

We Are Responsible:

Reader-response Criticism, Reflexive Religion, and Ministerial Author(ity)

The Rev. Dr. Carl Gregg (carl_gregg@yahoo.com)

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At last year's Harpers Ferry Study Group, The Rev. Fred Muir expanded on his Berry Street Essay, "From iChurch to Beloved Community." One of the "trinity of errors" that Fred named that stymies Unitarian Universalism is that, "we refuse to acknowledge and treat our allergy to authority and power, though all the symptoms compromise a healthy future." To continue that conversation, this year's study group is on "Antidote to the Allergy: Claiming Healthy Authority." And this paper will explore how the school of literary theory known as Reader-response Criticism challenges us to take responsibility for how we interpret texts, and to recognize that claiming interpretive authority can empower our ministerial authority. I will also trace a related path toward healthy authority through what our UU First Source calls "direct experience." The specific framework I will explore for claiming the authority of what we know to be true in our firsthand religious experience (as well as for cultivating religious experience in the lives of the congregants we serve) is "The Minister as Spiritual Director." Finally, I will consider the ways that Jeffrey Kripal's scholarship invites us to see a "hermeneutic of author(ity)" grounded in firsthand religious experience as vitally relevant for religion in our twenty-first century context.

I. The *Hermeneutic* of Reader-response Criticism: We Are Responsible

In our postmodern age, all traditional authority, including ministerial authority, has been radically questioned and can no longer be taken as a given. After Copernicus, Darwin, Einstein, and Hubble, we know that we humans are neither the pinnacle of creation, nor the center of the Universe. We are merely the most advanced species on a planet that is on the periphery of one spiral galaxy that, in turn, is merely one galaxy among more than 100 billion galaxies in the Universe. We are not “a little lower than the angels,” but merely “a little higher than the apes.” Moreover, after Freud, even our conscious mind has been decentered as we are increasingly aware of the influence of our unconscious drives.

Since the Age of Enlightenment, traditional religious authorities (such as hierarchy, tradition, and community) have been radically questioned. Indeed, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is called the “Father of Liberal Theology” for seeking to ground religious authority on “reason and critically interpreted religious experience, not external authority.”¹ The turn toward reason and experience as criteria of authority has been called the Liberal Turn in Religion, and is at the heart of the theologically liberal religious tradition that we know today as Unitarian Universalism.

And as I have experienced the Liberal Turn in Religion in my own journey from Southern Baptist Christianity through Progressive Christianity to Unitarian Universalism, one way of reading scripture and interpreting religious traditions that has become increasingly significant to me is Reader-response Criticism. This literary theory highlights the *interpreter’s responsibility*

¹ Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity, 1950-2005*, 1.

for his or her interpretation given the immense freedom and choice we have over how to approach a text in light of our reason and experience.

I first remember hearing about Reader-response Criticism from my seminary Hebrew Bible professor Toni Craven in a lecture based on the book *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, which explored the many different hermeneutical strategies for interpreting a text. Dr. Craven, invited us to consider that the various ways of reading texts could be divided into three major categories:

- “Behind” the text - reading for clues about historical events or sources that preceded the text or were the original context (*Historical Criticism, Source Criticism, Form Criticism, Redaction Criticism*)
- “In” the text - close reading of the elements and structure of the text in its final form (*Literary Criticism, Rhetorical Criticism*)
- “In front of” the text - attention to the construction of meaning that takes place between the text and the reader or the community of interpreters (*Feminist Criticism, Intertextuality, Reader-response Criticism*)

This framework made me more aware of the many different lenses through which a text could be approached, and that hermeneutical choices influence interpretations.

One of my favorite examples of this dynamic is “Prop 8: The Musical,” a YouTube video created in 2008 to oppose the passage of Proposition 8, which added an amendment to California’s constitution that said, “Only marriage between a man and a woman is valid.”² In the video, two groups are arguing over what the Bible says about same-sex relationships when

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_hyT7_Bx9o.

comedian Jack Black appears dressed as Jesus. They all turn to Jesus as an authority. And when asked if the Bible says, “‘These people’ are an abomination,” Jack-Black-as-Jesus smirks, “Well, it says the exact same thing about this shrimp cocktail,” which presumably most of the crowd would find delicious. He continues, “You know, the Bible says a lot of interesting things...like you can stone your wife or sell your daughter in slavery.” Aghast, someone objects, “Well, we ignore those verses” — to which he retorts, “Well then, it seems to me you pick and choose; and if you pick and choose, why not choose love instead of hate?” Indeed, the historical Jesus also “chose love” when he chose the two Greatest Commandments as to love God and to love neighbor (Mark 12:28-21 and parallels).

That one line from YouTube helped me claim more strongly than I had previously that I do “pick and choose” parts of scripture to privilege — and so does everyone else. But after admitting that we *all* pick and choose, the vital corollary is that *we are responsible* for what we pick and choose. And if we (or the communities of which we are a part) choose to emphasize texts and interpretations that increase hate, apathy, violence, sexism, racism, heterosexism, and classism, then Reader-response Criticism challenges that the resulting interpretation says as much (or more) about us — and our hate, apathy, violence, sexism, racism, heterosexism, or classism — than it does about the text. If you have the freedom to pick and choose, why not choose texts and interpretive strategies that are “standing on the side of love?”

A few months after I first saw “Prop 8: The Musical,” I discovered Yale New Testament scholar Dale Martin’s book *Pedagogy of the Bible*. He argues similarly that we free, individual interpreters are “responsible for the truth, goodness, morality, and social effect of how [we]

interpret the Bible or any other text.”³ To further illustrate his point, Martin shares a story from the Reader-response critic Stanley Fish’s classic 1982 book *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*.

Fish was once teaching two different courses in a row in the same classroom. During the first class, he had written the following names on the board over the course of his lecture:

Jacobs-Rosenbaum

Levin

Thorne

Hayes

Ohman (?)

The second class was on interpreting poetry. Fish told them that he had written a poem on the board, and asked them to interpret it:

One student pointed to the spatial arrangement of the words and suggested it could invoke a cross or an altar. Another interpreted “Jacob” by reference to Jacob’s ladder. We could imagine them interpreting “thorne” as a reference to a crown of thorns, and “Rosebaum” also as a religious symbol (“rose-tree”).

Because the students had been taught how to interpret religious, symbolic poems and had been told this text was precisely that, they had no trouble making perfect sense out of the text, even though the text had originally been a mere list of authors.⁴

³ Martin, 16.

⁴ Martin, 31-32.

In other words, authorial intent was not needed to speak with authority about meaning. Meaning was created in the interplay between a reader and a text that was created through happenstance.

Martin's shorthand for this phenomenon is that "Texts don't mean; people mean with texts."⁵ The pun turns on the double-meaning of *mean* as in meaning/understanding and *mean* as in cruelty. In other words, texts do not have meaning by themselves; rather, meaning happens as a human interpreter reads a text. And all reading happens and is influenced by the various interpretive communities of which we are a part. It matters if one is part of a community that calls you to stand on the side of love. We are responsible (at least in part) as interpretive communities for the impact of our interpretations.⁶

II. Spiritual Direction: Grounding our Authority in Firsthand Religious Experience

Reader-response Criticism challenges us to be acutely aware of the authority, power, and responsibility we have in how we interpret religious texts and traditions. This poststructuralist approach to interpretation is fully compatible with the Liberal Turn in Religion because it does not seek to retrieve an "external," "pre-existent" meaning; instead, meaning is understood to emerge "in front of the text" in the interplay between the text/tradition and the reader/

⁵ Martin, 31.

⁶ As the saying goes, "A text without a context is a proof-text" — that is, if you choose not to *contextualize* a text to lead to more compassion, justice, and mercy in the world, then you are simply using a text as a *pretext* to justify your hate, apathy, or prejudice. Or as I once heard Dale Martin joke in a lecture titled "Homo-hermeneutics," it's all about "Textual Orientation" and "Practicing Safe Texts!"

Along these lines, I have heard numerous textual critics use the analogy that it can be helpful to remember that the word *text* comes from the Latin root for "to weave" and is related to the word for "textile." And indeed all the multifarious ways of interpreting the same text is similar to how, when working with a textile fiber, it matters what string(s) you choose to pull and in what order — just like it matters what words, sections, passages of a text you choose to emphasize and in what order.

community. I will now trace a related path toward healthy authority through what our UU First Source calls “direct experience.” The specific framework I will explore for claiming the authority of what we know to be true in our firsthand religious experience (as well as for cultivating religious experience in the lives of the congregants we serve) is “The Minister as Spiritual Director.” In other words, I am inviting you to consider that the relationship between “Spiritual Direction and Religious Experience” is analogous to the relationship between “Reader-response Criticism and Religious Texts.”

Returning again briefly to last year’s Harpers Ferry presentation, there is a danger that an emphasis on individual religious experience could exacerbate anti-authoritarianism (one of Fred’s “Trinity of Errors”) by encouraging individualism (a second of Fred’s “Trinity of Errors”). But such an immature, navel-gazing spirituality is not my intention. Rather, Fred emphasized that two of the practices that can help us move from the “iChurch to Beloved Community” are interdependence and pluralism. And it is often the mystics of all traditions — those who have gone most deeply into the “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life” — who have been the ones most deeply aware of the interdependence of all things, making them the most open to learning from all spiritual paths.

And the practice of spiritual direction is one way of moving from a narcissistic spirituality to a spirituality grounded in the “interdependent web of all existence.” Henri Nouwen powerfully describes the difference this way in his book *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*:

Not too long ago a priest told me that he canceled his subscription to *The New York Times* because he felt that the endless stories about war, crime, power games and political manipulation only disturbed his mind and heart, and prevented him from meditation and prayer. That is a sad story because it suggests that only by denying the world can you live in it, that only by surrounding yourself by an artificial, self-induced quietude can you live a spiritual life. A real spiritual life does exactly the opposite: it makes us so alert and aware of the world around us, that all that is and happens becomes part of our contemplation and meditation and invites us to a free and fearless response.⁷

A paradigm of “Minister as Spiritual Director” might look like grounding one’s ministerial authority in a spiritual practice — which could draw from any (or all) of the Six Sources — that cultivates a direct experience of interdependence and a “free and fearless response” to whatever arises. It also looks like facilitating the spiritual practices in the lives of one’s congregants. After all, our 3rd UU Principle is “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” And to adapt one standard definition, spiritual direction, can be understood as seeking “to sensitize people further to [the sacred] in their lives, and to assist them to make a fuller and more appropriate response to it. The objectives are that simple: awareness and response.”⁸

But teaching along those lines is most authentic and effective if it emerges out of one’s own firsthand religious experience. Jesus’ teachings were perceived as remarkable because “he

⁷ Nouwen, 34.

⁸ Thomas Hart, *The Art of Christian Listening*, 32.

taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22 and parallels). And more than 300 years ago, George Fox (1624 – 1691), founder of the Society of Friends (known as the “Quakers”) invited his contemporary to claim a similar authority with these words: “You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say?”⁹ Among many other places, we hear a similar challenge in Channing’s “Likeness to God” and in Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” to question secondhand tradition and explore what we can know directly. Spiritual Direction can be a way of seeking such authority for ourselves today.

III. Reflexive Re-readings of Religion: Experiencing Reality as *Hermeneutical*

Having begun with Reader-response Criticism’s call to take responsibility for one’s interpretative authority (“The text made me do it is no excuse”; “Texts don’t mean, people mean with texts”) and having pointed toward spiritual direction as one practice for ministering “as one having authority,” I will turn now to the work of Jeffrey Kripal, the religion scholar who is currently challenging me the most about what it might mean in our pluralistic, postmodern age to “to sensitize people further to the sacred in their lives, and to assist them to make a fuller and more appropriate response to it.” The *hermeneutical* method of Reader-response Criticism invites us to claim our human-centered interpretative authority, and spiritual direction can additionally expose us to the ways that reality might be in some sense *hermeneutical*. As sociologist of religion Peter Berger writes in his landmark book *The Sacred Canopy*, perhaps humanity “projects ultimate meanings into reality because that reality is, indeed ultimately meaningful, and because [the human condition] (the empirical ground of these projections)

⁹ “Testimony of Margaret Fell Fox,” *Journal of George Fox*, II, 512, bicentenary edition.

contains and intends these same ultimate meanings.”¹⁰ If there is some sense in which that is the case, then how does that perspective inform our ministerial authority?

Jeffrey Kripal holds the J. Newton Rayzor Chair in Philosophy and Religious Thought at Rice University in Houston, Texas.¹¹ He completed his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago under Wendy Doniger, the renown Indologist, and he is the author of six books with the University of Chicago Press as well as a groundbreaking undergraduate textbook in *Comparative Religions*. I have taken time to establish some of Kripal’s academic credentials because when it comes to the history of testimonies about personal religious experience, there are a lot charlatans. And it is important to balance our First Source with our Fifth Source (“reason and the results of science that warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit”). But from what I can tell, Kripal is telling the truth, to the best of his ability, about his direct experience. And in his scholarship, he brings academic rigor to claims about religious experiences both in the past and today.

Regarding one of his more formative direct experiences, Kripal writes that in 1989 in northeast India:

For days, I had been participating in the annual Bengali celebration of the goddess Kali in the streets and temples of Calcutta (now Kolkata). One morning I woke up asleep, that is, I woke up, but my body did not. I couldn’t move. I was paralyzed, like a corpse, more or less exactly like the Hindu god Shiva as he is traditionally portrayed in Tantric art, lying prostrate beneath Kali’s feet. Then those “feet” touched me. An incredibly subtle, immensely pleasurable, and terrifyingly

¹⁰ Berger, 180.

¹¹ For more information, see Kripal’s professional website, available at <http://kripal.rice.edu>.

powerful energy entered me, possessed me, completely overwhelmed me. My vibrating body felt as if I had stuck a fork in a wall socket.... Perhaps more significantly, my brain felt as if it had suddenly hooked up to some sort of occult Internet and that billions of bits of information were being downloaded into its neural net. Or better, it felt as if my entire being was being reprogrammed or rewired.... It is almost as if some kind of direct, right-brained, mind-to-mind transmission took place, as if those residual plasmic energies were encoded with ideas or structures that could not be “language’d” but could be stored and later intuited and consciously shaped in the mirror of other resonant or echoing authors until they could appear, now through the prism of the left-brain’s words, as my books.”¹²

Now, there is much to be said about the different criteria of authority that science and spirituality use to understand reality. For now, suffice it to say that modern science is a powerful and successful methodology for studying parts of our universe that are objective, repeatable, and independently verifiable. But it is a mistake to extrapolate from the power of the scientific method that science is the only way of obtaining trustworthy knowledge about the universe. Indeed, that modernist mistake is part of what *postmodernism* is all about.

Modernity (“the modern world”) was about the seeming triumph of secularization, industrialization, progress, and rationality — understanding the world as a *machine*: the dream that if we could just figure out how all the component parts work, then we could understand the whole. *Postmodernity* is where we find ourselves now because it turns out that science,

¹² Kripal, *Mutants & Mystics*, 6-8.

rationality, and materialism alone — as powerful as that worldview continues to be — is insufficient. The universe is messier, more complex, more interdependent than modernity allowed. The postmodern world in which we find ourselves is skeptical of universal answers and open to multiple ways of obtaining knowledge.

As a case in point, Kripal's direct, personal, subjective experience came unexpectedly, and cannot be reliably repeated in a laboratory. In the words of the philosopher and psychologist William James, who a century ago extensively studied *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, "In order to disprove the assertion that all crows are black, one white crow is sufficient."¹³ For Kripal, his experience in 1989 was his one white crow: more than sufficiently convincing for him personally, even if he can't prove it to others beyond a shadow of a doubt. A related question for each of us and for the members of the congregations we serve is if you or someone you know has had a similar firsthand experience of the strange, the uncanny, the unrepeatable, the unasked for, but the nonetheless existentially real? And are there safe places in our congregations to tell our sacred stories of direct experience?

To share one story from my own life, during my senior year in college, as I was typing the final page of my application to one of the three divinity schools to which I had planned to apply, I "heard" a firm and distinct sense inside myself of "*No. This is not for you.*" And although I have not had so definitely clear an experience like that since — and although I normally weigh major decisions extremely carefully over a period of time — in this case, I immediately stopped filling out that application, and did not mail it in. That story is one among

¹³ *William James on Psychological Research*, eds. Gardner Murphy and Robert O. Ballou, 40-41.

many that come to mind from my own life as well as the lives of friends and family members as I reflect on questions of whether reality is in any sense hermeneutical/meaningful.

Returning to Kripal's worldview, as a Western scholar of religion in India, Kripal has raised the ire of fundamentalist Hindus for following in the footsteps of his doctoral advisor Wendy Doniger in bringing a post-Freudian psychoanalytic lens to the study of the Hindu Tradition. For example, the subtitle of Kripal's dissertation is "The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna." And when Kripal was defending his dissertation, one of the questions he was asked was about his preferred methodological tool. Without missing a beat, he answered, "a very big Freudian screwdriver"¹⁴ (Pun intended, of course — because with Freud the pun is always intended even if only subconsciously.)

In all seriousness, I would like to take that Freudian screwdriver pun and connect it with the point made earlier about both the power and the limitations of the authority available through the scientific method. In the words of the twentieth-century Indian mystic Bhagwan Rajneesh (1931–1990), "Freud only got to the third chakra." The implication is that Freud specifically and science generally are right in many ways, but neither goes far enough.¹⁵ Indeed, there is an intrinsic limit to the scientific method, which functions best when the object of study is repeatable and verifiable in laboratory conditions, making it often inadequate for studying interior, unpredictable, subjective episodes.

To consider an analogy, if we translate the first three chakras into more familiar scientific terms, we get "the anal, genital, and digestive." And if you think of those Freudian terms that

¹⁴ Kripal, *Comparing Religions*, 204.

¹⁵ Kripal, *Esalen*, 144.

have captured the popular imagination such as “anal-retentive” and “Oedipus/Electra Complex,” these areas focus on our unconscious motives related to areas “below the waist.” And rational science generally is better at addressing the aspects of the human condition represented by those first three chakras — the anal, genital, and digestive — than it is at addressing the subjective, poetic “mystical love” in the fourth (or “heart”) chakra, the “still-speaking ecstasy” of the throat chakra into the “near-absorptive state” (or “third eye” opening) of the sixth chakra, to the “complete absorption,” unitive state of the seventh chakra.¹⁶

From the opposite direction, just as spiritual teachers have criticized scientists for only getting to the “third chakra,” many orthodox religions are rightly criticized for stopping “just *above* the waist” — that is, many traditional religions are equipped to address sublime experiences of the sacred, but their approaches to the anal, genital, and digestive parts of the human condition (the parts “*below* the waist”) are often nonsensical, inhumane, and unrealistic to say the least.¹⁷

My point is that as Unitarian Universalists, heirs to the Liberal Turn in Religion, we are in a prime position to use our authority to bridge the gap between science and spirituality — to be a place where the full spectrum of the human condition can be taken seriously. William James,

¹⁶ Kripal, *Kali's Child*, 2nd Edition, 43-44.

¹⁷ Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism*, 343. Relatedly, this “above/below the waist” division is arguably the reason why there is so much excitement about any mention of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Although I do not think that the historical Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, I do think that archetypally the mentioning of Mary Magdalene and Jesus exposes that the orthodox tradition about Jesus, for the most part, stops “just above the waist.” As Dale Martin jokes in the title of another of his books, it’s the problem of *Sex and the Single Savior*. In other words, if your primary image of the sacred is a celibate male individual, there is an unconscious knowledge that there are huge aspects of the human condition which that image of the divine neglects, especially if you are female or non-celibate male. Invoking the name of Mary Magdalene fascinates many people for precisely that reason: she reminds us of a repressed “shadow side” of orthodox Christianity.

whose “white crow” analogy we saw earlier, called such an approach “radical empiricism”: “a faithfulness to the full data of human experience that refuses to ignore anomalies simply because they cannot be fit into the reigning scientism of the day.”¹⁸ This approach does not mean, of course, that ‘anything goes.’ In Kripal’s words, there are good reasons to continue to be skeptical of strands of spirituality that are “superficial, flaky, anti-intellectual, and socially disengaged.”¹⁹

Kripal calls himself a “Mystical Humanist,” a term I resonate with, and which Kripal says “brings together the worlds of Western critical theory and Asian mystical thought, on one hand, and those of the Asian philosophical traditions and Western mystical thought, on the other hand.”²⁰ And from such a worldview, as Kripal has taken the risk of speaking publicly about his direct religious experiences, he has had many other professional religious scholars tell him *privately* about their similar experiences, which has led him to wonder “how it is that these experiences, which seem to be so meaningful, energizing, and creative, are so seldom allowed a clear voice in public, published scholarship.”²¹ In Kripal’s words:

The limits of scientific materialism here are captured in the joke about the man searching for his car keys. Another man comes up and asks where he thinks he lost them. “In the basement,” he answers. “So why are you looking out here in the driveway?” he asks in confusion. “Oh, because the light is much better here.”²²

¹⁸ Kripal, *Esalen*, 7.

¹⁹ Kripal, *Esalen*, 474.

²⁰ Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion*, 171, 197.

²¹ Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom*, 25.

²² Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred*, 261.

Although we should continue to look for rationalist explanations on which we can focus the full light of day, mystics remind us that “there might really be something worth looking for in the dark.” And Kripal invites us to consider that we make a mistake if we too quickly dismiss all claims about spiritual experience as “irrationalism,” “anecdote,” or “pseudoscience.”

What, then, can we say about the source of religious experience? Will we discover, as Dorothy did in Oz, a frail wizard, who is all too human? (Is that our authority figure?) There are many definitions of religions, but here’s one that Kripal invites us to consider: “The history of religions [is] humanity’s millennia-long encounter and struggle with the anomalous, the powerful, the really, really weird stuff that does *not* fit in, that does *not* make sense.”²³

²³ The following is one of many examples from Kripal’s work:

I was lecturing at a major research university. Afterwards, as usually happens, really as *always* happens, a colleague asked me if she could tell me a story. She then proceeded to describe the following series of historical events.

A few years before our conversation, she had sent her four-year-old son up to a petting zoo north of the city with their nanny. At 10:06 a.m. she got a sudden “flash” of a picture in her head of her son screaming in his car seat at the back of her car and of the car filling up with what looked like white smoke, which she did not understand. She knew it was a serious car crash, as she could also “feel” the impact in her child’s body — viscerally. She immediately called her nanny. They were already at the petting zoo. She instructed the nanny to come home immediately and to drive very slowly. They got home just fine.

The next day the boy wanted to go back to the petting zoo. He had, after all, not been allowed to stay the day before. So the mother decide to drive him up herself this time. On the way there, a car made a sharp turn in front of them on the highway, and a crash ensued. The son was screaming in the back car seat. The airbags deployed and filled the car up with white powder or “smoke.” The mother turned around to check on her son: that was when the flash from the day before re-played, like a precise “video re-run,” as she put it. The man who hit them offered to call the woman’s husband after the crash, since the woman could not get to her phone. The emergency call registered on her husband’s phone at 10:08 a.m....

Was this woman seeing into the future? Or was the future, perhaps as her future self, reaching back to her present self? Also note that, by acting on the precognitive vision (and hence by preventing the child from a full visit at the zoo), the mother actually helped cause the future event to happen (since the child now wanted to return). Or did the vision from the future intend a warning, causing her to be more careful and cautious the next day, and this way helped prevent a much more serious event? (Kripal, *Comparing Religions*, 366)

Now, of course, we can all take on a “hermeneutic of suspicion” in order to cast doubt about the veracity of anecdotal testimony. But Kripal invites us to consider that even science — through Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and through contemporary Quantum Mechanics — is showing us how space and time are *relative* as well as how “spookily entangled” reality is on the quantum level, what is sometimes called “quantum weirdness.”²⁴

Kripal calls the worldview he is espousing the “School of the More,” which is an allusion again to James’ *The Varieties of Religion Experience* in which James writes about becoming “conscious that [a] higher part of one’s self is coterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of one’s self....” But by no means is either James or Kripal saying that we can or should try to make a leap *from* a felt sense that there is “More” about the universe than what can be rationally proven through the scientific method *to* the existence of “God.” Kripal thinks that reality is much more complex, messy, and in-flux than traditional views of “God” usually allow. (John Caputo, an emeritus philosophy professor at Syracuse University says it this way in his book *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, “I am trying to open thinking and practice to the event that is playing itself out under the name of ‘God.’”²⁵)

Rather, Kripal invites us to consider an approach that could be seen as at the intersection between Reader-response Criticism and Spiritual Direction, which Kripal calls a “Reflexive Re-reading of Religion.” In linguistics, the reflexive case refers back to the subject, such as “I help *myself* to dessert” or “They saw *themselves* in the mirror.” In the case of religion, what he means

²⁴ For a brief primer on “Spooky Entanglement,” see www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/physics/spooky-action-distance.html.

²⁵ Caputo, 10.

is that the academic study of religion has repeatedly exposed that the sources of religion points *not* to an external authority “out there,” but reflexively *back to* human culture. As Xenophanes said more than 2,500 years ago, it was no coincidence that, “the Ethiopians [who were dark skinned] worship black gods and the Thracians [many of whom had blue eyes and red hair] worship gods with blue eyes and red hair.... And If oxen, horses, and lions had religion (and hands), they would no doubt paint their gods to look like oxen, horses, and lions.”²⁶

But here’s where Kripal sees a twenty-first century twist. Even after we pass religion through the skeptical fire of all that we have learned from Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and so many others,²⁷ we sometimes discover in the crucible of our own firsthand religious experience “that [human] nature is something quite extraordinary in itself” — perhaps something “More.” For Kripal, “the ‘angry ghost’ of poltergeist events becomes the ‘ghost of anger’ of parapsychology — still human indeed, but a most extraordinary kind of human, who is clearly violating the way in which the world is supposed to work by reason’s rules.”²⁸

For me, the writings of the twentieth-century Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung have been among the most helpful I have found for understanding this postmodern perspective on religion. And one of the most helpful metaphors I have found for understanding Jung is to imagine our *ego* (the part of ourselves that we are consciously aware of) as the tip of an iceberg that is floating above the surface of the ocean. An equally important part of ourselves is our *individual unconscious*, which is the much larger part of the iceberg that is beneath the surface of the water.

²⁶ Kripal, *The Serpent’s Gift*, 63-4.

²⁷ For more on those classic “Masters of Suspicion,” see www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2014/02/atheism-for-lent-the-spiritual-practice-of-doubt/.

²⁸ Kripal, *Comparing Religions*, 368.

In this metaphor, the “More” (what Jung called the ‘*collective unconscious*’) is the ocean: “the sea of mind and being out of which the individual psyche, that is, the person, ‘freezes’ into hard form and comes into existence, at least for a time, before it is melted back into the ocean. . . .”²⁹

And Jung taught that the two best ways he knew for becoming more conscious of both our individual unconscious and of the collective unconscious is to pay more attention during the day to *synchronicities* (Jung’s term for “meaningful coincidences”) and more attention during the night to our *dreams*.³⁰ For Jung, synchronicities and dreams are major sources of authority, authorities toward which Jungian-influenced spiritual directors would point us.

(In)conclusion & Author(ity)

Playing on the relationship between the words *author* and *author(ity)*, one final quote from Kripal helps show how the poststructuralist *hermeneutic* of Reader-response Criticism — as manifested in Reflexive Re-readings of Religion — points us toward the ways in which reality may be *hermeneutical*:

If our cultural and religious worlds are authored by us (and they are), and if we are caught in them as if in a novel or a movie (and we are), it naturally and inevitably follows that we can re-read ourselves and so author new novels and movies in which to live. The process can be reversed. The very fabric of our lives

²⁹ Kripal, *Comparing*, 368-9.

³⁰ For more, see our colleague Jeremy Taylor’s excellent book *The Wisdom of Your Dreams*.

can be re-read, and hence, eventually, re-written. *You...* have this extraordinary power to help re-read the human past and hence re-write the human future.³¹

In our postmodern world, science itself in both the theory of relativity and quantum physics has showed us just how strange and uncanny the universe is. As the scientist J. B. S. Haldane famously said, “My own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose.”³² Finding ourselves in such a universe, we can use all the help we can get from both science and spirituality to find our way forward together to make the most of this life and this world. May we ever more fully live into the author(ity) of our ministerial calling.

Further Reading by Jeffrey Kripal

- *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (2001)
- *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (2006)
- *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (2008)
- *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (2010)
- *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (2011)
- *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms* (2014)
- <http://kripal.rice.edu/>

Further Reading by Dale Martin

- *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (2006)
- *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (2008)

³¹ Jeffrey Kripal, *Comparing*, 389.

³² Haldane, *Possible Worlds and Other Papers*, 286.