organized into a patriarchal hierarchy. All are subordinate to God and males have power according to their status. This hierarchy of males was very efficient on the battlefield. In war cultures self-sacrifice became an ethical code. Not only were the needs of the individual suppressed in favor of the

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[16]. Ake Hultkrantz, "The Place of Shamanism in the History of Religion," in *Shamanism Past and Present Part 1*, ed. Mihaly Hoppal and Otto von Sadovszky (Budapest: Ethnographic Institute Hungarian Academy of Science Los Angeles/Fullerton International Society for Trans-Oceanic Research, 1989), 47-48.

[17]. Andrzej Wiercinski, "The Origin of Shamanism," 20-21.

[18]. Talcott Parsons, *The Evolution of Societies*, 10-14.

community but the war against other nations became a war against the body as well. The *Bhagavad-Gita* expresses this well.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* is one of Hinduism's most sacred texts. It was compiled over several centuries, reaching its definitive form perhaps about 400 C.E.[19] Written in poetic form, it tells the story of the reluctant warrior prince Arjuna and how he was convinced by the god Krishna to do battle against his cousins. In this story, Krishna tells Arjuna that it is his duty to fight. It is honorable. As a prince of the *Kshatriya* (warrior cast), he should find joy in battle (2: 31-32). He should fear neither killing nor being killed, for death comes only to the body not to the soul. After the body dies, the soul puts on a new body as if it were a new suit of clothes (2: 21-22). Krishna tells Arjuna that if he survives the battle, he will become king. But even if he dies no harm will come to him. He will gain *svargam,* the heavenly kingdom (2:37).

The code of ethics for the warrior is one of self denial. Both the body and the personal self must be denied. This is stated plainly in chapter 2 verses 47and 48 which read, in Sir Edwin Arnold's translation:

> Let right deeds be thy motive,
>
> not the fruits which come from them.
>
> And live in action! Labour! Make thine acts
>
> Thy piety, casting all self aside,
>
> Contemning gain and merit; equable

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[19]. *Bhagavadgita*, unabridged ed., trans. Sir Edwin Arnold, Dover Thrift Editions, ed. Stanley Applebaum (New York: Dover Publications, 1993), v.

In Good or evil: equability

Is Yog, is piety![20]

In these verses, Krishna tells Arjuna that he must be selfless. Arjuna is also advised by Krishna to see pleasure and pain as equal (2: 38), not to gratify the senses for this causes attachment which leads to lust which leads to anger (2:62-63). But while Arjuna is told to deny his self and shun the world, neither loving nor hating anything in the world but being content to live in seclusion (18: 51-53), he is also told by Krishna, as Arnold translates, "Do all thou dost for Me! Renounce for Me! Sacrifice heart and mind and will to Me (18: 57-58)!" "Give Me thy heart! Adore Me! Serve Me! Cling in faith and love and reverence to me (18: 65)!"

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[20]. There are several translations of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, each with its own wording and even different titles for the eighteen chapters of the poem. Swami Prabhupada gives us the Sanskrit text, the English transliteration, a literal translation embedded in a transliteration, his translation, and a commentary in *Bhagavad-Gita: As It Is*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans.. His divine grace A.C. Baktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (Alachua, FL: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust International, 1989. The literal translation reads:

In prescribed duties certainly right of you
Never in the fruits at any time
Never in the result of the work cause become
Never of you attachment there should be
In not doing prescribed duties
Equipoised perform your duty
Attachment giving up
O *Arjuna,* in success and failure equipoised becoming
Equanimity *yoga* is called.

Prabhupada translates these lines, in prose, as such:

You have the right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty. Perform your duty equipoised, O Arjuna, abandoning all attachment to success or failure. Such equanimity is called yoga.

Although Prabhupada's translation is closer to the literal, Arnold's translation retains the poetic form and is more expressive.

This code of ethics fits well with the warrior lifestyle. This scripture teaches, as Plato did, that the body is separate from the spirit which is pure (13:22). In this doctrine, the body has little value, whether it is the body of the enemy or one's own body. A warrior who believes that his soul cannot be killed, that his god will protect him whether he lives or dies, can be persuaded by his superiors to do anything. The warrior will always feel he is right, that he is doing the will of god.

This kind of thinking is also found in Western spiritual manuals, books of rules on how to pursue the "interior life." The one that has become most popular is *The Imitation of Christ*. Joseph N. Tylenda S.J. tells us, in the introduction to his translation, that this book has been attributed to many authors including Saint Augustine. The author wished to remain anonymous. But most of the evidence points to Thomas a Kempis.[21] This gives the work a date somewhere between 1380 and 1471, the life span of Kempis. The similarity of this book to the *Bhagavad-Gita* is evident in the fact, as Sally Cunneen tells us in her preface to the same edition, that Swami Vivekananda prized *The Imitation of Christ* alongside the *Bhagavad-Gita*.[22]

Just as Krishna, in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, advises Arjuna that the body is nothing more than a suit of clothes for the soul; and therefore he should cast his self aside, shun the world, govern his mind and passions (not hating but also not loving) and turn all his devotion to Krishna, the author of *The Imitation of Christ* tells his readers that "it is vanity to follow the desires of the flesh" or "wish for a long life" or "love what is

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[21]. Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, rev. ed. with a preface by Sally Cunneen, ed. and trans. Joseph N. Tylenda, S. J. (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1998), xxix.

[22]. Ibid., xvii.

transitory."[23] The author tells his readers, "leave yourself behind … internal renunciation of yourself unites you to God."[24] But *The Imitation of Christ* goes farther than the *Bhagavad-Gita* in proclaiming war on the body.

While Arjuna is advised to cast aside his self he is not told to despise himself. No, Arjuna is told that if he renounces his self he will attain Brahman (18:50) who is the Master who lives in the hearts of all creatures (18: 61). The author of *The Imitation of Christ* teaches self hatred. A human should think of himself as "a wretched little worm," a "nothing" a "zero."[25] Those, who despise the world and subdue the flesh, "find their delight in God."[26] But in order to find this delight they must think of themselves as separate and worthless. They must stop loving themselves.[27] "Blessed is he who understands what it is to love Jesus and to despise himself for Jesus' sake."[28] The lover of Jesus will never become one with him. At best he will become his beloved but worthless son. Book III is organized as a dialogue between Jesus and the reader who always falls short. Not only should one feel worthless, not only should they strive to imitate Christ in his goodness but they should strive to imitate Christ in his suffering. "Nothing is more acceptable to God, nor more beneficial to the world, than being willing

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[23]. Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 4.

[24]. Ibid., 167.

[25]. Ibid., 77, 87.

[26]. Ibid., 128.

[27]. Ibid., 91.

[28]. Ibid., 55

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to suffer for Christ."[29] The author instructs his reader to give "attention to self-mortification."[30]

Ideals that stressed the "spiritual" over the material world lead to the formation of monastic societies. Monastic traditions were developed in both the East and the West. In the East, "the main normative reason for seeking ordination and voluntarily renouncing [according to John Powers] was the promise of even greater pleasure in advanced meditative states, rebirth in a heaven, or liberation from the sufferings of cyclic existence."[31] In the West, contemplative prayer and self-mortification was a way to gains the favors of God.

The sensations that caused humans to experience what they believed to be separate worlds and union with the divine are entirely natural and an understanding of this might help us to reconnect to our home here on Earth. The next chapter will begin to explain the neurophysiology of mystical experience.

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[29]. Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 69.

[30]. Ibid., 124.

[31]. John Powers, *A Bull of a Man*, 99.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEUROPHYSIOLOGY OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

In this chapter some neurophysiological explanations for mystical experience are presented. To begin, however, we look at the religious explanation of Rudolf Otto. Then, since mystical experience is a combination of sensation and emotion and may involve any of the five senses, examples of illusions and their natural causes, according to Oliver Sacks and also J. David Lewis-Williams follow. From there we move on to the theory of Kevin Nelson. Nelson sees a connection between the mystical experience and the intrusion of the dream or REM (rapid eye movement) state of consciousness into waking consciousness. This he labels REM intrusion. Nelson also describes the emotional feelings associated with mystical experience. Finally a connection between ascetic practice, addiction, and masochism is made using the ideas of Gabor Mate, a doctor who worked with addicts, and Anita Phillips, who practices masochism and writes in defense of this practice.

The Religious Explanation of Rudolf Otto

For many religious people mystical experience is something that comes from a different world. It is in no way a natural phenomenon. Rudolf Otto held this view. In *The Idea of the Holy,* he refers to the sacred as an object which he calls the *numen.* He

says that the *numen* is reached while a person is in a "*numinous* state of being."[1] During this state of being, the *numen* "grips or stirs the human mind." There is a "sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions [which may lead] to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy."[2]

Otto describes the *numen* as "*aweful*,"[sic] or full of awe, and overpowering, a kind of urgent energy. It is *aweful* because it is incomprehensible and it stirs a fear that is beyond dread simple because it is incomprehensible. Otto says that this feeling of awe "emerg[ed] in the mind of primal man" and is "the starting point for the entire religious development in history." This experience, he says, belongs only "to the spirit of man."[3]

The *numen* is overpowering and makes a person aware of their smallness, indeed, their "nothingness" next to this divine power. At this point the idea of "the annihilation of the self" enters. The only reality that is experienced is the *numen* and the self identifies with the *numen*. According to Otto, this experience of nothingness is the root of mysticism in any religion.[4] It is contrasted "with Being itself" yet it is "a very living factor." Not only is the *numen* other than nature, it is the "opposite of everything that is

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[1]. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational,* trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 6-7

[2]. Ibid., 12-13.

[3]. Ibid., 13-15.

[4]. Ibid., 19-22.

or can be thought of" but it has the quality of aliveness due to its "overbrimming religious emotion." For Otto, it is the "aspiration" of both Eastern and Western religion.[5]

Illusions: A Natural Phenomenon

Otto writes about the emotions experienced during a mystical experience but these experiences also affect the senses and sensing and emotion are connected in the functioning of the brain. Therefore this discussion on the neurophysiology of mysticism begins with the senses.

Seeing and hearing things, that others in your vicinity do not, is cause for concern for many. One might think or be thought of by others as crazy. Worse still, if one is religious, these apparitions might appear to come from the devil or evil spirits. A few, who might be considered lucky, believe and may be able to convince others that their visions and voices are from God or good spirits or some heavenly world.

Hallucinations, as Oliver Sacks calls them, are more common than most people think and there are neurophysiological explanations for them. Hallucinations come in all varieties. They can be visual, auditory, olfactory and even tactile. They can be the result of damage to the senses or damage to areas of the brain associated with each particular sense; for example, Charles Bonnet Syndrome (CBS) which is sometimes found in blind people.

CBS is "a reaction of the brain to the loss of sight." And it may not occur until many years after the person becomes blind. People with this syndrome are not crazy.

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[5]. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 29-30.

They have normal brains which are trying to compensate for eyes that no longer see.[6] Sometimes what people with CBS see is like a movie. There is never any interaction between the one who sees these scenes and the characters within the scene. More often, however, what is seen are "shapes and colors [and] sometimes patterns."[7]

The colored shapes and patterns that people with CBS see are also seen by people who suffer from migraine headaches. Sacks calls this "a visual migraine aura." He experiences this himself and describes his first experience of this phenomenon which happened to him when he was three or four. He describes the vision as "a shimmering light … with sharp, glittering, zigzagging borders and brilliant blue and orange colors." His mother, who was a doctor, was able to explain to him what was happening. She too had this experience. For her, there followed "a terrible headache." Sacks says that he was "lucky to be one of those people who got only the aura without the headache."[8]

This phenomenon was reported during sensory deprivation studies done in the 1960s.[9] Apparently there were those who believed it was abnormal. But according to Harry T. Hunt, these images are not malfunctions of the brain. These "branching angles,

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[6]. Oliver Sacks, *Hallucinations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 5.

[7]. Ibid., 10.

[8]. Ibid., 122-123.

I, myself, have seen this visual migraine aura and I once had a conversation with a man who has also seen it. Both of us had this experience after having surgery and this man told me that his doctor explained to him that this sometimes happens to people who have had surgery. It is one way that anesthesia can affect the brain. So it seems that there is more than one way to trigger this experience.

[9]. Marvin Zuckerman, "Hallucination, Reported Sensations, and Images," in *Sensory Deprivation: Fifteen Years of Research*, ed. John P. Zubek, Century Psychology Series (New York: Meredith Corporation, 1969), 85-94.

spirals, arcs, burst of stars, lattices and honeycombs" are "cognitive phenomena and the root processes of abstract metaphoric experience". They cannot be attributed to malfunction because they occur "in blind subjects, by direct electrical stimulation to the cortex."[10]

Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Aquili, and Vince Rause go into details as to, the way in which, not just sight, but all the senses produce impressions in the brain. Perceptions are "assembled" in three stages. Information from the senses first goes to a primary reception area. This information is refined in a secondary receptive area. Finally, the information is interpreted in an association area. The association area taps into memory and emotion to form an interpretation. Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause describe the formation of visual images and mentions the same abstract patterns as Sacks and Hunt. "A visual image originates in the electrochemical impulses streaming into the brain along the optic nerve. The first stop for these impulses once they arrive in the cortex is the primary visual area, where they are translated into crude visual elements—a jumble of abstract lines, shapes, and colors." According to Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, these patterns "can't be perceived by the conscious mind, but there is evidence that the brain becomes aware of them on an unconscious level." Evidence for this comes from people who have become blind due to damage of the primary visual area which "prevents visual input from reaching the secondary level." People with this kind of brain

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[10]. Harry T. Hunt, "Relations Between the Phenomena of Religious Mysticism (Altered States of Consciousness) and the Psychology of Thought: A Cognitive Psychology of States of Consciousness and the Necessity of Subjective States for Cognitive Theory," *Perception and Motor Skills* 61, no. 3, pt. 1 (August-December 1985): 914-919.

damage do not see in their conscious mind but they are able to navigate because of what their unconscious mind sees.[11]

How would Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause explain the migraine aura if, as they claim, the conscious mind cannot see the basic visual patterns? It would seem logical that the unconscious mind is intruding into the conscious mind. It would be similar to REM intrusion, the intrusion of the dream state into the waking state, which will be explained later in this chapter.[12]

What Sacks calls the migraine aura, J. David Lewis-Williams calls Navicular Entoptic Phenomena. Like Hunt and Sacks, Lewis-Williams associates this phenomenon with brain activity. All three see this phenomenon as having a connection to the natural function of the brain. Sacks cites Dominic Ffytche as "the first to make the connection between everyday sight and hallucinations. They share the same areas and pathways in the brain.[13]

Lewis-Williams makes a connection between these hallucinations and the images depicted in rock art and he writes about this in, *A Cosmos in Stone*. Lewis-Williams

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[11]. Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Aquili, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), 24-25.

[12]. It occurs to me that the unconscious mind intruding into the conscious mind may account for "extrasensory perception." These sensations may be coming from the primary areas of our perception assembly functions in the brain.

[13]. Sacks, *Hallucinations,* 24.

studies the rock art of the people of southern Africa which he reluctantly refers to as the San.[14]

Lewis-Williams's study of the rock art includes ethnography but also neuropsychological research on altered states of consciousness.[15] He sees the images depicted on the rocks as related to the entoptic mental images that occur during altered states of consciousness.[16] Though there are many different groups and languages among the people of this area Lewis-Williams is one of several researchers who see a "pan-San cognitive system." Lewis-Williams also associates the rock art with shamanism.[17]

The San shamans "induce trance by dancing, audio driving, intense concentration, and hyperventilation."[18] These techniques produce hallucinations that "derive from the

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[14]. Because San, or Bushman, communities speak many mutually unintelligible languages, there is no single indigenous word to cover all groups. "Bushman" is, in the view of some people, a pejorative or sexist word, although some San themselves do choose to use it. "San," a Nama (Khoenkhoen) word, is preferred by many, but by no means all, academic writers. Unfortunately, it means something like "vagabond" and is therefore also pejorative. There is no unanimity on which word should be used, and, as far as I can see, no way out of the dilemma with which history has presented us. In using "San," I explicitly reject any pejorative connotation. J. David Lewis-Williams, *A Cosmos in Stone: Interpreting Religion and Society through Rock Art* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002), 160n2.

[15]. Ibid., 137.

[16]. Ibid., 146.

[17]. Ibid., 139.

[18]. Ibid., 139.

structure of the human nervous system."[19] Techniques that include pain and sensory deprivation can also cause these hallucinations.[20] Lewis-Williams describes these hallucinated images in much the same way that Sacks does. They are "luminous, pulsating, expanding or contracting, blending, and changing geometric forms. These images "include zigzags, dots, grids, meandering lines and U shapes."[21] "They slowly expand until they disappear beyond the periphery of vision."[22] The brain tries to make sense of these images. And the sense that is made out of the images depends on the individual and the culture he belongs to.[23]

Lewis-Williams describes the San interpretation of an experience that sounds very much like the Kundalini experience of Hindu believers. San shamans say that "a supernatural potency" "boil[s] in their stomachs" and "rise[s] up their spines," "to explode in their heads." But they do not see this as an energy embodied within themselves. They associate this potency with dead animals who "release" this "potency so that the area around it becomes highly charged."[24]

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19. Ibid., 140. e.g., J. Eichmeier and O. Hofer, *Endogene Bilmuster* (Munich: Urban and Schwazenberg 1974); R .K. Siegel and M. E. Jarvik, "Drug-Induced Hallucinations in Animals and Man," in *Hallucinations: Behavior, Experience and Theory*, ed. R. K. Siegel and L. J. West (New York: John Wiley, 1975), 81-161; G. Asaad and B. Shapiro, "Hallucinations: Theoretical and Clinical Overview," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 143 (1986): 1088-97.

20. J. David Lewis-Williams, *A Cosmos in Stone*, 140.

21. Ibid., 140.

22. Ibid., 144.

23. Ibid., 142.

24. Ibid., 148.

The ability to have these kinds of experiences is not limited to modern humans. Lewis-Williams says that "the brains of anatomically modern Upper Paleolithic people were wired in the same way as those of all people living in the twentieth century."[25] He sees a relationship between Upper Paleolithic art and the San art which he studies. The style is similar and he believes that Upper Paleolithic art shows the same expressions of the navicular entoptic phenomena.[26] There is also "strong evidence that chimpanzees, baboons, monkeys, cats, dogs and other animals hallucinate suggesting that altered states of consciousness and hallucinations are a function of the mammalian, not just the human nervous system."[27]

REM Intrusion

Hallucinations can be a result of damage to the body or illness as well as techniques used by shamans but people often experience hallucinations as a result of stress. Sacks tells us the story of his friend Liz. Liz was so upset at the loss of her love that she decided to take her own life. She did not however because she heard a voice say to her, "No, You don't want to do that." "Remember that what you are feeling now you will not be feeling later." Then she had a vision, though not very clearly, of "a young man in eighteenth century dress." Liz believed that the voice and the vision of the young

[25]. J. David Lewis-Williams, *A Cosmos in Stone*, 164.

[26]. Ibid., 172.

[27]. Ibid., 175.

man came "from the deepest part of herself." Still she referred to this apparition as "her guardian angel."[28]

One of the most stressful situations in life is coming close to death. You might say that Sacks's friend Liz put herself in this situation when she decided to take her life; and that this added to the stress she was already under due to the loss of her love. Kevin Nelson, a neurologist, writes about near death experiences (NDEs) in *The Spiritual Doorway in the Brain*. Nelson did a study on NDEs. He argues that the NDE is brought about by the intrusion of the dream or rapid eye movement (REM) state of consciousness into waking consciousness. He calls this "REM intrusion" and suggests that this state of consciousness is brought about by crisis. REM intrusion is comparable to lucid dreaming, a state of consciousness in which waking consciousness intrudes on the dream state.

Just as the Navicular Entopic Phenomena was witnessed during the studies done on sensory deprivation during the 1960s, REM intrusion was also hinted at. More than one researcher had "suggested that some of the dramatic deprivation effects such as hallucination and disorganized thought processes occur[ed] while subjects [were] in a transitional state between drowsiness and alertness."[29] Sensory deprivation though not as extreme as an NDE, is also a crisis situation.

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[28]. Oliver Sacks, *Hallucinations*, 62-63.

[29]. John P. Zubek, "Physiology and Biochemical Effects," in *Sensory Deprivation: Fifteen Years of Research*, ed. John P. Zubek, Century Psychology Series (New York: Meredith Corporation, 1969), 266.

The parts of the brain that are active during the NDE are the more ancient parts of the brain. The brainstem for example, "developed early on in evolution, about 300 million years ago, and it has changed very little from species to species since that time. From rats to humans, the brainstems of all mammals are curiously similar."[30] Like Lewis-Williams, Nelson believes that animals may also experience REM intrusion as well as other phenomena associated with mystical experience.[31]

Bliss

In his book, Nelson describes a crisis situation and how the body reacts. The switch that controls whether the brain is in a state of wakefulness or dreaming is in the brain stem. Normally these states of consciousness are separate but during crisis "a portion of the REM switch called the v1PAG is activated." A neurologist, Cliff Saper, discovered that the v1PAG is "activated when we experience pain, low amounts of oxygen in the blood, or blood loss that causes low blood pressure." When the v1PAG is activated we become wide awake and our body is filled with Nor-adrenaline which puts us in a "full fight or flight mode." But if the pain or blood loss is too severe, an opposite response occurs. Nor-adrenalin is replaced by acetylcholine and the whole body slows down. This has been "hardwired into our brains" as a survival strategy when danger is inescapable. We "disengage … play dead, cease to struggle."[32]

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[30]. Kevin Nelson, *The Spiritual Doorway in the Brain: A Neurologist's Search for the God Experience* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 48.

[31]. Ibid., 258.

[32]. Ibid., 198.

Nelson tells the story of David Livingstone, "the famous Scottish missionary … who found himself in the jaws of a lion." Livingstone felt no pain or terror. At the same time he was curious about what was going on around him. Yet he said he had a "sense of dreaminess."[33] Livingston believed this was a gift from God.

Nelson explains that during "fight or flight events the brain stem sends a torrent of information along to the amygdala, which relays that information to other regions in the limbic system, including the prefrontal region."[34] The interesting thing here is that the limbic system is also part of the reward system in the brain. A part of the brain called the orbital prefrontal, which is part of the limbic system, "assigns value to pleasure and reward."[35] This would include spiritual values. Nelson tells us that "much of our spirituality arises from arousal, limbic and reward system." These systems are ancient and are found in the great apes and other mammals. Feelings experienced during mystical experiences may be beyond words simply because these ancient systems evolved before there was language, at least the spoken varieties of language.[36] The reward system is a survival mechanism. It keeps us healthy and it connects us to our environment. The reward system is related to mystical experience derived from ascetic practices.

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[33]. Kevin Nelson, *The Spiritual Doorway in the Brain*, 199.

[34]. Ibid., 178.

[35]. Ibid., 179.

[36]. Ibid., 258.

Addiction

Nelson says, there is a dark side to the reward system; "it's the basis for our addictions, not just to chocolate but to heroin, cocaine, and gambling."[37] This is something that the physician, Gabor Mate, is very familiar with. Gabor Mate worked with addicts in a Downtown Eastside Vancouver clinic and he admits to an addiction of his own. He explains that he is addicted to "buying compact discs."[38] Mate says "there are as many addictions as there are people." His list of addictions includes substances like sugar and caffeine but also activities like aerobic exercise, or doing crossword puzzles. He also lists watching sports or news programs on television as possible addictions. What may surprise some is that religion and the practice of meditation are also on his list.[39] Can we put fasting and self-mortification on this list as well?

That there is such a long list of possible addictions suggests that there is some underlying mechanism at work. Mate quotes Dr. Aviel Goodman who writes, "All addictive disorders, whatever types of behaviors that characterize them, share the underlying psychological process, which I call, the *addictive process.*"[40]

Nelson tells us that there is something different about "the brain switch linking waking and REM consciousness" in people who have experienced the crisis of an NDE.

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[37]. Gabor Mate, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 179-180.

[38]. Ibid., 227.

[39]. Ibid., 223.

[40]. Aviel Goodman, "Sexual Addiction: Nosology, Diagnosis, Etiology, and Treatment," in *Substance Abuse*: *A Comprehensive Text*, ed. Joyce H. Lowinson et al. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins, 2005), 516.

"They possess an arousal system predisposed to blending REM and waking consciousness."[41] Gabor Mate tells us that there is something different about the brains of people who are more susceptible to addiction. This difference can be viewed "by means of positron-emission tomography (PET) scans and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)." There is less white matter, the fatty tissue that covers the connecting fibers of nerve cells. There are also fewer nerve cells and less grey matter. But Mate's focus is on chemistry. "Dopamine [is] a key brain chemical 'messenger' that plays a central role in all forms of addictions." Addicts have fewer dopamine receptors and this makes them prone to finding outside sources of chemicals that are similar; or engaging in behaviors that stimulate the release of dopamine in the brain.[42] The difference in the brain and brain chemistry of addicts is caused by stress, just as the difference in the brain stem of people who have had NDEs is caused by stress.

According to Mate, differences in the brains of addicts can begin even before birth. Those susceptible to addictive behaviors start out with a different brain. He is not talking about genetics here. He is talking about stress or lack of nurturing. This is only beginning to come into the awareness of the scientific community. "The role of the environment in brain development isn't taught in many medical schools."[43] Children who grow up in stressful environments have less dopamine receptors and are more susceptible to addiction.

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[41]. Kevin Nelson, *The Spiritual Doorway in the Brain*, 200-202.

[42]. Gabor Mate, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, 150-151.

[43]. Ibid., 188.

When describing addiction in *In The Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, Gabor Mate, tells us that there is "no addiction center in the brain," but that there are "three major networks," the *opioid apparatus*, the *dopamine system*, and the *self-regulation system*.[44] The opioid apparatus is a pleasure-reward system, which produces endorphins that soothe "both physical and emotional pain." But it is involved with more than soothing pain. It is involved with our very survival. Endorphins "regulate the autonomic nervous system" which controls organs like the brain, heart, lungs and intestines. Endorphins influence not only moods but also sleep, bowel movements and the immune system. Endorphins also enable us to bond with others. They help to maintain bonds between mother and child as well as other social relationships. They "trigger feelings of intense pleasure" such as those involved with sexual intercourse.[45]

The dopamine system is "as powerful as the opioid attachment/reward system." Dopamine, a neurotransmitter, associated with the ventral tegmental apparatus (located in the midbrain, and the nucleus accumbens ("located on the underside of the front of the brain") is a substance connected with desire and consummation. Its natural function is to motivate us to learn new things and reinforce behavior that enhances our survival. The consummation of a desired act or substance gives us pleasure, even to the point of "euphoria and elation." This is the reason it plays such a large role in addiction. Strong desires may turn into cravings.[46]

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[44]. Gabor Mate, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, 158.

[45]. Ibid., 159-163.

[46]. Ibid., 167-169.

For those who start out with fewer dopamine receptors, trying to fix the problem with artificial dopamine substances only makes the problem worse. The brain in its attempt to stabilize, prunes away more receptors thus creating a vicious cycle. Addicts are never satisfied.[47] Addicts may even become addicted to their own stress hormones.[48]

The third system involved in addiction is the self-regulating system which is located in the cortex of the brain or the gray matter. This is the more evolved part of the brain. This area of the brain is involved in impulse control. It inhibits "inappropriate" behavior but does not produce appropriate behavior.[49] The orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), near the eye socket, is linked to addiction. Many studies show this link.[50] The OFC does not function well in addicts, whether they are "intoxicated or not." It is abundantly supplied with opioid and dopamine receptors. It is connected to the 'limbic (emotional) centers," and evaluates sensory input associating the input with memories. In the OFC there is an "implicit memory system." "Aspects [of this system] are present at birth." Mate speculates that if emotional memories are present at birth they are likely present before. We make judgments based on past and present experience through the OFC. A person who has not had much in the way of nurturing, such as many drug addicts, may find that drugs offer them more comfort then they have ever known.[51]

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[47]. Gabor Mate, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, 151-155.

[48]. Ibid., 397.

[49]. Ibid, 176.

[50]. Ibid., 177.

[51]. Ibid., 177-181.

Masochism

Referring back to Mate's list of possible addictions, we know that, while it is possible to become addicted to substances, these substances are not necessary to become an addict. The body produces its own drugs. "Endogenous opioids and their receptors have been found in all species examined, both vertebrate and invertebrate."[52] In humans, these opioids can be "found in many parts of the body but [they] are chiefly located in pain pathways and limbic parts of the brain," so writes June Rathbone in *Anatomy of Masochism*.[53] Opioids are activated by everyday activities, the most obvious being sexual activity; but they are also activated by eating, drinking and [other] physical exercise. Opioids are present during pregnancy in both mother and child, at birth and also at death.[54]

Opioids are pain killers. This means that "they are actually produced by pain [or] stress." Whether this stress is physical or emotional, pleasurable, such as the stress involved in sexual activity, or painful, opioids relieve stress "by reducing neural excitability." From studies done on the *vas deferens* of mice, it seems evident that "the relief of stress-produced nervous tension and the release of sexual tension in orgasm are parallel processes in both of which endogenous opioids participate." Rathbone's conclusion is "that endogenous opioids must play a role in the etiology and practice of

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[52]. June Rathbone, *Anatomy of Masochism,* The Plenum Series in Social/Clinical Psychology, ed. C. R. Snyder (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2001), 268.

[53]. Ibid., 267.

[54]. Ibid, 267-268.

the masochistic perversion."[55] It is an addiction in which the practitioner is addicted to their own internal drugs. And as with other addictions the masochist may accept that his or her behavior is addictive.

Anita Phillips, a masochist herself, has written *A Defense of Masochism*. She defends masochism as a "road to intense pleasure and renewal." She does not believe that this practice is pathological. She calls it "psychologically healing."[56] She says that masochism can be "a springboard for artistic and spiritual engagement."[57] But at the same time she implies that sex must be dirty to be good.[58]

Phillips suggests that there is some kind of fulfillment in needing to be "less than." It is what someone who is in a position of power might need.[59] It is a little like wanting to be taken care of by an authoritarian parent. But she does not see it this way. For her, it is about people who are overachievers, people who push themselves too hard. These are the people who need this kind of relationship.[60] I wonder why she does not see the pathology here.

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[55]. June Rathbone, *Anatomy of Masochism*, 267-269.

[56]. Anita Phillips, *A Defense of Masochism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 3.

[57]. Ibid., 5

[58]. Ibid., 10.

[59]. Ibid., 13.

[60]. Ibid., 3.

According to Phillips masochism "is about being hurt in exactly the right way and at the right time, within a sophisticated, highly artificial scenario."[61] "The masochist is a conscious manipulator not a victim."[62] She does not connect her behavior with a painful childhood. But I wonder. She talks about "a desire for solitude, masquerading as an addiction to suffering." She says there is no commitment with the lover and this is part of the pain. A masochist's partner is someone who will not be around for long and this is sad.[63] So along with the physical pain there is also emotional pain. She suggests "that masochistic love is passionate, sad and somehow solitary, rather than affectionate, engaging and joyful."[64] It may be that Phillips engages in masochism because it gives her intense pleasure. She may indeed be a manipulator. But it may also be true that her practice of masochism has changed her brain in the same way that a drug addict changes his brain with his drugs. The drug addict cannot find satisfaction in the ordinary stimulations of life and tries to fix this with drugs that only make the problem worse. I believe that Phillips cannot find pleasure in ordinary sex and has become addicted to her own endogenous opioids.

Phillips suggests a connection exists between masochism and mysticism. While she feels that "mysticism is a specific experience and should not be confused with

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[61]. Anita Phillips, *A Defense of Masochism*, 13.

[62]. Ibid., 19.

[63]. Ibid., 58.

[64]. Ibid., 60.

orgasm," she does categorize it as an "erotic experience.[65]" The language of masochists and mystics is very similar. Phillips does not agree with Freud's assessment of masochism as pathological. But she says that when Freud talks about masochism being "a combination of death instinct and libido" this is his "insight."[66] She talks about pain "spilling over" into pleasure.[67] Mystics talk this way as well.

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[65]. Anita Phillips, *A Defense of Masochism*, 150-151.

[66]. Ibid., 32.

[67]. Ibid., 58.

CHAPTER 3

THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

This chapter presents two examples of mystics, one from the Western tradition and one from the Eastern tradition. Teresa of Avila is the example from the Western tradition, because she is considered by many, including William James, to be an expert on mystical experience.[1] In her spiritual autobiography, as well as in *Interior Castle,* she describes her experiences. Teresa's experience is contrasted with that of Karen Armstrong, a modern woman who was a nun for seven years. Armstrong's experience gives us a different perspective and helps to make the case against asceticism. Gopi Krishna is the example from the Eastern tradition because, like Teresa of Avila, he wrote a spiritual autobiography. His experience is contrasted with my own. All four of these examples show that similar experiences can lead to different beliefs. The chapter concludes by showing how these experiences can be interpreted in a scientific way rather than a religious way.

Teresa of Avila

Teresa of Avila was "born in Avila Spain, on March 28, 1515, and died on October 4, 1582." She was "canonized a saint in 1622" and given the highest honor,

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[1]. William James, *The Variety of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature,* The Modern Library (New York: Random House, 1994), 445.

"Doctor of the Catholic Church," in 1970.[2] She came from an aristocratic family. But like many Castilians of the time she had Jewish heritage. Her grandfather Juan Sanchez was from a family that converted to Christianity in the fourteenth century. Sanchez was "the name of many converso Jews."[3] Jewish heritage was considered a blemish, impure blood, and it was for this reason that Teresa's family kept this a secret.

Teresa's religion "taught her that life on Earth was only a test: if she was chaste and virtuous, she would someday ascend to heaven; if she was immodest and sinful, she would descend to hell."[4] Life was an "illusion." Believing this, she convinced her eleven year old brother "to travel to the land of the Moors," with her when she was only seven. Where, exactly, the land of the Moors was she did not know but she believed that if she and her brother could get there they could give themselves up as martyrs and go straight to heaven.[5] Of course, she and her brother never made it to the land of the Moors. They were rescued by an uncle and brought home to worried parents.

This episode did not cure Teresa of her romantic notion of religion and martyrdom. Soon afterward, "she was busily at work, in the family orchard, building stone hermitages where she—and her siblings, if they obeyed their prioress—could savor

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[2]. Carolyn Myss, *Entering the Castle: An Inner Path to God and Your Soul* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 43.

[3]. Cathleen Medwick, *Teresa of Avila: The Progress of a Soul* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 11.

[4]. Ibid., 8.

[5]. Ibid., 9-10.

the austerities of monastic life."[6] Her idea of romance changed however when she became an adolescent. She began to read her mother's romance novels and even wrote one of her own which she called *The Knight of Avila*.[7]

Teresa was a beautiful girl and she tells us, in her autobiography, that she took pride in her appearance. As a young person she felt this was a sin but when she writes about this as a nun, she calls it "inordinate." She also talks about her "questionable cousins" whom she felt were a bad influence. "It's not that such people are wicked in themselves," she writes, "but they have a way of arousing wicked desires in others like me." She felt her soul "being pulled into a vortex of evil." She felt her father's disapproval.[8]

Teresa's first stay in a convent was not a matter of choice for her. She was sent to "a nearby Augustinian convent that ran a kind of finishing school for genteel young women boarders." She was sixteen years old and her mother had died three years earlier. Being that there was no woman at home to watch over her, her father thought this was the best thing for her.[9] Teresa tells us that she was "a favorite of the nuns" and she was influenced by them in a positive way. So when it became time for her to marry, she

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[6]. Cathleen Medwick, *Teresa of Avila*., 10.

[7]. Ibid., 16-17.

[8]. Teresa of Avila, *The Book of My Life*, trans. Mirabai Starr, with a forward by Tessa Bielecki (Boston: New Seeds, 2007), 8-10.

[9]. Cathleen Medwick, *Teresa of Avila*, 17-19.

chose to become a nun instead. She writes that she was "resistant to the idea of becoming a nun [but] the prospect of marriage repelled me even more."[10]

Teresa established several religious foundations. This was a great accomplishment but she gives all credit to God.[11] This was not just a matter of humility. She accepted the notion of female inferiority that was prevalent at the time. She often said and wrote negative things about herself and women in general. "Throughout the *Vida*, Teresa disparages herself as a *mujercilla,* a worthless little woman." But what is worse, she saw herself as wicked and in need of penance.[12] Worse still is that she advised others to see themselves in this way. In *Interior Castle* she uses the image of a silkworm spinning a cocoon to explain the way one gains the favors of God. The silkworm shuts out the outside world and is transformed inside the cocoon. "My daughters!" she writes: "Let us renounce our self-love and self-will, and our attachment to earthly things. Let us practice penance, prayer, mortification, obedience, and all the good works that you know of …. Let the silkworm die—let it die …. Then we shall see God and shall ourselves be completely hidden in His greatness as is this little worm in its cocoon."[13]

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[10]. Teresa of Avila, *The Book of My Life*, 12-13.

[11]. Cathleen Medwick, *Teresa of Avila*, 176.

[12]. Ibid., 37.

[13]. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, ed. and trans. E. Allison Peers (1946; repr., New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 2007), 73.

The Mystical Experiences of Teresa of Avila

Teresa of Avila experienced what she believed to be favors from God. But there is also a scientific explanation for her experiences. From the very beginning of her entry into the convent her physical being was being primed for mystical experience. Diet, illness, isolation, prayer, and self-mortification were transforming her. Teresa writes, "My new life brought many changes, including in my diet, which affected my health." She began to suffer from "mysterious ailments" and underwent "treatments so drastic that they nearly killed [her]." She believed that these treatments caused "permanent damage" and she was sent to her sister's house to recuperate. While at her sister's house Teresa pursued the prayer of quiet. She used, as a guide, a book by Francisco de Osuna, *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*. She considered her nine month stay with her sister as a kind of "isolation." It was at this time that she believed she first experienced the "Prayer of Union" though only for a short time.[14]

Teresa was not choosing her diet. She was not choosing to become ill. She was not choosing her treatments. What she thought of as the prayer of union was spontaneous, just as the experiences of the people that Oliver Sacks writes about in *Illusions*. But diet, fasting, isolation and even illness have all been used by mystics and shamans to gain entry into, what they believed to be, the spiritual world. Teresa may not have been aware of this at the time. She was only twenty. But others with beliefs that

[14]. Teresa of Avila, *The Book of My Life*, 19-20.

were different from hers had used these methods purposely. Lewis-Williams believes that these methods among others have been used since Paleolithic times.[15]

The most famous mystical experience of Teresa of Avila has been portrayed in sculpture, by Gian Lorenzo Bernini: *The Ecstasy of Teresa* is in the Cornaro chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome.[16] This statue is a visual representation of something Teresa wrote about in her *Vida*:

> I saw that he held a great golden spear. The end of the iron tip seemed to be on fire. Then the angel plunged the flaming spear through my heart again and again until it penetrated my innermost core. When he withdrew it, it felt like he was carrying the deepest part of me away with him. He left me utterly consumed with love of God. The pain was so intense that it made me moan. The sweetness this anguish carries with it is so bountiful that I could never wish for it to cease. The soul will not be content with anything less than God.
>
> The pain is spiritual, not physical. Still the body does not fail to share some of it, maybe even a lot of it. The love exchanged between the soul and her God is so sweet that I beg him in his goodness to give a taste of it to anyone who thinks I might be lying.
>
> On the day that this vision appeared to me, I wandered around in a kind of stupor for many hours. I didn't want to look at anything or say

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[15]. J. David Lewis-Williams, *A Cosmos in Stone*, 175-177.

[16]. Cathleen Medwick, *Teresa of Avila*, 59.

> anything. All I wanted was to embrace my pain and hold it close. This was greater glory than any created thing could ever offer me.
>
> Sometimes it was the Lord's will for these raptures to be so intense that I could not resist them, even if I was among other people. To my great dismay, people started talking about them. As time went on, the suffering that accompanied the visions grew softer. But in the beginning, the pain could be so excruciating that the Lord lifted my soul and carried her into ecstasy. In that place there is no room for suffering. It is pure joy.[17]

Not only does this passage sound sexual it also sounds masochistic. Cathleen Medwick tells us that Teresa flogged herself. She "kept her *disciplina* with her even when she traveled." She wore a hair shirt. She even sent a hair shirt to a friend.[18] Without knowing it Teresa was practicing a kind of masochistic behavior. Although she said that excessive punishment was "a sign of pride," her practices of self-mortification were severe enough to cause visions and ecstasies. Her body was reacting to the pain and stress of her ascetic practice. Her brain was stimulated in the same way as that of a masochist. Even though her genitals were not stimulated, the end results were the similar. She bypassed her genitals but had a very similar kind of climactic experience. This, as I will show below, is supported by neuroscience.

According to Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Aquili, and Vince Rause, "The very neurological structures and pathways involved in transcendent experience—including the

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[17]. Teresa of Avila, *The Book of My Life*, 225-226.

[18]. Cathleen Medwick, *Teresa of Avila*, 25, 205.

arousal, quiescent, and limbic systems—evolved primarily to link sexual climax to the powerful sensation of orgasm." Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause go on to state the differences. Orgasm is a result of tactile stimulation while the transcendent experience involves "higher cognitive structures." But it is interesting to note that both experiences are a result of rhythmic repetition. In the case of orgasm this is tactile while transcended states can be induced by the simple repetition of a word or sound.[19]

Teresa was not aware of the way her body and brain were functioning. She saw her experiences in terms of her spirit and the spirit of God. But the modern day Karen Armstrong *did* become aware of the connection between the "discipline" and masochism.

Karen Armstrong

Karen Armstrong, who is known for her many books on religion, spent seven years as a nun. She left her home in Birmingham, England to enter a convent when she was seventeen in September of 1962. She was "filled with excitement and enthusiasm," and had a sincere desire "to find God." She believed she would be transformed and that she would have a special closeness to God. She "would be serene, joyful, inspired, and inspiring—perhaps even a saint."[20] But things did not turn out as she expected. She did not have an easy time of it. She longed to be filled with God.[21] But she could not empty herself. She could not become nothingness as she was instructed. She did not want to

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[19]. Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Aquili, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 125-126.

[20]. Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), vii-viii.

[21]. Karen Armstrong, *Through the Narrow Gate: A Memoir of Spiritual Discovery* (New York: St. Martin Griffin, 2005), 95.

be—nothing.[22] Still one day her superior told her that she was ready "for the next stage" in her religious development. She would do more than eat things she did not like, get up earlier than she liked, or "endure the normal physical hardships of life." Now, she would practice "corporal mortification." She was given a "discipline," a whip to beat herself with.[23] She planned to do a good job of it since she considered herself "rebellious." She wanted "to make [her] body the slave to [her] will," believing that, if she could not do this, she could not "possibly love God." After beating herself for some time she reached a point at which she felt no pain. There was "just this dark and reckless excitement that grew steadily, blotting out everything but itself. And then there was a huge sense of release."[24]

Armstrong was "perplexed" by this experience. She felt "transformed," "clean and hollowed out." But the experience had nothing to do with God. The experience had "blotted out everything but that strange drowning sense. That peculiar pleasure." The experience had blotted out everything—including God. "The satisfaction had given way to a gnawing restlessness and some odd craving. Craving for what?" She felt the need to talk to her superior.[25] But when she told her superior about the experience she was made to feel as if there was something wrong with her, not the "discipline." She would just

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[22]. Karen Armstrong, *Through the Narrow Gate*, 148.

[23]. Ibid., 173.

[24]. Ibid., 174.

[25]. Ibid., 174-175.

have to beat herself harder. Added to this, she would also "be fasting once a month from now on, keeping the bodily appetite low."[26]

But one day she would actually tell her superior, "Reverend Mother, I don't want to take the discipline anymore." Self-flagellation was supposed to free the body from its passions but Armstrong saw it "whipping those passions in an unnatural direction." She told Revered Mother, "I don't think God wants me to do it." She said, "The Vatican Council seems to think that a lot of these practices are no longer suitable for people today." And then she finally said what she really thought. "To me it seems that flagellation is a means—a perverted means—of sexual satisfaction." She asked Reverend Mother what she thought. And Reverend Mother said "I don't—you don't—none of us knows what we think until the General Chapter tells us".[27]

Reverend Mother may not have known what to think about Armstrong's experience but the feminist Luce Irigaray's description of the experience of western female mystics, in "La Mysterique," matches that of Armstrong's description of her own experience. Irigaray describes the violence of the soul losing itself but says that the soul "does not feel raped by God … because He does not restrict her orgasm." In fact, the "divine companion never tires of praising her and encouraging her (auto)eroticism that has been so miraculously rediscovered."[28] Though Irigaray describes the masochistic behavior of the mystic: The way she "strik[es] herself so terrible, thrust[s] sharp points

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[26]. Karen Armstrong, *Through the Narrow Gate,* 177.

[27]. Ibid., 237-238.

[28]. Luce Irigaray, "La Mysterique," in *French Feminists on Religion: A Reader*, ed. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith L. Poxon (London: Routledge, 2002), 38.

into her stomach, burn[s] her body to put out the fire of lust, searing her whole frame, using these extreme actions both to calm and to arouse her sleeping passions," it seems that Irigaray sees something positive in this behavior. "Pain enables [the mystic] to feel herself again."[29]

Irigaray sees mysticism as connected to the sphere of women. She thinks of the soul as feminine. Mysticism offered women a public platform. It was "the only place in the history of the West in which wom[en] could speak and act publicly." This is ironic since (auto)eroticism, the term she uses to describe the mystics behavior, is a very private act. But, for Irigaray, ascetic practice is a way of breaking free from the logical prison that patriarchy has built for us. "The problem [she says] is to break down the wall around the male," who has defined himself "in a circularity that knows no end except the return over and over again, upon itself/himself."[30] But (auto)eroticism has the same focus. How can it be a way out?

Armstrong did finally experience what, at first, she believed to be God. She had never expected "visions or voices." These things were only for saints. But the theory was that the practice of prayer would lead to a sense of the presence of God. "Gradually the soul would be drawn into higher states of prayer, into reaches of silence, and into a mysterious state that lay beyond the reaches of thought and feeling." But *she* never felt God's closeness until she became ill. "It began with a smell … a sweet but sulfury aroma." Then there were fainting spells and unconsciousness. No one understood that

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[29]. Luce Irigaray, "La Mysterique," 36.

[30]. Ibid., 30-31.

she was ill. Her superiors "assumed that [these symptoms] were caused by [her] unruly emotions." But the symptoms "rarely [occurred] when [she] was upset." She came to believe that she was "displaying some subconscious need for notice, love, or intimacy."[31] She went to therapy. Then one day, after she had left the convent, God came to her in the Baker Street train station, or so she thought. There was the familiar smell and taste but then:

> Suddenly—at last—all the conflicting pieces of the pattern seemed to fuse into a meaningful whole. I had entered a new dimension of pure joy, fulfillment, and peace: the world seemed transfigured, and its ultimate significance—so obvious and yet inexpressible—was revealed. This was God. But no sooner had I realized this than I began to fall down the familiar dark tunnel into oblivion.[32]

Armstrong was taken to Middlesex Hospital and told that she had "suffered an epileptic seizure." At first she felt despair but as the doctor interviewed her about her symptoms she began to feel a sense of relief. She "was not mad." "The world had been given back to" her, she "could take charge of [her] life.[33]

Armstrong lost her belief in a personal God but not her interest in God or transcendent experience. She came to find "in study, the ecstasy that [she] had hoped to

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[31]. Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase*, 42-48.

[32]. Ibid., 178.

[33]. Ibid., 179-182.

find in those long hours of prayer as a young nun."[34] She has written many books on religion though she is no longer an orthodox believer. She believes in compassion. She believes, that "compassion has been advocated by all the great faiths because it has been found to be the safest and the surest way to enlightenment."[35] "The essence of religious life," she says is "Hillel's Golden Rule."[36] "Our task [according to her interpretation of the Upanishads] is to learn to see the sacred dimension in everything around us—including our fellow men and women."[37]

Armstrong explains that she was "one of the last people to be trained according to the old system" of self-mortification. But John Cornwell tells us that, though it may not be common in the West, practices of self-mortification are still maintained. For example, "at St. Patrick's Purgatory Island in Donegal Ireland," the tradition of prayer, sleep deprivation, fasting and self-mortification continues. Pilgrims spend the whole night praying in the church, then walk barefoot over rocks during the day. Their pilgrimage lasts three days and in all this time they have but one small meal.[38] These rituals are performed to subdue the appetites of the body but as Armstrong's experience shows us this is not the end result. For all the "disciplining" of the body, especially the sexual appetite, the body reasserts itself.

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[34]. Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase,* 287.

[35]. Ibid., 296.

[36]. Ibid., 272.

[37]. Ibid., 302.

[38]. John Cornwell, *The Dark Box: A Secret History of Confession* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 8-9.

Armstrong is a modern woman and because her experience was so close to present time, a time in which we are more knowledgeable about how the body works, we can see, as she discovered, that self-mortification leads not to God but an experience that, if not sexual, is very close to it. This is just what the mystic is so determined to deny. Not only is this response erotic, it is also addictive, the "gnawing restlessness" and the "odd craving" as Armstrong called it. Armstrong sums this up very well in a comment she makes after quoting from a letter of Saint Jerome in *The Gospel According to Women*:

> Jerome positively revels in this account, looking back to his desert days with a definite nostalgia. His oratory was quite simple "a place of torture for [his] unhappy flesh." It does not need much psychological perception to see that what is being set up before us as virtue is extremely perverse and masochistic behavior …. The body has a life of its own and if you ill treat it like this it will kick back; sexuality is not something that you can simple lock away and forget about. Either it will erupt in sick hallucinations or it will fester and go bad. There is something repulsive about the relish with which Jerome describes the hideous vitality of his sexuality—it is like raging "fire" it "bubbles"—coursing through his emaciated and corpselike body. Jerome may seem extreme—even mad—but his hatred of the body is by no means eccentric. It is not unusual in the

lives of saints, who discovered most ingenious ways of torturing the body, and putting it to death, which is what 'mortification' means.[39]

Gopi Krishna

While the Western tradition denies the connection between sexuality and mysticism, there are traditions in the East that celebrate this connection—in some respects at least. Wendy Doniger writes in *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Myth of Siva*, that the god Siva is both sexual and ascetic. In myths about Siva, he expresses both of these aspects of himself in extreme ways. Both extremes affect the people of earth. In one myth, when Siva destroys Kama, a god of desire, the world is on the brink of extinction. Siva needs to mate to keep the cycle of life going. But his sexuality is also a problem. "Siva's excessive sexual behavior weakens him so that he is unable to conquer demons"[40]

Siva is sometimes in balance but this is also a problem. One image shows Siva making love to his wife Parvati for a thousand years. This act is motionless. Siva is in a state of indifference. He feels no desire for Parvati but continues to make love to her. There is no orgasm and no release of seed. Siva is in complete control of his sexuality.[41] But Siva's balance is a problem for the human world which must go through cycles of creation and destruction. Doniger uses the image of a pendulum to describe these cycles.

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[39]. Karen Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Women: Christianity's Creation of the Sex War in the West* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 25.

[40]. Wendy [O'Flaherty] Doniger, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Myth of Siva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 296.

[41]. Ibid., 262.

The pendulum is never still. It swings back and forth with only instantaneous moments of balance.

What Siva is doing in his motionless lovemaking to Parvati is called *tantra*. In this practice the seed is believed to be absorbed mentally rather than ejaculated. But "the seed must be stirred sexually before it can be mentally absorbed."[42] *Tantra* is a homeopathic remedy. "Like an alcoholic who is able to have just one drink," the practitioner of *tantra* can make love with detachment.[43]

What Doniger calls the absorption of the seed is what practitioners of *tantra* believe to be the transformation of semen into a form of energy known as *prana* or *kundalini*. In 1970 Gopi Krishna wrote a spiritual biography which he called *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man*. In this book he described what he believed to be the awakening of this energy in his body. He says that he "felt a stream of light entering [his] body through the spinal cord."[44] At the time he felt he had "a vision of the divine."[45] He believed that the source of this energy was reproductive fluid or semen, which was converted "into a radiant vital essence of high potency which, racing along the nerve fibers as well as the spinal canal, nourished the brain and the organs."[46]

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[42]. Wendy [O'Flaherty] Doniger, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Myth of Siva*, 261.

[43]. Ibid., 260.

[44]. Gopi Krishna, *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man*, comm. James Hillman and forward by Gene Kiefer (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), 12.

[45]. Ibid., 14.

[46]. Ibid., 163.

Gopi Krishna felt this radiant energy as a result of meditation as well as self-mortification. Over the next fifteen years, he experienced a series of highs and lows. There were changes in the way his sensory organs perceived the world. There was a ringing in his ears. At one point he saw everything "as if [he was] viewing the world through a mental haze."[47] He felt a detachment from loved ones. He felt "purged … clean of worldly love."[48] Eventually he moved from a state of spiritual "intoxication to one of sobriety" in which he realized that he need not deny his feelings.[49] He came to the conclusion that "a reasonable control over appetites … proved a surer and safer way to spiritual unfolding than any amount of self-mortification or abnormal religious fervor."[50] He began to look on the whole process as an evolution of the body which all humans would go through and he felt compelled to tell people of this. This new body, he believed, would accommodate a more moral personality.

Contrary to the belief of Gopi Krishna, that mystical experience is a sign of the evolution of man to a higher state of consciousness, many of the parts of the brain that are active during these experiences are actually the more ancient parts of the brain. The brainstem, for example, "began developing early on in evolution, about 300 million years ago, and it has changed very little from species to species since that time. From rats to

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[47]. Gopi Krishna, *Kundalini,* 140.

[48]. Ibid., 217.

[49]. Ibid., 225.

[50]. Ibid., 234.

humans *all* mammals are curiously similar."[51] But evolution does have something to do with the experience of light and euphoria.

According to the psychologist, Harry T. Hunt, altered states of consciousness may have evolved from "tonic immobility," caused by fear. Tonic immobility "is found in animals from mammals, reptiles, and fish to crustaceans and even insects. It occurs under circumstances where a creature is overwhelmed by a catastrophe that cannot be assimilated or mastered." In humans this becomes "the immobile trance of catatonic and deep meditation and ecstatic states."[52] What is unique to humans is the meaning that we give to the experience and a kind of perception known as synaesthesia. Synaesthesis is the fusion of sense perceptions. Hunt says that synaesthesia brings about the emergent, recombinatory, creative features of the human mind."[53]

If Gopi Krishna had a better understanding of how his body functioned, he would have known that it is impossible for semen to be transformed into energy that makes its way up the spinal cord to the brain. What are actually being transported to the brain through the nerves are opiates which the body produces. On a cellular level altered states are the result of chemistry.

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[51]. Kevin Nelson, *The Spiritual Doorway in the Brain*, 48.

[52]. Harry T. Hunt, "A Cognitive Psychology of Mystical and Altered-State Experience," *Perception and Motor Skills* 58, monograph supplement (1984): 497.

[53]. Harry T. Hunt, "Relations Between the Phenomena of Religious Mysticism (Altered States of Consciousness) and the Psychology of Thought," 928.

Candace Pert discovered the opiate receptor "in the early 1970s, when [she] found a way to measure it and thereby prove its existence."[54] There are many different kinds of proteins that act as receptors and they are found on the surface of every cell in the body. It is hard to imagine but there are thousands upon thousands of these proteins on each cell. For example, "a typical neuron (nerve cell) may have millions of receptors on its surface." Information is relayed to the cell through these receptors by way of other proteins called ligands. Ligands are like keys that fit into receptors and open the cell wall to chemical information.[55]

Opiate receptors are found "in the gut and immune system, as well as in the brain."[56] In the brain "they are found in … the limbic system … the part of the brain classically known to contain the emotional circuitry."[57] Opiate receptors are also found "in the frontal lobes of the cerebral cortex of the human brain." They are found in the bodies of animals "even insects and other invertebrates could be shown to have opiate receptors."[58] The body's opiates are responsible for the bliss one feels during religious experience.

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[54]. Candace B. Pert, *Molecules of Emotion: Why You Feel the Way You Feel* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 21; though pharmacologists, such as Paul Ehrlich, *believed in* receptors, they "had no real evidence."

[55]. Ibid., 23.

[56]. Ibid., 178.

[57]. Ibid., 86.

[58]. Ibid., 134.

Like many people I have experienced the light, heat and bliss that many associate with mystical experience. This happened quite spontaneously during the night. My children and I had gone to an ashram with Daddy. There was a group meditation. Nothing spectacular happened. But for the rest of the day I felt this pressure between my eyes. During the night, however, I was awakened by a bright light in my head and a sensation of heat throughout my body. There was also this—blissful feeling. The only way I could describe it was that it was some kind of mental orgasm. I was uncomfortable with this description until I read the Sufi mystic Llewellyn Vaughan Lee's description of his first mystical experience in *Fingerprints of God*. He described this to the author, Barbara Bradley Hagerty, as a spiritual orgasm. He said, "Undergirding the light was love … a physical love, the kind that Saint Teresa of Avila experienced in what can only be called a spiritual orgasm."[59] I thought of my experience not as spiritual but rather mental. I did not equate the light with God or Brahman. Something physical was going on inside my body. For me there was some earthy explanation for what happened to me.

Meditation: Focus or a Form of Sensory Deprivation

There are positive benefits from the practice of meditation. In the February 3, 2014 issue of *Time* there is an article by Kate Pickert, entitled "The Art of Being Mindful." This article mentions Richard J. Davidson, "founder and chair of the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds, at the Waisman Center, at the University of Wisconsin at Madison." Davidson studied the brains of "Buddhist monks who had logged at least 10,000 hours of meditation time." He compared electroencephalograms of the monks'

[59]. Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 37.

brains with those of "novice meditators." The monks' brains showed "more functional connectivity" and "also had more gamma-wave activity" but even the beginners showed "more capacity for working memory and decreases in "mind-wandering."

Since the National Institute of Health was not satisfied with the scientific standards of these studies, it has funded "some 50 clinical trials in the past five years." These studies examined the effects of meditation on many things. Pickert lists social-anxiety, the immune system and cancer-related fatigue among these. In 2012 there were 477 scientific journals about mindfulness published.[60] Could changes in the brain, brought about through meditation, alter the brain for the better? There are those who compare the brain to a muscle that can be changed through exercise. Science has learned that the human brain is "plastic." It has the "ability to adapt and rewire" itself. But the connection between mindfulness and the brain's plasticity is inconclusive.[61]

Richard J. Davidson was one of the people that Barbara Bradley Hagerty interviewed for *Fingerprints of God*. She tells us that, in the early 1990s, the Dalai Lama "sent eight of his monks to Davidson's laboratory." She gives us more details about the study than the *Time* article. She says that both the monks and the novice meditators were instructed to "focus their minds on unconditional compassion and a readiness to help all living things" as they were showed photographs of people suffering. Scans of the brains of the monks showed that "parts of the brain associated with empathy and mother's love lit up like Time Square." The scans also showed that the monks were ready to help these

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[60]. Kate Pickert, "The Art of Being Mindful," *Time* (February 3, 2014): 45.

[61]. Ibid., 43.

victims, for other areas of the brain associated with planning were also activated. The monks were very alert. Their "brains were flooded with gamma waves" throughout. While the novice meditators brains scans showed small changes, the scans of the monks' brains were extraordinary.[62]

But there is one thing about this study that is confusing. Not only did the monks' brains show that they felt compassion and a readiness to help, the scans "confirmed what the monks already knew. They were happy monks." They were always in a "hyperalert, synchronized happy zone." Hagerty sees this as "something wonderful" happening. Through long hours of daily meditation the monks had altered their brains.[63] But one wonders, were the monks happy while they were viewing photos of people in pain? This would seem strange. It is good to feel compassion and a readiness to help but did they feel the pain of those suffering? The study showed that their sense of empathy was active. Were they happy and sad at the same time? It calls to mind Gopi Krishna and his loss of personal love for members of his family. Should we trade love for compassion? Is it not possible to feel both? It is certainly possible to have a spiritual experience that is quite the opposite of meditation—one in which the person feels excitement rather than tranquility.

Hagerty also interviewed Andrew Newberg. From Newberg, Hagerty learned that there are two kinds of prayer, meditative practice, and ecstatic Pentecostal prayer. These two kinds of prayer show different brain activity. While a person is meditating or

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[62]. Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Fingerprints of God*, 183-184.

[63]. Ibid., 184-185.

practicing a contemplative form of prayer, the frontal lobes of the brain, which are responsible for handling "details," are very active. This part of the brain keeps you "focused," "awake," and helps you "plan and execute tasks." Another part of the brain, the part which contains the parietal lobes, which orient you "in space and time" is much less active. The brain, functioning in the setting of meditation, gives one a sense that everything is one. Regardless of what faith tradition the person comes from, the blocking out of "external sensory information" allows one to "create [his] own transcendent reality," for although the parietal lobes are less active, they are still "trying to do [their] job."[64] Recall what Lewis-Williams labels the Navicular Entoptic Phenomena, which Hunt tells us are cognitive phenomena. Recall how the brain tries to make sense of these images, depending on the person's individual and cultural experience. Recall what Sacks tells us: that when the brain is deprived of sensory input it tries to make up for this. In meditative or contemplative prayer the frontal lobes, the thinking part of the brain, direct the creation of an illusory world for a person who has deliberately put themselves in a situation of sensory deprivation.

While contemplative prayer allows you to think, although the reality you think into existence may be an illusion; ecstatic prayer, on the other hand, is a kind of prayer without thought. In ecstatic prayer "the frontal lobes, actually shut down." Newberg told Hagerty that while meditation is a controlled experience, in ecstatic prayer, the will is "surrendered" to "a preconscious part of the brain." This part of the brain "is not tied into the cortical area." That is why this type of payer "*sounds* like language but it's not

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[64]. Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Fingerprints of God*, 172-175.

really language—because it is not tied into the cortical areas that would help you to produce something that is comprehensible."[65] Even after saying this Newberg admitted that we do not have all the answers when it comes to speaking in tongues. It is not a true language that is being spoken, but some see it as protolanguage.[66]

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[65]. Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Fingerprints of God,* 178.

[66]. In *The First Word*, Christine Kenneally discusses protolanguage. Citing several researchers, she explains that language evolved from simpler forms of communication, Christine Kenneally, *The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2007); These forms are referred to by Peirce as "iconic reference," one object being similar to another, "indexical references," one object having a correlation to another, such as when one thing causes another, and "symbolic references," linking one object with another, Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 11; Animals are capable of the first two while humans have created languages using the last. Jackendoff describes the progression from symbol through protolanguage to modern language in stages. From symbols for "nonspecific situations" such as an expression for pain like "ouch," to symbols with "more ties to context," such as words of greeting like "hello," to "symbols and phonemes," protolanguage evolved. Only after this came "grammatical categories" and "abstract meaning," Ray Jackendoff, *Foundations of Language: Brain, Meaning, Grammar, Evolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); The progression from iconic reference to modern language involves meaning. According to this explanation, speaking in tongues is not protolanguage since, as Newberg says it is not "comprehensible." But when you add music to this evolutionary process there is a connection. Ray Jackendoff and Fred Lerdahl see music as part of a cognitive process. Not only does music have "rhythm, the structure of melody and harmony," but there is also "emotion in music." Music also has, in common with stories, a build-up of tension and then release. "People convert music into gesture." Dancing is "spontaneous" in children, Ray Jackendoff and Fred Lerdahl, "The Capacity for Music: What It Is and What's Special about It?" *Cognition* 100 (2006): 33-72; Even animals may have an appreciation of music though their taste in music would be different from ours. We hear, in music, the echo of our human voice. Cats, for example, would have musical scales "derived from yowls and meows," David Schwartz, Catherine Howe, and Dale Purves, "The Statistical Structure of Human Speech Sounds Predict Musical Universals," *Journal of Neuroscience* 23 (2003): 7160-68; Sandra Trehub makes a connection between music and "motherese." Motherese is a kind of communication which has the power to entrance, enrapture, and make a baby fall asleep, Sandra E. Trehub, "The Developmental Origins of Musicality," *Nature Neuroscience* 6 (2003): 669-73; Elizabeth Peters at Florida University believes that "mothereses [may even be] a descendent of our ancestors' protolanguage, Christine Kenneally, *The First Word,* 167-174, including 315

The kind of prayer that one engages in determines, at least in part, the perception one has of the divine. As mentioned above, while in the meditative state, it is the frontal lobes that are active while the parietal lobes are inactive; in ecstatic prayer the reverse is true. The frontal lobes are responsible for thinking while the parietal lobes orient one in time and space. So "while the nuns and monks [in scientific studies] lost their boundaries and merged with God or the universe, Pentecostals remained keenly aware of themselves as separate from God. It is a relationship not a union."[67]

Newberg found that there were differences in the brains of people who had a regular practice of prayer, whether it was contemplative or ecstatic. "The Thalmus—a tiny part of the brain" that routs sensory input "to other parts of the brain" was asymmetrical. In one of his subjects he found "a 15 percent asymmetry." "The only similar cases he found were in people who had neurological damage caused by tumors or seizures." At the time of the interview, Newberg was not certain whether his subjects were born with this difference or it was caused by their religious practice.[68]

Sensory Deprivation

According to Patrick Mc Namara, whom Hagerty interviewed over the phone, "some scientist believes" that altered states "are quietly waiting, primed for a spark to ignite a spiritual blaze." Altered states can be triggered by "a stressful day at work, a Zen

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*n*16; From this perspective it is possible to see speaking in tongues as protolanguage. Like music and poetry it is rhythmical and emotional. I can relate to the emotion of the experience because I once had the experience of singing in tongues as a preadolescent child but this experience was in no way connected to religion.

67. Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Fingerprints of God*, 178-179.

68. Ibid., 180.

haiku, [or] "a long forgotten song." It is interesting to note that the first thing on his list is stress. He told Hagerty that a chain reaction is set in motion and this chain reaction begins with anything "the mind interprets" as a threat, as something "negative." "A whole series of stress hormones" is released. "These chemicals make you stronger and sharper and more vigilant." They make you ready "to meet any threat." But this heightened state of awareness cannot go on indefinably. And here Mc Namara makes a connection with meditation. He said that based on meditation studies, some scientists speculate that when people "let go" a new "chain of events" is set in motion. Mc Namara said, just as Kevin Nelson did, that when the body is overwhelmed by stress or pain, the hormones of stress are replaced by endorphins, the body's natural opiates, or pain relievers. Serotonin and dopamine levels are also elevated which makes us feel good. He added to this list oxytocin, a chemical which bonds mothers to their newborns. Some studies suggest that it is oxytocin which brings on the oceanic feeling of the mystical experience.[69]

Oxytocin was originally thought to be present only in females. But it turns out that this bonding hormone is also present in fathers and babies. It is present in babies before they are even born. In fact oxytocin plays a role in all forms of human bonding from the mother-child bond, to bonding with friends, and lovers. Ruth Feldman reviewed several studies which were done in order to determine the function of oxytocin in animals and humans. She writes that oxytocin (OT) "plays a key role in the motivation to bond through its connectivity with the dopaminergic reward system. OT neurons are

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[69]. Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Fingerprints of God*, 75-78.

reciprocally connected with mesolimbic dopaminergic neurons and this interconnection servers an important role in both romantic and parental attachment."[70] The attachments we form with our parents make attachments with friends and lovers possible.[71] Oxytocin levels are highest in the bodies of "new lovers." This is one reason for the "euphoria" experience by those in love.[72]

If oxytocin is a bonding hormone and it is responsible for the oceanic feeling experienced during meditation, what is one bonding to when one meditates and why is this state of consciousness considered to be higher than other states? Newberg gives us some evidence that seems to show that this state of consciousness may actually be regressive.

Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause write about "the obliteration of the self" as "Absolute Unitary Being." They say that this is the state of being that mystics strive for. But then they tell us that this is actually the state of being that we experience in the womb. We develop our sense of self and separateness through our contact with things outside of ourselves.[73] We bond as separate beings. Why is it better to turn inward? What are we bonding with when we do so? A fetus, during the third trimester, is bonding to, for one, the rhythmic heart beat of the mother. It is being primed for relationship with

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[70]. Ruth Feldman, "Oxytocin and Social Affiliation in Humans," *Hormones and Behavior,* (2012): 382., accessed 2013, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.yhbeh.2012.01.008 .380-391.

[71]. Ibid., 388.

[72]. Ibid.," 387.

[73]. Anthony Newberg, Eugene D'Aquili, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 148-150.

the mother and the world.[74] Could it be that a mantra mimics the rhythm of our mother's heart; or that focus on the breath may takes us back to the sound of our mother's breathing? Deprived of outside stimulation, we may tap into these pre-birth memories. This means that the benefits of meditation may be a reaction to the threat of sensory deprivation.

A description of the five stages of Buddhist meditation listed by Paul J. Griffith in *On Being Mindless* illustrates how meditation can become a form of sensory deprivation. In the form of meditation that Griffith describes the goal is "cessation," cessation of all mental function. In the first stage, one transcends conceptualization which is accompanied by a feeling of unending space. In the second stage, one experiences infinite consciousness. In the third stage, the meditator thinks "there is nothing." In the fourth stage he transcends this sphere of nothing. Finally, in the fifth stage, he experiences neither conceptualization nor non-conceptualization nor sensation of any kind.[75] Still "according to the canonical text two things remain: vitality and heat."[76] This vitality and heat could be the body's attempt to revive itself.

Some studies may even prove that altered states are a defense mechanism that bring the mind and body back to the physical world. "In 1983, Ingrid Mueller, a German medical student" consulting with Professor Kugler, studied four volunteers during religious trance. What she found was that levels of noradrenalin and cortisol in blood

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[74]. Ruth Feldman, "Oxytocin and Social Affiliation in Humans," 382.

[75]. Paul J. Griffith, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Problem* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986), 17.

[76]. Ibid., 9.

serum rose at the start of the test then dropped below normal levels. The brain started synthesizing beta-endorphin which is responsible for euphoria. "This was the first time it was identified reliably in a laboratory setting." In addition to this, "the EEG exhibited a steady stream of theta waves in the range of 6-7 cps, known also from Zen meditation." Another interesting finding was that, while the blood pressure dropped, the pulse began to race. "In persons in the ordinary state of consciousness such findings are known only from life threatening situations, such as bleeding or crisis during a severe infection."[77] Trance states, meditation, fasting, self-mortification, all these things the body may see as threats which it defends itself against. The orgasmic feeling that often accompanies altered states is part of this survival mechanism. The individual has an instinct to survive but also the instinct to reproduce, since reproducing results in the survival of the species. But there are healthy ways to feel euphoria, ways that do not involve harming the body but caring for it. And just as harming oneself is harmful to others, caring for oneself is beneficial to others.

[77]. Felicitus D. Goodman, "The Neurophysiology of Shamanic Ecstasy," in *Shamanism Past and Present Part 2*, ed. Mihaly Hoppal and Otto von Sadovszky (Budapest: Ethnographic Institute Hungarian Academy of Science Los Angeles/Fullerton International Society for Trans-Oceanic Research, 1989), 378.

CHAPTER 4

REVERENCE FOR LIFE

One alternative to ascetic practice is living with a reverence for life. Albert Schweitzer used this term when describing his theory of ethical mysticism. Albert Schweitzer lived from January 12, 1875 to September 4, 1965. According to James Brabazon, his name, Schweitzer, "simple means Swiss." But the family finally settled in Alsace and growing up in this region would have an effect on the way Schweitzer thought. Alsace was a place that was "midway between France and Germany, between Catholicism and Protestantism, between mountain and plain." Alsace had been a "battleground" for centuries. It was both "desirable" and "vulnerable." Schweitzer would become more tolerant and open minded coming from this place.[1]

At the time of Schweitzer's birth Alsace was part of the German Empire which made him "a German citizen."[2] His father was a Lutheran pastor and Schweitzer would also become a pastor.[3] He was a different kind of Christian, however, one who did not believe in the divinity of Jesus.[4] Schweitzer's relationship to Jesus had to do with ethics.

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[1]. James Brabazon, *Albert Schweitzer: A Biography*, 2nd ed. Albert Schweitzer Library (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 1-4.

[2]. Ibid., 1-4.

[3]. Ibid., 94.

[4]. Ibid., 117.

He believed Jesus had an ethic that was perfect and that this made him a hero worthy of emulation.[5] But it was not enough to simply believe in the perfection of Jesus. Schweitzer wanted to put ethics into practice.[6] It was this desire that would eventually lead him to become a doctor working in Africa. And it was in Africa that Schweitzer would merge the idea of reverence for life with ethics.

The inspiration came to him while he was traveling on the river. One day, as his boat "passed through a herd of hippopotamuses," a phrase "flashed" into his mind: "Reverence for Life." He had been struggling to find the connection between "the affirmative attitude [toward life] and ethics" and these words "unforeseen and unsought" emerged in his mind. By "Reverence for Life," *Ehrfurcht von dem Leben* in German, Schweitzer was referring to the emotional response that we have towards nature. It is a kind of awe that is not quite religious but mystical none-the-less. It expresses an "ultimate respect for the power of nature."[7]

Schweitzer believed that this reverence for life "[had its] foundation in thought."[8] But he was not talking about reason in the logical sense. The word *Denken*, which is translated as thought in English has a much broader meaning. Brabazon says that the best explanation Schweitzer gave of the meaning of *Denken* "comes from a statement he made

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[5]. James Brabazon, *Albert Schweitzer: A Biography*, 153-136.

[6]. Ibid., 168.

[7]. Ibid., 268.

[8]. Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography,* trans. C. T. Capion and postscript by Everett Skillings (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1949), 156-157.

in an interview on Radio Brazzaville in 1953."[9] In this statement he called this form of thinking a "meditation between ourselves and the world." Reflecting on the nature of existence he decided that, "we do not have—and never will have—a true knowledge of the world; such knowledge will always remain a mystery to us." But we like other life forms are "animated by a will to live." "True knowledge of the world consists in being penetrated by a sense of the mystery of existence." "This knowledge … is no longer isolated reason that devotes itself to thought, but our whole being, that unity of emotion and reflection that constitutes the individual."[10] Schweitzer believed that if we "thought upon life" we would become ethical. "Our thoughts seek ever to attain harmony with the mysterious Spirit of the Universe," he said. He believed that thinking on life would lead us to service and that serving life, in whatever form, we served the ultimate Creative Will.[11]

In his critique of Schweitzer, Henry Clark disagrees with Schweitzer's definition of thought and its connection with ethics. Clark says that "rational thought reaches ethical conclusions only when it works from prior commitment to will-to-live, a commitment nurtured and enhanced by many civilizing influences which have their

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[9]. James Brabazon, *Albert Schweitzer: A Biography,* 270.

[10]. Interview on Radio Brazzaville, quoted in Erica Anderson, *The Schweitzer Album: A Portrait in Words and Pictures* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1956), 153.

[11]. Albert Schweitzer. "The Ethics of Reverence for Life," in *The Ethical Mysticism of Albert Schweitzer: A Study of the Sources and the Significance of Schweitzer's Philosophy of Civilization*, ed. Henry Clark (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 186-187.

origin outside the self."[12] But Schweitzer was talking about something that was not influenced by culture. Schweitzer said that "this sort of meditation is not definitely that of civilized man rather than the primitive man. The primitive man, it may be argued, knows no such reverence for life …. Never-the-less [sic], it remains true that the primitive who begins to meditate must proceed along the same path."[13] Schweitzer called this kind of thinking "elemental thinking."[14] What he meant by this became clear to me while I was reading a book of his memoirs as a doctor in Africa. At one point he talked about the way that the African judges the white man. He said that, "the child of nature not having been artificialised and spoilt as we have been, has only elemental standards of judgment and he measures us by the most elementary of them all, the moral standard."[15] So while Schweitzer's statement shows the biased and paternalistic attitude toward the African that was typical of his time, he also attributed to him the same potential for ethical mysticism.

For Schweitzer, having a reverence for life meant affirming life. Schweitzer wrote in his autobiography that, "affirmation for life is the spiritual act by which man ceases to live unreflectively." This means not only affirming one's own life but the life

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[12]. Henry Clark, *The Ethical Mysticism of Albert Schweitzer*: *A Study of the Sources and Significance of Schweitzer's Philosophy of Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 127.

[13]. Albert Schweitzer, "The Ethics of Reverence for Life," 186.

[14]. Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought*, 224.

[15]. Albert Schweitzer, *On the Edge of the Primal Forest and More from the Primeval Forest: Experiences and Observations of a Doctor in Equatorial Africa* (London: Adam & Clarkes Black, 1951), 89.

of others as well. "A man is ethical only when life as such is sacred to him." Schweitzer included animals and plants in this sacredness. He recognized a "Will-to-Live" in all creatures and believed that we should respect this. At the same time he recognized that "the world … offers us the horrible drama of Will-to-Live divided against itself. One existence holds its own at the cost of another." This he found to be a "horrible law." Yet it was ethical to affirm life to the best extent possible.[16] "Nature compels us," he said, "to recognize the fact of mutual dependence" between life forms. "In the very fiber of our being, we bear within ourselves the fact of the solidarity of life."[17] It naturally followed that ethics, to some extent, could be witnessed in animal behavior as well as human behavior. Schweitzer gave examples. One of these was his personal experience in his own hospital.

In his article, "Reverence for Life," he tells the story of how it fell to him to care for "all stray monkeys that c[a]me to [his] gate." In rescuing these monkeys it was necessary to find an adoptive mother. The only problem was which monkey he would give the honor to. He said, "many times it happened that the seemingly worst-tempered monkeys are the most insistent upon having the sudden burden of foster-parenthood given to them."[18]

Anthropologists call this kind of behavior "inclusive fitness." This is the theory that we help others that are like ourselves, especially family members because they will

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[16]. Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought*, 158-159.

[17]. Albert Schweitzer, "The Ethics of Reverence for Life," 192.

[18]. Ibid., 193.

pass on many of the same genes that we have.[19] For example, Bobbi Low tells us that "lion females nurse one another's young; since they are related."[20] So even what appears to be altruistic behavior often has some reciprocal benefit. "Helping my neighbor of twenty years when a storm damages his house means he will help me when I need him."[21] But for Schweitzer this behavior was rooted in the emotion of sympathy.[22] There is scientific evidence that he was right.

Before I cite this evidence, let us first look at how scientists invent there terms. The terms that scientists use are not always to be taken literally. Some of the terms they use are more convenient than descriptive. Stephen Hawking makes this clear in regard to subatomic particles. He explains that:

> There are a number of different varieties of quarks, there are thought to be at least six 'flavors,' which we call up, down, strange, charmed, bottom, and top. Each flavor comes in three 'colors,' red, green and blue. (It must be emphasized that these terms are just labels: quarks are much smaller than the wavelengths of light and so do not have any color in the normal

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[19]. Bobbi Low, *Why Sex Matters: A Darwinian Look at Behavior* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 23-27.

[20]. Ibid., 149.

[21]. Ibid., 148.

[22]. Albert Schweitzer, "The Ethics of Reverence for Life," 191.

sense. It is just that modern physicist seem to have more imaginative ways of naming new particles.)[23]

The same thing can be said about terms used to explain evolution. Terms such as "survival of the fittest," "natural selection," and "inclusive fitness" make it sound as if nature has a will and uses this will to select certain individuals to survive. While there are some who believe that nature is a personality and *does* will things to happen, this is not the perspective of science. The term "fitness" has nothing to do with any kind of superiority. As Francisco J. Ayala explains, "the longest living groups of organisms on Earth are the microscopic bacteria, which have existed on our planet for 3.5 billion years or so and yet exhibit no greater complexity than their old-time ancestors." Yet we know they continue to evolve.[24] "Fitness" means the best fit for a particular environment. It does not mean the strongest or the best. The term natural selection has nothing to do with nature selecting any individual. What is taking place is simply that animals that survive pass on their genes. It does not make sense to say that a lioness nurses the young of another because that baby will pass on some of the same genes that her own baby will. Lions know nothing about genetics. They nurse each other's young because it feels good. Likewise, for most of human history people knew nothing about genetics. While it may be true that people are often kind because they expect something in return, there are also times when humans are kind to strangers who they never expect to see again. It feels good to be kind. That is the immediate payoff. The capacity to feel sympathy is genuine.

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[23]. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 65.

[24]. Francisco J. Ayala, *Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion* (Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press, 2007), 62-64.

The capacity to feel sympathy is passed on. It is a positive trait that facilitates survival. There are also negative traits that facilitate survival. But Schweitzer's belief in sympathy as the basis for ethics is supported by scientific evidence.

Virginia Morell, writes about "a peculiar kind of brain cell" that is found in animals with big brains, in *Animal Wise*. These cells are called "von Economo" after "Constantin von Economo, who identified them." They were thought to be specific to human beings but they have since been found in other primates as well. They are also found in other mammals such as elephants and cetaceans such as dolphins and whales. "Von Economo cells are always found in two regions of the cortex associated with emotionally charged, visceral judgments, such as deciding whether a fellow animal is suffering." They are found in the brains of animals that live in "a complex society." The animal researcher, John Allman, "suggests that these cells underlie the empathetic behavior elephant researchers have recorded, such as when two matriarchs saved a drowning elephant calf in Amboseli, or when another elephant brought water to a dying companion."[25]

It may not be necessary, however, for an animal to have von Economo cells to express caring behavior. Rats are not known for their caring behavior in popular culture. How often we have heard the expression, "you dirty rat," used to describe a person who has wronged another. Yet those who study rats tell us a different story. Morell does not say whether or not rats have von Economo cells but she tells us that "they can be

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[25]. Virginia Morell, *Animal Wise: The Thoughts and Emotions of Our Fellow Creatures* (New York: Crown, 2013), 155-157.

altruistic and offer help to a strange, unrelated rat." Do rats have von Economo cells or is this altruism coming from another part of their brains?[26]

Feelings that lead to caring behavior are also found in "more primitive regions of the brain." Jaak Pansepp studied "the brain circuits of crying baby animals." He considered these cries to be "evidence of the brain's basic 'PANIC system'—one of those core emotions that all mammals share." But this system is also found in birds, such as chickens, "suggesting that the urge [for a baby to cry] has even deeper evolutionary roots." A crying baby is concerned for itself. This is not a sign of caring behavior but of a need to be cared for. But "Panksepp suspects there is a parallel track of pain" in the brain of the mother of a crying baby. The pain of the mother is triggered by the crying infant. Animal mothers cry for their babies. Cows do this as well as cats and crows. And the list goes on.[27] If this is not empathy it is closely akin to it. These mothers may be mirroring the pain of their offspring.

The Difference Between East and West

Schweitzer saw a difference in the way that cultures responded to the "Will-to-Live." Some affirmed life while others negated life. In *Indian Thought and Development*, he gave his definition of world and life affirmation. It "consisted in this," he said, "that man regards existence as he experiences it in himself and as it has developed in the world as something of value *per se* and accordingly strives to let it reach perfection in himself, whilst within his own sphere of influence he endeavors to preserve

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[26]. Virginia Morell, *Animal Wise*, 127-128.

[27]. Ibid., 130.

and to further it." He also defined world and life negation which he said regarded existence as "something meaningless and sorrowful," something that one should "resolve" to bring "to a standstill."[28]

While Schweitzer saw Western thought as basically life affirming and Eastern thought as basically life negating, he felt that both systems of thought were imperfect and neither system was exclusively life affirming or life negating. According to Schweitzer, if one held a life negating belief then it would be logical for him to end his life; but the Eastern belief systems taught that it is more important "to mortify as thoroughly as we can the will-to-live in our hearts." This is contradictory because one is maintaining life at the same time one does not wish to live.[29] The Western belief system he saw as equally contradicting in that it teaches that this natural world will come to an end and be "superseded by a supernatural world."[30] Therefore, Schweitzer concluded that "both in Indian and European thought, world and life affirmation and world and life negation are found side by side: but in Indian thought the latter is the predominant principle and in the European the former."[31]

Schweitzer saw the strength of Eastern thought to be its monism and its mysticism, while the strength of Western thought, which was "dualistic and doctrinal"

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[28]. Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*, trans. Mrs. Charles E. B. Russell (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1960), 1.

[29]. Ibid., 7.

[30]. Ibid., 4.

[31]. Ibid., 6.

was its ethics.[32] Schweitzer felt that the perfect world view would be ethical and mystical at the same time but that this was an ideal that had not yet come about and might not be possible to attain. Still, he did not feel that this failure to "synthesis" the thought systems of East and West should mean that we should "cease to aim at that world-view which alone is really satisfying."[33]

Those of the Eastern tradition have a different perspective of their tradition than Schweitzer did. T. N. Madan wrote in *Non-Renunciation*, that Western thinkers were wrong in their assessment of Eastern thought as "annulment of the life of the man-in-the world." The "householder" is not expected to renounce the world. Renunciation becomes important only at the "culmination of life."[34] Until that time, a person is concerned with "the proper performance of [his] social role."[35] There are stages of life. The *Manusmriti* text of India "forbids men to become renouncers until they have discharged the traditional three debts (to gods, gurus, and ancestors) by living the life of the householder."[36] Madan also believed that Albert Schweitzer, as well as other Western thinkers, were wrong in their assessment of Eastern ethics as "moral Quietism." The teaching is that humans should strive for "the attainment of a level of self-consciousness (*atma-janana*) which transcends the need for moral choices of the either/or

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[32]. Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*, 10-11.

[33]. Ibid., 17-18.

[34]. T. N. Madan, *Non-Renunciation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 17-18.

[35]. Ibid., 1.

[36]. Ibid., 22.

kind." Moral choices are not usually that simple. True morality involves "self-sacrifice." It is "detached" rather than "self-seeking" and "transcends" all "dualities."[37]

The ethical mysticism of Schweitzer did not advocate asceticism or the renunciation of life, and yet it included the ideal of self-sacrifice. In "The Ethics of Reverence for Life," Schweitzer said that the ethics "cannot be fully carried out, without the possibility of complete sacrifice of the self." Schweitzer felt that the ideal of self-sacrifice was met in the life of Mahatma Gandhi. Though Schweitzer saw Eastern ethics as passive, he felt Gandhi was an exception. In *Indian Thought and its Development*, he said that "in Gandhi's ethical affirmation, *Ahimsa*, [the commandment not to kill] was freed from the principle of non-activity in which it originated, and became a commandment to exercise full compassion." Schweitzer also appreciated the fact that Gandhi, like himself, understood that the commandment of *Ahimsa* could not be perfectly followed "because man cannot maintain life without committing acts of violence." Schweitzer understood that animals need to eat. Gandhi understood that it was sometimes necessary for one to defend himself or others and that "passive resistance," though passive and non-violent was a "use of force."

According to Schweitzer, "Gandhi [brought] the idea of activity and the idea of world and life negation into relationship in such a way that he [could] regard activity in the world as the highest form of renunciation of the world."[38] One of the things that illustrate this point is Gandhi's relationship with women.

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[37]. T. N. Madan, *Non-Renunciation,* 93.

[38]. Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*, 229-232.

Gandhi used his ascetic practice not only to lead India into independence but also to address women's issues. Veena R. Howard writes about this in "Rethinking Gandhi's Celibacy." Howard explains that Gandhi practices "*brahmacarya* for the purpose of public service and service of women."[39] During Gandhi's lifetime, this vow of celibacy was usually taken "in pursuit of the personal goal of *Moksa* (religious liberation)." But Gandhi became celibate in an unorthodox way. It was customary for the celibate to maintain a "physical and mental distance from the opposite sex."[40] This Gandhi did not do. He "did not consider the regulations for constraining women found in the *Smrti* (Hindu Law Books) to represent moral law." Instead, he "reinterpreted texts and myths … to communicate women's inherent strengths." Gandhi also "denounced the description of women as temptresses."[41] He associated with women, allowed them into his *ashram*, and imposed no special rules for them. Gandhi's whole purpose in living as a celibate was to identify with women, to become a woman mentally in order to understand them better. He had a high opinion of women. He was criticized for "essentializing female sexuality" but, in fact, "he sought to transcend the distinct categories of feminine and masculine."[42]

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[39]. Veena R. Howard, "Rethinking Gandhi's Celibacy: Ascetic Power and Women's Empowerment," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 1 (March2013): 134.

[40]. Ibid., 140.

[41]. Ibid., 142.

[42]. Ibid., 147.

In his last years, Gandhi "undertook the controversial practice of 'sharing his bed' with Manu [his grandniece], without any sexual involvement, to activate the power of Truth for quelling the brute force of violence in India."[43] He was criticized for this. But he saw this as his "last war against his sexual desires."[44] Other ascetics practiced this ritual "for their personal transformation" but Gandhi made his niece a partner. He wanted her to become a woman who would serve other women. He was making Manu a disciple because he believed that women could help each other better than he could.[45] Manu would become his equal. Gandhi wished to "redefine" the practice of celibacy to include women in "non-sexist" terms.[46] He believed that his celibacy could give him special power.[47] But he believed that women could possess this power as well.[48]

Gandhi sacrificed his life for others. He did not withdraw from the world. He engaged with it. But rather than praise him for his celibacy we should understand his purpose in using it. In the culture in which he lived, the ultimate goal was to escape the cycle of reincarnation. Celibacy was a natural stage of life for him. But he used his celibacy as a way of confronting the discrimination against women. His culture, like so many others, made women feel shame and inferiority. It may be that in such a culture drastic measures are the only way of confronting inequality.

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[43]. Veena R. Howard, "Rethinking Gandhi's Celibacy," 151.

[44]. Ibid., 150.

[45]. Ibid., 156.

[46]. Ibid., 154-155.

[47]. Ibid., 134.

[48]. Ibid., 158.

It is true as Schweitzer says that ethics sometimes requires self-sacrifice, but this is not *always* the case. Nor is it necessary to see things in terms of balancing one's own needs with those of others. It is a matter of inclusion. Some situations require self-sacrifice. But when it is not, there is no reason for any person not to treat himself with the same care and respect that his ethics requires him to give to others. It is not a matter of choosing between yourself and others but rather of including yourself among the people you care for. In the end whatever one does for others he is doing for himself as well. If we are capable of feeling empathy sacrifices keeps us at peace with ourselves.

As Schweitzer said, life negation and life affirmation are found side by side in the Western tradition as well as the Eastern. Mother Teresa of Calcutta is a Western example of someone who sacrificed her life for others. Even the anthropologist Bobbi Low sees Mother Teresa as altruistic. Low sees her as such because she feels that Mother Teresa did not benefit in any way from her altruism. "She had no children, and devoted her life to helping non-relatives, and did not accumulate benefits to give away to her relatives."[49]

Mother Teresa's story is somewhat different than Gandhi's. Mother Teresa began an order of nuns that helped the poor in India but it took her over a year to convince the Catholic Church to allow her to begin the work that she believed she was called by God to do. She wrote in a letter to the Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Religious Rome, "Since September 1946 Almighty God is calling me to devote myself entirely to a complete poverty after the example of the great Saint of Assisi and to the

[49]. Bobbi Low, *Why Sex Matters*, 148-149.

entire service of the Poor in the slums and back streets of the city and elsewhere."[50] Her own archbishop wrote to her to tell her that she should "try not to put anything of your own in all this. You are His instrument nothing more."[51] She finally received permission, from Pope Pius XII, to leave the convent of Loreto to begin her "new mission" on August 8, 1948. "On August 17, 1948, clad in a white sari with a blue band, Mother Teresa—a European nun alone in newly independent India—set out to begin life as a Missionary of Charity."[52] She went first to "the Holy Family Hospital" at Patna to learn nursing skills.[53] When her training was completed she asked permission to use a vacant building belonging to the Loreto order which she had belonged to before her decision to go out on her own. But she was refused this request by the superior general of the order. She was able to find a space for herself on the third floor of a home owned by "the Gomes brothers."[54] "The Society of the Missionaries of Charity" was finally recognized by the Church "on October 7, 1950."[55]

Coming from different traditions, Gandhi and Mother Teresa had different beliefs about God and their *self*. For Gandhi his *self* would eventually be absorbed into the

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[50]. Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcuta,*" ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Image Doubleday, 2007), 115.

[51]. Ibid., 112.

[52]. Ibid., 121.

[53]. Ibid., 123.

[54]. Ibid., 134.

[55]. Ibid., 138.

ultimate *Self*.[56] Mother Teresa, on the other hand, had a desire to be *selfless*. She saw herself as separate from God. She would never think of identifying any part of herself with God. She could only hope for relationship with God—as an inferior being. She learned to see herself as nothing and this belief was continually reinforced by her tradition. Her bishop wrote to her, telling her to see herself only as an "instrument." All of her desires were submerged under Church doctrine. This can be plainly seen in a letter she wrote to Archbishop Perier on April 4, 1952:

> I want to be a saint, by satiating the thirst of Jesus for love and souls—And there is another big desire—to give Mother Church many a saint from our society.—These two are the only thing I pray for, work and suffer. Please pray for me, that I may fulfill His desire as regards our Society & myself [sic].[57]

Mother Teresa's desire to help the poor was genuine. She empathized with the suffering of others. Her desire came out of her feelings of sympathy for the poor. This follows the ethical theory of Albert Schweitzer which is supported by scientific evidence. Her desires were her own but she could not own them. This was the cause of great suffering in her life, a suffering which the public was made aware of through her private writings which were edited by Father Brian Kolodiejchuk. The private writings of Mother Teresa reveal a deep spiritual pain. This agony of the soul started when she began her work with the poor. She wrote to Archbishop Perier on March 18, 1953, "For

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[56]. T. N. Madan, *Non-Renunciation*, 21.

[57]. Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, 144.

there is such a terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead."[58] Still, contrary to what Bobbi Low says about Mother Teresa not benefiting from her behavior, Mother Teresa did get something out of this. She wanted to become a saint and she became one.

In the cases of both Gandhi and Mother Teresa their suffering was due, not to any divine necessity, but to the cultures that imposed this suffering on them through beliefs. Peter Berger writes about the way that culture is constructed in *The Sacred Canopy*. There is a physical world in which men live but there is also a "socially constructed world." This socially constructed world imposes meaning on the experiences of individuals. Berger calls this "meaningful order" a 'nomos'.[59] Within this system the individual consciousness is surrendered to the social order. In connection with religion, this self denial can become an "attitude of masochism" in which "pain itself, physical or mental serves to ratify the denial of self to the point where it may actually be subjectively pleasurable."[60]

When Mother Teresa told Archbishop Perier, in September 1, 1959, of a vow she made in 1942, you might say that she was embodying this attitude of masochism. She told the Archbishop, "with the permission of my confessor I made a vow—binding under mortal sin—to give to God anything He may ask—Not to refuse Him anything."[61] It may

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[58]. Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, 149.

[59]. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 19.

[60]. Ibid., 55.

[61]. Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, 34-35.

also appear that Gandhi's practice of *Ahimsa* and *brahmacarya* also expressed this attitude. But a better term for Teresa and Gandhi might be martyr.

According to Berger, the Catholic Church "segregates" its religious, leaving most people to live more ordinary lives.[62] The Catholic Church does not have a monopoly on saints, however. *All* those who sacrifice their lives for others are segregated from others by their ascetic practice. Even Gandhi who engaged with the world was set apart by his ascetic practice. Gandhi became a saint or hero to many. It is this segregation that makes martyrs. The reward for this should be a special union with the divine. But this does not always happen.

Berger says that "mysticism does not always appear in [its] perfect form … *total* union with the divine is not [always] attained or sought." Yet there is "an attitude of surrender that carries with it its own theodicy." Since "everything is or is in God, everything is good." And so the problem of suffering is solved. This may be:

> the principal theoretical and psychological 'gain' of mysticism. The extent to which the mystical surrender may be called masochist varies empirically, but it is safe to say that a strong masochistic element is present in nearly all varieties of mysticism, as evidenced by the cross-cultural recurrence of ascetic self-mortification and self-torture in connection with mystical phenomenon.[63]

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[62]. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 122.

[63]. Ibid., 64

Berger goes on to say that the "annihilation of the self and its absorption by the divine *realissimum* constitute the highest bliss imaginable, the culmination of the mystical quest in ineffable ecstasy."[64] I do not know whether Gandhi ever reached this state of bliss but Mother Teresa by her own admission felt abandoned by God.[65] Though the body tries to soothe pain, bliss does not always follow torture even when it is self inflicted. Some learn to manipulate the bodies reward system. Apparently Mother Teresa did not. Yet she continued her works of mercy, a true sign of courage and dedication.

The thought of a few people sacrificing their lives for others and becoming saints is as unjust as economic inequality. A more just society would be one in which all people had enough reverence for life to contribute their fair share to the community of all life on earth. In this kind of social system pain would not vanish, for it is part of life, but torture would. And bliss would be a natural, ordinary, this worldly experience, not something reserved for saints. This would be more in line with the thinking of Albert Schweitzer. As Schweitzer said this may be an ideal that cannot be reached. Yet he advised us that we should still keep trying.

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[64]. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 64.

[65]. Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, 157-158.

CHAPTER 5

REVERENCE FOR LIFE IN OUR OWN TIME

Dr. David Tabb Stewart told me that Albert Schweitzer has been forgotten since the rise of fundamentalism.[1] This may be true but there are those living today who hold similar beliefs. Fundamentalism is not the only movement taking place today. Albert Schweitzer's reverence for life is reflected in movements which are turning towards nature. In *Dark Green Religion*, Bron Taylor writes about several movements that find sacred value in nature.

There is what Bron Taylor refers to as a "greening of the world religions" taking place. According to Taylor, some religious scholars who are both "observers and participants" in the religions they study have tried to "push [these] traditions … toward ethics that make environmental sustainability a central objective."[2] But Taylor's book concentrates on new religious movements which he describes as "phantoms" having "no single sacred text" and no "hierarchy." These are not "official" religions.[3] They do, however, share similarities. These religions are in general "deep[ly] ecological, biocentric, or ecocentric." They consider "all species to be intrinsically valuable … apart

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[1]. Conversation with Dr. Stewart 08/08/2013.

[2]. Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 12.

[3]. Ibid., ix.

from their usefulness to human beings." Those who belong to green religious movements feel "kinship with the rest of life." They also feel humility and a corresponding critique of human moral superiority."[4]

Taylor describes four categories of dark green religion which he places in the following table.

TABLE 1. Types of Dark Green Religion

	Animism	Gaian Earth Religion
Supernaturalism	Spiritual Animism	Gaian Spirituality
Naturalism	Naturalistic Animism	Gaian Naturalism

Spiritual Animism is the belief that the natural world is animated by a supernatural force. Natural Animists are skeptical of this supernatural force but still feel a connection to other forms of life and a need to communicate with them. Gaian Spirituality views the earth or the whole universe as a superorganism with consciousness. Gaian Naturalists, like naturalistic animists, are skeptical of a conscious universe yet they feel a sense of connectedness, belonging, and even awe when contemplating the mysteries of the universe.[5]

[4]. Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 13.

[5]. Ibid., 15.

The boundaries between these types "are complicated and fluid," says Taylor.[6] He gives us the primatologist Jane Goodall as an example. Her experience since childhood has been naturalistic animism but her work with the chimpanzees gave her an "affinity for gaian spirituality."[7] Working with the chimps, Jane Goodall felt that she was part of "something greater, a sacred, interdependent universe."[8] Taylor quotes part of a passage from Goodall's book *Reason for Hope*, in which she describes one of her mystical encounters with nature. Here the entire passage is quoted.

> Lost in awe at the beauty around me, I must have slipped into a state of heightened awareness. It is hard—impossible, really—to put into words the moment of truth that suddenly came upon me. Even the mystics are unable to describe their brief flashes of spiritual ecstasy. It seemed to me, as I struggled afterwards to recall the experience, that the *self* was utterly absent: I and the chimpanzees, the earth and trees and air, seemed to merge, to become one with the spirit power of life itself.[9]

This strong connection with nature is sometimes felt with the sea rather than the land. Mother Nature also manifests as Mother Ocean.[10] Taylor found this feeling among many surfers. "For some surfers, [the sensuous experience of surfing] leads to feelings of

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[6]. Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 41.

[7]. Ibid., 30.

[8]. Ibid., 26.

[9]. Jane Goodall, *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey* (New York: Time Warner Books, 1999), 173.

[10]. Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 104.

humility, belonging, connection, and a reverence for life."[11] This dangerous sport often has a transformative effect on the *self*.[12] This transformation has a physiological base. It is connected to a pleasure causing chemical called dopamine. The danger involved in the sport, first causes the body to produce norepinephrine. Dopamine follows "once the danger has passed." For Jay Moriarity, one of the authors of *The Ultimate Guide to Surfing,* the dopamine is "a way to congratulate the brain for surviving." He feels that fear is an adaptation that has evolved and that "a good dose of fear is soothing for the human psyche."[13] Here again is an example of how the body chemistry of stress is replaced with endorphins that are soothing.

The spirituality of surfers is referred to as "*aloha spirit*." "A native Hawai'ian scholar, Kakuhi Kealiikanakaole, defined the word *aloha* for Taylor. She told Taylor "*Alo*' means your frontal presence … face to face. '*Ha*' means breath … We share the breath of a friend, neighbor, relative or acquaintance. That is the meaning.[14] Taylor says that term "*aloha spirit*" can be traced to Duke Kahanamoko, a Hawai'ian swimmer and surfer, who won an "Olympic gold medal in 1912."[15] But this "*aloha spirit*" is actually a very ancient indigenous spirituality.

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[11]. Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 116.

[12]. Ibid., 117-118.

[13]. Jay Moriarity and Chris Gallagher, *Ultimate Guide to Surfing* (London: Lyons, 2001), 10.

[14]. Interview with Kakuhi Kealiikanakaole, recorded in BronTaylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 107.

[15]. Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 107.

Aloha Spirituality is the subject of *The Pleasure Prescription* by Paul Pearsall. Pearsall is a clinical psychologist with an interest in the interaction between the brain and the immune system. He is also a Hawai'ian and knows, first hand, what he refers to as "Oceanic Culture," the culture of Polynesia. While writing his book he consulted Polynesian *kupunas* (elders) and *kahunas* (healers) to strengthen his position. As a psychologist specializing in the brain and its interaction with the immune system, Pearsall is concerned with health. But for him health is connected to spirituality. He offers a prescription of "shared joy" which he believes we were "made for." This joy is inclusive not individualistic. It is "not just elation but a balanced spiritual toughness that allows us to derive pleasure from every aspect of daily life." We learn from "all emotional states" not just from joy. This broader learning gives us "the grace to deal more harmoniously with and offer help to a world that is not always tranquil.[16]

Pearsall's understanding of "Oceanic culture" is that it is not restricted to Hawai'i. Polynesia includes many islands that "span the ocean." It includes, not only the Hawaiian Islands in the north but also Easter Island in the southeast, and New Zealand in the southwest.[17] What is more, as Pearsall writes about *aloha* spirituality, he reminds us that we have all descended from people who were part of indigenous cultures. Schweitzer believed that Western culture was superior to indigenous culture and that "the child of nature," although good and intelligent, would become a better person once he

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[16]. Paul Pearsall, *The Pleasure Prescription: To Love, To Work, To Play—Life in the Balance* (Alameda, CA: Hunter House, 1996), 3.

[17]. Ibid., 3.

became "familiar with the higher moral ideas of the religion of Jesus."[18] But Pearsall sees in indigenous culture a "third way," a philosophy of being which is in many ways healthier than that of either the Western or Eastern way.[19]

Pearsall explains how both Eastern and Western thought is centered on the individual, while *aloha* spirituality focuses on connections. He lists five principles of *aloha* spirituality: patience, unity, pleasantness, humbleness, and tenderness towards others.[20] He devotes a chapter to each of these virtues beginning with patience. He places the Hawai'ian words for these virtues alongside the English. The virtues are summarized here with an occasional comment.[21]

The first principle is *ahonui*, 'patience': This is an important virtue since life will always be chaotic.[22] The world will never be perfect. We will never be perfect, nor will we ever have perfect success. There is also an understanding, in the *aloha* spirit, that success has more to do with good fortune than individual merit. Polynesian success is

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[18]. Albert Schweitzer, *On the Edge of the Primal Forest and More from the Primal Forest,*104.

[19]. Paul Pearsall, *The Pleasure Prescription*, 9.

[20]. Ibid., 3-5.

[21]. While I agree with Pearsall in general it must be remembered that he wrote his book in 1996. Things have changed in the last eighteen years. The divide between "East" and "West" is not as great. The religious make up of the U.S. is much more pluralistic and the global south is having a greater influence. Finally, all indigenous cultures have not been and are not today egalitarian. Some are patriarchal. The virtues which are listed below are not without flaws. Agreeableness I could not resist commenting on.

[22]. Paul Pearsall, *The Pleasure Prescription*, 97.

based on a more collaborative model.[23] "The core of a successful life is connecting and caring. Giving and loving enough to make the world a better place, and caring for and nurturing the earth's resources, including all of its inhabitants, is true *aloha* success."[24]

Lokahi, 'unity': Pearsall explains each virtue with a story. The story Pearsall explains the virtue of unity with goes like this: a tourist takes a stone from the beach. When it is time to leave the beach, the truck that he came in will not start. The guide tells the tourist that the truck will not start because he took the stone and it will not start if he does not "put the stone back where it belongs." It takes some time to convince the man but when he does put the stone back the truck starts.[25] In *aloha* spirituality all things are connected and interdependent. Oceanic culture has an animistic view of the world. There is the sense that all things are alive. The world is not something to control or take possession of, nor is the world something to become detached from, as in ascetic practices. The word attachment has a positive meaning in *aloha* spirituality, unlike its meaning in ascetic traditions. It has to do with unity and a sense of belonging.[26]

'Olu'olu, 'pleasantness' or 'agreeableness': This quality has to do with how we deal with the many frustrations and disappointments of life. Are these things that we will get over or hold onto? How do we deal with feelings of anger?[27] Pearsall says that the

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[23]. Paul Pearsall, *The Pleasure Prescription*, 107.

[24]. Ibid., 113.

[25]. Ibid., 114.

[26]. Ibid., 116.

[27]. Ibid., 129.

best thing to do with angry feelings is to *confess* them.[28] He lists ten myths about the expression or suppression of anger. According to Pearsall not expressing anger does not lead to cancer, high blood pressure or heart disease. It has nothing to do with being truthful, seeking justice or being powerful. It does not prevent violence or clear the air. And anger unexpressed does not lead to depression. People who express anger are the ones who have the problems and when depressed people express anger that is supposedly turned inward they actually get more depressed. Pearsall says that the idea that depression is anger turned inward is a Freudian fallacy and he cites research to prove this.[29]

Before we move on, let us look at some new evidence cited in the April 2014 issue of *Psychology Today* which presents a slightly different perspective on anger. In this issue, Joan Ellison Rodgers writes about the value of anger in an article entitled, "Go Forth in Anger." She interviewed many experts who study anger and tells us that their conclusion is that anger has helped humankind to survive. Anger is "the polar opposite of fear, sadness, disgust, and anxiety." It helps us to face challenges that we might otherwise flee from.[30] According to Aaron Sellers, the ability to become angry is present at birth. It is "a cognitive mechanism" that has evolved along with other survival

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[28]. Paul Pearsall, *The Pleasure Prescription*, 133.

[29]. M. Weissman and E. Paykel, *The Depressed Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 138-53.

[30]. Joann Ellison Rodgers, "Go Forth in Anger," *Psychology Today*, (April 2014): 75.

mechanisms.[31] Anger only becomes a problem when the angry person feels there is no solution to the situation that caused them to become angry.[32]

In my own experience with anger, I have found that engaging in some useful activity like going for a walk or doing some physical work helps, while beating pillows or screaming in the closet makes things worse. These activities never accomplished anything for me. They made me uncomfortable. The anger was never resolved. It seemed only to intensify and this made me feel guilty and depressed. This would support Pearsall's conclusion, based on the study he cites, that expressing anger only makes depressed people more depressed. But in reality it is not anger but the guilt over the anger that causes depression.

In a culture which teaches us to feel guilt over anger, we have not learned to express anger in a positive way. What is honored is the blind obedience of selfless saints. Any kind of self assertion is thought of as selfish. This means that you cannot think or feel or act freely. When Karen Armstrong tells the story of how she questioned the "discipline" and how her superior reacted, "None of us knows what we think until the General Chapter tells us," she is giving us an example of this dogma. There are things we are forbidden to express and one of these was anger.

Anger is natural and sometimes necessary. The problem is not with anger itself but the way it is expressed. What Pearsall calls confessing anger *is* a way of expressing it. It is a constructive way. It is not violent. It is not hateful. It gives the person that the anger is directed to a chance to respond which might mean resolution. Rodgers ends her

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[31]. Joann Ellison Rodgers, "Go Forth in Anger," 76.

[32]. Ibid., 78.

article with a quote from Jennifer Lerner who says that anger is good for you "as long as you keep the flame low."[33] This, then, is the meaning of *'Olu'olu*—with a slight revision—for no one can be agreeable all the time.

Ha'aha'a, 'humbleness': According to "Oceanic philosophy," we are not all powerful beings. Everything is not a result of the choices we make. Life contains both the good and the bad as well as joy and suffering. All these things are "part of being alive." We are part of the larger world and as such we never actually do anything completely on our own. 'Self help' is impossible because we are not separate beings." In fact, Pearsall talks about the experience of losing "all sense of self," such as when we "become one with a lover" or with nature, as our "greatest pleasure."[34]

Sometimes a loss of self becomes an "epiphany." Epiphanies make us feel connected, not only to nature but to the creator as well. In Pearsall's words "we, as the created, have become more aware of being One with the Creator." Pearsall refers to this experience as transcendent. But, for Pearsall, it is not nature that is transcended, it is the "the urgency response."[35] The urgency response is an addiction to stress hormones which is caused by a pleasure system which has been numbed by "too much meaningless excitement."[36] Pearsall is saying the same thing as Gabor Mate about stress hormones,

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[33]. Joann Ellison Rodgers, "Go Forth in Anger," 79.

[34]. Paul Pearsall, *The Pleasure Prescription*, 146-147.

[35]. Ibid., 148.

[36]. Ibid., 64-65.

but Pearsall cites Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who believes we prefer intense stimulation and threatening situations because they keep us alert to threats to our survival.[37]

In *The Evolving Self,* Csikszentmihalyi says that humans "enjoy facing [the] challenges" that nature brings us and that we are rewarded with "a positive state of consciousness" when we meet them.[38] This reward is "immediate and very concrete … we enjoy whatever we are doing moment by moment."[39] Facing challenges can bring us to a state of awareness that Csikszentmihalyi refers to as "flow," a state in which we become so involved in what we are doing that we transcend the ego.[40]

Pearsall is not opposed to the feeling of transcendence. He is simply trying to steer people towards more healthy ways to attain this state. We are able to reach this state under stress. This is part of our evolution. But Pearsall believes "we have failed to develop another of our evolutionary gifts, the more moderate seventh sense [as he calls it] for healthy, balanced pleasure that results in *collective* survival."[41] The emphasis is not on the individual but the group. This is what attracted me to Pearsall's book: the idea that pleasure is good, something we are meant to share, and that our own natural world can be our spiritual world.

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[37]. Paul Pearsall, *The Pleasure Prescription*, 64.

[38]. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 190.

[39]. Ibid., 175.

[40]. Paul Pearsall, *The Pleasure Prescription*, 178.

[41]. Ibid., 64.

Akahai, 'tenderness': This is the core of *aloha* spirituality. It is where the golden rule, that is present in all world religions, came from. The golden rule was practiced before there were world religions. It was practiced in indigenous religions. Pearsall tells us that "the first meaning of *aloha* is love." And that "Oceanic love is based on *akahai,* which is a constant, conscientious, gentle and caring behavior." Love is "something you *do*."[42] Love, in the "Oceanic" philosophy is also extended to physical bodies.

In "Oceanic" philosophy, the body is not a negative aspect of the self that must be abandoned or overcome. It is equal with the soul and the soul extents to all beings in creation. All creation is family.[43] We are built to survive through cooperation and "we are wired to be giving because giving allows the world to survive and provide for us." There are "biochemical rewards" for altruism. "Fulfillment of the need for social contact and showing supportive behavior to others is accompanied by a strong endorphin rush." This is true for humans as well as for other creatures in the animal kingdom.[44] Studies led by psychologist Jaak Panksepp at Bowling Green State University have shown this to be true.[45]

Carol Lee Flinders also writes about the virtues of indigenous cultures, or as she calls them, the values of belonging. This was the original title of a book which she later renamed *Rebalancing the World*. She has a similar perspective to that of Pearsall. Like

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[42]. Paul Pearsall, *The Pleasure Prescription*, 165.

[43]. Ibid., 163-165.

[44]. Ibid., 175.

[45]. J. Panksepp, N. Najam, and F. Soares, "Morphine Reduces Social Cohesion in Rats," *Pharmacology, Biochemistry, and Behavior* 11 (1979): 131-34.

Pearsall she makes a list. Towards the bottom of her list is, "*playfulness*." "Play relieves tension and facilitates intimacy."[46] Play—is the second alternative to asceticism. Play and pleasure are connected. Indeed, the subtitle of Pearsall's book, *The Pleasure Prescription*, is—*To Love, To Work, To Play—Life in the Balance*. Not only is it good for the body, it is good for the brain as well. The mystic who cloisters him or herself and meditates as a way of expanding the mind might do better to take some real recreation.

According to Stuart Brown, "play seems to be one of the most advanced method nature has invented to allow a complex brain to create itself." The brain "wires itself" through play.[47] The simple act of movement develops the brain. The seemingly random arm and leg movements of babies, the way they play with their food, the babbling noises they make all help to develop pathways in the brain. Movement is "a way of knowing."[48] And when movement is assigned "pleasurable emotions," this is play.[49]

Jaak Panksepp, a colleague of Brown, "believes that play arises from the human brain stem … then connects to and activates pleasurable emotions that accompany the process of playing." For Brown, Panksepp "has captured [the primal processes] that link brain stem (movement) to limbic (emotion) to cortex (thought)."[50] Movement, emotion,

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[46]. Carol Lee Flinders, *Rebalancing the World: Why Women Belong and Men Compete and How to Restore the Ancient Equilibrium* (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 2003), xvii.

[47]. Stuart Brown*, Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 40.

[48]. Ibid.*,* 83-85.

[49]. Ibid., 61.

[50]. Ibid.*,* 61-62.

and thought are all related and play helps develop not only muscles but brains. When Morell interviewed Panksepp, he told her that play "acts like a spark, triggering the release of proteins that cause neurons to sprout and grow not only in the lower emotional-memory regions of the brain such as the hippocampus and amygdale but also in the prefrontal cortex, the brain's decision-making area."[51]

Panksepp uses rats in his studies and he has learned that play helps to develop "proper social behavior," as well as intelligence. He told Morrell that the most playful rats are sought out by others, are more successful at mating (knowing how to make the female comfortable), can handle stress and fear better, and are less prone to depression.[52]

Flinders compares the values of belonging to another set of values which she calls the values of enterprise. These are the values that we incorporated into our cultures once we no longer lived the life of hunter-gatherers but settled down to farm the land. In this new way of life, which actually took thousands of years to solidify, the land and its animals became material possessions; we *owned* them. We became more aggressive and violent. We developed hierarchies. Changes came faster and we relied on reason more than our senses. But Flinders does not suggest that we return to the past. She sees that the embeddedness of the hunter-gatherer actually has its limitations. It can become a "constrain[ing] womb."[53]

Flinders also explains that "it is a mistake to idealize the hunter-gatherer way of life" because their sense of belonging and their ability to empathize with others does not

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[51]. Virginia Morell, *Animal Wise*, 125.

[52]. Ibid., 126.

[53]. Carol Lee Flinders, *Rebalancing the World*, 70-71.

"typically extend to members of other bands or tribes."[54] What Flinders suggests is that we infuse the values of enterprise with the values of belonging. And we have to reclaim the values of belonging for men as well as women. For so long now they have been relegated to the sphere of women. Flinders insists that these are not feminine values but human values.[55]

Bron Taylor sees some need for caution here as well. In the preface of his book, he tells us that he labeled "dark green religion" as such "not only to emphasize the depth of its consideration for nature (a deep shade of green concern) but also to suggest that such religion may have a shadow side."[56] There are radical environmental movements, some of which see humans as a threat to the planet and feel more sympathy for non-human life forms. Some environmentalists condone violence. There is also a tendency for the "fusion" of science, apocalypticism and prophecy in some of these movements.[57] In spite of this Taylor sees the movement of traditional religions as well as new religions, toward nature, as a good thing. Like Albert Schweitzer, he thinks of the universe as a "Great Mystery" which we will never completely solve. Yet, for him, it is "far better to ground our philosophies, whether or not we call them religious, in what we confidently say is the real world." A world such as this "can be just as evocative,

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[54]. Carol Lee Flinders, *Rebalancing the World*, 29.

[55]. Ibid., 89.

[56]. Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, ix.

[57]. Ibid., 84-85.

inspiring, and meaningful as [one] purportedly based on divine (and replicable) revelation."[58]

Although we have lost touch with the natural world and there are things that our ancestors knew about the world that we have forgotten, there are also things that we have learned about the world that our ancestors did not know. Science has given us a better understanding of how the world works and it has shown us that we are not separate from nature. We are very much a part of nature and our acceptance of this can make us healthier, happier, and even more spiritual. Natural settings not only soothe us but make us more empathetic.

Juan Brena wrote, in 1899, about the benefits of natural settings on mental health but did not believe that this could be explained by "medical science." He felt that this was "one of the philosophical problems of the professions and [would] remain incomprehensible so long as we [were] without the clairvoyance necessary to enable us to penetrate the most hidden phenomena of physical life."[59] Today, however, "functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI)" shows "the firing up of a specific portion of the brain, the anterior portion of the parahippocampalgyrus, rich in opioid receptors" when test subjects view scenes of nature as compared to other scenes.[60] This was the finding of

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[58]. Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 220-221.

[59]. Juan Brena, "Influence of Forests on Public Health," *Public Health Papers and Reports* 25 (1899):64-65.

[60]. Eva M. Selhub and Alan C. Logan, *Your Brain on Nature: The Science of Nature's Influence on Your Health, Happiness, and Vitality* (Ontario: John Wiley & Sons Canada, 2012), 28.

researchers in California.[61] It is not just the sight of nature that has a positive effect on us. Green plants produce "olfactory-provoking chemicals that appear to act synergistically, balancing mental outlook and facilitating effortless attention to the environment in which one is immersed." These olfactory-provoking chemicals, and there are many of them, are called phytoncides.[62] We are usually unable to smell these substances and yet they affect our health. Qing Li, of Nippon Medical School, has studied phytoncides extensively and written several papers including one on the effect of the essential oils in wood on the human immune system.[63] Nature is good for us. But it also makes us better people.

"A 2009 study published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*," gives the results of research conducted at the University of Rochester. This study "examined the effect of nature immersion on life aspirations." The study found that after "participants viewed four images of natural environments" and "imagined themselves fully immersed" in these environments, answers to a questioner about life aspirations were more intrinsic and altruistic. Viewing images of "human-made city scenes" had the opposite effect. In a second experiment, the investigators used plants instead of images. "Incredibly, the mere presence of four plants in a room produced a robust and significant

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[61]. I. Biederman and E. Vessel, "Perceptual Pleasure and the Brain," *American Scientist* 94 (2006): 247-53.

[62]. Eva M. Selhub and Alan C. Logan, *Your Brain on Nature*, 82.

[63]. Qing Li et al., "Phytoncides (Wood Essential Oils) Induce Human Natural Killer Cell Activity," *Immunopharmacology and Immunotoxicology* 28 (2006): 319-33.

elevation of intrinsic aspiration."[64] If this is true ascetic practices that take us away from the world can only be harmful. Religious dogma must be replaced by beliefs that expand with changing knowledge. The final chapter will look at how traditional religion is changing and becoming more inclusive. We are learning to include others who may not share our dogma, yet share our values.

[64]. N. Weinstein et al., "Can Nature Make Us More Caring? Effects of Immersion in Nature on Aspirations and Generosity," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35 (2009): 1315-29.

CHAPTER 6

THE FUTURE OF RELIGION

This last chapter is a plea for a more pluralistic attitude towards religion because I believe it is the dogmatic attitude of the past which has caused the horrors of ascetic practice: the wasted bodies, the painful lives interrupted only briefly by episodes of ecstasy, and the teachings that only spread these horrors. The alternative to asceticism, especially the masochistic asceticism which I describe in the first three chapters of this work, is a life affirming spirituality which places less stress on dogma, reunites us to the Earth and all its creatures, gives us an appreciation of life's diversity, and best of all reunites us with our capacity for joy.

If religion is to be on the side of affirming life rather than renouncing it, we will have to make it inclusive rather than exclusive. We will also have to admit that religion, like life itself, is diverse and ever evolving. Gregory Riley makes this clear in *The River of God*, when he describes the evolution of Christianity. In his introduction, he tells us that, not only did Christianity evolve from Judaism; but since it "arose" within a "Greco-Roman context" it was influence by pagan religion as well.[1]

New knowledge adds to lineage and outside influence and changes religion as well. With every new scientific discovery our beliefs are altered. Dogmas can only stem

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[1]. Gregory J. Riley, *The River of God*, 2.

this tide of change for a time. Sooner or later we will have to accept that what we once believed no longer makes sense. Logically this must lead us to a pluralistic attitude. We will need to recognize, that even with ever increasing knowledge, there will always be more to learn. New knowledge will bring new questions along with new mysteries. No single person, no single religion could possibly claim ultimate truth.

With an attitude of pluralistic inclusion, our focus will not be on dogma. This will open our hearts to the possibility of making the world a better place for all its inhabitants. The Jewish tradition has a word for this, *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world.[2] And since Christianity has a Jewish background we might expect to find this sentiment in the younger tradition as well. In fact, Harvey Cox explains that this was the original focus of Christianity. The followers of Jesus looked forward to "an era of *shalom*" in which all were included. Cox calls the earliest Christian era an "Age of Faith."[3] He believes that before Christianity became a set of dogmas, there were several Christian communities united by a shared spirit. This spirit was a faith in the way of Jesus, his way of being. Following this way of being would culminate in a Kingdom of God on earth.[4]

We passed through this Age of Faith to an Age of Belief. But Cox believes that we are entering a new Age of the Spirit which is a close kin to the earlier Age of Faith. The Age of the Spirit "reflects" a "discontent" with "theological propositions" "packaged" by "religious corporations." It "represents an attempt to voice the awe and

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[2]. Joseph Naft, "Tikkun Olam: The Spiritual Purpose of Life," Inner Frontier, accessed July 1, 2014, http://innerfrontier.org/Practices/TikkunOlam.htm.

[3]. Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith*, 73.

[4]. Ibid., 60.

wonder before the intricacy of nature." And it "recognizes the increasing porous borders between the different traditions."[5]

In the Age of the Spirit the meaning of faith will be the same as it was in the Age of Faith. Diana Butler Bass explains that the interpretation of the word 'believe' in the English Bible has changed. She cites Wilfred Cantwell Smith who "argues for a distinction between 'faith' and 'belief' based on the etymologies of the terms."[6] According to Smith, you have the Latin words *opinor* and *opinari* from which our English word opinion comes. These words are translated as 'to believe'. They are not religious words. But then you have the Latin word *credo* which means "I set my heart upon" or "I give my loyalty to." This word has a religious meaning.

Smith goes on to say that in medieval England the sentiment of having a religious attachment of love and loyalty was translated as "believe" which has a similar meaning to the German word *belieben*, "to prize, treasure, or hold dear," from the root word *Liebe*, love."[7] Bass explains further that:

> In Greek, there is a verb for the experience of beloving [sic] God: "to faith" (i.e., *pist*-). In English, however, "faith" is a noun and not a verb. With no equivalent active word, English translations render the Greek verb "to faith" in English as "to believe." The verb "to believe" (meaning

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[5]. Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith*, 13-14.

[6]. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 117.

[7]. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Believing: An Historical Perspective* (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 1998), 26-42.

> "to belove, [sic] prize, or treasure," as explained above) appears frequently in the English Bible. It typically occurs … in the forms "I believe" or "I believe you" (or "him,""her," or "God"). This reinforces its original meaning of "belove" as a general confession of trust or a specific disposition of trusting someone—it is a personal and relational action initiated by love. In only 12 percent of scriptural cases does "to believe" appear as "I believe that ….," an impersonal affirmation about something.[8]

With this understanding in mind, Bass says that according to Smith, a passage such as John 3:16 should more appropriately be translated as "everyone who trusts in Jesus" or "everyone who directs his or her heart toward Jesus" will not perish. This passage and others like it have lost their true spiritual meaning when translated as a doctrine of belief rather than an emotional attachment of love, trust and loyalty.[9]

The Age of the Spirit is taking place within Eastern traditions as well.[10] A beautiful example of this can be found in the writings of the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. He, along with other modern Buddhist monks, teaches us to embrace the earth and even our physical bodies. This is very unlike the early Buddhism of ancient India mentioned in this work. Rather than seeing the body as a vile thing which oozes foul

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[8]. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 118.

[9]. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Believing: An Historical Perspective*, 58.

[10]. Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith*, 213.

liquids, Thich Nhat Hanh writes, in *Love Letters to Earth*, that we need to be connected to our bodies which in turn will connect us to the Earth and the whole cosmos. He sees our awareness of our oneness with the universe as enlightenment.[11] Rather than speak of nirvana, he writes that "we shouldn't be lured by the idea of a far away paradise …. We have to come back to take refuge in Mother Earth."[12] He tells us that there is no need to "imagine a Pure Land of the Buddha to the west or a Kingdom of God above …. Heaven is here on Earth. The Kingdom of God is here and now."[13] He claims that "the earth is us" rather than being "just [our] environment." If we had this awareness, he says, all our environmental problems would be solved.[14]

Thich Nhat Hanh, speaking of the Pure Land and Heaven in the same sentence, has made a bridge between the two cultures. But the biggest gap is actually between different denominations within the same faith.

Harvey Cox stresses the need for interfaith, and *intra*faith dialogue. He is concerned about the fact that the dialogue between people of different faiths is often easier than the dialogue between people of the same faith but different wings or denominations. We find differences in other religions "interesting" but people may feel threatened when cherished dogmas are questioned by someone who is supposedly of the same faith. Cox finds no future in a situation in which "open-minded members in each

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[11]. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love Letters to the Earth* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2013), 35.

[12]. Ibid., 61-62.

[13]. Ibid., 114.

[14]. Ibid., 27.

religion enjoy cozy colloquies with each other" while "the ultraconservative wing in each becomes more isolated and truculent." To address this situation, in 1983, he invited the fundamentalist Jerry Falwell to speak at John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. Then, "a few years after," he invited "a group of faculty members from Regent University, in Virginia Beach, founded by Pat Robertson." Cox says that there were no "dramatic breakthroughs" as a result of these gatherings. But he feels these meetings are necessary. Without them we grow farther apart.[15]

Interfaith dialogue must include nonbelievers as well. If, as Cox says, the world should no longer be "divided between 'believers' and 'nonbelievers'," and faith has a new meaning that goes beyond dogma then we must include nonbelievers in our dialogue.[16] Cox mentions briefly The Vatican Secretariat for Nonbelievers which was "created as a result of the Second Vatican Council." "In March 1969" Cox was invited to attend a meeting because Pope Paul VI had read his book, *The Secular City*. There were other Protestants at the meeting, as well as Jews, nonbelievers and Marxists. Cox viewed the Vatican Secretariat as a hopeful sign for the future of religion.[17] He quotes Giancarlo Zizola who suggested that the Vatican might become "a point of concentration of spiritual authority in the eyes of all Christians and of all people as to become a kind of

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[15]. Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith,* 132-135.

[16]. Ibid., 183.

[17]. Ibid., 125-126, 219.

agent of unification of all the forces that tend toward the good."[18] Cox says that the Secretariat of Nonbelievers declined around 2004.[19]

Paul Levesque, who heads the Department of Comparative Religions at California State University at Fullerton, addressed the topic of including atheists in interfaith dialogue in a speech before the Fullerton Interfaith Ministerial Association on September 8, 2013. He began his speech by outlining the differences between the exclusive, the inclusive, and the pluralistic response to religion. He said that while the exclusivists believe that they have the monopoly on truth, the inclusivists and especially the pluralists "have given birth to interfaith movements and interreligious dialogs that have shaped a spirit of trust, friendship, and respect among people of vastly different faith traditions." But he went on to say that the religious pluralists "must also be careful not to see themselves as opposed to the non-religious." For while there are exclusivist atheists who "see no value whatsoever in religion" there are also atheists "who find some common ground with religious believers." Levesque suggests that the term "non-theist" or "post-theist" might be a better label than atheists. The most important point that Levesque makes is that "people-of-good-will come in all shapes and sizes, and include believers and nonbelievers alike." Uniting together [we] can fight the common enemies of war, hunger, disease, sexual abuse, human trafficking, economic inequality, race inequality,

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[18]. Giancarlo Zizola, *The Utopia of John XXIII* (New York: Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1978), 171.

[19]. Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith*, 126.

sex inequality, anti-Semitism, discrimination against the disabled, exploitation of the environment, and the list goes on."[20]

An example of an atheist who holds the same view as Levesque is Chris Stedman, the Assistant Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University, the emeritus managing director of State of Formation at the *Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue*, and the founder of the first blog dedicated to exploring atheist interfaith engagement, *NonProphet Status*. Eboo Patel, founder and president of "Interfaith Youth Core [sic]," describes Stedman as "young and still emerging yet remarkably mature."[21] Stedman shares the story of his conversion, first to Christianity, then to atheism and finally to "faitheism" because he is interested in both exploring godless ethics and identifying and engaging shared values with the religious. He puts "faith in [his] fellow human beings and our shared potential to overcome the false dichotomies that keep us apart."[22] He reclaims the label "faitheist," pinned on him by a fellow atheist as an insult because he believes that religious and nonreligious can "accomplish so much more" by working together. The "new atheism," which has nothing but contempt for religion and sees the religious as fools, he finds "toxic, misdirected, and wasteful."[23] I want to summarize his story here because it expresses the new meaning of the word faith. Stedman is a young but wise gay atheist.

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[20]. Paul J. Levesque, "Religion as a Dialog in Diversity" (lecture at Fullerton Interfaith Ministerial Association, Fullerton, CA, September 8, 2013).

[21]. Eboo Patel, foreword to *Faitheist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious,* by Chris Stedman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), xvi.

[22]. Chris Stedman, *Faitheist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 15.

[23]. Ibid., 10.

He is all the things that many conservative religious people feel is unnatural, unholy, and undeserving of authority. Yet his story shows him to be a compassionate human being.

Chris Stedman grew up in a family that, for the most part, did not practice religion. Religion "was something other people did."[24] His interest in religion began with a childhood friendship. "Lia was adopted from South Korea." Her adoptive father was Jewish while her adoptive mother was Christian. Lia's family celebrated Jewish and Christian holidays as well as the holidays of Lia's birthplace. Stedman was invited to a Seder celebration which he found interesting but felt no sense of belonging. He felt "okay" with his family tradition of storytelling, in which "stories of generations past, instilled morals and practices of sharing and love and humor."[25]

Stedman's family did become part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation for a short time but it was far away so they stopped going. Stedman was moved towards "concern for the world … [and] a desire for justice," through reading "real-world tragedy," like *Roots, The Diary of Anne Frank*, and *Hiroshima*. But he needed a "moral outlet." When his parents divorced he was open to the persuasions of the Christian youth group on his middle school campus.[26]

"Though pizza and popularity brought me in," he says, "and the love of Christ and community kept me, it was in fact the image of Christ as a social reformer that impacted me the most." He was very much like Albert Schweitzer in this respect. Since this

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[24]. Chris Stedman, *Faitheist*, 17.

[25]. Ibid., 28-30.

[26]. Ibid., 31-34.

aspect of Christ was not stressed in the youth group, he began to explore the Bible on his own. He "began to ask a lot of questions, and in the process [he] discovered two things almost simultaneously: [He] was queer and [his] church would kick [him] out if they discovered [his] secret."[27]

Stedman thought of his homosexuality as an "affliction" that he needed to do penance for. He fasted and read his Bible. His life became a "performance." He thought about suicide. What saved him was his mother finding his journal when she went in his room to clean his messy closet. Stedman was forced out of the closet along with his journal. He felt an overwhelming sense of shame. But, to his surprise, his mother said, "I love you, and nothing will ever change that." His mother set up an appointment for him with a minister who told him that he was loved and that God did not want him to change. At first Stedman was relieved but then he felt anger. He stayed away from church for a while but was persuaded by his mother to go to a weekend retreat.[28]

The weekend retreat revived him. He liked the people there. He found them to be "among the most genuinely kind and open-hearted individuals [he] had ever met."[29] But what made this retreat even more meaningful for him was that, even though there were some homophobic people there, he met two other gay men, one his roommate and the other a counselor. These men made him feel that he could reconcile his homosexuality

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[27]. Chris Stedman, *Faitheist*, 38-40.

[28]. Ibid., 52-59.

[29]. Ibid., 63

with Christianity. He became a "queer Christian activist."[30] He even decided to study for the ministry.[31] It was in studying religion, however, that he lost his faith in God.

When he lost his faith in God, the anger he felt resurfaced. All religion was stupid to him, especially Christianity. He wanted Christianity to be "broken like it had broken [him]."[32] Feeling this way did not make him happy. It felt wrong. He had always "been drawn to serving others."[33] When he graduated from college, he "found a job with Lutheran Social Services as a direct service professional for adults with developmental disabilities."[34] It was while working with a man named Marvin that he found a resolution to his anger.

Marvin liked to be read to and Stedman liked to read to him. One day, however, the book that Marvin chose to be read from, was a prayer book. Stedman "cringed" but turned to a "dog-eared" page and read the "Lutheran Prayer for Courage." When he finished reading this prayer Marvin gave him "the tightest hug [he] had ever received." Stedman was not prepared for the emotions that followed. His heart was moved. He felt a sense of "relief." He says that "reading the prayer felt like a conversion experience." Marvin's reaction made him realize that a relationship with another human being, if it is to be complete, must include the whole person. It must allow them to share their beliefs

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[30]. Chris Stedman, *Faitheist*, 61-67.

[31]. Ibid., 81.

[32]. Ibid., 102.

[33]. Ibid., 109.

[34]. Ibid., 108.

because their beliefs are "significant" to them. Stedman felt sorry for all the opportunities to connect with others that he missed. He felt sorry for the "condescending and dismissive way [he] had sometimes treated [his] religious professors and classmates." He began to read. In school he read religious texts. Now he wanted to know more about religious people.

While researching the lives of religious people he discovered Eboo Patel. He had actually had an opportunity to hear Patel speak, since he gave a commencement speech at the college he had attended. But he passed this up because of his negative attitude at the time. This time, he took the opportunity to read Patel's book, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, The Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*. Stedman found himself "miraculously" identifying with Patel. He felt a desire to "join Patel's efforts to make society more cooperative and less conflict-oriented." He wanted to "[bridge] the divide between the religious and the secular." He decided that the best way to do this was to go back to school.[35]

Stedman became a graduate student at a "Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago." He tells us that by enrolling at this seminary he was also "allowed to take courses at any of the city's thirteen theological schools," as well. He was "excited to take classes among Catholics, Protestants, Unitarian Universalists, Jews, Muslims and others."[36]

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[35]. Chris Stedman, *Faitheist*, 113-114.

[36]. Ibid., 122-123.

After a year of study he received an email from Patel's organization: Interfaith Youth Core. He became an intern with this organization and it was through Patel that he found a new and better label for himself.[37] Patel introduced him to "Greg Epstein's *Good Without God* and the works of other contemporary Humanists." Stedman liked the label Humanist better than atheist, agnostic, nonreligious or secular because he found it to be a positive label. He was excited to find affirmative values to identify with rather than a label that simply identified what he did not believe in. In Humanism he found an ethical guide to do good for other humans.[38] As always he became very active. He helped organize the Secular Humanist Alliance of Chicago. He started a blog: *NonProphet Status*. He "joined forces with the *Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue* (JIRD) and the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions (CPWR)." He left the Interfaith Youth Core but only because he wanted "to work to help build a Humanist community." Shortly thereafter he was invited by Greg Epstein "to create a pilot inter-faith community service program for the Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard."[39]

Stedman's story is a perfect example of affirming life. But his humanity, his spirituality, and his goodness would not be appreciated in the minds of many dogmatic thinkers. Instead, he would be thought of as unnatural, unholy, undeserving of any authority, and maybe even destined for hell. Yet he represents the new meaning of the word faith. Each of us has a part in making the world a better place, a place where we maintain a spirit of playfulness and compassion rather than ascetic renunciation.

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[37]. Chris Stedman, *Faitheist*, 129.

[38]. Ibid., 136-137.

[39]. Ibid., 138-141.

Affirming life means accepting diversity, evolution and change. It means opening ourselves up to people that we might, at first glance, reject. If we listen to people, read what they write, we will find places where we can identify with them. This was so for Stedman as he read Eboo Patel's story. It was true for me as I read Stedman's story. And I hope it will be true for those who read the personal story that I close this work with. This is the only way to make positive changes, when we come together to solve problems despite our differences. Hopefully we will continue to include more and more people into our circle. And not stopping there we will include our fellow creatures on this earth. If we are all part of the same creation—or evolutionary tree of life—then our survival, and the survival of the earth depends on our coming together. This life, this earth, nature—human or otherwise matters. Not in renouncing this life will we be saved but in reconnecting to it, in embracing reverence for life.

AFTERWORD

For thousands of years human beings have been separating themselves from nature. Wiercinski sees this in terms of a conflict between our "psycho-corporeal animal side" and our "psych-cerebral potential"; Talcott Parsons sees it in terms of the evolution of society from smaller groups to larger civilizations which had to be organized in new ways. Our modern cultures have developed literature, art, science, and religion. Animals do not have these things and we humans have come to see ourselves as the peak of creation, citing our intelligence as our right to this claim. In the Christian tradition it is believed that it is our intelligence that gives us a likeness to God. In Genesis 1: 26, God says, "Let us make humankind in our own image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." The note on this passage, in the *Harper Collins Study Bible*, says that "human are like God/gods with respect to moral, spiritual, political, or other qualities."[1]

We humans have discovered what we have believed to be separate worlds. We have come to believe that these worlds are reached through practices that detach us, not only from this world of the senses but also from our own bodies. But nature, our nature, is very much involved. Hallucination and ecstasy come naturally to us. Each of our senses has a "primary reception area" in our brain. Visual images, for example, are

[1]. Ronald Hendel, note to Genesis 1:26*, The Harper Collins Study Bible*, rev.ed., ed. Harold W. Attridge (New York: Harper Collins, 2006).

formed using, in the words of Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, "a jumble of abstract lines, shapes, and colors."[2] These are the basic building blocks from which images are formed. We have learned to see these building blocks and create our own images through the use of drugs or techniques such as fasting, dancing, focusing the mind intentionally and intently, or simple letting the mind wander.

Ecstasy as well is hardwired into our brain. We have evolved to experience pleasure in activities that keep us alive and help our species to survive. We derive pleasure not only from eating, drinking, and sexual activity, but also from behaviors that we consider moral: cooperation and altruism. The most intense pleasure, however, seems to be brought about through stress or pain. The body defends against pain, injury, or stress which is beyond our tolerance. At this time nor-adrenaline, which puts us in "fight or flight" mode, is replaced by acetylcholine, which shuts the body down. Our consciousness is altered and sometimes we hallucinate. We feel not pain but relief and sometimes intense pleasure.

It is possible to become addicted to stress hormones. This may present itself as a need to be involved in a dangerous sport such as surfing. Or it may be the result of a stressful childhood, ascetic practices, or the practice of masochism. The curious thing is that mystics and masochists have used similar techniques to bring about intense pleasure and even ecstasy. The masochist is openly using physical pain to bring about sexual pleasure, while the mystic believes he or she is detaching from the world and being united with the infinite. Teresa of Avila, for example used a *diciplina,* and even sent one to a friend. She was able to beat herself into ecstasy. While Teresa felt graced by God,

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[2] . Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Auili, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 25.

in the words of the practicing masochist Anita Phillips, her experience was "erotic." The erotic nature of mystical experience is reflected in the words of the French feminist Luce Irigaray as well.

Though it may not have been her intention, Irigaray has put into words what I believe ascetic practice to be: a masochistic form of (auto)eroticism. I do not, however, see masochistic practices as good ways to get in touch with suppressed sexuality, lost identity or that it is in any way a union with God. The pleasure brought about through masochistic practice may be more intense than ordinary pleasure but there is a price to pay. As Anita Phillips explains, not only is there physical pain involved but also emotional pain. The lover is one who will leave us. The relationship may be one of passion but it is not one of joy or affection. This is the case with the mystic as well for the ecstasies "come intermittently, briefly, rarely, hastily, and the soul is left in great sorrow."[3]

Self-injury also has long term effects. Not only does pain cause the body to produce endorphins but "pain also causes the body to produce catecholamines, which over time damage major organs of the body." Even the heart may be harmed. People who injure themselves may not be aware of this. They are looking for the next "jolt" as any addict, their bodies losing the ability to distinguish between pleasure and pain. So say Barbara Natterson-Horowitz and Kathryn Bowers in, *Zoobiquity.*[4]

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[3]. Luce Irigaray, "La Mysterique," 33.

[4]. Barbara Natterson-Horowitz and Kathryn Bowers, *Zoobiquity: The Astonishing Connection Between Human and Animal Health* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2013), 216-217.

Natterson-Horowitz and Bowers worked with veterinarians to find the roots of human disease in animals. After all we share so much in terms of genetics with our fellow creatures. One topic they discuss is self-injury. A common activity among humans and animals is grooming which is naturally pleasurable and soothing. Natterson-Horrowitz, and Bowers explore "grooming gone wild," a result of "stress, isolation, and boredom." Some people will cut themselves or pull out their hair to relieve stress. Animals will lick themselves or bite or claw at themselves. Natterson-Horowitz and Bowers concluded that, "self-injury in humans and animals is aberrant, dangerous, and needs to be controlled."[5] If this is true of grooming gone wild, it must be true for self harm caused by harsh ascetic practices and masochism.

At its best, sex is a form of play. There is a common scene in films, at least in the ones that I grew up with. A boy is chasing a laughing girl. She is not afraid. She is not running fast enough that she will not be caught. When she is caught the two of them roll around for a bit and then the lovemaking begins. We have learned from researcher, like Stuart Brown, that play, in all its forms, is good for us. It helps develop not only our intellect but also enhances social bonds. It *is*, according to Carol Lee Flinders, a value of belonging. Proper social behavior and bonding, which are both derived from play, are part of morality. If this is so then the best way to develop morally is to have an attitude of playfulness, as Carol Flinders suggests.

Diana Butler Bass also writes about belonging but from a religious perspective. As a Christian, Bass believes that we need to feel that we belong to God, that we have "our place within God." She tells us that sin used to be defined as pride and a feeling of

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[5]. Barbara Natterson-Horowitz and Kathryn Bowers, *Zoobiquity,* 217-218.

being the center of everything, being in a sense one's own god. The cure for this was to negate the self and even torture one's self. Bass cites Valerie Saiving, who believed that this was a masculine sense of sin. Saiving, writing in 1960, felt that women actually needed to develop the self, that their sins were "better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness … in short, underdevelopment or negation of the Self."[6] Bass believes that since the sixties "most Europeans and Americans—male, female, gay, straight, transgender, black, white, brown—have most likely succumbed to the sins of 'triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness,' having lost any real sense of self in a world of broken memories, entertainment technologies, and frenzied materialism."[7] Bass says that we no longer need to free ourselves from ourselves. In our modern world, men, as well as women, need to find "an authentic sense of personhood." We need to become "whole." This is the meaning of the word salvation. It stems from the "Latin root *salvus*, meaning 'whole', 'sound', 'healing', 'safe', 'well', or 'unharmed'." The spiritual understanding of this, for Bass, is to feel connected to the whole, "to find our place within God and God's world."[8] I believe this sentiment could be translated into any positive religious or non-religious belief system. It does not seem logical that God, the gods, the universe or nature would reward us for hurting ourselves. It may be true that masochistic behavior produces extraordinary orgasm or ecstasy, but is this a reward? I see it as an attempt to soothe the pain and call one back to life.

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[6]. Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminist View," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 37.

[7]. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 181.

[8]. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 182-183.

A Personal Reflection

There is a more personal reason that it is impossible for me to believe that God would reward self-inflicted pain. Let me explain. I was raised Roman Catholic. The Church taught me that there was a heaven, a hell, and purgatory, a place almost as bad as hell, where most people spent time purging their sins before they could enter heaven. Only saints went straight to heaven. As I grew up, I heard people talk about being afraid of God because of sins they had committed. At times I felt I was bad enough to go to hell. I was never *really* that bad. But even if I had been I would never have been afraid of God. I was not afraid because I believed that I had a guardian angel and that this angel had spoken to me.

I must have been four when this happened because I was not going to school yet. Maybe if I had been in school I would have had more life experience and I would have interpreted my experience in a different way. This is my story:

I was sitting at the breakfast table with my mother and sister and brother. We were having our usual oatmeal with bread and margarine, when someone dropped a piece of bread on the floor. I do not remember if it was me who dropped the bread or someone else but my mother told that person to pick up the bread and then she said "Kiss the bread because bread becomes the body of Jesus at mass." This was an incredible idea. How could this be, I wondered? My whole attention was focused on this strange idea. I was so absorbed in thought that I stopped eating. When everyone else was finished eating my mother said, "We are going next door to your aunt's. You have to stay here and finish your oatmeal."

My mother grew up in the depression. She told me that she could remember sitting under the table of a neighbor while they peeled apples to make an apple pie. She was three years old and she was so hungry she was eating the apple peels as they fell to the floor. Food was not something to waste. It was something that had to be stretched and guarded. We were taught to eat everything on the plate and to ask for food before taking it. So I would stay behind to finish my oatmeal while my brother and sister went next door with my mother.

As soon as they walked out the door, I began to cry. And almost immediately I heard this voice say, "Don't cry Diana." I stopped crying and said, "Who are you? You come back here you stupid thing." I was afraid but I got up from the table and began looking for the source of the voice. I walked very slowly down the hall then ran back to the table and finished my oatmeal as fast as I could.

When I went next door to my aunt's, I told my mother, "Someone talked to me." "That was me," my aunt said. But I did not believe her. My mother told me, "That was your guardian angel." I believed her. And I believed what she told me for most of my life. But when my aunt was dying, she told me again, "That was me." And this time I had to believe her.

My belief in the voice as my guardian angel was the reason I never believed that the bright light in my head that awakened me at night so many years later was anything but something happening in my body. I compared the light to the voice. The light was inside me while the voice was outside of me. In my Western mind, the light had to be some purely physical reaction.

If I told someone about the voice I heard when I was four I would describe it as very strong but very gentle. I would say that it was neither male nor female but had the qualities of both. I would say that it had contrasting qualities. "It was like it was black and white at the same time. Not grey but black and white at the same time." Where did these ideas come from? Why was it that I could not believe my aunt when she told me that she was the one who told me not to cry?

After researching the topic of mysticism and asceticism, in an earlier work, I analyzed my experience and came to this conclusion: When my mother made the comment about bread becoming the body of Jesus, my consciousness was altered. I was deep in thought. When she left me alone in the house, a state of fear was added to this. I speculate that my aunt met my mother and siblings at the front door which was not in my field of vision. She could have spoken to me as the door was closing but I did not see her.

My aunt had a beautiful singing voice. She told me that one of her aunts used to do the dishes for her to get her to sing for her. But my aunt did not have the high pitched voice of a soprano. She had the low pitched voice of an alto. I did not recognize my aunt's voice because of the state I was in. I believed my mother when she told me it was my guardian angel because it was a loving voice and that addressed my fear. As I grew, I must have added things to the memory of my aunt's voice. When I learned the attributes of God and the angels, in catechism class, I must have applied them to her voice: It was very strong but also gentle. It was neither male nor female. That would fit the description of an alto voice.

My belief in this voice sustained me through all of life's trials. When I felt alone or hopeless, when I lost faith I would remember the voice. I did not understand other people's fear of God. If the angel who spoke to me was loving, how much more loving was God? I was never afraid of God. I never feared the punishment of God. I felt that I could share anything with God and He would understand.

When the miracle of the voice was dissolved by the knowledge of what truly happened, I was sad and disillusioned. But I read something that Carl Jung wrote and I came to see this experience in a new light. I came to see it as a different kind of miracle, not as a literal miracle but as a miracle of synchronicity, a psychic miracle, an illusion to which I gave great meaning. Carl Jung says, that "What we are pleased to call [illusion] may be for the psyche a most important fact of life—something as indispensable as oxygen—a psychic actuality of prime importance. Presumable the psyche does not trouble itself about categories of reality."[9] The way that all the components of my experience came together was in a sense miraculous: What my mother said when the bread dropped on the floor, the deep thought that her words aroused in me, her leaving me alone in the house, the fact that my aunt had this beautiful alto voice that I could easily interpret as the voice of an angel? But what is most miraculous to me is how this experience formed in me a very positive image of God and how it sustained me through all my trials. In the end, it was a very ordinary experience that became most meaningful for me. It was spontaneous and very this-worldly.

I do not doubt that the mystical experiences of ascetic saints have meaning for them. I also must admit that my experience involved some pain. I felt abandoned. But

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[9]. C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, trans. W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes (1933; repr., Orlando: Harcourt, 1993), 73.

my pain was not self-inflicted. My intention in writing this work is not to disillusion anyone. I am simply concerned in the harm that asceticism causes.

As part of the animal kingdom it is possible to experience the mystical in encounters with nature. This is the experience of Jane Goodall. It is not necessary to harm one's self. Nor is it necessary to live in seclusion. Paul Pearsall believes that we are made to share joy with each other in caring for one another and our fellow creatures. Finally, it is not necessary to detach from the world. Thich Nhat Hanh believes that we should find heaven here on earth. It is time to give up the torture and reconnect.

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