

# Transformations and Transformers: Spirituality and the Academic Study of Mysticism

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A colleague of mine at Southern Methodist University recently shared a story with me. Several years ago my colleague was hired as the chairman of a new department of religious studies at a major research university. It was his job to interview candidates to fill several positions in the department. The Dean was adamant that, in order to ensure scholarly objectivity, anyone hired to teach religious studies should not have deeply held religious beliefs; however my colleague went to the Dean in hopes of convincing him otherwise. 'You can certainly say whatever you want to', the Dean responded, 'but you should know in advance that my mind is already made up'. My colleague did not share with me his whole argument, but he did mention what must have given even that hard-nosed Dean a moment's pause: 'It seems that, in this department', my colleague pointedly remarked, 'it would be fine to hire an historian who is an expert on Thomas Aquinas; but, according to your rules, we couldn't hire Thomas Aquinas himself'.<sup>1</sup> I would like to suggest that this all-too-frequently found notion, that scholars who have no religious inclinations are somehow more objective and therefore are better scholars of religion than those who are pursuing a spiritual life, is fundamentally flawed. I am convinced that there is no such thing as a completely objective scholar, nor such a thing even as objectivity, *per se*. This conviction directly emerges out of my years of study of the works of William James. James persuasively argues that our perceptions and experiences are *always* shaped and moulded by our previous assumptions, desires, selective interests, hopes and fears. That is, *none* of us can ever be completely objective. As James puts it: 'we add to reality. The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands' (James, 1975, p. 123). Nonetheless it is important to understand that he does not think that the world is completely malleable. For James, even though 'we carve out everything, just as we

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<sup>1</sup> This particular Dean's stance, while common, is by no means universal in the area of religious studies. For instance, on the opposite end of the spectrum, and perhaps equally problematic, are those departments of religious studies which will not hire a candidate to teach a particular religious tradition unless that candidate has been culturally or religiously affiliated with that tradition.

carve out constellations, to suit our human purposes' (*ibid.*, p. 122), we are always given something to carve: we discover the world as much as we create it. Our experiences, in this way, are always partially objective and partially subjective.

If James is correct that our experience is always, in this way, 'double-barreled', then it is crucial to take the time to unearth the methodological implications of this interactive epistemology,<sup>2</sup> especially as it applies to scholars of religion.

To begin with, if James is correct then the reigning model of scholarship as disengaged, dispassionate, objective enquiry is based on an epistemic fiction. We want to convince ourselves that our academic work and our teaching is neutral and unbiased, that we are simply discoverers and transmitters of information. So we fool our colleagues, our students and ourselves into thinking that we are just presenting the facts, that we are merely describing, for instance, what Ramakrishna said or did, or that we are simply noting what, let's say, Oglala Sioux shamans believed or practiced years ago. As scholars of religion, most of us do not dare to admit that we might actually agree with Ramakrishna's worldview, or to confess that we actually think that the shamans' insights into different levels of reality are appealing. It seems slightly disreputable, or somehow unrigorous or somewhat unacademic, to come out and openly state that we believe that the mystics might well be onto something real, something valuable. Above all, we most certainly do not ever want to reveal that we have had mystical experiences ourselves, let alone that we have a regular spiritual practice. Then we would be opening ourselves up for academic ridicule. Then we would risk being seen as hopelessly subjective and utterly devoid of critical awareness.

In the academy, it is considered quite respectable to critique religious beliefs, to point out the economic and cultural determinants of mystical experiences, to unearth the psychological antecedents of ritual behaviour. But to be willing to suggest that such beliefs, experiences and practices might well be true or valuable, to imply that they might indeed even be worth exploring — that is simply not done; that is uncomfortably nonsecular; that is 'special pleading'; that is 'confessional'; that is simply not tough-minded and sophisticated enough for academic discourse.

What I would like to suggest is that this pretence of neutrality is nothing more than a facade; it is a mask that we have inherited from the natural sciences,<sup>3</sup> a mask that we hide behind so we do not have to take conscious responsibility for the much more difficult constructive and normative aspects of our work. It is much easier and safer to describe what someone else in another culture or an-

<sup>2</sup> Any investigation of James's epistemology should include the chapter entitled 'The stream of thought' in James (1981); the chapter entitled 'Pragmatism and humanism' in James (1975), and 'Remarks on Spencer's definition of mind as correspondence', an early essay that set the stage for his later philosophical work, found in James (1978).

<sup>3</sup> Ironically, a quarter of a century after the publication of Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, most scientific disciplines have now grudgingly come to accept that *all* empirical knowledge is theory-laden.

other time believed than it is to give good reasons why, for instance, I think that such beliefs might well be true or worthwhile. It is much easier and safer to expose and analyse the raw underbelly of religious phenomena than it is to construct a workable and persuasive image of our spiritual potential as human beings. It is much easier and safer to compile reams of statistics on, let's say, population shifts and denominational affiliations than it is to construct a workable and convincing metaphysical model of reality.

Please don't misunderstand me. I am not criticizing phenomenological accounts, nor critical analyses, nor social-scientific studies of religious life. This type of academic work is crucially important. We need as many detailed, nuanced and sophisticated accounts of the religious beliefs, experiences and practices of other cultures and other times as we can.

However, I would argue that we also need to encourage scholarship that acknowledges the very real, and perhaps to many scholars, very threatening, possibility that these diverse religious worlds might not simply be items for dispassionate, detached study, but instead might actually have something worthwhile to say to us, to our world, to our situation. I would like to see room in the academy for scholarship that recognizes the transformative potential of these religious worlds, a scholarship that is willing and able to affirm that the metaphysical models and normative visions of these different spiritual traditions are serious contenders for truth, a scholarship that realizes that these religious worlds are not dead corpses that we can dissect and analyse at a safe distance, but rather are living, vital bodies of knowledge and practice that have the potential to change completely our taken-for-granted notions of who we are, why we are here and what we could or should become.

It seems clear to me that few of us seek knowledge simply for the sake of knowledge. Few of us immerse ourselves in the lives and teachings of mystics and saints of other times and other places simply out of curiosity. Few of us are simply attempting to gather and transmit information. Instead, we are all, to one degree or another, hoping to make a difference. In our teaching we are trying to prod our students into becoming more open-minded, more sophisticated, more tolerant of differences. In our scholarship we want to be exposed to unique ways of understanding and experiencing the world and ourselves, we want to push ourselves past our prior limitations, we want to try on new possibilities, we want answers to our often inarticulate existential questions. Finally, in our give-and-take with colleagues, we seek to challenge narrow-mindedness while we also desire that our own unseen prejudices will be challenged as well. I will argue therefore that it is not just the spiritually active members of the academy who are seeking transformation in themselves and in others. Instead, as scholars and teachers, we are all seeking to be transformers and we are all seeking to be transformed. If this is indeed the case then it seems clear that the normative element<sup>4</sup> in our research and teaching is not something that should be ignored, rooted

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<sup>4</sup> Arguably the loss of a normative element in the pursuit of knowledge is proving nothing less

out, or attacked as an enemy to objectivity, critical thought and rational discourse. I would like to suggest, instead, that the transformative components of our work should be examined, nurtured and encouraged.

If this type of scholarship is ever to become a real force within the academy it will first be necessary to admit frankly that the exchange of ideas that takes place in academic life is rarely, if ever, a purely logical, objective, dispassionate discussion of ideas. We will have to acknowledge that our research interests as academic scholars of religion are inevitably propelled by very partisan and impassioned philosophical and normative assumptions. I would be willing to bet that if we all were completely honest with ourselves, and looked deeply enough into why we write about these often incredibly abstruse subjects, we would discover that we are not sharing the fruits of our research simply to increase our colleagues' knowledge of what we have been studying. Instead, we go to meetings, we give papers, we publish, in large part at least because we are hoping to change our colleagues' minds, we are hoping to demonstrate to them that we are right and that they are wrong. We want to confront our academic opponents and get them to agree with us, or at the very least we hope to persuade them that our point of view is worthy of *very* careful consideration.

We may have convinced ourselves that we are simply engaging in, for instance, a purely objective discussion of the monistic philosophy of Ibn al'Arabi. However, if we carefully examine our deepest motivations, we might discover that our academic investigation is not quite as innocent as it may seem; we might recognize that we have certain hidden agendas. Minimally, we might simply feel an inexplicable fascination with Ibn al'Arabi's monistic perspective; perhaps we might even be covertly attempting to persuade our audience that Ibn al'Arabi's monistic perspective is a truer and better way of understanding reality than, for instance, the simplistic notions of God that were given to us in our childhood. Conversely, if we are eager to point out the ways in which Ibn al'Arabi's thought is incoherent and irrational, we might well find out, if we are honest with ourselves, that what we are really trying to do is to convince our audience that his monistic philosophy is, for example, really nothing more than another variety of that same spiritual nonsense that was forced down our throats when we were young.

My point is that our academic give-and-take is never neutral or disinterested; perhaps all of us, to one degree or another, are convinced not only that *our* perspective is more correct than anyone else's understanding, but also that the world would be a much better place if only we could convince other people to agree with us as well.

I should perhaps stress that I am not suggesting that we ignore the numerous ways in which our sense of conviction can turn into a close-minded self-righteousness that

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than disastrous for the future of humanity. An acquaintance who had led a research team that stumbled upon a new genetic discovery met with his colleagues' incredulity when he started questioning whether the work would actually benefit the human race. The ruling principle is 'if the money is there, then go for it!'. The sociology of research funding is a whole field in itself, but grant decisions seem to have little to do with considerations of value.

stifles intellectual growth. I am not claiming that we should ignore challenges to our inevitably circumscribed horizons of interpretation. What I would like to argue, however, is that it is important to recognize the ways in which our particularity of vision and our desire to promote our own philosophical perspective is not only inevitable, but also often valuable. It seems clear to me that *good* scholarship is never neutral or detached. The Ur-figures of our contemporary secular culture — the Durkheims, the Freuds, the Marxs — were typically driven, impassioned, academically-pugnacious individuals who had a powerful desire to convince others of the validity and worth of their insights.

In the same way, there is no reason to think that scholars who are convinced that trans-natural levels of existence are real or who are persuaded that spiritual practices are highly valuable could not, and should not, also make very important contributions to the academy and to the culture at large. We need to slough off the antiquated notion that religious convictions are necessarily dogmatic and inflexible, while secular or atheistic convictions are not. Every scholar has an assumptive world. What counts is not whether that assumptive world is secular or religious, but rather whether that scholar's vision is complex, persuasive, clear and willing to be challenged.

If it is indeed the case that we are all approaching the material that we study and teach with a highly charged, often unexamined, set of assumptions and motivations, then it seems clear to me that the academic playing field is levelled. If the secular critic of mystical phenomena has to acknowledge and defend his or her naturalistic worldview, has to admit the subtle ways in which the veneer of detached scholarship is often a convenient rhetorical camouflage for an emotionally charged desire to covert his or her audience to a sceptical or positivistic perspective, then the question becomes not so much 'is this scholarship objective?' but rather 'which impassioned set of arguments is most persuasive?'

If it is indeed true that none of us are neutral, that none of us can lay claim to complete objectivity, then theoretically at least those of us with an active spiritual life who are also attempting to engage in the academic study of religion need no longer feel subtly embarrassed by or ashamed of our personal beliefs, experiences and practices. The academy has, over the past few years, worked hard to acknowledge and root out the insidious effects of racial, sexual and gender-based prejudices within its members. There seems to me no good reason not to extend this process of critical self-reflection to the frequently found undercurrent of academic bias against scholars who possess a deep and experiential religious faith.<sup>5</sup> If and when scholars of religion within the academy who have naturalistic beliefs could acknowledge the frequently unexamined and unsupported nature of their philosophical preferences; if and when key members of the academic study of religion could stop treating their overtly religious constituents as poor relatives that they are ashamed of — then and only then would it be

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<sup>5</sup> This suspicion is also present in other fields of the enquiry. For instance, a friend of mine who specializes in feminist ethics has frequently encountered intense hostility from other feminists simply due to her theological presuppositions.

possible to be completely open with our students and with our academic colleagues about our spiritual lives, without fear of vocational or financial repercussions; then and only then could the academy truly be said to be a place that supports and endorses an open and vigorous exchange of ideas and perspectives; then and only then could the academy's mystics, spiritual practitioners and contemplatives finally come out of the closet.

I would like to suggest that the very existence of spiritually active scholars of religion often acts as a disturbing reminder of many of the tensions that have plagued the academy from its inception.<sup>6</sup> Scholars who not only teach about different meditative and contemplative techniques but also practice them, scholars who not only study mysticism but are maybe even mystics themselves, scholars who are not resigned to learning about spirituality as it was lived in the past but who seek to be spiritually engaged in the present, threaten many of the most deeply rooted, and therefore perhaps least examined, assumptions that the academy holds. The academy as an institution simply does not want a bunch of potential Buddhas or St Augustines on its hands. The academy does not want individuals who claim to have access to levels of knowledge that cannot be subject to its institutional scrutiny or approval. The academy does not want anyone in its midst who might challenge the comfortable insularity of the scholastic world. The academy does not want to confront the disturbing possibility that perhaps teaching is not simply a matter of amassing and transmitting an enormous mass of arcane information, but is also bound up with the struggle to catalyse, and then respond to, existential questions of meaning and truth.

It is my contention that if the academy can acknowledge the disturbing presence of scholar-mystics in its midst, if it is willing to let itself be challenged by their alternative perspectives on the process and goals of the academic life, if it can undergo the uncomfortable re-examination of the validity and value of many of its most cherished notions, then the academy will have remained true to the most important academic value of all: the willingness to question continually and to test what has been previously taken for granted. In turn, the scholar-mystics themselves must also allow their own assumptive worlds to become candidates for testing and refinement in the very same fire of continual re-examination and transformation. In this way nothing is untouchable, nothing is static, nothing is exempt from transformation, except perhaps the value of transformation itself.

James, W. (1975). *Pragmatism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

James, W. (1978). *Essays in Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

James, W. (1981). *Principles of Psychology*. 3 vols., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>6</sup> After all, academic and scientific disciplines only emerged, in historical terms, relatively recently from under the sway of the Christian church. It makes sense, therefore, that academics and scientists are frequently highly suspicious of the presence of religious ideas within their realms of expertise. Whether these suspicions are necessarily justified is another matter entirely.