
Jewish Mystical Insights for Christian Anthropologists: Kabbalistic Musings on Ontology, Critical Realism, and Comparative Theology

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The Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah, as reflected in ethnohistoric documents underwriting the beliefs and practices of contemporary neo-kabbalists, practitioners of shamanic Judaism, Jewitchery, and other para-Judaic spiritualities (including Hermetic Qabalah and Christian Cabala) illustrate a cosmological theory of “kabbalistic perspectivism” analogous to the Amazonian perspectivism reported by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998). Consideration of kabbalistic perspectivism provides Messianic Jewish, gentile Christian, and other religiously committed anthropologists opportunity for practicing comparative theology. It also may serve as a model for developing “methodological possibilianism,” an ontologically-oriented complement to the epistemological model of critical realism popularized by Christian anthropologists Paul Hiebert and Charles Kraft.

“That’s another thing we’ve learned from *your* Nation,” said Mein Herr, “map-making. But we’ve carried it much further than you . . . We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of *a mile to the mile!*”

“Have you used it much?” I enquired.

“It has never been spread out, yet,” said Mein Herr: “the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.

Lewis Carroll, Sylvie and Bruno Concluded

Catholic Christian theologian Francis X. Clooney (2010, 10) recommends that believers living in a world of religious diversity engage in “Comparative Theology,” a discipline that

. . . marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one

or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.

As an anthropologist of faith conducting research in Messianic Jewish and Jewish mysticism-inspired communities (among neo-kabbalists, practitioners of shamanic Judaism, Jewitches, and Christian cabalists), my interlocutors are often curious about the spirituality of my *other* subjects. In attempting to make these perspectives mutually intelligible and help them recognize the cultural validity of spiritualities they find baffling, I have frequently found recourse to critical realism, an epistemological approach proposed by physicist and theologian Ian Barbour (1966)¹, developed by missionary and anthropologist Paul Hiebert (1976, 1999) and popularized by his fellow Christian anthropologist, Charles Kraft (1979, 2008).

While I have found critical realism a helpful tool, here, I offer a more philosophically and anthropologically up-to-date model inspired by comparative

¹ Barbour’s “theological critical realism” is to be distinguished from the critical realism of philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar.

theological reflection on Kabbalah. I have termed this contribution “methodological possibilianism,” which is an expression *and critique* of (as well as an alternative to) anthropology’s ontological turn (see Heywood 2017 and Meneses 2018) rather than merely an epistemological or representational approach. I am hopeful other religiously committed anthropologists will engage the kabbalistic perspectivism this article describes in their own exercise of comparative theology, and that methodological possibilianism will provide a hermeneutical device and ontological schema that might inform their anthropological labors in ways more in step with the ontological turn.

“The Jewish apocalyptic complex” refers to traditional accounts alleging to *apo-* (remove or take off) *kalypsis* (the concealing veil) from reality. Jewish apocalyptic and its derivatives constitute a revelatory disclosure of a world-behind-the-world, more substantial than the mundane material world—a spiritual space I suspect most readers will construe as merely “imaginary.” I do not limit “apocalyptic” to the eschatological, but treat all revelatory reports of both ancient and latter-day Jewish mystical *ekstasis* as members of the complex (Collins 1996, 7; Ostow 1995, 77; Rowland 2002, 9-11). All of these reports constitute a kind of “transhistorical mythology” evolving over the course of millennia (Ginsburg 2004, xxxvi.). While there is variation and even contradiction in the corpus, I am not the first to note that there are also clear “resonances and interrelations,” characterized by a common “suite of arguments [and] images” which emerge through a process where the earliest mythical paradigms are re-experienced, explored and elaborated upon by later voices in a multigenerational dialectic of retelling and reenactment; a kind of transgenerational palimpsest (Ginsburg 2004, lxxv-lxxvii.). Lest my readers take issue with my treating the ethnohistoric documents of several eras as all of one piece, note that I am following the convention of the tradition itself, which subsumes them all under the term “*Kabbalah*,” or “Receiving.”

Précis

Following Merleau-Ponty’s charge to develop a “lateral universal” acquired through incessant testing of self through other and other through self, with the ultimate goal of “constructing a general system of reference where . . . [all the relevant parties’ views] find a place” (1964, 120), I envision a “common ground” constituted through reciprocal dialogue in my

fieldwork among neo-kabbalists and my study of the ethno-historic texts, which has led me to reflect upon the implications of appreciatively regarding “their view,” for the larger ethnographic enterprise. In this article, I ask “What kind of ontological schema and hermeneutical methodology do we need in order to find common ground with the Jewish apocalyptic complex?” Is it possible to generate a schema which not only explains the world of the kabbalists to anthropologists (and vice versa), but also accounts for the broadest possible cultural divergences and contradictions in apprehension of reality beyond this particular case?”

In answering these questions, I begin with a sketch of kabbalistic perspectivism as illustrated by a description of the *Olam Ha-Nistar* (“The Hidden [Spiritual] Realm”). I follow this with a critical assessment of the enterprise of humanistic science, balanced by the entertainment of some variations on philosophical approaches which might assist in the endeavor. I review some of the resources available from our own intellectual milieu for considering the ethnographic possibilities of these philosophical perspectives, and propose methodological perspectivism as a schema providing an appreciative, yet critical, way of considering the foundations in reality of experiences alien to most of us.

The Jewish Imaginal World

Philosopher-theologian Henry Corbin developed a useful phenomenological approach to experience which challenges a false “dichotomization of the real and imagined” (Wolfson 2007, 121). He posits that “reality consists of . . . rational form, but this form, in turn, reflects and is in the form of the one to whom the image is manifest” (Wolfson 2007, 121). He observes that mystics generally agree that humans experience three distinct worlds: the physical world of our senses, the world of “intelligible forms” understood by the active intellect, and an in-between/intermediate suprasensory world (the imaginal world or *mundus imaginalis*), perceived through imagination. The *mundus imaginalis* “permits the formation of a rigorous analogical knowledge,” which (because “the same substantial realities assume forms corresponding respectively to each universe”) permits “all the universes to symbolize with one another” (ibid.). Although it is accessed through the imagination, the imaginal world should not be confused with the unreal *imaginary*. In sum, Corbin (ibid.) proposes that it is

. . . [a world] ontologically real as the world of the senses and the world of the intellect, a world that requires a faculty of perception belonging to it, a faculty . . . as fully real as the faculties of sensory perception or intellectual intuition. This faculty is the imaginative power, the one we must avoid confusing with the imagination that modern man identifies with ‘fantasy.’

The imaginal world is apprehended by “psycho-spiritual senses” of “imaginative perception” particularly suited to a subtly embodied world. Corbin also warns that “forms and shapes in the *mundus imaginalis* do not subsist in the same manner as empirical realities in the physical world; otherwise anyone could perceive them”—instead, the “‘immaterial’ materiality” of the imaginal world has its own kind of “‘corporeality’ and ‘spatiality’” (Wolfson 2007, 121).

The texts of the Jewish apocalyptic complex are replete with “maps” of the *Olam Ha-Nistar*. Probably the most intuitively clear map of the relations among places in this imaginal world is the abstract *Etz Chayyim* (or “Tree of Life”) image (Figure 1), showing interrelationships among *Sefirot* (“spheres,” or more literally, “tellings”). The *Sefirot* are together “the skeleton of the universe” “the tree of God,” and the various attributes of the Creator by means of which It communicates with creation (hence “tellings”). They are the ten most common names for varying aspects of the “Root of all Roots” (the *Ein Sof*, “Infinite One”), which is also the sap running through the tree and giving it life, and, though they are one with the Creator, they are also Its garments and the “beams of light which It sends out.” They are recursively replicated over and over again, as they “descend” through the four worlds of Emanation, Formation, Creation and Making (i.e., Doing or Acting), where they are finally manifested in “stepped-down” fashion to humankind.

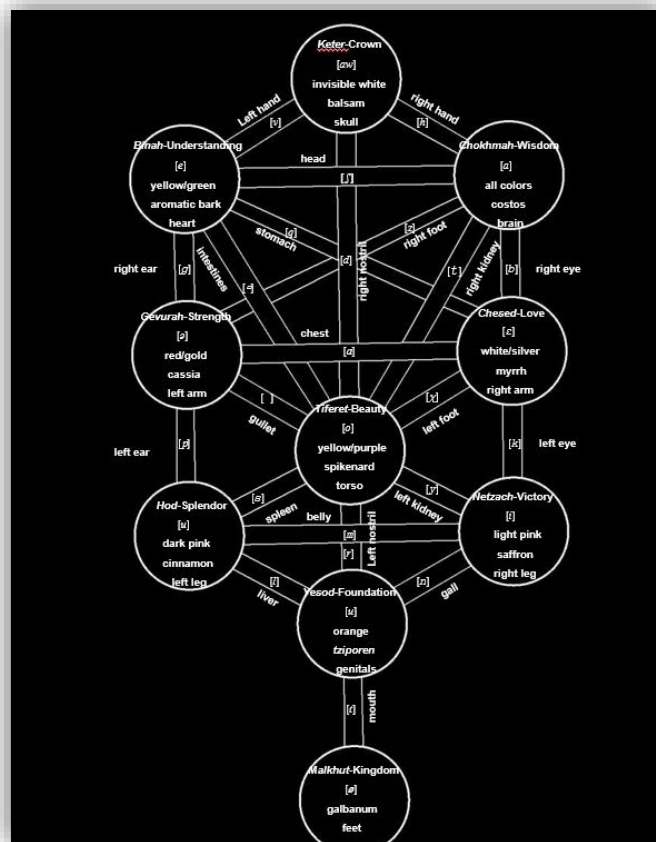


Figure 1.
The Etz Chayyim (“Tree of Life”)
as Map of Multiple Modalities of Experience.

The ten nodes and twenty-two lines of the kabbalistic *Etz Chayyim* are ascribed values from any number of domains. Alternate tree versions are spiritual maps modeled on various more or less material worlds: the interrelated appendages of the human body; categories of plant or animal life; celestial bodies; classes of angels; vowels and consonants of Hebrew; days, times and seasons, etc. All of these created domains are, in turn, both iconic and indexical of the attributes of the otherwise inconceivable *Ein Sof*.

The converse of all of this is that the physical world is really an expression of the hidden Divine; this world is formed in the image of its Creator. The *Etz Chayyim* and all worlds modeled after it, including the human form and the smallest particles of matter, are icons that resemble or correspond to various aspects of the supernal form of the Divine. They are also indices of their Creator, who is the primal Cause of Causes.

To the kabbalist, the world is a "*corpus symbolicum*;" the human arm, for example, is a symbol that only exists by virtue of the existence of the inner-innermost reality it points to: "the arm of God." Isaac ibn Latif (13th century) elucidates this concept, averring that "All names and attributes are metaphoric with us but not with [the Creator]." Indeed, the material could be conceived of as a metaphor for the spiritual! As Rabbi Nahum Tzernobiler (d. 1798) (Newman 1963:83) said:

Divinity created matter so that man, composed of matter and soul, may have a conception of it. It follows, therefore, that all matter may be likened to a parable by means of which Divinity can be understood.

Thus, the *Sefirot* are as much creation's blueprint as a map of the imaginal world. The physical Universe—in Hebrew, *Olam* (related to the root *alam*, "concealment")—is like a garment both concealing and revealing the true essence of Reality. In Lewis Carroll's book, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (quoted in the epigram), Mein Herr's countrymen would not allow an oversized map of their land with its one-to-one correspondence to their country to be laid down, although Mein Herr muses that now the country itself serves almost as well as its own map. In the Jewish apocalyptic complex, it is as if the Infinite actually did what they did not: It laid the map over the territory, making the map a new, more immanent, "territory." The territory is almost as good as the map.

Just as laying a 1:1 map on the ground would obscure the "true" terrain and restrict perception of its actual features, kabbalists posit that the *Olam ha-Zeh* (this material world) obscures the *Olam Ha-Nistar* (the hidden world). However, it is more complicated than just a matter of us not normally being able to see what is on the recto of the map. The restraints (or constraints, if you will) are much more profound than such a crude physical metaphor would suggest.

First, since the Four Worlds are conceived of as "simultaneous phases," rather than successive—everything that has being is present in all four simultaneously, so any being or event in our World of Action is simultaneously being formed, created and emanated in the three worlds "above" (Winkler 2003, 28). Everything in this world has its counterpart in the transcendental worlds (Luzzatto 2007, 77-79).

Second, "even in completely inanimate matter, such as stones or earth or water, there is a soul and spiritual life-force—that is, the enclothing of the . . . Ten Utterances which give life and existence to inanimate matter" (Zalman 1984, 287). According to the *Sefer Ha-Zohar*, "The form of the . . . [material] body in this world is projected outwards, and takes the impress of the spirit from within . . . [As] the seal presses from within and the mark of it appears outwards, so the spirit acts upon the body" (Zohar, Shemoth, 13b). Thus, everything we experience in our mundane world is an incarnation of consciousness.

Third, each world has its own distinct laws of nature and its own sorts of bodies, and these, in turn, have diverse capabilities suited to the nature of their own worlds. When a consciousness is separate from its this-worldly body, it has a more subtle "other-worldly" body (Zohar, Shemoth, 2:285b). Each world has its own conceptual space and mode of embodiment appropriate to that space.

Taken together, these three observations imply that what we experience in our world of Making is a highly constrained perception of what is really *Real*. The soul is, as it were, "held back," its "[native] power [and perceptions] obstructed," so that "it cannot do everything in its power" and "it can only act upon the body to the extent that . . . [the Infinite] allows" (Luzzatto 2007, 57-59). Before and after its embodiment in this world, the human soul "can see from one end of . . . [this] universe to the other," its perception is "unrestrained by the governance of the material world" (Winkler 1983, 271), though still constrained by the laws of perception of its own, more subtle, world. Perhaps unsurprisingly, human souls are

not the only ones constrained by this arrangement (Zohar, Bereshith, 1:65b):

[The souls of non-humans (including rocks, trees, birds, etc.)] . . . assume shapes which are clothed in another garment . . . They would . . . [prefer to] partake of the garment of humankind, corresponding to their inner nature, but their forms are covered by the name applied to their bodies; so we find [for example,] “flesh of ox,” “ox” being the inner element of that body, while the “flesh” is the garment; and so with all.

It should also be kept in mind that *all* worlds, with their own laws of nature (not just our physical world), are likewise constrained. So, as R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi wrote (1984, 269):

[The] higher worlds receive, in a somewhat more ‘revealed’ form, than do the lower; and all creatures therein receive each according to its capacity and nature, which is the nature and the form of the particular flow . . . [with] which the . . . *Ejijn Sof* imbues and illumines it.

If the light of the Infinite were not concealed, it could not be revealed, and all that exists in all worlds would be nullified by its unmediated inundation (Zalman 1984, 303): “[It] is like wishing to gaze at the dazzling sun,” wrote Moshe Cordevero in the sixteenth century, “Its dazzle conceals it, for you cannot look at its overwhelming brilliance. Yet when you conceal it—looking at it through screens—you can see and not be harmed” (Shabbatai Donnolo, paraphrased by Shim’on Lavi, trans. by Matt 1996, 91). We might call this a kabbalistic (ontological) perspectivism on analogy with Viveiros de Castro’s Amerindian perspectivism (1998).

During sleep, the bond between the restrictive material body and the ethereal spiritual body is loosened (Luzzatto 2007, 189; Winkler 2003, 270, 271). Released from earthly confinement, the soul transcends its physical limitations and “once again ‘perceives from one end of the universe to the other’” in a world unbounded by time, space or matter (Winkler 2003, 270, 271). Having been liberated to experience the *Olam Ha-Nistar* without their usual restraints, the “freed portions of the soul can . . . move about in the spiritual realm wherever they are allowed . . . [and] interact and associate with . . . the angels who oversee natural phenomena, some angels associated

with prophecy, and . . . (Demons)” (Luzzatto 2007, 189), as well as with souls of other dreamers, the unborn and deceased. What the higher “divine” portion of the soul perceives and encounters “over there” may be transmitted to some degree through dream to the coarser imaginative faculty, which is stimulated by these stepped down perceptions of perceptions to form *dimmyot* or images “in its normal manner” (ibid.).

A similar process is at play in the experience of prophetic vision. While the forms by which the *mundus imaginalis* are apperceived are “mental constructs or phantasma,” they are not *merely* so; the experience “is not purely subjective” (Luzzatto 2007, 189). Rather, “there is a correlation between the [objective] spiritual form and the [more tangible] mental image” (Wolfson 2006, 167). While moving about in the *Olam Ha-Nistar*, the visionary “sees forms appropriate to . . . his [or her] nature in accord with what he [or she] is accustomed to . . . The image is appropriate from the perspective of the seer but inappropriate from the perspective of that which is seen” (ibid.). The vision and the visualized are no less real or empirical than when a person imagines non-physically present things of *this* world (Wolfson 2006, 320). These *dimmyot* are not “shaped in accordance with individual [subjective] human capacity” (Wolfson 2006, 36, 40). Rather, they are formed intersubjectively under the influence of a “community of vision,” “in accordance . . . with the received tradition, each member of the faith community participates in” (Wolfson 2006, 39). This intersubjectivity is not limited to the community of consociates. Rather, it is dependent upon a “dialectical relationship . . . between past visions recorded in literary texts and the present visionary experience,” which makes the present experience a “revisiting” of earlier accounts (Wolfson 2006, 53).

Variations in experiences of apparitions of angels, demons, and ghosts clarify the limits of the intersubjective vision. As with the other experiences described so far, the apparition is an illusionary perception, but it is nonetheless an illusion of a real *reality*, a “reality illusion” (Winkler 1982, 321). The reality in question is perceived differently by different subjects due to no limitation of its own, but rather as a result of the limits of perceivers. On one extreme, there may be conflicts where one or more people see an apparition and others do not, or an apparition “appear[s] before two people at once, [and] before one person it appears in the form of a bird or another

creature, and before the second person it appears in another manner,” all depending upon the spiritual constitution or psycho-spiritual sensory capabilities of the one to whom it appears (Wolfson 2006, 320). R. Eleazer Ben Judah of Worms (d. 1238), wrote that “[transcendental beings are] replete with images (*da’atano*) and the particular perspective of a person is according to the decree that has been established” (Wolfson 2006, 213). According to the Ralbag (d. 1344), the reason Samuel’s ghost was invisible to Saul but seen by the “witch,” and that she did not hear the words of the ghost, but he did, is because “she had focused her concentration on visual appearance . . . and that is what her imagination revealed to her. But Saul alone heard the words . . . [because] he focused his concentration on the illusion of conversation” (Winkler 1982, 321).

The Possible and the Pragmatic

Berger and Luckman argue that our normal waking consciousness presents itself as “reality par excellence” and that “[compared] to the reality of everyday life, other realities appear as finite provinces of meaning, enclaves within the paramount reality marked by circumscribed meanings and modes of experience” (1967, 21). They claim that the experience of “intersubjectivity sharply differentiates everyday life from other realities of which I am conscious;” in their view, only “the world of everyday life is as real to others as it is to myself” (Berger and Luckman 1967, 25). Their perspective accords well with “embodiment” theorists who see the physical body as “the existential ground of culture,” “the source of symbolism” and “the locus of social practice” (Csordas 1993, 135). For them, the *Olam Ha-Nistar* is merely an imaginative projection from “bodily interactional experience” (Varela, et al. 1991, 178).

The assumption that the ‘spiritual’ worlds of our anthropological subjects are merely products of embodied metaphor is problematic. As Tedlock, Price-Williams, and others point out, “what is and what is not ‘reality,’” including the assumption that the physical body and everyday waking reality are the existential ground of experience “is itself a cultural and social projection” (Tedlock 1987, 4). Such exclusionary, anti-supernaturalistic presuppositions for explaining others’ phenomenological experiences seem self-evident to Berger and Luckman because, as Boas warned us, “We associate a phenomenon with a number of known facts, the interpretations of which

are assumed as known, and we are satisfied with the reduction of a new fact to these previously known facts” (1909, 6). As William James put it, “a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent us from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there would be an irrational rule” (2000, 216). Instead, we ought to be challenged by Andras Sandor’s censure that “Seeing metaphors everywhere means assimilating other worlds to a particular world: it is ethnocentric and works against understanding strange worlds” (1986, 101, italics added).

If we hope to approach a lateral universal, we need a much more liberal construal of reality embracing a broad range of possibilities. In my work on Kabbalah, I consider the converse of Berger and Luckman’s presupposition: “What if, because of ‘natural’ restrictions and constraints placed upon our perceptions, compounded by limitations begotten of the narrow slice of reality we attend to, our everyday life is merely a ‘finite province of meaning’, an ‘enclave’ enveloped on all sides by a usually hidden paramount reality of wider scope, to which our consciousness ultimately returns? What if our common-sense apprehension of ‘everyday’ mundane reality is as grounded in imaginal apperception as the ‘illusionary’ images experienced by mystics?”

According to classical possibilist philosophers (Menzel 2008), we ought to make an ontological distinction between *being* and *existence* (also known as “actuality”). *Being* is the primary attribute of all that *is*, about which logically coherent propositions may be made (including propositions about things that are merely *possible* but do not *actually* exist). Thus, *being* encompasses concrete and abstract entities, as well as fictional objects. *Existence* (or *actuality*), is the property of only some things which have being—all that exists has being, but not all that has being exists. All that is *actual* has concrete existence in the space-time of what Berger and Luckman call “paramount reality.”

Philosopher David Lewis offers an emendation to the classical possibilists’ starting point (Menzel 2008). He argues that no special ontological property separates merely possible worlds from actual. Rather, “other possible worlds and their inhabitants exist in precisely the same sense, and no less robustly, than the actual world and its inhabitants” (*ibid.*). According to Lewis, actuality is relational and relative—everything depends upon the spatio-temporal location of the percipient (*ibid.*). Thus “the fact that there are . . . [worlds] that fail to be actual . . . is no more

ontologically significant than the fact that . . . there are things that fail to be within five meters of me” (ibid., for a theologically-oriented parallel, cf., Wan 2006 on “relational realism”).

Neurophysiologist David Eagleman has developed a complementary philosophical approach, “possibilianism,” as a tool for generating novel scientific research questions. He defines possibilianism as a position “[emphasizing] the [active] exploration of new, unconsidered possibilities . . . holding multiple . . . [hypotheses] in mind; it is not interested in committing to any particular story” (Eagleman 2009). The emphasis of possibilianism is on “holding multiple positions at once if there is no available data to privilege one over the others” (Eagleman 2010).

I believe we can approximate the philosophical perspective needed for Merleau-Ponty’s lateral universal by combining Lewisian possibilism with Eagleman’s possibilianism and tempering both with William James’ pragmatism. James holds that the “supernatural region” is not simply imaginary, because “it produces effects in this world” and “that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so . . . we . . . [have] no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal” (2000, 289). His pragmatic method asks, “what would the practical (*i.e.*, adaptive) consequences be if this (or that) were true?” The only uninteresting questions are those for which there would be no practical difference one way or the other.

What if our adaptations are pragmatically useful to a larger environment than we habitually consider? If we take the possibility seriously, we must begin by searching our own culture’s resources for more familiar parallels which might serve as bridges between worlds of experience.

Theoretical Parallels and Precedents

The Jewish apocalyptic complex (*i.e.*, kabbalistic perspectivism) boils down to three propositions: (1) all of our physical world (including the non-human and inanimate), is suffused and infused with immanent consciousness; (2) our encounter with paramount reality (the really real) and the consciousness underlying the world of our everyday lived experience is highly constrained, and (3) sometimes (and some places), the restraints are loosened and we are able to experience more than we normally are of the paramount “absolute” reality and the consciousness(es) underlying it. Our culture is not bereft of

models generated by respectable scientists that support these propositions. Three mid-twentieth century scientists developed scientifically-grounded, though uncustomary ways for thinking about consciousness immanent in matter.

In his posthumously published work, *The Phenomenon of Man*, Catholic Christian philosopher and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (d. 1955) posits that, based on the evidence of consciousness in humankind (the exceptional case) and in light of the overall unity of nature, consciousness must have some kind of omnipresent “cosmic extension”—to some degree, there must be an “interior” aspect to *every* region of space-time, not just human beings—a “Within of things” that is “coextensive to their Without” (1976, 55, 56).

Czech-born engineer and inventor Itzhak Bentov (d. 1979), took the argument a step further in his 1977 book, *Stalking the Wild Pendulum*, where he proposes that we ought to think of consciousness as a continuum measured in terms of its most elementary unit—the ability to respond to stimuli: the greater the number of responses to stimuli, the greater the degree of consciousness. Thus, in Bentov’s thought, all of matter is imbued with a greater or lesser degree of consciousness (1977, 78).

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson (d. 1980) pointed out that “any ongoing ensemble of events and objects which has the appropriate complexity of causal circuits and the appropriate energy relations will . . . show mental characteristics” (1982, 321). Taken together, these three thinkers lead us to interrogate our culture-bound partitioning of reality into conscious and non-conscious domains, and lead us to conclude that the complex systems of material reality display characteristics of immanent mind.

The kabbalists hold that the consciousness immanent in the material universe is subject to restraints. Bateson similarly argues that all occurrences should be explained negatively, rather than positively, and in terms of restraints. His example of a monkey producing meaningful prose on a typewriter is suggestive: “perhaps the monkey could not strike inappropriate letters; [or] . . . the type bars could not move if improperly struck; [or] . . . incorrect letters could not survive on the paper” (1982, 407).

To explain analogous restraints specific to human perception and consciousness, Aldous Huxley developed the concept of Mind at Large, which bears a striking resemblance to kabbalist Moshe Codovero’s ideas regarding the concealment of the dazzling light of

the Infinite. According to Huxley, the brain should be thought of as acting as a “reducing valve” in order “to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by . . . [a] mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, . . . shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive, . . . and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful” (Huxley 1954, 23).

According to Huxley, the normal restraints on Mind at Large may be temporarily by-passed (spontaneously at certain times or places, through ‘spiritual’ training, by the use of drugs, etc.). In such circumstances, the immanent consciousness inherent in matter becomes manifest to human perception as a sharp exacerbation in the homogeneity of the universe, constituting what Mircea Eliade referred to as a “hierophany.” In hierophanies, there is a “revelation of an absolute [objective] reality” which reveals a “fixed [non-subjective] point” and therefore “ontologically founds the world” (Eliade 1959, 21). Eliade observes that, for mystics, the integrated quality of the universe is itself a sort of hierophany, characterizable as panontic. As the kabbalists put it, “Ein Sof . . . is intimated in everything” (El’azar of Worms, 13th c., trans. Idel 1988, 144 in Matt 1996, 29).

From a neurophenomenological standpoint measured by physiological correlates of experience, dreams, visions and other states of consciousness divergent from normal waking consciousness are perceived by experiencers as being “at least as solidly and as literally real as any other experience of reality” (Newberg, D’Aquili and Rause 2001, 160). Mystical experiences can be corroborated in much the same way as scientific ideas, and often just as critically

evaluated (Winkelman and Baker 2010, 51). As Winkelman and Baker point out, “mysticism . . . has empirical content, providing . . . rigorous methods to study the mechanisms that underlie the processes of the mind” (2010, 53). Each mystical approach to reality can be appreciated as “a science of the mind and consciousness, turning trained attention and observational processes toward a systematic examination of mental processes” (Winkelman and Baker 2010, 53).

A(n Excluded) Middle Way: Methodological Possibilianism

All human beings develop mental constructs, or “ideoverses” (labeled “Mental Organization” and “the Mind” in Fig. 2) to represent experiences to themselves. These overlap to varying degrees with the ideoverses of others by virtue of common experiences and ways of attending to the world (De Munck 2000, 23-24). Our ideoverses are constrained and conditioned by (a) the potential experiences actualized in our environment, (b) the capacity of our sensorium and by (c) what we attend to or ignore, and these restraints, in turn, further limit what we perceive and believe. This epistemological “critical realism” approach, proposed by physicist and theologian Ian Barbour (1966), developed by missionary and anthropologist Paul Hiebert (1999) and popularized by his fellow Christian anthropologist, Charles Kraft (1979; 2008), dovetails with the methodological approach I propose.

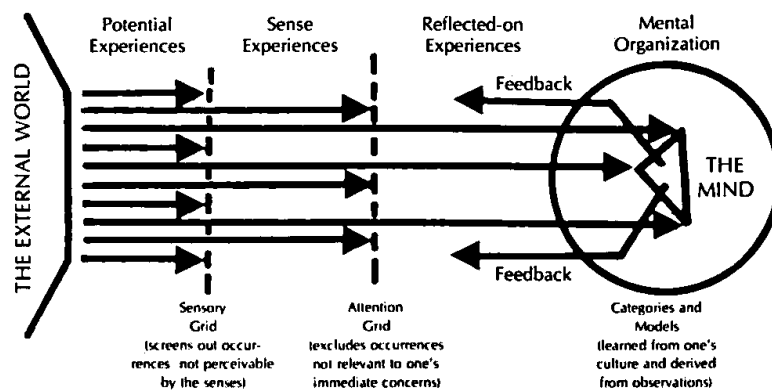


Figure 2.
 Charles Kraft's (1979) Representation of a Critical Realist Model of Knowing,
 adapted from Paul Hiebert (1976).

While the Hiebert/Kraft model certainly *accommodates* it, their brand of critical realism does not *explicitly* address a domain of experience Hiebert identified elsewhere as crucial for Christian anthropologists to engage, a domain which is essentially the subject of the ontological turn in anthropology, what he termed “the excluded middle.” Hiebert develops an analytical framework for analyzing belief systems, utilizing three cross-cutting dimensions: dominant metaphor (mechanical/inanimate—organic/animate), a scale of immanence—transcendence, and a continuum of empirical—transempirical ways of knowing. He argues that the sector of this-worldly, transempirical beings and forces (e.g., “magic, the evil eye, earthly spirits, ancestors, witchcraft, divination,” and anything else “Beyond immediate sense experience . . . [or] natural explanation, [knowledge of which] is based on inference or supernatural experiences”²) occupies a middle zone excluded in the “two-tier universe” of dualistically compartmentalizing “modern people,” and constitutes an excluded middle sector which we find extremely difficult to understand or relate to, but that is very real and immanent to our interlocutors (Hiebert 1982, 39 ff.; 1985, 157-158; Hiebert and Meneses 1995, 12; Hiebert, et al. 1999, 47-72). In alerting Christian anthropologists to their blindness toward the excluded middle, Hiebert is, perhaps, an unheralded pioneer of the ontological turn.

Inspired by kabbalistic perspectivism, I propose that we adopt methodological possibilianism as an ontologically-oriented step beyond the mere phenomenological epistemology of critical realism, a stance which explicitly addresses the excluded middle. This proposal challenges both reductionistic biocultural theories, which see spiritual experience as merely cultural interpretations of neurological phenomena, as well as the absolute relativists’ (i.e., ontological anthropologist’s) “multiple worlds” position, which says, “what is real or true for them is ‘real’ in their own universe of experience, but not in mine (though I can regard it appreciatively).” Instead, the methodological possibilian acknowledges that cultural others might be

conscious of something ontologically *real*, perhaps that has phenomenological actuality in a *shared world*, which may, at present, be beyond the perception of the anthropologist, but need not necessarily remain so if the anthropologist develops (willfully or unwittingly) a consciousness resonant with it. In short, methodological possibilianism holds that:

1. the physical world is suffused and infused with immanent consciousness (there is no “external world” to the Mind, as in critical realism; instead, all is a matter-consciousness relation);
2. our encounter with paramount reality and the consciousness(es) underlying the world of everyday lived experience is highly constrained (an “ideoverse,” “mind,” or “mental organization” is an active experience, a verb-action rather than an essentialized noun-object, as in critical realism; its actions and experiences constrained or facilitated by other agents), and
3. sometimes the restraints are loosened and we are able to experience more than we normally are of the paramount “absolute” reality and the consciousness(es) underlying it.

The above-listed considerations enlarge the possibility space for anthropological explanation, encouraging generation of novel scientific research questions. Accordingly, methodological possibilianism additionally recognizes that:

4. In addressing any phenomena, as many speculative hypotheses should be generated as possible, none of which are necessarily to be taken as serious proposals (i.e., they are only *provisionally* held as thought experiments); no particular story is *ultimately* committed to, rather, multiple positions are held at once if there is no available data to privilege one over others, encouraging exploration of new, previously unexplored possibilities in partnership with the ethnographer’s interlocutors.

² Hiebert’s allowance for knowledge of the transempirical “beyond immediate sense experience,” through inference or supernatural (i.e., extraordinary) experience distinguishes his use of the term from standard usage, where it generally refers to something “beyond experience” altogether. It seems he may mean something more like *transpersonal*, i.e., “experiences in which the sense of self or identity extends beyond (*trans*) the personality or personal to encompass wider aspects of community, culture, and even cosmos” (Walsh 2007, 5). Transpersonal anthropology “is the investigation of the relationship between consciousness and culture, altered states of mind research, and inquiry into the integration of mind, culture, and personality” (Campbell and Stanford 1978, 28). I will use the two terms interchangeably.

Methodological possibilianism entertains multiple possibilities and generates novel hypotheses, simultaneously destabilizing the hidden ethnocentrism inherent in absolute relativist ontological anthropology's indiscriminate privileging of "strange worlds," by allowing us to remain critical in positing that cultural others might really be on to something which our own culture is unaware of (and so should be taken very seriously, at least provisionally), *although their perceptions and understanding of objective reality are just as restrained and (ultimately) potentially faulty as ours, simply focused on experiencing other aspects or portions of the overall system.* This allows us to explicitly engage the excluded middle through an embrace of the possibility that the intersubjective community of vision shaping our ideoverses may include more than just our human cultural consociates or consciousnesses like our own.

Applying Methodological Possibilianism

As practitioners of comparative theology appreciatively encounter the written and lived texts of others, they not only "receive insights from other religions," but they also "deepen [their own] repertoire of theological ideas" for their own theologizing (Clooney 2010, 113). How might (1) the insights of kabbalistic perspectivism deepen the repertoire of theological ideas for religiously committed anthropologists addressing the excluded middle in their ethnographic work? How might (2) employing methodological possibilianism help them better integrate the intellectual and affective dimensions of their faith with their anthropological labors? Only experimental efforts made in response to this two-pronged invitation will begin to tell.

Pragmatically speaking, it seems that any such efforts might most fruitfully be undertaken as engagements with what James described as "radical empiricism" (1976, 22):

To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy,

the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as "real" as anything else in the system.

Young and Goulet (1998) and Goulet and Miller (2007) have collected numerous case studies of ethnographers who found themselves thrust into radically empirical "experiential anthropology" as a result of having spontaneous "extraordinary experiences" while undertaking fieldwork (e.g., visions, dream communications, encounters with visible spirit forms, "psychic heat," healing prayer). Anthropologists with no prior framework for such experiences describe them as profoundly discomfiting and painfully challenging to their presuppositions, requiring significant intellectual labor to process and make sense of. However, anthropologists beginning from a place of religious experience are at a distinct advantage when confronted with "extraordinary" encounters on the field, as they already possess *some* personal framework for relating to and making sense of such experiences. At the very least, their prior commitments may make them more relatable to interlocutors experienced in navigating the excluded middle.³

A major challenge for anthropologists of faith contemplating working in environments where they may be spontaneously thrust into a transpersonal "participant-comprehension" orientation (e.g., settings where interlocutors are engaging in consciousness-altering practices which may affect the anthropologist, whether actively involved, or remaining passively peripheral to goings on), is the consideration that not all hypothetical beings or powers of the excluded middle sector would necessarily be "safe" to interact with, what they appear to be, or compatible with persons having a prior commitment to or association with other transpersonal beings (e.g., Jesus). A number of years ago, I was seated at a breakfast at the American Anthropological Association meetings next to Edie Turner, (in)famous for her account of seeing a visible spirit form in Zambia when she was unexpectedly "appointed . . . as one of the doctors" in a healing ritual that she was observing (something she had not "bargained for"), her profession that "spirits actually

³ As a Coast Salish tribal advisor told anthropologist Bruce G. Miller, "I don't see how an atheist who doesn't believe in any form of spirituality is able to respect [our beliefs] . . . Atheists have nothing to look at for similarity or for understanding metaphor. A Christian has a soul . . . A Christian can relate to our *shxweli* [spirit or life force] and the connection to rocks, trees and fish" (2007, 190).

exist,” and her conviction that their reality is the most parsimonious explanation for such experiences (see Young and Goulet 1998, 87). She was speaking about her openness to direct personal encounter with spirits, and her desire to experience any and all such potential encounters available to her. I asked, “Edie, if Chagnon was duped by the Yanomamo about names and kin relations, and Stoller by the Songhay about their language proficiency—if our human interlocutors can potentially *lie* to us (or not have our best interests in mind)—don’t we need to be concerned that spirits might do the same? Should we *trust* every spirit?” I will not divulge Edie’s response, but for most religiously-committed anthropologists, the answer must be, “No, we cannot blindly trust *every* spirit (or transpersonal experience)” (cf. 1 Jn 4:1). So, how to proceed? How should anthropologists of faith think *anthropologically* about transempirical forces, “spirits” and, especially, about spontaneous transpersonal experiences in the field that they had not necessarily bargained for (something not as uncommon as some readers might suspect, see, e.g., Goulet 1998, Grindal 1983, Meintel 2007, Young 1998)?

With deepest respect and admiration, I differ with Edith Turner in positing that, as with human beings, we should be mindful that not all persons or person-like beings/intelligences/agencies (i.e., “spirits”) necessarily have our best interests in mind, and it is

appropriate to foster some relationships and curtail or avoid others. Neither are all transempirical forces to be engaged heedlessly (just as unmindful dalliance with radiation or electricity can be fatal). As Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou propose, it is important to “test the spirits” while at the same time, one’s attitude “should not be one of skepticism, but of openness to hearing the voice of God when he truly speaks to them” (1999/2000, 176).

In my fieldwork, when I find myself in situations where I may be passively present for or encouraged to participate in activities associated with transpersonal beings or forces (a commonplace while researching neo-shamanism, Jewitchery, or shamanic Judaism),

1. I first make sure that my interlocutors are aware that I have previous spirit experiences of my own. While I do not always divulge all of the details, I, like many readers of this publication, have a personal relationship with and commitment to *Elohim*⁵, the Creator God of the Hebrew Scriptures who Jesus addressed as “Father;” and also, as a 17-year-old Conservadox Jewish teenager, had a life-changing NDE (Near Death Experience) encounter with Jesus which has profoundly shaped my own spiritual path since,
2. I inform them that a condition of my presence or participation is that “the Spirit who guides me” (i.e.,

⁴ I will humbly step aside to allow the theologians to discuss how to think about these experiences theologically. However, I encourage them to consider Beck’s *Christian Animism* (2015), and Joerstad’s reflections on the relevance of “the New Animism” to the Bible in her article, “A Brief Account of Animism in Biblical Studies” (2020) and especially her book *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics: Humans, Nonhumans, and the Living Landscapes* (2021).

⁵ The Old Testament biblical name for God, *Elohim*, literally means “Source of Powers,” or “Forces.” For purposes of comparative theological reflection, it is worth noting that this meaning of the name is made much of by Rabbi (and neo-shaman) Gershon Winkler in a 2004 interview where he speaks of interacting with “the different powers and attributes of the spirits of the stones and trees and wildlife and people” (a belief and practice he grounds in the text of Job 12:7). The interviewer responds, “This is interesting, because the idea of spirits seems to go against the basic Jewish tenet that says, ‘God is One.’” Winkler counters: “Well, it’s true that we believe in one God, but that does not in any way preclude spirits . . . However, where we draw the line . . . is that, while we believe that all beings—from stones to stars to trees to people—are being spiraled into existence by their own individual spirits, we do not believe that these spirits are the source. Instead, they are empowered by *Elohim*, which is the name we have for God. Literally, ‘*Elohim*’ means ‘Source of Powers.’ Everything else, all other spirits, are just manifestations of that source in the physical world. Say I want to apply a certain herb for medicinal purposes. The first thing I would do is pray to the Source of All Powers and ask for access to the channels that flow from the Creator to the Creation, so that the spirit of this plant will be able to help the patient.” He is not the only contemporary rabbi to express this view. Ohr Somayach (2001) also contends that “The Hebrew word *Elohim* most often refers to G-d, but it is actually a descriptive word meaning ‘one of power’ or ‘force.’ Thus, it can also mean an angel (Genesis 32:29) or a powerful leader (Exodus 7:1). Other forces seem to exist—wind, fire, radioactivity, electromagnetism, *chi*, *yang*, etc.—so the Torah tells us that they have no independent power. G-d is all powerful and all other forces are merely G-d’s ‘agents’ and they should not be deified.”

the Spirit of *Elohim*) may veto my engagement in the setting or activities at any time, and

3. I ask if these terms will be acceptable. Usually this conversation happens at the outset of fieldwork. My terms have invariably been enthusiastically welcomed, as I am taking seriously the reality of spirits they know are real, but am also sensitive to proper, mindful relationships with the spirit realm.
4. After careful, prayerful consideration of what is involved, if it seems apropos for me to participate, I ask the Source of All Powers permission, and request that I may only experience that which is Creator's will for me. Only then (if I do not sense a "No" answer), do I engage as much as I can in good conscience with continuous discernment.

Allow me to present one vignette from my fieldwork of applying methodological possibilianism to an extraordinary experience I had within such a framework. In August 2016, I was deeply immersed in fieldwork with a group undertaking a three-year shamanic healing training. We had been charged by the circle's leader to attend to dreams as messages from the spirit world (and to keep a dream journal). I approached this practice using the protocol outlined above.

One Friday afternoon, I had a particularly painful interaction with one of my five children, a 'tweenager' who suffered from IED (Intermittent Explosive Disorder). I laid down for a nap, reflecting, "It feels like they're⁶ always verbally flinging [dung] at us!" As I closed my eyes and buried my face in my pillow, I asked Source of Powers (i.e., *Elohim*/God) for a dream to help me "handle" life with this emotionally challenging child. This was the first time I actively *asked* for a dream communication (prior to this incident, I was only attending to spontaneously occurring unincubated dreams). I was intentionally open to divine dream communication, but also open to the possibility that a dream could be more, less, or in some way, *other* than that, and that whatever dream I might have (if any) would be shared with and interpreted by the shamanic healing training circle. Here is an excerpt from my dream journal (8/19/2016):

I am outside. Just outside the door of our home . . .
From the right approaches the Sadhu, Mr. Black.
I've never met him before, but I know who he is

(though he's not well-known. I just *know* him). One of my children asks, in a worried . . . voice, "What's that?" (he's shuffling and ragged, but tall and stands straight—he could be mistaken for a zombie . . .).

"He's a Sadhu," I say, "His name is Mr. Black."

He approaches me purposefully. For some reason, just as we'd been going out the door, I'd given [name redacted (my youngest—not the child with IED)] a playful smack on the behind . . . [as] an attention-getting gesture, not really a swat or spank, but a reproof for . . . dawdling . . . [something I would not have done in waking life].

Mr. Black and I meet face-to-face . . . [He's] reproving me for what he just witnessed and I feel harshly over-judged:

"You are poisoning that [child]."

"What, that . . . ?! That was nothing. It was a playful expression of endearment."

"You are full of poison," Mr. Black says pointing with great intensity at my face, but not anger. I can tell he *knows* poison. It almost feels like his finger is a conduit for it as he points it toward me and I step to be sideways to him and let his gesture pass me rather than point *at* me.

In an instant, I realize . . . [any action] . . . can be a kind of poison when it is not mindful.

"We are *all* full of poison, Baba," I say, gently gesturing in a sweeping motion, a [mindful] gesture of compassionate non-judging extended to all beings, including Mr. Black.

"I am full of poison, he is full of poison, We are *all* full of poison."

The Sadhu walks away, seemingly satisfied with my response . . . I notice other Sadhus wandering up and down the street, looking for others to speak with, but finding none.

Needless to say, I found this dream simultaneously comforting and *alarming*. Alarming because *I had never previously heard the word "Sadhu," and had no idea what one was*. After writing the dream in my journal, I googled "Sadhu" "Black" "Baba" and "poison," and was shocked to see an image of the figure from my dream. I had dreamed an encounter with the long-deceased Aghori Sadhu, Baba Krishna Das (I only learned later that the name "*Krishna*" etymologically means "black"). The Aghori are shamans reputed to poison people and fling dung at them, with the intent of provoking ego-transcending

⁶ Gender neutralized for privacy purposes.

enlightenment regarding the ephemeral nature of this-worldly attachments (Svoboda 1986). This discovery helped me rekey my child's outbursts as invitations to let go of egotistical feelings of hurt and victimhood.

What was I to make of the dream? Had I really been visited by Krishna Das Aghori? A demon (or angel) in Sadhu guise?⁷ Had God given me a dream using the image of this stranger so I would know the dream was not "*just a dream?*" Would God *really* send the spirit of a *deceased shaman* (cf., 1 Sam. 28)?! Did I have Indian ancestors disclosing themselves (a theory popular in the neo-shamanic training circle)? Is the "me" of that phantasmagoric Aghori-saturated suburbia "real me," and the author of this article the dream? Did Krishna Das dream of *me*? Is all this just *God's* dream (as Rabbi Winkler would have it)? Had my subconscious tapped into the morphic resonance of a universal holographic field of intelligence (Sheldrake 2020, the second most popular interpretation in the neo-shamanic training circle)? Was this some kind of spiritual initiation or test (a third favorite among circle members)? Had I previously read about Aghori shamans, seen a picture of Krishna Das, and forgotten, only to have the image and associations reemerge in a hypnopompic illusion? Or, had the figure been more inchoate, and when I saw the photo, with a feeling of *déjà vu*, I falsely "knew" that this was the figure in the dream (the identification a foggy-headed confabulation)?

I could not (and still cannot) fully discount *any* of these possibilities (anthropologically speaking), nor commit wholeheartedly to any one of these stories, and have since had to hold all of them in tension, since there is no available data to privilege one over others.⁸

⁷ Or, as a Hindu friend wondered, Krishna Das Aghori's namesake?

⁸ It should be remembered that methodological possibilianism contends that, while *initially* all stories are to provisionally be taken equally seriously, *ultimately, none of these possibilities should be taken seriously*, as it is unlikely that *any* of them is actually correct. Where the ontological turn indiscriminately accepts *all* sincerely held ontological stories (indeed, privileging the "strangest worlds"), methodological possibilianism inverts this logic, positing instead that *none* of our stories are *ultimately* correct (including the anthropologists'), because all non-ultimate beings' perception is constrained and situated/perspectival (all fall short, because we only ever "see in a mirror dimly" and can ever only "know in part," 1 Cor 13:12).

⁹ Christian anthropologist R. Daniel Shaw's recent book, *Singing Samo Songs: From Shaman to Pastor* (2022) provides an example that could be seen as one aspect of methodological possibilianism in action in a circumstance *not* directly involving extraordinary experience. He writes of how, in the Samos' awareness, the Bible "corroborated their mythology" and "added another layer of truth *to what they already knew*" (p. 174, italics added). He quotes one Samo woman, Ulame, as saying, "So the myth is our story. Having heard the myths, people can know God . . . My story is true and if we follow the Bible and Jesus' footsteps, we will be safe in heaven. Our ancestors taught us that and so does the Bible . . . Our myth is true, it is what the Bible teaches" (174). Shaw then reflects on how *taking seriously the Samo ontology expands his own possibility space* and invites comparative theological learning: "Such a biblical theology in contexts goes far beyond anything I learned in seminary . . . It . . . enable[s] me (and all who read this

I have been able to process this real, extraordinary experience and its possibilities with interlocutors in neo-shamanic, neo-kabbalistic, Jewitch, Messianic Jewish, shamanic Jewish, Christian and Sufi Muslim field settings (some of these conversations generated additional hypotheses). Bringing these hypotheticals into various field settings has been immensely productive for generating new research questions in partnership with my field subjects, and for deepening relationships with interlocutors who take dreams seriously as messages, opening up avenues of conversation that would otherwise have been unexplored (e.g., I now know much more about Islamic theories—and *lived experiences*—of dreaming, ancestors, angels, saints, and demons than I would have, and my interlocutors in all my field settings now much more freely share their dreams and interpretations with me).

Conclusion

This kind of research setting and orientation, embrace of ambiguity, and speculative anthropological reflection is not for everyone. Certainly, I already had my own religious story which could interpret the experience (as may my readers). But accepting it as it was, leaving open where it came from, how, and why, not attempting to prove or disprove it, and instead focusing on what evidence supports one possibility or another has led me into an ongoing transformational process of personal comparative theologizing while opening up avenues of ethnographic dialogue and inquiry previously unconsidered and inaccessible.⁹ Some readers' theologies may readily embrace the

invitation to be alert for and attentive to one's own unbargained for spontaneous extraordinary experiences in the field, perhaps even open to humbly subjecting them to field interlocutors' interpretations. Others may reject this as anathema, or spiritually "playing with fire." Before jumping to any conclusion, I urge readers to deeply ponder the comparative theologies of Abhishiktananda (2007), Beck (2015), Griffiths (2004), and Yule (2005).

Much of what we call "knowledge" is, if we turn a critical gaze upon it, actually *faith*. But, as Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook wrote, "The essence of faith is an awareness of the vastness of Infinity. Whatever conception of it enters the mind is an absolutely negligible speck in comparison to what should be conceived, and what should be conceived is no less negligible compared to what it really is" (Kook 1961, 124 in Matt 1996, 32). Perhaps if we conceive a wider Infinity than we have heretofore allowed, we will have greater latitude to discover things about human nature, our universe, and the realities behind our respective ontologies than we heretofore imagined.

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book) to appreciate how the Samo internalized their understanding of the Bible in their time and place *and thereby expand[s] my own schema as it relates to knowing God*" (p. 174, italics added).

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