

Impossible Enchantment: The Paranormal, the Sacred,  
and the Secular

by

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## Introduction

A truly open mind. An attempt to think in terms of paradox rather than binary logic. A willingness to entertain the possibility that materialism, objectivism, constructivism, and naïve realism may not have a total purchase on all of cosmic reality, including, and especially, the human form. And, most of all, an impish delight in the weird and wonderful. It also requires a willingness to be tricked from time to time and an understanding that the truth can be hidden in the trick, that the two are not always mutually exclusive.<sup>1</sup>

According to contemporary religious studies scholar Jeffrey Kripal, these are the prerequisites necessary to become an “author of the impossible.” In *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred*, Kripal advocates a reassessment of paranormal phenomena in the field of religious studies. Kripal’s argument, that paranormal phenomena are meaningful and worthy of our attention, conflicts with the standard conception of the modern Western world as “disenchanted,” mechanistic, rationalized, and devoid of intrinsic meaning. In *A Secular Age*, eminent philosopher and secularization theorist Charles Taylor contrasts the secular world with an “enchanted” one. He argues that the world we now occupy is immanent, a notion that “[involves] denying—or at least isolating and problematizing—any form of interpenetration between the things of Nature, on one hand, and ‘the supernatural’ on the other.”<sup>2</sup> This shift is a central component of the

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Kripal, Reading the paranormal writing us: An interview with Jeffrey Kripal.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 15-16.

“disenchantment of the world,” a notion introduced by Max Weber in the early twentieth century that continues to influence the conventional conception of the modern Western world. Taylor appropriates Weber’s concept and contrasts it with the “enchanted world” of the past. The supernatural, magical forces that once populated the everyday environment are relegated to the mind or to some transcendent other realm. While many celebrate the triumph of reason over superstition, others look back with nostalgia to a time when magic and meaning were more readily accessible. In his account of the problem of meaning in our secular age, Taylor invokes the famous Peggy Lee song, “Is That All There Is?” “That” being the secular, the natural, the normal. The modern self inhabits a natural, secular world, one subject to scientific law and instrumental rationality. Yet despite this picture of the modern Western world, reports of anomalous or impossible experiences continue to surface.

The paranormal occupies a unique space in our “secular age.” In a time and place that is supposed to be eminently “modern,” rational, and disenchanting, efforts to understand and legitimize paranormal phenomena illustrate the problems and contradictions encountered in attempting to fit the bizarre and the unexplained into conventional narratives. What is deemed paranormal depends on what is accepted as “normal.” This in itself raises questions regarding who has the authority to decide what is normal or possible and what is not. In many cases, what is normal or possible is designated as such by the scientific community. How do we decide that something is impossible? And once we do so, how are we to study it? Often, reports of such occurrences are explained away as minor glitches in human rationality; residue of

fantasy and superstition in an otherwise disenchanted world. Neither religious nor scientific, “the paranormal” flouts our established categories at every turn.

With *Authors of the Impossible*, Kripal joins a line of thinkers who assert the significance of paranormal phenomena. These proponents lament the overwhelming tendency of their peers to discount real and meaningful forces and events in favor of a mechanistic view of the universe. For these thinkers, the paranormal promises to fundamentally alter the way we approach our universe, providing a means of challenging the rational-scientific view of the world and restoring meaning to immanence without reverting to a religious framework. While a variety of approaches have been taken to combat this fragility of meaning in the modern world, paranormal phenomena present a unique opportunity to restore the sacred in the objective, material world and to reconsider the boundaries between the mental, physical, and spiritual that threaten to shut out the possibility of “fullness” or meaning in modernity. At the same time, this viewpoint presents unique challenges, most notably in its ambiguous and contested relationship to both science and religion. Ultimately, investigation of the paranormal provides a venue for renegotiating the limits of science and fullness in a secular world. Kripal as well as the other authors referenced in this thesis negotiate these potential conflicts and inconsistencies by assenting to but also reframing the secularization narrative. In effect, investigators of the paranormal argue that we are indeed living in an enchanted world.

In addition to Kripal, I discuss two contemporary authors who together cover the range of paranormal phenomena discussed by Kripal: psychical phenomena and

ufology. Elizabeth Mayer, a psychoanalyst, examines instances of “extraordinary knowing,” such as telepathy, ESP, and clairvoyance. John E. Mack, a Harvard psychiatrist, has done extensive research on alien abduction reports. These two authors offer some insight into how researchers approach the paranormal in the present day. While there is a wide range of literature concerning paranormal phenomena, much of it is aimed at readers who have already accepted the reality of these occurrences. Mack and Mayer are asserting the reality of these events while acknowledging the appeal of the materialistic, disenchanting worldview. Both come from the community that is most likely to reject their central claims: that of scientists and academics. Their books are not aimed exclusively or even primarily at insiders. Consequently, they go to some lengths to acknowledge that the cases they are presenting may strike many as unconventional or even outrageous. Both Mack and Mayer serve as contemporary examples of how scholars present evidence of paranormal phenomena in a way that serves to legitimate it to those who accept a secular scientific worldview. They also come to conclusions that echo those of Kripal, especially regarding the boundaries between mental and physical, religious and scientific, which have long functioned to exclude the paranormal.

In his book, Kripal revisits the work of past and present “authors of the impossible,” authors who spent their lives exploring occurrences that most would dismiss offhand, because, most would insist, they couldn’t possibly have happened. Kripal explores the work of four authors: Frederic Myers, a nineteenth century researcher of psychical phenomena; Charles Fort, who documented bizarre and anomalous events from 1800 to the mid-twentieth century; Jacques Vallee, a



contemporary scientist, entrepreneur, and UFO researcher; and Bertrand Méheust, a French intellectual who formulated a sort of sociology of the paranormal. All four of the authors discussed by Kripal seriously engaged with one or more paranormal phenomena in their work, and none enjoy much influence outside of their specific fields of interest. Rather than dismissing them as credulous eccentrics, Kripal contends that these authors have something substantial to offer, that their work illuminates phenomena which are generally ignored or dismissed, but which nonetheless deserve our attention. All four authors are “secular” in the sense that they did not look to religious traditions to explain the subjects of their inquiry, instead using secular and modern techniques, terminology, and disciplines to better understand the paranormal.

Neither Kripal, nor Mack, nor Mayer suggest reverting back to religious explanations, nor do they advocate an uncritical acceptance of more contemporary secular and pseudoscientific explanations. Rather, all three insist that we can use scientific disciplines, in conversation with the humanities, to discover this enchantment and conceptualize it in new ways. According to Kripal, by neglecting these phenomena, both in the sciences and in the study of religion, we ignore a potentially vital part of our reality. All four authors engaged in “decades of extensive data collection, classification, and theorizing.”<sup>3</sup> They were knowledgeable of and even participated in contemporary scientific work but rejected materialist dismissals of paranormal events.

Kripal offers no explanations for these impossible events. He explores some of the more promising ones, but settles on no answers. Whether they are

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<sup>3</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 6.

psychological, physical, metaphysical or supernatural, or any of the possible combinations, is up to the reader to decide. If satisfying reasons exist for their occurrence, they are as yet out of reach. What he would like to convince us of above all else is that these things *happened*, though exactly what that means remains unclear. Nonetheless, if they happened, and have happened with such frequency throughout history, then they deserve some attention. In a sense, Kripal's claims could be interpreted as an affirmation of the reality of subjective experience. At times he seems to be echoing William James in his insistence that these events, however impossible, were indeed very real to the individuals who witnessed them. Yet whatever bearing they have on objective reality is left up for debate. He, along with the authors he explores and other serious paranormal investigators, discusses events that are usually marginalized, and occasionally demonized, by mainstream society. Figures of authority in both the scientific and religious communities are inclined to dismiss or suppress them rather than consider them as real and significant events deserving investigation. Myers, Fort, Vallee, and Méheust pursue anomalies, the miraculous, and the inexplicable. They diligently document strange events, to search for patterns and explanations, or simply to preserve them from the overwhelming tendency of overlooking the impossible.

Recent surveys demonstrate that belief in paranormal phenomena is ubiquitous in the United States, but also show the difficulty involved in grasping what, exactly, these beliefs consist of. A Gallup poll from 2005 indicates that approximately three quarters of Americans profess belief in at least one out of ten selected paranormal phenomena: ESP, haunted houses, ghosts, telepathy,

clairvoyance, astrology, communication with the dead, witches, reincarnation, and spirit channeling. The poll's design also indicates the difficulty of defining paranormal beliefs. According to researchers, three items included in the polling "do not necessarily reflect paranormal belief:" healing powers of the mind, possession by the devil, and visitations from extra-terrestrial beings. The poll also concludes that 37% of the population believes in haunted houses but only 32% believe in ghosts—what else are the houses haunted by? And while 73% believe in at least one of the phenomena, only one percent believes in all ten.

It could certainly be argued that investigators of the paranormal operate in fields that the scientific community once considered promising, but which are now generally labeled as pseudoscience. If Kripal's question is why the paranormal has been ignored by serious scientific and academic disciplines, the obvious answer is that none of these areas of inquiry, from psychical research to remote viewing to ufology, have produced any consistent and credible evidence to merit continued interest. After all, although we may look to alchemy out of anthropological or historical curiosity, few would contend that it fell out of favor in the scientific community simply because it lies outside of the current paradigm. Modern psychologists have given up the search for psychic powers just as chemists have abandoned the quest for the philosopher's stone. Kripal admits that some ghost sightings, psychics, and alien abductions have been debunked as illusion, delusion, or outright fraud. Many of us are familiar with the daytime TV mediums and professed psychics charging five dollars a minute. When faced with a seemingly impossible phenomenon, the simplest course of action is to reject it. Those who hold

faith in scientific materialism indeed cannot accept such events as possible without being forced to reconsider their entire worldview. It is tempting to dismiss them altogether. But Kripal insists that this is taking the easy way out. What is much more difficult is entertaining the idea that such occurrences, though they fail to conform to conventional ideas about the nature of consciousness and the universe, are real. Why not ask whether these events (which Kripal suggests are more ubiquitous than many would like to admit) are so elusive not because they never happen, but because our current methods of identifying and documenting them are insufficient. By their very nature, paranormal phenomena refuse to conform to physical laws, so how can we expect to understand them using only scientific methods?

## Defining the Paranormal

Listing paranormal phenomena is relatively easy—ghosts, psychic abilities, and UFOs are classic examples—but defining the “paranormal” as a category is much more difficult. There is currently no agreement regarding what constitutes a paranormal phenomenon, or whether paranormal beliefs qualify as religious. For example, on the official website for the Society for Psychical Research, the paranormal is defined simply as “[a] Phenomenon which is considered impossible according to the established scientific world-view.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, belief in miracles, the afterlife, angels or the devil, beliefs of mainstream Christianity, are at times characterized as “paranormal,” in the sense that they are supernatural.<sup>5</sup> Some researchers distinguish between “religious” and “classic” paranormal beliefs, but

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<sup>4</sup> “Glossary | Society for Psychical Research.” <http://www.spr.ac.uk/main/page/glossary-paranormal>.

<sup>5</sup> Rice, “Believe It or Not.”

this, too, raises problems, since what counts as “religious” varies from culture to culture. For example, the existence of ghosts is consistent with many belief systems, but not necessarily with mainstream Protestantism.

Often, theories of paranormal phenomena entail a fusion of religious and scientific themes. The category of telepathy “practiced a form of reductionism, but finally found the human nature to which the religious phenomena could be reduced to be ironically spiritlike.”<sup>6</sup> UFO sightings present striking parallels to Marian apparitions; visits from the dead involve notions of the afterlife, but also raise questions about psychology and the limits of consciousness.

Although many of these ideas have an ancient history, they are also, in their contemporary formations, distinctly modern. Many of the key terms employed by Kripal, Mack, and Mayer, such as “paranormal” and “psychical,” arose in the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, enjoying brief recognition in academic and scientific circles before falling into disrepute, especially as they came to be associated with religious movements such as spiritualism.<sup>7</sup> Now lacking the respectability of modern science and organized religion, paranormal phenomena are designated as pseudoscience or outright fantasy by skeptics. In a world where belief (or unbelief) is supposed to be safely consigned to the mind, where science and religion have been carefully delineated, the paranormal threatens to upset the established boundaries that have come to define modernity, questioning the limits of science, consciousness, the mental and the physical.

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<sup>6</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 81.

<sup>7</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 8.

Kripal's own definition does little to dispel this ambiguity. For his purposes, the paranormal is "*the sacred in transit from the religious and scientific registers into a parascientific or 'science mysticism' register.*"<sup>8</sup> The psychical is "*the sacred in transit from the traditional religious register into a modern scientific one.*" We might ask how he would define "parascientific" or "science mysticism." From the modern to the secular to the religious, definitions are contested.

In his definition, Kripal links these phenomena with a familiar term in the study of religion. According to Kripal, experiences of the paranormal can be classified with more conventionally religious experience as expressions of or connections with the sacred. He defines the sacred as "a particular structure of human consciousness that corresponds to palpable presence, energy, or power encountered in the environment."<sup>9</sup> Kripal's understanding of the paranormal is closely tied with the definition of religion implicit in his thinking. Following scholars of religion such as Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto, Kripal defends the relevance of the sacred to the construction of a suitable definition of religion. In fact, without such a definition the paranormal could be considered irrelevant to the field of religious studies, except insofar as it is the focus of certain contemporary movements such as scientology. It is a concept composed of a multitude of seemingly disparate phenomena, related only by the fact that they seem to resist all other forms of categorization. Kripal links the disappearance of the category of the sacred in academia with the neglect of the paranormal: "Something needs to be said about this eclipse and how it might be linked to the eclipse of the psychical and the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

paranormal in the same field.”<sup>10</sup> By defining religion as the manifestation of the sacred, Kripal is free to include paranormal experiences in the field of religious studies.

Kripal argues that the field of religious studies has played a role in this process. He proposes a reclamation of the category of the sacred, which once played an important part in religious studies scholarship, as in the work of Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade, but has since become somewhat unpopular in the field.

Kripal’s subject matter calls into question the distinction between the religious and the secular. On the one hand, insofar as we define “religion” as any belief in the supernatural, paranormal beliefs seem no different. On the other, many paranormal researchers seek to disassociate paranormal phenomena from traditional religious beliefs. They have also sparked hostility from both established religious traditions and scientific communities.

In his conclusion, Kripal suggests that “if the paranormal lies at the origin point of so much religious experience and expression, it should also lie at the center of any adequate theory of religion.”<sup>11</sup> Why should the paranormal, rather than religious experience more generally, lie at the center? As Kripal argues, encounters with the supernatural have occurred throughout history, and still do across the globe, even in the West, though admittedly with much less frequency in modern academia. Kripal asserts “any ordinary history of religions that relies exclusively on textual-critical, social scientific, or political analyses (from Foucauldian constructionism and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 253.

postcolonial theory to philology and materialist cognitive science) is woefully inadequate to the task of understanding and interpreting the paranormal.”<sup>12</sup>

Though he admits that some of these bizarre happenings may indeed be coincidences and nothing more, or that what seems “paranormal” may be normal after all, “anomalies may also be signs of the impossible, that is, signs of the end of one paradigm and the beginning of another.”<sup>13</sup> Clearly influenced by his own academic background in mystical literature, Kripal delves into the possible neurological underpinnings of religious experience, but also suggests, like James and Eliade before him, that these experiences may signify an underlying metaphysical reality inaccessible to more conventional scientific methods. Kripal eschews the notion that science and religion are non-overlapping, as well as the idea that materialism will eventually explain all of nature’s mysteries. The supernatural or the sacred is very much a presence, and not one that exists on some separate plain apart from the material world. It is *in* our world, and could perhaps be located if we simply found some new means of looking for it. Currently, however, anything that is incomprehensible to the prevailing materialist mindset “is relegated to the tired tropes of ‘irrationalism,’ ‘anecdote,’ or ‘pseudoscience’”<sup>14</sup> rather than seriously considered. Yet Kripal, Mack, and Mayer contest such explanations, arguing instead for a reconceptualization of the relationship between self and world, amounting to what Taylor describes as an “enchanted world.”

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 262.



## Chapter Outline

The first chapter presents a summary of the secularization narrative.

Secularization theory, widely accepted by social scientists throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has since fallen out of favor as trends in religiosity across the globe have failed to conform to its predictions. While there are many versions of this theory, which vary in their definitions of secularization, I focus on Charles Taylor's account of secularization in *A Secular Age*, which reiterates many of the claims of previous secularization narratives but also builds on of them to describe the "conditions of belief" in the modern Western world.

Chapter 2 outlines Charles Taylor's enchantment/disenchantment binary.

Taylor, echoing Max Weber's trepidations concerning the consequences of disenchantment, suggests that the secular age invites new difficulties in meaning-making. More specifically, for Taylor the transition from an enchanted to a disenchanted world involves a shift in the location of meaning. He differentiates between the "porous" self of the enchanted world, which was open and vulnerable to external forces and agencies, and the "buffered self" of the disenchanted world, conceived as functioning in a mechanistic universe. These "buffers" grant us a new sense of autonomy and invulnerability, but they also bar us from a certain mode of experiencing the world. This chapter touches on the novel "crisis of meaning" invoked by the buffered self.

Chapter 3 discusses the various attempts of "secular" thinkers to account for the possibility of enchantment in a secular world. Of course, defining "the secular" or secularity is notoriously difficult, but Taylor's picture of contemporary

“conditions of belief” provides a helpful framework for understanding the aims behind the argument for secular enchantment. I use Jane Bennett’s book, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, as a central example of atheistic/agnostic enchantment, and argue that, while Bennett does address the question of meaning in a material universe, she, like other secular authors, falls short of presenting a version of enchantment that matches Taylor’s description. In contrast, Kripal offers a more radical, if problematic, portrayal of the enchanted world. Underlying many of these efforts is the assumption that we can never fully return to our previous “enchanted” existence, even if we might want to.

Chapter 4 reviews the work Mack, Mayer, and Kripal, and two contemporary psychologists who study the paranormal. This chapter demonstrates how the study of the paranormal has led these thinkers to conclusions that directly contradict Taylor’s definition of disenchantment, and how they negotiate and contest the boundaries between science and spirituality, sacred and secular, mental and physical, binaries that seem central to modernity and disenchantment. I also explore the ways in which these scholars and Kripal in particular present the paranormal as a subject worth taking seriously and simultaneously attempt to shed the obvious stigma associated with paranormal beliefs. In doing so, they also argue for an alternate view of the relationship between self and world that is also fundamental to Taylor’s description of enchantment.

Chapter 5 positions Kripal’s definition of the paranormal in the context of religious studies and the notion of *sui generis* religion, touching on certain problems and confusions that may arise in the conflation of the paranormal with “the sacred,”

a concept that has been subject to criticism by religious studies scholars in recent decades.<sup>15</sup> The chapter also raises issues of interpretation that arise in understanding paranormal phenomena. In what sense are they meaningful and how can we reconcile conflicting understandings of the same event?

In my conclusion, I return to Taylor's conceptions of fullness and enchantment, asking how Kripal, Mack, and Mayer accept or diverge from the secularization narrative, and how their explorations into the paranormal connect to their sense of meaning. By conceptualizing the world as "enchanted" in Taylor's sense, these investigators of the paranormal present a means of understanding paranormal phenomena without accepting them uncritically or reducing them to "normal" events.

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<sup>15</sup> E.g. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*

# Chapter 1: Secularization

## Charles Taylor and the Secularization Narrative

Secularization theorists generally assumed that the decline of religion was inseparable from modernization more generally.<sup>16</sup> That is, with the dissemination of modern science, increasing industrialization and urbanization, the institution of more democratic governments, and the rise of a global economy, the rest of the world would gradually follow the West's example and relinquish more traditional religious ideals in favor of scientific rationalism.

A primary aim of Taylor's work is to combat what he calls the typical "subtraction story," a tale which humanity comes to realize its ability to master the natural world and to construct and function in society without the guidance of religious dogma. It is a story of humanity coming to maturity, learning to live and act guided not by fantasy, however appealing it might be, but by its own capacity for reason. Religion is no longer necessary. Belief is only viable if accompanied by an "intellectual sacrifice." With the help of science especially, modern westerners are stripping off layers of superstition as they gain more understanding of the natural world and come to see that it is possible to function individually and as a society without traditional religious concepts, which skew our vision of the world and

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<sup>16</sup> Peter L. Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," 2.

pervert our natural morality. The subtraction story posits that, throughout history, religious beliefs serve certain purposes, for example, by providing social stability and explanations of the unknown. In an era of modern science and institutions, these beliefs become more and more obsolete, and are gradually “subtracted” from human life until there are none left. In contrast, Taylor argues that such stories are themselves products of particular moral and epistemological assumptions formulated in a specific cultural and historical context, composing the background of our everyday lives.

According to Taylor, the subtraction story fails on multiple levels. First, it implies the inevitability of a global decline in religiosity. Traditional conceptions of secularization, once popular, have proven insupportable by actual trends in religiosity across the globe. If religion were considered false or irrelevant by anyone who received an education in modern science and a proper introduction to exclusive humanism, the world, and the West, would look very different than it does today. An awareness of modern evolutionary and political theory and access to advanced technology has not proven to be a direct path to atheism. Secondly, Taylor argues that the subtraction story largely neglects the complex history of the modern moral outlook, as well as exclusive humanism’s ideological debts to the very belief system it now seeks to displace. Contemporary secularism rests on assumptions that are no less historically and culturally grounded than those of Christianity.

Despite much evidence to the contrary, the notion that religious conviction among the educated today must necessarily involve a sacrifice of the intellect remains widespread among contemporary unbelievers, informing many popular

atheist arguments against religion. Taylor's argument helps to "[displace] the commonsense opposition between the religious and the secular with a new understanding in which this opposition appears only as a late and retrospective misrecognition."<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Taylor seeks to account for the ease with which scholars and the public accepted this line of thinking, but also to explain how a theory that appeared to many as self-evident could also be fundamentally wrong.

Contemporary subtraction stories mirror the predictions of many scholars and intellectuals from the Enlightenment into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who assumed that, for better or worse, secularization would inevitably take hold. The eventual disappearance of religion seemed a logical conclusion to modern science's inexorable advance. Arguably, the field of sociology of religion has been entangled with the concept of secularization from the beginning.<sup>18</sup>

Taylor joins other contemporary social scientists in asserting that "secularism" cannot be defined simply as the absence or decline of religion, but contains its own metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical assumptions, which must be examined as they developed in a specific historical context.<sup>19</sup> Secularism, or secularity, involves more than the loss or rejection of certain beliefs. The story Taylor endeavors to tell is "one that thinks not only of loss but of remaking."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, "Editor's Introduction," 22.

<sup>18</sup> Berger, "Reflections on the Sociology of Religion Today," 443.

<sup>19</sup> See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003)

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, "Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo," 303.

While some scholars, such as Rodney Stark, maintain that the secularization thesis should be altogether abandoned,<sup>21</sup> others struggle to redefine its terms, either by characterizing it as a historically specific phenomenon with little bearing on the relationship between modernization and religion more generally, or by redefining secularization itself, not as a widespread decline in religiosity but as a transformation of religion's role in society.<sup>22</sup> Charles Taylor has been a significant figure in this project. The publication of his *A Secular Age* in 2001 served as a catalyst for ongoing discussions about religion and secularization.

Taylor's work on secularization is in part an attempt to reconcile two convictions regarding religion in modernity: first, that it is not going away, and second, that *something* has changed. Sociologists of religion have been occupied with defining this change for the past two decades. According to Taylor, this shift should not be identified with different levels of belief but with different *conditions* of belief. Even if other markers of religiosity (such as church attendance) remain relatively stable, as they have in the United States, the context in which people hold religious beliefs has transformed, perhaps irreversibly. Even fairly insulated religious communities are exposed to the idea of a world devoid of transcendence, even if they choose not to accept it. There is no longer a possibility of "naïve" religious belief. There are always other options. In this sense, we all live under the same conditions for belief. What varies is which frame we choose, what degree of transcendence we allow to enter into this common condition.

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<sup>21</sup> See Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P."

<sup>22</sup> For a review of the current state of the secularization debate, see Gorski, "After Secularization?"

In the first chapter of *A Secular Age*, Taylor differentiates between three compatible but ultimately separable understandings of secularity, which together comprise a range of variations of the secularization narrative. The first, secularity 1, involves the privatization of religion. The political and economic spheres are no longer entangled with Church interests and authority; religion becomes an individual matter separate from our public activities and roles. Advocates of secularity 2 posit that people have become less religious in terms of their personal beliefs in the modern era. In this case, while one or more religions may retain institutional roles in society, fewer and fewer people profess belief in religious tenets. These two modes of secularity have been suggested by social scientists in various forms over the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Taylor shies away from these conceptions of secularization. Although he sees a certain degree of merit in both, and all three overlap in significant ways, he focuses on the contemporary conditions of belief in the West. Rather than claiming widespread decline in religiosity, or the exclusion of religion from the public sphere, both highly contested components of most secularization theories, Taylor attempts instead to explain the changes which have occurred from roughly 1500 to 2000, that is, between the medieval and modern eras. In his account of secularity 3, the shift Taylor intends “to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.”<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, “[t]he purpose of Taylor’s book is to demonstrate that there is another, much more fundamental sense of the secular that is not captured by the classic sense of the secular as patterns of institutional separation and ‘secularistic

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<sup>23</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.



certainty.”<sup>24</sup> That is, secularity 3 is concerned primarily with the “conditions of belief” in Western society.

In his book, Taylor limits his discussion to the Western world, or “Latin Christendom.” While this choice is no doubt due in part to a desire to avoid the universalizing tendencies that plagued earlier secularization narratives, many scholars fault Taylor for omitting any discussion of colonialism and imperialism from his book.<sup>25</sup> Social scientists such as Peter Van Der Veer cite interactions between the West and other cultures as a decisive factor in the Western discourses about religion and secularization.<sup>26</sup> Many have questioned whether the process of secularization can be adequately explained without reference to this formative aspect of Western history, considering that “the colonial governance of non-Christian peoples was one of the central contexts in which Europeans developed their understandings of religion, the state, and themselves.”<sup>27</sup> This criticism is also relevant to understanding the discourse about disenchantment. Although Taylor suggests that the concept of disenchantment arose primarily in order to differentiate between modern Western society and medieval Europe, postcolonial theorists such as Dipesh Chakrabarty have argued that Westerners grew to define themselves by technology and rationality partially in opposition to the irrational superstition and magic of non-Western cultures.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, “Editor’s Introduction,” 22.

<sup>25</sup> Casanova, “A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight;” Mahmood, “Can Secularism Be Otherwise?”

<sup>26</sup> Van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters*.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, “Editor’s Introduction,” 27.

<sup>28</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

Taylor rightly points out that disagreements among scholars over whether secularization has occurred are motivated largely by conflicting definitions of religion. If religion is defined as broadly as to include any form of spirituality or devotion, then a decline in religiosity is difficult to prove; if “religion” encompasses only orthodox Catholicism, then traditional secularization theory certainly holds. The search for a middle ground has been contentious, but Taylor argues that, whatever the definition, a change has occurred. The fact that many, including members of the general public, observe a decline in the importance of religion, is telling.

Although definitions that apply more appropriately to Christianity than to other forms of religiosity are often seen as biased and limiting, Taylor suggests that such constraints may be suitable for our purposes. If secularization theory is meant to apply to the West, rather than globally, then a focus on Western forms of religiosity may prove most valuable in determining its viability. Thus, although Taylor admits that characterizing religion primarily in terms of “belief” is problematic when applied to many non-Western religions, he maintains that this category is indeed helpful in exploring religiosity in the Western world.

Many of the historical events and cultural trends that Taylor highlights in his narrative are present in most traditional secularization stories. Taylor touches on the establishment of more democratic governments that place a new emphasis on natural and inalienable rights gradually displace political regimes that once relied on religion for their authority. The French and American revolutions demonstrated humanity’s ability to construct its own society without reliance on ancient religious

tenets. The state has gradually taken on roles previously reserved for religious institutions, and science eliminates the uncertainty and mystery of the medieval world. Urbanization leads to pluralization, such that longstanding religious beliefs can no longer be taken for granted. Taylor grants that all of these factors were indeed indispensable to the development of the modern West, but he argues that none of them on their own, nor even all of them combined, inevitably lead to religious decline.

Like other secularization theorists, Taylor begins his story with the reform efforts of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with the Protestant reformation and the Catholic counter-reformation as the primary initiators of disenchantment. Although these religious movements were not unprecedented, as many had occurred throughout Catholic Europe throughout the Middle Ages, their scope and influence had previously been limited. Over the course of the century, little of Latin Christendom would remain untouched by these efforts, whether they were welcomed or resisted. Reformers condemned what they viewed as superstition and idolatry with the aim of emphasizing the omnipotence of the Christian God over anything worldly. Both religious and secular elites enforced these changes, with the intent of “civilizing” the general population.

Sociologists of religion often cite religious pluralism as a key contributor to secularization. The inception of a multitude of new Protestant denominations from the Reformation onwards weakened any single denomination’s claims to absolute truth. Furthermore, colonization and imperialism exposed Westerners to alternate forms of religiosity, contributing to the development of the definition of religion

itself.<sup>29</sup> The secularizing effects of pluralism only increased with modernization. Urbanization resulted in more and more interaction with people of various religious backgrounds and a heightened awareness of competing belief systems.

## The Immanent Frame

According to Taylor, inhabitants of the modern Western world occupy the “immanent frame:” “the sensed context in which we develop our beliefs.”<sup>30</sup> “[T]his frame constitutes a ‘natural’ order, to be contrasted to a ‘supernatural’ one, an ‘immanent’ world, over against a possible ‘transcendent’ one.”<sup>31</sup> This context is shared both by believers and unbelievers. The difference arises only when we come to see the immanent frame as “closed” or “open” to the transcendent, which ultimately determines where we locate meaning, within or outside of the natural world. Either way, however, our sense of meaning is derived from the self, whether or not we connect it to a higher power, if we, in Taylor’s words, leave it open. The world in itself no longer carries any inherent value or agency aside from the minds that inhabit it. The secular, and the immanent world, are always assumed to be mundane and mechanistic.

Taylor resists the notion that, as the secular world has matured, Christianity has remained stagnant, trapped in a past that it longs to return to, an enchanted world it cannot escape. Although this is a common picture, one that is at times painted by Christians themselves, Taylor argues that religion has not remained unaffected by modern developments. Even the most conservative Christian movements recognize

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<sup>29</sup> Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious..”

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 542.

the effects of secularization not just in their laments at the evils of modernity, but in their attempts to combat it. A resistance to mystery is evident not only in scientific or humanistic accounts of the world, but also in many religious attempts to counter them.

For example, creationists compete with scientists to find supporting empirical evidence to their theories. Everything must be backed up by evidence.

Incompatibilities between Genesis and evolutionary theory cannot be explained simply by the mystery of God's design. Instead, institutes are established devoted solely to collecting empirical evidence disproving Darwin. For certain Christian groups, there is no longer any room for alternate or multifaceted interpretations of the Bible. Instead, "Seen within this framework, the whole Christian faith stands or falls with the exact historicity of the detailed accounts of the book of Genesis."<sup>32</sup> In actuality, this conflict between belief and unbelief takes place on modern terms.

Scientific recognition has become a crucial factor in achieving legitimacy.

Creationists or advocates of Intelligent Design (and, as we shall see later, many researchers of the paranormal) seek out credentialed scientists to support their cause even as they challenge the authority of scientific knowledge.

For Taylor, the possibility of exclusive humanism is a key component of the possibility of secularism more generally. Although unbelief may take a variety of diverse and conflicting forms, exclusive humanism precedes them such that "other modes of unbelief—as well as many forms of belief—understand themselves as having overcome or refuted it."<sup>33</sup> Competing types of unbelief that diverge

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 330.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 269.

considerably from exclusive humanism should be seen as responses to it, rather than strains of thought that developed independently. While exclusive humanism developed in relation to and defined itself against religion, other forms of unbelief defined themselves in opposition to exclusive humanism. Thus, just as Christianity, in its attempts to reform and intensify religious belief generated rival faiths, so exclusive humanism fostered its own discontents.

## Chapter 2: Enchantment/Disenchantment

### The Disenchantment Narrative

Arguably one of the most important components of Taylor's narrative is disenchantment, a term he borrows from Max Weber. According to Weber in "Science as a Vocation," in modernity, "we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but...on the contrary, we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*. That in turn means the disenchantment of the world."<sup>34</sup> The concept of disenchantment has proven extremely influential to the formation of the modern mentality. Taylor argues that, prior to disenchantment, the natural and the supernatural intermingled and interacted, so much so that they were indistinguishable. In part through the development of modern science, but also through the work of the Church itself, the natural and the supernatural were strictly demarcated, until the latter was pushed out of view entirely. The disenchanted world created a new sense of self, one that has fundamentally shaped our history up to the present day. Taylor notes throughout *A Secular Age* that disenchantment is not to be confused with secularization. Though they are often correlated, the conflation of the two results in a skewed conception of the conditions of modernity, and often leads to the misguided perception that modernization inevitably leads to a decline in religious belief and practice. Still, for Taylor, disenchantment *can* function to make religious

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<sup>34</sup> Weber, et al, *The Vocation Lectures*, 13.

belief more difficult. Disenchantment is related to but not identifiable with various definitions of secularization. That is, disenchantment need not be accompanied by religious decline, either in individuals or in the public sphere. Instead, for Taylor disenchantment signals a fundamental shift in our approach to and interaction with the world around us.

Taylor, like Weber, views religion as the initial driving force behind disenchantment. This process can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation, or even ancient Judaism, in the attempts to eliminate idolatry and magic from religious practices.<sup>35</sup> Although “this clear distinction of natural from supernatural, which was an achievement of Latin Christendom in the late Middle Ages and early modern period, was originally made in order to mark the clear autonomy of the supernatural,”<sup>36</sup> it also made it easier to erase all traces of the supernatural once the door to the transcendent was closed. Reformers unintentionally played a role in the elimination of the supernatural altogether by their successors. Science, notably Newtonian physics, certainly played a vital role in this shift, with the discovery of unchanging laws of nature, but ultimately religious actors played the main role in instigating these changes. For Taylor, the first push towards what would ultimately result in the secularization of the West was intended to increase the intensity of (correct forms of) religiosity. This focus on lesser spirits misdirected attention from a God who should be conceived as all-powerful. Although there were some popular pushes for reform, these changes were primarily enforced from the top down, by clergy and elites on the peasant laity.

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<sup>35</sup> Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 113.

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542.



Disenchantment or, more literally, “the elimination of magic” was assumed to occur as society became more modernized. Before the Protestant Reformation, the world was permeated with unseen forces, good and bad. As religion became increasingly individualized and the world increasingly rationalized, the supernatural forces assumed to permeate the natural world gradually receded. In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber outlines the religious contribution to secularization and disenchantment. Religion functioned to disenchant the world and subsequently to secularize it. Weber’s view has played a significant role, either explicitly or implicitly, in many of the sociological secularization theories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most notably in the prevalent assumption that modernization is inevitably accompanied by religious decline and the loss of collective meaning, and that the historical process of rationalization, with the rise of the modern state and scientific and technological advances have rendered belief in the supernatural at worst delusional and at best unnecessary. This is not to say that religious belief was impossible for the educated modern Westerner but “[t]o anyone who is unable to endure the fate of the age like a man we must say that he should return to the welcoming and merciful embrace of the churches...In the process he will inevitably be forced to make a ‘sacrifice of the intellect’”<sup>37</sup> For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the discourse of modernity and disenchantment “defined enchantment as the residual, subordinate ‘other’ to modernity’s rational, secular, and progressive tenets.”<sup>38</sup>

Disenchantment is often celebrated along with secularization as the triumph of reason rather than the loss of meaning. No longer bound to the superstitions of the

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<sup>37</sup> Weber et al., *The Vocation Lectures*, 30-31.

<sup>38</sup> Saler, “Modernity and Enchantment,” 695.

past, we are free to create our own meaning. Human life, no longer subjugated to a higher power, achieves a new significance, and we are compelled to strive to eliminate suffering in this world rather than placating ourselves with the fantasy of an afterlife. Freed from the strict religious codes of our ancestors, we can reinvent morality, focusing on fulfillment rather than suppressing bodily desires. A sense of mystery, central to the religions of our ancestors, is an indication of apathy. Scientific work, perhaps over the course of several generations, promises to unlock the secrets of the universe. Nothing is intrinsically inexplicable. In this view, enchantment and religion more generally were the result of ignorance, deference to authority, and the human imagination. Elite culture marginalized remnants of enchantment. With the triumph of Enlightenment rationality, “enchantments became associated with the cognitive outlooks of groups traditionally cast as inferior within the discourse of Western elites: “primitives,” children, women, and the lower classes.”<sup>39</sup>

The logic behind this line of thought is at first glance easily traced. If religion served only a functional purpose, then it seems reasonable that supernatural explanations would fall away as we acquired better explanations for the workings of the natural world, as well as an understanding of how to control them. Who needs a rain dance when we have better irrigation techniques? Or an exorcism with antipsychotic medications? It only makes sense that religious rituals would be marginalized as we discover more effective methods of controlling our environment, and even of explaining our existence. Our God was a “God of the gaps,” and the gaps are steadily narrowing. For some, even the realm of ethics is subject to

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<sup>39</sup> Saler, “Modernity and Enchantment,” 696.

scientific rationality, as neuroscience can be used determine the optimum level of happiness.<sup>40</sup> Though this is an extreme example, it is indicative of the tendency of some unbelievers to assume that science is capable of explaining and dictating nearly every aspect of human life. It is this type of reasoning that prompts some to proclaim that religion must inevitably disappear as society progresses, and others to suggest that religion can never be entirely eradicated since secularism cannot fully satisfy the natural human thirst for meaning.

Medieval Europe is often presented as the quintessential example of an “enchanted world,” in which religion, magic, and superstition permeated nearly every aspect of life. Orthodox religion intermingled with folk magic, and the evocation of the supernatural was not reserved for important rites of passage or holidays. Contact with spirits, demons, saints, and holy sites was part of one’s daily activities. Certain relics, people, and places could emanate exceptional powers, both good and evil.

Though some of these forces may have been indifferent to human concerns, there were certain means of manipulating them. This is not to say that magic was simply a more primitive version of technology. Many credit “a preoccupation with the explanation and relief of human misfortune”<sup>41</sup> as the driving force behind magical beliefs. As our explanations and remedies improve, magical practices decline. While scientific advancement may render such tactics less urgently necessary, it does not preclude them altogether.

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<sup>40</sup> See Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010)

<sup>41</sup> Thomas, *Religion & the Decline of Magic*, 5.

Scientific and technical mastery of the world did lessen the need for rituals with practical, rather than purely spiritual functions. For example, healing rituals were less urgent as medical practitioners gained a better understanding of human anatomy and disease. Fertility spells were used less frequently with the development of improved agricultural techniques. But the rites and rituals of the enchanted world cannot simply be seen as more primitive practices that are readily supplanted when more effective methods of control arrive. For Taylor, the “magic” of the enchanted world was also deeply connected with a sense of the transcendent. According to Taylor, “ritual was not simply an attempt at manipulation of higher powers, as we would understand this today, because it was accompanied by a sense of awe at these higher powers.”<sup>42</sup> Religious ritual, even when used primarily to influence natural forces for the sake of personal gain, cannot be viewed simply as an application of instrumental reason, aimed only at employing the most efficient method to produce the desired effects. These practices involved a very different understanding of the world and the role of the supernatural within it. Thus, the displacement of these practices cannot be explained only by scientific advancement. The success of disenchantment can be attributed as much, if not more, to the efforts of religious leaders.

Though Taylor adopts Weber’s term, he offers a more complex definition of disenchantment than the one presented in Weber’s lecture. Disenchantment, for Taylor, does not simply involve the “elimination of magic” or the loss of the experience of wonder or meaning. It is a process that fundamentally alters our conception of the world as well as our perceived relation to it. Taylor isolates a

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<sup>42</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 439.

variety of factors contributing to the transition. For Taylor, the distinction between enchantment and disenchantment is largely a question of boundaries. Namely, “the enchanted world...shows a perplexing lack of boundaries that seem to us essential.”<sup>43</sup> What is key for Taylor is that the very boundary between self and world was conceived differently; the barrier between inner and outer worlds was permeable, or “porous,” rendering inhabitants of the enchanted world vulnerable not simply to physical events, but to moral forces, good and bad. Thus, the enchanted world was not a more naïve, fantastical, or childish view of the universe we know today, but consisted of an entirely different, though equally complex, set of assumptions about the nature of our surroundings.

Over the course of the centuries following the Reformation, the magical beliefs and practices of the Middle Ages gradually gave way to science and a mechanized universe. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, “The notion that the universe was subject to immutable natural laws killed the concept of miracles, weakened the belief in the physical efficacy of prayer, and diminished faith in the possibility of direct divine inspiration” while “[t]he Cartesian concept of matter relegated spirits, whether good or bad, to the purely mental world.”<sup>44</sup> For Taylor, the writings of Rene Descartes represent an early formulation of what would become the dominant outlook. According to Taylor, “[t]he Cartesian subject had lost the kind of depth which belonged to a ‘nature’ which was part of a cosmic order.”<sup>45</sup> It became possible to understand oneself as wholly separate from the material world.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless,

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<sup>43</sup> Charles Taylor, “Disenchantment—Reenchantment,” 60.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas, Keith. *Religion & the Decline of Magic*. New York: Scribner’s, 1971, 643.

<sup>45</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 348.

<sup>46</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*

religion and science were often interconnected for much of the next century. Over time, however, the emphasis on consistent empirical demonstrability gradually ruled out a variety of practices and belief systems. Enchantment made the regulation of religious practices more difficult, risked devolving into paganism, and directed focus away from God, towards lesser spirits and powers in the pursuit of worldly interests.

The enchanted world was hardly entirely positive. There were evil forces at work as well as good ones. Porousness did not only make the self more receptive to wonder; it made the self more vulnerable to attack. Religious rituals and magic were necessary to ward off these threats. In his essay, "Enchantment, No, Thank You!" Bruce Robbins claims "the disenchantment story celebrates the pre-modern past without bothering to remember the evil spirits."<sup>47</sup> Those nostalgic for an enchanted world would do better to remember that belief in God was so necessary in 1500 in part because He offered protection from the constant threat of evil forces.

Even where vestiges of supernatural belief remain, people in the modern era take magic less "seriously." After all, reading one's horoscope in the morning paper or visiting a psychic aren't necessarily indicative of a comprehensive worldview. The remnants of our superstitious past are not consistently practiced or constitutive of a larger system of belief, nor do they have any significant social influence. All of the characteristics that might make "religion" a valuable object of study are absent from modern magic.

In an enchanted world, specifically pre-Reformation Europe, the self is vulnerable to forces and agencies external to it. Objects, places, agents, possess meaning independent of the mind. In a disenchanted world, this magic, good and

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<sup>47</sup> Bruce Robbins, "Enchantment? No, Thank You!" 76

bad, is gone. Meaning is located in the mind. Any link to the transcendent is accessed through the mind, not through “charged” sites or objects. This conception of the self is deeply linked to our conditions of belief. Things are meaningful only insofar as we take them to be.

The transfer of meaning from the outer world to within the mind is one of the most significant shifts that occurs with disenchantment. Taylor notes, however, that this change cannot be simplified to a move from “outer” to “inner” meaning. With disenchantment comes a new conception of the self. Taylor describes this transition as a move from “porous” to “buffered.” For Taylor, the process of disenchantment is closely entwined with the modern conception of the self. He contends, in contrast to Weber, that modernity has not inhibited us from discovering meaning and wonder, rather, in a secular age “the only locus of thoughts, feeling, spiritual élan is what we call minds.”<sup>48</sup> We are, in the words of Descartes, “thinking things” in a mechanistic universe. The boundaries of our previously porous selves have solidified, and any meaning and magic we find in the world can now be traced back to the mind. According to Taylor, this buffered identity is “the self-understanding which arises out of disenchantment.”<sup>49</sup> That is, the disenchanted world is the context in which the modern self, religious or secular, is realized.

With the rise of the buffered self comes the possibility of disengagement. Although we perceive certain things as meaningful, letting certain people, places, and events affect us, we ultimately have the option of disengaging from our surroundings. In the enchanted world, on the other hand, “the presence of something

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<sup>48</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 30.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

beyond (what we call today) the ‘natural’ is more palpable, and immediate, one might say, physical, in an enchanted age.”<sup>50</sup> Taylor distinguishes the enchanted cosmos from the mechanistic universe. The medieval cosmos was limited in both time and space. In the modern universe, these two dimensions are infinite, or at least much more difficult to define. For some, “it comes to seem axiomatic that all thought, feeling, and purpose, all the features we normally ascribe to agents, must be in minds, which are distinct from the ‘outer’ world.”<sup>51</sup>

### Meaning and the Buffered Self

According to Taylor, “for the modern, buffered self, the possibility exists of taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind.”<sup>52</sup> This possibility can produce a sense of autonomy and power over oneself, but also a feeling of emptiness. When the outside world evokes negative feelings, we can convince ourselves that such things ultimately have no power over us. Consequently, however, the perception of anything outside of us being inherently valuable can always be conceived as an illusion. The sense of a loss of meaning “is specific to a buffered identity, whose very invulnerability opens it to the danger that...nothing significant will stand out for it.”<sup>53</sup> The material world is rationalized, homogenized, deadened. Though the buffered self does not demand disengagement, the very possibility of such a state is indicative of the tremendous shift in self-understanding that occurs with disenchantment.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 553.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 539.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 303.



This is not to say that disenchantment means that the outside world can no longer affect us, or that disengagement is easily achieved. Tragedies and natural disasters can still upend our lives, we can still be heartbroken or elated or terrified. Certain places or objects continue to hold a certain meaning to us. But we now recognize that this meaning is not inherent. We assign it based on certain memories or associations. Certain sites or objects, such as family heirlooms or childhood homes, may fill us with sadness, or nostalgia, or joy, but this is not due to lingering spirits or energies. It is because it holds a certain place our minds, such that these feelings are evoked, but not caused by, a specific object or place. The meaning is based on our associations, not located in the things in themselves.

According to Taylor, a new discontent with the meaning provided by the buffered identity gave rise to new configurations that need not leave space for transcendence but which nonetheless attempted to counter the gaps produced by the exclusive humanist outlook. The criticisms of exclusive humanism are familiar. It elevated the mind at the expense of the body, reason at the expense of feeling. Its emphasis on equality precluded the possibility of heroism. The value it places on human life neglects the reality of death. Romanticism, Marxism, fascism, existentialism, can all be viewed as attempts to combat the inadequacies of Enlightenment exclusive humanism that more or less stay confined to the immanent frame. Taylor asserts that World War I was a key turning point in the popular conception of exclusive humanism and Enlightenment rationality. Confidence in humanity's capacities was severely shaken, and the barbarity of the war seemed to run counter to the concept of an enlightened civilization. At this point, many turned

to more extreme ideologies, on the right and left of the political spectrum, the horrific consequences of which would shape the remainder of the century. Natural human morality could be conceived in many different ways. For some, pure self-interest could motivate ethical actions if society was correctly constructed. Others went further to say that people are essentially good but are forced to act badly if in the wrong circumstances.

The buffered identity is a symptom of modernity in general, not just of secularism or exclusive humanism. Consequently, modern forms of religion are little more successful at combatting it, though Taylor seems to believe that an acceptance of the transcendence puts them at something of an advantage. Immanent senses of fullness are often more tenuous, more easily questioned. Nonetheless, the multiplicity of forms of religiosity, and the frequency of conversion demonstrate that religion's claim over meaning is not much stronger. What is certain, for Taylor at least, is that this crisis of meaning is an entirely new and entirely modern predicament.

Without any link to the transcendent, characteristic of the closed immanent frame, one's sense of meaning is doubly tenuous, as it no longer carries any connection to something higher than the self. In a secular age, meaning acquires a new fragility. Our valuations are inherently precarious, as they rest not on some inherent meaning but rather on our own experiences, feelings, and judgments.

Taylor concedes that such sentiments are not universally shared. Some may live out their lives with little concern for a larger purpose, except perhaps in moments of exceptional tragedy or hardship. Nonetheless, this "anguish about

meaning is quintessentially modern.”<sup>54</sup> Here, Taylor returns to his central aim, to describe the conditions of belief in the modern age. Though the extent to which people still believe in God is still contestable, depending on the definition of religion or methods of measurement relied upon, that a significant change has occurred is indisputable. Even in countries such as the United States where most citizens profess a high degree of religiosity, the possibility of living without an awareness of other options is nonexistent. As in other theories of secularization, pluralism is crucial in weakening the hold of religious authority. Any particular individual may be an avid churchgoer, but chances are her neighbors, coworkers, friends or family members may not be.

Taylor highlights three “malaises of immanence”: (1) “the sense of the fragility of meaning, the search for overarching significance,” (2) “the felt flatness of our attempts to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives,” and (3) “the utter flatness, emptiness of the ordinary.”<sup>55</sup> Meaning, however defined, is easily shaken over the course of one’s lifetime. Births, deaths, and marriages may be observed through religious rights and rituals, but these moments have in many cases lost any tangible connection to the transcendent. And everyday life is carried on without the same sense of purpose. Religious believers are not immune to these concerns. In an age of pluralism, they too are faced daily with alternate belief systems, other possibilities which deeply disturb any sense of certainty. In the modern era, “naiveté is now unavailable to anyone, believer or unbeliever alike.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 399.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 21.

This looming threat of meaninglessness is also what leads many to define religion's primary function as providing meaning and value to our lives. Taylor considers this characterization inadequate: "in taking this stance, they absolutize the modern predicament, as though the view from here were the final truth on things."<sup>57</sup> The notion that religion's main purpose is to supply meaning is imaginable only in an era when meaning (or lack thereof) has become a great cause for concern. Taylor suggests that the problem of meaning in the immanent frame can be encapsulated "in the words of a famous song by Peggy Lee: 'Is that all there is?'"<sup>58</sup>

Clearly, the issue of meaning in a secular world is of profound interest to Taylor. In "The Mundane in the Neoliberal Era," Simon During claims that "For all its efforts to avoid conservative melancholy and to resist appeals for the reanimation of past social forms, Taylor's argument is based on nostalgia for a lost fullness and coherence."<sup>59</sup> Taylor employs "fullness" "as something like a category term to capture the very different ways in which each of us...sees like as capable of something fuller, higher, more genuine, more authentic, more intense...form."<sup>60</sup> A place of fullness is also the place where we connect most profoundly with a sense of ultimate meaning. Although many readers have interpreted Taylor's notion of fullness as an exclusively religious concept, Taylor clarifies in a later essay that, in his view, the experience of fullness is not limited to those who accept some form of the transcendent. Rather, it is "a human universal."<sup>61</sup> Though this claim may invite its own criticisms, it is important to note that Taylor does emphasize that a

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 718.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 311

<sup>59</sup> During, "Completing Secularism," 110

<sup>60</sup> Charles Taylor, "Disenchantment—Reenchantment," 315

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 316

meaningful life is reserved exclusively for believers. Nonetheless, the buffered self does invite a new and more penetrating sense of the “fragility of meaning,” one which was not possible in an enchanted world. Whatever beliefs we settle on, whether or not they involve an affirmation of the transcendent, “a crucial feature of the malaise of immanence is the sense that all these answers are fragile, or uncertain; that a moment may come, where we no longer feel that our chosen path is compelling, or cannot justify it to ourselves or others.”<sup>62</sup>

Although Taylor never advocates a return to a previous way of life (and expresses doubt that this would even be possible), for Taylor, disenchantment amounts to the “loss of a certain sensibility, which is really an impoverishment (as against simply the shedding of irrational feelings).”<sup>63</sup> An entire way of knowing and living in the world is no longer accessible to us.

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<sup>62</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 308

<sup>63</sup> Taylor, “Afterword,” 304

## Chapter 3: Re-Enchantment

Taylor does not propose that we can so easily separate modern westerners into believers and unbelievers, atheists and theists, religious and exclusive humanists, open and closed frames. On the contrary, the modern “conditions of belief” serve to set off a sort of spiritual “supernova.” The problem of meaning gives rise to a multitude of creative solutions, some more successful than others. The impossibility of settling upon a universally satisfactory worldview leads to the creation of more and more forms of belief and unbelief. Taylor even cites certain movements that have attempted a sort of “re-enchantment.”<sup>64</sup>

In recent decades, scholars have begun to question the previously uncontested link between disenchantment and modernity, suggesting that the possibility of enchantment still exists, albeit often in new, modernized forms.<sup>65</sup> Scholars cite the popularity of New Age spirituality and Eastern religious beliefs and practices as evidence for the persistence or reemergence of enchantment in modernity.<sup>66</sup> Rather than looking to institutionalized religion as the manufacturer of enchantment, they suggest a turn towards mystical practices and popular spirituality as a novel source of enchantment in modernity. The endeavor to discover new modes

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<sup>64</sup> Taylor, “Recovering the Sacred.”

<sup>65</sup> Saler, “Modernity and Enchantment.”

<sup>66</sup> Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*; Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*

of enchantment in the secular world is not unconnected to Taylor's discussion of locating meaning in immanence.

In a survey on the scholarship on enchantment and modernity, Michael Saler notes that the conceptualization of the relationship between the two has shifted over the past few decades, from "either/or" approach to "both/and." Whereas many 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars viewed the interaction between enchantment and modernity as either binary or dialectical, in recent years, due primarily to the rise of postmodern and postcolonial studies, "the long-accepted discourses of modernity and enchantment have also been interrogated."<sup>67</sup>

In "Enchantment and Disenchantment in Modernity," William H. Swatos examines the concept of "religion" in sociology and its value in an increasingly secularized world. Rather than concluding that religion will cease to be a helpful category as religious institutions decline, Swatos suggests that a revision of the traditional definition of religion may be necessary if social scientists are to continue to study religious beliefs and practices in society. According to Swatos, in the modern West "[r]eligion has been transformed from a normative set of beliefs and practices shaping a moral community into a personal relationship to a suprahuman power."<sup>68</sup> As religion becomes more subjective, it will become more difficult to study it by looking at church memberships and the claims of religious institutions. Swatos argues that new forms of enchantment, though more individualized, are no less of a social force, and thus of no less interest as objects of study in the social sciences. According to Swatos, the failure to create a new definition of religion more

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<sup>67</sup> Saler, "Modernity and Enchantment," 700.

<sup>68</sup> Swatos, "Enchantment and Disenchantment in Modernity," 333.

appropriate for the modern era has resulted in the neglect of significant and influential forms of religiosity.

In *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Christopher Partridge contends that, despite a continuing insistence among some scholars that modernity has functioned to disenchant and secularize the West, spirituality is still widespread, even in the most thoroughly “secularized” parts of the world. He contests the notion that New Age religions and alternative spiritualities are inherently superficial, and thus unworthy as a subject of serious study and too insignificant to provide any substantial counter-evidence to the disenchantment narrative. Although he admits that it is difficult to measure the degree of participation in such movements, he argues that they must be taken seriously as a challenge to the standard secularization theory. Even in Western Europe, where it is generally accepted that secularization has succeeded, there is growing evidence of novel types of religiosity. According to Partridge, while institutional religions have indeed lost much of their force, “cracks are appearing in the disenchanted landscape and new forms of *significant* spiritual life are emerging.”<sup>69</sup> The modern era has not seen simply a decline in, but also a transformation of spiritual beliefs and practices in the West.

## Enchanted Materialism

Self-proclaimed “secularists” have tackled the question of meaning in a variety of ways, and there seems to be no shortage of answers. Atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists note interpersonal relationships, self-actualization, humanitarian work, and a general awe in the face of the material universe as just a

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<sup>69</sup> Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, 43.



few of the potential sources of meaning in a secular world. In the wake of the “New Atheists”’ aggressive rejection of faith, other authors have shifted to a more positive approach, focusing less on negating religion and more on affirming the robust foundation for morality, happiness, and meaning to be found in modern secularism.

In his review of a collection of essays aptly titled *The Joy of Secularism*, writer and literary critic James Wood notes that although the book is largely praiseworthy, “tormented metaphysical questions remain, and cannot be answered by secularism any more effectively than religion.”<sup>70</sup> Wood’s review underscores the difficulties faced by secularists in portraying a positive picture of unbelief, rather than one constructed as an answer to religion’s supposed failings. From much atheist and secular literature, one gets the sense that in the minds of the authors the best thing about secularism is, quite simply, that it is not religion. In his introduction to *The Joy of Secularism*, George Levine suggests that the chief concern of the book is to illustrate that “there are ways in which the secular world can be experienced as ‘enchanted’ and remain absolutely of this time, of this place.”<sup>71</sup>

In *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, philosopher Jane Bennett addresses the possibility of secular enchantment, arguing that “[t]he disenchantment tale figures nonhuman nature as more or less inert ‘matter’; it construes the West as a radical break from other cultures; and it depicts the modern self as predisposed towards rationalism, skepticism, and the problem of meaninglessness.”<sup>72</sup> Bennett credits this view for the shortcomings of many secular philosophies, which tend to deemphasize our attachment to the natural world in favor of an autonomous, rational self. Bennett

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<sup>70</sup> Wood, “Is That All There Is?”

<sup>71</sup> George Levine, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>72</sup> Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 7.

does not claim that people no longer experience enchantment. Our tales of disenchantment are not necessarily an accurate account of how we live in the world.

For Bennett, disenchantment essentially amounts to depriving experience of any sort of wonder, preventing us from being attached to the natural world and perhaps to each other. Whether disenchantment is lamented or celebrated, the traditional narrative carries with it certain risks: the loss of meaning, exemplified by Weber, overconfidence in our ability to master and exploit the natural world and its resources, and nihilism. In short, the story of disenchantment has significant moral implications. Bennett seeks above all to combat these perils with her alter-tale, one in which meaning can be experienced immanently, in which the material world is alive and full of mysterious forces. Thus, Bennett attempts to relate an “alter-tale” to counter the traditional accounts of disenchantment, one in which moments of wonder and experiences of uncanniness are still possible in a material universe. Though Bennett devotes a chapter to common stories of disenchantment and their implications, she generally ignores the other aspects of secularization, as well as disenchantment theories in their more complex forms. The assumption is that, enchanted or not, we are living in a material universe, one without God or inherent purpose. Secularization has already occurred; our present task is to demonstrate how secularity can nonetheless be meaningful. Bennett presupposes Taylor’s “immanent frame,” and her frame is decidedly “closed.” Her book is written, for the most part, for a secular audience, not to offer an alternate account of the process of secularization or to contest the notion of materialism but to suggest that enchantment and meaning are nonetheless possible.

In this sense, Bennett neglects to address a key facet of Taylor's conception of disenchantment: that it is entirely possible to be religious in a disenchanted world. She notes that "the disenchantment tale does reserve a space for divine enchantment"<sup>73</sup> but, in Taylor's account, in the modern West, we all live in a disenchanted world, as buffered selves. The question is rather whether or not we remain open to the transcendent. Though he retains the enchantment/disenchantment dichotomy in his account of secularization, Taylor's definition differs substantially from those offered in Bennett's various "disenchantment tales." Taylor never suggests that life in a disenchanted or secular world is meaningless, or that there is no wonder to be found in immanence, even for those whose frame is tightly closed. Instead, the *location* of meaning has shifted, from the world or cosmos to individual human minds. Even where he seems skeptical that exclusive humanism can provide the same degree of fullness as religious belief, Taylor concedes that secular thinkers have indeed found meaning in a material universe. This is not to say that he is entirely convinced of secular humanist conceptions of meaning. But he never dismisses them as impossible or false.

Thus Bennett's definition of enchantment diverges from Taylor's considerably in various ways. The notion that we can experience moments of wonder in the modern world is hardly revelatory. Bennett suggests that "enchantment never really left the world but only changed its forms."<sup>74</sup> Arguing against what she views as traditional tails of modern disenchantment, expressed and elaborated by authors such as Max Weber, Hans Blumenburg, and Simon Critchley,

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 91.

Bennett presents a theory of “enchanted materialism,” contending that enchantment can be experienced even in a world that is not “designed, or predisposed towards human happiness, or expressive of intrinsic purpose or meaning.”<sup>75</sup> For Bennett, enchantment can be elicited by literature, technology, physics, and popular culture.

Even the most vehement secularists generally accept the notion that inhabitants of a modern, secular world can still experience moments of awe and wonder. That collective meaning has become fragmented in modernity is hardly debated, even by those who suggest a version of “modern enchantment.” Bennett’s proposal does not involve breaking down the boundaries of Taylor’s buffered self. She may identify novel sites of wonder, but her “alter tale” retains the assumption that meaning is to be found in the mind.

Another shortcoming of Bennett’s conception of enchantment is that she for the most part neglects to address the more negative aspects of enchantment. The magic of the enchanted world was not all good. In fact, according to Taylor, belief in God was so necessary in part because He served to protect people from evil forces. One of the key characteristics of the porous self is that it is extremely *vulnerable* to external forces, good and bad. Though Bennett allows that “fear...also plays a role in enchantment,” it also “cannot dominate if enchantment is to be.”<sup>76</sup> For Taylor, however, enchantment could (and inevitable did) involve moments of overwhelming fear in the face of these magical forces. Taylor, too, however, at times downplays these more negative aspects of enchantment. The Christian God could not, after all, ensure immunity to the influence of or penetration by evil spirits.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 5.

Bennett's conception of enchantment is somewhat analogous to Taylor's fullness (she even uses the term in her definition of it). Bennett's emphasis on affective attachment could be related to the possibility of disengagement. It seems that, for Bennett, this possibility is problematic, to the extent that it can function to sever the link between ourselves and the world. Disengagement is encouraged by disenchantment stories, which suggest a universe devoid of meaning. Thus, Bennett encourages a reengagement, and a recognition of value outside of ourselves.

One reviewer of Bennett's book highlights what I believe is one of the key distinctions Taylor seeks to make in his discussion of disenchantment:

One interpretation of enchantment would be that it is grounded in a subjective human response to the world; it is a possible aspect of human experience of the world...An alternative would be to claim that the world *is* enchanted—that enchantment is a characteristic in the world independent of the human experience of it.<sup>77</sup>

Ultimately, the reviewer concludes that Bennett has only presented evidence for the former, though she at times seems to endorse the latter. Yet “disenchantment” in Taylor's sense doesn't necessarily preclude the possibility of individual enchantment in the more general sense of the word. As the aforementioned secularists point out, we can still be “enchanted” by the world around us, even if it is in itself devoid of any inherent purpose or meaning. Apprehensive of the consequences of disattachment, Bennett tackles the problem of meaning in the immanent frame, but in doing so she presents instances in which we might *perceive* of the world as meaningful, rather than locating value intrinsic to it.

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<sup>77</sup> Bates, “The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics // Reviews // Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews // University of Notre Dame.”

This distinction is significant in distinguishing between Bennett and Kripal's respective aims. Bennett's enchantment is based on the perception and reaction of the self. It is entirely dependent on how we choose to experience the world around us. In Kripal's thought, choice plays an equally significant but fundamentally different role. While we may "choose" to approach the world as disenchanted, effectively erasing the paranormal from the Western consciousness, it will continue to make unsolicited appearances, simply by virtue of the fact that, in Kripal's words, "it happens." The incontestable persistence of the paranormal in popular culture betrays our ongoing fascination with these phenomena, even as we are informed by the reigning Western ethos that they are not worth our attention.

Kripal differs notably from Bennett in that fear at times overwhelms any positive aspects of his version of enchantment. Not all of the experiences that Kripal describes are positive. Some are harmful, mentally and even physically. The subjects of alien encounters at times suffer the effects of radiation poisoning. Visits from the deceased can be comforting or frightening. There are healings, but there is also injury and even death, ecstasy but also terror.

I would like to argue that Kripal and Taylor share roughly the same definition of meaning. That is, when Kripal deems paranormal events "meaningful," he is suggesting their relevance to a greater cosmic purpose that has bearing on human life. The study of the paranormal is significant not just to the field of religious studies but also to our search for "fullness" in general. To Peggy Lee's question, "Is that all there is?" Kripal's answer would be a resounding "No." They are, at least in some sense, physical events, but also events that convey meaning. It is

this meaning, above all else, that seems to interest Kripal. In ignoring the paranormal, we do not simply overlook anomalous physical or mental events, we miss the meaning behind them as well.

Asserting the value of paranormal phenomena contests the discourse of disenchantment in a way that Bennett's "enchanted materialism" and other secularist formations cannot: it is not a matter of approaching the world in a new way, but a matter of shifting our attention to what was always there, even when we stopped looking for it.

## Chapter 4: The Paranormal

### Study and Stigma

From the infamous collective suicide of Heaven's Gate in 1997 to allegations of abuse and corruption within the Church of Scientology, belief in UFOs and alien abduction occupy the territory of some of the more bizarre and horrific modern religious movements. Too much interest in the paranormal seems to indicate pathology. The people who devote their time to this sort of thing are strange, even dangerous, occupying the margins of society. Mainstream scientists and skeptics often label the paranormal as "pseudoscience:" "claims presented so that they appear [to be] scientific even though they lack supporting evidence and plausibility."<sup>78</sup> A report published by the National Science Foundation associates belief in the paranormal with scientific illiteracy, "trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality," an "absence of critical thinking skills," and "false hopes and unrealistic expectations,"<sup>79</sup> among other things. This government-sponsored admonition of believers in the paranormal echoes the New Atheists' condemnation of religious believers. The NSF report ultimately blames television and other media for the ubiquity of paranormal beliefs, suggesting that TV networks add disclaimers to shows like *The X-Files* to

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<sup>78</sup> Shermer. *Why People Believe Weird Things*, 33.

<sup>79</sup> National Science Board, *Science & Engineering Indicators – 2000*. Arlington, VA: National Science Foundation, 2000, (8-31).



avoid misleading the public. The authors of the report also note that women are more likely than men to believe in paranormal phenomena (but men tend to be more drawn to UFOs and cryptids<sup>80</sup>). The report seems to imply that no intelligent person in his or her right mind could believe in this kind of thing.

This common conception of believers of the paranormal evidently influences the way in which believing academics present themselves and their subjects. Even the SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) Institute, which maintains that there is currently no evidence that aliens have made contact with Earth but remains optimistic that intelligent life could be proven to exist, warns scientists that those “who choose to participate should be aware of the giggle factor and the risks of over-identification with the SETI cause.”<sup>81</sup> While many scientists admit the possibility of other intelligent life in the universe, excessive enthusiasm for anything associated with the paranormal inevitably evokes incredulity. If religious studies scholars are reluctant to group paranormal phenomena with the category of religion, Taylor’s subtraction theorists appear to be up to the task. The charges levied at believers in the paranormal are almost identical to indictments of religious believers. Their experiences are psychologized, pathologized, dissected and rejected.

According to Taylor, the rejection of the enchanted world is as much an ethical stance as an epistemological one. Belief is associated with childishness, fear of the unknown, cowardice in the face of an uncaring universe: “We need to stand up like men, and face reality.”<sup>82</sup> The skeptical mentality Kripal seeks to combat affirms

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<sup>80</sup> Legendary creatures whose existence is unconfirmed, e.g. the Loch Ness Monster, Sasquatch, the Yeti

<sup>81</sup> Harrison, “Overcoming the Image of Little Green Men,” 1.

<sup>82</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 561.

the traditional subtraction story: science has occluded the possibility of the existence of the supernatural and the paranormal. The remaining believers are simply engaged in wishful thinking. For Taylor, “[t]he crucial idea is that the scientific-epistemic part of it is completely self-supporting.”<sup>83</sup> That is, a rational person will be led to accept this worldview through reason alone, prior to any ethical commitments. The exclusive humanistic worldview is self-evident, and its appeal is in no need of justification. Instead, what needs to be accounted for is the persistence of religious beliefs in spite of the overwhelming body of evidence against it. Explanations range from humanities’ desire for meaning and purpose, our fear of the unknown, our fear of death, our need for authority or comfort or rules, or simply our natural gullibility, among other things. According to Taylor, “[t]he convert to the new ethics has learned to mistrust some of his own deepest instincts, and in particular those which draw him to religious belief.”<sup>84</sup>

The scholars discussed in this chapter paint a different picture. Here, it is the skeptics, the hardline secularists, who fail to step up and face reality. They withdraw to the comfort and certainty of a knowable material universe rather than confronting the possibility that the long established limits of science and modernity may need to be redrawn. Kripal, Mack, and Mayer, on the other hand, often present themselves as daring to step outside conventional boundaries in order to discover some deeper, and perhaps more frightening reality.

Kripal, Mack, and Mayer often use science as a means of differentiating their object of study from other forms of popular spirituality or magical practices. The

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 562.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 563.

emphasis on empirical documentation of paranormal phenomena is a way of shifting them from the realm of belief to that of reality. While some hope to explain these mysterious occurrences by strictly scientific methods, thus separating them from the supernatural altogether, the scholars I focus on see modern science as one of many resources in exploring the paranormal. They draw on the explanatory powers of scientific inquiry but are also careful to note its limits.

Like other critics of secularization, paranormal researchers often display an obvious ambivalence to the value of modern science. Towards the end of *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor raises another concern about secularization and the rise of scientific materialism: reductionism. Scientific laws seem to have eliminated the magic that once permeated the natural world. With the advances of fields such as neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, the self, once the remaining source and arbiter of meaning is also at risk. But at a time when human consciousness is subject to scientific reduction, the paranormal offers a respite to those who think that scientific materialism has gone too far.

This does not, however, mean that science is the enemy. If the paranormal does not abide by the rules of modern science, this is not because it is a figment of the imagination, but simply because such phenomena can't be captured by them (and even, in some cases, don't want to be). It may be enchantment, but it certainly isn't medieval. The appropriation of modern scientific method is used in part to counter skeptics' claims that interest in the paranormal is simply a regression to "primitive" supernaturalism. Rigorous documentation and classification serve to supply empirical evidence for these elusive phenomena.

Investigators of the paranormal often employ contemporary terminology from psychology to frame psychical events as interactions between consciousness and the physical. As Kripal states, “it is clear that such events cannot be understood without reference to consciousness *and* the material world.”<sup>85</sup> But Kripal, Mack, and Mayer concede that the language of inner/outer worlds cannot fully capture paranormal phenomena. Our conventional conceptions of such boundaries are more often a hindrance, rather than a tool, for understanding the paranormal.

The paranormal’s relationship with science is doubly complicated by disagreement among researchers. Some still hope for an entirely materialistic explanation for UFO sightings and alien abductions. According to these theories, UFO and abduction phenomena would be entirely compatible with the known laws of the physical universe. Their existence is unproven not because they are unknowable by modern science but because they are either actively being covered up or simply haven’t been adequately investigated. When UFO sightings entered public consciousness in the mid-twentieth century, they were generally assumed to be a material phenomenon, subject to scientific laws. But when various government-sponsored projects designed to study UFOs provided little empirical evidence for their reality, ufologists shifted to more religious or spiritual explanations.<sup>86</sup>

Kripal, like Taylor, counters the traditional subtraction story, though in a very different way. Rather than adhering to the common conception that modern science has contributed to the “elimination of magic” by providing explanations for previously mysterious phenomena and superior methods of manipulating the natural

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<sup>85</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 23.

<sup>86</sup> Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge*, 105.

world, he contends that scientific disciplines function to obscure occurrences that fail to fit neatly into their predetermined framework. In a sense, magic is eliminated not because it has been disproven but because it has been actively ignored. Science had the potential to develop novel ways of articulating this enchantment, of discovering and illuminating it. Yet modernization and secularization served simultaneously to allow the formulation of new explanations of these occurrences and to deny their existence altogether.

The weakening of the Church's control over Western European intellectual and scientific interests promised new opportunities for exploring previously censured phenomena. Unfortunately, the climate of scientific materialism would prove just as dogmatic as its religious predecessor. In some ways it was an improvement—after all, there are no stories of eminent modern scientists burning psychics at the stake—but in another sense, it drove society even further away from uncovering the paranormal. Magic was no longer feared or condemned; it was completely rejected.

Kripal asserts throughout that, regardless of which specific interpretation one adheres to, one cannot deny that these events, in one way or another, did in fact “happen.” If paranormal phenomena are purely psychological, or understandable by way of modern science, then they do not conflict with Taylor's definition of disenchantment. But Kripal joins other contemporary authors in asserting that these phenomena cannot be understood or explained by scientific means alone. This is not to say, however, that they aren't real.

Of course, this modern enchantment does not correspond entirely to Taylor's model. It's difficult to imagine a re-enchantment that wouldn't fall into the category of religious experience, since even if a particular individual or group lived conceived of themselves as living in an enchanted world, the greater part of society would not. In this case I do not take the phrase "enchanted world" to signify that it is universally accepted. Clearly, believers in the paranormal face far more obstacles to their belief than a medieval Christian. Their acceptance of the existence of the paranormal cannot be "naïve," in Taylor's words, because they are frequently encounter alternative explanations. Although it is in part defined by an adherence to or rejection of certain truth claims, it also involves a disruption of the inner/outer distinction so central to disenchantment.

### Scholars of the Paranormal: Mack, Mayer, Kripal

John E. Mack, a Harvard professor and psychiatrist, challenged skeptics and mainstream scientists with his research on alien abduction in the 1990s. Prior to his investigations, Mack was a materialist, for whom "[s]pirituality was a vaguely pleasant but unrealistic concept."<sup>87</sup> He dismissed religious belief as an illusion, a product of the human mind. But his investigation into abduction phenomena gradually challenged his long-held convictions. A now-prominent researcher of psychopathology, Mack attempted to assimilate the claims of abductees with his clinical understanding of the human mind, to no avail.

Mack eventually came to a conclusion that challenged his materialistic worldview and troubled other members of the psychiatric community: the

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<sup>87</sup> Mack, *Passport to the Cosmos*, 4.

experiences he was studying were not entirely psychological. But they weren't purely physical, either. In the introduction to his second book on alien abduction, Mack suggests that in order to understand the phenomena in question, investigators will need to adjust their notion of reality, which "[requires] that for something to be real, its behavior must be consistent with the laws of nature we already know, and it should yield its secrets to a way of knowing that relies primarily on the five senses, rational analysis, and a virtually complete separation of subject and object, of the explorer and what is being explored."<sup>88</sup> Mack's unusual approach sparked an enquiry into his work by a committee assembled by Harvard Medical School. A colleague advised him "that I would not have gotten into trouble if I had not suggested in the book that my findings may require a change in our view of reality rather than saying that I had found a new psychiatric syndrome whose cause had not yet been established."<sup>89</sup> This statement encapsulates the paradox faced by many scholars of the paranormal: their findings themselves are acceptable only if they can be integrated into existing paradigms. Mack could either go against his better judgment and fabricate a new mental condition or risk both career and reputation in pursuit of his controversial subject matter.

Mack's status as a psychiatrist brought ethical questions into play as well. After all, if his patients were indeed suffering from some unnamed mental disorder, wouldn't his uncritical acceptance of their claims only intensify their delusions? Yet many insisted that their sessions with Mack were extremely beneficial. If anything,

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, 6.

they were comforted by the fact that someone was willing to listen without jumping to conclusions or pathologizing their experiences.

Mack opens his book with the caveat that he is not “seeking to establish the reality of alien abduction phenomena.” That is, the literal, physical events described in many abduction reports may not (and probably don’t) correspond to material reality. Though his central focus is abductees, Mack sees a connection between alien encounters and other paranormal phenomena, all of which “seem to violate the barrier, so sacred to the rationalist mind, between forces of the unseen world and the material realm.”<sup>90</sup>

There is evidence to substantiate the abductees’ claims that alien visitors are not just figments of the imagination, but many of their accounts violate conventional conceptions of what is possible in material reality. Aliens infringe upon the division between mental and physical. They may leave physical traces in the form of

UFO photographs, radar records, missing persons and pregnancies following abductions, reported observations of strange beings, burned patches of earth where UFOs presumably landed, bodily lesions and so-called implants removed from experiencers’ bodies after abductions.<sup>91</sup>

Yet these alien entities often refuse to abide by physical laws. Spacecrafts disappear into thin air and abductees are levitated through walls and ceilings. The abductee’s sense of time can be severely altered, such that minutes seem like hours or vice versa. Even ufologists disagree over what constitutes legitimate empirical evidence.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 9.



Although Mack suggests that a search for physical evidence may someday prove to be worthwhile, interviews with various abductees were more convincing to him than any material proof:

It is not just the experiencers' conviction that what they have undergone is in some way real that has made me take them seriously. The richly detailed narratives they provide, the appropriate surprise, the convincing incredulity, and above all the genuine distress or other feelings they report...all these elements combined can give any witness the sense that something powerful has happened to these individuals, however impossible it may seem from the standpoint of our traditional worldview.<sup>92</sup>

Mack describes the abductees' experiences as "ontological shock." Taking paranormal events seriously often comes at the cost of one's long-held and comfortable worldview. Subsequently, many experiencers find themselves on the outside of mainstream society. Alien abductions and other paranormal experiences can be—for lack of a better word—alienating.

The similarities he observed between the descriptions of abductees also factored into Mack's conviction that abductions could not be entirely subjective, psychological phenomena. The narratives he recorded possessed several common elements. Abductees report intense lights, strange energies and vibrations, and time lapses. Many report undergoing medical procedures, often associated with reproductive organs. It is not uncommon for abductees to testify to having sexual intercourse with one or more alien beings. Some even meet hybrid children in a later abduction.

In her book *Extraordinary Knowing*, Psychoanalyst and Professor at UC Berkeley Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer describes her own encounter with the paranormal,

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 50.

which prompted an extensive exploration of psychic phenomena. After her 11 year old daughter's harp was stolen, Mayer contacted the police, countless instrument dealers, and the American Harp Society in her attempt to retrieve it. When nothing worked, her friend suggested she contact a dowser. After her failed efforts, "half-embarrassed but desperate,"<sup>93</sup> she called Harold McCoy, president of the American Society of Dowsers, for help. From his home in Arkansas, McCoy divined the harp's location in Oakland, CA, down to the house, with only a street map for guidance. Mayer spent several months haunted by the incident, but convinced that a rational explanation would come to her. Eventually, however, "I had to face the fact that my notions of space, time, reality, and the nature of the human mind were stunningly inadequate."<sup>94</sup> The questions sparked by "the harp that came back" would occupy her for the next 15 years. She came to discover that similar instances of "extraordinary knowing" were much more frequent than she initially thought.

In addition to accounts of her encounters with professional psychics (some were convincing, others less so), Mayer's book is interspersed with reports of "extraordinary knowing" from otherwise ordinary people. She tells the story of an accomplished neurosurgeon who is forced to give up teaching because he cannot explain to his students that his exceptionally high success rate is due to the fact that a bright light shines from his patients' heads when it's time to operate. Another physician could *smell* her patients' conditions. Though confident in her intuitions, when the smell led her to a different opinion than that of her superiors, there was little she could do to convince them otherwise—"What could I say—I got a

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<sup>93</sup> Mayer, *Extraordinary Knowing*, 2.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

*smell?*”<sup>95</sup> In another instance colleague informed Mayer of an unpublished paper by psychiatrist Robert J. Stoller documenting his research on telepathic dreams. This subject was of personal interest to Stoller: beginning in 1960, several of his patients related dreams that were strikingly similar to events happening in his everyday life. In the introduction to his paper (published ten years after his death by Mayer in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* in 2001), Stoller writes, “I am not intrigued with the subject of telepathy nor a devotee of that literature, usually feeling the reports I chance upon to be foolish or fraud” yet “the data—seemingly telepathic dreams—appear more than coincidental.”<sup>96</sup> As a former critique of such claims, Stoller goes on to acknowledge will likely be grouped “with alleged seers, psychics, and the rest of that mostly disreputable crew who inhabit this strange land—not to mention the many delusional eccentrics who also claim telepathic and like powers.”<sup>97</sup> His mentor, though convinced by Stoller’s findings, avowed that “if Stoller valued his professional future, he would put the paper away in a drawer and forget about it.”<sup>98</sup> Mayer emphasizes throughout that many of her subjects, especially those reluctant to risk their standing in the scientific community, were extremely hesitant to come forward with their abilities. Like Mack’s abductees, many were unwilling to give their names.

Mack and Mayer’s “conversion” narratives, their personal accounts of how they came to doubt their old worldview and embrace a new one, contain a number of parallels. Both initially approached paranormal phenomena with skepticism and a

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>96</sup> Mayer, “On “Telepathic Dreams?” 635.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Mayer, *Extraordinary Knowing*, 17.

decidedly materialist worldview. As far as their narratives indicate, they displayed no deep-seated longing for something more, no dissatisfaction with the notion of an entirely mechanistic universe or crippling fear in the face of death. Both, along with many of their subjects, describe their initial resistance to the possibility of a new reality. Mack and Mayer, along with Kripal, are just as careful in presenting their subjects. Mack takes pains to establish his abductees as credible witnesses, with no delusional tendencies, history of severe mental illness, or expectation of any tangible gain in compensation for sharing their experiences. Furthermore, they are presented as perfectly capable of distinguishing between fantasy and reality. Without this characteristic, their experiences wouldn't be so jarring.

The authors discussed here tend to subvert the secular-ethical narrative in their own conversion accounts. The “deepest instincts” which come to be distrusted are secular rather than religious in nature. For them, God, the afterlife, and the transcendent in general have long since been abandoned. Instead, it is the secular ethical outlook itself that has come to provide comfort and stability. Mayer likens her experience to “the loss of a child’s world.”<sup>99</sup>

Unlike Mack and Mayer, Kripal does little of his own data collection, focusing instead on how four different authors approached and theorized paranormal phenomena. Kripal notes that despite their detailed and methodical accounts of paranormal phenomena, all but one of his subjects are virtually unknown in the discipline of religious studies today. The exception is his first author, Frederic Myers, in part due to his influence on William James. All four approached the paranormal as a means to integrate supernatural subjects with contemporary science

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 264.

without explaining away the former. In doing so, they challenged the limits of scientific materialism and the boundary between self and world. Their differences and similarities also allow Kripal to do his own extensive theorizing on the subject of the paranormal, as well as modern manifestations of the sacred. For Kripal, meaning cannot be said to be wholly “in the mind,” projected into the physical world, as is typical of disenchantment. Meaning is in the world, and while many of us have grown adept at ignoring it, occasionally it may find us whether we like it or not.

Myers, as indicated by his background in the burgeoning field of psychology, dealt primarily with the properties of consciousness. Like William James, he suggested that certain individuals were predisposed to easy access to alternate states of consciousness than ordinary individuals. He also believed that extreme emotional states were more likely to elicit exceptional mental powers. Working in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Myers studied (and invented the concept of) telepathy, worked with mediums, sat in on séances, and wrote in depth on the afterlife. Drawing on the concepts of evolution, the electromagnetic spectrum, and contemporary psychology, he theorized extensively about the extraordinary powers of the human mind as well as the survival of consciousness after death.

Myers believed he lived in a time defined by the “radical break with the past that we have come to see as one of the essential features of modernity.”<sup>100</sup>

Exemplified by Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, published when Myers was in his late teens, the Western world was in Myers’ time facing provocative questions about religion, science, and humanity. According to Kripal, the psychical became a

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<sup>100</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 39.

subject of great interest in a time “when the universe was looking more and more indifferent to human concerns with each new discovery and every passing year.”<sup>101</sup> Thus, the discovery of evolutionary theory and the ensuing conflicts between science and religion, viewed by many as a key point on the path to secularism, also opened new possibilities for spirituality. Myers believed that “at least some mystical and occult events are both empirically real *and* entirely consistent with natural, though as yet unexplained, laws or patterns.”<sup>102</sup> Just as we can only perceive a small portion of the electromagnetic spectrum with our senses, Myers theorized that we ordinarily experience only a fraction of the possible range of consciousness.

Myers’ theorizing influenced subsequent work in the psychology of religion, including James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*. According to Ann Taves, “Myers’ theory of the subliminal self provided a new psychological framework for understanding a wide range of phenomena, including religious phenomena, without reducing them to epiphenomena of psychopathology or necessarily ruling out influences beyond the self.”<sup>103</sup> He established a basis from which to study religious and paranormal phenomena without reducing them to psychology.

Psychical research, though faced with its share of skeptics, enjoyed more credibility in the Myers’ time than it does today. More renowned figures in religious studies and psychology such as William James and Carl Jung entertained the same ideas, but left a more lasting impact in their field. In 1882, Myers, along with colleagues at Cambridge University, founded the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR), an organization dedicated to documenting and studying a wide

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>103</sup> Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 258.

array of psychical phenomena. James later served as president of the American chapter of the SPR. Myers and his peers saw themselves as engaging in serious scientific inquiry, employing strict methodology in their research in order to distinguish between real and false psychical events. Rather than resorting to religious explanations of seemingly miraculous events, thinkers such as Myers utilized modern understandings of psychology and science in their investigations of the supernatural.

In some ways the entire field of psychology, even in its earlier and now outdated formations can be seen as a consequence of disenchantment. Articulating magic in the terms of psychology can be seen as the ultimate disenchantment or “demagification” of magic itself. What is fantastic, irrational, mysterious or meaningful is placed within the subject. In his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James defines religion as “*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*”<sup>104</sup> Here he presents a definition that emphasizes the individualistic, subjective aspects of religion. It is emblematic of the “psychologization” of religion that occurred around this time.<sup>105</sup> Nonetheless, James, who was strongly influenced by Myers work, though he disagreed with some of his more elaborate claims, also “sought to blur the modern Western dualism between the mental and the physical” to a certain extent. He was interested not simply the psychological component of religious experience, but also in the ways that psychical phenomena could influence material reality.

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<sup>104</sup> James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 31.

<sup>105</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 41.

Although psychical phenomena are often most easily studied in particularly exceptional individuals, the presence of such powers indicates a very different relationship between subjective and objective realities. Ultimately, understanding the paranormal isn't simply about harnessing the abilities of a few super-humans. It is about gaining a greater knowledge about the nature and meaning of humanity as a whole, as well as its relation to the cosmos. It should, and can only be, a collective enterprise, entailing a reconfiguration of our presumptions about the sacred and the scientific.

Charles Fort, Kripal's second subject, was a "collector of anomalies," less interested in the psychological aspects of the paranormal than discovering extraordinary events in ordinary places. For 25 years, Charles Fort searched through newspapers, from the present back to 1800, documenting bizarre events such as mysterious fires, frogs falling from the sky, cities appearing in the sky above a town in Ohio, stones falling slowly in the sky in France, 1942 and in Sumatra, 1903. Although the majority of these occurrences were forgotten shortly after they happened, Fort was convinced that they "signaled some larger, and perhaps literally cosmic, truth."<sup>106</sup>

With a familiar skepticism regarding the relationship between subject and object, "Fort denied in principle any stable distinction between fiction and reality."<sup>107</sup> And while Myers' psychic phenomena often required an exceptional individual or critical break from the everyday world, the events Fort recorded were witnessed by ordinary people, many of which were simply trying to live out their

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 98.



daily lives before frogs came falling from the sky. Fort was openly hostile to both institutional religion and modern science, both of which he believed erected rigid barriers determining what was and was not possible. And Fort, armed with tens of thousands of pages of evidence, sought to contradict the claims of both. At the beginning of *The Book of the Damned*, he purports to be presenting “a procession of data that science has excluded.”<sup>108</sup> He goes on to present his own unique and fantastic cosmology. For Fort, “[c]oincidences...are grounded in a deeper Oneness of which they are distant echoes.”<sup>109</sup> Just as Myers’ telepathy was viewed as evidence as of an underlying unified consciousness, Fort’s extraordinary events, while somewhat unremarkable when looked at individually, together signified a whole untapped cosmos of meaning.

Though Fort detailed an elaborate philosophy based on his findings, what is important in regards to enchantment is that he constructed a meaningful cosmos, one in which anomalous events, which taken separately could perhaps be explained (though unconvincingly to Fort) by scientific means, when combined, are far too strange to be considered coincidence. Or at least, coincidences are far less innocuous than we normally take them to be. Fort, like the preceding authors, opted for a radical reconceptualization of conventional boundaries; he did not “believe in any stable distinction between the imagined and the physical.”<sup>110</sup> The material/mental divide is challenged yet again.

Like Myers, Fort was convinced that he was living on the verge of a new era. But Charles Fort expressed markedly greater skepticism concerning what science

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 98.

could explain. Fort believed in a kind of historical relativism, in which certain modes of knowledge were privileged over others based on the intellectual trends of the time. He separated Western history into three “Dominants,” that is, three different systems of thought that functioned to determine what sorts of truths were acceptable, and what should be “damned.” The first Dominant was religion, the second, beginning around 1860, was science. According to Fort, “the first two Dominants work from the systemic principle of Exclusionism, that is, they must exclude data to survive as stable systems.”<sup>111</sup> Fort thought that both science and religion only function as convincingly unified systems by shutting out any data that contradict them. Though Fort saw the triumph of science over religion as a positive development, he carried many of the same reservations about both Dominants. Religious leaders resisted any scientific data that contradicted scripture, and the now reigning scientists shunned any examples of an occurrence that evaded explanation by purely scientific law, that is, exactly the occurrences Fort was documenting. The soon-approaching “New Dominant” would accept all of the data, even at the expense of consistency. In doing so, the third Dominant would exceed the limits previous ways of knowing, religious faith and scientific explanation.

Jacques Vallee, born in France at the beginning of World War II, has a similarly wide range of interests. An entrepreneur, computer scientist, science fiction writer, and covert military advisor with a Masters degree in astrophysics, Vallee borrows from all of these areas to develop his own unique philosophy, centered around UFOs. He had witnessed one himself as a teenager, and his fascination never wavered. Vallee’s career began at a time when UFO sightings were frequent, and the

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 113.

government was taking interest in this mysterious and alarming phenomenon. Vallee also contributed to a government sponsored program studying “remote viewing,” in which subjects could mentally picture places and objects from faraway. Researchers hoped to harness these abilities for the purposes of espionage. Science would open up new possibilities for investigation and understanding of these phenomena only to later dismiss them as illusory and impossible.

The common contemporary understanding of UFOs was possible only with new knowledge of technology, astronomy, the possibilities of space travel, and perhaps a little Cold War paranoia. While Vallee acknowledged this break with the past, he also searched for continuity. In *Passport to Magonia: From Folklore to Flying Saucers*, “Vallee effectively argues...that the modern flying saucer cannot be understood without taking into account the striking parallels that exist between the bizarre behavior of contemporary UFOs and the earlier appearances of various occult beings in the history of folklore, magic, witchcraft, and religion.”<sup>112</sup> In other words, the modern alien encounter is best understood in the context of the old enchanted world. As Vallee saw it, similar events had been occurring for centuries, perhaps even millennia. The angels and demons of medieval times were the extraterrestrials of the modern era: “UFOs have been active throughout human history, always appearing and acting in the cultural terms of the place and time” (Kripal, 170). He resists privileging either interpretation, though he entertains his own explanations. Rather than limiting his to the history of UFO sightings, Vallee expands his theorizing to a wide variety of paranormal phenomena, which he saw as interconnected. Vallee also “[s]eriously questions the usual psychologization of

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 156.

these experiences.”<sup>113</sup> This is not to say that they don’t have psychological components, but rather to suggest that their effects and meaning are not limited to the human mind.

Vallee observed that the UFO sightings were not limited to the modern era nor to the Western world. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, sightings were reported in the US, Europe, Iran, Latin America, the Soviet Union, and China. The Brazilian island of Colares was the location of a disturbing series of incidents, in which inhabitants observed flying saucers that emitted beams of light. Those struck by the beam all exhibited similar symptoms: they suffered from hair loss and wounds or bruises in the place where they were exposed. This modern form of enchantment thus shares at least three aspects of medieval magical enchantment. First, these events can be associated with lasting physical (rather than only psychological) effects. Secondly, the effects are not always positive. And finally, they can be collective experiences.

Though Vallee tries to stick to the ‘facts’ as much as possible, and generally resists resorting to unscientific speculations, he has some ideas of his own about where UFOs come from. Rather than alien beings from distant region of the universe, these mysterious interlopers may be human beings from the distant future, who have developed methods of visiting and manipulating their ancestors. Thus, such events have significant bearing on human life. His writings “strike at the very roots of the way we separate and divide our experience of the world into subjective appearances and objective realities, into ‘religion’ and ‘science.’”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 173.

Kripal's final "author of the impossible" is Bertrand Méheust, a French sociologist interested in a range of paranormal phenomena. He wrote comprehensive accounts of UFO sightings, the history of animal magnetism, and the life of a young 19<sup>th</sup> century medium. What sets Méheust apart from Kripal's other subjects is not his subject matter but his theories, as well as his use of sociology and critical theory in accounting for modern (mis)understandings of the paranormal. Echoing the preceding authors, Méheust suggests that the facts of history are established by culturally specific epistemologies. He argues that the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw an unprecedented suppression of paranormal and supernatural occurrences in favor of the now-dominant scientific materialism, contributing to the current atmosphere of unrelenting skepticism. Méheust is the only one of Kripal's subjects who has not personally witnessed the paranormal. Nonetheless, he presents an elaborate theory of the history of paranormal phenomena, and their eventual suppression under the guise of Western rationalism. Under this view, psychoanalysis and Freud's unconscious incorporated certain aspects of more impossible theories not because of sympathy towards them but in order to guard science against more fantastic aspects of the paranormal. What was seen by psychical researchers became a deep metaphysical well of mental abilities and supernormal powers, spanning across vast regions of time and space, became the human unconscious. But this amounted to an extremely limited understanding of human consciousness, which would only be restricted further in the decades to come. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, integrating more subdued understandings of the paranormal was a method of denying the more extraordinary ones. Thus, the field of psychoanalysis comes to

be *between* the two competing worldviews, acting as a buffer or stop zone between them.”<sup>115</sup> Méheust is “interested in the broad social processes and institutional structures, not to mention the outright cultural wars, that produce a sense of the real in any given place and time.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 223.

## Chapter 5: Interpretation and Explanation

### The Paranormal and the Sacred in the Study of Religion

Mack suggests that “Westerners constructed a universe in which the material or psychological, the seen and unseen realms, have been kept largely separate so that the physical world might be understood and mastered in its own right.”<sup>117</sup> This project facilitated the development of modern science and technology, but it also resulted in “the loss of the sense of the sacred, of a connection with the spaces or places of higher value.”<sup>118</sup> Here Mack articulates the basic outline of Weber’s notion of disenchantment. It is a narrative that is shared, to a certain extent, by both Taylor and Kripal. Kripal would likely agree with Mack that this practiced “disenchantment” has contributed to the suppression of the sacred in modern life, and, perhaps more importantly, in the study of religion. This stance has severely inhibited our ability to understand paranormal phenomena, even as they continue to present themselves in our supposedly rational, secular world. Kripal proposes that we “reimagine history (and hence ourselves) ‘outside the box’ and ‘off the page’ of what Max Weber so powerfully called the iron cage of modern rationalism, order, and routinization.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Mack, *Passport to the Cosmos*, 270.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 21.

In defining the paranormal as a manifestation of the “sacred,” Kripal joins a line of religious studies scholars, such as Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto, whose thinking has been thoroughly questioned in recent years, those who advocate for a *sui generis* definition of religion. Kripal explicitly connects his thought to Eliade’s theory of the sacred, suggesting that, while “the category has become taboo today...the subject of the paranormal invokes it again, and in full force.”<sup>120</sup> For Eliade, the field of the history of religion is “an autonomous discipline devoted to analyzing the common elements of the different religions and seeking to deduce the laws of their evolution, and especially to discover and define the origin and first form of religion.”<sup>121</sup> The task of a religious studies scholar is thus distinct from that of social scientists. Rather than focusing on social and historical concepts (although these do come into play), historians of religion are supposed to engage in a comparative project, determining what is common to all religions. For Eliade, “the sacred,” as well as human experiences of and interactions with it, is definitive of all religious belief and practice, across time and cultures. The project of the historian of religion is not to ignore cultural differences, but to find out the universal essence underlying them. The central claim is that religion is *sui generis*, autonomous, and cannot be fully captured by or reduced to nonreligious concepts. .

Kripal explicitly identifies with this line of thinking, and reveals a few apparent parallels with these thinkers. First, he believes that the paranormal as the sacred cannot be reduced to the social or historical context in which it appears. Second, he asserts, much like Otto, that “if you have not experienced the sacred (or

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>121</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 216.



the impossible), you are missing a very important key. It is not the only key. But it is most definitely a key.”<sup>122</sup> For Otto, the experience of the sacred, or the “numinous,” was “perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible.”<sup>123</sup> It cannot be adequately captured by language; the only way such a state can be understood is by experiencing it oneself. Kripal doesn’t venture as far as Otto, who later states that “whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no further”<sup>124</sup> but he does suggest that “If you have experienced the paranormal, then you know—well, you know that it is real, in the simple sense that *it happens*.”<sup>125</sup>

In asserting the importance of the sacred to the field of religious studies, Kripal places himself squarely in the midst of a longstanding debate within the discipline. If initially the concept of *sui generis* religion was meant to prevent scholars from reducing others’ meaningful experiences to byproducts of psychology or social and political forces, it is now regarded as doing a disservice to the very same religions it was supposed to rescue from the academy. According to the *sui generis* definition, religious beliefs and practices are an outgrowth of encounters with an irreducible “sacred.” Proponents of religion as *sui generis* contest the reduction of religion to social, cultural, political, or biological factors. The assumption is that any of these methods, and thus the social scientific study of religion in general, must ultimately leave something out. Not only that, but they ignore the most important and meaningful aspect of religion. Yet religious studies scholars as Russell T. McCutcheon argues that this approach in fact shields scholars

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<sup>122</sup> Jeffrey Kripal, Reading the paranormal writing us: An interview with Jeffrey Kripal.

<sup>123</sup> Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 7.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>125</sup> Jeffrey Kripal, Reading the paranormal writing us: An interview with Jeffrey Kripal.

from critique while negating the significance of the historical and political contexts from which religious beliefs and practices arise and elevating the sacred above the lived realities of the subjects who are supposed to experience it.<sup>126</sup>

Such a definition of religion overlooks the numerous social, historical, and political factors contributing to the formation of any one set of beliefs and practices at any given time. Talal Asad argues that “there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive properties.”<sup>127</sup>

One reviewer contests Kripal’s “assertion that the academic study of religion should primarily concern itself with the experience or interpretation of ‘the sacred’ in essentialist, ahistorical, universalist terms.”<sup>128</sup>

Although Kripal’s understandings of the paranormal and the sacred clearly draw from Otto, the paranormal and the numinous aren’t identical. The experience of the numinous is subjective, insofar as it is a highly personalized interaction. While it could interfere with the limits of the buffered self, it may also leave these boundaries entirely intact. The experience of the paranormal most often has both a subjective and objective component. That is to say, the paranormal is defined as such in part because the phenomenon has some (alleged) effect on the material world.

## Problems With Definition and Interpretation

Kripal does not present his readers with a comprehensive theory of the paranormal. What should these experiences be termed when they occur in societies

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<sup>126</sup> McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*

<sup>127</sup> Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 28.

<sup>128</sup> Goodwin, “Dis/enchantment.”

that deem them to be entirely “possible”? Or when the experiencer defines it as religious rather than paranormal? There is an ongoing discussion in the field of religious studies over the merits and problems of studying religious experience that may also be relevant to studying paranormal phenomena. Namely, in positing a “sacred” or numinous object of a subject’s experience, we neglect to recognize that “[t]he labels a person adopts in order to understand what is happening to him determines what he experiences.”<sup>129</sup>

In a chapter on alien abduction in his book *Why People Believe Weird Things*, Michael Shermer recounts his own abduction experience, which occurred in 1983 when he was participating in the Race Across America, a 3,000 mile transcontinental bicycle marathon. On a highway in rural Nebraska, 1,259 miles into the race, a group of potentially homicidal aliens coerced Shermer into their spacecraft. He came to ninety minutes later, back on his bicycle.

To Shermer, a science writer and Editor in Chief of *Skeptic* magazine, this experience serves to disprove alien abduction phenomena. Shortly after the incident he discovered deduced that the “aliens” were simply his crew, and the “spacecraft” was his motorhome. After days of strenuous physical activity and almost no sleep, Shermer had hallucinated an abduction, which, he admits, looked a lot like the ‘60s TV show *The Invaders*. In reality, his crew was just trying to get him to take a nap. For Shermer, who has practically made his career debunking paranormal phenomena, this incident suggests that the simplest (and therefore best) explanation for abductions is that “humans are experiencing altered states of consciousness and

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<sup>129</sup> Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 229.

interpreting them in the context of what is popular in our culture today, namely, space aliens.”<sup>130</sup>

While Shermer’s experience and subsequent interpretation does not disprove all others, it does raise some pertinent questions regarding the analysis of paranormal experiences, questions that Kripal does not adequately address. All of Kripal’s subjects (and Mack’s, and Mayer’s) interpreted their anomalous experiences as paranormal or supernatural. Shermer did not. What happens when individuals do not see their experiences as meaningful? What if they don’t think they happened at all? Shermer’s encounter with the paranormal is easier to explain naturalistically than others: he was clearly under severe mental and physical stress; the “aliens” didn’t look like extraterrestrials, they looked just like his crew; he quickly connected his hallucination to a TV show he was familiar with.

Nonetheless, one could presumably have an experience that exactly matched Mack’s criteria for an abduction narrative in terms of content and still interpret it psychologically. Are there objective criteria for determining which experiences are paranormal and which are not? Or does it simply depend on the subjects’ understanding? If we interpret the paranormal as something *real*, can we establish certain criteria for designating phenomena as such, independent of subjective interpretation? But this would amount in effect to engaging in the same apologetic reasoning as proponents of *sui generis* religion. Ann Taves suggests re-characterizing the problematic category of “religious experience” as “experiences deemed religious.”<sup>131</sup> Might it be more appropriate to discuss “experiences deemed

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<sup>130</sup> Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, 90.

<sup>131</sup> Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 14.

paranormal” in studying paranormal phenomena? If the Miracle of the Sun can be explained in terms of Roman Catholic theology, alien mythology, and (if inadequately) meteorology, where does that leave us?

Both Mack and Mayer cite a statement by Nobel Prize-winning biochemist Kary Mullis about his own encounter with the paranormal: “I wouldn’t try to publish a scientific paper about these things, because I can’t do any experiments. I can’t make glowing raccoons appear. I can’t buy them from a scientific supply house to study...But I don’t deny what happened. It’s what science calls anecdotal, because it only happened in a way that you can’t reproduce. But it happened.”<sup>132</sup> Mullis’ statement is presented by Mack as a renowned scientist’s admission that there are just certain things that science can’t do. He is also a notorious proponent of AIDS denial,<sup>133</sup> a fact that Mack neglects to mention, perhaps because they was not aware of it, but maybe because such an association would call into question this Nobel Prize winner’s authority on the subject, or remind readers of the potentially dangerous consequences of ignoring scientific facts in favor of pure conjecture. This is not to equate an anecdotal glowing raccoon with the rejection of a well-documented and deadly disease. It is to ask, however, how we should go about deciding which “impossible” claims to take seriously, and which to attribute to eccentricity or irresponsibility. Impressive credentials cannot be equated with reliability.

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<sup>132</sup> Mullis, *Dancing Naked in the Mind Field*, quoted in Mack, *Passport to the Cosmos*, 22.

<sup>133</sup> Johnson, George. “Bright Scientists, Dim Notions.” *The New York Times*, October 28, 2007, sec. Week in Review.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/28/weekinreview/28johnson.html>.

Kripal ends his *Authors of the Impossible* with a reinterpretation of a series of Marian apparitions in Fatima, Portugal in 1917, culminating in the Miracle of the Sun, witnessed by thousands. Kripal notes several parallels between accounts of the events in Fatima and UFO sightings: “UFO encounters are often associated with lightning and/or thunder, strange cloud formations, bizarre chromatic effects, perfume-like odors, and spontaneous healings and cures”<sup>134</sup> all of which were present in Fatima. Kripal even notes the similarities in height between the Virgin of Fatima and the aliens of various UFO encounters. In original accounts, the children are unsure of the apparition’s identity. Lucia, the eldest, even expressed concern that the visitor was demonic, though she later came to accept the Church’s official interpretation: that she and her siblings had been visited by the Virgin Mary.

While Lucia and her siblings were the key witnesses, the apparitions at Fatima ultimately constituted a collective experience. Some reports count over 70,000 people present for the final apparition. Many skeptics and unbelievers corroborate the accepted report. The Roman Catholic Church issued a statement affirming that the event was genuine. Though skeptics have cited several alternatives to an authentic sighting of the Virgin, none have adequately explained all aspects of the event.

It was a physical event, not a mass vision or hallucination. But designating it as material also suggests a divide that, according to Kripal, is nonexistent. Her final visit, on October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1917, was accompanied by “The Miracle of the Sun.” Witnesses described the sun shining dimly, so that observers could look

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<sup>134</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 279.

directly at it. It shifted from its usual position, bouncing and spinning in the sky. Some described it as a glowing disk, emitting lights of various colors.

Kripal notes several parallels between accounts of the events in Fatima and UFO sightings: “UFO encounters are often associated with lightning and/or thunder, strange cloud formations, bizarre chromatic effects, perfume-like odors, and spontaneous healings and cures”<sup>135</sup> all of which were present in Fatima. Kripal even notes the similarities in height between the Virgin of Fatima and the aliens of various UFO encounters.

Though Kripal interprets the event through a more modern lens, untied to more traditional Catholic understandings, he does not deny that it represents a physical manifestation of meaning. Marian or Martian (or, as Kripal suggests, “a Marialien”<sup>136</sup>), this occurrence carried real significance. It was authentic, not just in the minds of the witnesses, but also in objective reality.

Kripal’s offering of an alternative interpretation of Fatima should not be taken as indicating an endorsement the extraterrestrial hypothesis. In his own words: “Let’s not be naïve. Let’s not assume that our present Cold War sci-fi mythology just happens to be the true one into which we can stuff everything else.”<sup>137</sup> Instead, this retelling is meant to “destabilize the older religious hermeneutics,” rather than provide a superior explanation. Kripal asserts that “the phenomenon can only be understood on its own level and on its own terms, and that, moreover, it can only be misunderstood if reduced, without remainder, to our physics, our psychology, our

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<sup>135</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 279.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>137</sup> Jeffrey Kripal, Reading the paranormal writing us: An interview with Jeffrey Kripal.

cultures, our ethnicities, our materialism, our politics, our ethics, or whatever.”<sup>138</sup>

The question remains, however: if neither description is accurate, how does one go about explaining such a phenomenon “on its own terms?” And how do we avoid conflating *its* terms with our own? After all, the term “paranormal” has its own history, and inevitably carries with it certain assumptions.

Kripal fails to address many of these criticisms. He suggests that the “eclipse of the sacred” in religious studies is due primarily to the “conflation of the *sui generis* nature of the sacred and the believer’s perspective...as if taking the sacred seriously is equivalent to surrendering one’s own intellect and critical faculties to the faith-claims of the religious traditions.”<sup>139</sup> While this assertion is likely true in some cases, Kripal neglects to engage with many of the other problems of defining religion as *sui generis*, as though they could all be reduced to social scientists’ aversion to belief.

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<sup>138</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 254.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.



## Conclusion

Criticisms levied at Kripal's body of work are important in considering his theory of religion and the paranormal. Nonetheless, in *Authors of the Impossible* Kripal raises provocative questions that are worth examining, even if his answers leave something to be desired. While scholars of religion are often encouraged to avoid evaluations regarding the veracity of their subjects' claims, what we deem possible or impossible no doubt has an effect on our approach to certain beliefs, practices, and experiences. Kripal's concerns go beyond a conflict over methodology in the discipline of religious studies. He, like Taylor, is concerned that the "immanent frame," open or closed, impedes us from comprehending meaningful phenomena that occur within our world. By segregating the immanent and the transcendent, we neglect to account for *real* and meaningful events that continue to occur, even in our so-called "secular age."

Just as Taylor cites Descartes' writings as a major moment in the shift to disenchantment, Kripal credits the *Meditations* as contributing to the suppression of paranormal phenomena in the strict division between material and mental.<sup>140</sup> The understanding of the material world as extended substance, to be explained through

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<sup>140</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 23.

mathematics rather than magic, relegated meaning and spirituality to the soul. Though we now have a very different understanding of the natural world, the conception of mind and matter as two distinct substances is still very much with us today, and whether consciousness is conceived as an emergent or God-given property, its connection to the brain and material world remains something of a philosophical mystery.

According to Mack, Mayer, and Kripal (as well as the authors he discusses), the paranormal cannot be adequately explained without reference to both the mind and the physical world. A distinct separation between mind and matter necessarily allows certain occurrences to slip through the cracks. Such events simply fall through the gap, rather than helping to bridge it. Kripal suggests that “[w]hatever they are, it is clear that such events cannot be understood without reference to consciousness *and* the material world.”<sup>141</sup> Not only do such incidents require crossing the divide; they call into question the notion that such a divide, as typically conceived, even exists. They require a reevaluation of both objective and subjective realities. Paranormal phenomena “are about the irruption of meaning in the physical world via the radical collapse of the subject-object structure itself.”<sup>142</sup> In describing paranormal events, physical evidence is frequently emphasized. Thus, for Mack, Mayer, and Kripal, the boundary between self and world is “porous,” in Taylor’s sense of the word, in that the paranormal involves a breach of traditional boundaries between physical and mental. These events aren’t simply physical, not just because

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 25.

they cannot be adequately explained by current natural laws, but also because they are *meaningful*.

Mack and many of his subjects turned to other belief systems in an attempt to understand what was happening to them. Mack devotes an entire chapter to his interviews with four “shamans,” many of whom seemed to offer better answers than Western scientists and psychologists. While on the one hand this inclination could be interpreted as yet another instance of New Age spiritualities’ tendency to misappropriate religious concepts from non-Western belief systems, I believe it also indicates the complicated position in which many experiencers find themselves. With no pre-established religious community to turn to in order to legitimate their experience, they are often left without any tools to make sense of what happened. While the witnesses at Fatima had found a way of assimilating their experience into their (Roman Catholic) belief system, many of Mack’s abductees did not. Although some seek to profit from their extraordinary experiences or psychic abilities, it seems that many would like nothing more than to be “normal.”

For Kripal and other scholars, their investigations cut to the heart of the issue of meaning in the immanent frame. At the end of her book, Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer suggests that “[t]o pursue the questions behind extraordinary knowing is to pursue a complete and free articulation of what it is to be human,”<sup>143</sup> while Mack ultimately seeks to discover “what such anomalous experiences and related phenomena can tell us about ourselves and our evolving knowledge of the nature of reality.”<sup>144</sup> Yet neither was drawn to the paranormal because the secular-scientific outlook could not

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<sup>143</sup> Mayer, *Extraordinary Knowing*, 272.

<sup>144</sup> Mack, *Passport to the Cosmos*, xi.

explain the meaning of life; they were drawn to it because it couldn't explain what seemed to be real, physical events. In other words, while they ultimately came to answer the question, "Is that all there is?" this is not the question they started out with.

Kripal's idea of fullness is somewhat elusive. His interest lies primarily in refocusing the lens of the history of religion, and suggesting that reigning methodologies inevitably miss a crucial aspect of their field. Though he explores the possibility of some ultimate meaning, he encourages the investigation of paranormal phenomena rather than touting any singular explanation for them or their meaning. Of course, the fact that he views the paranormal as so worthy of investigation betrays his conviction that such an inquiry would indeed have the potential to reveal something significant about the universe and our place in it. This meaning would necessarily be, to a certain extent universal, though manifest in a myriad of ways across diverse times and cultures. Kripal explores the possibility of experiencing immanent meaning that isn't defined by or limited to human flourishing. The buffers we have erected may shield us from the chaotic forces of the enchanted world, but they also function to blind us to the aspects of human life that may prove to be most meaningful.

Kripal asserts that "what is generally possible and impossible to experience as real does appear to change from culture to culture, as each culture actualizes different potentials of human consciousness and energy."<sup>145</sup> In modern western society, those who experience the "impossible" are left without any means of integrating their experience into a wider belief system. In a world in which "we can

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<sup>145</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 29.

in principle *control everything*,<sup>146</sup> mysterious forces and events are often more easily denied than confronted. As evident in Mack and Mayer's books, witnesses of paranormal phenomena may be reluctant to share paranormal incidents with others, even close friends or family members. Mack and Mayer are able to outline the psychological toll that such events may take on experiencers. Both suggest that many of their interviewees were left questioning long-held convictions about the nature of reality. Since several of Mack's patients were Christian, it seems safe to say that the unsettling nature of the events cannot be attributed to a secular worldview. Instead, it could be argued that their experiences become "impossible" in a disenchanted world, the world in which Charles Taylor insists we all live, to some degree or another.

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<sup>146</sup> Weber et al., *The Vocation Lectures*, 13.

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