

Review Essay: The Power of the Paranormal (and Extra-Ordinary)

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Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal. By

Jeffrey J. Kripal. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. Pp. xvi + 370.

Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred. By Jeffrey J. Kripal.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Pp. xiii + 332.

“Secret Talk.” By Jeffrey J. Kripal. Unpublished journal.

Jeff Kripal’s Mutants and Mystics [MM] is the dazzling companion to his path-breaking book, Authors of the Impossible [AOI]. AOI focused on scholars (Frederic Myers, Charles Fort, Jacques Vallee, and Bertrand Méheust) whose research on paranormal phenomena has been overlooked by scholars of religion. MM focuses on similar themes that Kripal finds eerily echoed in superhero comic books and science fiction, but readers will immediately realize that MM is not a normal academic book. Not only is the cover a stunning explosion of color, but the book has color graphics on every page, shifting type fonts, and sixty or so full page, full color images from the author’s pulp fiction and comic book collection. The linkage of words and graphic art is central to the book, which explores the magical, mythic, esoteric dimensions of popular culture and, as Kripal argues, the intimate ties between these themes and the histories of occultism, psychical research, and the paranormal. These ties are not just intellectual but also are reflected in the outsized and “impossible” personal experiences of many of the authors and artists.

The two volumes are explicitly intended as a challenge to the academic study of religion and as calls for a more adequate theoretical understanding of religion. In his recent review of AOI in this journal, Urban (2012, 3) finds Kripal's "pleas for a recovery of the sacred and the paranormal in the contemporary study of religion" problematic in light of Kripal's "metaphysical claims" regarding consciousness and the sacred. While I share some of Urban's concerns, they should not obscure the force of Kripal's critique, which is best understood, I suggest, not as a gloss on Eliade, as Urban claims, but in light of Kripal's continuing preoccupation with the relationship between personal experience and scholarly and other creative productions.

That Jeff has looked for and found connections between the personal experiences of creators of pop-culture and their creations should not surprise us. He revealed similar connections between life and work among scholars of mysticism in Roads of Excess (Kripal 2001) and between psychical researchers and scholars of the paranormal in AOI. He also has been correspondingly upfront about the connections between his work and a profound, life changing experience in Calcutta in 1989, which he alludes to in Kali's Child (1995), but describes much more fully in Roads. In MM, he links his "that Night" experience in Calcutta with the accounts of those who claim to have been abducted by aliens -- a literature that, he argues, provides "the experiential core behind the sci-fi and superhero folklore" (8). Alien abductees, he writes, describe feeling "as if an intense energy is separating every cell ... of their bodies, [afterwards] ... powerful residual energies are left in their bodies, as if stored in the cells themselves." This, he says, is "exactly how it [his 'that night' experience] felt, and still feels in [his] memory" (8).

I draw two points from this that I think are significant for scholars of religion interested in Kripal's work and the questions he is pursuing. First, Kripal's 'that Night' experience – and indeed his religious quest – has provided the lens through which he has pursued the study of religion and, thus, shaped it in particular ways. Second, I think that the particular shape of Kripal's experience orients us to a very important starting point for the study of religion and one which, as Jeff rightly stresses, has largely been ignored – at least in recent decades -- when it comes to theorizing about religion.

Kripal has been entirely – indeed disarmingly -- upfront about the influence of his "that Night" experience on his work. But we need to ask how the lens has shaped his approach and the six substantial volumes he has now published with the University of Chicago Press. In Fall Quarter 2011, I used Kripal's accounts of his experience, including his unpublished journal entries from the night of the experience, as a case study in an upper-division seminar on methods of studying religious experience. Based on a close reading of his published and unpublished accounts, as well as interviews with him over Skype, it is clear that his accounts of the experience take on subtly different forms and shadings in different iterations. In his initial account, which he wrote in his journal in the middle of the night that it occurred, he describes the experience in terms of energies, not deities. He recounts feeling "an intense energy gradually awaken, completely fill[ing] my consciousness and 'threaten[ing]' to develop into an ec-stasis or rapture." In the commentary written immediately after the description, he described it as an intensification of his "normal energy," simultaneously erotic, mystical, and loving, which felt like it was propelling or pulling him out of his body. He says "it was all beyond my

control, it was [in Bengali] ‘shakti-pat,’ ‘the descent of the initiating energy’” (Kripal, “Secret Talk,” Nov. 5, 1989).

Deities, especially the image of Kali on Shiva, figure more prominently in later retellings – in the preface he wrote for, but did not include in, Kali’s Child and then in Roads (Kripal 2001, 201). In a footnote in Roads (361, n.1), he made an initial connection between his experience and sleep paralysis, which deepened a few years later when he read David Hufford’s work, as he recounted in a letter addressed to Hufford in March 2006 that he shared with the class. Then in MM, he compared his experience with those who claim to have been abducted by aliens, a connection my students and I initially found rather hard to fathom. Through our discussions and interviews with Jeff, we realized that he is not equating his experience with these subsequent experiences as much as recognizing his experience in theirs. The key for us was discovering that however much he wanted to and tried, Jeff has not been able to re-experience “that Night” through any sort of practice (Skype interview #3, Nov. 15, 2011). Although he hasn’t been able to recreate it, he nonetheless remembers it at some level in his body. Accounts that have something in common with his experience evoke the bodily memory of his experience. These evoked memories in turn have served as guideposts for him in the unfolding of his own creative, intellectual energies.

I highlight this discovery not as a criticism, but to suggest that the patterns and resonances that Kripal identifies loom particularly large for him because they resonate with his experience; other starting points – experiential or otherwise – would likely configure the perceptual field differently. In saying this, I am not arguing that there is a precise pattern that underlies his chain of evoked memories, but that they have a rough

form and that form poses a challenge to the way we theorize religion. Unlike Jeff, however, I would frame the challenge not in terms of “the sacred” per se, but in terms of how we as a field have dichotomized religion and magic.

Kripal integrates this thread of the paranormal into the study of religion through definitional moves that are most explicit in *AOI*, where he defines the paranormal “as the sacred in transit from the religious and scientific registers into a parascientific or ‘science mysticism’ register,” and the sacred in terms of Otto’s *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (*AOI*, 9). He notes that the sacred also was a key concept for classical thinkers, such as Durkheim, Wach, and Eliade, but views “the category [as] ... taboo today” in religious studies. Urban (2012, 1) takes issue with Kripal’s call for a recovery of the sacred and the paranormal in the contemporary study of religion on two grounds. First, he views Kripal’s claim that the sacred has been eclipsed in contemporary scholarship as vastly overstated and, second, he questions Kripal’s conclusion that “it [the sacred] is intimately tied to the deepest structures of the human psyche” (*AOI*, 255, quoted in Urban 2012, 3). Urban is right to point out that deconstructionists (and, I would add, scientists) do not dominate the field and that Eliadians still hold their own especially in introductory textbooks. Amongst those scholars most invested in issues of theory and method in the field, however, I think there is considerable skepticism regarding concepts such as the sacred and the holy, which has given rise to protests from theorists such as Kripal, Orsi, and others (see Orsi 2012). Urban is more concerned, however, with the theological tendencies that he detects in Kripal’s claim that the sacred is “intimately tied to the deepest structure of human consciousness.” He suggests that “the vast array of strange phenomena, bizarre encounters, and surprising anecdotes [that Kripal unearths] would

lead more logically to William James's emphasis on vast plurality, diversity and varieties of religious experiences." He is right, I think, to criticize Kripal's assertion of "some grand, universal and singular 'sacred' at the core of human consciousness," but the challenge for us theoretically is not just historical and contextual, as Urban contends, but also conceptual. If we are going to eschew "the sacred" or "the holy" as grand, universal, singulars – which I think we should do – then we need to focus more carefully on the various sorts of experiences that give rise to such claims.

So, and this is my second point, I think that the particular shape of Kripal's experience orients us to a very important starting point for the study of religion and one which, as Jeff rightly stresses, has largely been ignored – at least in recent decades -- when it comes to theorizing about religion. The problem arises because he is starting from an experience that is fundamentally about energies or powers, a starting point more readily located within the study of religion, I suspect, by South Asianists like himself, who have terms for such things, such as *shaktipat*, *sidhis*, and *kundalini*, largely unfamiliar to those of us trained in Western traditions. When Jeff traces what seem to him similar powers and energies in the Western context, a task he took up in *Roads* and then, with the encouragement and support of Michael Murphy, in his history of Esalen (Kripal 2007), he wound up referring not only to mysticism but to the various powers that we associate in the West with the esoteric, occult, paranormal and, of course, magic, i.e., the very realms that many classical western theorists have defined out of the study of religion. It is these powers in their various historically defined forms that run like a thread through AOI and MM, such that, as he says, "the magnetic ability [of 19th century magnetizers and mesmerists] ... will become the supernormal capacity in [psychical

researchers Frederick] Myers and company, the wild talent in Fort, and, eventually, the pop-cultural superpower [of the comic books]" (AOI, 224).

Although I can see why Otto appeals to Kripal, I think there are other classical resources for integrating the paranormal, occult, and magical that focus more directly and explicitly on the nexus between the religious, sacred, and magical as it relates to power. I am referring to the line of theorizing initiated by R. R. Marett in England and Marcel Mauss in France in response to Tylor's animistic definition of religion in terms of "spiritual beings." Marett and Mauss argued that religion arose from an undifferentiated religio-magical force or power, which is later reflected in Weber's notion of charisma as "extra-ordinary power" and Van der Leeuw's "idea of Power" (see Taves in press b). I think it is essential that we more fully incorporate this line of thinking about religion-sacrality-magic into our theorizing about religion, not as the definition of religion but as an aspect of what many have characterized as religion, in addition to such things as spiritual beings, otherworlds, and ultimate concerns. Rather than defining religion substantively, stipulatively, or in terms of family resemblances, I think we would be better off if we used the classical debates over definitions to identify building blocks or components of the various phenomena we have characterized as religious, magical, spiritual, etc. Rather than pitting one definition against another, we can use them to tease out more basic elements and processes, which are not specifically religious, that people mix and match to generate various things and *types of things* some of which they (or we) want to call sacred or religious. Thus, as I have argued elsewhere (Taves, in press b), drawing from Durkheim's definition of sacred things as "things set apart and forbidden," we can identify the most basic process as one of *setting things* (anything) *apart* from the

ordinary or everyday. From the debates over defining the most elementary form of religion, we can identify two broad classes of things that people often set apart: *non-ordinary powers*, including those associated with unseen agents, and *non-ordinary realities or worlds*. Finally, drawing on Tillich's definition of religion as ultimate concern, we can identify *processes of valuation* as the means whereby people rank and order that which they set apart.¹

If we focus on building blocks or components rather than definitions of "religion" or "the sacred," we do not have to equate the underlying processes or elements with "religion" or "the sacred." We can take the diversity of processes and elements that subtend the wide range of experiences, events, beliefs, and practices that people have characterized as religious, spiritual, sacred, or magical, occult, superstitious, or paranormal seriously at a phenomenal level, while at the same time recognizing (and studying) the diverse ways in which these things are assessed, characterized, and explained within and between cultures.

Differentiating between the generic building blocks that comprise experiences, event perceptions, and beliefs about reality and the complex culturally-labeled "products" that we or others characterize as religious (paranormal or magical or superstitious) experiences, events, perceptions or beliefs is crucial if we hope to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between biology, consciousness, and culture. The tendency to conflate more generic "building blocks" with complex culturally labeled "products" is still widespread, however, and has led to confusion among both scientists and scholars of religion and impeded creative work on the interface between

¹ Portions of this paragraph were adapted from Taves in press a, b.

consciousness and culture. This confusion is particularly evident in the scientific research on “religion” and “magic,” where research on underlying processes has been far too quickly linked with fluid cultural categories. Thus, for example, in the cognitive science of religion, many researchers have focused on the widespread belief in unseen (aka “counterintuitive”) agents. Although researchers generally acknowledge that “spiritual beings” are actually only one of many potential building blocks of religions, they nonetheless argue for the naturalness of “religion” based on this Tylorian definition rather than simply advancing a more modest claim regarding the ease with which human infer the presence of unseen agents (see, most recently McCauley 2011, Barrett 2012).

Religion, defined in this way, is not what most interests Kripal. What Kripal characterizes as the paranormal is being studied scientifically under the heading of “magic.” Thus, if we turn to psychologist Eugene Subbotsky’s *Magic and the Mind: Mechanisms, Functions, and Development of Magical Thinking and Behavior*, we find definitions and claims that mesh well with Kripal’s. Subbotsky defines magic in terms of two types of magical causation -- mind over matter and mind over mind (5).² He examines the experimental evidence for magical thinking, non-institutionalized magical beliefs, and magical behavior in the cognitive development of children and in the functioning of adults (15-19). Subbotsky cites experimental evidence to suggest that magical thinking thrives unimpeded throughout the lifespan and argues that, because “magical reality deals with meaning, emotions, and communication, it can peacefully coexist with, and productively complement, scientific reality” (14). Subbotsky’s research

² Jeff confirmed the connection indicating that “the key ... for me is that the paranormal, like the magical, involves a correspondence between an internal subjective state and an external objective event; that is, the mind-matter distinction breaks down as the world becomes a narrative or series of signs” (email, August 7, 2012).

would suggest that magical thinking is at least as “maturationally natural” and intuitive as the tendency to infer unseen agents. Moreover, conceptually, Subbotsky indicates that adults typically characterize what he calls magical thinking as *play, dreams, art, or imagination* so as not to compete ontologically, at least in Western contexts, with the claims of religion or science (15-19, emphasis added). In very parallel fashion, Jeff argues that we find the paranormal most fully realized in the popular genres of science fiction and superhero comic books, where it is “given the freest and boldest rein” precisely because it is there that it does not have to compete ontologically with the claims of religion or science (MM, 330).

However the divide between “religion” and “magic” is characterized culturally, Subbotsky argues that the distinction between religion and magic is in fact socio-cultural, not ontological. Magical beliefs are equally evident in the context of institutionalized religion and, indeed, he argues foundational to it. This is quite parallel to the central point that Jeff is trying to make relative to the study of religion: as theorists of religion we cannot afford to overlook the paranormal just because it has been defined out of “religion” in much Western theorizing. As he puts it in AOI (253): “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.”

Subbotsky’s research allows us to return to Kripal’s claim that “it [the sacred] is intimately tied to the deepest structures of the human psyche,” which Urban rejects as an untestable metaphysical claim. As it stands, formulated in terms of the sacred, I agree that the claim is untestable. If we reformulate it more specifically, in terms of (say) believed in powers of mind over matter or mind over mind, psychologists can test to see

if belief in such powers has measurable effects on the body (i.e., placebo effects) or on performance (e.g., in athletics) (Damisch 2010; Taves in press). Evidence of measurable effects does not establish the reality in these paranormal powers, but does tell us something about the power of belief.

Kripal is quite open to the neuroscientific and psychological study of such phenomena. As he states forthrightly in AOI (253): “If something, for example, like modern neuroscience can reduce all of this impossible material to neurological processes, frontal lobe microseizures, cognitive grids, and evolutionary needs, then so much the better. We will have a genuine and genuinely powerful theory of religion that we should pursue with all of our resources and courage, ... If, however, such a new approach ... cannot finally deliver the goods ... then we are just as clearly on to something big and important here. ... Either way it seems to me, the study of religion wins and wins big.” Kripal doubts that the neuroscientists will be able to pull this off, however, for two reasons: first, because he views the interaction between consciousness and culture as both biological and semiotic and, second, because he believes that “the human is two, both mind and brain” (AOI, 256), not just experientially but ontologically, such that mind can exist separate from brain. I’m more or less in agreement with Jeff when it comes to the interaction between biology, consciousness, and culture, but we are placing our bets differently when it comes to mind and brain.

With respect to the first issue, consciousness and culture, Kripal’s and my differences are largely matters of emphasis and positioning. We are both captivated with the challenges involved in bridging subjective and objective, physics and comparative religion, sciences and humanities, or, as he puts it, with the role of meaning-making in

generating our experience of reality. Jeff tends to push his ideas regarding the relationship between consciousness and culture further than I would, going to far as “to suggest that the psyche and our social consensus of what reality is somehow ‘make each other up’ within a constant loop of Consciousness and Culture” (MM, 330). I would agree that biologically based consciousness and culture do “somehow ‘make each other up,’” but they do so, I would argue, within biological limits that, as far as I can tell, Jeff isn’t that interested in exploring. The tension between hermeneutics and biology is evident in his “that Night” account, which opens with the words: “I’m not sure whether what I’m about to write was a dream or ‘real.’” His initial description of the experience (a paragraph within the overall entry) explicitly characterizes the experience as a dream from which he “woke up very confused and very excited.” In the commentary, he considered “discount[ing] it all as ‘only a dream,’ although [he said] it would be difficult honestly to do this” (Kripal, “Secret Talk,” Nov. 5, 1989). Given his later interpretation of the dream as a sleep paralysis episode, I was interested in establishing whether or not he was in fact oriented as to place at any time during the experience or in a “dream reality” throughout. The bottom line for Jeff, however, was not whether it was a dream, but whether he was going to engage with it or dismiss it (Kripal, Interview #2, Nov. 1, 2011). His central question, in other words, was not whether it was biological (a dream) but whether it was merely biological (“merely a dream”) or had added meaning and significance. It is the added meaning and significance that he has been exploring ever since.

His experience of “that Night,” thus, not only led him to question the way we theorize about religion and specifically the extent to which we want to consider what is

often dismissed as magical, occult, or paranormal under that rubric, but also the way we conceive the relationship between our own life experience and our scholarship. Like artists, novelists, and poets, who bring their life experience and their writing into closer relationship than most academics are wont to do, Jeff's work clearly has a creative, constructive edge to it. In choosing to find meaning in "that Night," Jeff allowed the experience to write him, as he would say, as he simultaneously wrote about it. He has been walking that tightrope ever since, juxtaposing his experience with that of others, reflecting on the relationship between life and scholarship, and simultaneously living and writing the process that he writes about. Although we may not want to position ourselves in that way, his work nevertheless challenges us to reflect on the relationship between our own life experience and our scholarship.

In addition to positioning himself on the creative, constructive edge of the discipline, Kripal has also placed his bets on the mind-body problem. Here he is wagering that "the Human is Two," that mind and brain are interwoven, interacting, yet separable, such that the brain acts as a "filter" for the mind, shaping and constraining it (AOI, p. 256; Kripal 2012b). The underlying issue is whether mind emerges from brain in the course of evolution and human development and is inescapably bound to it or whether it is to some degree separable. He and I don't agree on this, but we need not place our bets on the same horse in order to find enormous value in the challenges Kripal has posed for scholars of religion.

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