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Field Statement Three
For Dr. Kurt Keutzer (and Dr. Somadeva Vasudeva)
The Role of Religious Experience in the Study of Indian Religion

Preface

The confused, ambiguous, polarized, and largely stagnant state of scholarship on religious experience, also called mysticism, requires a somewhat lengthy introduction to this paper, in which I attempt to give an overview of the theoretical issues on which the literature has focused, and further attempt to clear up what appear to me as needless ambiguities and misunderstandings. The introduction draws on scholarly literature I have read over the past ten years that I have thought about this issue, much of which is listed in the bibliography.

Introduction: a précis of the issues

This introduction attempts to come to grips with the problems in the study of mysticism, addressing (as much as space allows) the following issues:

- Why is the study of religious experience (RE) important?
- The problem of empiricism and epistemology in the study of RE
- The effect of personal beliefs on scholarship and the emic/etic tension in work on RE
- The problem of scholarship ungrounded in real-world actions and experiences

The concept of 'experience' is a central one in both the practice and the study of religions, for it is frequently invoked by religious actors as the reason for anything up to and including drastic life changes, and indeed the whole orientation of their worldview. That is, religious actors tend to grant high epistemological value to (what they view as) spiritual experience, though it cannot be observed or corroborated by others. Because of the latter

fact, 'religious experience' has a vexed and contested history in the academic study of religion—a self-avowedly *empirical* discipline—both in terms of the nature (or even existence) of its referent as well as its epistemological value. Debate on the role and significance of experience occupies a unique area of discourse for the scholar of religion, for the simple reason that she has limited access to the data about which she writes (unless it be that of her own experience, virtually verboten for an academic) and thus all her conclusions are partial and provisional.

Various scholars have, in recent decades, employed a variety of strategies to mitigate or eliminate this epistemological disadvantage, with little to no success: religious actors public and private still cite personal experience as a guarantor of the truth of their propositions, and scholars remain unable to determine how to assess the validity of such claims. Some are uncomfortable with this situation, for it threatens the authoritativeness of their discourse over the only area of religious studies that seems unequivocally *religious* (that is, the area that is not also political, social, aesthetic, etc., and thereby covered by other disciplines as well).[1] And there is a further unacknowledged issue at stake: this is the one area of scholarly discourse where the scholar's own unstated religious convictions influence—sometimes even determine—the view she upholds. No one has yet pointed out the elephant in the room: that to deny the possibility of an 'unmediated experience'[2] is tantamount, in certain contexts, to denying the existence of God (or at least a God with agency). This latter is of course *the* issue that academic discourse must bracket in order to be academic—but it has failed in its treatment of mystical experience in part because it cannot

[1] A possible exception would be certain forms of individual ritual that cannot be shown to have functions that are social, political, etc. and are therefore unlikely to be studied within any other field—such the daily ritual of propitiation of a mantra in Tantric Śaivism.

[2] Where 'unmediated' means, as per Katz (1978), not mediated, shaped, or determined by (culturally determined) socio-linguistic constructs.

directly comment on exactly what the religious experiencer takes to the be the central element of her experience: that it is an authentic influx of divine power. In the event this *is* addressed by the scholar, it is usually subject to a kind of reductionism that the agent/experiencer would invariably reject. And, some would argue, if our treatment of a phenomenon is unintelligible to the one with first-hand knowledge of it, scholarship cannot be said to have entirely understood it. Others would argue the opposite, that such concession to the *emic* viewpoint is unecessary and even distortive—and these are, not coincidentally, almost always the scholars who are not themselves believers or practitioners in their private life.[3] Though again, these are not issues ever brought into the open—in order to maintain the fiction that the private and public lives of a scholar are separable. Thus, in the study of mystical experience, unlike other areas of scholarly discourse, the religious convictions of the scholar cannot be bracketed as irrelevant to her findings, and we should not go on pretending they can.

Finally, one more key issue must be highlighted by way of introduction to the topic, and that is the prevalence of recent scholarship that ignores the role of experience in contexts where it would seem crucial to address it; that is, work that neglects to ever ask the question "What were these religious actors actually *doing*?" There are countless examples, but in interests of brevity I will address one, a popular article by Phyllis Granoff entitled "Other People's Rituals" (2000). In this article, she discusses medieval Sanskrit texts that provide rituals by which one may attain various supernatural powers. One such ritual, an all-night affair that includes the fashioning of ritual objects out of clay and grass, concludes thusly, according to the primary source:

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[3] Though making this sort of observation in print is generally 'not done', this hardly obviates the need to understand why it is so often true, what role psychology plays in the formation of scholarly agendas, and how it affects the outcome of research. This is the parallel in the humanities of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle in quantum physics, and it seems to me untenable for the field to continue to fail to address it.

> When the sun comes up, the clay peacock becomes the great Peacock King. The wheel made of grass begins to glow. The practitioner has a divine body, adorned with heavenly garlands, ornaments and clothing; the practitioner is radiant like the sun that has risen and he can assume any form he wishes. Bowing down to all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, the practitioner circles the cloth three times. He takes ahold of it and then, sitting on the peacock, in an instant he travels to the Brahma world. Surrounded by a retinue of innumerable vidyādharas, he is the king of the vidyādharas. He lives for six manvantrakalpas. [*sic*] He can go wherever he wishes; there is nothing that impedes his passage. He has divine wealth. He sees Mañjuśrī right before him. . . . he becomes a vidyādhara; he has the ability to fly through the sky; in this very body he traverses many world systems. [Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa ch. 10, cited at Granoff 2000: 412-3]

The fantastic account occurs in a Tantric Buddhist text whose language and cultural context indicate that it was written to convert people to its particular mode of practice, and that the hyperbole evident in passages such as these was intended to persuade the reader of the value of the text and its rituals. However, this begs a question obvious and of the greatest interest to any non-scholarly reader who confronts these accounts: if the language is meant to persuade readers to adopt the text and perform the given ritual, then the writer of the text must in fact experienceect the ritual to work, and to accomplish *something* extraordinary, if not all he promises. So what, in fact, were the actors implied in such accounts as the above actually doing and experienceeriencing? That is, what kind of experiences and interpretations allowed them to maintain such views as, e.g., the belief in the yogic power of flight (attested across centuries and different genres of texts)? Was it all complete fabrication, a flight of the imagination or the ramblings of a pathologically unhinged mind? If so, why study it? If not, what is the nature of the experiences that reinforce and legitimise these views?[4] None of these questions are addressed or even hinted in Granoff's article and many like it. Thus the entire piece, full of rich cultural

[4] I am not of course suggesting that perhaps yogis really could fly, but rather that they may have had some experience that felt like flying, giving rise to the trope; such an idea is already established with regard to the extraordinary accounts of the *soma* hymns of the Ṛgveda, partially because of the greater believability of drug-induced experiences in the context of post-psychedelic Western culture.

detail, remains curiously ungrounded in the real world. Granoff takes the accounts at face value, engaging in an almost purely descriptive enterprise, but it seems hardly possible that she personally believes them. If the scholar believes the accounts presented as true by the source are in fact literary or pathological, then surely they should be analysed as such. If she thinks they relate, however slightly, to some real experience of the world, then surely what that is ought to be part of her scholarly discussion. Yet none of these questions, which would serve to ground what we read in the real world of religious actors and experiencers, are even on the table.

All of the above issues combine to make the study of religious experience seem less advanced, less sophisticated, less empirical, more intractable and saddled with greater ambiguity and interdeterminacy than perhaps any other issue in the field. The need for new thinking and new approaches is clear.

Part One: Charting the Field

Scholarly views on the concept of religious or 'mystical' experience (RE, ME) in the last century have covered a spectrum whose further ends are polar opposites: on one end, William James' view (1902) that religious experience constitutes the defining essence and most salient feature of religion, and that an inquiry into it is necessary to have a complete picture of reality; and on the other, Robert Sharf (1998), who simply denies both the existence of a particularly religious experience and the notion that inner experience provides any useful data to the philosopher with which he might constitute a theory of consciousness or reality. Sharf's view is the logical culmination (and, as we shall see, over-extension) of a trajectory referred to as the 'constructivist' or 'contextualist view' or the 'linguistic turn' and begun by Steven Katz in 1978, with the publication of his paper "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism". The success of this trajectory, which overturned

the Jamesian trajectory (which itself culminated in the 1950s and 60s in the writing of 'perennialist' thinkers), is now thoroughly widespread and evident in many publications, and has in some circles become a kind of scholarly dogma.[5]

Let us begin then by summarizing the three basic positions that have emerged in scholarship on ME (cf. Brainard 1996: 361-2). First, the perennialist view emerged slowly over the course of the 20th century, articulated by a variety of scholars from Aldous Huxley and E. Underhill to W.T. Stace and Huston Smith. Informed by the increasing pluralism and burgeoning popular interest in other cultures and alternative spiritualities, and inspired by W. James' seminal work on the varieities of religious experience, the perennialist view flourished up through the 70s. It was later called the 'common core' hypothesis because the central feature of it was the belief that mystics in all times and places describe similar experiences of unity-consciousness. When examined cross-culturally, it is believed that this universal experience appears to suggest the following basic tenets of the perennial philosophy:[6] (1) The phenomenal world is the manifestation of a transcendental (divine) ground; (2) human beings are capable of attaining immediate knowledge of that ground; (3) in addition to their phenomenal egos, human beings possess a transcendental Self which is of the same or like nature with that transcendental ground; and (4) this identification is

[5] For example, in the careful bracketing of the notion of experience in Gavin Flood's recent (2006) book *The Tantric Body* (which almost implies that the concept of RE has been so problematised, best not to address it at all) and the uncritical assumption of the constructed and linguistically determined nature of all experience seen in Peter Antes' recent (2002) article.

[6] In fact, some perennialists, such as Huston Smith, thought it was the other way round; that is, the tenets of the perennial philosophy were arrived at through purely gnostic intuition or 'intellection' and they then conferred on certain mystical experiences whatever authority the latter possessed. That is, the perennial insights validated mystic experience, not the other way around. (Smith 1987: 554) As we shall see, this was more or less the Indian point of view as well, and though hardly without problems for a scholar, it is certainly more coherent than the notion that a cross-culturally consistent religious worldview could be built up from experience without any prior ideological contraints, which given the range and variety of RE, seems absurd.

life's chief end or purpose.[7] This view was hardly without cultural bias, and the strongly Indian flavour of the tenets (seen even in James) leads me to characterize it as a kind of 'Hindu Universalist' view rather than a 'perennialist' one.

Second, Steven Katz (and following him others such as Kellner, Penner, and many more) argued the opposite pole, i.e. that "There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences" (1978: 26), that is, every experience is shaped by one's complex culturally and linguistically determined prior history and activity (62) and draws on the stock of "images, beliefs, and symbols" (33) derived therefrom. Each experience is a product of the elements of one's total prior experience (59) and thus a Christian always has a uniquely Christian experience, Hindus have uniquely Indian experiences, and so on. There is no possibility, on this view, of a cross-culturally common experience, because of the culturally-specific ways in which experience is constructed and mediated. It goes without saying that Katz's view assumes that mystical experience is not a special type of experience, and that there can be no other source of experience but culture, though he later modified his view to except non-culturally mediated experience on the "infantile, and sensate level" (1988: 755). As with the perennialist view, this position is itself shaped by its formulator's cultural background, though it is more rigorously philosophical and empirical. A Professor of Judaic Studies whom I know referred to Katz's view as "implicit Jewish Triumphalism" because it seemed motivated by the desire to reserve for each type of mysticism unique qualities, and because it further left open the unstated possibility that, being different, one sort of mysticism might be superior to another.[8] However, the real flaw in Katz's constructivist position is that it leaves no room for other forms of mediation besides the socio-linguistic; it neglects the fact

[7] This version of the tenets follows Shear 1994, who follows Smith 1987, who follows Huxley.

[8] The professor did not mean to imply that this was Katz's conscious agenda, but was suggesting rather that Katz was himself also shaped in his ideological perspective by his own cultural conditioning.

that humans do share at least one thing across cultures: their biology, and the pre-linguistic sort of experience that results from it and is common to us all. As there are undoubtedly experiences mediated to us by our physiological constitution (apart from its language-producing capacity), and subsequently interpreted or expressed in cultural terms, so might religious experience derive in part from our biology, as the emerging field sometimes called 'neurotheology' suggests (see work by Atran, Bennett, Boyer, Hood, Newberg, Alper, etc.).[9] The theologian would wish to add the possibility of experience that is not entirely socio-linguistically mediated because it has a divine source. Secular scholarship on religion must comes to grips with the question of whether failing to address this unverifiable postulate is functionally the same as denying it, and thereby address the emic/etic tension that would result from such denial.

In the 80s and 90s, the perennialist or common core camp developed a more rigorous and thoughtful version of their views, becoming a vocal minority in the field, including scholars such as Grof, Smith, King, Forman, d'Aquili, and Almond, as well as others trying to strike something of a middle ground, in a manner that nevertheless implies a desire to 'rescue' perennialism, such as Shear and Short. One strategy, exemplified by Forman, was to challenge Katz by positing that there was at least *one* ME that was unmediated, namely that which he called the 'pure consciousness event', a state of meditation that was devoid of all empirical content, and thus by definition unmediated. But to reduce the large variety of REs to one in order to save the idea that there *is* an experience that is the same cross-culturally impoverishes the area of study, for this is hardly the commonest form of RE; and is in any case such a move is unnecessary. For as Short (1995: 661) has well argued, both poles of the

[9] It has been well established by cognitive scientists that the brain is hard-wired for language (see, e.g. Pinker's *The Language Instinct*), and a current debate in evolutionary biology and cognitive science is over whether it is "hard-wired for religion" or predisposed to belief in supernatural agents and causes, e.g. as a byproduct of the process of natural selection (for this see esp. Atran's *In Gods We Trust*).

debate create a false dichotomy by assuming that if experience is mediated it cannot have a common core. In fact, there is a third possibility, that it can be mediated *and* have a common core, as long as we allow for the idea that the some of the factors of mediation can be other than socio-linguistic. As Short argues (1995, *passim*), the whole function of the mystical dimension of any religion can be seen as consisting of strategies to disable language and ordinary discursive thought forms, and thrust the participant into the non- or pre-linguistic experience, which is then rendered meaningful by the particularized socio-cultural discourse of the given sect.

The thesis of a common core that does not require an axiom of unmediated experience is derivable from, but not explicit in, the work of the third group of scholars, more recently arisen. This group, including such figures as Izutsu, Sells, Idel, and McGinn, suggest that the followers of Katz went further than the evidence allowed for in their total denial of any universal elements to RE. They find such cross-culturally common elements in the textualised accounts of REs; but conceding one of Katz's key points, they argue that the accounts cannot be used to reconstruct the actual experiences, and that therefore they reserve all opinion as to whether there is a common core to RE itself, and argue only in favour of common elements in the accounts.[10]

An part of the constructivist argument that appears necessary to its conclusion is the tenet that it is impossible to tease apart the mystic's culturally-constructed account of his experience from the original experience itself, for each experience is shaped by, permeated with, and interpreted through socio-linguistic constructs. Whatever reality or value the experience has is to be found in the account alone, i.e. in its mediated representation. Sharf

[10] They thus must refrain from positing a source for the commonalities—which, as alluded to above, must be either biological or spiritual (or both).

even makes the surprising claim that "it is a mistake to approach literary, artistic, or ritual representations as if they referred back to something other than themselves" (1998: 113), thereby reducing all experiences to their second-order representations. Though I agree that there is no such thing as an uninterpreted experience (or rather, if there is it can never be formative for the character and views of the experiencer) it seems absurd to suggest that interpretation cannot be distinguished from sensate experience.[11] The constructivists would have us believe that socio-linguistic formations permeate and shape every experience, rather than follow it, however rapidly. Yet even in 1960, W.T. Stace had given us an obvious example that refutes this view: that of the hypothetical London tourist who, upon spotting a lifelike waxwork bobby outside Madame Tussaud's, begins "Excuse me, officer..." but pulls himself up short with chagrin when he realizes the truth. Two interpretations rapidly follow each other, but each is based upon the same visual data.[12] What was seen did not change, only the interpretation (which itself determines subsequent action). So representation, as the very word implies, *must* refer back to something: the 'raw' experience, by which I mean simply the sensate data and associated inchoate feelings. What is problematic in the study of religion is not so much experience as the interpretation of it, the processes that shape it, and the question of whether it can have any truth-value.

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[11] What Short calls the pre-linguistic and the categorical (in the Kantian sense). An example of Sharf's (110; drawn from D. Dennett) seems to imply an understanding of this: that while the taste of beer may remain the same, many find it at first repulsive and eventually come to love it. But this is not the fundamental shift in interpretation of the same singular experience I wish to address (see Appendix), by which the very understanding and truth-value that the experience has for the experiencer may be altered, demonstrating the separability of basic assumptions about the experience from the experience itself.

[12] Since one could argue that the second interpretation was in fact based on a closer inspection, i.e. more data, a better example would be that given in the Appendix of two successive incompatible interpretations of a *remembered* experience; i.e. a radical interpretive shift without the addition of any more experiential (sensate) data.

Definition of (Religious) Experience

We may then define ‘experience‘ quite easily, following but precising the dictionary definitions established by usage: 1) it connotes what an individual undergoes, that is, both the perceptions of an event that one is physically present for and the associated subjective (and sometimes non-linguistic) state of consciousness with its sensual and affective dimensions; and 2) the knowledge that one derives from such first-hand data and associated states, which conditions one’s future responses to similar phenomena (as in, “I have combat experience“). The first meaning of experience we may subdivide into two aspects, internal and external experience, where the latter is defined as perception of sense-objects that others may also perceive, though conjoined as always to uniquely subjective feelings about those objects. Internal experience may be subdivided into two aspects, what Brainard calls (372) process vs. content, or what Daniel Dennett describes (161) as that which can be known about the experience “from the outside“ (e.g. through psychological or physiological measurements) versus that which can be known about it only “from the inside“ (i.e. the elements accessible only to the experiencer). This last subdivision of a subdivision is the only aspect of an experience inaccessible to the researcher (unless he has access to a living subject, and can ask sufficiently precise, probing, and non-leading questions).

But we need more to define ’religious experience‘, and this is precisely where some scholars have gotten into trouble, offering a variety of contentious lists of the characteristics of the category of ME that they are, in effect, trying to create more than describe. Yet it should be abundantly clear that the modifier ’religious‘ in most if not all cases can be contingent only on the experiencer’s *interpretation*, not on the experience itself (as defined

in the first meaning above).[13] To put it another way, the modifier 'religious' can only strictly be added to the word 'experience' in its *second* meaning above. Hence when we consider whether we as scholars have access to a specifically religious experience, the answer is yes, by definition. If we ask whether we have access to the content aspect of the inner component of that experience, the answer is no. However, we are not hindered in our work by the latter fact, for it is the interpretation that makes the experience religious, and it is neither necessary or desirable for us to adjudicate whether the interpretation is warranted by the inner perceptions, sensations, and so on. In this sense, then, the 'constructivists' are correct in arguing that scholars of religion cannot separate experience from interpretation, not because there is no such thing as non-socio-linguistically determined experience, but because to do so would be to destroy that which we wish to study: i.e. to undo that which made it 'religious' in the first place.[14] Thus RE can only ever refer to experience conjoined with its religious interpretation, or rather it must encompass both basic definitions of experience given above. Note that this is acknowledged also within religious traditions themselves: for example, in the primary sources of late Tantric Śaivism, a commentator (Jayaratha, TĀV ad 1.216) argues that non-religious persons (*paśu*s), from time to time, spontaneously experience the same non-discursive states of [expanded] consciousness as those who have been awakened, but that such experiences remain sterile due lack of access to the [scriptural] teaching that would expound their meaning and thereby make them productive (Torella 1994: xxxix).

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[13] The seeming exception would be an experience where someone has a vision of a specifically and unambiguously religious image (e.g. Christ on the cross) or hears a voice proclaiming 'I am God...' or some such; but this is in reality no exception, because some recipients of such experiences can and do regard them as delusions, fantasies, daydreams or hallucinations. If so, they are *not* religious experiences in any academically meaningful sense of the term.

[14] But this should *not* be taken to mean that the category 'experience' is wholly reducible to the account of the experience, as Sharf implies (110, 113), i.e. that there is no need to postulate any 'originary event' (109).

While it is not the place of the scholar to try to part them, the experience and interpretation may be separated by the religious agent herself. The attached Appendix offers a hypothetical example (based on real case studies) that conveniently also points up a crucial difference between a modern[15] religious experiencer and a premodern one.

Typology of Religious Experience

Now to identify the main types of RE/ME, which range from the socio-linguistically mediated to the entirely unmediated. These I would argue, come in four primary types: the sensual, emotional, unitary, and void, plus two associated ancillary categories (see below). The first type includes all visionary, auditory or other types of sensual perception (not available to all persons present). The second entails (often overwhelming) surges of emotion, usually positive but sometimes also negative. The third is a pre-linguistic state of awareness in which all analytical boundaries are dissolved, and all objects of consciousness, whether external or internal, are seen/felt as existing within a unified field. The fourth type is the so-called 'pure consciousness' experience that is devoid of all empirical content, whether thought or sensation, though after-the-fact (and only after-the-fact) it may be characterised as 'peaceful' and so on. Any of these four may overlap within a single experience except for the first with the last.[16] A fifth type should perhaps be added, though it can occur within the context of any of the first three, and perhaps not separately from one or more of them: the

[15] I am using the term 'modern' here in a specific sense: to refer to those living in the industrialized societies profoundly influenced by Einstein, Freud, and Marx. This usage of the term is influenced by art historical discourse.

[16] Note that some early studies of mysticism (e.g. Stace) limited the range of what was called ME by excluding all but the fourth state. Thus Stace excluded all visions, trance states, and so on—simultaneously (and not accidentally) excluding many popular and 'superstitious' forms of ME, apologetically reserving the category to rarified forms that could be treated 'rationally'. Forman and others also excluded all but the fourth category, but for a different reason—they thought that a common core had to be unmediated, and only the fourth type, being void, fulfills the requirement.

perception of the presence of a greater being, whether conceived of as one's own higher self, or entirely separate from oneself. I follow James in describing this as an experience of communion or union or coterminousness between one's "highest part" and a MORE of the same quality (James 1985 [1902]: 508) but enhanced in degree, and experienced as a palpable presence. We are lacking necessary evidence (for less has been published on this type of experience) to conclude whether it occurs in all cultures. This experience may well be limited to those who believe in such a 'higher being', but perhaps may have a biological basis as well, as suggested by those of a non-religious nature who nonetheless have powerful 'presence' experiences which are considered by themselves and/or a diagnostician as a "major hallucinogenic fit" (in the words of Carl Sagan) or, in the language of the DSM-IV, a subtype of 'subjective paranormal experience psychosis'.[17] Finally, we should add that type two above is sometimes also connected with dramatic somatic symptoms, up to and including uncontrolled dancing, convulsions and fainting—symptoms parted from the pathological perhaps only by the subject's insistence of their religious nature and beneficial results.[18]

The Epistemological Question

This leads us to the final question of Part One of this paper, concerning the epistemological status of RE/ME, both for the one who undergoes such and for the scholar. One of the most important questions of this area of inquiry is whether particular types of RE suggest particular forms of knowledge, i.e. are more relatable to one religious doctrine than

[17] See Neppe, Vernon, "Clinical Psychiatry, Psychopharmacology, and Anomalous Experience" in Coly and McMahon, eds., *Psi and Clinical Practice (1989),* New York: Parapsychology Foundation, 1993.

[18] Note that some scholars of religion have striven to define RE in terms that apply to its interpretation more than its subjective content; an example is F. Samuel Brainard's identification of the two key elements of RE as 'non-ordinariness' and 'profundity' (Brainard 1996). These work as elements of a nominal definition but not as elements of a real one, for they tell us what the subject thinks about her experience, as opposed to what she feels in it, as I have tried to do above.

another; or whether the associations formed are partially or wholly arbitrary. In his book, F. Samuel Brainard argues that mysticism cannot be taken as a ratification of any particular conventional metaphysics, but rather is compatible with a variety of contradictory metaphysical systems (241-2, 267, 270n12).[19] Here he follows James, who wrote:

> The fact is that the mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own. It is capable of forming matrimonial alliances with material furnished by the most diverse philosophies and theologies, provided only they can find a place in their framework for its peculiar emotional mood. We have no right, therefore, to invoke its prestige as distinctively in favor of any special belief... (James 425-6)

This argument clearly applies to types 2 and 4 of our classification above. Such experiences, grounded at least as much in our neurological natures as in specific socio-cultural milieus, are points of common ground that are invariably recognized when advanced religious practitioners gather for cross-cultural exchanges.[20] The argument of an arbitrary connection between RE and religious doctrine only partially applies to type 3 above (unity-awareness), for this particular type of pre-linguistic biologically-based experience, by its very nature, does connect more easily to those religious doctrines which emphasize unity, such as monism, pantheism, and panentheism. More study is needed to determine whether those with dualistic religious frameworks have unitary-type ME, and if so, how they (re-) interpret them to fit their beliefs. RE of type 1 above (sensual) are linked to specific doctrines not arbitrarily, for such experiences often consist in a vision of a figure known to the experiencer from their religious context (Antes 2002).[21] RE of type 5 also suggests (to persons already religiously-minded) a specific doctrine, that of a god or God, the

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[19] Citations from Kenneth Rose's review, JAAR p. 426.

[20] The standard critique of such a statement is that commonality is recognized only through vague statements taken out of their socio-linguistic context. Yet what is instructive about the discussion at ecumenical events I have attended is that participants necessarily describe their experience with different terminology, and yet it is still structurally and affectively similar enough to trigger an 'Aha!' response in practitioners from different cultures who are open to such a possibility at all.

[21] Though this is not always the case, as Antes assumes; see, for example the religious vision of an unknown figure recounted in Muktānanda, *Play of Consciousness,* ch. 29.

qualities of which are generally determined by culture rather than the content of the experience.

Given that RE does not usually justify in its content the specific doctrinal elements of a given faith, we must ask what epistemological value such experiences have for scholars in constructing a comprehensive picture of human nature. As implied in the foregoing discussion, there is no point for a scholar of religion to separate religious agents' experiences from their (emic) interpretation, though such separation is technically possible. For the scientific value of such experiences comes from our study of the real-world uses to which they are put, such as the hermeneutic strategies that use them to validate religious belief. Whether such experiences tell us something about the objective nature of reality is something only the theologian can argue (or, with necessarily different conclusions, the evolutionary biologist); but it is safe to say that RE don't tell us anything if uninterpreted. Nonetheless, that ME *is* a facet of our human experience of reality cannot be denied (*pace* Sharf). James made an argument that seems compelling even today, that ME has the same claim of validity—no more and no less—as ordinary sensory experience, for "our own more 'rational' beliefs are based on evidence exactly similar in nature to that which mystics quote for theirs" (1985: 423-4). Thus, though like all experience MEs must be "sifted and tested, and run the gauntlet of confrontation with the total context of experience" (426-7), from a (humanist) psychological point of view—as well as from an emically-sensitive scholarly point of view—"the existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe." (427)

Part Two: Religious Experience in India

In 1988, the great scholar Wilhelm Halbfass, expert in the study of the process whereby Indian thought has been mediated to Europe and subsequently returned to India,

published in his book *India and Europe* an essay entitled "The Concept of Experience in the Encounter between Indian and the West" (1988). In this, he argued cogently that the hermeneutical uses to which the term 'experience' had been put by Radhakrishnan and others, in justification of what is now called neo-Hinduism,[22] were entirely at odds with the premodern Sanskrit sources. Radhakrishnan's arguments that Hindu thought was based on and validated by RE can only be understood in the colonial context, for his project was to justify religious belief to an audience that shared few to none of his cultural assumptions or religious framework principles about the nature of reality. Thus, drawing on Western philosophers (including James) he gave much greater weight to experience than his premodern predecessors, as well as a kind of *a priori* status that would have been repugnant to them (1988: 398f). Radhakrishnan and his compatriots frequently cited Śaṅkara, despite the fact that his understanding of the role of experience was nearly opposite to theirs. Specifically, as an exegete of the Uttara-mīmāṃsā school, he maintained a dogmatic adherence to the Veda as supreme authority for all knowledge about the ultimate nature of reality. For him, the Veda validates religious experiences (and only specific types thereof) rather than the other way round, which would (in the traditional view) be incoherent and/or selective and self-serving. That is, we would have no way of knowing which experiences are valid means of knowledge without the Veda. Though it is the case that for Śaṅkara, the culmination of knowledge is the immediate *experience* of Brahman, that experience is entirely guided and even determined by Vedic revelation. And such revelation is not understood, as Radhakrishnan et.al. would have it, as an embodiment of the experiences of Vedic authors, but rather as Brahman itself made Word. (1988: 388) Thus the modern neo-Hindu usage of the notion of experience is 180 degrees removed from Śaṅkara's.

[22] I.e., the vision of Hinduism that developed under Western influence among the educated Indian elite in the 19th century.

Problematizing Sharf's Interpretation of Halbfass

However, the implications of this accurate analysis were greatly overextended by some later scholars, such as R. Sharf, who made Halbfass' piece the basis of his article "Experience" in the important but controversial book *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (1998; reprinted in the Journal of Consciousness Studies, 2000). For Sharf argues that "the category experience is itself of recent provenance" (1998: 105) in both Asia and the West, and that modern Asian theologians drew upon Western discourse in their constitution of this 'new' category.[23] (In this he also follows W. Proudfoot, who argued in 1985 that our current understanding of the notion of religious experience goes back no further than Schleiermacher, and that thus it is "very likely an artifact of the past two centuries of European scholarship on the subject . . . [and] that we cannot accurately ascribe it to people in other cultures and other periods" (124).) Sharf states that for premodern Asian religious practitioners,"experiences were not considered the goal of practice, were not deemed doctrinally authoritative, and did not serve as the reference points for their understanding of the path." (1998: 99) As we will see in the next section, his claims can be falsified entirely with regard to Tantric Shaivism. Sharf even goes so far as to suggest that there is no 'originary event' behind accounts of mystical experience, comparing them to accounts of alien abduction that he assumes cannot correspond to an originary event. (1998: 108-110) Yet, granted that the 'abductees' are not consciously dissembling (a possibility that has been discounted in many cases by psychologists), there is no non-polemical reason to assume that there is no originary event of any kind, such as (say) a very vivid dream. Sharf has

[23] In the same sentence, he dismisses the testimony of "mystics of old" that would appear to contradict his claim, implying that since the recent provenance of the category is (in his view) a fact, their testimony necessarily couched in different terminology "is going to prove ambiguous at best". Any evidence provided cannot, of course, refute such a closed circle of reasoning.

presented us with a false choice: either the account is transparent to the original experience, or it is wholly false. In fact, he is correct in comparing accounts of alien abduction to RE, but in a sense different from that he intends: in both cases, the key issue is that of the *interpretation* given to the originary event—an interpretation that a) can persist only with social support, b) shapes the experiencer's worldview, c) even influences his memory of the originary event, and d) is factually but not theologically falsifiable (the latter characteristic not always true of RE). To state, as Sharf does that "while these [religious] representations may at times assume the rhetorical stance of phenomenological description, we are not obliged to accept them as such" (111) seems to me, if applied across the board, to be carrying the hermeneutic of suspicion too far: to the point of distrusting all ethnographic informants and viewing all primary source accounts as universally disingenous agenda-driven pieces of phenomenological rhetoric. Indeed, this leads us past healthy scepticism and into the dangerous waters of deep orientalism.

This critique of Sharf should not at all be taken to mean that I disagree with his argument that textual accounts that seem to be experiential maps of the stages of progress should not be taken as having a literal, one-to-one correspondance with reality. Indeed, the Indian completist propensity to fill out a systematic account with speculative categories to make it symmetrical and numerically complete (e.g. the artificial addition of long vocalic ḹ to the alphabet in Tantric analyses) is too well known to contradict Sharf on this point. However, the primary Śaiva sources themselves illustrate an awareness of the fact that real-life experience is always messier than neat textual maps, through presenting several different such maps and further suggesting that yet other, undocumented typologies are possible (Vasudeva). As we will see below, I only wish to show that Sharf is wrong to think

that verifiable, real spiritual experience was not a major category of concern and discourse for some Indian religious agents in the pre-modern period.

Religious experience as a significant category of discourse in Sanskrit texts

The contention that religious experience was not a significant category in Indian religious discourse is patently false. Halbfass himself (who makes no such claim) points out that Sanskrit commentator Medhatithi argues in the course of discussing Mānavadharmaśāstra 2.6 that it is reliance on the validity of personal experience that has led Bauddhas, Jainas, and Pāñcarātrins into heterodoxy (1988: 391). As Medhatithi implies, when there is a break from orthodoxy, those making it need to formulate different epistemologies and/or different hermeneutics to justify it. Indeed, scholars such as Snellgrove have suggested that it is the Buddha's "fundamental mystical experience" that is the starting point and "*raison d'etre* of all later Buddhist developments." (13)

It is true though that in many Sanskrit philosophical texts, one searches in vain for an appeal to personal experience as means of establishing anything (and mention of the author's own experience is almost completely unknown), especially if one is thinking in terms of the English category and thus looking for the Sanskrit word *anubhāva,* which is not commonly encountered. Yet it is well known that the first of the *pramāṇa*s or valid means of knowledge is that of *pratyakṣa,* or direct perception, which simply denotes sensate experience.[24] A debated subcategory[25] in the literature is that of *yogipratyakṣa,* denoting a type of experience available only to yogins, i.e. visions, clairvoyance, gnostic insight, and

[24] In acknowledgement of the sometimes fickle and unreliable nature of sense perception, the śāstraic authors argue that pratykṣa is *not* established in perceptions that are characterized by *vyabhicāra*, or anomalous deviation, such as in the case of a mirage.

[25] For example, conservative schools such as the Mīmāṃsakas reject it vehemently; those who endorse the value of meditation, such as most of the Buddhist and Śaiva schools, accept it. J. Woo writes that it was accepted by the Bauddhas ever since Dignāga (2007: 347).

other forms of mystical experience. Dharmakīrti defines *yogipratyakṣa* in the Nyāyabindu (1.11) as the cognition "which is produced at the termination of the intensification of meditation on a true object" (trans. Woo). Thus it entails the belief that through meditation, gnosis about the real nature of things (whether abstract or concrete) is attained. It is classed as a type of perception because, Dharmakīrti argues, it is immediate and bereft of mental constructs (*nirvikalpa*). Note that not all types of yogipratyakṣa would be characterized in the West as an ME.

A common word that is perhaps the closest analogue for the English word 'experience' is *sākṣātkāra*, which includes (despite its etymology) non-sensate intuitive perception in its semantic range. Specifically, *sākṣātkāra* refers to what has been made present in one's field of consciousness at any given moment, including visualizations, cognitions, sensations and so on. It is defined as such by Prajñākaragupta (in his *Pramāṇavārttika-bhāṣya,* p. 112): *sākṣātkaraṇam evāsya bhāvasyāstitvam ucyate, "Experience* is defined as the fact of a given state (of consciousness) being present." He (and Dharmakīrti) argue that is is distinguished from discursive cognition by the vividness (*sphuṭābhatva*), clarity and purity (*sattva*) of the perception, which indicates that it is directly caused by the actual object (*sarvatra sākṣātkaraṇāt sattvaṃ bhāvasya gamyate;* see Woo 2007: 348-9 and fn12). We may offer an example of the use of the term to denote non-sensate immediate experience from the (Tantric Śaiva) *Chummāsaṅketa-prakāśa*'s autobiographical frame story: "Thus in an instant I experienced directly the most transcendent reality… [*parataraṃ tattvaṃ sākṣātkṛtya mayākramāt*]" (f. 2v8). An initial (and far from comprehensive) search of e-texts in the Bauddha, Darśana, Dharma, Śaiva, Vedānta, and Yoga genres revealed over 100 instances in 30-odd texts of the term *yogipratyakṣa* and nearly 1000 instances in over 200 texts of *sākṣātkāra.* Thus it can hardly be stated that experience is not an important category of

discourse in Sanskrit religious texts, even if it is usually discussed in the abstract. We find these terms for experience debated in the context of epistemology (i.e. what constitutes valid means of knowledge). While *pratyakṣa* is generally admitted as a means of knowledge, *smṛti* (memory) is usually not; this can be understood as a way of saying that while one's own experience ought be to weighed in any assessment of truth, others' experience has no such weight (due, presumably, to the inevitable distortion involved in its second-hand transmission). This view is mirrored by James, who argues: "No authority emanates from [MEs] which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically." (422) This is further paralleled by the recent constructivist view that apparent phenomenological descriptions by religious agents cannot be treated as transparent to the originary events themselves (Sharf 111, 113). Thus three widely disparate areas of discourse agree on the problematic nature of accepting second-hand 'experiential' evidence at face value, but this is hardly the same as saying it cannot constitute evidence at all, depending on what exactly one is trying to prove.

Finally, we should note that the Western notion of the "constructedness" of experience involves an implicit reductionism and a recourse to psychology that simply does not apply in the Indian case. That is, in the discourse of popular or folk psychology, expecting to have a particular experience, setting up the conditions for it, and indeed striving to have it, all somehow invalidates the spiritual nature of the experience, because the assumption is that, drawing on cultural formations, one mediated the experience to oneself: it did not come from God. The ancient Indian perspective is so different because it takes the infallibility of scripture as axiomatic. When practitioners have the experiences they strive after, the conformity of those experiences to scriptural accounts is necessary and sufficient validation of their reality and divinity. As discussed in the Appendix, where a Westerner readily

discounts drug experience as a valid means of knowledge about reality, the Indian uses drugs as one of the tools available to him to personally assimilate the reality taught in the scriptures (see the ritual use of the psychoactive plant *datura* in the *Jayadrathayāmala* where it is explicitly compared to yogic experience); that is, any experience in conformity with the scriptures is valid for that reason alone, regardless of its catalyst. Furthermore, in Tantric epistemology, an object described by the scriptures could not shine forth in *nirvikalpa* awareness if the scriptures were not in accord with reality (for *nirvikalpa* awareness of an object is considered a form of real perception linked to the real object); therefore, experience corroborates revelation. Thus RE *is* constructed and mediated—but by God.

The Meaning of 'Possession' and related terms in the Indian Context

Before proceeding to the examination of a specific Indian tradition, we must pause to consider the little-understood notion of possession in the context of South Asian culture, for reasons that will become clear as we go. The term 'possession' is certainly not to be understood in the sense it has in Western religious contexts; but neither in that seen in many ethnographies of the Asian social milieux that used to be called 'tribal' or 'primitive'. To reduce a massively complex phenomenon to two basic poles for the sake of clarity, South Asian possession in most contexts is either malefic, denoted by the Sanskrit verb *√gṛh,* seize (and derivitives like *graha*), whereby spirits cause physical or mental illness in the victim, or beneficial, denoted by the verb *ā+√viś,* enter (and derivitives like *āveśa*), whereby a blessed devotee becomes permeated by or coextensive with his deity.[26] These very different

[26] This is of course an oversimplication of the linguistic terminology, not least because only one language is cited here. A more detailed treatment in several languages can be found in Smith, ch. 4, passim. Note also that even in malefic possession, the spirits involved are never called 'evil' in the original languages, only sometimes 'unhappy' (See Smith 2006: 116f). The fact that the possession is unhealthy is generally not due to ill intent on the part of the confused spirit. The contrast with assumptions around possession in the West could not be stronger.

concepts and the different terms in the original languages would suggest to us the inapplicability of the same English word for both, were it not for the fact that the Indic terms are occasionally reversed, though the conceptual distinction is generally maintained.[27] Still, there are many contexts where for the latter term, *āveśa,* the connotations of the translation 'possession' are inappropriate, and instead context dictates one or more of the following: pervasion, infusion, interpenetration, co-extension, communion, union, identification, or even self-abnegating devotional rapture. Extraordinarily helpful in the study of the semantics and contexts of possession in South Asian literature is the recently published monumental study of the subject, *The Self Possessed* by Frederick Smith. Smith cogently demonstrates that to properly understand possession (in the broad sense of the term) in South Asia, one must first grasp the South Asian notion of self. This notion has been obscured by the overemphasis in Western scholarship of the Sanskrit philosophical literature of the classical elite culture, which sometimes posited, in consonance with the predominent Western view, that the self was an unchanging inviolable monad, impermeable and unitary.[28] Smith presents a comprehensive raft of evidence to convince us that this is not the dominant Indian model of self, which in fact is rather closer to the Buddhist vision of an aggregate entity in constant flux, permeable by and interdependent to its environment, and of course never fully defined or circumscribed by the contained physical organism associated with it. This concept of self has a negative consequence, i.e. the vulnerability to penetration by other forces and beings from sorcerors to spirits; and a positive consequence, i.e. the capacity to receive an influx of divine power or experience a communion that is a

[27] The otherwise clear boundary between malefic and benefic possession is blurred in cases where the possessed behaves as if negatively afflicted, but accomplishes some positive end for himself or another, and feels himself more healed and whole after the experience.

[28] I am of course thinking here primarily of the classical Sāṅkhya schools, along with the Bhagavad-Gītā (which I see as a Sāṅkhya document more than a Vedāntic one).

true commingling with (the/a) deity. Thus, on this view, possession is really a matter of *sharing self* with some manner of being, or in more rarefied environments such as high Śaiva Tantra, with absolute Being itself.[29] Whether the possession is understood and experienced as positive or negative depends on which sort of being one is sharing self with. In either form, possession is ubiquitous through South Asia's history, and Smith is not wrong to call it "the region's most widespread form of spiritual expression" (597). This is especially apparent when it is understood that the notion of *permeation* is on the same semantic spectrum with possession, and that therefore the infusion of *śakti* into inanimate images is also often spoken of as a kind of 'possession'. Even being overwhelmed and pervaded by intense emotion is spoken of with the same vocabulary, in Sanskrit and even more so in the vernaculars (e.g. *kāmāveś, krodhāveś;* Smith 2006: 121).

This is because, I propose, the word *āveśa* always has the connotation of the dissolution of psychic boundaries (revealing, for some, their constructed nature), and the flooding of the whole person with a single powerful experiential state. In Śaiva religion, it connotes the complete permeation or *samāveśa* of one's being with divine power (e.g. *rudraśakti*), with a concomitant dissolution of any sense of a separate egoic self (however temporary). Indeed, the Śaiva exegetes use *samāveśa* exclusively in the sense of *immersion*, and liquid metaphors are apposite here, for the *śakti* that floods one's being sweeps before it all walls that divide the parts of our ordinary fragmented identity. The metaphor is frequently used; for example, in Nāga's autobiographical *Citta-santoṣa-triṃśikā*, we read (v. 29): "By great good fortune I stand today flooded with the blissful relish of the nectar of the

[29] Such is seemingly suggested by the brahman/ātman equation of classical Vedānta, but the language of possession is almost never used to denote it, unlike in Śaivism.

non-local consciousness that surges up from its unfettered, stainless ground…"[30] Thus the term *samāveśa* has a connection with another Tantric term for divine experience, *sāmarasya,* a term for 'fusion' that literally connotes the permeation of all elements and levels of being with the same flavour or liquid essence.

Part Three: Religious Experience in Śaivism

As we saw above,'experience' does not feature heavily as a category of discourse in the purely philosophical texts, except in discussions of epistemology. As any scholar of religion ought to experienceect, the situation is different when we examine the evidence from fully religious milieus, from *bhakti* to Tantra. RE occupies a central role in Tantric Śaivism, as my forthcoming dissertation is intended to show. We will briefly survey some of the evidence for this proposition.

As early as the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (c. 100 CE?) we see textual evidence for the significance of mystical experience in the Śaiva religion, with a list citing the different visionary experiences that come to the practicing yogin in this yogic-cum-devotional context.[31] "Fog, smoke, sun, fire and wind, fire-flies, lightning, crystal, the moon – these visions manifest in yoga (practice) are the harbingers (of the full manifestation) in Brahman."[32] Note here that, contra Sharf, these visions are considered reference points on the path; but, lacking the historical context of this document, we can say no more about it with certainty.

When we turn to Tantric Śaivism, we find that personal experience is given a more

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[30] *Svacchanda-nirmala-padodita-nirniketa-saṃvit-sudhā-rasa-camatkṛti-nirbharo'smi diṣṭyā,* f. 48v2-5, trans. Sanderson 2007: 297, with slight modifications.

[31] Elsewhere I have presented evidence that the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* is probably an early Pāśupata text.

[32] *nīhāra-dhūmārkānalānilānāṃ khadyota-vidyut-sphaṭikā-śaśīnām / etāni rūpāṇi puraḥsarāṇi brahmaṇy abhivyaktikarāṇi yoge* // ŚveUp_2.11 //

prominent place than anywhere else in Indian religion excepting some forms of *bhakti.* This fact might not be immediately evident to one unfamiliar with Śaiva terminology; most notably, the fact that the verb √jñā, 'know', is used in the sense of 'to know experientially' or even 'to experience'. Thus when Abhinavagupta speaks of knowledge as the only cause of liberation, the context suggests that he means not abstract intelluctual knowledge about the subject, but rather direct intuitive gnostic insight (something he also uses the word *pratibhā* to describe). We see this usage of √jñā clearly in statements of 'knowing' a state of consciousness, such as in *Netratantroddyota* ad 16.47cd, referring to why some mantras work and others don't: "These mantras, being the [sound] form of Śiva, give rewards [only] to that *ācārya* who is *Śivāveśajña*, i.e. who knows the state of immersion into [/pervasion by] Śiva." This can only mean one who has experienced the state—as to know about it, however thoroughly, would not cause the mantras to become vivified and therefore efficacious.[33]

We saw above that Sharf, in a well-respected article, argued that for practitioners of Asian religious traditions, the "experiences [that occurred through meditation] were not considered the goal of practice, were not deemed doctrinally authoritative, and did not serve as the reference points for their understanding of the path." (1998: 99) When we examine the case of Tantric Śaivism, especially in its non-dual current, we find evidence of exactly the opposite: that 1) being drawn to the practice of this tradition, 2) being successfully initiated into it, 3) becoming a guru within it, and 4) attaining liberation through it, were all described as a result, or expressed in terms of, spiritual experience. We will examine each of these in turn.

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[33] Compare Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111): "what is most distinctive of mysticism is something which cannot be apprehended by study, but only by immediate experience (*dhawq*—literally 'tasting'), by ecstasy and by a moral change. What a difference there is between *knowing* the definition of health and satiety, together with their causes and presuppositions, and *being* healthy and satisfied!" (trans. Watt 1953: 54-55)

We do not need to look far in the secondary literature to find corroboration in general terms of my thesis. It is attested, for example, in articles by the pre-eminent English-language authority in the field, Alexis Sanderson, especially "Power and Purity among the Brāhmins of Kāshmīr" (1985) and "A Commentary on the Opening Verses of the Tantrasāra of Abhinavagupta" (1995). Somadeva Vasudeva's book, *The Yoga of the Mālinīvijayottara-tantra* (2004), documents a yogic visualisation and meditation practice in which the mastery of each consecutive level is described in terms of the attainment of specific experiences and powers.[34] Another well-recognized senior authority on Śaivism, Raffaele Torella, writes:

> "[Kāśmīri Śaiva] texts give voice to a need for a more direct participation in the experience of the divine, no longer seen as a transaction managed by specialized personnel with a view to obtaining clearly defined and circumscribed benefits...but as a transfiguration here and now of the whole person, whose components, including the purely physical, become the very protagonists of the path of liberation and not the unwelcome extras." (1994: x)

Due to lack of space, we will only briefly give specific examples of the role of experience in the different phases of the Tantric initiate's career. First, the very cause of a prospective initiate seeking out initiation in the first place is given in terms of RE: specifically that of a conversion experience which is seen as a direct result of Śiva's grace, metaphorically understood as a sudden descent of Śiva's power (*śakti*), which causes the awakening of religious emotions and a strong interest in the religion. This is a doctrine held across the various streams of Śaivism. For example, we read in the *Mṛgendra-tantra* (one of the original Saiddhāntika texts), in its 'Knowledge Section':

> *yeṣāṃ śarīriṇāṃ śaktiḥ pataty api nivṛttaye*
> *teṣāṃ talliṅgam autsukyaṃ muktau dveṣo bhavasthitau* 5.4
> *bhaktiś ca śivabhakteṣu śraddhā tacchāsake vidhau* 5.5ab

[34] Note: I am not here naively assuming that these programmes of practice were undertaken exactly as written, or that they yielded the results described, only demonstrating the great importance of a discourse around spiritual experience in this literature.

> Those embodied souls on whom Power descends, for the cessation (of their bondage), show these signs: eagerness for liberation; aversion to remaining in the world of transmigration; devotion towards the devotees of Śiva; faith in their Teacher and rites.

Note here the interest in 'signs', i.e. evidence from the process aspect of inner experience (C.1.b.i. in the handout) that something was genuinely happening within the candidate. [The *Matańgapārameśvara* adds: "Steady devotion is the clear sign of the Descent (of Power)." (*Caryāpāda* 4.10cd)[35]] As we will see, the signs that were expected from a initiand in the non-dual streams are more dramatic and more difficult to feign.

A candidate accepted for initiation in the more transgressive, heterodox, charismatic, and anti-institutional nondualistic 'left current' of Śaivism was advised to himself examine the Guru who is his prospective initiator, as the most highly prized Gurus were those who could not only ritually initiate but also perform a transference of energy (*śakti*), variously described as penetrating the disciple with it or awakening the dormant *śakti* already within him or her (yes, women were also initiated). Such Gurus displayed specific signs, such as steady devotion to Rudra, ecstatic and enstatic states, 'mastery' over all beings, and ability to write beautiful spiritual poetry (MVT 2.14-16). The *Siddhayogeśvarī-mata-tantra* (2.4) teaches that when one observes the 'divine behaviour' in a Guru, then one may receive a mantra from him. And indeed, the most important of all signs of a true master is the ability to wield mantric power effectively, for this is at the very heart of all Tantric practice. Possessing such *mantravīrya* is itself dependent on the powerful religious experience denoted by the term *śivāveśa,* which can be variously translated as 'possession by Śiva', 'infusion of divine power,' or 'immersion into divine consciousness'. This connection is made in some of the scriptural sources (e.g. SYM, ST) and most of the nondual exegetical sources. For example, in

[35] These two citations drawn from SANDERSON 1992: 286; translations mine.

Svacchanda-tantra (4.152):

> *Viṣāṇām iva pāśānāṃ mantraiḥ kavalanaṃ dhruvam |*
> *karoti mantratattvajñaḥ* ***śivāveśī*** *guruḥ kṣaṇāt ||*
> A Guru who is [possessed by/immersed into/coterminous with] Śiva knows the reality/principle of mantras: he can in an instant certainly destroy the [metaphysical] bonds that are like poisons.

This verse explicitly links all three: the experience of Śiva makes a Guru able to wield mantric power effectively, which in turn qualifies him to initiate. This is reinforced in the commentary (*Svacchanda-uddyota* ad 4.196, p. 121):

> *iha mantrāḥ śivāveśaśālinaḥ vīryavidaḥ guroḥ nijaśaktisāratayā sphurantaḥ*
> In our system, mantras vibrate/shine with the essence of their own power for a Guru who knows/experiences mantric potency, and is a *śivāveśa-śālin*, endowed with immersion into Śiva.

Such a Guru is highly desirable precisely because, through a kind of contagion or sympathetic vibration, they can transfer their state—or a taste of it—to the disciple. This is explicit in a number of texts, such as the scriptural *Mālinīvijayottara-tantra*:

> *rudraśaktisamāveśād ācāryasya mahātmanaḥ*
> *śaktir utpadyate kṣipraṃ sadyaḥpratyayakārikā* 2.5
> Because of a great teacher's infusion by the Power of Rudra, that Power arises quickly (in the disciple), producing immediate evidence (of its arousal).

Here the phrase *rudraśakti-samāveśa,* found in a number of sources, connotes a thorough pervasion of the Guru's subtle body by the power (*śakti*) of God, personified as the Goddess (*śakti*). *Pace* those who would be inclined to regard this as mere religious rhetoric with no empirical component, this can only refer to a state with an actual experiential content, as the text specifies that it produces observable evidence on the so-called "process level" (see above). I am not here arguing that we should uncritically accept such 'evidence' at face value, as indicating what it is said to; I only mean to prove that these religious actors valued

religious experience enough to make attempts to verify that it really was occurring in others. Indeed, an even earlier text, the Kaula *Timirodghāṭana* (4.21), says that if the Guru and initiand do not observe the "signs of yoga" in each other (indicating potency in the former and receptivity in the latter), they ought to abandon one another, as the (mantra-)initiation will not be successful. By contrast, says the *Siddhayogeśvarī-mata* (2.3), simply from being initiated by a Guru in whom *rudraśakti* is fully activated, a qualified disciple immediately experiences the state of being 'possessed by the Self'. This curious phrase makes no sense on the Western view of possession; but drawing on the discussion above, we can clearly understand it to mean that the ordinary boundaries of the fragmented and divided being are dissolved and the blissful core consciousness (sometimes referred to as the Self) pervades the whole being, creating the unified and integrated state referred to above.[36]

As we have seen, RE plays a role in seeking initiation and in verifying that both Guru and disciple are qualified to participate in the initiation. It is also central within the initiation (*dīkṣā*) itself. On the more conservative right current, the initiand is expected to demonstrate some minor display of emotion such as tears welling up to indicate that the mantras are working and the disciple's impurity is being (partially) removed. On the more charismatic left current, quite a bit more is often expected (such as any of the signs listed under H in the handout). The great exegete Abhinavagupta describes the initiation rite in these words:

> "The initiand, suddenly seeing the sacrificial area [*sthale*] illuminated by the supernatural power of the mantras [*mantra-prabhāvollāsite*], is possessed by [/coextensive with] them [*tad-āveśa-vaśāt*] and identifies with them [*tanmayatvaṃ prapadyate,* attains union with

[36] Torella (1994: xxxiv) paraphrases Abhinava's discussion (ĪPVV III p. 327) of *samāveśa* as equivalent to *jīvanmukti*: "...the various components of the levels of the limited subject are gradually penetrated by the elixir of the I, until they become, so to speak, transfigured, removed from their nature of knowable [i.e. objective] realities. This experience...can be extended further, until it flows into the state beyond the fourth [*turyātīta*], where the components of limitation...are totally dissolved and incorporated in the I."

> them]...made perfect [/purified] by the descent of divine grace [*śaktipāta-saṃskṛto*], he experiences the presence of the mantras [*paśyati mantra-sannidhim*]" (TĀ 15.451-2; trans. Padoux 228)

From reading the primary sources, it is clear that in some sects the Guru would carefully observe the disciple for signs throughout the rite to determine the degree of its success. The signs specifically are thought to be physical manifestations of the loosening of metaphysical bonds (*pāśa, mala*). As we read in the MVT:

> *eteṣāṃ cālanān mantrī śaktipātaṃ parīkṣayet* 11.26
> Because of the loosening of these (bonds), the Mantra-master (i.e., Guru) may verify the Descent of Power (that the disciple has received).

Abhinavagupta understands this specifically in terms of signs of experience, usually of the emotional/somatic variety, which are interpreted as possession by the *śakti,* indicated by involuntary but ritually correct movements on the part of the initiand (see TĀ 29.196-7b).[37] The exegete Kṣemarāja argues that the whole purpose of *dīkṣā* is to make manifest in experience one's true divine nature (*śivatvābhivyakti*).[38] In fact, in the more transgressive Kaula context, if the Guru observes no signs of religious experience in the initiand, he "should be abandoned like a stone" (*tam atropalavat tyajet*; TĀ 29.210-11ab), as being too 'dense' (*nibiḍa, jaḍiman* [Jayaratha ad.loc.]), for the dangerously transgressive ritual will be misunderstood by an initiate bereft of the intuitive knowledge that invariably accompanies powerful MEs. We could hardly ask for a more explicit statement of the centrality of RE/ME to some forms of Śaivism than one that argues that those who have had no inner experience

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[37] For Abhinava, this reveals the transhistorical nature of the M.E. of the *śakti:* while the initiand's experience is always one of abolute presence of the divine, the "correctness" of the involuntary movements in the ritual reveals the recurring motif or mythological/archetypal structure of the eternal M.E. (thanks to Christopher Dale Johnson for this observation).

[38] In a hermeneutical etymology (*nirukti, nirvacana*) which is a good example of the exegetes' predilection to change the original meaning if necessary: *sā ca dīkṣā samuddiṣṭā dāna-kṣapaṇa-lakṣaṇā* in the scriptural source (SvaTa 19.161) is understood by Kṣamarāja as *dānaṃ śivatvābhivyakteḥ, kṣapaṇaṃ tu pāśānām.*

of Śiva's grace must be denied admittance to the ranks of the fully-fledged Śaivas. Indeed, in Tantrāloka 13.302 (quoting the Vīrāvalī), there is a fascinating gradation of the initiations offered by different Śaiva sects *in terms of the ascending importance of religious experience* from right to left:

> *hautrī* (em.: hotrii Ed.) *dīkṣā tu siddhānte tantre yojanikā smṛtā | trike samāveśavatī kule stobhātmikā matā | sāmarasyamayī kaule dīkṣā pañcavidhoditā ||*
> "Now, initiation through fire is taught as a 'ritual fusion' (of the deity with the individual soul) in the Siddhānta and [Svacchanda-]Tantra [systems]. In the Trika, it (necessarily) includes a *samāveśa*, and in the Kula, it is characterized by supernatural 'paralysis' [by the *śakti*]. In the Kaula [system], it consists of an experience of unity-consciousness: (thus) initiation is taught to be five-fold.

Once initiated, a disciple undertakes a practice of daily ritual in which he propitiates a mantra-deity. This is of course largely a socio-linguistically determined, textually circumscribed and validated operation. But again, in the nondual left current a different understanding of ritual is taught, i.e. that it has no purpose but to activate the consciousness of one's own divinity and indeed that of all things. Thus, as Abhinavagupta says, the nondual tāntrika has the understanding that he, God, worships God, on God, by means of God, for the sake of God (Sanderson 1995: 49, citing Abhinavagupta). Thus ritual is intended to result in spiritual experience for these practitioners (ibid.: 47): as Sanderson writes, their ritual was considered meaningful insofar as they were required to perceive the actions it comprises "as fulfilling their purpose by experienceressing and evoking in him a salvatory awareness of reality as he performs them." (1995: 24-25) We see primary source evidence of this in, among other texts, the *Paramārcana-triṃśikā* of Nāga in the Krama lineage, in which the author asks a series of rhetorical questions implying the uselessness of dualistic ritual that does not bring about a powerful ME:

> What kind of worship is it if in it one does not experience the surge of expanded consciousness within each and every movement of cognition, taking hold of the trance

> of sudden enlightment, flooded with radiant, pure awareness? (v. 7)
> What kind of worship is it in which one does not let go of the travails of one's unliberated existence by gazing directly at the dynamism that, beautiful in the unfolding of the heart, pervades the sky [of consciousness]...? (v. 6; trans. Sanderson [2007: 296] with minor changes)

Finally, we also have ample evidence that the soteriological goal of spiritual liberation in Tantric Śaivism was understood in experiential terms. From the Trivandrum *Mahānaya-prakāśa* (1.7):

> *Atitīvra-śaktipātād āruḍhe śāmbhave samāveśe*
> *svānandāmṛta-rūpaṃ jīvanmukteḥ *prakalpyate* (conj. Sand.: prakalpate Ed.) *viśvam*
> When a Divine samāveśa has arisen due to a very intense Descent of Grace/Power, one attains the state of liberation while still in the body, due to which the entire world is reconstituted/reinvented as the nectar of one's own bliss[ful awareness].

This verse from an important exegetical Krama text explicitly equates *samāveśa,* liberation, and intense religious experience. In Abhinavagupta's definition of *āveśa,* which Smith cites as the only definition of possession in all of Sanskrit literature, he too explicitly links it to spiritual experience, in this case that of union with God:

> *āveśaś cāsvatantrasya svatadrūpa-nimajjanāt*
> *paratadrūpatā śambhor ādyācchakty-avibhāginaḥ*
> Āveśa is (that state which arises) due to a suppression of identification with the unliberated self, and a (concomitant) state of identification with the supreme, that is, the primal Śambhu, (together with and) never separate from his Power.

Conclusion

Thus we have seen that RE is an important category of discourse in at least one major Indian religion, that of Śaivism. The study of RE is therefore worthwhile and indeed required to understand this (or any) tradition in which the religious actors make RE a centerpiece of their discourse. Though we cannot treat their accounts as completely transparent to whatever originary events inspired them, we have no need to do so, as we

wish specifically to understand what is religious about them, and that is the hermeneutical discourse that contextualises and makes use of them. The study of RE in Śaivism may add something to the debate around the perennialist or 'common core' thesis, for the nondualist Śaiva claim is that their desired goal is an experience of the most intimate and ubiquitous of all (human) realities: the very core of human consciousness that makes all knowledge, perception and experience possible. If this claim is at all grounded in reality, the REs the Śaivas had must be paralleled elsewhere in the world, as the power of consciousness *per se* is universal in its form and function.

Though not treated in full here, all the types of RE listed in my typology in part one are represented in the Śaiva corpus. The complex Tantric discourse around possession terminology will require more scholarly attention, as well as the seeking of parallels in other religious cultures to determine if these altered states of consciousness have common components, and if so, how they are received and interpreted differently in different cultural milieux.

Appendix

Here I offer a hypothetical example (based on real case studies) to illustrate the difference between experience and interpretation, and the possibility of their separation; it also conveniently points up a crucial difference between a modern religious experiencer and a premodern one. This example is a conflationary fiction, a digest drawing from experience reports of anonymous subjects I have interviewed over a period of years.

Imagine a present-day person who has a powerful mystical experience—unasked for, not prayed for, and not voluntarily induced—of a type commonly encountered: visionary, accompanied by partial disabling of language functions but strong affective elements including a revelatory sense of unity or connectedness due to a temporary apparent dissolution of objective boundaries[39] including the ego-boundary, and with a sense of great significance or epiphanic revelation attached to the whole experience. Drawing on culturally mediated concepts, she concludes during or after the fact that she has been the recipient of the grace of God, who has blessed her by revealing the true divine order of things, a glimpse of the 'kingdom of Heaven'. Some time later, she discovers through whatever means that the catalyst for the whole experience was in fact a piece of bread made from rye parasitized by the fungus ergot, containing psychoactive alkaloids. This new knowledge causes her to revise her interpretation: she may completely dismiss her earlier 'religious' interpretation in light of the 'real cause', resulting also in a substantial reduction in her estimation of the value and significance of the experience, which is now regarded as simply a pleasant delusion. (If this route is followed, she is also likely to dismiss others' mystical experiences

[39] To be more precise, objective boundaries are perceived in this state to be not 'really real' or not important, not the salient features of objects; rather, the perception of the interdependent and interconnected nature of the objects (and oneself) is what seems of paramount importance, together with a sense that all things are suffused with a common element, which some experiencers give a religious name to, e.g. 'blessedness'.

in the same terms.) Or she may modify her interpretation, if her new religious consciousness has taken root strongly enough, to *include* the catalyst by positing that God led her to eat the bread, and acted through the agency of the ergot alkaloids to reveal the truth to her. At any rate, it is clear from this plausable example that it is the agent's interpretation that dictates whether the experience may be called religious, and furthermore also shapes the course of her life afterwards. The experience as reported by the subject is a complex interplay of chemical, biological, psychological, religious, cultural, and socio-linguistic factors. Nonetheless, we may identify an aspect of it—the psychoactive symptoms—which is *not* mediated by socio-linguistic constructs, containing no specifically cultural elements. Such an observation opens the door to the possibility of other experiences mediated by non-socio-linguistic factors; biology being an empirically verifiable source, and supernatural beings an unverifiable one (which is of course different, in an truly scientific perspective, from being an impossible one). Let us consider by contrast the case of the same experience happening to a premodern person, in order to illuminate a key difference, i.e. the apparent inability to separate experience from interpretation in premodern accounts. For indeed, some scholars (e.g. Wasson, Ruck, Hofmann) have posited that ergotamine alkaloids were the active ingredient in the barley drink called *kykeon* served during the initiation ceremonies of the Eleusinian Mysteries. If true, the priests would have had to have been conscious of the presence of the ergot in order to replicate it (as the Mysteries lasted for centuries), thus indicating that the biological catalyst for them in no way invalidated the value of the knowledge gained, nor undermined their belief in its ultimate supernatural source. But since this theory is quite controversial (due to insufficient evidence), we could cite instead any of the many examples of ritual psychoactive plant use that are well documented, such as the use of the so-called Ayahuasca brew among

the Mestizo and many other peoples of the Amazons (Luna 1986). The shamans of these tribes know full well that they are ingesting plants with active chemical agents, yet that poses no contradiction in their minds with the notion that accurate forms of knowledge and power with authentic divine sources are mediated to them through these plants, including the ability to locate game, clairvoyance, prognostication, diagnosis of illness, contact with wise supernatural beings, the ability to serve as psychopomp, and so on. (Shanon 14-15) The shamans are comfortable with over-determined causation, whereas many 'modern' (see fn11) informants I have spoken with are ready to reject one cause if another becomes apparent, especially if it seems more scientific or 'natural'. The latter standpoint is rooted in scientific/modernist values of scepticism; by contrast, in premodern accounts, we do not find several possible interpretations of experience offered, but instead an apparent inability to separate sensate experience from its interpretation. By stark contrast, modern persons can, and indeed often can't help doing so. The modern cultural tendency to assume a single cause, and a supernatural one *only* if a natural one is not apparent also seems to affect modern scholarship in terms of its propensity towards over-reductionism, or what cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett calls 'greedy reductionism', i.e. experiencelaining something *away* rather than experiencelaining it. Or we may invoke C.S. Lewis' memorable phrase of "nothing buttery", referring to the modern tendency to dismiss certain types of experience with the phrase "it's nothing but..." followed by the speaker's favourite form of reductionism. Thomas Carlson, a scholar of the philosophy of religion has pointed out the irony that the sort of secular humanism that undergirds this perspective is itself rooted in and made possible by a specific religious worldview, that of northern European Protestantism.

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