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Metamodern Mysticisms: Narrative Encounters with Contemporary

Western Secular Spiritualities

by

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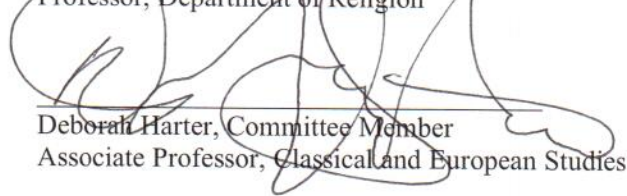
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ABSTRACT

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The phenomenon of *secular spirituality* has grown increasingly visible in the contemporary Western world in the past two decades. From oral or written narratives of life-altering realizations that unchurched individuals describe using spiritual vernacular, to the plethora of encounters with the supernatural and paranormal depicted in popular culture, broad interest in and even comfort with mystical and non-ordinary experience is found more than ever in contexts not considered traditionally religious. The *spiritual but not religious* (SBNR) identity as a Western contemporary idiom in some sense curates this secular-spiritual space in the current cultural landscape. This project seeks to ask how, why now, and to what effect.

To do so, I examine the SBNR and popular cultural instances of lay spiritual encounters that I am calling *secondhand mysticism*. Looking at how contemporary individuals encounter the mystical and non-ordinary will help shed light on the phenomenon of decontextualized, secular mystical experiences themselves, and will help consider new frameworks for viewing some of the central debates within mysticism studies. These types of encounters trouble the well-trodden perennialism-constructivism binary, and will consequently be a rich inroad to illuminating the larger epistemic terrain that undergirds the SBNR that I refer to as metamodernism.

This project seeks to add to two types of recent efforts that have forged new theoretical bases for interdisciplinary scholarship in the twenty-first century: The first is the scholarly engagement with mysticisms as a "gnostic" enterprise. I will explore the idea that a gnostic scholarly perspective, one that neither negates nor endorses any individual's particular truth claims but instead generates third positions, has the possibility of accessing, performing, and/or even, at its most extreme, producing a secondhand mystical moment of "Aha!"

The second current interdisciplinary project is the theorizing of metamodernism. Previous studies of the SBNR, of popular culture mysticism, and indeed of this gnostic position, I will argue here, have yet to account for and situate the emergence of this secular-spiritual sensibility within recent shifts in the contemporary Western cultural *episteme* (a term I

borrow from the Foucauldian schema). Whereas the debate dominating mysticism studies that has for decades hinged on a central bifurcation pitting universalism against contextualism is, arguably, the product of modern and postmodern views colliding, I will take the position that the SBNR and the gnostic approach to viewing secular mystical phenomena are something else. That something else, I assert here, is the product and/or producer of a so-called metamodern shift, in which the Western cultural frame enacts a kind of collective emergence out from under the thumb of hyper-relativization and irony, among other postmodern ideas.

Metamodernism factors into my study of secondhand mysticisms as a theoretical tool in three senses: as an instrument of historical contextualization or periodization; as an emerging narrative container in the figuring of the SBNR that gives contour to the secular and spiritual bridges and to the Western encounter with "the East"; and as a way of accounting for specific types of content that secular popular culture brings to the exploration of mysticisms.

To examine the theoretical work metamodernism can do, I first locate the SBNR in currents of American spiritualities by identifying some of its major narratives as metamodern. I illustrate the intersection of these in chapters two and four by looking at instances of Neo-Advaita Vedanta spirituality as performed through the figure of Russell Brand and other contemporary expositors. In chapter three, I use popular culture depictions of monsters such as those in Joss Whedon's cult television show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* to show how metamodern monsters have shifted narratives of the monstrous Other in a manner that highlights social shifts toward pluralism and inclusivism. Other ethical considerations related to this post-postmodern epistemic shift will be discussed in chapter five. There I also continue to make my case for the efficacy of theorization of a new episteme—in simple terms, to say why and when the signifier *postmodernism* needs replacing and what doing so will accomplish for the academic study of religion.

Each chapter includes analysis of different types of mystical narratives: In chapter two, an anonymous account from a contemporary "ordinary mystic", in chapter three, those of fictional television characters, and in chapter four, from a highly visible celebrity—each for how they convey personal transformation and understanding of the secular-spiritual qualities such as I identify here and also for how they illuminate a metamodern immanent soteriology, giving transformational power to the viewer/reader, who becomes, in effect, a secondhand mystic.

Acknowledgments

Many people have been involved in the writing of this narrative encounter. There are two "without whoms" to acknowledge first.

One is my advisor, Dr. Jeffrey Kripal, whose work opened up the field of religious studies for me such that I could imagine that my ideas and perspectives might find a place in the academy. Reading Jeff's work in 2007 put a string of thoughts and intellectual goals into place that has led, albeit quite circuitously, to this dissertation. It has been an honor to study with him. It is difficult to overstate the impact of Jeff's work on my thinking, and on my experience navigating the twin paths of a mystic-scholar as one. But also two. And also a third thing. (A not-so-inside joke whose meaning will quickly be apparent to anyone after reading this dissertation.) I am quite sure that much of what I have written here would be a good deal paler— if it even ever came to fruition—had I not had the benefit of exposure to his approach to mystical material and his feedback on my ideas. I have borrowed and been inspired by his thought a great deal in these pages, and I hope to have done justice to the lineage of inquiry in which he is so influential. Any mistakes, misconstruals, or accidental appropriations, however, are my own fault. Jeff's confidence in my ideas has meant the world. I would not have taken the risk to pursue my metamodernism thesis if he had not bought in. Lucky for me, he did. I still kind of can't believe it.

Also, indescribable gratitude goes to Greg Dember, who has been my friend and thinking partner on this thing called metamodernism from the beginning. While I suppose it is possible that I would have found my way to metamodernism without his early queries ("Hey, have you been noticing what's going on?"), there is much that I might never have thought or found or even asked. It is certain that my exploration here would not be nearly as rich without those many protracted conversations and his partnership. Over the last nine years we have held one another's conceptual feet to the fire, making each other clarify and justify and rethink. Greg has held down the fort in numerous other ways while I have been at work on the doctorate, for which I am very thankful. The huge heaps of support, reading of drafts, reminding me what I am capable of, and always having my back over our twenty-five-year friendship are priceless gifts for which I'll always be grateful.

My committee members have my deep appreciation as well. Dr. William Parsons has taught me a lot about mysticism. Early discussions in our seminars influenced my thinking, not just about the importance of theoretical categories like "experience" but also its place and role in our field and in the academy. Bill has been especially helpful and encouraging as I have developed my ideas on the SBNR. I am indebted to him for not only choosing to include me, a lowly grad student, in the consortium of individuals invited to study the SBNR as a collective but also for having the expectation that I could hold my own in that group of senior scholars. What an honor it has been. Dr. Deborah Harter has been a fantastic teacher, mentor and stabilizer of my sanity on numerous occasions. I feel extraordinarily lucky to have had the opportunity to be part of her interdisciplinary Mellon Seminar in 2012–13, *Frames of the Beautiful, the Criminal and the Mad: The Art and Science of Excess* in which portions of this dissertation were in fact born. It was there that I first tiptoed into scholarly writing about the metamodern. Without that seminar, in which we were encouraged to be excessive in our thinking and writing, chapter four

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The mystic has nothing else to say under the blow that both wounds and delights.… There the unbelievable and the obvious collide.

—Michel de Certeau

The greatest spiritual experiences do not produce insignificant words.

—Pierre-Francois de Béthune

My two epigraphs represent two views on mystical experience that are, each one, eminently accurate while also seeming contradictory. The one suggests that there is nothing that can be said about the mind-blowing ineffability of mystical experience. Mystics throughout the ages have said and have "unsaid" as much. The other reminds us that the words used to describe mystical experience are often discursive phenomena that carry astonishing transformative power of their own. This project has found itself, from the beginning, hovering in the spaces in between

these two positions—positions that both hold separate and also bridge the dichotomy they represent.

I will be addressing narrative encounters with contemporary mysticisms and the manner in which scholars and audience members—readers, viewers, listeners, fans—make sense of them. The thesis here is that contemporary Western subjects who are both spiritually and secularly aligned, those for example who consider themselves *spiritual but not religious* (SBNR)—may be equipped differently than were previous generations to understand the aporias of the mystics, and the ramifications for them of that understanding. I ask how and why this is so, and what the effects may be for scholars of mysticism and religion, and for society at large. To do so, I examine the narrativizing of mystical and non-ordinary experience in the context of a structure of epistemes, hoping to illuminate cultural shifts taking place literally as I write, and that I consider a post-postmodern development that aligns with what some scholars have begun to call *metamodernism*.

1.1. Research Questions and Aims

The broad set of questions that initiated this study is as follows: *How has contemporary scholarship most effectively engaged accounts of mystical experience, and how has it come up short? How can we understand mystical narratives and insights in a manner that neither endorses nor refutes their truth claims—that hinges neither on essentialized/universalized nor on hardline constructivist ontologies—yet accounts for the way these narratives, radically speaking,*

possibly even reproduce, perform or generate the transformative potential of the narrative

encounter[1] with such insights?

I set out purposely asking quite a lot of the mystical narratives I engaged, and of scholarship's capacity to engage them, as I wanted to explore what their boundaries may be. The spirit behind pursuing this set of questions starts with a wish to address the contemporary mysticism scholar's conundrum: that we cannot simply refer to the mystic's reality as a universal reality, and, inasmuch as we cannot crawl into her/his head to know whether and what "happened," we cannot make any endorsements or judgments as to the content of the mystic's realizations. Yet we should not be willing to dismiss or deconstruct away the mystic's experiences for this reason—or for any reason, actually. I feel a kind of scholar's Hippocratic Oath is in order when it comes to the engaging of the personal, life-altering experiences as those that define the mystical encounter: a need to be aware when our intellectual efforts may do harm to the claimant or subject, an obligation to operate in good faith with respect to the integrity of the narrative.

I have therefore tried to devise a contextualization with the intent to illuminate the questions I raise above, and then go a step further. If I am successful, this contextualization will show how a reader or viewer of such a narrative may enter into a certain level of participation in the gestalt the mystic describes. Because this participation is itself potentially transformative, I am calling it secondhand mysticism.

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[1] *Narrative encounter* is a phrase used by Gadamer in a pedagogical sense to describe how learning takes place through story. Understanding, according to Gadamer, is always a fusion of horizons. Though I don't engage Gademer here specifically, I think it is appropriate to extrapolate this usage if it helps in considering the mystical narrative and the reader encountering it as a fusing of horizons. See Goodson and Gill, "The Nature of Narrative Encounter."

I hope that at minimum this exploration will make possible a good-faith meeting between the fluid, multivectored logics of the mystic with the multivectored approach I take. That is, I wish to show that such a contextualization allows for, and also depends to some extent upon, making (and un-making) sense of mystical narratives from multiple directions.[2] In many ways that I will discuss, the secular and the spiritual belong in conversation when it comes to the study of mysticism and spiritual experience. As Paul Heelas writes, the languages and experiences of spirituality "serve as a vehicle for critical reflection," while humanistic "secular" usage "[enters] the picture by affirming non-materialist experiences."[3] This dissertation, then, hosts a kind of interreligious dialogue between the secular and the spiritual.

An epistemic contextualization of metamodernism is one important frame for this conversation. It will address how mystical transformations are increasingly viewed less as a means of transcending this-worldly existence and more as products, and enrichers, of an embodied and immanent life, in terms of the meanings made, the identity issues they present, the ethical conundrums they engage, and other this-worldly concerns that I will discuss. Confronting this paradox inherent in contemporary secular spiritualities at very least assists in giving shrift to religious or spiritual certainties and truth claims in the dominant secular culture.

The line of questioning I refer to above as my starting point is not original to me. In fact, it comes basically as a synthesis of what I have learned from the scholars and mystics, and mystic-scholars, upon whose work I build my theory of the secular-spiritual's hermeneutical both/and mechanism. I also build from scholars of Asian traditions who have actively explored the foothold that Buddhism and Hinduism have gained in the West. These histories establish the

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[2] Un-making and un-saying are references to the apophatic mystics.
[3] Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life*, 231.

opportunity for forwarding more ongoing interreligious dialogue between the soteriological paradigms of the "East" and "West."

1.2. The Conceptual Backdrop: History of Religions and Other Influences

My secular-spiritual approach is one that has been conceived and well-written by the lineages that define the History of Religions school of comparativism, as well as by those mystics and minds who have formed these scholars' subject matter. Those who are both mystic and scholar have been highly influential and inspirational in my effort to find such a voice of my own in this respect. Those who have explored the mysterious consciousness shifts that become available in the attempt to narrate the ineffable—or as I am calling it here, the secondhand encounter with such attempt—include Henry Corbin, Mircea Eliade, Wendy Doniger, Jeffrey Kripal, Elliot Wolfson, Gananath Obeyesekere, Amy Hollywood, Michael Sells, and Jorge Ferrer. These pioneering minds, whether explicitly cited here or not, are among the conceptual forces behind this exploration.

Another set of figures outside the History of Religions school have also influenced this topic: those who have troubled the distinction between mystical transformation and the discourse used to express it sometimes in advance of (or sometimes in lieu of) considering them as separate domains, and who have argued for and/or written with alternative discursive forms themselves to demonstrate. These include Georges Bataille, Helene Cixous, Rainer Maria Rilke, Luce Irigaray, and the medieval apophatic mystic Angela of Foligno.[4] Bataille's inventiveness in crossing the

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[4] The language of the female Christian mystics tended to be less apophatic than their male counterparts, and was more likely to declare a discursive "allness" next to the apophatic "not this." Angela of Foligno is arguably an exception.

boundaries of the limits of language to convey the mystic's excesses are hugely relevant to secondhand mysticism (and to metamodernism, which I hope to show in a future piece). Cixous's discursive innovations were the topic of my undergraduate thesis, along with Rilke, who created poetry in the voice of a mystic or rendered mystical thoughts in the voice of a poet. Irigaray helped me understand the language of contradictions and the genderings in the mystics' expressions. Angela of Foligno unapologetically raved as she expounded, at times while in the throes of her mystical encounters; and when her scribe was too thick to understand these excesses, she simply screamed the impossibility of expressing her visions. Each did not have equal access to the variety of categories of discourse such that they would or could have performed the kinds negotiations that the contemporary scholars I mention here have done. But, in their apophatics and poetic discourses, subverting phallogocentrisims and other static significations,[5] they widened the way to understanding of expressions of the mystical "Aha!"—at least for this writer.

1.2.1. Symbolic Flexibility

Working with this material has been helped by my exposure to Obeyesekere's psychoanalytic anthropology as elucidated in *Medusa's Hair* and *The Work of Culture*. These texts contain several ideas that I regard as important to the study of accounts of mystical experiences, miracles, magic, and other impossibilities. Obeyesekere uncovered the importance of individual symbols as pertains to anthropology—a field which, he wrote, has assigned

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[5] See Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*. Hollywood has written that Irigaray's theorizations on the feminine imaginary mimic mystical modes of writing that subvert the "phallic economy of Western culture" (118), giving rise to her term *phallogocentrism*; and that the writings of Cixous defend the "art" of the hysterical expressions of the mystics (4).

meaning to just about every corner of life but for the glaring exception of the individual's private life of the unconscious. Obeyesekere's work is theoretically anchored in a conviction that the combined strengths of the psychoanalytic and anthropological codes can function to right the hermeneutic ship when it lists under the reductive tendencies of the disciplines in isolation.

His most substantial move for my purpose here is to show that the ways that societies utilize religious symbols are by no means equivalent. His example of a symbolically very "flexible" and rich society (*society* is the word he prefers, as opposed to *culture*) is Hindu India, where symbols are abundantly in use in almost every aspect of life. There is, then, one might say, a very expansive symbolic infrastructure for understanding and explaining the behaviors of mystics. The opposite would be said of the West, as a society that has no such myth models, in his parlance. Such a society has no choice but to come up with psychological/pathologizing readings of a mystic's behavior. A society with a *normativized culture of mysticism* (my phrase) would be one with a "shared idiom" of transformation and perhaps transcendence, that would put the often-inexplicable behaviors of mystics, shamans, and other kinds of seers and visionaries into a more normativized context.[6]

My early thinking on the social and cultural normativity, or lack thereof, of experiences of mystical and non-ordinary realities was the result of encountering Obeyesekere's work on symbolic flexibility. His ideas helped me think beyond the rather obvious notion of "mystical experience" being treated differently in different contexts and how to move beyond generalizations in accounting for that fact. In other words, it is clear to anyone who studies the mystics and their narratives comparatively that several of the key constructs one must invoke perform quite differently in different contexts. I put the phrase in quotations here to signal my

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[6] Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair*, 100–104.

adoption of Obeyesekere's suggestion that in a general sense all instances of terms *mystic* and *mystical* and *mysticism* should be read as if quotation marks surround them.[7] That is, one really should not say "mystical" or even "non-ordinary" or "experience" (as I do here, plenty, for brevity's sake) without plurals and other qualifiers. This is a point the constructionists make vociferously. Obeyesekere is especially able to answer their morcellation of such terms in a manner that avoids the potential of negating the veracity of truth claims or experiences in the process. Better than avoiding their negation, it seems to me that his interdisciplinary approach makes it possible to use a constructed but also contextualized *Real* as its own legitimate site from which to explore various means of theoretically framing them.

1.2.2. Narrative Defiance

As Certeau writes, the mystical drifts between extremes: "In one of its aspects, it is on the side of the abnormal. A rhetoric of the strange; in the other, it is on the side of an 'essential' that its whole discourse announces without being able to express. The literature placed under the sign of mysticism is very prolific, often even confused and verbose. But it is so in order to speak of what can be neither said nor known."[8]

Mystical languaging is intended to interrogate the very discourse about it. It is meant to exceed its own capacity. It has to, or else it fails to come near to its subject. Years ago, musing about how this crazy conundrum creates a kind of crack in the system, I wrote that in order for language and narrative to be a vehicle to explore the ineffable, *the narrative has to defy itself, or at least try*. It has to contest ordinary reality. One thinks of Bataille's *limit experience*—the idea

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[7] Obeyesekere, *The Awakened Ones*, xv.
[8] Certeau, "Mysticism," 16.

of an experience that breaks the boundaries of ordinary or predeterminable knowing through defamiliarization, or what he called *non-knowledge.*

One manner of narratively broaching this impossibility I discuss here is voicing of the "autonomy" or agency of the mystical experience itself (which I assert it by definition contains, based upon three of William James's widely accepted terms defining mystical experience: ineffability, noesis, and passivity[9]). A kind of widening of the subject/object parameters characterizes much mystical language, including language employed by Jeffrey Kripal in *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom*, in which he describes a very non-ordinary night encountering Kali in Calcutta. Kripal writes of how his vision "clearly understood itself" as an ascension to a super-conscious level and that "the vision wanted to claim" the ontological priority of mystical consciousness.[10] Certeau also writes of mystical accounts: "No one can say, 'It is my truth' or 'It is me.' The event imposes itself."[11] This kind of usage grants the vision itself agency to act *upon* the self, which, to my way of thinking, is truer to the mystic's reality of being *taken over by* the encounter itself. This language shows the self surrendering its ability to guide, steer, or even necessarily fully understand itself as an agent with something happening *to it* (*self,* in that case, standing for whatever the reflexive capacity might be called). There is still action, though causal directionality is inverted: there is a moving aside of self via the volitional component of surrender—passivity as an action, if you will. It is performable in language by the subject and the object seeming to have either inverted or to have merged.

Michael Sells writes about apophatic language as having a similar kind of agency when he says that it attempts to evoke something in the reader—"an event that is—in its movement

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[9] See James, *Varieties of Religious Experience.*
[10] Kripal *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom,* 251.
[11] Certeau, "Mysticism," 18.

beyond structures of self and other, subject and object—structurally analogous to the event of mystical union."[12] He gives the language itself agency to make an ontological move. In this sense, apophasis factors into my study as it has a performative quality.

In chapter two I will comment on the apophatic monikers of some contemporary spiritualities. This idea of widening the parameters and the causal order of the subject and object will also be seen in chapter three, when I discuss how metamodern monsters are given agency that was heretofore unavailable to them as symbolic of forces to be countered. They are now also subjects as opposed to only objects.

1.2.3. Meaning Event

I was inspired in my treatment of the potential power of the paradox inherent in mystical narratives to transmit, perform, or in some way share the mystic's aporia by Sells's concept of *meaning event.* This is a term he coined for "that moment when the meaning [of a text] has become identical or fused with the act of predication. In metaphysical terms, essence is identical with existence, but such identity is not only asserted, it is *performed*."[13] In his book *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, there is a sentence that has been behind my exploration of this topic acting as a continued koan: "The meaning event is the semantic analogue to the experience of mystical union." Sells reads the mystical writings of Plotinus, Eriugena, Ibn 'Arabi, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart and attempts to identify the semantic location, the moment, when a text acts as a meaning event. I read Sells reading these texts and find that these several levels of "meta" act like a meaning event on me, undoing unilinear logics and causalities.

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[12] Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 10.
[13] Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 9, italics mine.

Sells's entire passage reads as follows: "The meaning event is the semantic analogue to the experience of mystical union. It does not describe or refer to mystical union but effects a semantic union that re-creates or imitates the mystical union."[14] This riveting claim anchors my understanding of textual transmission as potentially both contextual and universal. Furthermore, it suggests accessibility to mystical experience for anyone who can read the language, regardless of home tradition or lack thereof.[15]

1.3. Tricky Terminology and Other Symbols

Because no one methodology defines the field of religious studies, definitions of fundamental terms such as *religion/religious*, *spiritual/spirituality*, and *mystic/mystical/mysticism* are floating signifiers used in different ways depending on the context. Therefore, I will make a few notes here and provide provisional definitions from which to launch my inquiry.

1.3.1. Defining Mystic/Mystical

My definition of the experiences of secular as well as religious/spiritual individuals as *mystical* is based on one basic criterion: that the individual has had a *noetic experience* of the nature of reality that destabilizes her previous structures of identity and meaning. I define a mystic as someone who purports to have had such, and in her own perception is susceptible to radically de-centering, life-altering visions or realizations. I point this out to clarify the stance

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[14] Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 9.
[15] Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 9. Sells maintains that mystical realization "entails a complete psychological, epistemological, and ontological transformation" however, and I agree that this definition should be maintained. It is not clear whether he is indicating that the meaning event is or is not to be considered a watered-down version of such by virtue of being a "semantic occurrence" (9).

upon which I build my approach, not to suggest that such a cursory definition by itself is adequate.

It may seem as though I use the terms *mystical*, *non-ordinary* and "big AHA!" as interchangeable terms for such de-centering, life-altering events. This is not the case, although the differences may appear subtle. The latter two terms I generally employ when the context of the mystical encounter is the focus and is very specifically secular. At other times, when *mystical* is employed in a secular context, such as in chapter three when I discuss Buffy and Willow's mystical moments, I mean to use the word *mystical* to convey the sense in which the realization itself has a "mystical quality" (as evident for example, by the aforementioned Jamesian qualities that I also uphold as central to the definition of mystical experience), while the event itself might be referred to generically, secularly, as *non-ordinary*.

A major piece of that scaffolding upon which I build here, then, is viewing the mystical narrative as a disruption of notions of a stable reality, of temporality, and/or of the concept of self. That is, one chief way the mystical text performs, or creates a space for, the apprehension of a mystical reality is to destabilize any notions of a single, static, or ordinary reality. In the aftermath of an encounter, when narrativizing takes place, the mystic grapples with a shattered conception of the nature of reality and the ensuing rearrangement (or total dissolution) of the self-concept. These I assume to be common components of mysticisms inasmuch as a mystical event, if it is anything, is marked by a breakdown of these fundamental meaning structures.

In doing so, the mystic doesn't just deal with destabilization and problems of meaning but in a sense *becomes* a problem of meaning; she *is*, ontologically, the dissolution, and is reconfigured by it. The mystic symbolizing such destabilization, her culture—her "readers"— will then either pathologize or embrace the account of her noesis (and there may be a hundred

points on a continuum between these two poles) and thereby shape the narrative, the very biography, of the mystic.

On the history and relationships of the terms *mysticism*, *mystical*, *mystic*, *spiritual*, and *spirituality*: Bernard McGinn traces the term *spirituality* to biblical times, when it essentially stood for the life force animating a Christian, until the sixteenth century, when it began to be used to signify an interiority, or inner sense, closer to current usage.[16] *Mysticism* enters as a noun, as something isolated from the public, something hidden, only in the early seventeenth century, according to Certeau. Beforehand the adjectival *mystical* was available and "could be assigned to all types of knowledge or objects in a still religious world."[17] Now a division, a "mode of experience" circumscribed the extraordinary and the ordinary.[18] "What was new was not mystical life—since this undoubtedly had been initiated in the very beginnings of religious history—but its isolation and objectification in the eyes of those who began to be unable to participate or believe in the principles upon which it was established. Including becoming a specialty, mysticism found itself limited to the margins of the sector of the observable."[19]

In 1768, McGinn catches the use of the terms *mysticism* and *spirituality* as synonymous. Then, from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, he writes, the term *spirituality*, having been elided *too* closely with the later, much-maligned term *mysticism,* fell out of use for a time. At that historical juncture, *mystical* was also used pejoratively.[20]

Certeau writes that in the nineteenth century, mysticism was pathologized:

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[16] McGinn, "The Letter and the Spirit," 26–29.
[17] Certeau, "Mysticism," 13.
[18] Certeau, "Mysticism," 14.
[19] Certeau, "Mysticism," 14.
[20] McGinn, "The Letter and the Spirit," 26–29.

Bound to its corporeal language, mysticism borders on or overlaps the pathological—all the more since the "extraordinary" character of mystical perception was increasingly expressed in the nineteenth century by the "abnormality" of psychosomatic phenomena. In this way, mysticism entered the psychiatric hospital and the ethnographic museum of the marvelous.[21]

In other words, he writes, for three centuries the "optic" by which mysticism would be viewed was the "'modern' Western society."[22] Its psychologization and biologization of course continue. But these no longer constitute the only nontheological perspectives available, as I will discuss. My typology of metamodern monsters in chapter three will reflect and expand on this epistemic point.

McGinn expresses the reception a bit differently: *mysticism* had regained favor by the mid-nineteenth century, having even become an encyclopedia entry, as the Transcendentalists took up the topic of "the question of the mystics" (1830s) and Bronson Alcott started his short-lived Mystics Club later that century. By about 1840, under the influence of Margaret Fuller, he writes that "*mysticism* lost its history"—meaning that its early uses as part of a total matrix along with liturgy and scripture, or as referring to monastics, for example, were a thing of the forgotten past.[23]

Mysticism was now a popularized term. As we know, since the early twentieth century, *spirituality* has often been vaguely elided with *mysticism*; and *mystical experience* or *spiritual experience* might be talked about in a general sense without differentiation. To be clear, though, scholarly works around the constructivist-essentialist debates of the1970s spoke only of

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[21] Certeau, "Mysticism" 15–16.
[22] Certeau, "Mysticism, 14.
[23] McGinn, "The Letter and the Spirit," 26–29.

mysticism. At that point few were seeing fit to argue about *spirituality*. And since the academy (outside the field of theology) has until relatively recently given scant attention to *spirituality* as a component separated from *religion*, it has had to respond to popular usages to not only resurrect spirituality for common usage but to inflect it as something other than religion— something now largely regarded by such groups as the SBNR as more authentic, more personal, and often, preferable to anything *religion* has to offer, as I will discuss.

Certeau writes that mystical language is a social language, by which I believe he means that social reality makes the extraordinary accessible. When he writes about the historical determination of Western analyses having a "determining role in the definition, the experience, and the analysis of mysticism," he is talking epistemically about the often-hidden influences of what I call the *cultural containing myth* of the West—the one that has determined that "what becomes mystical is that which diverges from normal or ordinary paths; that which is … on the margins of an increasingly secularized society." Certeau penned these ideas in the 1960s. His idea here will provide a kind of beginning to understand the relationship of the intensely personal mystical encounter and the ramifications of its inevitable social framing. I refer to the bifurcation of the secular and mystical, the divergent and the ordinary.

1.3.2. Troublesome Binaries: The Ordinary, Non-ordinary, East and West

The term *ordinary* and other connotations of the *normative* are of course problematic in their presumed transhistoricity. Yet, in studies of mysticism, we have to be able to refer to states of consciousness that are set apart as not ordinarily experienced, special, and sometimes marked as sacred. Hence the efficacy of the term *non-ordinary*.[24] But that, too, is problematic. Claire

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[24] I first heard this term used by Stanislav Grof in reference to states of consciousness he was observing in his research on LSD and on holotropic breathwork as entheogenic-state-inducing practices. Speaking of

Villarreal's research on Buddhist emptiness states reveals the important point that what is considered non-ordinary to an advanced religious practitioner would mean something quite different to the rest of us. "Buddhist yogis might argue that visionary experiences reveal a level of reality closer to the way things really are and that a direct experience of emptiness is the most 'ordinary' state of mind possible."[25] I utilize the term *non-ordinary* in certain cases to replace the term *mystical* if I mean to indicate a more specifically secular context. These examples of lack of equivalence when using such terms in different contexts should be presumed in all "East/West" scholarship—a usage I consider next.

It is now accepted that speaking of *the East* has an orientalizing tinge to it, which we now avoid by using the term *Asian*. Even as another potentially problematic set of presumptions comes with such a grouping, it is the best we have so far in the latter half of the 2000-teens. The also problematically loaded terms *the West* or *Western* somehow slide by and continue as acceptable usage, however, even in our supposedly postcolonial age. We are still learning Foucault's lessons about the connections of language, the production of knowledge, and the exercise of power, apparently. Protecting *the West* and *Western* civilization, scholarship, and viewpoints is seen as reasonable (since no longer in binary opposition to *the East*?) but nevertheless should be interrogated as a form of othering. However, since it is still the custom in current scholarship, I use it here—wincingly, but nonetheless—in the expected set of ways: as a shorthand for contemporary, for modernized, or for "the developed world"—all admittedly problematic conceptions themselves.

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the non-ordinary clearly allowed him to talk about his research without using the term *mystical* or any other term that has religious connotations. See, for example, Grof, *The Ultimate Journey*.

[25] Villarreal, "To Know a Buddha," 30n14.

That we scholars who laud the developments—spiritual and otherwise—of Asian countries and cultures yet still tacitly juxtapose Asian against Western is both unfortunate and something I cannot hope to rectify in this current work. Nor, however, do I prefer to take the easy way out and say that such languaging difficulties inherent in covering contemporary Asian-influenced spiritualities are simply unavoidable. But here I can merely call out the elephant in the room. However aware I may be that the material I present is grounded in Western borrowings of material from Asian religious and spiritual traditions, their utilizations molding and blending with Western conceptualizations as well as Judeo-Christian-informed soteriologies, I have to acknowledge that these Asian traditions, having already been put through the sieve of Western appropriative tendencies many times over, are to receive another such treatment here.

The term *experience* similarly extends page counts for scholars, as we must explain what we do and do not mean by it. All of these terms are as indispensable as they are problematic. Navigating these linguistic conundrums requires, as Kripal has pointed out, a cross-cultural grasp of the many forms of mystical experience and the contours of the debates that surround such claims, and a critical, first-person, self-reflexive analysis.[26] Untangling the synchronic uses in more casual treatments (such as I deal with in chapter one on the New Age's influence on the SBNR) would consume a fair amount of the scholar of comparative mysticism's energy.

Generally, *individual experience* is acknowledged as a different concept when viewed from inside the Western containing myth that harbors a stronger concept of "individual" than when it is found in the Asian cultures and traditions under discussion here (especially prior to

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[26] Kripal, *Roads of Excess,* 4.

their own modernities).[27] More will be said about the term and usage of *experience* in chapters four and five.

As a final word on the topic of the problematic and necessary terms in use here, I will point out that I make *narrativizations* of mystical accounts, rather than the mystical experiences themselves (whatever qualia that may refer to), an explicit topic here. This is by way of being clear about two things: one, my own view that the experiences themselves are not available as such—we are virtually always working with narrative interpretations; and two, no generalized grouping of meanings of *mystical experiences* or *Asian traditions* can erase the theoretical challenges inherent in working with these appropriations. In other words, especially in this area of study, there is no area of mysticism studies reducible to one interpretation. On the contrary, I hope and expect that my work will convey an insistence on continued metacritical examination and that the historical genealogies and groupings that I point to are presumed to require continued reexamination. Finally, I hope that my enormous respect for the Vedantic and Buddhist traditions to which I make mention comes through as I pursue what I intend as fruitful lines of questioning for all concerned.

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[27] See Sharf, "Experience" in Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies,* and Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*. Klein writes about the consequence of the inflecting of individual for contemplative practices: "[P]ersons formed by a culture like Tibet that does not localize feelings within the bodily boundaries, that finds life a ubiquitous expression of the cosmos, rather than localized only within visible beings, are less likely to become alienated from their own personal histories in meditative practice" (193–194).

1.4. What the Project Called For, and What Was Left Behind

Let me point out at the outset a few ways that this dissertation may be unusual. One is that it is as much about the approach, about inquiring into the methodological and theoretical stances taken toward such a subject as mystical narrativizations and the possible secondhand effects on their audience, as it is about the subjects I have chosen to elucidate my points. If it feels methodologically top-heavy, this is by design. Here, the method is 50 percent of the topic.

Moreover, dissertations are usually occasions to atomize. It would have been expected for me to approach secondhand mystical narratives by homing in on one aspect, one type, or one demographic within a specific tradition or one narrative theory. However, because the actual hub here is a new epistemic stance, one that contextualizes other theoretical stances and material, I felt the need to approach this differently. It seemed that an introduction to the utilization of metamodern theory for religious studies, addressing the topic from several angles toward a broader overview, was what was called for. I took the approach of setting up several platforms from which to ask some of the broad questions rather than attempting to answer from one platform a more succinctly drawn question. It seemed necessary to provide a number of examples to help show the how and the why of this cultural sensibility and further suggest ways to relate this new conception of the post-postmodern to contemporary spiritualities. Because this becomes in effect more of a quick "flyby" through a vast region than an afternoon spent hunkered down in one cafe, there will necessarily be much left unexplored.

Also, as with any worthy topic, the subtopics here that would help in fleshing it out seemed innumerable. For example, in terms of the epistemic shift and its ramifications, the growing literature of post-postmodernism and the theoretical material to support such moves receive brief treatment in each of the chapters, but the discussion necessarily leaves aside much

of that vast literature. The debates on Western secularism, secularity, or postsecularism that would help center my concept of secular spirituality are another example of a topic attended to only elliptically here. I avoid entering into those debates, preferring to call attention to secular and spiritual views and cultural dynamics that are combinatory and oscillative as against a qualitative determination of the dominance of any single dynamic or trend, such as terms like *postsecular* or *resacralization* connote. At any historical moment such trends in the contemporary West may be more or less appropriate in specific contexts; this is indeed part of the larger point I am making about the efficacy of metamodern theory and oscillative tendencies. And there are, of course, much lengthier histories on the usages of the terms *mysticism* and *spirituality* that rightly undergird my conceptualizations but are acknowledged only in truncated forms here. There are bodies of study on fan cultures, audience studies, and other popular culture theorizations that all by rights have a place within these pages. These are some of the many topic areas this dissertation had to be stopped from pursuing lest it become encyclopedic. A few others now deserve further comment.

1.4.1. My Initial Project—Accidental Mysticism

Originally, I sought to take on mystical experience as narrativized but also as experienced, specifically by people who did not think of themselves as seekers. I called them *accidental mystics*. I wanted subjects *for whom the answers came before the questions*. My own theories as to *what happens* between the experience qua experience, and the thing reported upon, and the qualia as narrated, would have a chance to be explicated via analysis of the accounts of these subjects who, I theorized, would be the most "clean" of religious or spiritual motives, and

if so, would be able to address the contextualist's argument that mystical visions come as a result of a preconditioned mind.

This supposition has long bothered me, since I, and others I personally knew, experienced visions or realizations seemingly "out of nowhere" and not as related to any prefigured religious ideology, ideation, or upbringing. It was, in my own empirical findings, patently untrue that, as scholars like Stephen Katz assert, a Christian's mind, being predisposed, will only have visions of Christian figures, and a Hindu's visions will always orient around the Hindu pantheon, to oversimplify an admittedly more nuanced position.[28] Sells, writing in 1994 (still in the wake of Katzian constructivism), takes what seems to me a smart middle-ground position that "while the meaning event's significance will be different for the practicing mystic of a particular tradition than for readers who do not practice or confess a particular tradition … it can occur to readers within and without a particular religious community."[29] So, again, one need not be a Christian reading Christian texts or of another specific religious identity reading the texts associated with that tradition to get the *semantic analog* version of mystical gnosis. This very intriguing declaration deserves further study, especially given my extension of mystical texts to popular culture.

In pursuit of this accidental mystical experience, I read hundreds of firsthand accounts of mystical, supernatural and non-ordinary experiences. Many of these were found in the database in the Archive of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC), at University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter, UK. Others came from personal interviews with

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[28] See Paul Marshall who theorizes the category *extrovertive mystical experiences* as those which "often occur *outside any clear tradition of teaching and practice*, in non-religious contexts, and to persons who had no idea that there were such experiences. It is therefore by no means obvious that the experiences are a product of indoctrination and enculturation" (*Mystical Encounters*, 9, italics mine).

[29] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 9.

subjects and a few from already published accounts. These accounts held many fascinations. As I read through them, I made my own catalogue, sorting them by what seemed to be the salient foci of the author. My headings included *ineffability*, *noesis*, *nothingness/emptiness*, *traumatic precipitative event*, *religion-specific vision*, *conversion*, *episodic*, and so on—many were qualities that I sought to bolster my own ontological observations and theories.

This was methodologically problematic for a few reasons, some of which one may be able to guess. One of the main issues was that the line between *accidental mystic* and *seeker* was too slippery. If a subject were walking down the garden path, and then, in their own terms, "out of nowhere" suddenly had a realization, this might be deemed accidental, but if the subject had been studying Gurdjieff in the months before, or that afternoon, or had just been meditating, or had just come from church, or had been grieving a loss, was it still an "accidental" encounter?

For example, one RERC account contained this text: "I did not knowingly ask for any of this … it all happened so naturally, like a song unfolding, and climaxed with its final Chord in Paradise.… I do not have a religion, never have done, life is just too busy to have a religion, mate. There is nothing supernatural, but that which is natural is super."[30] The subject had sat down to listen to music:

> and as I did so (hold on to your credibility) … everything vanished ... instantaneously.
> There was no room, no cat, no fire burning in the grate, no smell, no sensation of weight,
> heat, cold. There was no mass, no substance, no up, down or gravity; no arms, no legs, no
> body ... sod all. Only me and music in a total void. This is not a poetic description
> referring to my listening to the music, make sure you understand this.... It is "literal" …

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[30] Account #005426, 'Archive of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre.This narrative was quite long compared to many—approximately five single-spaced pages were logged in the database—but it was noted that this subject had actually submitted a 113-page document and that the archivist had transcribed just this five-page excerpt for the database.

everything was "gone." Even more odd was the fact that I did not care about it. I never questioned it at all.

One senses this would be a perfect setup for a secular, accidental mystical occurrence, perhaps an instance of *nature mysticism*. Reading some of the backstory the subject provides later in the narrative, however, I felt that making even that assumption would be problematic. He reveals that he had been a seeker of sorts in his youth, and that he had concluded on his own that nihilism was the best answer he could find to his burning existential questions:

Up to the age of twenty-four, and as a grossly uneducated Cockney kid of no great importance or significance, I began asking questions at the age of three, as to where did I come from and why, but nobody would answer them, and I was not too happy about that for they all thought they were so clever and smart with their PhDs and other medallions of conformative potential which amounted to a pile of Hybrid Dribble [*sic*].… However, by the age of twenty-four it was plain enough that I was not going to get any answers, and I thought nature was stupid to create beings that asked questions to which there were no bloody answers. And thus, one day out on the moors (Exmoor), an illicit day off from work in order to be alone with nature and myself, I discovered 'Nihilism', and I laughed at it. That very same evening while sitting alone while my first wife was out and I was looking after the kids whom I had just tucked up for the night … I died of love, for about three hours G.M.T. During that event I danced in music made of light, beyond this world and the known universe. After that I was given a question ... "did I want to go on further"? and it scared the bloody daylights out of me, I did not know what the question meant or from whence it come, or why, or how ... but it was just known, and almost verbalised on the inside (for there was no outside by this time). I was about to answer ...

thanks very much but NO ... and if it's all the same to whomever it may concern I would like to be back in the living room where I was a few million years ago ... but then I was washed in an ultimate love again … and I said … O.K, let's go on! Fate is loaded by the dice of love. (Einstein was wrong!)[31]

I tagged the account with my own choice of markers of mystical experience such as *void*, *no self*, *mysterium tremendum*, *timelessness*, *ineffable*, *nothingness/emptiness*, *witness consciousness*, *surrender*, *passivity*. I realized it would be impossible for a reader to know to what degree his early life was given to seekership, and that while it seems like no religion or spiritual path was part of the subject's consideration, he may well have left that detail out for whatever reason. Or the excerpt contained in the database did not include that particular detail. Furthermore, it seemed to me salient that his declaration of nihilism precedes the mystical encounter. But to what degree might this be true? And how would I judge? Did his subconscious conjure this "answer" to satisfy his "trauma" or "mourning" over the loss of meaning? A Freudian reading would have concluded as much. In any case, this account was not a clear case of *the answers coming before the questions*, per se. This is but one example of the questions that arose for me in reading mystical experience narratives and shows the complexity of evaluating and typologizing such narratives.

Other questions arose. Jean Matthews, archivist at the RERC for more than ten years, offered her opinion that overall, "very few of the people [who submit their experiences] have been *looking* to have a mystical experience."[32] Could this be a reason why they were keen to submit their accounts? In other words, was the surprise or the accident of it part of the impetus to seek from an external source something of an affirmation or a way to name the phenomenon

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[31] Account #005426, dated March 10, 1991.
[32] Jean Matthews, personal conversation, n.d.

religious—that is, an affirmation such as a public call for accounts of religious experiences might infer? Despite this opinion by Matthews, to my mind, in the background of the accounts I read, most of these respondents mentioned at least some abiding interest in spirituality or religion before the encounter.

The very word *accidental* is difficult from all sides. It will certainly trouble those who approach the study of mysticism as biologically, neurologically, or traumatically induced. Which part is accidental? The fact that an RERC respondent, walking home from a Quaker Meeting and stopping to admire a snail on the path, suddenly found herself at the bottom of an embankment, or that after coming to consciousness and before her rescue, she experienced a "sense of wholeness with all life and the overwhelming presence of God enfolding me and drawing me in. I was not important, I had no fear, but a total sense of calmness & peace…. lost in wonder, love & praise."?[33] The fact that another respondent, after an especially long day of work, suddenly had a strong vision of accompanying a dying friend through a tunnel of light? Or the fact that the death of this friend was recorded at that same time of the night in a hospital?[34] In any case, the experience itself will not be seen as an accident to those for whom the whole reductive effort is to explain its origin. I am not opposed to reductive readings if they are couched as one possible interpretation among many. Almost any reading will be, in effect, reductive, if relied on exclusively. What I am opposed to, and what I regard as incumbent on scholars of religion to problematize, are claims that there can be only one interpretation, one type of reading.

For a time, I redefined *accidental* to refer to anyone who was not a professional seeker—that is, in a situation of having given their life-purpose over to spiritual advancement, such as a monastic life. This discounted too many people. In any case, I still felt uncomfortable

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[33] Account #005506, Archive of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre.
[34] Account #100032, Archive of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre.

interpreting their experiences along my own subjectively determined criteria. Perhaps I lacked

confidence in my own ethnographic skills. In the end, I had ample data for some comparative

project—but not necessarily the one that I had hoped to accomplish. At some point it became

clear that neither any perceived cohesion of these accounts around my designations/

interpretations nor lack thereof was going to net a substantial enough branch upon which to hang

my suppositions.

Also, the question of why the accounts I sought were not available was interesting.

Though the RERC archive holds more than 6,000 firsthand anonymous accounts, for whatever

reason, the amount of accounts logged between the year 2000 and the present was relatively few.

As I had trained my sights on contemporary mystical experience accounts per se, hoping to

compare these narratives to ascertain whether they represented a qualitative shift in the

narrativizing of mystical experiences, I was especially interested in recent accounts from

individuals of millennial age or younger. These were exactly what I was not finding.[35]

The dearth of written accounts seemed to belie my supposition about there being more

accidental mystics cropping up. What I was hoping to show was that more individuals are willing

to talk about their experiences now. But then why the scarcity of accounts at the Alister Hardy

Archive? Had the RERC for whatever reason simply sent out fewer questionnaires in the last two

decades than they had in decades prior? (The project started in the 1960s.) While trying to sort

this out, I was hearing that the institution was in flux both in terms of their sponsoring

organization and the staffing available to log the accounts into their database. They may have

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[35] One reason is that the name associated with the public request for accounts (Religious Experience Research Centre) may have unintentionally discouraged potential respondents who would be most likely to affiliate as SBNR—those staking an identity on being *not* religious. It would be interesting to speculate what would happen if the term *religious experience* were shifted to *spiritual experience* or to a secular-friendly signifier such as *non-ordinary experience*.

simply been backlogged on current accounts. I was not able to ascertain this. In any case, separately, I was realizing that the question of whether or not there truly were more people coming out as ordinary mystics was not going to be answerable by separate close readings of the accounts.

By this time, other questions seemed to loom much larger. I had no trouble finding and naming instances of public discussions of spirituality that were increasingly secular-friendly— detraditionalized acknowledgments of consciousness-shifting realizations by "ordinary people." For example, I began listening to the podcast on the website *Buddha at the Gas Pump* (BATGAP), which features interviews with hundreds of "ordinary spiritually awakening people" as deemed by the site's founder, Rick Archer. Included among them are a handful of mystic-scholars in religious studies. This is noteworthy when we consider that scholars have their own special set of concerns about revealing personal experience in terms of how it may impact or influence their work, as I address briefly in chapter one. Some of these interviews on BATGAP indeed have an "accidental" component—waking up one day with a sudden realization that changes one's life. My question now was aimed at understanding why people seem so willing to tell their stories now. My current speculation is that the dearth of individuals submitting private, anonymous accounts at RERC since 2000 may even be because of the very thing I sought to show—a greater comfort felt by individuals in telling very personal stories of their awakenings. In other words, if one is not inhibited in telling one's friends or social media contacts, one would presumably feel less urgency to submit an anonymous account.

BATGAP is also significant in my research as an example of a content aggregator of other websites, groups, and podcasts trafficking in spiritual experience—some with names that evoke both the spiritual and the secular at once (such as *Urban Guru* and *Nonduality Street*).

Noting the increased prevalence of sites like these, as well as the veritable explosion of secular-spirituality-themed mass media, I felt comfortable switching my question from *whether* to *why and how*: Just how it is that "ordinary" and "spiritually awakening" people have come to be so comfortable and so cavalier about occupying the same phrase?

Building from the above questions and concerns, the already-developed pillars of mysticism scholarship, and my own prior research, then, my project settled into engaging the research question of how to understand the distinct character of the secular-spiritual mystic subject in Western contemporary culture. What does the increased level of interest in (and comfort with) the experience of the numinous tell us about the current cultural context and the openness or friendliness toward engaging the non-ordinary? And how is it that the general population of seculars seems by far more "spirituality tolerant" than in the heyday of the New Age? Exactly what and how does mystical material perform in a post-postmodern, secular millennial milieu—one increasingly composed of "digital natives"? Is this proliferation of mystical material helping the contemporary West grow and expand its symbolic flexibility?

Like accidental mysticisms, secondhand mysticisms as I conceive of them are a product of the blurring of boundaries of the Real and the "unreal" and of an undoing of bifurcations such as these, so that the territory between and the both/and are informing a loosening of hard-and-fast definitions. In short, secondhand mysticisms allow me to talk about how mystical experience is culturally normalized and is being represented differently, secularly. As I will discuss, the number and popularity of film and television depictions of mystical and supernatural encounters constitute one indication of an increased interest in and comfort with broaching the subject of personal mystical experience. I examine the place of popular culture in furthering these interests and conversations, and how these kinds of narratives are acting as mirrors, as in my examples,

Joss Whedon's *Buffyverse* and Russell Brand as high-profile harbingers of metamodern spirituality on public display. Reading these as mystical texts and asking how and what they perform open up a liminal middle space between their narrative logics and illogics to mirror the aporia of the mystic.

1.5. Summary of Chapters

As I will talk about in chapter two, mystics are no longer always situated away from the masses, on the mountaintop, or in a cave. Increasingly, people seem comfortable with the idea that not just a rarefied few may be having experiences that could lead them to an "awakening." I address the question of what happened to sully the designation *New Age* while many of the beliefs live on in the SBNR. There is no current text that I know of that explains what happened to cause this downturn for the term *New Age*, while their practices persist just fine. I was specifically driven in this inquiry by the fact that no one has yet, to my knowledge, made these connections epistemically past postmodern theory in a way that goes forward in time far enough to account for the current phenomenon of the SBNR. I therefore begin the periodizing of the metamodern SBNR.

In showing how metamodern theory accounts epistemically for the rise of certain sensibilities seen in the contemporary SBNR individual and the normalizing of secular-spiritual mystical encounters seen in popular culture, we are able to see how the younger generations— the Millennials and Plurals—enact a kind of dislocating or disrupting of ontologies, of singular identities, in two broad ways: 1) In secular contexts such as media and pop culture, we can see more pluralistic and more inclusive values being reflected in the contemporary cultural products,

and 2) An updating of epistemic categories shows that certain metamodern concepts such as this sense of fluidity of identities, the metamodern idea of oscillation between binaries or between a larger number of positionings in any delineated field (that is, oscillation need not be between only two points or positions), and the notion of liminality as a contemporary secular state help us understand how mystical experiences and mystical knowing are entering secular culture.

Some of my metamodern distinctions will be linked to certain concepts originating from Asian spiritualities and religious philosophies now in regular use in the general cultural sense, such as the idea of being in the present moment, mindfulness, and the use of *Zen* adjectivally. I submit these ideas to contribute to the research showing how the current metamodernism-influenced SBNR and/or current SBNR-influenced metamodernism—one should conceive of it both ways—reflect how Western seekers have been steeping in tenets from these originating traditions' central teachings. In particular, I will show that a "metamodernization of spiritual figures" can be spotted in Western Neo-Advaita teachers who have recently integrated into their teachings metamodern values such as fun, simplicity, and lighthearted innocence (all in their metamodern, self-reflexive, performed sense), and that this amounts to a shift to a more world-affirming perspective that may be in some respects traceable all the way back to the home tradition. Each of the chapters to some extent slides metamodernism and contemporary secular spiritualities near to Asian traditions that have come West. This is an ongoing exploration for me in which I make an effort to connect Asian influences and Western spiritualities, past the New Age, and also past postmodernist relativism, to the current post-postmodern character that I argue typifies at least some portion of the current SBNR.

In chapter three, I build on the observations made in chapter two about fluidity of identities to show how, and to ask why, the metamodern monstrous reflects this. Succinctly: "As

our ideas of self-identity alter so do our ideas of what menaces this identity."[36] I trouble the more standard frames of polarity between monstrosity and humanity. As Richard Kearney writes, "Most strangers, gods and monsters—along with various ghosts, phantoms and doubles who bear a family resemblance—are, deep down, tokens of fracture within the human psyche … speak[ing] to us of how we are split between conscious and unconscious, familiar and unfamiliar, same and other … they [also] remind us that we have a choice: a) to try to understand and accommodate our experience of strangeness, or b) to repudiate it by projecting it exclusively onto outsiders."[37]

My example of a popular cultural portrayal of metamodern spirituality is Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*Buffy*), a television show—a cultural happening, really—that is still reverberating in the Western imaginary 20 years later. The work of *Buffy* here is its exemplification of metamodern monsters that initiate a very different encounter with the Other: the making of the monster-as-object into a subject, which in turn showcases my concepts of fluid identity narratives and metamodern heroes. Additionally, I discuss how *Buffy* interweaves mystical experiences in a secular setting, portraying them as both socially and personally meaningful, without losing the show's overall irreverence and ambivalence toward religion—that is, without taking a side *for* or *against*, thus enabling the *both/and*.

More popular culture and different kinds of public portrayals of metamodern spirituality come into focus in chapter four. My example of the metamodernization of secular spirituality is the figure of Russell Brand—a completely unapologetic follower and public proselytizer of (Neo-)Vedantic traditions who presents highly salacious comedic material in direct dialogue with his universalized spiritual material and his progressive social activism as performed in his

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[36] Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters,* 4

[37] Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 4.

comedy and his public works. It's all there at once, is the point. To my thinking this is a kind of neo-Tantra that plays with the relationship of transgression to spiritual transformation and interlocks with the SBNR's shift toward a more decisive inclusivity of the light and the dark *vicissitudes* of human beingness. Such a manifestation makes room for the presence of *both* a felt experience of universalism *and* a complete contextualism/constructivism, working together to express subjectivities in an earnest yet playful sense.

Once having introduced the epistemic mapping schema in the introduction above and having exemplified metamodernism sufficiently in each of the chapters, chapter five returns to a few important leftover strands of conversation. First, the argument for a new -ism and against the continued use of *postmodernism* will be continued. I use the examples of postmodern Christianity and Buddhist postmodernism to make my case. Second, issues of ethics: As metamodernism becomes familiar and its sensibilities become more mainstream—thus rendering it both more visible and more invisible—it is important to clarify what the term is and is not capable of or meant to do.

There are those in the general public who have set out to utilize the term to forward a social or ethical agenda and who have sizable followings on social media. I point out that metamodernism is not a purposive program to unite opposites, reconcile difference and somehow produce world peace. I make the case that metamodernism does not offer a specific social program or outcome, much the same as modernism and postmodernism did not—and could not—have done. This will set up my conclusion, in which I discuss a few current cultural phenomena that may be illuminated through the metamodern lens. I also speculate on the potential longevity of the SBNR and offer a few last words on the efficacy of the new -ism for the study of religion.

1.6. Methodologies

This work is certainly multidisciplinary in that it involves several disciplines and the methodological approaches associated with them. It is also interdisciplinary, in that the methods both complement and challenge one another, and inevitably form the hermeneutical approach I use here.

My broad approach to this inquiry is to situate the contemporary SBNR, secondhand mysticism, and metamodernism in dialectical relationship. That is, each necessarily responds to, engages, and influences—or, writes and is written by—the others.

What follows is a brief encapsulation of the methods I use throughout the dissertation. Each method is described more fully while it is at work within the chapters.

Comparativism/History of Religions

I use a comparative approach consonant with the History of Religions school. The History of Religions school's main tool for the study of religions is a historical-critical method. I present the idea here that the New Age was supplanted by the SBNR, and to some extent by a host of other designations that show individuals striking very overtly away from certain religious traditions while not always necessarily sure what they are going toward. The separate histories and lineages of the contemporary spiritualities that I mention here such as the Nones, the Unaffiliated, the Secular Christians, and the Free Thinkers are not dealt with, though they are located as linked by historical ideas and impulses.

Comparativism enables me to theorize a "third thing," as Kripal has referred to it. He writes, "The study of religion possesses both Enlightenment and Romantic roots. Both together can form gnostic epistemologies that employ robust rational models to 'reduce' the religious back to the human only to 'reverse' or 'flip' the reduction back toward theological or mystical ends. These are what we might call reflexive re-readings of religion" that suggest a continuum including both reductive and divine modes of understanding, and "we can travel *either way* along that line. We can travel in one direction along that line and reduce the religious 'down' to the human, but we can also reverse direction and travel from the human back 'up' to the religious."[38] Doniger's metaphor of the *Implied Spider* developed alongside the ideas of the implied author and the implied subject is also a comparative idea that brings into view the sense of being authored and of doing the authoring.[39] (The oscillative reflexivity of metamodernism, which I will discuss later, is, theoretically, in sympathy with this idea. Likewise, its emphasis on felt experience will probably help make the multimodal and fluid means of engagement that such utilization of multiple positionings suggests even more normative.)

Metamodern Theory

Metamodern theorization of the contemporary subject is, again, my specific addition to this inquiry, brought on board to periodize and to ask how we might understand what happens when the current cultural sensibility includes both modern, grand, narrative-bound assumptions and postmodern, delimited contextualization of all realities. My conception of a *metamodern* soteriology is a way of describing the emphasis on immanence and this-worldliness that has informed current secular spiritualities—a soteriology that hinges on the acknowledgment of

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[38] Kripal, *Secret Body*, 122–23.
[39] See Doniger, *The Implied Spider*.

flawed, sometimes shadowy, muddled, haphazard, and paradox-driven individual subjectivities—the fully *human, fractured self* as a salvific principle—not perhaps replacing the otherworldly transcendent but declaring that the latter is no longer so much an end point; yet, neither is "the sacred" disenchanted or deconstructed away.[40]

Metamodern theory complements the gnostic both/and inquiry. "Metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility," as Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker write.[41] This is gnostic with a small *g*—I do not refer in this work to the grouping of ancient religious orders under the name Gnostic. Nor to nineteenth-century Catholics who retrieved the heresiological term to "to characterize such movements as Spiritualism and Theosophy, and in the process introduced the term into the popular lexicon," as Caterine writes.[42] Kripal's twenty-first-century usage of the term *gnostic* is the one I intend: "The gnostic intellectual is the one who privileges knowledge over belief, who knows that she knows, *and* knows that what she knows cannot possibly be reconciled with the claims of any past or present religious tradition."[43]

Popular Culture and Monster Theories

As mentioned, one of the most direct ways of encountering epistemic shifting is through popular culture. Using current concepts from popular culture scholarship and monster theory is a

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[40] Ferrer and Sherman identify the linguistic turn in religious studies as the point at which a subversion of the "transcendental authority in the Heavens bring[s] the legitimization of its cognitive and normative claims down to Earth, that is, to the intersubjective space constituted by communicative exchanges among rational human beings." They call this a "disenchanted world of post/modernity [where] the sacred has been detranscendentalized, relativized, contextualized, and diversified, but, most fundamentally, assimilated to linguistic expression." Ferrer and Sherman, "Introduction," 6.

[41] Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," 5.

[42] Caterine, "Narrating the Story," 13.

[43] Kripal, *Secret Body,* 122.

way of framing an analysis that can bring about the kind of "interreligious dialogue" between the secular and the spiritual previously mentioned. Monster theory in particular works for my conception of the liminal position of the monster and the mystic because it deals in "strings of cultural moments, connected by a logic that always threatens to shift."[44] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *thesis five* relates to the borders and boundaries I consider: The monster "resists capture in the epistemological nets of the erudite…. [E]very monster is in this way a double narrative, two living stories: one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing *what cultural use the monster serves*."[45]

The next section introduces metamodernism in terms of how I utilize it as a category container. I go into particular depth as to how and why it should be considered as part of the epistemic mapping schema that I employ. I try to anticipate readers' big-picture questions here. Note that each of the chapters also contains further explication accompanying my specific exemplifications of metamodern sensibilities and cultural products.

1.7. Epistemic Mapping and Metamodernism

1.7.1. Metamodernism in Religious Studies Scholarship

Metamodern theory is, to date, found only in a few instances in religious studies scholarship and has yet to be theorized for mysticism studies. This dissertation presents an opening attempt to audition its use. To date, I am aware of three other scholars of religion

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[44] Cohen, "Monster Culture," 6.
[45] Cohen, "Monster Culture," 13, italics mine.

utilizing metamodernism as a category per se.[46] Along with my own unpublished seminar papers

(2012–2017), conference presentations (2013–2018) and two forthcoming chapters in volumes,[47]

I have noted the following: Tom de Bruin uses the term to comment on the "post-Christian

church" in a personal essay for a Seventh-day Adventist bulletin;[48] Brendan Dempsey uses it in a

literary essay on metamodern myth-making;[49] and most germane for the current purpose, Michel

Clasquin-Johnson has published "Towards a Metamodern Academic Study of Religion and a

More Religiously Informed Metamodernism."

In his essay, Clasquin-Johnson poses the question—in a bit more of a subjunctive, future-

oriented sense than I do here—of what metamodernism's uses for the field of religion may

eventually be.[50] He refers to metamodernism as both a philosophy and a movement, even "a

prescriptive view," which sets it up as a somewhat different platform from my application here.

However, inasmuch as the term is at times employed in the wider culture as each of these, I

readily agree with him that these are trends deserving of our attention. Since about 2011, I have

noted a continued increase in the number of websites, online discussion groups, blogs, and

personal Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter accounts using the terms *metamodern*/*metamodernist*/

metamodernism in their names. The line on that graph appears to go steadily upward. Not only

that, but something has galvanized more individuals recently to begin calling themselves

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[46] Literary scholar Alexandra Dumitrescu (also known as Alexandra Balm) might be counted among them as she refers to metamodernism in quasi-religious terms, as "a paradigm that reflects the self's evolution towards its self-realisation, and the sublime and the beautiful," but hers is ultimately a literary treatment. Dumitrescu, *Towards a Metamodern Literature*, 167.

[47] Some of these papers and presentations can be found on https://rice.academia.edu/LindaCCeriello. My two forthcoming chapters are "Toward a Metamodern Reading of Spiritual-but-Not-Religious Mysticisms" in Parsons, ed., *Being Spiritual But Not Religious,* and "The Big Bad and the Big "Aha!": Metamodern Monsters as Transformational Figures of Instability" in Heyes ed., *Holy Monsters, Sacred Grotesques.*

[48] De Bruin, "That's So Meta."

[49] Dempsey, "[Re]construction."

[50] Clasquin-Johnson, "Towards a Metamodern Academic Study," 3.

metamodernists—a noteworthy trend deserving of its own ethnographic study. My investigation

of metamodernism stems from an observation several years ago that efforts to clarify what the

current post-postmodern age might be all about appear to run nearly parallel to the rise of the

SBNR in the United States, which I will discuss more in chapter two.

The steady rise in the number of metamodern enthusiasts—social media groups,

websites, popular essays, blogs, and the like—shows an increasing variety of uses of the concept

by those who wish to latch on to the promise of this new -ism for their varying reasons. I concur

with Clasquin-Johnson that the "totalizing aspect" of metamodernism does beckon for its

analysis in the register of the religious. However, my interest here is a bit more pointed.

On one fundamental point, I would differ with Clasquin-Johnson: he opines that the clash

between what he calls *modernist and postmodernist paradigms* has *not* been strongly felt in

religious studies,[51] whereas I center my reading of the coeval emergence of metamodernism and

the SBNR precisely on the vigorous argument between universalists and contextualists

foundational to our field. In treating that debate here as essentially a modern-postmodern

epistemic negotiation, I am asserting that the very centrality of this clash instantiates

metamodernism as a topic for the comparative study of religions.

1.7.2. An Abbreviated Genealogy of the Term *Metamodernism*

The term *metamodernism* itself is indeed relatively new, and its ideological

underpinnings are contested. My own starting point for encountering metamodernism occurred

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[51] Clasquin-Johnson, "Towards a Metamodern Academic Study," 3.

prior to hearing of the several names proposed for a post-postmodern shift. In the mid-2000s, I began noting pop-cultural products with a new and marked similarity in tone. From filmmakers (Miranda July, Michel Gondry, and Wes Anderson are standouts) and television programs (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Modern Family, The Office, Community, Girls*) to the humor styles that went with them, to comedians (Russell Brand, Chris Gethard, Maria Bamford), songwriters (Ben Gibbard of Death Cab for Cutie, Conor Oberst of Bright Eyes, Bianca and Sierra Casady of CocoRosie), fiction writers (Dave Eggers, Miranda July again, Haruki Murakami, Arundhati Roy), and certain vernacular expressions which carried clusters of new and subtle meanings that differed from previous connotations (such as newly refurbed versions of *awesome*, *awkward*, *epic fail*)—all of these cultural products clearly had something in common. They seemed to have already pushed beyond the stalemated either/or debate and had already reclaimed elements of subjective experience that had been previously theorized into hiding, as I will explain shortly. Something was certainly happening culture-wide, but ... what? How to name it? The Foucauldian epistemic mapping schema helped me organize conceptually around the potential and scope of such a culture-wide shift. It was definitely something other than *postmodern*, as I have understood and lived that term.

As I searched for a term that would be more descriptive and satisfactory than *post-postmodernism*, I quickly became aware of a cadre of scholars hashing out their proposed names for their sometimes loosely similar and sometimes closely aligned ideas of the central components of the post-postmodern move.[52] In 2000, Slavist and cultural theorist Raoul

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[52] Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," 1–14. Not that term *metamodernism* doesn't itself have issues. It elicits confusion, given the etymological uses of the prefix *meta* to mean after, above, or behind. Also, the generic usage of the term *meta* to refer to any instance of talking about talking about something, which is indeed occurring here as well, means it runs the danger of giving off a kind of splayed, indistinct tone. Putting a word, any word, in the service of trying to describe both the process and the cultural products that result from the activity of coming to grips with a post-ironic, post-

Eshelman theorized *performatism*, a very close conceptual cousin to metamodernism, and a

concept I utilize in my work on this topic and will refer to in later chapters.[53] Other terms with

some family resemblances include *cosmodernism* (2011) by literary scholar Christian Moraru;[54]

altermodernism (2009) by art critic Nicolas Bourriaud;[55] and *pseudomodernism* or

digimodernism (2006) by writer and literary scholar Alan Kirby. All overlap at least partially

with metamodernism in their descriptions of the conceptual content of the current episteme.*[56]*

The term and concept of metamodernism per se is by some followed backward to literary

critic and Marxist political theorist Frederic Jameson's ideas connecting the influence of late

capitalism and affect (though Jameson never used the term *metamodernism* himself) and by

others to literature and film scholar Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, who, as early as 1975, imagines an

emerging aesthetic in fiction in which a sharp division between life and art does not exist.

Jameson's influential essay, written in 1984 and later developed into a book by the same title,

was "Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*"* (1991). There he pronounced an

intensification period "in which culture and capitalism were collapsing into one another and

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anti-sentiment, post-death-of-the-subject cultural movement is a tall order, and those of us who have
heretofore been stymied and given to dislike of the vague and rather ouroboric *post-postmodern* are in
some ways happy to have any term at all to use.

[53] Eshelman's first English-language publication on his version of post-postmodernism is "Performatism,
or the End of Postmodernism." His monograph of the same name appears in 2008.

[54] See Moraru, *Cosmodernism*. Eshelman writes in a brief review of this text that cosmodernism "is
strongly oriented towards postmodernism but emphasizes 'ethical relationality'" and "arises mainly
through the process of globalization unleashed by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989" and that
cosmodernism is "[o]riented towards poststructuralist Levinasian ethics as well as the later work of
Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy," which may make it of interest to scholars of religion. Eshelman,
"Annotated Bibliography of Works."

[55] See Bourriaud, *Altermodern*.

[56] Eshelman has a useful annotated bibliography of works that attempt to theorize a post-postmodern and
his opinions on how well they succeed. Eshelman, "Annotated Bibliography of Works."

beginning to share the same logic."[57] The term has also reportedly been used since the 1970s in writings on law, politics, economics, data analysis, and architecture.[58]

No one, however, seems to follow the term back to a Canadian graduate student whose 1991 master's thesis was titled "Meta-Modern Culture: The New Age and the Critique of Modernity." Thomas A. Haig's communication studies thesis uses the term (with a hyphen) to address his observation that the New Age is not quite modern and not postmodern. Instead, he writes, "I propose a concept of the 'meta-modern' to describe the paradoxical attempt … to reproduce the trajectory of modernity by appropriating traditions marginalized by modern 'progress.' I conclude that New Age consumer culture relocates, rather than transcends, the crises of modernity."[59] While his thesis is relevant to the present work and would be useful for anyone interested in early studies of New Age marketing or a deconstructive reading of transcendence-soteriology-influenced cultures, it has missed the attentions of most other metamodern theorists as far as I can tell. Only Clasquin-Johnson cites Haig.

Haig's application begins in a similar place to mine but utilizes the neologism to nuance the move by the New Age to "retextualize experiences of the body and consciousness, and become the dynamo for a new form of 'progress' organized around a conception of consumer lifestyle."[60] While Haig goes in a different direction with the meaning of meta-modernism than the bulk of the current theorizers (he is closer to Heelas's "self spirituality"), what is noteworthy

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[57] Qtd in Mullins, "The Long 1980s," 13. Jameson was also considered foundational for theorization of metamodernism by Vermeulen, who adds that "for Fredric Jameson, postmodernism was characterized above all by the waning of affect. Not necessarily affect in the Deleuzian-Spinozist sense (a sort of ping-ponging, pre-personal intensity), but affect in the colloquial meaning of the word, as empathy, as a sensibility towards something." Critchley, "Theoretically Speaking."
[58] This according to an editorial essay on Notes on Metamodernism, "Previous Uses of the Term Metamodernism."
[59] Haig, "Meta-Modern Culture," iii.
[60] Haig, "Meta-Modern Culture," 6.

is the fact that his characterization of the New Age very closely matches that of some of the current-day general-audience exponents of metamodernism who run a similar sounding narrative "of transcendent, social and cultural ... renovation, that promises the reintegration of the disparate and colliding fragments of social existence into a harmonious, meaningful totality," and further,

> will see the replacement of all of our old, dysfunctional systems with new ways of thinking, speaking, and living. It will bring back our authentic identities, both individual and collective. It will also bring back the past: the cultural artifacts that we too hastily discarded in a rush to modernize will find their proper place in the present, no longer in conflict with, and indeed the perfect complement to, our most advanced technologies.[61]

Heelas and other theorists of the New Age would probably not disagree that the New Age movement, as Haig writes, "relocates its trajectory and its crises" as something other than modernism and postmodernism. But the type of critique of modernity the New Age performs, Haig feels, may signal an out from both: "New Age cultural forms are constructed on the basis of a very concerted critique of modernity, which is seen to have failed, precisely, to guarantee humanity's progress towards its ultimate telos."[62] This, Haig feels, is a reason to deem it neither modern nor postmodern but deserving of a new term. So this term, *meta-modern*, will describe the relationship of wresting from the modern by paradoxically attempting to transcend it. Haig prefigures Vermeulen and van den Akker's popular use of binaries when he writes, "Meta-modernity eradicates modern dialectics (general vs. particular; individual vs. community; fragmentation vs. synthesis; self vs. other) but not by means of any deconstructive or critical strategy. Instead, modern dualisms are both maintained and resolved by an attempted relocation

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[61] Haig, "Meta-Modern Culture," 49.
[62] Haig, "Meta-Modern Culture," 82.

of the modern trajectory to a 'higher' level as a process of 'synthesis.' The meta-modern is thus a response to modernity that, unlike affirmative, eclectic postmodernism, reproduces the logic of modernization in a new, often paradoxical fashion."[63] The retextualization of "premodern and non-Western traditions" as spiritual disciplines certainly does apply to the New Age as seen in looking back on it today, as well as to some extent to the habits of the SBNR. In fact, Haig's statement that meta-moderns are seeking to no longer be "hindered by the inherent contradictions of modernity" fairly closely reproduces my critique of current-day metamodernism's general-audience enthusiasts who want to engage it as a social panacea.[64]

The cultural and epistemic usage of the term *metamodernism* that I employ here first begins to be delineated in the early 2000s, however. Balm (née Dumitrescu) writes a research proposal for its study in 2001 and publishes starting in 2003;[65] Andre Furlani publishes in 2002.[66] Its theorization comes into more active scholarly use (still primarily in literary critical and art historical capacities), as a dialogue between various scholars and theorizations later in the 2000s. In 2010, Dutch cultural theorists Vermeulen and van den Akker spearhead the online resource *Notes on Metamodernism*, which to some extent centralizes an interdisciplinary community of scholars and laypeople with interest in metamodernism's exploration as a post-postmodern cultural *structure of feeling*.[67] I came upon it near that time as a critical mass was mobilizing around that term.

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[63] Haig, "Meta-Modern Culture," 83.

[64] There is a cadre of metamodernism enthusiasts today who appear to be enacting what Haig described in 1991. One of the central organizations championing such a take on metamodernism is found at www.metamoderna.org.

[65] See Balm, "Metamodernism in Art."

[66] Furlani, "Guy Davenport."

[67] See *Notes on Metamodernism*, www.metamodernism.com.

1.7.3. The Epistemes in Religious Studies

The Foucauldian apparatus that I build upon (traditional/premodern, modern, and postmodern)[68] appears (though not referred to by name) in the works of numerous scholars of religion whose subfields intersect with the current topic, notably Paul Heelas and David Lyon in their debates over whether the New Age as a movement should overall be regarded as a modern or postmodern phenomenon.[69] This will be discussed in chapter two on the SBNR. Philip Wexler engages this system, writing in 2000 that, "even as the alienating conditions of modernity are intensified in postmodernity, the stage is simultaneously set for the renewal and revitalization of everyday life" which will lead "to change in the terms and categories of social understanding, as well in the character of ordinary experience." He proposes that the next age be called the *Mystical Society* and will include "an enactment of the fluid, boundariless state that was seen as a mark of postmodernism. [But] [i]nstead of complete fragmentation ... we have processes of reintegration."[70] Wexler's vision of the turn away from complete fragmentation as the chief differentiation of a next "age" after postmodernism anticipates several of the moves I am highlighting here. "Reintegration" or even integration poses some issues, however, which will be taken up shortly. Jorge Ferrer and Jacob Sherman's proposal of a "participatory turn" also has similarities to the aforementioned, in that they write that their articulation is

> neither a return to previous epistemological structures nor a drastic rupture from them,
>
> but rather reflects the ongoing project of a creative fusion of past, present, and perhaps

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[68] The original Foucauldian terms for the three *epistemes* are *Renaissance, Classic,* and *Modern.* However, since it is far more common for both scholars and laypeople to refer to the first three epistemic periods as premodern (or traditional), modern, and postmodern, I adopt their usage as well.

[69] As referenced in Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, 224n16. Fiona Bowie, invoking Ricoeur, uses *episteme* in her "Building Bridges, Dissolving Boundaries," 705.

[70] Wexler, *Mystical Society,* 2.

future horizons that integrates certain traditional religious claims with modern standards of critical inquiry and postmodern epistemological insights about the cocreated nature of human knowledge.[71]

Kripal makes use of the epistemic structure in 2007, proposing something close to metamodernism-—referenced as *(post)modern* (reflecting the presence of both modern and postmodern aspects—a both/and rather than an either/or) to undergird his delineation of a *gnostic scholarship.* Gnostic scholarship, he writes, is

not a pure, untroubled reason that refuses to think a thought that cannot be quantified ... neither, however, is it anti-reason, even if it sees the limitations of any strictly conceived rationality. It is not anti-modern ... not relativistic, even if it embraces both deconstruction and pluralism as necessary methods and values. It takes moral positions, even if it recognizes its own fallibility and limited sight ... [and] claims to *know* things that other forms of knowledge and experience (like traditional faith or pure reason) do not and probably cannot know, even as it submits its claims to public review, criticism and renewal, all of which it listens and responds to.[72]

Kripal is speaking on one level to an important methodological innovation in the field of religious studies, but the ontological reconfiguring he signals is both much deeper and much more widely applicable. In subsequent chapters I cover this more extensively, linking the innovations of the concept of gnostic scholarship in the study of mysticisms to the discursive and even phenomenological openings that become available, to suggest, via theorization of metamodernism, that this is an ethos which echoes the metamodern turn, one that we will see guiding the spiritual but not religious as a whole.

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[71] Ferrer and Sherman, "Introduction," 2.
[72] Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift,* 12.

My equating of such a theory (and a new one at that) with what some might see as a form of mystical agency, will also give address to Kripal's final *logos mystikos* in *The Serpent's Gift.* His suggestion there is that each individual be taken as "simultaneously a conscious, constructed self" and "a much larger complexly conscious field" that has been "historically objectified, mythologized, and projected outward ... or introjected inwards." In this sense, it is clear that the second of these *fields of consciousness*, as he refers to them, has been largely ignored in the field of religious studies.[73] What Kripal calls a "phenomenology of inspiration" comes from recognizing that a simultaneity of these fields of consciousness is "often experienced as coming from elsewhere, as if it were being literally empowered by non-ordinary energies or forces that temporarily overwhelm the thinker in order to bring new ideas, images, or words into the field of awareness."[74] This powerful idea will be shown to have resonance with metamodernism, especially via Eshelman's *performatist double frame*.

The line of thinking I pursue here is, moreover, an attempt to follow another Kripalean thesis that has been a more or less constant backdrop to my study across decades: one that "the modern study of mysticism can function as a kind of modern mystical tradition" and furthermore, "that some types of scholarly writing can also function as modern mystical literature."[75] I mentioned Sells's *meaning event* as a way to describe this phenomenon.

Along this line, Clasquin-Johnson feels that metamodernism offers "a methodology that already has affinities with 'the religious impulse,'" exemplified by metamodernism's relationship with paradox, as utilized for example in the spiritual technology of the Zen koan. "What metamodernism offers us here may be a way to speak about paradox without constantly needing

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[73] Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift,* 164–65.
[74] Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift,* 171.
[75] Kripal, "Being Blake: Antinomian Thought," 75.

to slip back into modernist language patterns that require us to explain the paradox away."[76] This echoes my own observation about the dialectical relation between the contemporary affiliations like SBNR, popular culture, and tenets of ancient Eastern religious traditions that have found their way into Western popular vernacular and practice. However, this idea should not be mistaken for a notion that the metamodern turn proclaims any affinity, agenda, or position on religion/s whatsoever.

While this theoretical work of ontological boundary blurring (and/or sharpening and/or celebrating) and the related both/and have been delineated by a handful of scholars, some aspects have room to be more fully explored.[77] My application of metamodern theory here has potential utility in accounting for the normalizing of presentations of mystical experience in contemporary culture and will expose a dimension of the choice to identify as SBNR in which *this-worldly* spaces of liminality, analogous to the mystical encounter, itself are reflexively constructed. In other words, I will be working from the idea that secular mystical encounters—including secondhand ones, as in film and TV show depictions—mirror contemporary individuals' felt experience of being in-between, of being both/and—secular and spiritual. This is a theorizing of the mechanism, if you will, of the both/and, which will be considered as an oscillation, not simply in the manner of a pendulum swinging between two extreme points. In a sense, the purpose here is to make a foray into exploring and further explaining this dynamic, clarifying the "how" of the gestalt of self, culture, and noesis.[78]

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[76] Clasquin-Johnson, "Toward a Metamodern Academic Study," 5.

[77] I consider the term *both/and* to be born out of postmodern thinking, though, once inherited by metamodernism, updated. Van den Akker and Vermeulen will argue for a "both/neither, and/nor" as the updated metamodern version. "Periodising the 2000s," 6, 10.

[78] Kripal has written that such processes "make each other up" in a triadic fashion (*Roads of Excess,* 7).

Locating the epistemic basis of a secular/spiritual both/and in contemporary culture will offer a means of understanding the motivation to identify as SBNR. Kripal's *The Serpent's Gift* develops the both/and concept. After postmodernism's "overplayed" embrace of difference and rejection of sameness, he writes, "Don't we know enough now to avoid the simple and simply false dualisms of nature *or* nurture, sameness *or* difference? Can't we begin to think in terms of a more sophisticated and accurate *both ... and*?"[79] Mark Freeman's 1993 hermeneutic of subjectivity, of "thinking beyond skepticism," also addressing this, might be considered *proto-metamodern* in the sense of proposing a reaction to postmodernism that is inclusive of felt experience. He asks how we may stretch past reductive narrative interpretations of self in the wake of Derridian relativism:

> Even if the furniture of the world doesn't really exist apart from the words I use to speak it, which on some level I am fully prepared to avow, I still bump into it all the time. More to the point, even if my "self," fleeting as it is, doesn't exist apart from my own consciousness of it, from my own narrative imagination, indeed from my own *belief* in its very existence, it is nonetheless eminently real and—within limits—eminently knowable.[80]

Examples of metamodern academic treatments can arguably be found in the work of a handful of scholars of religion who—while not using the same name for this epistemic shift as such—focus on third positions carved out of the "spaces in between." In addition to Kripal and Sells, Elliot Wolfson and Jorge Ferrer come to mind. I view Kripal's portrayal of Esalen as an

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[79] Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift*, 182n19; Christopher Partridge's "subjective turn" (*The Re-enchantment of the West*) and Ferrer and Sherman's "participatory turn" (*The Participatory Turn*) can be seen as undergirding the felt experience of being *both/and*, and, relatedly, the assertion of the primacy of sincerity, authenticity and self-reflexivity which I feel typify the metamodern turn.
[80] Freeman, *Rewriting the Self*, 13.

example of a metamodern reading, in that it self-consciously reaches through the modern and postmodern to name a third way that neither negates nor replaces the others. One could argue that Kripal's manner of avoiding portraying Esalen in a way that affixes it as one thing or another, evokes a postmodern positioning. But in asserting his gnostic reading, both "beyond belief and beyond reason," Kripal describes how the cultural movement that Esalen is both defined by, and does a great deal to reify, historically speaking, acts as a third space.[81] Also, because Kripal's portrayal does not hover safely, abstractly, noncommittally, *over*, but speaks *into* the space in between the naming/crystallizing and the refusal to name or affix; and because it does not shy from the sacralizing function of the institution (nor, for that matter, does Kripal shy away in terms of the sacralizing language he employs to convey it), I argue that what is advanced is an example of metamodern scholarship.

1.7.4. Problematizing the -isms

A few important terminology notes are relevant at the outset of my explication of what makes a contemporary spirituality metamodern. Of the previously mentioned handful of other terms that may overlap partly or largely with the terrain that the term *metamodernism* seeks to carve out, *performatism* is perhaps the closest. While not suggesting that the usages of *metamodernism* by Vermeulen and van den Akker and *performatism* by Eshelman overlay completely onto one another, I do want to point out that they agree that the key move that begs to be theorized is not to be thought of as a simple reinvesting in the notion of the universal or

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[81] Kripal, *Esalen,* 456. Kripal is not only Esalen's biographer with the book *Esalen: The Religion of No Religion,* published in 2007, but also joined the board of directors in 2014 and is its current chair. In that sense, his scholarship on the institution did not lead to objective distance but the opposite, to a subjective engagement and a position of cocreation.

moving away from irony. Rather, the idea of the metamodern or performatist turn is to reflect the occurrence of multiple arenas and vectors, mined concurrently for their truths and meanings, generating a type of new cultural gestalt resulting from the confluence of previously bifurcated arenas of cultural experience or expression.[82]

As with the multiple meanings of and the pitfalls of generalizing about all modernisms and postmodernisms, any depictions of metamodernism will also encounter problems. My attempt at defining metamodernism should be understood as provisional, and as necessarily centered on a select few germane qualities or tendencies intended to help distinguish the epistemes and show where they end up in conversation on the topic of secular spiritualities.

The difficulties with using terms like *postmodernism* or *modernism* (the -isms) are well known to most scholars. The copious, disparate permutations and applications of *postmodern* often confuse intellectuals and laypersons alike. With aesthetic forms such as *postmodern architecture* or *film* conveying something quite different from *postmodern philosophy*, and each implying different usages from that to which the *postmodern era* (or *age*, *period*, or *episteme*) refers, there is perhaps more potential for convolution with this term than coherence. A relevant observation that some scholars make is that the uses of the term *postmodernism* in the 1970s and prior tended to be more utopian, signifying "everything that is radical, innovative, forward-looking" in literary and artistic practice.[83] Dumitrescu notes that early postmodernists treated their literary creations "more as the discovery and the disclosure of numinous relationships within nature than as the creation of containing and structuring forms."[84] The 1980s and 1990s

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[82] Eshelman's monograph, the essays that comprise *Notes on Metamodernism,* and my own website with Greg Dember, *What is Metamodern?* offer three cogent catalogues of examples of the cultural trends that help us understand the work resulting from the metamodern sensibility.

[83] Marjorie Perloff, qtd in Edmond, "The Uses of Postmodernism."

[84] Charles Altieri, qtd in Dumitrescu, *Towards a Metamodern Literature*, 170.

saw the term used in a more dystopian way. By the mid-1980s *postmodernism* was used variously "as a figure for radical artistic experimentation, for French theoretical sophistication, and for postindustrial capitalism and global neoliberalism," and, of course, "to attack diverse versions of modernism."[85] The effect, Edmond explains, of these myriad overlapping usages is that the term can

> embody both sides in the unfolding tension between globalization and localism. Postmodernism could be used to claim an advanced position in the global cultural field and to dismiss nationalisms and other localisms as hopelessly theoretically naive or outdated. Yet it could also be deployed to assert cultural relativism and so the singularity of a national or local culture.[86]

Given these and other generalized applications of the term *postmodern* that can seem so contradictory, it is understandable that we will see post-postmodern responses range from mimetic and appropriative to dissenting. While it's too early to say whether the term *metamodernism* may itself go through as many permutations, one can already see it applied rather differently in the realms of economics and political/sociological analyses than it is to visual arts, music, literature, and other, more aesthetically focused analyses—something that will need monitoring and analysis in future treatments. Common in most of these arenas, however, metamodernism's conceptualization has established a space for a post-ironic discursive engagement, the significance of which will be central to my reading of the evolution of an SBNR as a "movement" or as an identity or affiliation.[87]

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[85] Edmond, "The Uses of Postmodernism."
[86] Edmond, "The Uses of Postmodernism."
[87] Ironically, it will be out of a certain cynicism and/or relativism garnered from postmodernism that later generations may begin to beg out of identifying with this term.

1.7.5. Epistemes as Category Container

One of the chief difficulties in considering the -isms as analytical terms is also one that receives infrequent attention. It is usually with an assumed justification but no thoroughgoing analytical inquiry that they are deployed as dislocated from any specific category container. *Postmodernism* and *modernism* have for so long been grandfathered into the cultural lexicon that even usages which are continually contested are nevertheless now so common as to be sanctioned for general and, as mentioned, sometimes contradictory purposes. Even, or especially, after granting these -isms their historical range of meanings, if no category distinction is identified to which they are meant to belong, how can we judge how well they may be able to signify? The question is, is the conceptual container to which the terms *traditional* (or *premodern*), *modern*, *postmodern*, and now *metamodern* belong meant to be an era? An age? A zeitgeist? A milieu? A paradigm? A philosophical movement? An aesthetic trend? Something else? Or, as often seems to be the case, a mélange of several of these categories at once? What exactly they are meant to be naming and defining is relevant enough here to address at the outset.

It has been interesting to note that very few of the major theorizers writing about metamodernism refer to the Foucauldian epistemic structure, even as they are placing tradition/premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism side by side for comparison.

One of the more problematic categories used as a substitute is *paradigm*. Others are *philosophy* and *movement*. Balm (writing under the surname Dumitrescu) is one prominent theorist who calls the category of thing that metamodernism is a paradigm. Many general users

of the term do so, as well. "Metamodernism is defined as a paradigm of engaging in a dialogue with other paradigms, past or present…. It is a paradigm for recovering and reestablishing tradition(s), and establishing an ongoing dialogue with previous paradigms of thought—as opposed to the modernist rejection of traditions and the postmodernist ironic detachment from previous texts."[88] (I am picking out only specific parts of her definition for interrogation. Her dissertation and her several published essays obviously show much more nuance than I am able to deal with here.) While sympathetic to aspects of this definition—in particular, I do not largely disagree with *dialogue* over *oppositions*, *rejections*, and *detachments*, for example, and, with the deference given her as one of the first to propose contour and shape to metamodernism—I will nevertheless assert a brief critique of her above characterization of the goals of metamodernism.

In reviewing the early scholars who had employed the term *metamodernism*, she writes that Stephen Feldman calls metamodernism a paradigm in 2005: "Feldman describes metamodernism as a paradigm of thought, 'a world-view, a set of presupposed beliefs that pervasively shapes one's perceptions of and orientation toward the world' (297), by which he outlines the genus proximus rather than the specific difference of metamodernism."[89] This is the popularized sense of *paradigm* as a worldview, not the specific sense that Thomas Kuhn proffered.

Even still, if metamodernism were a paradigm, then it would have to follow that postmodernism and modernism are paradigms, which they are not considered to be. So, establishing metamodernism as falling into the category container of *episteme* is a distinction critical for establishing its current reach as well as its future treatment as on parallel with modernism and postmodernism.

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[88] Dumitrescu, *Towards a Metamodern Literature,* 167, 169.
[89] Dumitrescu, *Towards a Metamodern Literature,* 167.

Other than *paradigm*, the main word in Balm's definition above that I have to quibble with is the use of the word *for*—since that word implies a directive embedded in the metamodern turn that would render it something else besides a paradigm, and certainly other than an episteme. The -ism itself has no agenda and is not a project. From my perspective it is in fact necessary for metamodernism, like the other epistemes, to be defined very clearly as *not* a project with an ethics—a larger topic which will be addressed more fully in chapter five.

That said, metamodern works do engage felt experience, and to the extent that other theorists mean to identify this tendency as a substantive part of the cultural turn, I am happy to concur. In that engaging human relationality and connection tacitly comes with concerns for the ethical, it may indeed therefore instate ethically inflected material. But the attribution of an ethical component provokes unease in that an overdetermination in this direction could lead to a preformed, even promotional outcome—that metamodernist works should be about the good, the positive, etc. As I will explain in chapter two, metamodernism needs to be able to encompass the good, but also the bad and the ugly in order to be considered a major epistemic or cultural turn.

Seth Abramson uses *cultural philosophy* and even calls metamodernism "the cultural philosophy of the digital age."[90] Vermeulen and van den Akker do not theorize it as a philosophy, but instead use the categories *structure of feeling*, *cultural sentiment*, or *emergent sensibility*, stating that they mean to relate "a broad variety of trends and tendencies across current affairs and contemporary aesthetics that are otherwise incomprehensible (at least by the postmodern vernacular), by understanding them in terms of an emergent sensibility we come to call metamodern."[91] However, it is safe to assume that they mean to tacitly locate metamodernism in the category of a *period* given that they mention Frederic Jameson referring to a period as "a

[90] Abramson, "What Is Metamodernism?"
[91] Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Paper Addressed at."

common objective condition to which a whole range of varied responses and creative

innovations is then possible, but always within that situation's structural limits." If this definition

is not also the operative definition of episteme, it is not far off. The volume of essays in which

they write the introductory essay, they note, builds from this notion of a common objective

condition of contemporary Western capitalist societies, which "cannot any longer be understood

in terms of the postmodern."[92]

    Film critic James MacDowell, borrowing from sociologist Raymond Williams, remarked

that metamodernism might prudently be thought of as an "emerging structure of feeling."

Williams, MacDowell notes, wrote that historical/cultural moments express themselves in "'the

most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity,' becoming a matter 'of feeling much more

than of thought—a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones.'"[93] A suggested benefit, then, of taking

metamodernism as a structure of feeling is in acknowledging the extent to which it will express

an *emotional* logic as much as a conceptual or cognitive logic, which indeed allows the term to

do more and different kinds of work than it could as a philosophy.[94]

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[92] Van den Akker and Vermeulen, "Periodising the 2000s."

[93] MacDowell, "Wes Anderson."

[94] Vermeulen and van den Akker, "What is Metamodernism?" "We understand metamodernism first and foremost as a structure of feeling, which can be defined, after Raymond Williams, as 'a particular quality of social experience…historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period'…. Metamodernism therefore is both a heuristic label to come to terms with recent changes in aesthetics and culture and a notion to periodize these changes. So, when we speak of metamodernism we do **not** refer to a particular movement, a specific manifesto or a set of theoretical or stylistic conventions. We do not attempt, in other words, as Charles Jencks would do, to group, categorize and pigeonhole the creative work of this or that architect or artist….We rather attempt to chart, after Jameson, the 'cultural dominant' of a specific stage in the development of modernity….Our methodological assumption is that the dominant cultural practices and the dominant aesthetic sensibilities of a certain period form, as it were, a 'discourse' that expresses cultural moods and common ways of doing, making and thinking. To speak of a structure of feeling (or a cultural dominant) therefore has the advantage, as Jameson once explained, that one does not 'obliterate difference and project an idea of the historical period as massive homogeneity. [It is] a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate features'" (5).

I purposely champion the use of the Foucauldian term *episteme* in discussions of metamodernism, feeling that terms such as *era*, *zeitgeist*, *paradigm*, and *milieu* are too imprecise or not sufficiently wide to act as umbrella terms. The above each fall short as category containers in encompassing the nested quality of the structures we are dealing with. My stance would be that "metamodernism is not a paradigm, but a given paradigm may be metamodern—that is, may be included under the umbrella of metamodernism."[95] And metamodernism similarly is not a philosophy, though given philosophies may have metamodern dimensions or aspects.

However, there is a place for usage of some of these other terms. Though feeling that if metamodernism is going to gain more traction, it must be capable of being compared against postmodernism, modernism and premodernism/tradition, and therefore should be located with these others in the category of epistemes, I will also refer adjectivally to a metamodern *cultural sensibility* when trying to indicate how a cultural product or trend exemplifies a new and specifically metamodern aesthetic or tone.

I will not attempt to speculate about what agendas other theorists have in choosing, or avoiding, the above labels for this category to which metamodernism belongs, beyond imagining that some might consider it efficacious to avoid attaching to an already conceived schema such as Foucault's epistemes. This could be for any of the following related reasons. First, its difficulty: Foucault's legendarily complex and layered setting of structures is in full force in *The Order of Things*, the text in which he unfolds the idea of epistemes. Second, its circumscription: The schema may be felt to hinge too much on other Foucauldian concept containers there, such as his *archaeology* and *human sciences*. (These are structural terms, not academic disciplines.) Third, its generality: The concept of epistemes may feel too sweeping and generalized for some

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[95] Dember, personal conversation, October 23, 2017.

people's taste.[96] Or fourth, its structuralist tinge: There is a certain irony in the modern project of nailing down a categorical structure to something that is meant to be post- or post-postmodern; no theorist gets around that completely. That metamodernism does not eschew the use of even the grandest of meta-narratives, so much as it invites them into dialogue, as I will talk about here, means that the present project's utilization of the ambitious and capacious epistemic mapping is no exception.

Let us back up a few steps to better define *episteme*—itself a slippery affair that may have to be approached a bit apophatically. This section will also lay bare a bit more of the theoretical scaffolding undergirding the use of metamodernism as a methodology. Arthur Miller wrote that "an era can be considered over when its basic illusions have been exhausted."[97] Substituting "episteme" for "era" in this maxim, we have a place from which to start. As mentioned, Foucault felt that epistemes were more or less invisible, unconscious forces for the participants, like water to a fish. Exactly how one knows when those basic illusions have been exhausted? His epistemic mapping system presumes this general stance:

> Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures

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[96] John Protevi, citing Gary Gutting, comments that *The Order of Things* is doing "a sort of perverted Hegelianism" in which Foucault is "taking the Kantian insight into categorical structuring of experience and investigating historical differences between categorial systems." Protevi, "Order of Things I."

[97] Miller, "The Year It Came Apart," 30.

accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.[98]

Again, while many people are in fact using the concept of the episteme, very few are referring to it as such, and almost no one bothers to define it. Obeyesekere is an exception, making use of the concept of epistemes in his *The Awakened Ones* to refer to epistemic breaks occurring in "preexisting traditions of thought and consciousness," which then facilitate "new ideational sets or epistemes, the success of which depends on a host of historical and sociological and emotional reasons that cannot be easily separated."[99]

The "Episteme" Wikipedia page frankly does as serviceable a job at defining *episteme* as I have found in outside sources, while also usefully differentiating it from *paradigm*:

> Whereas Kuhn's *paradigm* is an all-encompassing collection of beliefs and assumptions that result in the organization of scientific worldviews and practices, Foucault's *episteme* is not merely confined to science but to a wider range of discourse.… While Kuhn's paradigm shifts are a consequence of a series of conscious decisions made by scientists to pursue a neglected set of questions, Foucault's epistemes are something like the "epistemological unconscious" of an era; the configuration of knowledge in a particular episteme is based on a set of fundamental assumptions that are so basic to that episteme so as to be invisible to people operating within it.… Foucault attempts to demonstrate the constitutive limits of discourse, and in particular the rules enabling their productivity.[100]

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[98] Foucault, "Truth and Power," 131.
[99] Obeyesekere, *Awakened Ones*, 355–56.
[100] Wikipedia, s.v., "Episteme." (A "semi-retired" and thus unlocatable Wikipedia author expanded the original entry on "Episteme" to include a comparison to Kuhn on February 8, 2005.)

Those basic illusions presumably seem to become visible, and are finally exhausted, when individuals' meaning needs are no longer met and conceptual innovations bring something more enticing. If individuals are no longer satisfied with, for example, their onto-epistemological need for certainty and stability (or for *un*certainty and *in*stability—this will get interesting when we take up the draw to *de*stabilization in the chapter on the metamodern monstrous), that would begin to tip the scale toward shift in the era. This shift does not, however, necessitate being firmly grounded in what the shift comprises per se. Put differently, if we don't know yet what we are, we may still be able to say what we are not (that is, what we are not buying into, and also, not buying, anymore). The SBNR reflects just this dynamic.

All that said, it is important to underscore that the metamodern turn presents us with an unprecedented situation with respect to one important component of the epistemic mapping equation to which Foucault could not have anticipated fully: self-reflexivity. The ideas of historical contextualism, of relativism and deconstruction—of understanding what it might mean that one is situated in an "era," that one's actions and thoughts are guided by sets of ontological and epistemological assumptions—are widespread enough that I think most would agree we now live in an era of unprecedented self-reflexive awareness. So, metamodernism is unique among the epistemes in being founded and defined, to an extent, coeval with the awareness of the phenomenon of epistemic shifting itself. Much more so than with postmodernism, for example, whose sensibilities crept in after World War II and began to be defined in a robust sense later, in the 1980s (and modernism was not really defined epistemically until after there was a postmodernism with which to compare and contrast), it might be said that metamodern theorization was present for its own birth.

Some stress that the epistemes are meant to be *unconscious* principles, not self-reflexive ones. In that case, postmodernism and metamodernism, characterized in large part by their self-reflexivity, might be argued to have broken that particular fourth wall for good. This simultaneity—the awareness of a new epistemic reality occurring more or less right on top of the shift—might be considered a transformational element in the epistemic structure itself and is one that beckons for parallels with mystical realization, my topic at hand. Self-reflexivity means contemporary actors now have a way to experience the awareness of oneself as situated within an epistemic container.[101] Later chapters will delve into and relate the influence of concepts from Eastern religious traditions to this.

A final preliminary word on the epistemic structure as I utilize it here is to note that there will naturally be some overlap between the epistemes. Even while the metamodern turn has to some extent assimilated into the culture at large, traditional, modern, and postmodern epistemic realities remain guiding forces for living segments of the population. One light switch turned on does not necessarily turn others off.

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[101] Protevi, "Order of Things I."

Chapter 2

Spiritual but Not Religious and Metamodern Millennial Mysticisms

We are now leaving the postmodern era with its essentially dualist notions of textuality,

virtuality, belatedness, endless irony, and metaphysical skepticism and entering an era in which

specifically monist virtues are again coming to the fore. For the most part, this process has been

taking place directly in living culture, around and outside the purview of academic theory.

—Raoul Eshelman

[T]he death of God does not necessitate the death of magic, and if anything,

secularization seems to amplify enchantment.

—Jason A. Josephson-Storm

2.1. Introduction

Among the proliferation of alternative spiritualities seen in the West in recent decades are
the spiritual but not religious (SBNR), the Nones, and the Unaffiliateds. These monikers, with

their apophatic appellations, signal a new kind of secular spirituality arising in the current period. One question scholars of mysticism face is how those who identify themselves in this apophatic and ambiguous manner—that is, emphasizing what they are *not* equally or more so than what they *are*—regard their own relationships to the mystical and just what has informed these perspectives.

Wouter Hanegraaff ends his 1998 text *New Age Religion and Western Culture* by giving the last word to Gershom Scholem. Scholem's 1976 pronouncement about the importance of mystery has significance forty years later: "If humanity should ever lose the feeling that there is mystery—a secret—in the world, then it's all over with us."[102] Both of these scholars express concern that the espoused trend of secularization and its presumably concomitant emphasis on individualism might threaten the Western bedrock of shared symbolism; each home in on *mystery* as an important aspect of the human quest for meaning. Hanegraaff's concern contrasts mystery with epistemological certainty. He writes:

> Private symbolism and the dissipation of mystery are indeed connected. The New Age movement tends to make each private individual into the center of his or her symbolic world; and it tends to seek salvation in universal explanatory systems which will leave no single question of human existence unanswered, and will replace mystery by the certainty of perfect knowledge.[103]

Heelas expresses a separate but related concern, wondering if the commodification of contemporary spiritualities, starting with the New Age in the early 1970s but culminating when he was writing in 2007, renders them unable to "make a positive difference to individual, social

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[102] Scholem, "With Gershom Scholem," 48; qtd in Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion.*
[103] Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 524.

or cultural life."[104] As "integral tools of capitalism," he wonders what kind of response contemporary spiritualities can make against the materialist, instrumentalist "iron cages" around the human spirit. "On the one hand, we find a person-centered, expressivistic, humanistic, universalistic spiritualty," Heelas writes, "which ... stimulates the flourishing of what it is to be human.… On the other hand, we find capitalist-driven gratification of desire, the pleasuring of the self, self-indulgence, if not sheer greed."[105]

Both scholars frame these social concerns as ethical issues, ultimately. I will attempt to address these issues here. Regarding Heelas, I will challenge either/or presumptions about what the new spiritualities will do, initially through a widened and then nuanced epistemic view of the current situation. Regarding Hanegraaff, and Scholem before him, I will show how, from the perspective of current, popular mysticisms, mystery has reasserted itself—reframed, at least in part, by the concerns of SBNRs.

This chapter takes the position that the secular spiritualities and mysticisms being embraced by SBNRs come about precisely via the sharing of subjects' highly individualized, and also highly public, symbolic worlds. and that mystical material, found increasingly in secular popular culture, both reflects and instantiates a means of engaging with mysticisms unique to this post-postmodern, or *metamodern*, episteme. In fact, Scholem's statement in the epigraph above about the importance of personal access to a sense of mystery may end up reflecting an underlying tenet of what is being conceptualized here as a *metamodern turn*. Secular-spiritual mysticisms' situatedness in a metamodern context will furthermore be examined as potentially leading to quite different social outcomes from what is often forecasted by the millennial

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[104] Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life*. J. Carette and R. King also make this question the focus of their volume *Selling Spirituality*.
[105] Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life*, 7.

generation's detractors—those who essentialize the thirty-five-and-younger population as entitled, lazy, and narcissistic.

Important to my argument is that the specific differences between the New Age and the SBNR, far from being incidental, in fact contribute to this epistemic shift. Heelas's model, by contrast, groups the New Age with other so-called "spiritualities of life" (variously, "inner spiritualities") that reflect certain similar tenets of individualization. These include self-designated beliefs, self-crafted menus of rituals and practices, and an inwardly directed locus of meaning and interpretation of experience. Spiritualities of life also share what he calls a "culture of authenticity." His grouping seems apt and appropriate with respect to these similarities. I, too, will discuss in a later chapter how a culture of authenticity contributes to the creation of an internalized spiritual authority, pinpointing the Western encounter with Eastern religious and spiritual traditions as a contributing factor to that notion of a culture of authenticity becoming a "socialized sociocultural construct" in the West.[106] However, I will also discuss how the SBNR has changed expectations around some of these tenets.

Robert Fuller is another early theorist of the SBNR who groups it with the New Age in terms of their being part of a broad "tradition" of unchurched religions. Mapping the trajectory of seeker spirituality in the West from Swedenborgianism and Transcendentalism to the present, Fuller observed in 2001 that there was "a change in the relative cultural influence" of seeker spirituality as against formal religious institutions.[107] Metamodernism will help illuminate the nature of that change.

Heelas's concern that "whatever value or usefulness New Age spiritualities of life might possess—as a way forward, perhaps as a force for good in the longer-term future—is ravaged,

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[106] Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life*, 194.
[107] Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious,* 154.

dissipated by consumption"[108] should not be dismissed. My argument, though largely pursuing another vector, posits the replacement of the New Age by the SBNR as coming about for reasons that, in fact, speak directly to the younger generation's creative negotiation of the concrete realities of the consumer culture in which they were raised. Wondering whether there is to be found "a counterbalance" to the increasing inculcation of capitalist, consumerist orientation of contemporary Western life, Heelas is asking if something as amorphous as spirituality can combat such forces. To that I ask: What if contemporary secular spiritualities were able to embrace or negotiate these forces, specifically by *not* oppositionalizing in an either/or manner? This intriguing, metamodern move may prove to constitute the counterbalance sought or at least point to its potential. To evaluate this possibility requires more fully differentiating the New Age from the SBNR than has been done heretofore, and specifically, identifying the significance of what I am calling their soteriological divergence. That is, I unpack an epistemic contextualization of the subtle yet significant soteriological shift located with metamodern millennial SBNRs, first by characterizing the emergence of the SBNR with respect to its position "between" epistemes: between the New Age and its attraction to the grand theories and universalisms of modernism, on the one hand, and the postmodern contemporary constructivist—and deconstructionist—relativistic, cultural soil in which it grew, on the other.

Metamodern theory will also contextualize and update the cumulative effect of twentieth-century spirituality's emphasis on individual experience and the influence of Eastern spiritualities, as alluded to by Freeman. Historiographies of Western metaphysical religions, such

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[108] Heelas, *Spiritualties of Life*, 7. To be clear, Heelas will conclude in this volume that the contemporary "spiritualities of life" are, in the end, *not* reducible to consumerist trappings. He will opine that their preoccupation with "inward looking" can make a difference in the emerging "politics of wellbeing" (196) and call upon them to contribute to the resistance to "erosion of the expressive" (231). The present chapter tries to expand on these observations by further grounding them epistemically.

as those by Albanese, Schmidt, Versluis, Hanegraaff, and Owen, tell us that the "experience"

baton was carried from nineteenth-century roots in Transcendentalism, Theosophy, and New

Thought, to the counterculture era and to the New Age.[109] There should be little doubt that that

particular baton has now passed to the SBNRs, as evinced by their move toward a further

reclamation of personal and felt experience, as will be covered presently. The current project

means to continue where these existing historiographies leave off, charting a shift in the

relationship between secular culture and the increased acceptability of public sharing of personal

spiritual experience that occurs between the decline of the New Age and the present.

Another capacious aspect of metamodern theory that I will explore here is its enabling of

proper emphasis to be given to specific forms of "participatory" popular culture and media

practices in creating the both/and quality of secular spiritualities. Gary Laderman writes,

> popular culture in America rules our spiritual lives and is a more important source of
>
> wisdom, morality, transcendence, and meaning, than the traditional institutions like the
>
> church that used to provide these religious elements. Films, music, the internet,
>
> television, literature—these now are just as important, if not more important, than the
>
> teachings found in sacred texts and theological pronouncements for the younger
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> generation as well as baby boomers.[110]

If popular culture "rewrites" contemporary religious and spiritual cultures, as Kripal has

written, or "rescripts" them, as Richard Santana and Gregory Erickson have also indicated, it

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[109] I refer to the historiographies of Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*; Schmidt, *Restless Souls*; Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions*; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*; and Owen, *The Place of Enchantment* as among those that have helped form the backdrop of the present effort with respect to the historical and cultural roots of the contemporary eclectic spiritualities under consideration here.

[110] Laderman, "The Rise of Religious 'Nones.'"

seems important to investigate the governing mechanisms for how and why this is so.[111] And because the influence of pop culture is arguably nowhere in greater evidence than in the current era, in which Generation Y (more popularly known as millennials) and Generation Z (referred to by some as the plurals) hold cultural sway, my emphasis here will be on the pop-cultural artifacts that intersect with the spiritualities of millennials and plurals.

A note regarding my use of the terms "*millennial* spiritualities" and "*millennials'* spiritualities": The latter refers to the age demographic of the millennial generation (henceforth grouped with plurals unless otherwise noted), while *millennial spiritualities* is meant to include current SBNRs of all ages within the current metamodern epistemic period—that is, roughly 2000 to the present. It is an important distinction meant to emphasize that no episteme— traditional, modern, postmodern, or metamodern—is to be regarded as wholly determined by a given generation, even if coeval. That is, in the same way that not all Generation Xers, nor the cultural artifacts generated by them, are postmodern, similarly, not everything millennials say and do is metamodern. Concomitantly, not everything that can be taken to be metamodern comes from a millennial, though millennials as a group most embody the metamodern sensibility, having come of age together. The category of *metamodernism*, incidentally, will help paint a more well-rounded portrait of these younger generations, a means of digging more deeply than the essentialized and most often disparaging characterizations of them commonly deployed.[112]

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[111] The Richard W. Santana and Gregory Erickson text I refer to is *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred* (the first and second editions—2008 and 2016). Jeffrey J. Kripal's *Authors of the Impossible* as well as his *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics and the Paranormal*, especially his fifth and sixth mythemes "Realization" and "Authorization" in the latter text, theorize this rewriting.

[112] Relatedly, Courtney Bender also problematizes the conclusions of studies cited in *The New Metaphysicals,* which sees contemporary spiritual seekers as "cultural and theological orphans adrift in fragmented, post-religious worlds"—portrayals, which, in her view, "miss the mark" (3). See especially her introductory chapter, "Long Shadows."

2.2. Three Traits Marking Metamodern Millennial SBNRs

The following three tendencies, or traits, that characterize metamodern millennial SBNRs will be covered in the content chapters of this dissertation.

1. Fluid identity narratives and public ontologies: The existence of an SBNR, as we shall see, "challenges the division created in the modern era between religious and secular realms of life and enables the formation of new lifestyles, social practices, and cultural artifacts that cannot be defined as either religious or secular."[113] The idea here is that the bifurcative stance of *you are or you aren't* (that is, either you are or are not a mystic, a religious person, a spiritual seeker, an atheist) reflects much less than ever before the felt reality in the millennial period.[114] To stand with a foot in one affiliation while also partially planted in one or more others is a more and more common experience. Individuals' identities are therefore currently constructed and reconstructed, we might say, more fluidly and also in a more public manner than heretofore. (Arguably these shifts began in earnest during the earlier, postmodern epistemic period, but change vectors somewhat in our current iteration of the Digital Age.)

2. Engagement of mystical and spiritual phenomena in secular settings: For today's SBNRs, as Courtney Bender has noted, "numinous, unexpected experiences, mystical experience of

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[113] Huss, "Spirituality."

[114] I don't doubt that some SBNRs do and will continue to display the "adamant bifurcation of spirituality and religion" that Linda Mercadante called "a nearly universal trait among SBNRs" ("The Seeker Next Door"). But for other SBNRs, perhaps more influenced by the metamodern cultural sensibilities that I will discuss here, this begins to give way to a more fluid, less bifurcative identity cluster.

'flow' and daily synchronicities, ... and the like [shape] the worlds in which spiritual practitioners [live]."[115] Further, what is considered "spiritual" and even "sacred" has come to occur as "a robust, dynamic, shape-shifting force that now more than ever is free-floating and disconnected from conventional anchors."[116] I expand these observations about spiritual-sacred occurrences in everyday secular environments to include TV, film, and other technologies of mass communication. As these become more a part of the quotidian, their impact on contemporary culture is more easily overlooked.

3. An expectation of a seat at—and active participation in—"the pluralistic table": Lynn Schofield Clark, writing in 2003, noted, "Since [Generation Y, or the millennial generation,] is more religiously diverse than any previous generation, the challenge of identifying with a religious tradition is often perceived as marking out a way to live among relative truths."[117] Millennial and younger SBNRs especially are evidenced engaging spirituality with agency and curiosity and a distinct kind of egalitarianism—toward other beliefs or worldviews.[118] Individuals may now "inhabit multiple religious cultures at one time, and be in contact and interact meaningfully with diverse sacred anchors in their lives."[119]

I will consider how and why these three traits may have emerged by examining the eclipse of the New Age by the SBNR, and I will ask whether, as this group becomes larger, we

[115] Bender, *The New Metaphysicals,* 2.
[116] Laderman *Sacred Matters*, xvi.
[117] Clark, *From Angels to Aliens,* 8.
[118] By now, Generation Z is cited widely as the most pluralist generation in the US, in terms of ethnic diversity, which is why some suggest this generation be known as the Pluralistic Generation or Plurals, for short. See Loechner, "Plurals"; Baysinger, "Turner Says."
[119] Laderman, *Sacred Matters*, xvii–xviii.

may begin to see pluralistic views extending to an increased acceptance of and engagement with mystical or non-ordinary realities.

2.3. The Work of the SBNR Moniker

What initially led me to this inquiry was a desire to understand what specific cultural or ideological shifts might account for the New Age's falling out of favor—why the term *New Age* is embraced less and less frequently as an identity, surviving mainly as a pejorative after the turn of the millennium.[120] I have come to feel that the significance of this shift for understanding the SBNR has gone undernoticed.

While I highlight the differences between the New Age and the SBNR, I do not want to give the impression that their similarities are not indeed quite marked. As previously mentioned, Fuller, one of the first to historically locate and offer an initial characterization of the SBNR, shows in his 2001 work *Spiritual but Not Religious* that the SBNR shares much with the New Age. Fuller's intention in focusing on their commonalities was to make the case that "seeker spirituality is hardly new"[121] and to highlight a trajectory of diverse spiritual interests that "created an enduring tradition in unchurched American spirituality."[122] In considering this common metaphysical heritage, taken to extend to the human potential movement, the counterculture of the 1960s, and the "Me decade" of the 1970s that ushered in the New Age

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[120] At the *Being Spiritual But Not Religious* conference at Rice University in March 2016, Elaine Eklund cited a respondent in her study who referred to not wanting to sound like a "flipping New Ager." The mass chuckle from the audience showed that it was well understood what was meant by this remark.
[121] Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 154.
[122] Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 11.

movement, one can imagine the apple might not have fallen all that far from the tree.[123] Heelas made the point in his earliest volume on the New Age movement (1996), that affiliants' beliefs and activities are located along a spectrum from world-rejecting to world-affirming, with perhaps the majority falling in a central ethos that he called simply "the best of both worlds."[124]

The point to be taken here is that, as with any spiritual path, there will be purists and casual users, as well as many points in between. Although we may not yet have mapped them fully enough to know what a "purist" version will look like, SBNR adherents are likely to be no exception in terms of falling across such a spectrum. Naturally, none of these portrayals should be thought of as static. The New Age of the 1990s, it would stand to reason, more closely resembled the SBNR of the 2000s, perhaps more than it did the New Age of the 1970s. One might then be tempted to simply regard the phenomenon of the SBNR as merely a name change away from the waning popularity of *New Age*. And that it may be; but there are reasons to believe more is afoot.

In terms of their study, an important similarity relates to the fact that both the New Age and the SBNR are collections of subaffiliations and even "modes of affiliation." Thus they raise similar "practical, on-the-ground research challenges" of a kind not encountered by those studying a more homogeneous religious organization,[125] as Heelas points out. "Theorizing is required which can handle the cultural diffusion of New Age values, assumptions and activities and the ways in which they are incorporated into individual and community life."[126] This is precisely what I suggest the theoretical frame of metamodernism may provide.

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[123] For a concise outline of this historical "tradition" leading to the SBNR, see especially Fuller's first chapter, "The Emergence of Unchurched Traditions," in *Spiritual, but Not Religious*.
[124] Heelas, *The New Age Movement,* 30.
[125] Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, 9.
[126] Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, 9.

In 1998, Hanegraaff wrote that he doubted if the term *New Age* would survive the twentieth century[127] given that it had "acquired negative connotations, and many people no longer want to be associated with it."[128] At the time it had only recently become rare to hear the term *New Age* used without a tone of derisive irony. His remark turns out to have been prescient—in part. As noted by Sean McCloud in 2013, we actually have no idea how many individuals identifying as New Agers might be out there at this point simply because one cannot use that phrase on a questionnaire anymore. So few would be willing to check that box.[129] Fuller also noted as early as 2001 that "very few people ever use the term [*New Age*] when describing their own religious beliefs. He was pointing to the fact that there is no organized New Age movement per se.[130] Of course, these observations bring forth issues regarding the interpretation of survey data on religious affiliations and the efficacy of such check-box questionnaires to produce meaningful data. What use an individual makes of the affiliation s/he has checked becomes a highly complex question. For one thing, we cannot safely infer what affiliating means to people, whether it indicates an adherence to a worldview, belief, or creed, or if they are checking an affiliation box (or avoiding checking one) for other reasons. What meanings may be made by checking the box next to *SBNR* or *None* or other ambiguous labels can be very different for various populations and even for different generations of immigrant groups.[131]

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[127] Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion,* 17.

[128] Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion,* 17n49.

[129] McCloud, "Discussing the 'Nones.'"

[130] Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 99.

[131] Brett Esaki has suggested that for some generations of Asian immigrants, the idea of choosing an affiliation category may give rise to a complicated cost-benefit analysis. Recent migration often means a displacement of identity matrices, including religious identities. For some, identification with their home tradition may feel like locating oneself as part of an oppressed group. Some may have "private pride but public shame," for example, about the ritualistic aspects of the home tradition as perceived within secular society. Also some may feel that they have provisional acceptance into American culture and therefore do not want to disrupt that acceptance by making a statement about traditional roots. To affiliate as noncommittally as possible, then, may be perceived as the best way of avoiding problems. Esaki was

Furthermore, as Gordon Lynch writes, citing Linda Woodhead, "In a contemporary context in which people's attitudes towards traditions of all kinds are changing and evolving, it makes less sense to restrict our analyses to specific, boundaried traditions."[132] For one thing, being allowed to check more than one box would seem important in the pluralistic, contemporary West. It seems safe to speculate that, overall, checking the boxes *other* or *none of the above* becomes more normative as people are more comfortable sampling from different traditions and with understanding ambiguity as a valid and even salient identity marker (à la SBNR), as I discuss here. Also, for the new spiritualties that Lynch studies, he remarks, citing Woodhead again, "Rather than functioning as a 'statement of faith' to which all religious progressives are expected to sign up, the emerging ideology of progressive spirituality is more of a potential basis for mutual identification, communication and collaboration."[133]

2.3.1. Spiritual but Not New-Agey?

While the term *New Age* is embraced less and less frequently as an identity after the turn of the millennium, it does continue today to do some important signifying work as a pejorative. A telling case of the derisive use of the signifier *New Age* now being employed directly toward defining another spiritual identity can be found on the web magazine *Elephant Journal*.[134] This magazine seems to be oriented toward a millennial SBNR demographic.[135] It describes its demographic as those interested in "the mindful life"—people who care about

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specifically addressing the choice to affiliate as a "None" with these comments. However, we can infer that at least some of these issues will apply to the SBNR affiliation as well. See "Sociological Factors."

[132] Lynch, *The New Spirituality,* 6.

[133] Lynch, *The New Spirituality,* 42.

[134] Thanks go to Terry Stella for pointing me to this resource.

[135] Although *Elephant Journal* doesn't mention either of these groups on its "About" page, a look at the photos of the staff and contributing authors shows a largely millennial-aged and Caucasian group of individuals. This begs the questions of whether SBNR is a "white" phenomenon and whether the upward

living a good, fun life that's good for others, and our planet. The mindful life is about

yoga, organics, sustainability, conscious consumerism, enlightened education, the

contemplative arts, adventure, bicycling, family ... everything. But mostly it's about this

present moment, right here, right now, and how we can best be of benefit, and have a

good time doing so.[136]

On *Elephant Journal*'s home page, alongside topic tabs such as Wellness, Green, and

Enlightened Society, one finds Non-New-Agey Spirituality. Articles under the latter tab include

some that frankly epitomize the stereotypes of the New Age ("Discovering Your Soul Purpose:

Change Your Mindset & Your Life"; "The Simple Two-Step Process That Will Free Your Inner

Child"; "When We Connect with Nature, We Recharge Our Senses"; "How a Mind-Body

Intervention Can Improve Your Health"), as well as some that seem to aim at differentiating from

an older version of eclectic spirituality and carving out a newer, more capacious, cheekier, and

demonstratively more self-aware sort. Article titles, such as "5 Differences Between a Spiritual

Truth & an Urban Outfitters Window Slogan"; "Why My Yoga Practice Sometimes Includes

Tequila"; "How to Be a F*cking Goddess"; "Why I Stopped Trying to Be Happy"; "Why I Crave

a Life of Disorder"; and "Spiritual Snobbery: The Dark Side of Light Workers" acknowledge that

an authentic contemporary spiritual life will necessarily be a mash-up of sometimes

contradictory aspects along with secular concerns.

One author, David Zenon Starlyte, who appears to write as often under this overtly New

Agey sounding name or under the name Zenon, as he does under the name David G. Arenson,

exemplifies a meeting of the New Age and SBNR ideologies. His article "Darkness Can't Exist

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mobility presumed both from these photos and from the "leisure activities" promoted require analysis as
such. Until the data is in place to confirm or deny these suppositions, I limit my commentary to that
which I have observed anecdotally.
[136] Elephant Journal, "About Elephant Journal."

in the Light" opens with the lament that "our society has evolved to view polarity as intrinsic to creation, and from this perspective, construct a reality. An inseparable duality runs through the matrix of our thinking ... encouraged by institutions.… Perhaps our traditions have misled us or simply polarised our view into black and white thinking?"[137]

It is traditions like Christianity, Tantra, and Daoism, with their "dualistic paradigms," he writes, that have manipulated our thinking. "Complexity and multiplicity, which is [*sic*] the nature of existence, has [*sic*] been maligned and even suppressed" by these "old perspectives." To overcome such dualities, he advocates following the more contemporary wisdom of quantum physics, citing ideas familiar from 1970s New Age stalwarts, such as *The Tao of Physics*[138] and *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*.[139] But Starlyte also argues for the place of the full spectrum of human experience, including "the dark," a metaphor he employs in two ways: one, a thing's "darkness," which he connotes as a negative thing, can be removed by shining one's awareness on it, putting it in the "light," which is connoted as positive; and two, to say that the dark is not meant to be dismissed as "bad": "When we fear the dark, we give it power over us. We tend to view darkness as bad and light as good, and place them on opposite ends of the spectrum."[140] I speculate that the pushback against a duality that would banish "the dark" and overemphasize "the light" satisfies those for whom it is important not to sound too New Agey. Utilizing a transcendence-model soteriology, which I associate with New Age beliefs and will be defined presently, Starlyte places the onus on an individualistic "higher self" to sort all of this out. This higher self is the same concept that we find is staple to the New Age. And similarly, in positing the higher self as the rightful arbiter of wisdom, the authority of institutional religion is tacitly

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[137] Starlyte, "Darkness."
[138] Capra, *The Tao of Physics*.
[139] Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*.
[140] Starlyte, "Darkness."

denied. His final point is also familiar: the pronouncement of universal Oneness. "Since all is God—all is alive with awareness and sentience. We are infinite creators living in a world of infinite creations."[141]

In sum, by angling against *either/or* binary conceptualizations about reality, arguing for a *both/and* multiplicity, but ending with the monist position that all is God, the author straddles ideologies that permeate both the New Age and the SBNR. This argument runs a circuit familiar to anyone acquainted with New Age tenets: railing against the hegemonies of organized religions by proposing a universalist philosophy that is inclusive of scientific perspectives and friendly to postmodern relativism, and still arrives at the monist position that all is God. Floating seamlessly from *one's truth* to *One Truth* is, again, not a great departure from beliefs associated with the New Age. But the tone of this and other *Elephant Journal* articles mentioned above reflects something a bit different. Epistemically, this presents a kind of clash between traditional (or premodern), modern, and postmodern epistemes. The simultaneous borrowing from and critique of religious ideas reflect both a suspicious stance toward them and a disinclination to discard them, as well as a tacit suggestion that anyone can offer their take on *the mindful life*; that the project of engaging with and rewriting the ancient wisdoms to incorporate contemporary values is ongoing and open to all comers.[142] Moreover, it asserts a sense of agency to actively rework

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[141] Starlyte, "Darkness."

[142] Certainly mindfulness as detraditionalized has led to its commodification as the phrase *McMindfulness* identifies. One can buy *Mindful Mints* and *mindful mayonnaise.* See Wilson, *Mindful America*, and Gelles, "The Hidden Price of Mindfulness Inc." As I prepare this document, one writer has decided to coin "metamodern mindfulness": Gregory Leffel, "Will Cuba Become a Test Case?" What the author gets right is that "the way the world feels" to individuals has become more important. Much of the rest of the article is a grafting onto Vermeulen and van den Akker's work his own ideas of social mission and is largely a misappropriation. Mindfulness also is taken out of any context whatsoever here, referenced neither as stemming from religious traditions nor as a practice of any sort: "Metamodern mindfulness offers a new way of thinking about the ideological conflicts of the past—a new frame through which to assess class conflict, egalitarianism, liberal freedoms and religious values—and the possibility of new syntheses within and between these things." Though an irritatingly erroneous neologism, I include it here

them to incorporate more contemporary values. Examples of said values here are pluralism and inclusivity.[143] This sense of the personal authority, even responsibility, to take their seat at the table, along with the even more unapologetic oscillation between spiritual and secular positions, is part of the SBNR's update that I deal with here.

Lynch's model of *progressive spirituality* may be useful toward considering an ambiguous attraction to and repulsion from religious traditions. In Lynch's model, the term *progressive* indicates "a commitment to understanding and practising religion in the light of modern knowledge and cultural norms."[144] In this model, an "emphasis on the ineffability of [the] divine presence leads advocates to regard all constructive religious traditions as containing insights that can be valuable for encountering the divine," while also being "highly critical of aspects of these traditions which are patriarchal and offer a 'top-down' notion of a God, separate from the cosmos"—meaning those that seek an authoritarian, or even an authoritative, way of ordering human life. A religious tradition can be valued "insofar as it reflects some of the core assumptions of progressive spirituality—and other meaning-systems, such as rational secularism, or even Eastern and New Age spiritualities that are also subject to critique where they differ from these core assumptions."[145]

Here Lynch evokes an epistemic sort of mapping (but note that he is almost certainly using *modern* in this instance to mean *contemporary*) with metamodern spiritualities as I posit them here. His progressives are not homogeneous in their liberal and left leanings, although he asserts that there exists a "fundamental sympathy to notions of democratic society, gender

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to show an example of how these two terms, metamodernism and mindfulness, are watered down and adapted for a variety of uses.

[143] Lynch, *The New Spirituality*, 11.

[144] Lynch, *The New Spirituality*, 19.

[145] Lynch, *The New Spirituality*, 11.

equality and a welcoming of diversity."[146] Lynch will call this broad context of left-leaning forms

of religion the progressive milieu:

> This milieu stretches across and beyond individual religious traditions, and so within it
>
> we find progressive Jews, Christians and Muslims, various forms of feminist or holistic
>
> spirituality, Pagans, Wiccans, and Quakers, as well as "Engaged" Buddhists and
>
> Hindus.… This spirituality is not simply a diffuse sentiment of tolerance and openness
>
> amongst religious liberals but arises out of particular concerns and is organized around a
>
> common set of clearly identifiable values and beliefs. Progressive spirituality is a
>
> particular way of understanding the world shared by individuals and groups across and
>
> beyond a range of religious traditions, who seek to understand their particular tradition
>
> and commitments through the lens of ... [some] basic assumptions. It can be seen as a
>
> step beyond multi-faith tolerance and collaboration, towards the definition of a spiritual
>
> ideology that could unite people across and beyond religious traditions.[147]

Such a progressive ideology shows signs of bridging across the secular-religious divide

as well, especially if understood as part of a metamodern epistemic shift. Stating that this

ideology "offers the potential for a shift to a sense of mutual identity based on common social

and political concerns," one that is possibly an even stronger type of identity than that of the

primary tradition with which one most affiliates (remembering that in many cases there may be a

set of several affiliations), Lynch's broader postulation, evoking Kuhn, is of a paradigm shift:

"[T]he data of contemporary life no longer fits the paradigm of traditional religion, and this

creates pressure for a new spiritual paradigm to be developed which takes better account of

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[146] Lynch, *The New Spirituality* 19.
[147] Lynch, *The New Spirituality*, 20–21.

contemporary experiences, values and concerns."[148] This explanation approximates the sense in which I talk about metamodern spiritualities, such as the SBNR, as themselves a kind of performance of interreligious dialogue between the secular, the spiritual, and the religious. Starlyte's article, with its negotiation between two spiritual views, and *Elephant Journal*'s acknowledgment of something called non-New-Agey Spirituality, demonstrate this sort of social performance.

2.3.2. Beyond a Rebranding

Both voices underscore the relevance of the underlying question to which I now turn with more specificity: What exactly happened to sully the designation *New Age* while many of the beliefs and practices persist, now under the banner of progressive spirituality or SBNR? It is likely that part of the sullying has to do with a backlash against the simultaneous (and seemingly inseparable) popularization and commodification of contemporary expressions of spirituality. Critics have been associating detraditionalized religious or quasi-religious groupings (such as the New Age) with rampant consumerism for some time. One reason it is difficult to combat this insinuation, as Heelas writes, quoting Colin Campbell, is that "the underlying metaphysic of consumerism" has become "a kind of default philosophy for all of modern life."[149] The association there has been clearly negative.[150] Given such charges of inauthenticity that

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[148] Lynch, *The New Spirituality*, 24.

[149] Campbell, "I Shop Therefore," 41–42, qtd in Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life*, 82. Heelas's text reviews the literature that addresses how *New Age spiritualities of life* have become an integral tool of capitalism. See especially chapter three on the negative associations to consumerism. Boaz Huss addresses these also in "Spirituality," 58.

[150] See Kathryn Lofton, who characterizes consumerism as embraced more readily in her *Consuming Religion*. Her study found secular practices increasingly thought of in terms of the *religious*, and *religion* to be a word that designates both how people consciously organize themselves in the world and how they

accompany the idea of the commodification of New Age spiritualities, *spiritual but not religious* may indeed surface as a rebranding—a swapping out of the name *New Age* for the purpose of establishing some distance from such suspicions. If so, an attempt to avoid being called out as inauthentic puts SBNR individuals in an interesting, split position—both embracing and being reflexively skeptical about their embrace of spirituality.

This, in turn, perhaps accounts for the centrally defensive signifier: *not*. Let us hold these ambiguous positions in mind while considering other kinds of work that the term *spiritual but not religious* performs. To be clear, I make no presumption that any of the following are necessarily conscious strategies on the part of those who choose the designation SBNR, beyond the fact that "with the phrase generally comes the presumption that religion has to do with doctrines, dogmas, and ritual practices, whereas spirituality has to do with the heart, feeling, and experience."[151]

Utilizing the ambiguity of the term *spiritual,* firstly, SBNRs may feel they are able to circumvent being marked with any definitive identity that could be commodified and/or derided away in the manner that *New Agey* has come to be. One of the oft-noted characteristics of the New Age as well as the SBNR is abstaining from declaring affiliation with one religion or form of spirituality. The name *SBNR* marks a more decisive and active deflection away from religion, i.e., from the concept of religion. What SBNRs are demonstrating with their worship behaviors, given that many may continue to attend church or temple services, for example, is another issue. Often, the conclusion of religious affiliation polls is that contemporary Western individuals are running from religion in droves. More nuanced studies show not so much that the data is

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are unconsciously organized by the world. Lofton wants readers to "think about how the desire to keep consuming something is connected to our other acts of creation" (*Consuming Religion*, Kindle edition).

[151] Hollywood, "Spiritual but Not Religious."

incorrect but that the conclusion drawn is a specious one. In an effort not to veer too far off

course, here I will limit my commentary to remarking that both the deriving of this sociological

data and its analysis need careful checking.[152] What the recent polls do suggest that is worthy of

note is that new spiritualities such as the SBNR offer something different from fixed and singular

religious or spiritual identities.

Second, if responding to accusations of inauthenticity, SBNR affiliants may prefer

identifying with the vague and purposeful murkiness of *spiritual* because it might feel less easily

commodified. (Even though the converse could, in fact, be argued. That is, with the monistic

position that anything can be spiritual, anything can theoretically be made a sellable product in

the spirituality marketplace.) SBNR's "shopping mall" or "salad bar" spirituality, as it is

sometimes called, is regarded as indecision, cageyness, materialism, or naiveté on the part of

SBNR-identified individuals.[153] Beyond being consumers exercising the freedom to choose,

might their eclecticism be considered a strategy to avoid being ontologically pigeonholed?

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[152] A recent PRRI study of the SBNR in American spirituality that makes the data more meaningful in my opinion has made an effort at nuancing the categories *religious* and *spiritual* first by ranking subjects as one of four combinations of the two terms with an *and* or a *not* between them or a *neither/nor*. And second, rather than asking whether a subject considers herself "spiritual," this study maps the concept to some specific qualities, such as self-reported experiences of feeling connected to something larger than oneself. "We developed a battery of eight statements that were posed to a nationally representative sample of Americans about how often they had a variety of different experiences related to spirituality." Their ideas of "related to spirituality": feeling "connected to the world around you," or feeling like one is "a part of something much larger than yourself," or "felt a sense of larger meaning or purpose in life." (The parameters for *religious* were questions about participation and importance in personal life.) Note that their "spiritual" is in effect a "secular-spiritual." Are such polls reifying the bifurcation of spiritual and religious? It should be no wonder that the group called SBNR is supposedly growing in numbers when the label has the potential to cover so many forms of non-ordinary experience or awareness. Not that the definition of *spiritual* should necessarily be drawn more tightly. But we still need to be able to ask why, for example, one person might call an experience of witnessing childbirth or a beautiful sunset "spiritual" while another individual would not necessarily use that term while each could be, from some quantitative measure, experiencing a similar neuro-cognitive effect. Raney, Cox, and Jones, "Searching for Spirituality in the U.S."

[153] Robert Fuller addresses such charges of narcissism and salad-bar spirituality (what he calls "Cafeteria Catholics") in *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 156–65.

Meanwhile, then, these SBNRs can continue to engage in nearly identical lifestyle choices to those of the New Age: buying similar types of products; responding to similar flyers for meditation retreats; attending healing workshops, astrological readings, and so forth held at the self-same bookstores; and pursuing their personal paths of awakening with an essentially identical crop of spiritual teachers.

Third, I underscore that *SBNR* is an *individual's* designation, rather than an alignment with a grouping, per se. Moreover, whereas one can use *New Age* as an adjective that implies a collective mentality or as a descriptor (as in *New Age authors*, *New Age bookstores*, or *New Agey*), these usages do not translate to the SBNR moniker; its subtext of individual choice and autonomy is therefore preserved.

My fourth point here is a kind of composite of the previous three and expands on a comment made at the outset of this chapter about the apophatic quality of the term *SBNR*. To reference what one *is not*, equal to what one *is* signals both an opening (*spiritual* with its intentionally wide set of meanings, not to mention an association with breath—*spiritus*, from the Latin) and, in the next instant, a closing (*not* religious). Again, this move tacitly subverts the usual manner of affiliating with a specific side. To identify as SBNR is perhaps to signal personal autonomy, something like: *I am calling myself "spiritual," but I claim the right to decide what I mean by that. Whether others define their spirituality the same is not my main concern.* The SBNR moniker's interesting relational aspect, then, is that in centering the gauge of authenticity on the individual, it rejects the idea that a stamp of approval from extrinsic sources should be needed and yet also beckons for engagement with the individual. That is, since the affiliation, in effect, props the door open to a broad array of teachers, beliefs, and practices, if one wanted to know which of these a given SBNR individual follows, one has to ask. This ambiguity,

furthermore, may signal a secular, even science-friendly sense that an ongoing *search* is to be trusted more than any religious *certainty*.[154]

The fifth observation about affiliating as SBNR that I wish to call attention to is one that does not seem so ambiguous. It is the observation that the name *spiritual but not religious* avoids conveying any telos or soteriology. No definitive creed is announced, no call for anything "new" nor a connotation of SBNR as somehow an improved version of what came before. SBNR can be thought of, then, as a horizontal move of sorts, one that reflects a position *between*: between the New Age's modernist, grand narratives and notions of progress, on the one hand, and the overtly constructed, postmodernist stance on the other. This does not mean that a soteriology is missing, however. I will expand on this last point shortly as I define the SBNR's soteriological shift precisely as reflective of a telos—a metamodern one—which, to borrow a phrase from Vermeulen, "is as imperative as it is imaginary, a horizon forever beyond reach."[155]

2.4. Being Between Epistemes

Where my analysis differs from other scholars working to unpack metamodern theory who do not attend to religious historiographies is in placing emphasis on the SBNR's emergence—its specific response to the New Age—as an important factor in this epistemic turn. The polarization created by the New Age's universalized truth claims and its ultimately dualistic, transcendence-model soteriology, which I assert typifies that movement, makes it possible to cast

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[154] See Lynch, *The New Spirituality*, especially 17–39.
[155] Timotheus Vermeulen in Critchley, "Theoretically Speaking."

the New Age, for my purposes here, as *modern*.[156] I will now expand on this epistemic

categorization of the New Age, since this is a somewhat contested attribution.

I follow Heelas in calling the New Age a spirituality of *modernity* in at least two specific

senses. One, that New Age values provided "a *sacralized rendering* of widely held values (…

tranquility, harmony, love, peace, creative expressivity, being positive and, above all, 'the self' as

a value in and of itself)."[157] And two, its conception of a "Higher Self" regarded as the "real

you," the accessing of which is a major soteriological goal for New Agers.[158] The Higher Self, in

capitals, as distinct from the "little *s* self," can be regarded as a key aspect of the transcendence-

model soteriologies of many eclectic spiritualities in the lineage before the New Age[159] (New

Thought and so forth). My addition to Heelas here is this: seeing the Higher Self as part of the

New Age's polarization of the light, the good, the positive, the transcendent—as "higher" and

therefore *more real*—intrinsically pitted against the darker, more ambiguous, contingent,

immanent, and more human should be regarded as a significant factor in propelling the

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[156] For another interesting discussion of New Age soteriologies, see Sutcliffe, "Practising New Age Soteriologies."

[157] Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, 169. Also, David Hess, in *Science in the New Age*, asserts that the New Age movement was not postmodern, citing two factors. One, its mode of mass communication was attached to books and pamphlets and so forth. Its discourses were therefore not a part of a "cultural industry and religious experience [that] merges with entertainment" (38). Hess also differentiates New Age capitalism—essentially "small-scale, largely entrepreneurial"—from postmodern capitalism's "large-scale corporate and multinational" type. Though the buying of products and thereby buying "the story of their cultural meaning" is "what locates the consumer as either belonging or not belonging" to a movement (38), Hess's distinction was that "New Agers view themselves as turning commodity production into cultural production [via producing] *goods with a heart*" (39, italics mine). With the booming of spirituality industries, the situation has changed. If Hess could have known in 1993 about current day enterprises, such as the yoga-industrial-complex, which, according to a 2013 report by Channel Signal, sold $27 billion annually in the US alone (see Channel Signal, "By the Numbers"), would he be able to say that there is some level of sale or quantity of merchandise at which yoga mats and apparel or other such goods are no longer made and sold "with a heart"?

[158] Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 212–15.

[159] See Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 211–19, and Hess, *Science in the New Age*, 43–52.

postmodern backlash—its disavowal of that sort of lopsided engagement with the self and culture.

Situating the fall of the New Age and rise of the SBNR as occurring in response to specific narratives that no longer fit the constituents, we are well positioned to then consider some of the narratives that guide the current digital era and affect the SBNR identity for present and future generations.

Let us first briefly consider one salient aspect of the epistemic situation leading into the new millennium: postmodernism and its association with anti-universalism. One of the oft-cited postmodern cultural tropes is the expression "no *there* there"—a phrase used to describe the deconstructionist idea of there being no such thing as *unmediated* meanings—and also of there being no stable subject to derive any meanings. Meaning structures associated with modernism—its grand narratives of progress, emphasis upon science and rationality, and religious impulses recoded as mechanistic, progress-driven, and given quasi-scientific rationale as determinants of knowledge and truth and always with a potential for attainable certainty— were countered in the epistemic shift to postmodernism by its challenge to the idea of *any* epistemological or ontological certainty. Affective constrictions relevant to the present discussion accompanied this shift.

Several decades of inculcation later, postmodernism's influence is, indeed, still felt. Of the operative narratives that have persisted, a number of them have eschatological overtones, such as narratives of end, negation, and lack.[160] As its name indicates, the condition of being post signals an eclipsing of and a detachment from the old meaning structure but offers no real replacement with another graspable meaning structure. An end without a beginning. The

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[160] David Loy addresses this in broad scope in his *A Buddhist History of the West: Studies in Lack.*

detachment itself was the salient statement: A verb without a noun. A lack of existential ground as a purposeful postulation. Meany, Clark, and Laineste, researching design, communication, and literary arts, call postmodernism "an opposed movement";[161] Stephen Knudsen, historian of visual arts, stresses its "detachments."[162] Dumitrescu summarizes that literary scholar Andre Furlani "defined metamodernism as a literature of presence that arrived in the last stages of postmodernism, which is a literature of absence."[163]

In more demonstrable terms, the postmodern negation and lack generated an effect of always-already suspicion and irony. This meant that certain kinds of affective expressivity were curtailed.[164] By the end of the 1980s, it had become something of a cultural *faux pas* to openly convey sentimentality. The postmodern era became typified by influential writers such as David Foster Wallace as a time in which there was an unstated taboo on expressing earnest feelings without an ironic rejoinder, or to allow sincere beliefs and uncomplicated truths to go unmocked. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Generation Y, the newest crop of culture makers, seemed to have found this tacit taboo against earnestness and the rejection of the personal rather intolerable.

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[161] Meany, Clark, and Laineste, "Comedy, Creativity, and Culture."

[162] See Knudsen, "Forward," 66–69. I don't mean to give the impression here are that there are not also applications of the term *postmodernism* with non-negating) meanings. As Lynch notes, Charles Jencks, a central figure in delineating postmodern architecture (and considering it at its core pluralistic), in recent years has contended that postmodernism ought not indicate a necessary collapse of meta-narratives. Lynch, *The New Spirituality,* 32.

[163] Dumitrescu, *Toward a Metamodern Literature*, 168.

[164] To chart the phenomenon of the eschewing of affect, one might also consider Christopher Hauke's psychological reading of how affect came to be "cast as a thing apart—an anomaly in the otherwise rational mind, to the point of being regarded as a mistake." *Jung and the Postmodern,* 225–26. Put simply, affect became associated with the unconscious while rationality was paired with the conscious mind. This view surfaced adjacent to Darwin, Freud, and Jung and was carried by such figures as William James. The prevailing idea that emotions were essentially interruptions in rationality, Hauke says, resurfaces in the 1960s (226). His section nine, "Affect and Modernity," provides helpful context to further explain why the emotions were treated as an untrustworthy object.

This affective response is demonstrated by the cultural products that I describe here and elsewhere.[165]

Relatedly, in some parts of the academy, there was a kind of taboo against doing scholarship that sidestepped the poststructural claim of "nothing outside the text," something that amounted to an analytical kind of blasphemy.[166] As Robert Forman quipped in his memoir, describing the bombshell of postmodern contextualism dropped on him by Professor Wayne Proudfoot in a graduate school course, "This whole postmodernist story put me in a hole I, and our culture, are still climbing out of."[167] The impact for those in mysticism studies who broach the affective domain of "experience"—to either admit aligning with the universalists (as Eshelman put it, "No one wants to get caught practicing metaphysics"),[168] or to align with a social constructionism that cuts ontological conversations off at the knees—has become something of a battle cry for a contingent of scholars ready to recast the Forman–Katz debate's bifurcate lines in the sand. Adding metamodernism to the epistemic map enables the description of the positive terrain that emerges after postmodernism—and here I mean *positive* as in *extant*, or *not missing*, not as in *a rosy outlook*, though, as we will see, the latter meaning does actually fit to some degree. The name *SBNR* itself indexes the postmodern narratives of negation but with a positive addition.

To summarize this set of observations: I'm positing here that the growth of the millennial SBNR as a kind of spiritual identity comes about as a response to a lopsidedly light, power-of-positive-thinking-fueled soteriology and points it back to ground level, as it were, to instantiate a

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[165] My blog with Greg Dember catalogues a variety of cultural products and describes what makes them metamodern. See *What Is Metamodern?*, http://whatismetamodern.com.

[166] Eshelman, *Performatism*, x

[167] Forman, *Enlightenment Ain't What It's,* 52.

[168] Eshelman, *Performatism*, x.

secular-informed type of immanence that now manifests culturally (and we will see examples of this presently) as a general gravitation toward—and even a "sacralizing" of—individuals' felt experience, inclusive now of the rougher, flawed, more shadowy, and sometimes even the weirder and sillier human qualities and experiences. So, if the SBNR, the Nones, and the Unaffiliated emerge out of disenchantment with the doctrinaire nature of the postmodern disenchantment, they do so with a concomitant desire to *reclaim* that which had gone underground with postmodernism—again, affect, emotional sincerity, and personal and local agency in meaning-making.

This reclamation is one characteristic of the metamodern cultural shift that I wish to emphasize here, one which has important cultural ramifications for the present discussion. Not only is "the subject" not dead, but one literary narrative move emerging in the 2000s and onward is for the author "to preserve the integrity of the subject even under the most unfavorable conditions."[169]

2.5. "I'm Here!" Connecting the SBNR to Metamodernism's Roots and Expressions

Vermeulen observed the following topoi comprising the metamodern cultural sensibility: "The renewed appreciation of grand narratives, of *transcendence*, of optimism and sincerity, the reinvention of the commons, and the rediscovery of affect and of love, even, of techne, craftwo/man-ship, and of the body as origins and remains." Metamodern SBNRs are not just

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[169] Eshelman, *Performatism*, 4.

rejecting or accepting the grand theories they inherited from the New Age. With some level of awareness of the baby-bathwater problem perpetuated by postmodern relativism's absolutism—an "informed naiveté," as Vermeulen calls it—they make space for both. Again, I regard this soteriological shift in the script as a centerpiece of the attempt to define metamodern spirituality.[170]

At this point, we can see these topoi expressed across disciplines. The literary school New Romanticism and its spawn, The New Sincerity, are thought to be related to the metamodern shift. An aesthetic negotiation between the poles of modern and postmodern epistemes is highlighted frequently in characterizations of a new movement in visual arts, as well.

David Foster Wallace's influential essay "E Unibus Pluram" is thought to have articulated what would become one of the anchors of the metamodern cultural sentiment. As early as 1993, he wrote against irony culture and the passivity and cynicism portended by being always "behind the scenes" rather than *in* the scene (that is, in non-screen-based reality).

> The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of "anti-rebels," born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre values. Who treat plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue…. The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists … accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity.[171]

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[170] I don't mean to suggest that all SBNRs should be characterized as metamodern. Some who have adopted the SBNR identity may still essentially follow the New Age in terms of the soteriological leanings I highlight here.

[171] Wallace, "E Unibus Plurum."

Wallace foresaw the postmodern culture of removal, disaffection, and irony and the resultant taboo against expressing any earnest sense of an uncomplicated truth or sentimentality playing itself out, as it were, though the new impulse had yet to find its way into popular culture.[172] It is as if millennials—born into postmodern fragmentation—had at some point unconsciously thrown up their hands and screamed, "OK! Maybe there is *no 'there'* there, but yet ... *I'm* here! *We* are here!"[173] This, I suggest, is the ground of metamodernism: a way of calling out the paradox of negating oneself as subject and a recognition of, but also simultaneous protest against, the ensuing disconnectedness, by affirming their *both/and*. We might put it like this: if modernism eventuates in giving people the finely wrought tool of suspicion, postmodernism sharpened it and drew all over the Western world; metamodernism then reacts to the sense of being stopped by that suspicion and the curtailing of personal expression, not by choosing one epistemic discourse over the other but by insisting on their ultimate relationality.

Speaking about the reclamation of affect as a central aspect of the metamodern epistemic shift, Vermeulen writes, "As of late ... in philosophy as well as in the realm of aesthetics ... affect has made something of a surprise comeback.… [A] number of thinkers have adopted affect as a strategy not just of deconstruction, but also of reconstruction, as an orientation, or promise, that may alter not only our experience of life, but also 'living' itself."[174]

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[172] Qualifying is required, however, since the postmodern, and postmodern irony, don't just evaporate but continue to act as the cultural soil for many. Also, it would be wrong to suggest that irony is always meant to be valenced negatively, even within metamodernism, my compacted portrayal notwithstanding. Lee Konstantinou tracks the scope and the history of the ironic in *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*. Metamodernism is necessarily replete with irony—having been born of postmodern irony culture—but utilizes it differently.

[173] Ceriello and Dember, "What Is '*What Is Metamodern?*'"

[174] Vermeulen in Critchley, "Theoretically Speaking." In the field of religion, the subfield of affect studies—itself developed in interdisciplinary conversation with the fields of literary theory and cultural studies—garnered a place in the American Academy of Religions in 2013 with the admittance of the Religion, Affect and Emotion unit. This is an area whose intersection with metamodern theory could lead to great developments for both. (Although content-wise, affect theory itself at present veers more toward the psychoanalytics of desire and toward political critique.) The emergence of affect theory itself could be

What metamodern thinkers appear to be after, he continues, is a theoretical and affectively friendly way to "reclaim for themselves a relationship to an ideal 'reality' of unity, coherence and truth that they nevertheless realize is forever beyond their recognition and reach, that they realize cannot exist."[175] I would comment here that Vermeulen's wording could easily cause the reader to construe the metamodern as going a few degrees further toward the postmodern nihilism from which it precisely differentiates. To my mind, the tone evokes the act of protecting against a simplified, too idealistic sense of what metamodernism is, one which would conveniently solve problems under the rubric of "It's all good!" I do agree that while earnestness, niceness, and sincerity—qualities that connote optimism and uplift—are hallmarks of the metamodern sensibility, interpretations of it in which a utopian new world are imagined would be too narrow (not to mention too grand narrativist) and thus not in alignment with the use of metamodernism as an episteme. In chapter four, I go into greater detail about the issue of the ethical positions that metamodernism is or is not being (and should or should not be) made to address. At this juncture I will simply make the assertion that those who cannot countenance a reality in which some things are "forever beyond reach" may be wishfully projecting salvific qualities onto the new -ism.

My personal adjustment to the language Vermeulen uses would be to change the penultimate word *cannot* with *might not*, to reflect my proclivity as a scholar of mysticism

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explored as a possible artifact or epiphenomenon of the epistemic turn to metamodernism. I am not arguing that affective concerns are newly recognized in this century. Deborah K. Shuger, in a treatment of early-modern Christianity traces the philosophical foundations of the emergence of emotion to the Western Renaissance's appropriation of Augustine. See Shuger, "The Philosophical Foundations of Sacred Rhetoric." However, as she points out, "The deeply favorable view of the emotions that is characteristic of sacred rhetorics depends in part on denying reason's exclusive proprietary rights to truth. The emotions present a threat to rational objectivity but not to faith" (121). Metamodern uses of affect will be more likely to emphasize the legitimacy of emotion in either domain.

[175] Critchley, "Theoretically Speaking."

committed to the excavation of that which is considered unknown, unknowable, and impossible. This *oscillation* component of metamodernism that carves a space between deconstruction and reconstruction, pessimism and optimism about the future, will receive further treatment in the following chapters. I connect this to the SBNR in that, as part and parcel to their *both/and* propensities,[176] SBNRs have projected what Eshelman refers to as a *monistic* insistence that the spiritual can be found anywhere and in everything.[177] But this time—that is, with the waning of the New Age in the late 1990s and early 2000s—they *really* meant *everything.[178]*

It may be productive here to remember that metamodern religions and spiritualties draw from qualities associated with postmodernism but choose an alternate path from the dead-endedness of a necessary ironic detachment and removal. Instead, they self-consciously cultivate sincere enjoyment and meaning—even sacrality—out of self-reflexivity and irony. We see in the

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[176] As mentioned, Vermeulen and van den Akker prefer to use the nomenclature of *both/neither* and *and/nor*, apparently to show that even if both sides are present, it is not a move toward any singular or predetermined meaning outcome. More simply, they may be aligning metamodernism as simultaneously both modern and postmodern and also neither of them.

[177] Eshelman, *Performatism.* It should be noted that while the term *monism* features heavily in this text, Eshelman does not employ this as a religious concept per se, but more as an ontological metaphor. "The new monism" that he proffers can be roughly described in this passage, in which Eshelman utilizes work on *ostensivity* by anthropologist Eric Gans to describe a move beyond an "ironic regress" or beyond any one frame at all: "The point is not whether the sign is really of divine origin; it's that the sign could be; it marks not only the boundary line between the human and the animal but also between the immanent, real world and an outside, possibly transcendent one." The sign itself possesses an aesthetic beauty, and "allows us to oscillate between contemplating the sign standing for the thing and the thing as it is represented by the sign. We imagine through the sign that we might possess the thing but at the same time recognize the thing's inaccessibility to us, its mediated or semiotic quality" (4–5). This seems to both draw near to Vermeulen and van den Akker's oscillation and to what I refer to here as the action or the agency of the secondhand mystical encounter with texts.

[178] Lynch's 2007 model of progressive spirituality in *The New Spirituality* may, again, be pointing this direction. He attributes to certain contemporary spiritualties a "pan(en)theist" view of the divine "grounded in the belief in the immanent *and* ineffable divine which is both the intelligence that guides the unfolding cosmos as well as being bound up in the material form and energy of the cosmos" (11, italics mine). Also relevant here is his suggestion of an attraction to mysticisms: "This view of the divine is often held in conjunction with an emphasis on the value of mystical union" while it also reflects the contemporary desire for sacralization of nature and science (11). "Arising out of [a] progressive view of divinity, progressive spirituality promotes the sacralization of nature as the site of divine presence and activity in the cosmos—and the sacralization of the self, for the same reasons" (10–11). He refers to progressive spirituality as "well adapted to the cultural conditions of late modernity" (13).

SBNR that the sacred finds belonging in the secular, but without so much need to polarize *against* it. What this does to readings of mystical experience is the topic I will take up next.

2.6. A Metamodern Narrative Analysis of Mystical Experience

I will now turn to a narrative account of a contemporary mystical experience and attempt a brief close reading. This account was submitted anonymously to the Alister Hardy Archive in the early 2000s. I have excerpted three short sections. The subject begins the narrative by describing her own process of painting as her portal to mystical states of awareness. She then gives a phenomenological report of a state she describes as "an extreme continuity between you and the material world around you." (Here she is speaking in the second person.)

> You have an extremely heightened awareness of ... the ground around your feet, the grass just next to you, the shells on the beach, the interaction of earth, air, ground, sky and water, and the sea rolling in miniature tidal waves onto the beach ... an experience of unity with the forces of both the material world and the spiritual world within that.

The spiritual world is characterized as "within" the material, rather than outside, above, or in some way superseding it. Continuing, she qualifies what the state is *not*:

> It is not a precise, illuminating sort of experience. It is rather more generalised. You could not say from this experience that life had a special meaning and purpose. You could only say: "Life has a meaning, and it is this: We are continuously a part of this material and spiritual world." It is not that, "There is a transcendent world. And I have discovered and know about that which will come in the future." I don't think we need to go so far as to say this is a vision of a new world, nor of a new heaven and earth.… What is important is

the enhancement of creativity and awareness in the moment. The reason we don't have to do that "transcendent-for-evermore" bit is because, by this means, we can have great, great eternity in one great, great moment. "Eternity in the palm of your hand ... Heaven in a wildflower."

"Awareness in the moment" by means of ordinary activities like painting, she feels, can bring access to a kind of transformational awareness that, finally, anchors one in the world. The subject then writes at length detailing her means of "returning" from this non-ordinary state back into the "everyday world" (omitted here), then concludes:

> Whilst such moments are great ones, we have to absorb what has happened, and go on from there in the everyday world. I would argue that to look for universal insights from this experience of unity is not the right way to go about it. I do not think this means we will be joining a continuously unified world which is wonderful after our own and material death. I have to say I feel that this does not matter too much. We don't have to deal with anxiety about death this way. That is because we can personally have a great life in this life and from this kind of experience.… As ever, we return to everyday life, problems, conflicts, perceptions, and failures of communication. That is life.[179]

What struck me about such passages as reflective of a metamodern cultural sensibility is that the narrative hinge in this subject's account of *spiritual* transformation is, in a way, to *secularize* it. Her account is largely *not* centered on otherworldly transcendence, that is, not on a new, augmented reality, but more on the mystical realization informing and augmenting her *this*-worldly existence. As such, it stands in contrast to a type of transcendence-model narrative common in my research, which could be considered "modern" in that they often use a type of

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[179] Account #200025, Archive of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre.

developmental progression. Mark Freeman has called this developmental progression a *process narrative* and explains that it tends to take shape thusly: subjects interpret their experience by engaging in a kind of tacit ranking of their previous mystical/spiritual experiences, in which they assess these as less powerful than the current experience; but they acknowledge that these prior experiences have led them toward, and finally culminated in, the currently reported "higher" realization/state of consciousness.[180]

Our present subject does not organize her experience this way. She does not imply that she has reached any pinnacle, nor does she lead the presumptive interlocutor (the imagined reader of her submission) to the suggestion that her mystical awareness provides her any real resolution of everyday problems. On the contrary, in my reading, the message conveyed in her metanarrative is a feeling that she has glimpsed a part of the transformative capacities inherent in human experience, perhaps one mode of awareness among many. In terms of affirming the importance of personal experience and of focusing on the present moment, she is in step with commonly cited New Age and SBNR metrics mentioned earlier. But her reach back to its validation in the context of ordinary lived reality over a transcendent reality marks her account as an example of what we might call metamodern mysticism.[181]

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[180] Freeman, *Rewriting the Self.* Freeman writes that the narrative of an "old Self" and a "new self"—before-and-after self-constructs—create a kind of developmental narrative for mystics. Coherence is made when these identity conflicts are reconciled, one into the other, the new self gaining ascendancy, after having articulated the falsity of the previous version. See chapter two on Saint Augustine, 25–49.

[181] This brief analysis admittedly bypasses important issues of gender and social location in examining personal experience and agency. Also, my synchronic approach here does not address whether mystics writing their narratives in other time periods might have also made similar discursive choices. Further analysis of personal narratives of mystical experience from the millennial era will reveal whether there is a decreased emphasis on the spiritual goal of transcendence, with mystical realizations portrayed as ordinary, accessible, and framable in terms of everyday life, as this one seems to.

2.7. Media, Technology, and Participatory Rescripting of Spiritualities

Spirituality in the millennial era and beyond cannot be addressed without taking into account the SBNR's embeddedness in media culture. As Lynne Hume and Kathleen McPhillips observed in 2006, "media technologies are a core aspect of spiritual access and religious community in contemporary [Western] societies."[182] Clearly, SBNRs and others with spiritual interests can connect with groups and resources more readily than ever. As just one example, internet-based Meetup groups, a popular means of networking around various activities and affinities, including a wide variety of spiritual affiliations and interests, exist in nearly every major U.S. city. Checking for groups in the Seattle area that used the keywords *spiritual but not religious*, I noted a jump from eighteen groups counted in 2014 to thirty-eight groups in 2017. (Also interesting is that groups that define themselves using the keywords *new ag*e and *spirituality* went down from eighty-two in 2014 to thirty-eight in 2017.) An audience member at a lecture I gave referred to social media, the "sharing economy" and Meetup groups as both her "spiritual vehicle" and her "sangha."

We can expect that advances in technology and media will only continue to augment the means by which people can engage their spiritual passions. But what I specifically wish to welcome into the mix here is the question of the significance of new norms of life ushered in with regard to social media and the fluidity of identity narratives available, by way of asking how they intersect with interest in the spiritual and mystical. This exposition creeps near to, but unfortunately must bypass, treatment of other identity issues surrounding discussion of the media-mediated age, such as uneven access by different socioeconomic groups and other

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[182] Hume and McPhillips, *Popular Spiritualities*, xix.

important social factors. My comments will necessarily be general signposts rather than pointed dissections of any specific group's usage of any specific media.[183]

Social media's ubiquity, popularity, and structural "egalitarianism" mean the rating and reviewing activity by the common person, regardless of credentials, becomes a hugely impactful form of participation in an array of social and economic spheres.[184] It also encourages and normalizes the constructing and deconstructing of a menu of differing identities in the sense I have been using the term here. As anyone in the contemporary West who owns even one "device" knows, in this *sharing economy*, liking, posting, and sharing others' posts as forms of endorsement make virtually everything into products to be rated, overtly tying this manner of identity construction to social as well as market capital. Social media technologies are now a literal engine of economics and make individuals into parts of that engine as they "ask us to participate in amorphously defined professional and *self-marketing practices*."[185] To the extent that the felt experience is of empowerment and participation, the sharing economy is "commerce with the promise of human connection."[186] Perhaps we can extend this to understand millennials'

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[183] Joseph Laycock writes about the importance of considering fictional narratives in the study of new religious movements, noting the ways in which public perception is affected by them. His corpus includes several looks at public fears that are portrayed in television and other media that come to enter the real-world imaginary. It stands to reason that portrayals of mystical experiences in popular culture will similarly influence and possibly even qualitatively affect public views. See Laycock, "Where Do They Get These Ideas?" and *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*.

[184] This, of course, is a qualified egalitarianism. Obviously, one must have a computing device and access to the internet. Beyond that, users anywhere, regardless of age, race, gender and socio-economic background, are able to participate largely equally. I am aware that a statement claiming "equality" (particularly one that comes from a cisgender white person) is potentially fraught. No classism or ableism is intended here. My generalization is meant only to indicate that unprecedented online accessibility in the current day affords the ability of publicly offering one's opinion on myriad subjects in a manner incomparable to any prior time period.

[185] Ersatzism: A Conference and Workshop, italics mine.

[186] Gebbia, "How Do You 'Design' Trust?"

reactions to technology and media, as creative responses that show previous generations' fears of the downfall of civilization at the hands of cyborgs now met with an affect of friendliness and sympathy toward this Other. (Examples of such a shift in approach to the Other will be forthcoming in several chapter sections which treat popular culture more specifically.) Contemporary SBNRs, it would stand to reason, may be less concerned about whether their constructed spiritualities match up to any sanctioned, preexisting options since the current mediatization brings with it a cultural norm of just that—options; and the idea of participation in constructing them.

Furthermore, the contemporary orientation toward *visual* media contributes to the popularity of media forms in ways that are significant for millennials' spiritualities. In the contemporary West, as Generations Y and Z are raised to frame and display their identities through momentary snapshots on their numerous social media platforms, it is those with whom one shares these frames—one's social media contacts—who, to some extent, double as "community" and "sangha." We can now literally view, in real time, the ongoing and continuous forging of individuals' new identities in their multiple social media contexts. The metamodern sensibility includes postmodern deployment of ironic distancing that makes one recognize oneself as a character in, and a witness to, a kind of always-already-unfolding four-dimensional movie. Also, metamodernism reflects a new permission to react with awe and wonder to everything and everyone playing a part in one's "movie," simultaneously as a part of it and as a removed witness. This I have referred to elsewhere as "the metamodern AWEsome!" about which more presently.

2.8. Mystical-Metamodern Themes in Popular TV

This section deals with how television and film give significant access to spiritual subjects and have brought about forms of participatory community that rely on media and technology. They are arguably more prominent now and more significant in the lives of millennials than for any generation heretofore. Here I will limit my treatment to just a few recent offerings of contemporary television as cultural texts that can support the idea of normalization of secular/spiritual mysticisms of which I speak.

In a list ranking the top five American TV shows among millennials in 2014, all of them engage religious, spiritual, mystical, psychic, or supernatural themes: *The Walking Dead, American Horror Story, The Big Bang Theory, Game of Thrones* and *NCIS*.[187] Some estimates state that 25 percent or more of current television and film cover such themes.[188] As I have written elsewhere and will elaborate upon here, "not only do these shows bring the spiritual and supernatural to secular settings, but they also often wrap them in messages of both religious pluralism and humanism.[189]

In *The Big Bang Theory* (*TBBT*), one of the longest-running sitcoms in history, the show's protagonists are scientists in the secular setting of a university. The characters are shaped partly by situations that are staged to bring their views into contrast with nonsecular characters and views. Religious and spiritual views are showcased in story lines that have the characters

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[187] Barna Group, "What Americans Are Watching in 2014."

[188] Dean Radin, interviewed on BATGAP, commented on the preponderance of TV and film "themes having to do with psychic phenomena…some very large percentage…a third perhaps? The entertainment world simply reflects what our interests are" (Radin, "Dean Radin"). Also see Josephson-Storm, "Introduction," in *The Myth of Disenchantment*, in which he cites recent quantitative studies that to him suggest "an America enthusiastically engaged with angels, demons, and other invisible spirits" (25).

[189] For a discussion of the manner in which pluralist/humanist values are conveyed in AMC's *The Walking Dead* see my blog post, "What Popular TV Shows Reveal About Contemporary Views of Religion in Society: Pt. 1—The Walking Dead."

engaging beliefs that do not fit into the scientists' stereotyped hyper-left-brain worldview. Audience laughs are meant to be leveled at the scientists' positivistic stridency, painted as almost religiously dogmatic. The effect is that both religious beliefs and strident adherence to scientific epistemologies as tools for negotiating social realities are mocked in equal measure. That they are placed on equal ground arguably humanizes each—which I suggest is a metamodern aspect of the show and one that furthermore reflects the underlying pluralism of millennial spiritualities.

Additionally, the sitcom's lively online message boards show audiences engaged with such questions as, "Can a theist appreciate this show?" (And, incidentally, the answer would appear to be yes, because, according to the same poll, the show ranked second among "practicing Christians.")[190] This demonstrates viewers' interest in seeing the intersections of the religious and secular interrogated more fully and their desire to ask deep questions, even of a comedic program.

Other elements of this show are noteworthy in terms of it exemplifying a metamodern treatment. Some critics are also picking up on the metamodern sensibility though largely not aware there is a word for it—yet. The geek-as-winner is a trope in the metamodern rescripting, with *TBBT* following in the footsteps of a show like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer.* Melissa Locker explains *TBBT*'s popularity thusly: "As geek culture becomes mainstream, *The Big Bang Theory*—with its casual references to Schrödinger's cat, *Star Trek* and string theory and a running gag about how one of the characters 'only' has a master's from MIT—is the natural evolution of a changing pop-culture ecosystem."[191] Quoting Katherine Brodsky, Locker writes,

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[190] Barna Group, "What Americans Are Watching in 2014." Perhaps it is not without significance that this nationwide study names *The Big Bang Theory* as the one show that spans all four generational categories—Millennials, Generation Xers, Boomers, and Elders. "More than one-quarter of each generation segment are *TBBT* watchers."

[191] Locker, "Critics Be Damned."

"This is the age of the geek and *The Big Bang Theory*'s popularity is a reflection of a massive cultural shift where we're celebrating the brainy, the intellectual and the different—instead of making them an outcast.… *Big Bang Theory* lets audiences identify with and be part of that geek world.'"[192]

India Ross encapsulates what I am saying here about the rescripting of the geek: "What formerly passed for inadequacy is now a covert strength."[193] This 2013 review states that *The Big Bang Theory* sits, "in a transition period in which irony is heaped upon irony, such that the very uncertainty over what constitutes 'cool' gives us the social fluidity which defines our world today. We are still looking for the New Normal, so to speak."[194]

I would alter the idea that we are "still looking." In 2009 I co-authored an essay explaining the significance of the new usage of the word *awesome* as encapsulating this new normal. First, we noted that meta-observation had produced a way to express and narrate both ironic distance and earnest appreciation for the weird and quirky:

> In the late '00s, meta-observation is the main gear of a new generation of meaning-makers—the post-postmoderns.… This generation has changed not only the connotations of the word *awesome*, but of the whole concept of cool as well. Increasingly, cool is no longer revealed in the smug smirks of kids in-the-know, with their perma-ironic observations that are the hallmark of Gen X. "That's AWEsome!" is the opposite of the withering sarcasm that was employed to separate those "in" from those "out." The expression defines something unique to those who are ready to get over themselves; ready to stop justifying a nastily exclusive world divided up into *"I'm cool,*

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[192] Katherine Brodsky was a stringer for *Variety*.
[193] Ross, "The Big Bang Theory."
[194] Ross, "The Big Bang Theory."

you're not" and *"This is cool, this is not."* This new brand of AWEsome trumps the old

cool. It's now actually cooler to be AWEsome than to be cool.[195]

My claim here has been that this new normal is actually part of the metamodern cultural shift we

have been tracking since the mid-2000s that arose around the turn of the millennium. Its

visibility increases as it is reified in popular culture. "The best [TV] shows of our age aren't

finding humor in the gaps that have developed between people. They find humor in the absurd

and awkward attempts by people trying to bridge those gaps. They want to show us that humans

can have real connections and sincerity for each other."[196]

NCIS, a crime drama, is perhaps the surprising television show on this list in that one

would not expect it to engage religious themes much, if at all. However, a look down the list of

episode titles reveals the show's use of religious metaphors to direct story lines that liberally

combine secular and religious topics, and occasionally mystical ones, as well. Titles include

"Saviors," "Faith," "Resurrection," "The Immortals," "Shiva," "Devil's Triad," "Devil's

Trifecta," "Devil's Triangle," "Shabbat Shalom," "Better Angels," "Chasing Ghosts," "Judgment

Day," "Witch Hunt," and "See No Evil." An episode entitled "Faith" (season 7, episode 10) is

replete with "teachable moments" about Islam. For example, a corpse found on a prayer mat

necessitates that the detectives trot out an explanation of *salat* as one of the five pillars of Islam.

The prostration prayer position and feet-washing become elements of the forensic investigation.

In an uncharacteristic moment of emotional honesty, one scientist character reflects on

the reality of what his job entails, and concludes with a prophesy: "Perhaps if humanity focused

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[195] Ceriello and Dember, "That's AWEsome!!" Since I wrote that piece, at least two other treatments of
the metamodern awesome have been written: Karthauser, "The Awesome, or the Metamodern Sublime";
Riggle, "How Being Awesome Became the Great Imperative of Our Time." Riggle's essay does not
mention metamodernism but the cultural sensibility he describes very closely resembles it.
[196] Schoder, "David Foster Wallace."

less on what separates us from one another and more on what we could learn from our differences, we would stop killing one another; that is what I pray for." The pregnant-with-silence moment that follows registers the surprise of his colleagues at this very personal admission. Silence conveys that such personal ethical proclamations are felt as awkward inasmuch as they do not normally have a place in a police environment, but the silence also gives the impression of a somber moment of agreement deserving of a few moments of quiet reflection.

Topics such as whether *NCIS* as a whole is friendly to one religion over another are debated on numerous blogs.[197] My main point is that the collision of secular and spiritual values in these sorts of story lines seems to create moral arcs that span both and often advance a kind of reconciliation of them. Moreover, some *NCIS* fans will instill an admixture of spirituality into their show, in a manner of speaking, by participating by posting fanfic—their own fictional stories written around the characters and shared in online fan groups. These fan-writers weave supernatural and mystical elements, for example, taking the show's crime-solving story lines into alternate realities, where cop characters are liberally turned into shape-shifters, telepaths, and so forth, among other alternate-reality plot twists.[198]

Examples of the long reach of television, film, and other media-based sources of entertainment into mystical and spiritual territory are so numerous that I can only gesture at them here. There are numerous other examples of television shows drawing big ratings that point to an apparent interest by both secular and spiritually minded audiences in the intersection of the two.

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[197] In the aforementioned episode, the religious extremism portrayed is Christian exclusivism, not Muslim.
[198] See, for example, https://www.ncisfiction.com/browse.php, under genre *alternate universe*. This phenomenon is also referred to as "textual poaching" a term coined by Henry Jenkins in the early 1990s. The author released a twentieth-anniversary update to his earlier volume, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*.

The inference I am making, if not yet abundantly clear, is that if the most popular secular American television programs regularly involve viewers in religious and spiritual topics, it would seem proper that they factor into our analysis of SBNR mysticisms and how they are made relevant for secular audiences.

Subsequent studies may draw more data relevant to understanding these series' effects on consumers by extending their analyses beyond shows most often consumed and themes most often portrayed, to look even more closely at what meanings are performed by them for an increasingly participation-oriented, media-mediated audience. Media studies scholars have shifted their attention in the last decade to highlight the manner of engagement with pop culture—not just as texts, as the performance of a cultural expression, but again, as events inclusive of the "performance activity of the audience" or "the use audience members make of things," as Jeffrey Mahan writes. Fans understand themselves neither as passive viewers nor passive consumers of religious and spiritual material. "The popular culture event, properly understood, includes both the text and the activity of the readers," Mahan continues. As readers/audience "write themselves into the popular culture event through their activity, which includes wearing costumes, belonging to fan clubs, attending conventions, memorizing lore,"[199] the phenomenon of passionate fandom bends further toward something that is sometimes theorized as a *cultural religion*.[200] Michael Jindra feels that fan activities instantiate a kind of community that can "resist the secularization and rationalization of modern life."[201]

Television shows such as these that draw big ratings among both secular and spiritually minded audiences point to what appears to be clear interest by fans in the intersection of the

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[199] Mahan, "Conclusion," 289–90.
[200] Jindra, "It's About Faith," 171.
[201] Jindra, "It's About Faith," 166.

religious and the secular.[202] It seems clear that pop culture acts as an engine of an ongoing, "intertextual rescripting of the sacred," to borrow the phrase from Santana and Erickson,[203] and that an increasingly mediatized society provides an avenue for viewers to become quasi-spiritual practitioners—actively participating in this rescripting—in ever more inventive ways.

2.9. Liminalizing: Drawing and Erasing Boundaries

Let us look from another angle at the question that is in some ways at the heart of understanding the popularity of secular-spiritual mysticisms, as we now ask not only epistemically but phenomenologically what might cause today's SBNRs to respond enthusiastically to the sorts of media representations I have just discussed. While a complex question, to be sure, I offer one theory here that draws several of the strands of my main thesis together (though admittedly requiring a leap on the reader's part into more phenomenological territory). Having looked briefly from a narrative perspective, I want to call attention to the mechanics of a *secondhand mysticism*. How does the move across the borders of ordinary and non-ordinary realities work for a contemporary consumer of mystical material?

I have cited the enhanced relationship of the consumer to media and popular-culture entertainment as a reason why the adoption of a number of identities at once would have become in a sense normalized, especially for millennial SBNRs and their youngers. Now I wish to more firmly instate the epistemic connection. What if mystical, supernatural, and paranormal

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[202] This is consonant with other efforts focusing on the work that popular culture does in translating the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* to a secular audience. See Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*; Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*.

[203] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 1st edition, 148.

narratives—those that blur, bend, and reconfigure the boundaries of "ordinary reality"—act as a kind of performance of liminality, mirroring metamodern SBNRs' felt reality, including that of individuals who have no direct experience with a mystical encounter themselves (the vast majority, one imagines)? Or, put more radically, mystics and mystical activity may be construed by millennial SBNRs *as* sacred sites themselves.

This idea I borrow from Carmel Bendon Davis, who makes use of the Foucauldian concept of *heterotopic liminality*, and before her, Caroline Walker Bynum, who presented the related idea of monks as vicarious worshippers for all of society.[204] Heterotopias are "places which are '… a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of space in which we live' ... representing something that is *beyond* that society."[205] The mystic and mystical experiences act as heterotopias when the mystic shows how she negotiates her ordinary reality while in the throes of a non-ordinary state, a vision or realization, and/or afterward, during what is sometimes referred to as the "descent period," when the mystic draws conclusions about the meaning of the event, as in our earlier account.[206] Mystical encounters, which obviously vary widely, generally have in common this period of negotiation in which the mystic is straddling multiple perceptual realities. She is cognizant of her liminality, while experiencing and, we could say, *performing* a fluidity of identities. The leap I make here is to suggest that a secondhand encounter with mystical material may set up a similar kind of cognitive ontological negotiation.

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[204] Caroline Walker Bynum, qtd in Davis, *Mysticism and Space,* 64. Davis and Bynum apply this idea to medieval mystics, whereas I see it as applicable to the mediatized world of millennial spiritualities. Elisa Heinämäki has also written about the instability and ambiguity of saints and demoniacs, making them apt "personifications of the sacred: set apart as exemplary incarnations of shared values but also objects of collective affects." (513). See her "Durkheim, Bataille, and Girard."

[205] Davis, *Mysticism and Space,* 93.

[206] My analysis of mystical narratives suggests that the "descent" from a mystical experience is no less important than and is in fact part and parcel to the noesis; as Kripal put it, quoting Alvin Schwartz, "you can't have a Superman without a Clark Kent—because no one can live all the time at that level of experience." Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 243.

If our mediated contemporary culture cultivates in us a penchant to become consumers of mystical, paranormal, or supernatural narratives/texts, as I've suggested here, and if these texts are negotiated encounters, their "construction, practice, and interpretation," as Santana and Erickson have written, always relate to a "process of *drawing and erasing* lines and boundaries."[207] Encounters with mystical figures, furthermore, problematize the *boundaries between* good and evil, between believers and nonbelievers, or ordinary and non-ordinary realities. These are boundaries that are "kept alive by both faith *and* doubt, located *between* existence and nonexistence."[208]

The drawing and erasing of boundaries can be seen as an active dialectic that is particularly interesting for this inquiry. Taking liminalizing as a performative process, and relating it to metamodern oscillation, it might be said to renegotiate the *both/and* identities of which I have spoken here by means of this stepping back and forth between domains. When Vermeulen and van den Akker use the term *oscillate*, they signal that the operative dynamic of metamodernism is not so much an integration or reconciliation. "Although it expresses itself as a dynamic, metamodernism should not be thought of as a balancing. It is rather a pendulum that moves between innumerable poles."[209] Put more simply, the notion I am building upon here is that the active riding of tensions between the secular and spiritual *is* how SBNRs and Nones forge their identities—how their public ontologies are performatively generated. They are both inside and outside their secular and their spiritual identities, negotiating constantly with these realities, not unlike a mystic.

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[207] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 1st edition, 151, italics mine. These authors use monster theory to address the encounter with the monstrous Other. I apply monster theory to my work in mysticism since both instances feature narratives of ontological destabilization and restabilization.

[208] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 1st edition, 151, italics mine.

[209] Delfs, "What is Metamodernism?"

Again, the current emphasis on visual media likely contributes to this participatory performativity of which I speak.[210] The activity of framing reality *through the lens*—processing and viewing moments in one's life like snapshots or like scenes in a movie meant for consumption by one's network of followers, is a specific kind of reflexive propensity that younger generations would seem to come to more natively. This activity, which I refer to for short as *life-as-movie*, further blurs the lines between lived and constructed realities. Transient realities and identities instantiated in a momentary manner, such as those that are facilitated by social media, can be read as any number of story lines, and in that sense, they may foster a form of community that does not insist on adherence to a single, totalizing truth but rather thrives on multiple perspectives. That is, when characters, viewpoints, and frames are shiftable and momentary, and realities can be read as any number of story lines with entangled and shifting plots, the effective message for millennial SBNRs may be that they do not feel alone in their metaphysical truths.

Rather than expressing cynicism about how unmoored and unstable this may sound—lamenting that millennials are content to morph and shape-shift per the collective cultural allegiance to the economy of likes on their various social media platforms and followers on their YouTube channels, as some commentators do—I suggest it is more fruitful to explore their polyvalence as a sophisticated, pluralistic, metamodern move of integrating and recovering from the dead-ended aspects of the postmodern ironic.[211] Even if this reading feels as if it's reaching

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[210] Kripal refers to popular cultural treatments of the paranormal in *Mutants and Mystics* as mystical, performative, and participatory. Paranormal events, he writes, "are not only real, but also inherently *participatory*," behaving like texts that "rely on our active engagement" because "in some fundamental way that we do not yet understand, they *are* us, projected into the objective world of events and things, usually through some story, symbol, or sign" (217).

[211] Craig Detweiler also comments on clicking on the like button as a form of voting and a democracy of sorts—liking as both self-identification and as an economic driver. See *iGods*, 159–61.

too far or is too rose-colored for some, I think we can say that at minimum, this generation has found a means of engaging their secular technologies in a creative manner that does not pit them *against* spirituality. Indeed, as viewers of mystical pop culture involve their felt experience, the epistemological undercurrent for millennial SBNRs is one of a shared, multivalent, metaphysical truth. When truth is reality right here, in one's own skin, not elsewhere, it becomes a humble cocreation, no less meaning-filled for its accessibility on ordinary, secular terms.

2.10. The Metamodernization of Spiritual Figures

In this last section, I describe what I am calling the "metamodernization" of spiritual figures, which can apply to both living teachers and also to repackagings of historical saints and spiritual figures. Such metamodernizations emphasize their human, vulnerable, often quirky aspects, thereby making them seem more ordinary and relatable—hence making the extraordinary ordinary, and vice versa. I will mention two currently active figures in contemporary spirituality illustrative of metamodernization, Briton Jeff Foster and American Chris Grosso, both millennial-age men who write and address audiences publicly as spiritual teachers and who each, in some capacity, borrow concepts from ancient Eastern traditions, though they offer them in a largely detraditionalized way.

Life Without a Centre*,* the website of popular British spiritual teacher Jeff Foster, appears to be designed to reflect some recognizably "millennial" sensibilities. Foster's teaching, in my estimation, could be described as Neo-Advaita Vedanta, though he takes pains to avoid any such labels. His website/project appears to be designed to reflect millennial sensibilities.[212] For

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[212] Foster, *Life Without a Centre* (blog), www.lifewithoutacentre.com.

instance, the headshot on his home page avoids stereotypes of a "spiritual look," instead presenting a visage that seems to signal an ordinary moment for a not-*too*-radiantly-blissed-out person—someone who, with his incomplete scruff of beard, might, like you, be "in progress." The Life Without a Centre home page links to Foster's writings on very human and ordinary topics such as depression, heartbreak, addiction, activism, passion, and grief. Foster seems to aim to offer a relational, feeling-centered approach that addresses average people's this-worldly emotions and concerns. He writes that the real work lies in **"BLESSING THE MESS OF YOUR LIFE!** … Thoughts and feelings are not mistakes, and they are not asking to be HEALED. They are asking to be HELD, here, now, lightly, in the loving arms of present awareness."

The content of his writings avoids reflecting any ascetic form of spirituality and references no originating tradition. The subtitle of the site (at the time of writing) reads, *My guru is this moment. My lineage is this moment. My spiritual path is this moment. And my home is this moment*. In his writing and public talks, negation is also employed heavily. A biography for Foster, included in an interview, echoes this negation:

> Jeff belongs to no tradition or lineage but has a deep respect for traditions and lineages. Jeff is not an "authority" on life. His words are equal to the sound of a bird singing, or a cat miaowing. All are expressions of the One Life. And when all words have disappeared, as they do, all that's left is laughter.[213]

This verbiage would probably feel familiar to millennial SBNRs and to writers of publications like *Elephant Journal,* whose language conveys a negotiation or oscillation between epistemes— a performance of their complex and sometimes contradictory relationships around authority, meaning, and truth.

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[213] Foster, "Jeff Foster."

Another way Foster metamodernizes his teachings, making them broachable by Western audiences, is to lightly poke fun at ideas like spiritual perfection and seekership, disarming any esoteric connections that could be an affront to secular audiences. For example, his site includes a short video of bloopers of himself screwing up on camera, self-effacingly titled "I'm a Useless Spiritual Teacher."[214] Also, in a short video called "The Advaita Trap," he stages what I would call a metamodern spiritual intervention, a scene in which one spiritual seeker finds she must confront her companion about his annoyingly didactic preachiness:

A: Hey, look over there. Do you see it? What a beautiful tree!

B: STOP RIGHT THERE! There is no "tree"! There is no "beauty"! Both "tree" and "beauty" are merely concepts appearing in space-like, ever-present awareness! Don't settle for mere concepts, A! Don't buy into the ignorance of the mind! End seeking once and for all, here and now! All words are merely pointers! Discard the pointers!

A: Er ... yeah. Of course. I get that. I was just saying—

B: STOP! There is no "I" to "get" anything! And nothing to get! And no "saying"!

A: Yes. I know. I SEE that.

B: WHO sees that? WHAT is there to see? WHO sees WHAT? There is nobody there seeing! Ask yourself the question "WHO SEES?"! There is only clear, space-like seeing with no person doing anything! There is no duality! There is only nonduality! Duality is an illusion! Only nonduality is real!

A: I was just saying—

B: WHO was saying? WHAT is there to say? And to WHOM?

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[214] Foster, "I'm a Useless Spiritual Teacher!"

A: Jesus, I knew you were going to say that.

Similar banter continues between them until Character A finally reproves Character B:

A: Can I be honest with you? Since you've, well, in your own words, recognized your

true nature, all the joy seems to have gone out of you. I'm sure you've found

some clarity in one way or another, but it's almost like you've lost the ability to

relate as a human being to me.… You're playing the guru and it's getting

tiresome.… I'm trying to talk to you in a down-to-earth, ordinary, human way; not

asking for help but sharing.… You're no fun anymore.[215]

Here we see that Character A's way of combating the annoying didacticism of the

"nondualist preacher" is to invoke simplicity and innocence, the human desire to connect, and

the desire for fun. She acknowledges the nondual truth of no tree, no beauty, and ultimately no

self to make these distinctions, but still she refuses to allow her heartfelt joy at the sense-

impression of the tree as beautiful to be deconstructed. This example shows the performance of a

negotiation between universalism and constructivism *through* felt experience, which, as I have

been suggesting here, appeals to contemporary secular concerns about spirituality.

"The Advaita Trap" exemplifies a reflexivity directed specifically at the Neo-Advaitan

seeker who is rankled by the same kinds of issues that I am suggesting created the SBNR—

specifically, dogmatic, modernist soteriological stances that present as universalisms. It is also

indicative of the angling of SBNR spiritualities toward a world-affirming perspective. Moreover,

in some of the literatures on mystical experience, one reads of fears that nondual realization may

result in either nihilistic or, on the other pole, megalomaniacal tendencies.[216] The video suggests

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[215] Foster, "The Advaita Trap."

[216] R.C. Zaehner's *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into Some Varieties of Praeter-Natural Experience* raises this concern explicitly. As Kripal points out, Zaehner's ethical critique of monism, ultimately emblematic of a Christocentric position, argues that dualism is a necessary ingredient of

something that runs parallel with the metamodernist "course correction" after postmodernism—

that is, to become more attentive to that which simply makes us all human. The negatives Foster

employs (*without* a centre, *no* tradition, etc.) seem to also stand for an awareness that, like other

millennials, he must face the postmodern, knee-jerk reaction against authority, meaning, and

truth, and that it is then up to the individual to give content and meaning to that negation. This

occurs not as an afterthought but more as a centerpiece in what is presented on his website and in

his talks.

Both of these videos invoke simplicity and innocence and the human desire to connect as

something that need not be overshadowed by spiritual seeking. They exemplify the negotiation

between universalism and constructivism *through* felt experience, which, again, appeals to

contemporary secular concerns about spiritual dogmatism. Overall, Foster's website proclaims in

a number of ways that one needn't discard feelings and emotions to pursue spiritual fulfillment.

Another example of a spiritual figure focused on "keeping it real" is Grosso, also a

millennial-age, self-styled spiritual writer/teacher, though with fewer years at it than Foster. On

his website, *The Indie Spiritualist,* Grosso also seems packaged as ordinary and accessible.[217]

With tattooed arms, T-shirt, jeans, and ear gauges, he comes across as working-class- and hipster-

friendly. His plain and unassuming gaze contrasts with the rough edges and dark, industrial

textures in the home page photo to give an overall impression of a street-smart but approachable

guy. If one were to glance at this home page before reading any text, one would be hard-pressed

to guess exactly what the site is promoting. Perhaps an auto mechanic garage (where he is shown

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mystical experience in order avoid dangerous immorality. Zaehner seems to be less *against* the possibility
of a nondual monism than he is *for* a proclamation that individuals are psychologically and socially
unable to manage a monistic mystical experience in a responsible manner. See especially Kripal, *Roads of
Excess*, 168–80.
[217] The Indie Spiritualist, "About."

sitting)? Maybe an indie rock band? (In fact, Grosso does happen to be in a band.) Among one's

last guesses might be that he is promoting a spiritual philosophy. The multitude of signifiers in

use, creating a combinatory identity saying "*this* is me, *and* this, *and* this…" would probably not

seem strange or confusing to those of a metamodern cultural persuasion as I have outlined here.

The lowbrow, cheeky, regular-guy authenticity signals, again, that the worldly rather than the

transcendent is the home concept.[218] The home page also shows an endorsement atop Grosso's

book *Everything Mind*, which reads simply, "I dig this book," by actor Jeff Bridges in *The Dude*

mode.[219] The performance of secularity there, one might say, converts into a spiritual commodity.

Prominently shown on the cover of Chris Grosso's other book, *Indie Spiritualist: A No*

Bullshit Exploration of Spirituality, is an endorsement by another famous Western spiritual

teacher, Noah Levine, a Generation Xer, who pioneered the *Dharma Punx* movement. The title

itself directs a challenge at the approaches of—or even the need for—other spiritual movements,

programs, or teachers. "Indie"—a Western subculture of the 1990s—is part of the do-it-yourself

(DIY) movement that has continued into the twenty-first century. DIY applies to designing one's

own spirituality and is the sort of ethos that would be more normative for millennials and plurals.

Levine has also used signifiers of negation and antinomianism to signal his heterodoxy within

the Western Buddhism he propounds. His organization, Against the Stream Buddhist Meditation

Society, has as its core mission social action in prisons and recovery centers to "support the

dharma and our practice both on and off the cushion." Its home page shows a monklike,

contemplative figure but one resembling a ninja with a mohawk. Certainly Grosso, following in

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[218] Certainly Grosso follows in the footsteps of figures like Noah Levine, a Generation Xer who pioneered first the Dharma Punx movement, and then, in 2008 founded Against the Stream Buddhist Meditation Society, which has as its core mission social action in prisons and recovery centers to "support the dharma and our practice both on and off the cushion."

[219] Grosso, *The Indie Spiritualist*, referring to Jeff Bridges' character in the film *The Big Lebowski.*

Levine's footsteps, utilizes branding tactics to appeal to secular audiences and particularly to the "rough hewn" in the millennial population. Levine, Foster, and Grosso are but a few examples of how metamodernization shifts the packaging of spiritual figures for an audience/consumer wishing to access transformation via secular, this-worldly, flawed, and "real" teachers. I offer another explication of this metamodernization in the figure of Russell Brand in chapter four.

I mentioned that this metamodernization of spiritual figures can be seen with historical figures as well as current ones. We can take as one example how Teresa of Avila is portrayed as quirky in a 2014 teleseminar called "The Divine Ordinariness of Saint Teresa of Avila" featured on The Shift Network, a social and spiritual transformation organization offering primarily web-based educational content (virtual courses, lectures) and sometimes live gatherings. The Saint Teresa course is offered by Mirabai Starr, whose own eclectic background as a professor of philosophy, Jewish studies, and Christian mysticism, her initiation into a Sufi order, her Buddhist meditation practice, and claiming Hindu guru Neem Karoli Baba as her teacher, would align her with the SBNR. Starr's depiction of Teresa, as indicated by the title, emphasizes the saint's divinity equally with her ordinariness or her humanness and portrays her as a champion of the ordinary. Starr makes her seem very contemporary and relatable by emphasizing the quirkiness of her no-nonsense conversations with God.[220]

Lastly, by way of summarizing, I have made a table to encapsulate this metamodernization and how it updates previous New Age-influenced iterations of seeker spirituality. (For comparison purposes, I extrapolate tenets from a selection from Heelas's

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[220] Starr, "The Divine Ordinariness of Saint Teresa."

characteristics of what he calls *self-spirituality* as examples[221] and then offer a rough idea of the metamodern counterpoints.)

New Age Self-Spirituality	Metamodern SBNR
"Your life doesn't work."	"Your life is a movie with all kinds of plot lines, and you're the producer, director, actor(s), and audience—isn't that awesome?"
"True Self is perfect."	"We're not convinced there's any one Truth, so we'll just remain agnostic and embrace both sides of the argument."
"Disidentification with ego is necessary."	"Disidentification with one's ego seems to make everyone happier and make everything work better, but we're not going to make an ideology or make people wrong about it."

Table 1 New Age Self-Spirituality versus Metamodern SBNR

2.11. Conclusion

This chapter has introduced a way to look at the mechanics of the ontological *both/and* and its relationship to mystical experience as a major influence on the emergence of the SBNR

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[221] These tenets, what Heelas calls "the essential *lingua franca*" of self-spirituality, are given in chapter one, "Manifestation," in *The New Age Movement.*

by understanding them in the context of the metamodern shift. With a deepened understanding of

the cultural situatedness of millennials, we may better understand what work they require their

forms of spirituality to perform and what will likely happen when their multivalent identities and

secular-spiritual worldviews take their seats at that pluralistic table. To that end, what I have

explored here is the rise of the SBNR occurring as a consequence of being caught between its

attraction to the grand theories and universalisms of modernism (as inherited from the New Age)

and its identifications with constructivist, relativistic worldviews of postmodernism. What this

gives rise to, finally, is a mash-up, if you will, not about adhering to one or the other's

epistemological/ ontological ground but oscillating between them, thereby making forays in

reckoning with the bifurcations inherent in these epistemes, which perform and act as an analog

to mystical experience.

 I asked if the metamodern epistemic move, reflecting multiple arenas and vectors, mined

concurrently for their truths and meanings and reflected in multiply experienced states and

identities (the *both/and* of mystics and ordinaries) might generate a gestalt out of the confluence

of these previously epistemologically exclusive arenas of religious, cultural, and individual

experience or expression. I have noted that performing this negotiation seems at minimum to

open space for something uniquely responsive to contemporary concerns about spirituality.

 I also introduced the notion of a metamodern soteriology. For some who embrace

metamodern sensibilities, the fact that "the search is off" for the immaculate moment in which

one might find *the answer* means no moment or point of view is thought of as necessarily

salvific. This, at first, sounds postmodern. But what I have suggested and will continue to

develop in the next chapter is that the performative reconciliation of these epistemes allows for

constructive destabilization (whereas the postmodern anxiety is said to be of nihilistic

destabilization). It is an approach that seems to allow for the earnest pursuit of truth, while acknowledging truth as constantly on the move. Metamodernism, replacing the ill-defined and ouroboric "post-postmodernism," calls attention to the full reflexive awareness of the human penchant to seek a grand theory and the simultaneous contemporary understanding that history will continually belie that effort. Later chapters will continue to address the query of whether this gestalt has made room for mystical/non-ordinary experience and spiritual seeking in secular contexts to become more normative and acceptable, less foreign, and how this will impact contemporary secular spiritualities' social agency.

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Chapter 3

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Metamodern Monsters: The Promise of Unsettling Subversion

Horror swings us both ways, soliciting both conservative and radical impulses.

—Timothy Beal

Monsters ... make strange the categories of beauty, humanity, and identity that we cling

to.

—Judith Halberstam

The monstrous body is pure culture.

—Jeffrey Jerome Cohen

    The figure of the monster has been employed in popular culture in a number of ways to represent extremes of fear and anxiety on individual, community, and societal levels. In many monster narratives, the monster is called to stand for that which threatens or has gone wrong in society or within an individual—that which, once "fixed," will result in the restoration of social order. The monster may also represent resistance to

change and the threat of transformation—of physically or psychologically becoming the monstrous Other. (Think Jekyll and Hyde, the Incredible Hulk, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* or Captain Picard becoming Locutus of Borg in *Star Trek: The Next Generation.*) Much scholarly commentary on the cultural work of the monster presumes social and individual stability as the underlying goal in the deployment of the monstrous. In these cases, the topos of restoration of order or stability may equate to a return to a singular category of identity: the monster as the exceptional element is identified and tagged as dangerous and Other, thereby defining the identity of the subject as *not* that. This type of monster—to state the rather obvious—is regarded as threatening in contexts where uniformity and homeostasis are desired. Timothy Beal refers to "the politically and religiously conservative function of the monstrous ... to encourage one to pull back from the edge. The monster is a warning or portent, demonstrating what to avoid, and *remonstrating* with anyone who would challenge established social and symbolic boundaries."[222]

But what about when social or individual stability is not an inherent or desired goal? In some more recent monster narratives, the fear of transformation has flipped to now reflect an interest in, and valuing of, the possibilities inherent in *de*stabilization and heterogeneity. What the monster as metaphor enacts in these cases stretches the bounds of the symbolic work it has performed heretofore.

One instance of instability valenced as fruitful and productive occurs in narratives of mystical encounters. In these intimate and profound situations of merging of self and Other, the monstrous may act as the key to ushering in spiritual realization. We see this in

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[222] Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 195.

mystical texts linking monsters and spiritual transformation that stretch from archaic to contemporary times. In the mythologies of various religious traditions, East and West, devils and demons are often cast in the role of thwarting an individual's spiritual aspirations. For example, Origen, the third-century Christian church father, saw demons as representing the thwarting of a monk's progress toward virtue. Another church father, Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604), wrote that God allows Satan to toy with humans, knowing it will strengthen them. Tales of the life of Saint Anthony (360 CE) feature the saint's demon foe forcing him into battle with his conscience, testing his mental, physical, and psycho-emotional endurance, and thwarting the attainment of his spiritual goal of absorption into unity with God. The temptations and hardships thrown at Siddhārtha Gautama Buddha (b. 562 BCE) by Mara, the primordial Buddhist demon, are instrumental in the prince's attainment of Buddhahood. According to David Brakke, "Demons paradoxically facilitate that progress by providing the resistance they had to overcome."[223] The demon or monster figure (I use these interchangeably here) calls forth the mytheme of spiritual warfare. If the battle with the demon is fruitfully pursued and fought, many scriptural accounts have it, the adept's struggles with temptations may lead to a major spiritual realization—what I call here, generically, the "big AHA!"

There is another way that monsters are involved in transformation, however. In addition to providing that resistance, of an Other that one seeks to avoid becoming, metamodern monsters are troubling the border between self and Other in a way that may reflect and even forward a social shift toward pluralist perspectives and egalitarianism, perhaps leading to a different kind of "Aha!" In popular culture, some of these

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[223] Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk,* 13.

contemporary monster narratives go further still to depict the upheaval caused by the instability of the monstrous as an inroad to both personal and social transformation.

Beal remarks, "Whether demonized or deified or something in between, monsters bring on a limit experience that is akin in many respects to religious experience, an experience of being on the edge of certainty and security ... standing on the threshold of an unfathomable abyss."[224] The mystical encounter may or may not be experienced by the subject as a "religious" experience, however. Portrayals of battles with a monstrous Other are one way that transformation is secularized in contemporary Western narratives. By secularized, I mean that profound personal transformation is portrayed as open to ordinary individuals—to laypeople versus only monks or saints—and as occurring in nonreligious/nonspiritual contexts. In these secular contexts, with the monster as accessory, the "big AHA!" and the value of instability and heterogeneity are rewritten as a kind of social "Aha!" as well.

This chapter will explore these recent secular monster narratives that have taken the monster's instability beyond its use as a symbol of upheaval, and beyond the goal of a return to "normal," to also demonstrate the possibility of both personal and social transformation, and will ask how this monstrous presents a different way of engaging the Other. Such portrayals of the mystical and the monstrous in contemporary popular culture will be explored here also for how they contribute to shifting beliefs about the accessibility of the "big AHA!"I will discuss how recent popular cultural portrayals utilize such fruitful instabilities available symbolically through the mystical and the monstrous. And I will suggest that the phenomenon owes its development and popularity

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[224] Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 195.

in part to the recent cultural shift specific to the contemporary Western mediated age, itself emerging as part of the metamodern epistemic shift. I will explore the significance of the fact that this "species" of monster reflects secular forms of mystical transformation and surfaces alongside this metamodern turn with its values of pluralism, emphasis on felt experience, normalization of what I have called fluid identity narratives, and celebrations of the odd, the ordinary, and the Other.

3.1. Methodology and Theory Notes

The popularity of Western popular cultural depictions of the monstrous in Western media has received much treatment in the subfield of religion and popular culture, as well as by scholars of comparativism. As they note, monstrous, supernatural, and paranormal figures and stories are on the rise in the contemporary West. According to Line Henriksen, the 1990s experienced "a resurgence of interest in strange creatures, also within academia, ... [and] came to be known as the decade of the so-called 'spectral turn,' that is a (re)discovery of the metaphorical and conceptual potentials of spectrality and haunting."[225]

However, seldom has the question been addressed: Why now? I employ metamodern theory and monster theory to unpack the impact of contemporary monstrous figures, and comparativism to link them to how mystical texts are read. My comparative use of terms is analogical, not univocal. Adding to a historical-contextual treatment of the developments of the monstrous in popular culture, I will suggest some provisional typologies of their social uses and meanings.

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[225] Henriksen, *In the Company of Ghosts,* 27–28.

In addition to Foucault's epistemic mapping concept, there is another Foucauldian strand running through this chapter's analysis, as well: an understanding of culture as a struggle between the marginal, transgressive, and different, on one hand, and the socially acceptable, "normal," and homogeneous, on the other.[226] Luciano Nuzzo applies this to understand "the enigma of the monster" as "the space of emergence itself, i.e., the location where sheer potentiality becomes the possible of and in the event.... It is *the promise of unsettling subversion.*"[227] I take this claim as further connecting the monstrous to mysticism; the mystical moment of "Aha!" is nothing if not a promise of unsettling subversion.

Santana and Erickson's *Religion and Popular Culture* takes contemporary monstrous figures in American popular spiritualities as intertextual creations that rescript ideas of spiritual and social transformation.[228]

The television exemplar par excellence of a script-flipping, metamodern monstrous is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the popular American show that ran from 1997 to 2003 and enjoys a cult following twenty years later. Scholars recognize the show as one of the first television efforts to bring sacred/religious/spiritual content to a self-consciously secular setting.[229] *Buffy* (hereafter) has been subject to a huge body of analysis by scholars, TV critics, and fans in the last two decades. Patricia Pender states, "The cult television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is now indisputably one of the most

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[226] Edward Said, qtd in Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 1st ed., 143.
[227] Nuzzo, "Foucault and the Enigma of the Monster," 55, emphasis in original.
[228] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture* (both the first and second editions are based around this general thesis).
[229] Noted in Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, and Clark, *From Angels to Aliens*.

widely analyzed texts in contemporary popular culture."[230]

I expand on previous theoretical treatments to situate the show and other current popular treatments of the monstrous Other within the *post*-postmodern epistemic ground of metamodernism that, I argue, it has both been grown in and has shaped. Thus far, no scholar has directly tied contemporary monsters (in terms of aesthetic and ethical choices) to the rise of the contemporary spiritualities such as we see in the spiritual but not religious. I connect these to understand the shift in current portrayals of monsters as well as mystics, who today appear as increasingly multivalent: showing up in many guises, performing a variety of roles, and delivering specifically twenty-first-century social commentaries and soteriological messages.

Further, I read the metamodern monstrous Other and examples of *Buffy* characters' transformations for what they signal about current Western secular spiritualities' shifted soteriological stance. Reading *Buffy* as a metamodern spiritual text, I first posit a correlation between pop-culture monsters becoming more multivalently "human" and humans becoming more tolerant of difference and themselves adopting more multivalent identities. Second, I clarify and update postmodernism periodization to differentiate it from cultural forms of metamodernism that are breaking different ground. Third, I show the de-emphasis of certain postmodern narratives and rise of metamodern ones to illuminate a parallel to the rise of the SBNR controlling narratives. I then examine those soteriological conclusions as emerging from (and/or mirroring) the defining qualities of the SBNR from yet another angle.

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[230] Pender, "Buffy Summers."

Buffy takes place in a cosmology sometimes referred to by fans as the *Buffyverse* (or *Whedonverse*). In the Buffyverse*,* demons find their way into ordinary reality via a Hellmouth located below Sunnydale High School. High school student Buffy Summers, the "Chosen One" and Slayer of her generation, is responsible for keeping these demons in check. But in the Buffyverse, good and the evil are anything but clear-cut. A monster may occur as an enemy, lover, friend, purveyor of gnostic wisdom, or comrade in spiritual combat against other monsters and/or humans. Sometimes the monsters have the moral/ethical high ground over the human characters. Victoria Nelson writes that the trope of vampires who strive to do good in spite of their inherently evil nature as seen on several series in the early 1990s was indicative of "the growing shift from the traditional dark supernatural into a wider and more flexible vocabulary of good and evil."[231] What I refer to, however, goes even further. In depicting such multivalency going both ways, questions of an inherent nature are overridden. As Karin Beeler notes, not only do the lines between good and evil blur, but a given monster's affiliation with one or the other may be left ambiguous. At different times, the monster may be on either end of the pointy stake.[232]

When human characters engage with monsters, their fears seem to be mitigated by a contemporary form of self-reflexivity—an understanding that the monster "means" on many levels—demonstrating comfort with the ambiguities and shifting identities that this monstrous "new normal" symbolizes.[233] These ambiguities have led global fans in the hundreds of internet-based fan groups, some of which have run continually since *Buffy*'s

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[231] Nelson, *Gothika,* 129.
[232] Beeler, *Seers, Witches and Psychics on Screen,* 31.
[233] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 1st ed., 129.

final season, into deep theological, philosophical, and ethical discussions. The depth and longevity of *Buffy* fandom is one reason the show is so compelling for studying the interface of contemporary spiritualities with popular culture.

Santana and Erickson call *Buffy* "an instructive text on the interaction of American popular culture and popular religion in that it presents religious and theological themes in ways that refuse to provide comfort and stability." It demonstrates the desire for "a complex depiction of the different sides and shades of belief and disbelief, of human and nonhuman, and of the importance of finding ways to negotiate these issues."[234] As I demonstrate, the negotiation of these complexities is in fact the terrain of the metamodern cultural sensibility.

3.2. A Methodological Dialectic of Transformation Narratives: Metamodern Performatism, Popular-Culture Fandom, and Contemporary Mysticisms

Narratives that portray the kinds of transformation to which I have referred here are the natural fodder of popular culture. Aspects of the methodology I employ have been used in two volumes on popular culture and religion that have also used *Buffy* as a case study. In *Religion and Popular Culture*, Santana and Erickson write: "Popular culture not only rescripts how we think, and read, and believe. It also reframes the practices of engaging with what we think of as religious, scriptural, or theological." Big questions of

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[234] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 1st ed., 129.

meaning, they continue, are what "popular culture and its complicated symbiotic and antagonistic relationships to popular religion can serve to destabilize and to open up," with the inverse being true as well: "Religious practices will simultaneously continue to inform, reshape, and rewrite the products of popular culture."[235] In *From Angels to Aliens*, Clark echoes this simultaneous influence, cautioning against attributing a unidirectional causality: "While it is important to examine the relationship between popular entertainment and religious beliefs, the claim that one directly changes the other denies the way that media tend to reflect cultural values as well as shape them."[236]

I took up this supposition that each of these forces informs the other in my previous chapter, where I asked how a third thing is then generated. In this chapter, the monster helps me build another level onto the scaffold from which to address the question. Drawing in a general sense from Cohen's *Monster Theory*, Santana and Erickson provide a useful metaphor: "The construction, practice and interpretation of demons and demon belief are always simultaneously a process of *drawing and erasing lines and boundaries*."[237] Monsters, they write, problematize the boundaries between good and evil, believers and nonbelievers, natural and supernatural, feared and desired, the possible and impossible—boundaries which are "kept alive by both faith and doubt, located between existence and non-existence."[238]

The similarities with the liminality of the mystic should be fairly apparent: the monster's significance as an agent of transformation, similar to that of the mystic, lies in being native to this active, liminal, between space, as in Nuzzo's "promise of unsettling

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[235] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 2nd ed., 234.
[236] Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens*, 47.
[237] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 1st ed., 151, italics mine.
[238] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 1st ed., 167.

subversion." The action indicated in movement between and across binaries—described

in the previous chapter as an oscillation—situates the above in relation to the theoretical

strand of epistemic metamodernism.[239] Beal further highlights the manner in which such

blurred lines and the fertile, liminal, middle-space that is then revealed is the territory of

both the mystical and the monstrous. The mystic is aware of "simultaneously pulling

back and pulling over. In this teetering, an irreducible ambivalence is revealed within.…

The monstrous can elicit an urge to pull back from the edge of order at which it appears

and, at the same time, an urge to cross over, to transgress, to lose ground."[240]

Another way to state this dialectic is as follows: Cultural artifacts such as TV

programs produce and adumbrate that which is monstrous, mystical, or both; audiences

then decode them in a manner reflective of the current episteme—in this case

metamodern secular spiritualities and soteriologies. Each inflects, writes, and rescripts

the other. In post-postmodern cultural and academic climates, this idea should not seem

terribly radical. That said, the possible social effects need to be broached more

specifically, because this is a case where theory is not just theoretical; if I am correct, it

has overt effects.

Treating television shows and their fan communities as textual sites has gained

greater acceptance in the last few decades.[241] As mentioned in the last chapter, this

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[239] I use the phrase "theoretical strand of epistemic metamodernism" here (which might seem somewhat redundant) because there are various other permutations of "metamodernism" being generated by scholars and general audience writers on an ongoing basis, some of which have little to do with theorizing ontological dynamics as I am attempting here.

[240] Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters,* 195.

[241] See Santana and Erickson on how "television dramas are now more firmly established as an observable text in themselves, as objects available for study." *Religion and Popular Culture*, 1st ed., 115. For an interesting discussion of how television fans produce versus consume culture, see Kirby-Diaz, "So What's the Story?" 63.

manner of analysis grants that the performance activity of the audience—the use that audiences make of the art work—deserves a central place in any theorizing. One cultural study done on fan communities pronounces them "the most active site of vernacular theory-making."[242] Studies of fan communities in fact make up a significant portion of the scholarly works on the Whedonverse.[243] Fandoms, it is increasingly noted, provide a context for exploring values that may take the place of more traditional religious participation. Fandoms are a place for direct involvement in a variety of media platforms and also for participation in the organization of same—that "place at the table" previously mentioned that informs the millennial metamodern view.

Fan commentaries display the variety of interpretations and concerns that are brought to the viewing of *Buffy*. For example, blogger Jonathan Budden writes from a Christian perspective. In one lengthy post, Budden performs a textual reading of the series in which he compares the cosmologies of the Bible and the Buffyverse, examines theodicy issues, analyzes the idea of a soul's creation and its relationship to its creator, and reflects theologically on free will and the relative capacities for evil in demons versus humans.[244] My position is that it is not only appropriate to incorporate the narrative reactions of fans, but perhaps negligent to exclude them.

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[242] McLaughlin, qtd in Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture* 1st ed., 115.
[243] See especially Kirby-Diaz, ed., *Buffy and Angel Conquer the Internet.*
[244] Budden, "The Portrayal of Religion."

3.3. *Buffy* Scholarship and Fandom

Along with the hundreds of scholarly books and articles written about *Buffy*, an academic journal and the biennial Slayage Conference on the Whedonverses series have existed since 2004.[245] Scholars have read both Buffy the character and *Buffy* the show as Kantian and Thomist, have argued that the show critiques Nietzschean and Kierkegaardian philosophy and have interpreted the show as realism, mythology, and allegory.[246] They have analyzed it for the "jokey" vernacular it spurred, called "Buffy Speak." A plethora of articles by scholars, journalists, and media critics in the two years leading up to its twentieth anniversary in 2017 gushed about the show's long reach—for example, its innovative and influential plot stacking format, its feminist critiques as well as critiques of feminism,[247] and its tackling, or avoiding, of other complex representational themes.[248] As Lucy Mangan writes, the show "posed so many questions of identity, morality, and responsibility that if the propulsive storytelling or snappy one-liners had ever let up you would have collapsed under the weight of the philosophical complexity by the time the credits rolled. Fortunately, ... they never did."[249]

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[245] *Slayage*: *The Journal of Whedon Studies*.

[246] See, for example, Kellner, "*Buffy* as Spectacular Allegory" and Loftis, "Moral Complexity in the Buffyverse."

[247] Pender wrote in 2016 that the show's last season contains its most enduring feminist story lines, still applicable to third-wave feminism today: "In introducing a previously unknown matriarchal legacy (and weapon) for the Slayer, staging the series' final showdown with a demon who's overtly misogynist, and creating an original evil with a clearly patriarchal platform, *Buffy*'s final season raises the explicit feminist stakes of the series considerably." See Pender, "Buffy Summers," and Schwab, "The Rise of *Buffy* Studies."

[248] Kellner (in "*Buffy* as Spectacular Allegory") both praises the show's innovations and critiques its tacit defense of a white middle class ethos, writing, "on the level of the politics of representation…*BtVS*, like most television, reproduces much dominant ideology" 17.

[249] Mangan, "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* at 20."

To get even more "meta," articles have been written on the popularity of writing about the show. In a 2012 article, "Which Pop Culture Property Do Academics Study the Most?" Daniel Lametti, Aisha Harris, Natasha Geiling, and Natalie Matthews-Ramo counted the number of academic writings on the *Alien* quadrilogy, *The Simpsons*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Wire*, and *The Matrix* trilogy, texts they call "pop-culture favorites known to have provided plenty of PhD fodder over the last couple decades." They found that "more than twice as many papers, essays, and books have been devoted to the vampire drama than any of our other choices—so many that we stopped counting when we hit 200."[250]

Why does this show still hold such a storied place in the cultural imaginary? Even with the "meta" writing on Buffy and the Whedonverses I feel the question has not been adequately answered. Many theories have been floated specifically about its approach to religious matters, which might seem ironic given that *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon is a self-professed "angry atheist."[251] For his part, Whedon has expressed that fandom is "the closest thing to religion there is that isn't actually a religion."[252]

David Lavery (known to some as the "father of *Buffy* studies") called Whedon "the avatar of [a] narrative religion."[253] Jennifer Stuller argues that the show leads fans to internalize social justice messages, evidencing the numerous *Buffy* conventions, screenings, charity events, academic conferences, and class discussions that take place.[254]

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[250] Lametti, Harris, Geiling, and Matthews-Ramo, "Which Pop Culture Property Do Academics Study the Most?"
[251] See Mills, Morehead, and Parker, eds., *Joss Whedon and Religion*.
[252] As quoted in Mills, "*Buffy*verse Fandom as Religion," 135.
[253] Lavery, "A Religion in Narrative." This paper was first given at the Blood, Text and Fears conference in Norwich, England in October 2002.
[254] Stuller, "Introduction," 5–6.

In a review on *Hollywood Jesus*, a blog "offering entertainment reviews and interactive ranking articles from a faith-based perspective,"[255] Maurice Broaddus asserts that "Whedon has woven an entire theological and redemptive model into the show's mythology."[256] Broaddus opines on how the series addresses themes of sin, mission, resurrection, and the afterlife, finding a "Holy Spirit" motif to be prevalent. He ends his review with a secular take on the draw of the show—its intersectional and self-reflexive play with popular culture itself: "In this media-savvy world that we live in, the show resonates because it allows culture to infiltrate it, digesting and absorbing it, then turning around and infiltrating culture."[257] More meta. I will continue to answer the question about the show's draw shortly, as I mention reviews that touch upon metamodern components of the show, in apparent awareness of the concept but not the word. First I will ground the reader in more of the epistemic content we are dealing with.

3.4. The Big Bad: A Brief Epistemic Breakdown

If the monster is "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place," as Cohen claims,[258] epistemic mapping is especially suited for accounting for the "feeling" of a cultural moment. Each season of *Buffy* presents a different entity or force as the newest inconceivable evil, referred to as the Big Bad. Each successive Big Bad seems like the characters' worst foe yet, but each is eventually dealt

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[255] Hollywood Jesus, "Home page."
[256] Broaddus, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer.*"
[257] Broaddus, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer.*"
[258] Cohen, "Monster Culture," 4.

with, at least provisionally: Big Bads are not so much vanquished forever as manageably downsized. The apocalypse appears to be averted—again—just in time for more ultimate evil to arise. The writers ironically nod to the (modernist) bifurcating of good and evil, treating it as both cliché and also quite real. That is, the cosmological element of this force of supposedly ultimate evil that keeps getting topped from season to season by an even bigger Big Bad gave them the full range of epistemic story lines, from apocalypse (traditional) to psychological terrors (modern) to the deconstruction of an absolute evil (postmodern).

The small and large forces of evil were, according to Whedon, meant to reflect very subjective realities. Sunnydale High School, with its Hellmouth, functions as a hierophany through which Big Bads symbolize the terrors and humiliations that accompany growing up and forging one's identity in the world—those seemingly insurmountable foes delivered in unrelenting succession.

An epistemic breakdown of the uses of monstrosity in a given episode might look something like this: First locating the impulse to do battle as traditional (or premodern), supernatural entities and humans alike exhibit clannish behaviors and use weaponry and force to keep a threat at bay. A modernist-informed progress narrative directs the humans' and demons' impulses to seize power, confront evil with teleological motivations that make their difficulties seem "solvable," and make the world look savable. Humans' motives and actions, however, are quite often shown as morally suspect. For example, three awkward teens who delight in playing evil geniuses constitute the Big Bad of season 6. Warren, Andrew, and Jonathan, students at Sunnydale High, decide to use their nerd-powered tech savvy to manufacture cyborg entities to do

their bidding. The mad scientist game gets out of hand when real human emotions intervene and they kill Warren's ex-girlfriend. In another story line about trying to play God, season 4's Big Bad, a paramilitary organization formed to control vampires, constructs an uber-powerful android called Adam.

These story lines each address the dark side of modernism's technology fetishization as well as the postmodern difficulty of locating an originating point for one's moral compass. In the mediated age, where whoever controls technology seems to rule the day, why shouldn't these geek boys carry out their evil plots? As the characters grapple with what the measure of good and evil should be in a rapidly shifting world, their distinctly metamodern response, as I will describe in more detail shortly, is shown in their doubts and moral confusion, which, although peppered with plenty of irony and humor, never result in nihilism or relativistic unconcern.

To put the above into perspective, I will expand on this observation by offering a preliminary model of a taxonomy of the epistemic treatment of monsters.[259] This model is neither meant to be exhaustive nor to be chronologically precise. For example, *Frankenstein* is given as an example of a modern monster narrative, despite being written in 1818—before the literary period known as modernism. It qualifies as modern, however, where its themes and symbolic usages match that epistemic category. Many "modern" monster narratives continue to be written in the current day. Furthermore, artful works of fiction will probably not adhere neatly to just one epistemic category. Such readings require nuance. It may in the end be more useful to employ the schema for the purposes of illuminating elements of a work, rather than entire works.

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[259] Credit is due to Greg Dember for the concept and much of the content of this taxonomy.

Traditional or Premodern Monster Narratives

In a traditional monster narrative, monsters are a decidedly *un*ironic Big Bad, an unacceptable ontology that simply must be overcome. They symbolize some sort of danger—a force of nature, a social transgression, something taboo or non-normative— and they invoke the topos central to so many works in the horror genre, of transformation-as-threat. Traditional monster narratives involve identifying who (or what) is dangerous and who should therefore triumph. Plots center on vanquishing or ousting the evil foe or force from the community. Once this is accomplished, the reader/viewer is expected to experience relief at the return of order and normalcy. Whether the hero slays the monster or doesn't, however, such narratives present this as part of a grand cycle that will repeat, following the same structure, because the "truth," including the ontology of the monster, is fixed—anchored in the past.

Modern Monster Narratives

Modern monster narratives also present the monster as a social threat, adding as a central component an attempt to solve the problem of the monster. In such narratives, a more solid, rational truth is usually revealed under the layer of deception that the monster represents—and there is generally only one layer. In modern narratives, "the Truth is out there," lying just under the surface.[260] Vilifying and vanquishing the monstrous foe may

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[260] This slogan was popularized in the 1990s by the television show *The X-Files*. Although the slogan itself exemplifies a modern epistemic position, *The X-Files* could be said to have employed it ironically in the sense that truth was continually portrayed as being beyond the agents' grasp, a message that puts the show overall in the postmodern category. However, see my blog post with Greg Dember, "Metamodern Television," for an analysis of another individual's epistemic television analysis of the episode of X-Files entitled, 'Jose Chung *From Outerspace*'.

take place through reason: recognizing the monster itself as aberrant and wrong (Frankenstein's monster), or treating a character's actions as monstrously aberrant (Dr. Frankenstein himself), or treating visions/experiences of the monstrous, supernatural, or paranormal as pathological. In such cases, something about the monster turns out to be "not real," converting the monstrous into a disease, psychosis, neurophysiological manifestation, or projection of the unconscious. All of these are generally diagnosed by an expert with superior knowledge and a preoccupation with what should and should not be allowable in ordinary reality or society.

If a hero slays a monster (including the monster within, a monstrous urge, and so forth), it brings a new order to what had been chaos; the world is fundamentally transformed and reconciled, and the audience won't need to worry about that monster anymore. The premodern and modern epistemic narratives as I am conceptualizing them here value stability, certainty, and clarity. And the modern concern with applying such principles toward grand narratives of progress sometimes means that any supernatural beings present as characters are employed as part of a transcendence narrative in which ultimate truth is found in "the beyond." (These beings will be characterized as clearly distinct from monsters.)

Postmodern Monster Narratives

In postmodern monster narratives, any attempts to slay the monster reveal to the hero and the reader/viewer that there is no such thing as resolution. Every fix generates its own problems, and any layer of reality uncovered is shown to have other layers

underneath. Heroes and saviors are not what they seem. Such postmodern monster

narratives often end by proving that no foe truly exists, leaving reality fractured, or they

posit confusion as the nature of reality, leaving the viewer/reader with unresolvable

questions as to whether the monster is a dream, a hallucination, or even oneself. Such

narratives may leave one straddling several onto-epistemological options at once, such

that arriving at a solid ethical position is rendered problematic.

Metamodern Monster Narratives

Metamodern monster narratives may also employ the "many layers of reality"

motif, but the way the characters deal with fear and threat differentiates these from

previous epistemic approaches. Neither relying solely on expert knowledge nor on a

singular savior figure, as in modern narratives, nor deconstructing the reliability of any

source of truth or reality, as in the postmodern ones, in a metamodern narrative,

efficacious engagement of the monster is likely to be enacted via small actions by

individuals in local groupings or communities, working in their own modest ways, and

for purposes that are more personal than global. Overall, the sensibility is one of honoring

subjectively determined truths. Transformation is not framed as taking place in the

beyond, or by means of otherworldly transcendence. At least not solely. Quirky, unlikely,

or nonstandard heroes (like Buffy) lead—often reluctantly—with monsters depicted as

trusted friends as often as enemies.

With *Buffy*'s Big Bads*,* Whedon seems to have made thorough use of the narrative

assumptions of the first three epistemes, while also problematizing them, to arrive at a

different set of guiding aesthetics and principles. In a nod to the traditional monster

narrative, and a reversal from a typical modernist narrative, these unrelenting Big Bads convey the idea that there are life circumstances that cannot be fixed or expected to change fundamentally. In yet another way, the show leans on postmodern reworkings of earlier epistemic narratives. For example, the idea of evil in the show, Nandini Ramachandran writes, is treated as "a behavior, not an ineffable Kantian category. Like all behavior, it is mutable and socially constructed." However,

> the hero and the devil in the Whedonverse are interdependent, and morality is born in the space between the within and the without. One generation's savior is another generation's terrorist, ethical positions exist only in the eye of the beholder.... What makes the world run is neither good nor evil, but rather the balance [between] them, the paradox that neither has any meaning without the other. This paradox is at the crux of all Whedon's television ... [making] a comment about the here-and-now, not about the far future or a mystical alternate reality.[261]

The *Buffy* writers instead ask each of the Scoobies (the TV-referential name the central characters give themselves) to struggle with their own reasons for persevering. In this sense, they battle their own personal demons. Likewise, certain monster characters also undergo their own personal, existential struggles (and do so perhaps even more acutely, since they battle their own demons *as* demons!). Overall, the writers present each individual's worth and agency, as shown in how they rise to the many occasions to face down Big Bads, as their reason to go on fighting. Next, I expand on how this representation forges a different kind of monster.

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[261] Ramachandran, "Good and Evil According to Joss Whedon."

3.5. *"… But Sometimes, Not"*—The Monster's Multivalence

It is often said that what makes a monster monstrous is its difference from the human. *Buffy*'s monsters subvert and play with this notion by also signifying to varying degrees the *very* human—in personality, sense of humor, moral stance, and sometimes physical appearance. It is also said that monsters are defined by their inability to change. But, again, sometimes, not! Some of *Buffy*'s demons show a range of character dynamics equal to or even surpassing that of the human characters. In fact, few demons in the Whedonverse are portrayed as wholly evil. "'Pure' demons are rare, [and] most vary considerably along the demonic-human continuum."[262]

The character of Clem provides an example of demons' multivalence. Clem is a Loose Skin Demon who appears in seasons 6 and 7. With his flaps of droopy skin and comically floppy ears, he looks both frightening and ridiculous but is portrayed mainly as kind and deferential to the Slayer, as a lovably avuncular demon trustworthy enough to be called on to babysit Buffy's sister. Again, all is not as it seems; it is averred that Clem also snacks on kittens and can pull his face back to unleash his species-specific, powerful biological weaponry. The message is that even the most terrifying monsters can be gentle, and the gentlest can terrify. Such messages of multivalence play out in the Buffyverse as fruitful instabilities, opportunities to grapple with the world's unstable nature with bravery and compassion, but also with discernment.

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[262] Riess, *What Would Buffy Do?* 17.

This sentiment comes through via the notion that monsters have ontologies of their own. In *Buffy*, the monster no longer performs exclusively as the object to whom the human-as-subject must react, as a force to control. In other words, the monsters can be subjects or protagonists, even the ones occupying the moral high ground, as noted earlier. The fact of their status shifting on the continuum of good to evil means these main character demons have complex inner lives that move the plots along and help develop the show's soteriological perspective. This is an important script flip from prior treatments of the monstrous, as noted by Beal, wherein the inevitable appearance of the monster on the screen is linked to objectification.[263] This simple but surprisingly radical move means that the show promotes the notion that monsters and humans can engage as equals. The relationship of the complex human to the equally complex monster is arguably the show's cornerstone and also one of the main characteristics of a metamodern monster narrative, as I theorize it.[264]

TV and film monster figures are more often portrayed as coming out of the shadows to engage with humans in a humanized manner different from that of previous iterations of the monstrous, as acknowledged by a few recent pieces of scholarship. In the introduction to their 2013 edited collection *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader*, for example, Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui note that "while monsters always tapped into anxieties over a changing world, they have never been as popular, or as needed, as in the past decade." In fact, they go as far as to "theorize monstrosity as a condition of the twenty-first century."[265] In this reader, Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo and

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[263] Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters,* 165.
[264] Credit is due to Greg Dember for the explication of this idea.
[265] Levina and. Bui, "Introduction," 2.

Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo observe, "Increasingly the monster is no longer a marginal entity hidden out of sight, but rather functions within ... society."[266] Levina and Bui's anthology, however, largely tracks the ways monstrosity has stood in for myriad social ambiguities related to globalism, technology, and identity. The authors interpret the increased characterization of zombies and vampires in broad daylight as figures indicating widespread moral panic with respect to globalism, neoconservatism, and neonationalism. I do not argue against these interpretations so much as place them aside a different reading: not only is a metamodern monster not necessarily hidden from sight, but it is also not necessarily horrific and not always the enemy. It might be several other opposite things as well.

In her essay in that volume, Carolyn Harford delves into the affectively different monstrous that I claim has become a larger part of the current Western sociocultural landscape. She writes about the symbolic widening of the vampire figure in the *Twilight* series as "no longer a monster to be defeated and killed, but ... now on the side of good, that is, on the side of humanity," implying that this sort of monstrous portends a "mutual understanding and de-demonizing [of] the Other"[267] and a kind of "reconciliation of the monstrous outsider with society,"[268] an idea in sympathy with my thesis here.

However, while Harford astutely points to this "reconciliation of the monstrous outsider with society,"[269] she misses the opportunity to ground this important observation in a sociocultural explanation for the expanded portrayal. In the *Twilight* series, she writes, "the monster cannot change, so society's boundaries are expanded to include

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[266] Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo, as mentioned in Levina and Bui, "Introduction," 11.
[267] Harford, "Domesticating the Monstrous," 304.
[268] Harford, "Domesticating the Monstrous," 307.
[269] Harford, "Domesticating the Monstrous," 307.

him."[270] To what do we owe this narrative inversion? What exactly has made it possible? The distinguishing of metamodernism as an interpretive lens addresses this question and also expands readings available for other works and cultural artifacts of the current episteme. So if "monster narratives in general ... operate on clearly delineated parameters: monsters are monstrous and humans are humane,"[271] the metamodern monster seems to intentionally challenge such assumptions.

3.6. The Everything All at Once: Reading *Buffy* as Metamodern

This "but sometimes, not" trope is, paradoxically, a consistent feature in *Buffy*. This can be interpreted as a postmodern element of the show, especially considering Whedon himself has called it such. In a 1999 interview he said, "The show's tone is everything all at once. It has that sort of pop-culture blender ... *that pomo thing*. But, at the same time, the one thing we always stress is drama, and is the truth of things.... And we try and combine as many strange and often disparate elements as we can, but in a framework where they all make sense, and they all feel real."[272] What Whedon describes indicates well how the show is meant to straddle several epistemic views, which, with the benefit of hindsight, characterizes the show overall as metamodern. In continuing to elucidate the epistemic characterization of monsters, I will argue against the treatments of *Buffy* that describe it as an artifact of postmodernity, some pointing to its narrative style,

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[270] Harford, "Domesticating the Monstrous," 307.
[271] Bishop, "Battling Monsters and Becoming Monstrous," 75.
[272] Warner, "Marina Warner," italics mine.

tone, peculiar form of humor, and Buffy Speak*,* and others to its philosophical and even theological conclusions.

Although many *Buffy* scholars and fans cite the show's ambiguity, instability, and absence of clear ethics to define it as postmodern, I suggest that Whedon's monsters provide something else that goes unnoticed if seen only through that epistemic lens. The characters' response to such instability is actually what performs a shift to a metamodern epistemic position. In fact, a certain amount of struggle is required to try to wedge the show into the category of postmodern, or into any one epistemic category, for that matter.

Douglas Kellner speaks to this issue when he writes that "grappling with difference, otherness and marginality is a major theme of the show and puts on display its affinity with postmodern theory." He then notes that *Buffy* can also be read for what he calls traditional or realist narratives: "The series exhibits perhaps the most fully developed female Bildungsroman narrative in history [*sic*] of popular television."[273] Further, Kellner remarks that the writers "have produced on one hand a modernist text with a very specific vision and systemic structure while on the other hand engaging in postmodern pastiche, irony, metacommentary and hipness."[274] His astute observations about the show's pan-epistemic quality came in 2004, at the early stages of the coalescence of a metamodern aesthetic. He and other *Buffy* scholars writing at that time would therefore not be expected to have had awareness of the post-postmodern cultural shift already transpiring—that which would only later in that decade begin to gain ground under the name metamodernism.

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[273] Kellner, "*Buffy* as Spectacular Allegory," 3.
[274] Kellner, "*Buffy* as Spectacular Allegory," 19n2.

When Kellner wrote that "the allegory of *BtVS* does not produce a seamless whole or convey an [*sic*] unified system of messages ... but rather provides a more fragmented and contradictory postmodern set of meanings," he goes part way to identifying the instabilities I have highlighted here. The show clearly combines and overlaps a number of moral and ontological realities, and utilizes but never rests for long upon an ironic vision. The show's flip-flopping across demon-human and good-evil continua, has some detractors, and here I will let Kellner's remarks represent these views: "[T]he characters and the viewer cannot tell who is good and bad and Buffy and her friends often do not really know what to do or if their actions will turn out to have negative consequences."[275] I submit that this state of ambiguity is one of the show's important premises exactly because it reflects a contemporary, felt experience that younger generations especially can understand. The world *is* confusing and complicated, and it is hard to know what to stand for and how, or how much, to take responsibility.

In fact, the characters' floundering in the face of a lack of discernment moves them toward an important recognition that it is up to them to be their own saviors. Robert Loftis feels that the show's compelling "moral incoherence" is a crucial component and, he infers, one that offers a soteriological revision:

> The worldviews clashing in *Buffy*—nihilist camp, fascist superhero narratives, thalian redemption stories—are driving contemporary culture…. [T]he fictional world we see presents in a fresh way the moral dilemmas of thereal world. It is a world that cries out for moral judgments but resists making them coherently. Thus we know that there are some true moral statements, we have several good

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[275] Kellner, "*Buffy* as Spectacular Allegory," 9.

candidates for true moral statements, but we cannot always reconcile them and should be prepared to revise them in light of future experience.[276]

Santana and Erickson's valancing of portrayals of instability in the show as a positive echoes this, remarking that its popularity reflects the desire for "a complex depiction of the different sides and shades of belief and disbelief, of human and nonhuman, and of the importance of finding ways to negotiate these issues."[277] I suggest then that the ambiguity Kellner names as postmodern is better reframed as a metamodern tactic of showing characters at work devising their own metamodern ethos, which I will explore further shortly. Viewing the show as moving *between* epistemes allows us to understand the cultural work of such shows that are often cited as genre-busting and boundary-defying.

Like Kellner, Beeler reads the show's treatment of the Cordelia character as postmodern. Cordelia seems at first a mere stereotype of a snarky, somewhat vacuous cheerleader, but she later joins the Scoobies as a brave demon fighter, and is even portrayed as a mystic in the *Buffy* spinoff series, *Angel*. Beeler asserts that "the unpredictability of Cordelia's world suggests that there can be no easy identification of good or evil forces. Cordelia finds herself in multiple in-between spaces in *Angel* and lives in a world with shades of gray."[278] She adds, "In a postmodern, post-feminist world of relativism, it is not always clear whether there is a 'correct' choice."[279] Further, she cites as a postmodern element the theological wobbliness as to where Cordelia's mystical visions stem from, "since postmodern narratives typically do not provide final

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[276] Loftis, "Moral Complexity in the Buffyverse."
[277] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 1st ed., 129.
[278] Beeler, *Seers, Witches, and Psychics*, 30n182.
[279] Beeler, *Seers, Witches, and Psychics*, 149.

answers."[280]

What I appreciate about Beeler's analysis is the identification of a "third space" that such characters occupy. In such a space, in Kripal's conceptualization, is "open to the ontological shock of … spectral events but that [does] not immediately push the buttons of psychological reduction or religious belief." I conceptualize this third space as the heart, or one of the hearts (since we're in paranormal territory, why not multiple hearts?), of the metamodern sensibility. Characters like Cordelia are engaging and dynamic because they advance through several identities and emerge more multidimensional but still quite human. In her case, this cheerleader and stereotypical mean girl is a poster child for the postmodern preoccupation with superficiality and surfaces. Yet she emerges more vulnerable, more understanding of what personal sacrifice and true friendship entail—and, importantly, she does not renounce her human personality quirks. With her caustic wit as sharp as ever, Cordelia's tough and brutal honesty toward others' failings becomes an important and appreciated skill, to the point where it almost makes sense when she is elevated to the status of a higher being in the fourth season of *Angel.* Portraying the potential for high schoolers and young adults to develop into "higher beings," or at least as perfectly capable of making important ethical choices, is a key part of metamodern narratives, as is the fact that characters like Cordelia do not draw on religion or a "strong family upbringing" to grow socially or spiritually. In fact she may, more than the other characters, draw on family traumas and betrayals.[281] Cordelia's bad

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[280] Beeler, *Seers, Witches, and Psychics*, 98.

[281] This idea echoes Kripal's "traumatic secret"—the notion that "in many cases the mystical event or psychical cognition occurs ina state of grave danger, illness, or near-death…. [and that] such states and cognitions often serve obvious adaptive purposes… Such a model does not reduce the mystical event to the traumatic fracture, but rather understands the trauma as a psychological correlate or catalyst of the mystical state of consciousness." *Secret Body,* 323.

upbringing and her bad attitude translate into her being a bad-ass in dealing with monsters.

Asim Ali's analysis also inclines toward the postmodern attribution, writing, "*Buffy* is a very postmodern show. It's about ... slamming together a diversity of beliefs, and then waiting until the dust settles to see which of them are left standing. It's about the multiplicity and fluidity of ideas, meanings, and identities, and how mixing them up allows us to deconstruct our own hidden assumptions." Although Ali is quite correct to spotlight the show's use of multiplicities, writing that Buffy and her friends are the ones who "see the world for what it really is,"[282] this reading also exceeds the bounds of the postmodern category. A postmodern deconstructive reading might be more likely to show that there was nothing, finally, to be uncovered, save for that realization itself—the awareness that there is no centering truth or reality. In short, truth claims like these do not pass postmodern muster and in fact help make the case for its categorization as something else.

On *Hollywood Jesus*, Broaddus oxymoronically conflates several aesthetic, ethical, and theological sentiments, and even epistemic positions, which he calls "postmodern":

> In a lot of ways, *BtVS* is a truly postmodern religious experience. What we
> ultimately learn from *Buffy* is that true spirituality is about the journey.…
> It's the journey itself that shapes them, not the distance, not even the
> destination or completion of the goal or defeat of the villain. *Buffy the*

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[282] Ali, "In the World, But Not of It," 89.

Vampire Slayer is, in essence, a parable with Buffy as messiah, the

Scoobies as her church, and the demons as the temptations of life.[283]

Broaddus refers to Buffy as the "savior" (though a flawed one), and her gang of

Scoobies as symbolic of the Apostles. The monster as temptation, as I have argued earlier,

would be at home in a premodern or modern narrative, but not so much in a postmodern

one.[284] And the focus on finding one's ethical way is called by Broaddus a postmodern

trait. So here again, in an attempt to account for the entangled mishmash of epistemic

qualities, the evocation of postmodernism obscures more than it illuminates.[285] Finally, as

Loftis points out, the show is replete with profound moral optimism and a "constant

theme of redemption is the most important [element] of all…. [i]t is hard to make sense

of a world of redemptive narratives unless you assume that some kind of morality holds

in that world."[286]

An example in which the characters negotiate their way through more than one

epistemic perspective at the same time is found in a scene from the episode "Becoming"

in which Willow and Oz prepare to face season 2's Big Bad that threatens to destroy

human civilization. Willow, progressing into full-blown panic, becomes exasperated by

Oz's casual demeanor.

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[283] Broaddus, "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*."
[284] Although here I make allowances for the sometime different use of "postmodern" for evangelical Christians, as mentioned in the previous chapter.
[285] Some of these uses of *postmodern* may be catchalls for *contemporary*, *the world today*, or *our cultural condition*. Such usages perturb more formal applications being attempted within and outside the university. See Brian McHale's wide-ranging essay on the history and uses of the term postmodern. He writes, "Period terms like postmodernism (and modernism, for that matter) are strategically useful; they help us see connections among disparate phenomena, but at the same time they also obscure other connections, and we must constantly weigh the illumination they shed over here against the obscurity they cast over there. From the moment when the obscurity outweighs the illumination, and the category in question becomes more a hindrance than a help, we are free to reconstruct or even abandon it." McHale, "What Was Postmodernism?"
[286] Loftis, "Moral Complexity in the Buffyverse."

Willow: Oz, could you just pretend to care about what's happening,

please?

Oz: You think I don't care?

Willow: I think we could be dead in two days' time and you're being

ironic detachment guy.

Oz: Would it help if I panic?

Willow: Yes! It would be swell! Panic is a thing people can share in times

of crisis, and everything is really scary now, you know? And I

don't know what's going to happen. And there's all these things

you're supposed to get to do after high school, and I was really

looking forward to doing them, and now we're probably all just

gonna die and I'd like to feel that maybe you would …

Oz (leans forward to kiss her)

Willow: What're you doing?

Oz: Panicking …

This dialogue moves seamlessly from post- to metamodern, utilizing hyper-self-reflexivity—reflection on the epistemic situatedness of one's reflection—coupled with sincere irony or *ironesty* (Greg Dember's neologism),[287] along with an emphasis on individuals' felt experience as evincing what is true or can be counted on. Although Oz is not the kind to express his concern as panic, he connects with Willow to address her fear while still maintaining some level of ironic response congruent with his personality. Initiation of a kiss is a gesture that obviously won't change the situation of impending

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[287] Dember, "How to Be Ironic and Earnest."

doom but, when the couple later makes love, it is highly impactful in shifting Willow's panic and brightens her outlook considerably. Even with a battle to save the world ahead, the message seems to be, their experience in the here-and-now as young lovers is still worth claiming. Meanwhile the other characters are also shown finding physical and emotional connection in the face of their nearly certain demise to improve their outlooks and bolster their courage to fight the current Big Bad. Our heroes'/heroines' status as mortals, immanently located, is reaffirmed as a strength. Relational gestures—expressing one's felt experience and seeking human connection—are conveyed as literally salvific.

As has been widely noted (but bears underscoring in the present context), to the extent that the postmodern is defined by a critique of modernism's reliance on or search for a guiding, universal narrative, it arguably then creates another guiding narrative that is meant to show a lack of continuance or a continued state of flux. That is, postmodernism provides a guiding narrative supposing no guiding narrative. Metamodernism doesn't signal an attempt to overcome such a position, but in offering a nontotalizing perspective, it may actually further the project that postmodernism proposes but cannot ultimately manifest, until there ceases to be opposition to modern meanings. Without getting too far down a metaphysical rabbit hole, metamodernism seen in this way actually escorts postmodernism past its paradoxically ideological stance of no-meaning—not killing it off but bringing to light the shadow of the always-already ironic. In sum, metamodernism reframes postmodernism's stereotypically nihilistic dead-end while understanding the aforementioned ambiguities as inflected with a postmodern tone, though not thereby limited.

A few other scholars do perform metamodern readings of parts of the show—though without using the term. Budden, for example, expresses his take on the overall message of Whedon's series *Buffy* and *Angel,* from what sounds like a metamodern perspective on religion:

> Both *Buffy* and *Angel* are series about standing up to the odds and doing what is right.… *Buffy* ends with Buffy and her friends overcoming the embodiment of all evil and breaking a millennia-old system of patriarchy to share power with girls [all] over the world. Both shows to the end deny the idea of giving up or caving in to superior knowledge.… In the *Buffy* universe, there are godlike beings capable of stealing free will and ancient prophecies that hold your destiny. However, the moral of how to deal with these things is made clear: stand up to them, do what is right and try to forge your own path no matter what is against you. In the works presented by Joss Whedon, prophecy and the will of higher beings are not things to be accepted but to be fought against in the name of humanity and individuality.[288]

What I would call metamodern about Budden's conclusions here is his focus on how Whedon's characters engage their own experience as their source of morality. In other words, they are moved to "do what's right," sometimes in flagrant opposition to conventional moralities. So Budden's advice to "try to forge your own path no matter what is against you" comes partly out of the plot element in which there is conflict between the protagonists and the conventional anchors of society (for example, parents

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[288] Budden, "Free Will in a Universe of Prophecy and Higher Powers."

and formal education) that are supposed to provide guidance and moral modeling. These institutions turn out to be unreliable. So "the will of higher beings are not things to be accepted" is both a theological comment and is analogic, for example to the will of a Sunnydale High School principal, who turns out to be aware of but largely unconcerned about the Hellmouth below the school. The break from patriarchy and the move toward shared power is a social comment that could also be read as aligning with the Christian Emerging Church's directives of simplicity, care, and relationality—particularly if the girl slayers-in-training are read as analogous to Jesus's disciples. In all cases, when authority figures fail the young protagonists, the onus is on them to save the world.

3.7. Major Metamodern Qualities in *Buffy*

Buffy embodies several other qualities of metamodernism, namely smallness/ordinariness, community/individual responsibility, and oscillation/pluralism. Some of these elements have received comment in previous *Buffy* scholarship, though not under the epistemic mapping rubric. My focus is to propose how they fit together and illuminate what I am calling a metamodern soteriology.

These elements should be regarded as having significant overlap and effect upon one another. For example, smallness/ordinariness (often present with its flipside, epic awesomeness) can include a youth-positive culture in which small, human efforts serve in specific community-related capacities. Also, the contemporary felt experience of an oscillation between fluid identity narratives mirrors and possibly encourages pluralist values—an interest in the Other and other realities, including the mystical (often in

secularized forms, such as in popular culture). Increased self-reflexivity means that all of the above are understood and engaged more flexibly.

3.7.1. Smallness/Ordinariness

The seemingly insubstantial packs a wallop in *Buffy*. The ordinary and the tiny hold unexpected capacities. The show juxtaposes its huge themes undertaken and Buffy's Slayer power with a name that connotes trifling-ness[289] and physical smallness (allowing her to take enemies and audience by surprise as they underestimate her strength). These traits act as metaphors for character strength combined with willingness to be real and vulnerable.

In terms of intelligence, Buffy is purposely drawn as average. Whedon wanted his heroine not to be a super achiever because "*Buffy* is an ode to misfits, a healing vision of the weird, the different and the marginalized finding their place in the world and, ultimately, saving it."[290] As Elijah Prewitt-Davis explains, "Buffy was a sort of feminist archetype that showed us how we could be vulnerable, flawed, reluctant, and powerful."[291] The Slayer's and the other characters' ordinariness plays against transcendence-model soteriologies. Heroes do not need to come from another planet or dimension, wear capes, or be spiritually advanced or otherwise exceptional. In fact, the characters all seem drawn to that specification in that each has ordinary struggles while also possessing some gift that becomes an extraordinary help to their cause.

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[289] Also, speaking of the power of smallness, Koontz suggests that *Buffy's* tackling of "Big Questions" was possible due to its "flying under the radar" as "a little show on a start up netlet with a silly title." See Koontz, "Foreword," 1.
[290] Millman, "The Death of Buffy's Mom."
[291] Prewitt-Davis, "The Passion of the Slayer."

The show's play with binaries like these challenges the idea that Buffy's smallness or ordinariness should signal insubstantiality and "calls into question the idea that slight and substantial, ephemera and art, language and content are mutually exclusive just because we tend to treat them as binary opposites."[292] Since none of the characters is perfectly packaged, yet all are revealed to have special powers of various sorts, they are ordinary and at the same time extraordinary. The show's underlying message is that anyone, no matter how small, average, unremarkable, or young, could be percolating a quiet superpower that can contribute to saving the world. Kellner writes:

> This youth-positivity toward high school students means that the series refreshingly resists the assaults on youth and demonization of the young that is a major theme of many films, media representations, academic studies, and political discourse. Instead, *BtVS* presents images of youth who are intelligent, resourceful, virtuous, and able to choose between good and evil and positively transform themselves, while also capable of dealing with their anxieties and grappling with the problems of everyday life.[293]

Bonnie Kneen notes, "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be said to have *Romeo and Julietted* late-nineties TV ... because *Buffy*, like Shakespeare's seminal teen angst spectagedy, doesn't see why what is trivial, simple, adolescent, comic, and genre-based cannot illuminate and interrogate what is important, sophisticated, universal, tragic, or literary."[294] *Buffy*, however, highlights the dramas of adolescence as meaningful not only

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[292] Kneen, "The Language of Buffy Speak."
[293] Kellner, "*Buffy* as Spectacular Allegory," 4.
[294] Kneen, "The Language of Buffy Speak."

for individuals but also for how they serve the creation of a Turnerian-type of *communitas*.

3.7.2. Community, *Communitas*, and Individual Responsibility

A number of *Buffy* scholars have pointed out that the show supports a culture of individualism and personal empowerment that also extends to a community-minded ethos. As Buffy and her Scooby gang engage various human and monstrous forces and the power issues they represent, they negotiate their attendant roles both as individuals and as a collective. The demon-fighting strategies they craft fit with the show's metamodern epistemic sensibility: the Scoobies' response to their situation is to first gather themselves as the most important resources. They focus very little on the odds against their success or the why and wherefore of their absurd predicament. Though they level plenty of ironic humor at it, they respond not abstractly but in and to the here and now. Anthony Mills encapsulates what I am identifying as *communitas* as "recognition of the powerlessness in the face of it" that makes "true community" possible: "Only when each member of the gang realizes that they cannot handle life alone, especially life in a world infested with demons, do they really come together."[295] Julie Sloan Brannon adds, "For Buffy, it is her relationships that have enabled her to survive longer than any other slayer," as in "Checkpoint" (season 5, episode 12), when Buffy takes back power from

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[295] Mills, "*Buffy*verse Fandom as Religion," 137–38. Mills makes the additional point that when "authorities and institutions in which they are supposed to trust turn out to be irrelevant, disinterested or corrupt" and fail to "provide social cohesion and personal wholeness," what may take their place for the viewers is fan culture. The non-normative or fringe status of such fan groups reflects fans' feeling of finding themselves in a "position of cultural obscurity" and bonding over it.

the Watchers Council—an ancient bureaucracy and symbol of a dispassionate, end-justifying-means, patriarchal power structure. When it is revealed that the lineage of Slayers from the beginning is utilized by the Watchers Council as political pawns, Buffy reframes herself as the center of the organization rather than as its tool. But her subversion of the council is not simply for the purpose of reversing their domination but to quickly find a way to work cooperatively toward their common cause.[296]

As a metamodern hero, Buffy understands there are numerous forces at play, exposing traditional, modern, and postmodern teloi, which are not going anywhere. The show also suggests that due to the systemic nature of some of these forces, resolution is never as simple as "winning" by identifying the root of corrupt power. Rather than trying to overpower or dethrone the oppressive force, or opt for another systemic solution—say, radical anarchy—Buffy focuses on getting all the various forces aligned, at least temporarily, to find a way to work toward their common cause, which is, after all, surviving the apocalypse. A modern-postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion gives way to a "hermeneutics of 'situation'" wherein the cultural logic dictates that "the only way out is through."[297] This fits with the oscillating, combinatory, local positionality that I suggest is an ethos of metamodernism, in that it ultimately locates power in individuals and cooperative effort.

Season 6, for example, portrays an oscillation between following and rejecting the patriarchal structure of the Watchers Council. When Buffy buys into the lore about Slayers, as she has been told that she is the only one with the power to save, this is

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[296] Brannon, "It's About Power," 1–9.
[297] Qtd in Mullins, "The Long 1980s," 13 (a book review of Jeffrey Nealon's *Post-Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*).

revealed later to be the wrong strategy. Isolation, megalomania, and the narrative of the

lone superhero are shown to be wrongheaded in terms of what is needed to win the fight.

Loftis writes that Buffy presents as "more than a little fascist" in her moral heuristics, but

in the final season of the TV series, she is "pulled out of her descent into fascism by the

revold of the [potential Slayers] against her authority and her ultimate decision to literally

share her power with all the potentials." Loftis, however, also reads the show in its

entirety as featuring a "profound moral optimism."[298] Brannon writes, "The show

underscores that the Slayer's power must be understood in a dynamic other than that of

the disciplining force and the object of discipline."[299]

The soteriological revelation is that the powers inherent in each individual, when

combined, rather than wielded through one vessel, stop powerful agents of destruction.

Using power unilaterally, blindly, or egotistically is shown to fail, while negotiation,

group decision-making, and egalitarianism are what generally work against the Biggest

Bads.[300] The metamodern ethos of locating power in individuals and cooperative effort

means that Buffy refuses to put an abstract idea, authority, or institution over the lives of

her friends, which forces her to come up with her own ethical code. In season 2, she must

stake her boyfriend, the vampire Angel—whose soul has been lost (rendering him evil)

then regained (pairing him with Buffy as lover and co-evil-fighter) then lost again

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[298] Loftis, "Moral Complexity in the Buffyverse."
[299] In her interesting Foucauldian commentary on *Buffy,* Brannon writes that "the show underscores that the Slayer's power must be understood in a dynamic other than that of the disciplining force and the object of discipline" (Brannon, "It's About Power," 9). On "dividing practices," she writes, "Buffy has become isolated completely because she believes that her power is by necessity one that can only be wielded successfully by herself. Both Giles and Buffy use dividing practices (control, manipulation, exclusion), and echoing the Council's methods ultimately brings them almost to the brink of disaster" (9).
[300] For how Buffy's relationship to Giles, her Watcher, illustrates this see Riess, *What Would Buffy Do?* 66–69.

(turning him against her), and finally regained again—to keep the Hellmouth from opening. The torment she experiences at once conveys a young woman's heartbreak over her cad boyfriend whom she entrusts with her virginity and who then callously dumps her; and also models an issue much bigger than herself: the confusion and personal challenge in "doing what's right" and electing to accept responsibility for one's community. Such decisions often do not lead to tidy resolutions.

Whedon has said that he wanted his characters' deeply ethical stance toward community to be conveyed in a non-formulaic fashion that never gives way to a sappy or campy conclusion: "In my characters there's a core of trust and love that I'm very committed to. These guys would die for each other, and it's very beautiful. But at the same time, you can't keep that safety. Things have to go wrong, bad things have to happen."[301]

Clark analyzed the consumption of monsters and supernatural elements in popular culture by young viewers in particular. Her respondents, she found, were often "oriented toward [the] collective approaches to change" depicted in shows such as *Buffy*, where the characters "work together to address various injustices of teen life. They work together to challenge racist practices and prejudiced views; they hold each other accountable for behaving with integrity toward others; they even unite with their classmates to confront corrupt administrators in their school."[302] Clark feels their engagement with these themes amounts to a kind of cultural critique. Rather than downplaying evil, or acting affectively blithe about its consequences, the message in *Buffy* is that "evil has the potential for

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[301] Qtd in Lavery, "A Religion in Narrative."
[302] Clark, *From Angels to Aliens*, 234.

large, social consequences."[303] I would add that young people's collective actions and ethical stances are relevant, even key, to the successful confrontation of social injustices.

Many of *Buffy*'s characters exhibit compassion and self-sacrifice. "At one time or another almost every character engages in selfless acts to shift the burden of pain from others to themselves,"[304] including, or perhaps even especially, Cordelia. The show suggests that since Cordelia is portrayed at first as a spoiled, entitled, rich girl, if this character can find meaning in self-sacrifice and contribute to saving the world and those important to her, anyone can. The teleology is murky—sometimes fate is invoked but not without ultimate responsibility returning to individuals. This message carries through both *Buffy* and *Angel*, as exemplified in this monologue from the *Angel* episode "Inside Out" (season 4, episode 17) in which characters Gunn and Fred have just been told by a grey-toned demon named Skip (referred to by Gunn cheekily as "Monochrome" here) that all of their destinies have been rigged by the evil "law firm" Wolfram & Hart, which is actually a front for the disembodied and ever-ambiguous ontology known as "The Powers That Be" and which Gunn refers to here as "No-Name."

> Gunn: Monochrome can yap all he wants about No-Name's cosmic plan. But here's a little something I picked up rubbing mojos these past couple years: The final score can't be rigged. I don't care how many players you grease, that last shot always comes up a question mark. But here's the thing: You never know when you're taking it. It could be when you're duking it out with the Legion of Doom, or just crossing the street deciding where to have brunch. So you just treat

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[303] Clark, *From Angels to Aliens*, 234.
[304] Riess, "Buffydharma," 1.

it all like it was up to you. The world in the balance. 'Cause you never know

when it is.

These sorts of personal ethical stances that deflect from good guy/bad guy

binaries, and instead imply a responsibility toward one's community, are a frequent topic

of deep debate by *Buffy* fans and scholars alike.[305] In his ethnographic study of

Whedonverse fan cultures, Ali analyzes interactions among members of an online fan

community and concludes that the group "tends to exhibit tolerance and flexibility,"

correlating this with the idea that the members together negotiate "several dramatically

different worlds."[306] He concludes that the online community exists as an effort to extend

the ethos of the show, to "continue to build bridges which bring people together along

racial, economic, cultural, religious, gender, and political backgrounds."[307] Further study

of more, and more varied, fan cultures may reveal if situating these elements within the

metamodern turn gives us an epistemic basis for understanding the foregrounding of such

values and ethics of tolerance and negotiations of difference—on the part of fans and also

those researching them.

3.7.3. The Performance of Boundary Blurring/Oscillating Identities

Oscillation was made a marker of the metamodern cultural sensibility in the

writings of Vermeulen and van den Akker. Although I generally agree about its centrality,

my usage diverges somewhat from theirs. I build on the idea of oscillation as a move

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[305] See Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters*.
[306] Ali, "In the World," 116–20.
[307] Ali, "In the World," 117.

back and forth between epistemic positions, to also theorize the mechanism, if you will, of its dynamic as constitutive of the "big AHA!" In other words, mystical realization is made possible as a result of moving between various binaries and interrogating their boundaries, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Different usages of *oscillation* exist among general audiences and opinions vary as to how central the idea is to metamodernism. Some have taken metamodern oscillation to mean a wavering or flightiness, as a catchy name for noncommittal floating from one position to another, either due to some existential struggle or simply on one's own whim. Ollie Lansdowne, for example, tries out such a meaning:

> How do you live with ... internal conflict? The metamodernist way is to oscillate. You might call it friends-with-benefits, or spiritual-but-not-religious. *"Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm."* If it sounds trippy when it's laid out like that, it's because it is. It ends with you falling towards the earth but never getting closer.[308]

Though he acknowledges that there is something significant going on when one oscillates, it is not clear whether Landsdowne means to criticize or sympathize with it as a kind of contemporary state. What most serious scholars of metamodernism mean *oscillation* to signify is not limited to the negotiation of a personal, existential moment. Despite this, insights, even "big AHA!" moments, may in some cases result. My application here of the concept initiated by Vermeulen and van den Akker proposes to go further (as is the purview of scholars of religion more so than of cultural studies, much to

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[308] Lansdowne, "Against Metamodern Mysticism," emphasis in original.

my good fortune) into the question of what manner of meaning is performed as a result of the activity of oscillating. My suggestion, as I have introduced it in chapter two—part mystical, part existential, part psychological—will be taken up again in chapters four and five. As I focus on the more specifically epistemic sense of oscillative aesthetic choice-making in *Buffy*, it is worth repeating that deploying several epistemic sensibilities at once, without the contradictions needing to be overcome, is itself a feature of metamodernism.

What accounts for the appeal of the vampire who is by turns a tender lover and an uncontrollable killer (in *Buffy* and also in other recent vampire films and TV shows such as *True Blood*, *Twilight*, and *Being Human*), the human who is a monstrous serial killer though only to fight crime (*Dexter*), and the mutant who has a more humane, loving, and enlightened perspective than most of the humans around it (*Hellboy*)? What aspect of their blurriness is appealing, possibly even comforting, and draws viewers to these polymorphic figures of instability? The category of metamodernism helps explain why multivalency makes these stories so compelling. The viewing of a demon—which should be understood by definition to be evil—as a complex and multifaceted entity means also allowing that angels are not always good and that ostensibly "good people" might not always be out for the good or even know what "good" is in every case. The hero is not always right, wise, or mature.

Kellner writes, "*BtVS* ... interrogates the boundaries between life and death, good and evil, the human and the nonhuman, and rationality and irrationality. The categories and behaviors they describe keep sliding back and forth into each other, deconstructing

an all-too-binary division between them."[309] Buffy's variable relationship with Spike

provides an example of the potential impact of blurred identity boundaries. A vampire

with a sometimes-operable conscience who acts over seven seasons as Buffy's sworn

enemy, lover, loyal friend, attacker, confessor, and liberator, Spike demonstrates the

"borderline quality of the monster and ... our desire to embrace and expel it at the same

time."[310] Whedon allows the subject/object status to go both ways, however, meaning that

from Spike's point of view, Buffy is *his* sometime arch enemy, major crush, trusted

friend, lover, and tormentor. Showing the borderline qualities of humans equally to those

of monsters allows, perhaps even forces, viewers to more deeply consider the point of

view and subject status of the Other. Victoria Nelson calls vampires like Spike and Angel

"bridge" vampires and charts the history of this and other tropes of vampires'

"humanization" in *Gothicka.* What seems unique, however, about Whedonverse vampires

and monsters is that there are often not just one or two of these "bridge" creatures on a

given show carrying the characterological promise of an ethical monster, but many.[311]

Again, when read as postmodern, switches in identities—monster to human and

back again—deconstruct any central identity and render the various personalities or

expressions meaningless, or at least not meaning-based. Opposites pitted against one

another to dissolve the firmness or thingness of each is postmodern. But metamodernism

employs the switching of identities to reinforce a multivalency. Combined with an

imaginative third thing—whether demon or human—the various parts can add up to a

meaning, one that usually has a relational quality. Spike's character has consistency not

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[309] Kellner, "*Buffy* as Spectacular Allegory," 9.
[310] Levina and Bui, "Introduction," 4.
[311] Nelson, *Gothika*, 92.

in his ethics—this is not the deepest level through which an individual "self" is recognized on *Buffy*—but in something more than a personality, perhaps in what we might call his "inner being."

This narrative overturning of binaries (such as good and evil) is nothing new. Indeed, the monstrous could scarcely exist without this trope. Moreover, the blurring of boundaries is most often thought of as an artifact of postmodernism. However, the notion that these negotiations take place within each episteme and, as my typology shows, offer up different feeling tones, provides the possibility of fuller and richer narrative analysis.

In terms of pluralism and fluid identity narratives, Kellner raises a relevant question for this discussion, one that would seem to oppose a postmodern label. He wonders whether *Buffy* "exaggerates the ease of radical self-transformation" or reflects it. Critiquing the social effect of the "constant undermining of distinctions between good and evil," he writes, "while it is positive that a TV series shows that moral choice, existential authenticity, and radical self-transformation is possible and sometimes necessary, it is not useful to show radical change happening so fast and easily as it usually does in the show."[312] If viewed as a facet of the burgeoning metamodern sensibility, however, this rapid-fire shifting, or oscillation, more clearly reflects the sensibilities of Generations Y and Z, in which radically transforming oneself, switching roles and identities may feel actually more native to their experience. It may be seen as aptly reflecting our contemporary reality in which the shifting of identities has become in a certain sense indeed fast and easy. I referred in chapter two to the prevalence of social media, and the way its influence facilitates the sense of individuals as multivalent sets of

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[312] Kellner, "Buffy as Spectacular Allegory," 13.

identities. Presently, the more identities one assumes on social media platforms and the faster one can "shape shift" between them, the more personal currency—virtual, as well as sometimes economic—one obtains. My inference here—one that admittedly will require more thorough consideration elsewhere—is that if individuals treating themselves as shifting sets of identities extend that ontological multiplicity to others, they may to some extent be tacitly promoting pluralistic social views.

In the previous chapter I also remarked that as technology and social media economies have instantiated *identity currencies*, this could make people gravitate toward ambiguous affiliations such as SBNR. *Buffy*'s narrative exemplar of characters' radically shifting roles and viewpoints reflects the contemporary felt reality of media inundation and its potential to broadly affect the destabilizing of the singular identity. Technological advancements, especially their social utilizations and the economies of identity that have sprung up in response, have quickened the pace of communication and broadened the scope of engagement with the Other—and, by extension, with communities, lifestyles, and worldviews to which one simply would not have heretofore been exposed. Coeval to these developments and the radical social reconfiguring toward the economy of likes, is an upward trend in pluralistic values. Further, the notion of a multivalency of identities—one or more maintained for each platform, game, account, online discussion group, and so forth—may indicate that the expectations of active participation in our globalist, pluralist culture have increased.

The social phenomena I refer to can certainly be couched as either positive or negative. Such a determination is not my goal. At present, it seems that characterizations of media as a dehumanizing force are far more numerous than those that argue otherwise.

Indisputably, Generations Y and Z have inherited a postmodern understanding of what

Erik Davis described in 1998 as "a decentered world of endless fragmentation, a field

where human identity becomes a moving target."[313] It sounded bleak then. Now, much

more so than when Davis was writing, the post-postmodern epistemic reality is perceived

as cocreated and participatory. In the eyes of the culture-makers of this young century,

identity/ies as moving targets are experienced as "normal" rather than something to

disdain, run from, or resist.

In sum, the current-day emphasis on visual media normalizes fluid identity

narratives. And younger generations are growing up oriented to framing their reality

through the lens (*life-as-movie*), perhaps predisposing them to processing and viewing

their lives—all lives—as cinematically constructed moments. This reflexivity further

blurs the lines between lived and constructed realities and, to recapitulate my argument

from chapter two, may to some extent tacitly instantiate or even promote pluralistic social

views and impact secular subjects' tolerance for religious/spiritual ideas, experiences, or

views.[314] Shows like *Buffy* reflect the entanglement of the spiritual and secular in the

contemporary era. As Jana Riess writes, "*Buffy* might be paradigmatic of Generations X

and Y because it is so spiritually eclectic, borrowing freely from several different

religious traditions at the same time."[315] (However, she also notes that in Sunnydale, the

power is located not with religious institutions but with individuals who use what is at

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[313] Davis, *TechGnosis,* 388.
[314] Schofield Clark correlates the interest in the monstrous with the propensity of young people to be interested in "possibility" in general. She asserts that "the increasingly multicultural and religiously plural environment in which [they] live" contributes to younger generations' pluralistic manner of engagement with religion (*From Angels to Aliens*, 228).
[315] Riess, *What Would Buffy Do?* xvi.

hand to forge a path to personal ethos and to community.)[316]

More thorough study would be required to fully support the broad claims I make here.[317] Perhaps my analysis of these social trends, embodied by the show's popularity and the ethos of the Buffyverse—with its characters alternating ontologically between evil and human, heroes and regular Joes/Josephines, and thereby modeling the notion that even "absolute" identities shift—can act as a starting point. At minimum, *Buffy* appears to be a significant contributor, even a forerunner, in the metamodern, pop-cultural rewriting of the monstrous as multivalent.[318] In narrative moments in which the Scoobies must stand up to institutional forces, these forces are frequently portrayed as at least

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[316] Riess, *What Would Buffy Do?* xvi–xvii.

[317] To make this assertion I am leapfrogging over a number of important intermediary discussions about how technologies of communication in general, and social media in particular, restructure social relationships. A more theoretical and less sociological discussion area germane to this study, but unfortunately outside its bounds, is hauntology, which connects current technological usages with the supernatural. Studies of the ghostliness or spectrality of media and technology, from Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" to media theory like Jeffrey Sconce's, consider how contingent and temporary—yet somehow also "real"—identities are formed with the tools of technology, and what the ramifications may be. Sconce asserts that the sharing of inner experience as has been annexed and dehumanized by media. Other robustly-made counterpoints to this view (besides metamodernism) came later, for example, with the New Materialists. See Zekany, "The Hauntology of Media Addiction."

[318] Of the many other contemporary examples of monsters with metamodern multivalency beyond the Whedonverse presented in film and television, the TV series *True Blood* (2008–2014) for example, has several lead vampire characters showcasing the monstrous other with a complex humanity. Portraying the monstrous other as no-longer scary occurs in *Monsters, Inc.* (2001) where cartoon monsters battle their own fears of humans. This plot essentially performs a flip of the monster as subject and the human little girl as object. The film, *Paul* (2011) depicts the alien Other as your goofy, fun-loving pal who just needs help to get home. It recycles the *ET* (1977) plot to a large extent but puts a metamodern twist on it. Paul is a much more down to earth "dude" than ET—belching, cracking jokes about genitalia, and stopping to bring a dead bird back to life, although, subverting the expected orientalist trope of the alien as higher being who would be expected to use his healing powers for virtuous reasons, Paul simply enjoys eating animals live. This whipping the rug out from under the moralistic assumptions brings him again back down to human level. The Wiki website TVTropes.org hosts several pages of quirky monster taxonomies, including Benevolent Monsters, Non-Malicious Monsters, Reluctant Monsters, Friendly-Neighborhood Monsters, and Vegetarian Vampires, some of whom are "Cursed with Awesome," and so on. In the United States, you can join Monster Rangers, "a real life troop of monster-loving misfits" (http://monsterrangers.com).

partially corrupt or corruptible. In season 4, episode 19, Buffy calls her boyfriend, Riley,

a bigot after he opines that Willow was reckless for getting involved with Oz, a likeable,

low-key guy who, as it happens, turns into a werewolf once a month. Buffy tries to

explain that there are some demons who are not evil, which Riley at first rejects. Later

Riley witnesses the paramilitary organization to which he belongs capture Oz in his

werewolf state to experiment on him. This reframes his ideas about Othering the

monstrous, as he admits his previous thinking about demons had been too "black and

white."[319]

It should be said that a metamodern monster narrative does not necessarily convey

the trope of welcoming the Other with open arms, but, if we take *Buffy* as allegorical, it

wrestles (often literally) with the borderline qualities of both self and Other. Levina and

Bui suggest in their delineation of a "representational approach to monsters" that a happy

ending with monsters is not to be trusted; if the monster signifies that which must be

repressed in the human, it often amounts to "the restoration of repression."[320] Their

reading more clearly describes postmodern monsters, inasmuch as the postmodern period

spurred critical theories of oppression. Whedon himself does not want a tidy answer to

the human condition in his stories: "If you raise a kid to think everything is sunshine and

flowers, they're going to get into the real world and die.… That's the reason fairy tales

are so creepy, because we need to encapsulate these things, to inoculate ourselves against

them, so that when we're confronted by the genuine horror that is day-to-day life, we

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[319] Loftis performs an interesting analysis of Riley's moral shift as "a cautionary tale against all hyperrationalist systems of ethics, including Kantianism," while also critiquing others' analyses of this character. See "Moral Complexity in the Buffyverse."
[320] Robin Wood, qtd in Levina and Bui "Introduction," 4–5.

don't go insane."[321]

3.8. Mystical Encounters in *Buffy*

Mystic and supernatural figures can be seen in Whedon's work as bridging the untenably threatening situation (the monstrous) and the normative. But a mystic may also be configured as, or may herself feel like, a monster. The mystic inhabits a liminal space analogous to the monster, disturbing and destabilizing notions of normalcy. In *Buffy*, the human-monster hybrid sometimes functions as an analog to mystics, or to characters that sometimes read as mystics. The show's writers depict various transformations of the human mystic, symbolizing her non-ordinary or liminal status as a human who accesses other realities and identities—in effect portraying her as a kind of monstrous Other. Of course, encounters by ordinary people with supernatural beings occur in every episode of *Buffy*. Additionally, the characters have personal, life-changing, "big AHA!" experiences that allow them to walk the line between human and monstrous.

One important way that monsters disturb is that the liminality of their "externally incoherent bodies resist[s] attempts to include them in any systematic structuration," Cohen suggests; monsters are disturbing and thus Othered due to their "resistance of easy classification."[322] Visual media in particular affords the opportunity to depict the change of the human mystic via this external incoherence, and thus to symbolize her non-ordinary or liminal status as a person who accesses other realities as a monstrous Other.

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[321] Qtd in Longworth, Jr., *TV Creators*, 213.
[322] Cohen, "Monster Culture," 6–7.

In *Buffy*, the human-monster hybrid, for example, sometimes functions as an analog to the mystic. Willow transforms physically into "Dark Willow" when she loses control of her magics (referred to on the show in the plural) and becomes evil. Physically, her hair and eyes turn jet black and black veins pop from her face, marking her as an unnatural force. In contrast, Buffy's body, as Slayer, is already supernaturally powered, already a kind of hybrid.[323] So when Buffy returns from the dead, her body remains "coherent" while internally there is a destabilized identity. I will focus on these two examples of personal transformation conveyed as both mystical and monstrous instabilities in season 6's story lines with the characters of Buffy and Willow. This will serve to further tie in the cultural work of the monstrous as productive destabilizer.

Season 6 begins with Buffy clawing out of her grave, brought back from the dead by Willow's magics. Buffy had sacrificed herself months before to prevent a demon goddess from opening a portal that would have destroyed the borders between dimensions. The viewer is not privy to what Buffy experienced while dead but only to her existential destabilization in the aftermath. For the bulk of the season, we see Buffy dazed, detached, and grappling with something that looks and sounds like a *descent period*, in which a mystic must come to terms with the extraordinary noesis revealed to her while managing the disorientation of a "return" to ordinary reality.[324] In one of the

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[323] In *Gothika*, Victoria Nelson recounts the deep history of vampire stories with human-hybrid characters like Buffy and others in the Whedonverse—heroes and heroines "possessing something not of this world in his or her deepest biological nature." (130). See especially chapter six, "The Bright God Beckons."

[324] The large literature on mystical experience offers myriad interpretations and terms to for that moment of "realization." Here I use *noesis*, from William James's seminal *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*.

series' most powerful confessional monologues, Buffy reveals to Spike that what she

experienced in death was not hell, as her friends had assumed, but the opposite:

> Wherever I was—I was happy. At peace. I knew that everyone I cared
>
> about was all right. I knew it. Time didn't mean anything. Nothing had
>
> form, but I was still me, you know? And I was warm and I was loved and I
>
> was finished. Complete. I don't understand theology, or dimensions, any
>
> of it really, but I think I was in heaven. And now I'm not. I was torn out of
>
> there. Pulled out—by my friends. Everything here is hard and bright and
>
> violent. Everything I feel, everything I touch, this is hell. Just getting
>
> through the next moment and the one after that, knowing what I've lost. [325]

This scene, and particularly the mention of heaven, has the effect of making one

aware of the lack of any cohesive theology in the show. Though it deals with religion in a

number of ways, as I have mentioned, the entire series contains "[no] statement of

absolute meaning or divinity ... that is not ultimately opened to questioning and

subversion."[326] Religious beliefs either do not factor in or, if they are glancingly relayed,

they are regarded as opinions and are kept quite local. Buffy's classic quip on the topic of

religion—in fact the only statement she makes about it before this point in the series—is

brilliantly brief: "Note to self: Religion—Freaky."[327] The noetic certainty Buffy

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[325] "Afterlife" (S6 E3).

[326] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 1st ed., 128.

[327] "What's My Line, Part 1" (S2 E9). In season 7, episode 7, "Conversations with Dead People," Buffy is asked by a new vampire whether there is any evidence for God's existence. She replies, again with overt brevity, "Nothing solid." Santana and Erickson's exegesis of this response is relevant here: "Her two words—nothing and solid—express the two polarities around which concepts of God are based. This need for solidity in an answer to questions of indeterminate nature is characteristic of traditional interpretation—readings that presume stable meanings, origins, and autonomous existence" (*Religion and Popular Culture*, 2nd ed., 158). They cite the apophatic quality of the word "nothing" as the opposite of "solid," as an expression of "not only

experienced, characterized by a felt experience after her death experience, is, however,

consonant with mystical narratives from many traditions.

Buffy's stammered attempt to label her experience shows her tentatively trying on

a religious meaning, almost as a last-ditch effort. The general description she gives allows

viewers to insert their own interpretation. Absent any visual cues, it could be read as a

description of Christian heaven, Buddhist *shunyata* (emptiness), Buddhist/Hindu *samadhi*

(meditative absorption of which leaving the body is the final stage);[328] or other traditional

religious associations might be made. The writers could also be referring to the literature

on near-death experience.[329] Whedon keeps viewers on the fence. If Santana and

Erickson are correct, "the mythology of *Buffy* is more accurately anti-myth—not an

affirmation of [any] older systems of thought—but a continual challenging of them, not

stories that explain and comfort us with certainty, but stories that pull the ground out from

under our understanding."[330] Here we see another ambiguity leading to a fruitful kind of

destabilization.

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the show's ambivalence towards religion, but also…the importance of literal presence—the need for something solid that occupies space and can be located and framed by both character and viewers. It is the very tension between the two opposing words that the 'theology' of *Buffy the Vampire* Slayer and of American popular culture is located" (Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. 158–59). The positioning of tradition and the need for stable meanings as against the riding of the tension between these is of course evocative of the present epistemic reading.

[328] I suggest this equation based both on the short description Buffy gives, though it might also be an intentional reference to Asian religions. Whedon appears to have some investment in making Buddhist concepts, rituals, and figures symbolically meaningful for some characters. Riess points out a number of instances of inclusion of Buddhist images and iconography in both *Buffy* and *Angel*. See Riess, "Buffydharma." She also writes in *What Would Buffy Do?* of how the characters of Buffy and Angel seem to be configured as Bodhisattva figures.

[329] Studies of near death experiences include copious first-person accounts of subjects describing a feeling of being "torn out" of a nebulous place in which they felt happy and complete, and of their difficulties adjusting to ordinary reality afterward.

[330] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 1st ed., 134.

Buffy's existential difficulty is finally overcome not by relating her experience to any religion or spiritual path, but by an "Aha!" in the form of connection to those around her. Later in the season, her little sister, Dawn, fights bravely alongside her in a demon assault. Dawn possesses no super strength, but her show of raw vulnerability and bravery moves Buffy to find the will to keep battling as she suddenly experiences a deep yearning to be there to watch her sister grow up. In finding her way back to purpose and meaning via ordinary familial love and friendships, the ordinary is made extraordinary. Relationships are again salvific.

This metamodern soteriological representation appears again in the climactic episodes of season 6, in which Willow, overcome by grief at her girlfriend Tara's murder, uses "dark magics" to avenge Tara's killers. After stealing magic mojo from the life-energies of both humans and monster/mystic hybrids, Willow has an overwhelming noetic experience of awareness of all the forces and energies of the world as within herself. She also feels the cumulative pain of all beings. It is too much for her to bear. Buffy hopes this vision will make her feel compassion and bring her down from her megalomaniacal bender. But Willow's state of consciousness combined with the power of the grief fueling her has a destructive effect instead. She determines to end all suffering by ending the world. The utilization of supernatural powers here connotes a problematic kind of destabilization, to say the least. Willow is portrayed here as an addict, unable to control the temptation to use her power to play God. With her ability to access mystical states, supernatural Willow has at other times helped get the Scoobies out of dire situations, though not without unpredictable consequences.

At the end of this penultimate season, it is neither Willow's magics nor her

embodiment as an uberpowerful human-monster hybrid nor Buffy's death gnosis that saves the world. Instead, it takes a simple and powerfully human gesture from Willow's oldest friend Xander to bring Dark Willow's power down. The use of Xander as savior in this instance is noteworthy in that he is the only Scooby character who has neither supernatural power nor ontological uniqueness, a fact that causes him to struggle mightily with his ordinariness during the whole series. That the only power he can summon is also the only possible hope of salvation reveals an important aspect of the metamodern soteriology: Xander, approaching her as utterly human and vulnerable, invokes what we might call the power of ordinariness. Evoking early memories of their childhood friendship, he reminds Willow of her own sweet and lovable fragility. As for her powerful dark self, Xander says, he will love all versions of her, no matter how evil. This acceptance of both the light and the dark is portrayed as ultimately more metaphysically powerful and real, and finally succeeds in bringing back ordinary Willow.[331]

In Sunnydale, warfare with demons is de rigueur and quotidian, which is to say non-sacralized. At the same time, encounters with the monstrous serve up religious material in the form of ancient rites and practices evoked as problem-solving methods. These mystical episodes in *Buffy* present spiritual and supernatural visions as life-altering yet also normal, and assert a reality in which many overlapping realms, experiences, spiritual states, and secular perspectives can coexist. This contrasts with choosing one epistemic truth over another. Put differently, rather than pathologizing mystical visions and experiences, presuming the existence of a state of perfected morality as a "fix," or

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[331] Feminist readings of this scene abound, questioning the idea of Willow's powers as dangerous and needing to be curtailed. The final season shows her recover a balance, however, so that she can use her gift but not become overwhelmed by it.

questioning the veracity of personal truths and experiences, on *Buffy* the mysterious and the unexplained are respected as real and impactful in the everyday world. Also real, however, is the need for their thoughtful human management.

3.9. Metamodern Soteriologies

It might seem odd to draw soteriological conclusions from a television show whose hallmarks are its ambivalence toward religion and its ambiguous, intentionally fluctuating identity narratives. This chapter has argued that these elements elucidate a distinctly metamodern approach to spirituality, one inclusive of skepticism and a lack of easy answers, and reflecting a clear shift in what is considered salvific. In making warfare with demons a quotidian occurrence in Sunnydale, *Buffy* writers wield the performative power available in oscillating between secularism and spirituality. Although symbols of the religious/spiritual/mystical are never far away, as each episode includes religious material in the form of ancient rites and practices, these are invoked as any other tool might be: as both problem-causing and problem-solving.

And while some commentators see the appearance of crosses, holy water, and themes of spiritual warfare, salvation, and redemption in the show as privileging Christianity,[332] I would argue that these narrative elements are engaged for the purpose of rewriting them or at least opening them to a wider interpretation. For instance, Riess sees Buffy as a Bodhisattva rather than a Christlike figure: "Buffy is called on to live for

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[332] See, for example, Kellner, "*Buffy* as Spectacular Allegory," 16.

others, not just die for them."[333] And when the "big AHA!" occurs—a mystical or personal, life-changing glimpse of an ultimate reality—it is portrayed as open to interpretation through the lenses of a variety of traditions, including the secular. In any case, religious belief or belonging is itself never posed as a solution. Santana and Erickson write that with the creation of *Buffy*, Whedon presents arguably some of the most rich and varied discourses on religion in popular culture, though rarely mentioning God.[334] Clark adds that *Buffy* and *Angel* "told stories of a spiritual battle between good and evil with an almost complete disinterest in organized religion. On the rare occasions when references to religion surfaced ... they were approached with great ambivalence."[335]

If we look at what kinds of actions and impulses the show portrays as having the power to save the world, spiritual union with God, transcending the world, and other concepts of an ultimate metaphysical force are not among them. And by *save*, here we mean saving the world from apocalyptic destruction, not saving of individual souls—this may make a difference. Buffy's sense of being complete and at peace, if read as a consequence of her graduation to a Christian heaven, could be seen as the saving of her soul; but how do we interpret the fact that her peace cannot exist in her earthly existence, that once returned she is worse off than before her death? These questions are deliberately left unanswered and unanswerable.[336]

Sometimes what counts as salvation in *Buffy* is preserving the distinctions between the human and infernal realms. Glory (aka Glorificus), a deity from hell and the Big Bad of season 5, aims to dissolve the walls that separate realities, walls that keep her

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[333] Riess, *What Would Buffy Do?*, 11–14. Also see her "Buffydharma."
[334] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 1st ed., 123.
[335] Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens*, 47.
[336] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 2nd ed., 159.

from returning to her hell-home. Doing so would open the Hellmouth in perpetuity, unleashing all demons into the human realm. So, things are pretty serious. The blood of Buffy's sister, Dawn, is thought to be the only thing that will close the portal. But Buffy's blood will do in a pinch, and so she sacrifices herself. Broaddus opines that on *Buffy*, "self-sacrifice, rooted in love, is the only act to bring salvation."[337] Santana and Erickson make the observation, however, that even though a sort of redemption is offered, and Buffy sacrifices herself with a crucifix-shaped swan dive into the Hellmouth, the redemption or salvific moment there does not attempt to override or tidy up the difficulties nor dampen the pain of sacrifices and losses: "Buffy realizes that life is essentially irrational, painful and meaningless, but that there are reasons to go on living, there are things in the world to be appreciated and enjoyed."[338] The way this is attained, they write, is by breaking free of traditional or premodern good-versus-evil dualism. But this is also attained, as I have shown here, by breaking free of the constraints of modern and postmodern narrative conclusions.

What viewers are given for a kind of soteriological heuristic in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is structured roughly around four ideas:

1. Immanence: The conviction that what happens *in the world* is crucial. As Kearney has written, "Monsters show us that if our aims are celestial, our origins are terrestrial."[339] The "saving" happens down here, and its fruition is also meant to be experienced locally. Transformation takes place in an immanent register.

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[337] Broaddus, "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*."
[338] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 2nd ed., 159.
[339] Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters,* 4.

Ordinary reality occurs as a container for the *extra*ordinary; but also vice versa.[340]

2. Multiplicities: All individuals contain light and dark, as well as multiple shades of gray. People are complicated, love is complicated, the world is complicated, and taking personal responsibility is complicated. No romanticized version of any other telos is real—not for long, anyway. Monstrosity and its attendant instability and uncertainty are a virtual given. Your close friend may develop an addiction to power and become mega-evil for a time (Willow). Your boyfriend may lose his soul and turn on you (Angel), and the recovery of his soul may happen too late or may not be enough to keep you from having to make a painful decision for the greater good (Buffy). Self-interested actions and totally human emotions can turn anyone temporarily monstrous (nearly every character on the show does at some point). But the plot of one's life will inevitably shift, so one should keep having faith in one's temporarily monstrous friends, and by extension in humanity. Whichever characters are "good" at any given moment in the story must band together for the cause, remembering that new story lines will emerge that could render anyone capable of evil.

3. Community: Small acts and steadfast friendships help one stand up to forces intent on taking away one's individuality or free will. No superhero acting alone is going to save the day. Whedon has made that message clear: "We don't need

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[340] The ordinary as extraordinary, as a marker of contemporary spiritualities, is also discussed in Coats and Emerich, eds., *Practical Spiritualities in a Media Age*.

heroes so much as recognizing ourselves as heroes."[341] Additionally, as the show

conveys, we need to be heroes working together. Jeremy Ricketts summarizes,

"Whedon ... symbolically emphasizes that although the trials of contemporary life

often lead us to feel like the world is ending, if we can only connect, then our

friends will be there to fight the demons we all face, at least until the next

apocalypse."[342]

4. Love: The unsullied, simple innocence of love as felt experience, eminently

local and this-worldly, may be the only thing that transforms the monster in us, at

least for a time.

3.10. Conclusion

It has long been the task of popular culture to reflect our existential struggles with

contemporary life. It seems that we now ask our popular cultural forms to narratively

create situations of productive instability that reflect both personal and social "Aha!"

moments, including shifts in the way we approach the monstrous Other. Contemporary

popular culture now presents innumerable examples of ordinary people accessing special

knowledge and powers. Increasingly, more monstrous and supernatural figures are

portrayed in very human ways, engaging in ordinary activities, and not only posing

ethical conundrums but helping to solve them. Tracking the possible reasons for the

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[341] Qtd in Riess, *What Would Buffy Do?,* 11.
[342] Ricketts, "Varieties of Conversion," 24.

positive reception of these conjoint narratives as significant for our understanding of secular-spiritual perspectives on twenty-first-century transformation has been the purpose of this chapter. As the monstrous figure shifts from being packaged as merely an Other, with plots revolving around resolving the difficulty it represents to humans, to being positioned as a subject with its own ontological status, it reflects narratives more relevant to contemporary viewers.

If the message taken from the Whedonverse is about embracing fluid identity narratives and marshaling shifting plot lines toward affirming felt experience and personal transformation, it has traveled well. Beyond valencing monsters and their behaviors as a reflection or even an uncomfortable mirror of human complexities, the monstrous in *Buffy* highlights what is different about the metamodern cultural sensibility in which the youngest generations are being raised. As Prewitt-Davis has commented, "*Buffy* is indeed a profound show, but its profundity is always in how it tackled the quotidian nature of life's vicissitudes."[343] I have shown that the entanglement of this burgeoning sensibility with the contemporary American SBNR helps explain the huge popularity of monsters in secular contexts, such as on American television. Understanding the metamodern cultural turn helps make sense of the fact that the monster's liminality—its Otherness, challenge to the natural order of things, and resistance to easy classification—may increasingly be received as familiar and comforting, even the basis for an ethos of pluralism and an affective safety zone—not erasing difference but making room for the monstrous in all.

Popular culture and personal manifestations of the divine in everyday experience

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[343] Prewitt-Davis, "Passion of the Slayer."

have developed alongside one another, as Santana and Erickson note.[344] "The secular and the religious—although still often perceived as separate or antagonistic—participate in a relationship that is constantly creating and erasing meaning.… This Penelope-like creation and destruction of a web of meaning is at the heart of the American experience, aesthetic and spiritual."[345] Seven seasons of *Buffy* (and five of *Angel*) provide much evidence that this can in some cases be couched as a postmodern, nihilistic project, but ... sometimes, not. Postmodernism instantiated a way of thinking, being, and regarding the world that emphasized distance and removal. Metamodernism puts personal, felt truths back into the picture while reflecting a widened array of possible meanings.

One of metamodernism's main messages that I will reiterate is that there are not, nor need there be, hard lines separating the epistemes. Rather than eliding contemporary cultural sensibilities and artifacts as engaging with the current condition of fragmentation under one heading, we do better to define this "something else" that has arisen as deserving of its own explication. *Buffy* is significant as an early example of a widely viewed cultural form that refused to remain stuck in postmodernism's relativistic quicksand in the project of trying to understand the world and humans' role in it. There have been many other examples since.[346] In *About Religion*, scholar of religion and postmodernism Mark C. Taylor asks, "Can inevitable loss be embraced in a way that leads to creative engagement rather than the endless melancholy of interminable mourning?"[347] In a sense, metamodernism's normalization of fruitful destabilization and reclamation of affect—treated as I do here as aspects of a contemporary secular-spiritual

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[344] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 2nd ed., 17–18
[345] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 2nd ed., 19.
[346] See my blog *What Is Metamodern?* for more examples: www.whatismetamodern.com.
[347] Taylor, *About Religion*, 6.

response—addresses just this question, answering in the affirmative.

Chapter 4

Exploding the Serenity of the Moment: Russell Brand's Secular-Spiritual Performativity

I'm not one of those cultural trend experts ... but I do shout my mouth off about things

I don't know much about, and I'll tell you this, that we'll see a lot more references to

other realms, ethereal realms, other dimensions, as people become wholly dissatisfied

with the limitations of the achievements that are possible with these limited economic,

social, cultural systems, as celebrity reaches its sort of pinnacle, as capitalism

reaches its pinnacle…. I suppose what we are experiencing is what follows

postmodernity, what follows post-secularism, the reemergence of religion in the

social sphere—did it ever really go away? ... And the point where the only things that

products can do and culture can do is eat itself, truly, truly this is the end of days,

something from another dimension has to manifest itself here.

—Russell Brand

In the previous chapters I conveyed how certain religious and spiritual themes inform popular culture and vice versa, observing also that critical and fan engagements with these forms are made possible in part because of technological trends, which pop-

culture audiences also have a hand in forwarding. The popularization of *Buffy* studies, as has been noted, came as "a combination of new information technology, and a characteristically American creative process that allows the rescription of new monsters and mythology as well as the serious discussion of their role in our culture."[348] Moreover, Santana and Erickson liken internet-based discussion groups of shows, conventions, and other such forms of participation, and interpretation of these texts to "a type of 'Midrash'—the Jewish form of commenting on or interpreting scripture."[349] What is more typically Western or even American about these discussions, they feel, "is the emphasis on individual interpretation, but what is similar to Jewish interpretation is its willingness to incorporate and accept multiple interpretations. As opposed to the Greek/Christian tendency to search for unity, to gather various meanings into a *one*."[350]

This sort of description is apposite with my hermeneutics exploring the transformative capacity of text as dialectical, performative, and defiant of expected discursive limitations, including the discursive pull toward unifications. Perhaps we could also ask if the most attentive television viewers may perform a kind of *lectio divina.* Enjoying television content may approach a kind of contemplative practice for some for whom a show is read as a sacred text, given the textual meanings, feelings, and insights that emerge. (Or is this going too far? I will leave the question dangling. But perhaps this is the place to note that the word *fan* derives from the Latin *fanum*, which means

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[348] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture,* 1st ed., 115.

[349] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 2nd ed., 148; Clasquin-Johnson, "Towards a Metamodern Academic Study," quoting Spong, *Biblical Literalism* (5), also comments that textual literalism has been called the "Gentile Heresy," which is relevant in the context of the former's treatment of *paradox* as a mode of interpretation, one which, Clasquin-Johnson points out, metamodernism handles well.

[350] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, 2nd ed., 148.

temple.[351]) In any case, a *text* is here understood to include television, film, and also videotaped interviews and comedy specials, such as Russell Brand's *Messiah Complex*, each of which I discuss here, in the sense that with digitized viewing, these materials are "more firmly established as an observable text in themselves, as objects available for study; a show is no longer a transitory event in time and space ... projected into people's living rooms on Thursdays from 8 to 9 pm ... but is available at any time ... like a book."[352]

The increased comfort with multiple interpretations of meanings of such texts will now be extended to my next subject. In this chapter I will explore a similar analysis of another type of popular cultural performance—or, in the case of this subject, a multiplicity of performances—as encapsulated in the contemporary public figure of Russell Brand.

A comedian, actor, activist, author, former drug addict, Transcendental Meditation (TM) meditator and yoga practitioner, social activist, and one of an increasing number of outspokenly "spiritual" celebrities today, Brand is unique among contemporary comedians in unapologetically showcasing religious truth claims in both his stage act and his public persona. As such he represents a new kind of public figure whose popularity, I will contend here, reflects wide cultural acceptance of the central principles that underlie the spiritual but not religious identity.

What initially caught my attention about him was hearing Brand's unapologetic presentation of "Eastern" spiritual philosophies, whilst performing in nonspiritual settings. He talked openly about *truth*, *consciousness*, and *enlightenment* and somehow

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[351] Thanks go to Jeffrey Kripal for pointing out this derivation.
[352] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture,* 1st ed., 115.

managed to avoid being dismissed as a New Age "woo-woo."[353] How was he getting

away with it? Has contemporary Western secular culture become less hostile to certain

kinds of overt religious or spiritual claims? I believe that the answer is yes, and that the

epistemic situatedness of the SBNR holds a key to understanding why. In this chapter, I

unpack how Brand has created a public persona capable of simultaneously engaging the

ancient wisdom traditions of "the East," progressive social reform agendas, contemporary

"Western" spiritualities, and *anti*-religious, outrageously profane, secular themes—all the

while, as one fan commented, "doing a brilliant job keeping the average Joe off balance

intellectually."[354] I also want to explore why this type of celebrity persona as well as this

"intellectual unbalancing" would find a wide audience today.

I again apply the epistemic mapping lens to suggest that the current epistemic

position after postmodernism is one in which it is increasingly acknowledged that, as

Laderman wrote in 2009, "[t]he sacred is a robust, dynamic, shape-shifting force that now

more than ever is free-floating and disconnected from conventional anchors ... cut loose

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[353] I do not mean to suggest that reception of Russell Brand's public spirituality has not included some detractors. However, anecdotally speaking, from my own casual monitoring of comments on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, and receiving Google Alerts weekly for other top-hitting pieces of news about him for approximately three years, I feel confident saying that Brand's supporters and fans have outweighed his critics by increasing margins. As this dissertation goes "to press," I caught the following announcement about a radio piece on Brand from a web-based independent radio station in South Africa called Jacaranda FM: "Love him or hate him, he's on a one-man crusade to connect the world and make it a better place for all of us to live in…. The image of Russell Brand has changed over the years. From heroin-addicted lothario to husband of one of the biggest pop stars of our time, he is now a yoga-pants-wearing writer and speaker. Whichever Russell he may be, his message is very clear—kindness can change the world." The truth is that Brand has a number of messages, as I detail in this chapter. That this is the narrative catching the media's attention (and being propagated by it) in February 2018 interests me. In the interview clip Jacaranda FM reposts from his Facebook page, Brand talks about prayer and meditation and about doing acts of kindness for others—all in some sense interpretable either as religious acts or as "take what you will" secular-spirituality. See Painter, "Russell Brand."

[354] This quote was originally found in the comments section of a YouTube video of Russell Brand's *Messiah Complex* show, which has since been removed.

in the cultural sea of rock stars and casinos ... individuals can exhibit, indeed embody, contradictory forms of sacred life.… Simplistic and clean divisions separating sacred and secular no longer hold up in this complex cultural arena of interpenetrations and cross-fertilizations."[355]

Brand is an exemplar of several elements of the SBNR: a seeming lack of allegiance to any one tradition but an attraction to Asian spiritual practices and philosophical concepts as they have been appropriated by the West; a progressive spirituality that overlaps with social activism; a regarding of entertainment media as a kind of community of knowledge and a social tool; and, similar to what we saw in the *Elephant Journal*'s mission, an emphasis on fun and worldly enjoyments. Brand's spiritual and political activisms will be shown to be directly mediating one another through performance that includes a necessary (in Brand's view) dose of bawdy humor.

While I have neither read of nor seen him call himself *SBNR* nor *metamodern* per se, the epigraph above does show Brand acknowledging a cultural state of something that "follows postmodernity." His fluid identity narratives and utilization of several epistemic stances actively interplaying in his comedy—both the style and the content—therefore make him in certain ways an exemplar par excellence of a metamodern SBNR. The "strategic slipperiness," as Steven Ramey has called it,[356] of terms like *SBNR* and *Nones* would, in fact, appeal to someone like Brand who demonstrates that he feels comfortable with ambiguity. Such terms also reflect a nondual ontology with which he would likely be familiar, of *neti neti* or "not this, not that," as a monistic way of pointing to *all of this,*

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[355] Laderman, *Sacred Matters*, xvi.
[356] Ramey, "Notes from the Field."

all of that, as mentioned in chapter two. In other words, the both/and again rears its head out of the apophatic negation.

The perspective here, again, is a kind of peering between epistemes, as has been done in projects such as Hugh Urban's essay, "The Beast with Two Backs: Aleister Crowley, Sex Magic and the Exhaustion of Modernity," which situates Crowley at the time period between modernity and postmodernity. Borrowing from Nietzsche, Urban refers to the "exhaustion" of modernity—in the period of "disillusionment and disaster" of World War II.[357] In a similar sense, to understand Russell Brand's appeal is to understand something of the Western cultural response to postmodernity around the turn of the recent millennium. Like Crowley before him, Brand "offers an illuminating window" into the metamodern oscillation between interrogation and integration of modern and postmodern epistemic sensibilities. And like Crowley (and like most stand-up comedy for that matter), Brand does not seem to want to let audiences rest complacently, which makes the moments in which he draws the audience toward universalities of love and kindness particularly intriguing.

This chapter also places another kind of ambiguity on the table—that of how such identity categories tend to gloss topics of belief, practice, and fixed affiliations. As previously mentioned, the tendency as regards SBNR spiritualities is to be more comfortably centered not on the *beliefs* of a tradition but on the *practices*. Those practices should be understood as having been partly or largely dislodged from their home traditions. In short, beliefs may be loosely held, combined, essentialized, or even largely ignored; the traditions that are syncretically lenient (chiefly Vedanta/Hinduism,

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[357] Urban, "The Beast with Two Backs," 8.

Buddhism) and, as Obeyesekere would say, symbolically flexible, have tended to do well with SBNRs.

All that said, when Brand expounds upon Asian philosophical concepts, using phrases like "objective truth" and "something from another dimension," it becomes clear that he has indeed adopted some beliefs and that, whether he embraces them or not, his spirituality does have origins, albeit a detraditionalized sort. I will discuss his beliefs and sometime lack of adherence thereto as part of his performed dialectic: his trademark disruptive, overtly salacious comic material, next to the certain sort of spiritual profundities (arguably as deeply disruptive in a different sense) that he espouses publicly, alongside his political as well as social-spiritual activism. What makes this Brandian dialectic significant for the study of religion is how his persona illuminates even more conclusively the kind of performed soteriology I have drawn in the previous chapters as one that makes use of a sacred-transgressive found as much in the immanent as it is in the transcendent.

My discussion of Brand's performances also adds to the query as to what specific kinds of personal and cultural—and perhaps social/political—work metamodern art performs. The treatment here will not go into the more technical aspects of theories of humor and the art of comedy, such as various incongruity-and-resolution theories, simply because they are outside this author's field of expertise.[358] Such a study would

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[358] My treatment here only gestures at a few concepts basic to humor theory. I was privileged to participate in the International Society of Humor Studies annual conference in 2014, thereby receiving an introduction to the field, enough to get a sense for the many schools, theories, and levels of complexity the field encompasses. Elements of humor such as are categorized as narrative strategies, or *release/relief* theories focusing on the effect on the hearer, and other structural/functional modes of examining humor might indeed be a fruitful direction, both in terms of garnering a more thorough understanding of how someone as multivalent as Russell Brand utilizes such elements, and in terms of exploring functionally what I have referred to here

undoubtedly enrich the current effort, however, insofar as it inevitably presents the

necessity of taking a stance as to where meaning-making occurs (e.g., only in the text,

only in the subject's interiority, as a negotiation between the two, via audience

communalism, etc.).

In theorizing further about the mechanics of the metamodern both/and, with the

theme of invoking the shifting and crossing or blurring of boundaries, we will add the

crossing of a few more binaries to the list. Monster theory can be employed here in that it

deals in "strings of cultural moments, connected by a logic that always threatens to

shift."[359] Let us recall Cohen's *thesis five*, cited above, regarding borders and boundaries:

The monster "resists capture in the epistemological nets of the erudite…. [E]very monster

is in this way a double narrative, two living stories: one that describes how the monster

came to be and another, its testimony, detailing *what cultural use the monster serves.*"[360]

I will explore whether this can be directly related to millennial SBNR's several and fluid

identity narratives. I relate this specifically to Russell Brand in that the crossing of

boundaries, for millennials especially, also includes the new boundaries around fame: the

subverting of highbrow and lowbrow cultures, the shifting of the line between artist and

observer/audience, and the issue of fame that is based around the economy of likes (and

shares and followers and so forth). In short, new boundaries that arise from the new uses

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as the *mechanics* of the both/and. Michael Meany, Tom Clark and Liisi Laineste, in "Comedy,
Creativity, and Culture," argue for what they call a "metamodern perspective" as encapsulated in
the idea in humor theory that an "oscillation between incongruity and [its] resolution" is in force,
and that the issues that arise between various schools of humor theory may in some sense be "the
result of the uncritical acceptance of binary opposites" (12). While the addressing of binaries
would not qualify a theory to be considered metamodern in itself, the piece presents some
interesting avenues for further inquiry into the generative capacity of a third space.
[359] Cohen, "Monster Culture," 6.
[360] Cohen, "Monster Culture," 13 italics mine.

of new technologies I deal with here also present new blurrings and new ways to cross them.

4.1. "Exploding the Serenity of the Moment" as Metamodern Oscillation

For comedian Russell Brand, performing is a transgressive act. "Comedy is inherently transgressive," he said in an interview. "You've got to be ... exploding the serenity of the moment; exploding what people assume to be the truth in any given moment.... Comedy is constantly aware of the invisible reality that supports the reality within which we consensually live."[361] Taking this quote as a springboard, we can infer some things about what he is asserting as epistemologically possible through comedy—perhaps enabled by the role of the comedian—and about the work both perform within specific contemporary spiritual milieus.

A noteworthy element of his comedic style is that this deconstructive, metacritical mode of engaging his audience runs directly alongside a commitment to certain grand spiritual narratives and other modernist ideals of social progress. These might seem incompatible, even contradictory. As I have written in my second chapter, however, the beliefs articulated by many who align as SBNR show that their coexistence is not only tolerable but is itself a key component of the SBNR's soteriology.

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[361] 3News, "Extended Interview: Russell Brand."

It was shortly after I had written in an unpublished seminar paper that "metamodernism names an existential move out from the shadow of the postmodern ironic, one that allows for persons to (re)claim ownership of a breadth of human vicissitudes experientially felt to be real, and more so when they stand messily entangled together rather than tidily sorted out," that I recognized Russell Brand as an apt spokesperson for such a sentiment, embodying and utilizing both the breadth and the messy entanglement in the reading of contemporary individuals as intertwining "narrative paths" and bringing that self-reflexive understanding to audiences.

Brand has described some moments of personal awakening in interviews and has also mentioned personally transformative experiences when called to speak to audiences for the David Lynch Foundation to promote TM:

> What it felt to me was like the dissolution of my idea of my self.… I felt like separateness evaporated. I felt this tremendous sense of oneness. I find I'm quite an erratic thinker. Quite an adrenalized person. Through meditation, I felt this sort of beautiful serenity, and a selfless connection. My sort of tendency toward selfishness—I felt that kind of exposed as a superficial and pointless perspective to have. I felt a very relaxed sense of oneness. I felt love.… A constant sense of absolute love between all of us.[362]

> When asked in an interview to describe what meditative states have given him, he said, "A sense that you shouldn't worry too much about material things, about what everyone thinks of you, that we're all one—and to be beautiful to one another.… You

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[362] David Lynch Foundation. "Russell Brand Talks about Transcendental Meditation."

start to realise that all other forms of happiness are temporary, conditional, transient, illusory forms of happiness. Sexy happiness, druggy happiness, new jacket happiness."[363]

He has also described performing stand-up comedy using the language of spiritual experience:

My mind is aware, I'm the puppeteer of myself. When it's good, there is nothing, I'm just completely engaged in the moment, completely lost within it. I have the idea as if there are tendrils that hang from the heavens and when my head is clear I can cling to them and nothing happens, I don't have to think, it all just comes, I feel like a conduit, so that I'm free from my own mind…. When it's good it's like I'm not there.[364]

In the same interview, he conveys a sense of "the old me"—much less connected to acceptable social norms, even committed to thumbing his nose at them—that he has learned to work with:

I've made terrible mistakes; I'm attracted to subjects that are dark and slightly taboo, and I realize that you have to approach those things sensitively ... the audience has to have a tremendous amount of trust in you.… I didn't appreciate that when I was a ... drunker man.… I've done so much of that now that I'm kind of relaxed with an audience and I know my obligation.… I think everything is funny, when you get into the right frame of mind, like from a sort of Zen Buddhist perspective then it will all be funny ... it will never not be funny ... if you're approaching it with love.… And that's why I try to not be an absolute bastard in life because then I think, how can I go on stage and ask people to love me and

[363] Youngs, "Russell Brand Discusses the Dalai Lama."
[364] DrunkInAGolfCart, "Part 2."

laugh at me when I know I've been a right wanker in my private life? ... Now, I know that I do love them, and I know that what I'm saying is sincere, and I mean it, so it all sort of seems to work.[365]

This idea of an older, less evolved self reflects a kind of secularized usage of the New Age notion of a "Higher Self," a term that Brand uses liberally. He "secularizes" it by continually referring back to social and personal relationality as the locus of his efforts—again, not transcendence but immanence. Even the use of "Zen Buddhist perspective" is working in service of an ethic located in this world. This transforms a New Age idea into one more embraceable by the SBNR and other contemporary secular spiritualities. "All my shows have been written from doing it on stage in front of people, that's what I'm more comfortable with.… Ultimately ... if its genesis is with an audience then when it's realized it makes it magnificent, because it's always been in relationship with an audience."[366]

The excessiveness he emblemizes, the transgressive stance of exploding the serenity, may be thought of as an example of unroutinized behavior.[367] Perhaps due to

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[365] DrunkInAGolfCart, "Part 2."

[366] DrunkInAGolfCart, "Part 2."

[367] A comparison to Georges Bataille here would be apt. Bataille classified all routinized thought and activity as "project" by which he referred to the idea that individuals organize all manner of distractions into their lives that eventuate in the postponing of their existences; therefore, such routinizations should be avoided or undone via activities like laughter, carnival, eroticism, and exposure to the deeply disturbing. Elsewise, he writes, "…our outrage that existence should be reduced to the realm of project, [will] continue to resurface, continue to provoke a dissatisfaction with our attempts to evade what we are" (Bataille, *Inner Experience*, xi-xii). Bataille's contradictory and apophatic discursive exercises can be seen as an exemplification or perhaps a precursor to the type of epistemic between-state I cover here. One could speculate about this as a reason why interest in Bataille took off in the early-to-mid-2000s, during the beginnings of the metamodern turn. Bataille's discursive style, too, would appeal to the reader for whom an experience of feeling linguistically unmoored, or of apprehending one's own self as irreducible to explanation, is not something outrageous or even that unfamiliar as with recent generations influenced heavily by postmodernism.

this unroutinized quality, Brand seems in some interviews to have the effect of enlivening or energizing both the interview and interviewer. He can occur at times as a kind of trickster figure, conscious of his role, and at other times as an infectiously energetic personality. Larry King commented on Brand's surprising and unabashed authenticity, proclaiming at the end of their 2010 interview, "I never get personal in an interview but I want to say something. I have interviewed many types of people ... but you are the first truly insane person; and I love you for it.… You are totally you; there is nothing false about you; and yet you are in show business!"[368] King became visibly looser and even a bit giddy during this interview.

Social and political theorist/columnist James Poulos writes about meeting Brand in a rehearsal setting and describes Brand as "immensely pleasant and intimately, immediately human." He refers to what he calls Brand's "weird magic" while relating to crowds of strangers during a rehearsal as "stunningly heartwarming."[369]

Another instance of Brand's *undoing* effect on his interlocutor occurred when he was a guest on the interview show *Morning Joe*.[370] The three hosts of the show seemed to become increasingly altered by the presence of Brand, such that they began reacting to him as a kind of spectacle rather than a person. By the time he called them out about speaking about him in the third person as if he were "an extraterrestrial," the hosts had fairly well lost their professionalism. A clip from the show went viral as one host, Mika Brzezinski, lost her ability to speak cogently after a comment by Brand, who seemed to

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[368] Serena, "Russell Brand on Larry King Live- Full Interview."
[369] Poulos, "Russell Brand."
[370] People Over Politics, "Russell Brand."

be obligingly fulfilling the expected role of flirty sex symbol.[371] The other two hosts

fared only a little better. Midway through the eight-minute interview clip, one sees that

the hosts seem unable to compose themselves. They remark further on the persona of

Brand as if he were not there, even calling him "an experience." With a jovial snip,

"Well, thank you for your casual objectification," Brand broke the fourth wall. Here is a

bit of the written commentary from the poster of the clip in its description on YouTube:

> When the conversation began to break down, Brand asked, "Is this what you all
>
> do for a living?" before hijacking the broadcast to talk about [current news topics]
>
> Edward Snowden, the NSA spying scandal and Bradley [later Chelsea] Manning.
>
> "Look beyond the superficial, that's the problem with current affairs, you forget
>
> about what's important, you allow the agenda to be decided by superficial
>
> information.… [D]on't think about what I'm wearing, these things are redundant,
>
> superficial—don't be distracted," said Brand as Brzezinski physically cowered.[372]

The jolt of something fresh and immediate that Russell Brand seems to be able to

inject into interviews can apparently feel surprisingly disarming—in either a joy-inducing

or an anxiety-inducing sense. In either case, individuals seem to react to a quality as

simple as King stated: Brand's unwavering authenticity and honesty about who he is and

what he believes. This would be attractive to metamodern audiences. By contrast, as

someone whose background of drug addiction and various kinds of rebelliousness and

lawlessness is out on the surface, he occurs as something of an enigma to mainstream

media. Fans on social media consistently cite the refreshingly real side of Brand's

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[371] Sarah Ditum, however, calls out Brand for his appearance on *Morning Joe* for displaying what she calls "his penchant for lazy sexism." Ditum, "If Only Russell Brand."
[372] Ditum, "If Only Russell Brand."

celebrity—the willingness to say provocative things that seem to provide a sense of relief because they ring true. Here are a few comments on social media to that effect[373]:

> "When Russell Brand first came on the scene I just thought he was an attention grabbing gobshite and I had no time for him. I know different now I know some of his back story and what he has been through and I love him now. I agree with this message whole heartedly. It is so good to feel others waking up around me!!"

> "Brand is so fucking amazing. The man has no filter, completely speaks his mind, and is straight up hilarious AND enlightening."

> "Appalling how these anchors are reduced to inane and embarrassing children. Shameful how they are the ones delivering the news and commentary—no wonder the US is becoming a nation of fear-based citizens who can't think. Brand is brilliant—sharp, informed—and of course by wrapping him up in "otherness" it's a great excuse to denigrate him instead of focusing on his observations. At least someone out there in the public eye is telling the truth. Brand is authentic and transparent, which is why these pathetic anchors are squirming about like teenagers. We become nervous when we are exposed, when inauthenticity is exposed, which is what Brand does so beautifully and even elegantly in his own way. Wake up people!!!!"

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[373] These and subsequent comments in this section were garnered from social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube. I have omitted the commenter's names in favor of presenting their comments anonymously.

Also interesting here is the effect on the viewing public. Though it is likely that Brand is quite aware of his effect upon audiences and is deliberate about creating it (not a radical assumption, being that it is part and parcel of the job of comedian), it seems certain that the *Morning Joe* debacle was not planned as a stunt by either side. Nevertheless, Brand becomes a kind of public hero in the eyes of many for taking on the facade of mass news media, for bursting the bubble of expected niceties and for expressing his felt experience. I will address the mechanics of his comedy with reference to specific performances and how these are combined with his social activism in the next sections.

4.2. Spiritual Identities, Strategic Affective Shifts

4.2.1. Russell Brand on Stage with His Holiness the Dalai Lama

To illustrate his combining of epistemic positions, in this section I will describe two of Russell Brand's performances. The first occurred in June of 2012, when Brand was asked to act as the Dalai Lama's compere at a Manchester, U.K., event for youth called *Stand Up and Be the Change*. Brand was then someone who was perhaps still more widely associated with his addictions than with his spiritual views or practices, who was fired from the BBC in 2008 for pulling too many pranks, and who, moreover, does not practice as a Buddhist. I was curious to understand what may have made him the choice of His Holiness to share the stage at that event. The pairing, an interviewer suggested afterward, had raised many eyebrows. "Yes," Brand quipped, "eyebrows have shot

through the roof. Some people can't tell their eyebrows from their hairline any more. Some people's eyebrows are on the ceiling."[374]

The event was reported by several British news sources as a kind of curious success. Brand seemed to have done what he was asked, which was to "form a kind of wobbly rope bridge between the Dalai Lama and the young people of Manchester."[375] But he wasn't simply "on good behavior" that day. The comedian in fact did dare to have a little public fun with the Buddhist Nobel Laureate on the stage. Riding a characteristic edge of irreverent temerity—a sort of mannered-egotism-meets-self-effacing-irony—he asked the Dalai Lama whether, in watching from backstage as the comic warmed up the audience, he might have "picked up any spiritual tips?" Brand elicited another easy chortle from "the world's most influential spiritual figure"[376] when he speculated that His Holiness is so jolly because he might be sipping booze from his ubiquitous tea thermos.

Contrary to the idea that he might be a "reformed" comedian, watching Brand in subsequent gigs, such as a TV talk show host on *Brand X with Russell Brand* (2012–2013), as host of his YouTube web series *The Trews* (2014–2015 and again 2016–present), or on his comedy tour *Messiah Complex* (2013), one sees that he has not backed away a bit from his most bawdy material.

In recent years, Brand has himself become a certain sort of spiritual figure. He had stopped taking drugs in 2002, a point about which he bases some of his stand-up

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[374] 3News, "Extended Interview: Russell Brand."
[375] 3News, "Extended Interview: Russell Brand."
[376] The fourteenth Dalai Lama was ranked first on Watkins Books' list of "100 Most Spiritually Influential Living People" in 2013, where it is noted that *TIME Magazine* called him "the most influential person in the world." See "Watkins' Spiritual 100 Lift for 2013."

material and about which he has written fairly extensively.[377] He reportedly keeps up a daily yoga and meditation practice and has been practicing Transcendental Meditation specifically for many years. A spokesperson for the Dalai Lama says that Brand was chosen for this event as a figure who has clearly turned his life around through spiritual practice.

Even so, one has to wonder at the Dalai Lama's choice of Russell Brand over any number of young Buddhist or Vedanta practitioners who have made names for themselves by advocating a clean path. High-profile figures with more extensive spiritual pedigrees would seem to have made more sense, such as Noah Levine, founder of the Dharma Punx—a worldwide youth-centric movement supporting those who have eschewed criminal activity by embracing Buddhist practice. However, I argue that there is a much more illuminative story to be told about this choice.

The Dalai Lama's choice of a comedian whose act relies on "exploding the serenity of the moment" suggests an awareness by HHDL of two things—one of which he is doubtless conscious and the other perhaps not. The first, which I will explore elliptically here, is the historical relationship between transgression and spiritual transformation. The other is the idea that the SBNR is an increasingly dominant identity group, and Brand represents the shift toward inclusivity of both the light and dark of human behavior that SBNRs, as I argued in chapter two, exemplify. Brand's performances come during an epistemic shift from a polarization to an embrace of these qualities, and an embrace of human ambiguities overall, that has been quietly giving rise to cultural forms that bear the particular signature quality under discussion here. This

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[377] Russell Brand fundraises for the Focus 12 drug treatment program. In September 2017 his book, *Recovery: Freedom from Our Addictions*, was published.

burgeoning episteme creates new cultural forms palatable to both secular and spiritual populations precisely out of what we may in the end be able to refer to as the *excessive humanness* of the confluence of each.

This quality, this new *cultural flavor*, can help make the case that these two figures found themselves on the stage together not in spite of but directly due to Brand's reputation, his often transgressive material, and the manner in which he delivers it, in dialectical relation to the aforementioned metamodernist turn. The particular cultural force of Brand's "brand," which is a Shiva-like oscillation (meaning, Shiva the Hindu deity—about which I will expound presently) between at least two categories of excessive interests—spiritual-seeking and Dionysian engagement with samsara, or the worldly—is a specific characteristic that I am identifying as metamodern for my investigation here. I read this microcosmic meeting of the sacred and the profane—an event-as-text—as a metamodern encounter of the evolving relationship of two major (and overlapping) movers in the culture of contemporary western spirituality—the SBNR and the detraditionalization of Asian spiritual traditions by the West.

To summarize from previous chapters: The SBNR, caught between its attraction to the grand theories and universalisms of modernism (as inherited from the New Age) and its identifications with constructivist, relativistic worldviews of postmodernism, gives rise to a mash-up, if you will—not about adhering to one or the other's epistemological/ontological ground, but oscillating between them, thereby reconciling, in a sense, the bifurcations inherent in these epistemes. Rather, the metamodern epistemic move reflects the occurrence of multiple arenas and vectors, mined concurrently for their truths and meanings, generating a gestalt-like dynamic of the confluence of the

previously epistemologically exclusive arenas of religious, cultural, and individual experience or expression.

When asked in a 2012 interview as to his religious identity—"Are you a Buddhist?"—Brand was careful to demur, "No, I don't have any kind of theology or religion yet, I'm just learning all about it." However, from other interviews and autobiographical writings, one can identify Brand's belief system as a hybridized form of Advaita Vedanta and Westernized Tantra. "I do Transcendental Meditation, which is, I suppose, derived from Vedic or Ayurvedic principles, which is sort of Hindu principles. I also do a lot of Kundalini yoga."[378] It was apparent that his is a more-than-casual interest in the spiritual.

To clarify how I am employing *Westernized Tantra* here: I am borrowing from Kripal the notion that Tantra's transgressive arm was the primary form of "Hindu" philosophy appropriated in the 1950s and 1960s countercultural movements in the West. The mystical "East" of the 1960s, as propagated by figures like Ram Dass, Timothy Leary, and Alan Watts, Kripal writes, was "a Tantric East."[379]

Vedanta was and continues to be incorporated into the strands of new religious liberalism, along with Transcendentalism, Unitarianism, Theosophy, and Quakerism, that pushed American *spirituality* as against *religion* as a term out into the open, and therefore is significant here. Advaita Vedanta in particular is a central source of what Westerners construed as Hinduism, especially since the arrival in the United States of figures such as Swami Vivekananda, who appeared at the 1893 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, and Paramahansa Yogananda, who arrived a few decades later. Further, Advaita

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[378] Youngs, "Russell Brand Discusses."
[379] Kripal, *Esalen,* 127.

Vedanta made a large leap when the Vedanta Society was formed in the United States in 1894 and began drawing the attention of figures such as Aldous Huxley and Huston Smith.[380] The number of Western teachers as well as the number of adherents of various Indian philosophic practices began to increase in the 1960s when popular culture figures began visiting India—figures such as the Beatles, Donovan, and Mia Farrow, whose concurrent stays at the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi ashram in Rishikesh in 1968, it is generally agreed, contributed greatly to a rise in interest. This is not news.

However, the subsequent history of Westernized Vedanta has been less rigorously charted, which is unfortunate since the number of Westerners reached by a handful of teachers has seen another wave of significant growth in the last two decades. If one were to chart the influence of teachers like Muktananda, Shivananda, Sai Baba, Ramana Maharshi, Nisargadatta, Yogananda, and H.W.L. Poonja, to name some of the most active and widely known gurus who produced lineages of Western followers, one would see that by the mid-1990s the number of "dharma books" published or written by Western teachers increased and that many of these teachers offered satsang to increasingly packed houses, halls, even auditoriums.[381] I suggest that it is under the steam of Neo-Advaita, which gained an added boost in popularity in the West due to the satsang culture in the 1990s and 2000s, that a hybridized version of the two—Neo-Advaita, lumped in with the Westernized notions of Tantra—becomes an even more central

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[380] For a summary history of this time period, see Goldberg, *American Veda.*

[381] Phillip Lucas does make such a chart of several prominent Advaita Vedanta lineages in his essay "Non-Traditional Modern Advaita Gurus," 17. Other popular Western teachers with significant followings who use Advaita Vedanta concepts in a detraditionalized manner whose have been very influential on SBNR-type spiritualities in the United States include Ram Dass, Catherine Ingram, Gangaji, Andrew Cohen, Francis Lucille, Wayne Liquorman, Neale Donald Walsh, Ken Wilber, Rupert Spira, and, of course, Eckhart Tolle, the latter named by the *New York Times* in 2008 the most spiritually influential person in the United States.

component of what Westerners today refer to as Hinduism, or even as "Eastern spirituality."[382]

Russell Brand does not mention Advaita Vedanta and very rarely mentions Hinduism or Tantra by name (the quote above being a rare example), though Indian iconography has played a fairly prominent role in some areas of his public life. For his 2006 national stand-up comedy tour, *Shame*, the stage backdrop consisted of huge posters and statues of Hindu deities as well as decorative flower garlands hung in a characteristic manner of Hindu deities as ritually dressed. The interest in and desire to connect his own persona with Hindu religion or spirituality was clearly there. In 2009 during one of his trips to India, he proposed to former wife Katy Perry in Rajasthan. They later wed in a Hindu ceremony in the same location, with one source reporting that he "worship[ped] an idol of Lord Ganesha" during the ceremony. His wedding to his current wife, Laura Gallacher, included an India-themed party. Whether accurate or not, the article reporting on the event stated that "Brand, a practicing Hindu, continues to prove his fascination with India."[383] Brand's wax figure at Madame Tussauds in London is dressed in Indian flower garlands and has a vermilion *tilaka* between the eyebrows. One source reports that he chants the Hare Krishna mantra before going on stage. At a *kirtan* in London while introducing Bhakti yoga teacher and International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)–affiliated Radhanath Swami, Brand said that meeting the man a decade

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[382] Two important treatments of the influence of Advaita Vedanta in the West and its expansion via prominent India guru lineages are Lucas's "Non-Traditional Modern Advaita," as mentioned in my note 387, and Gleig and Williamson's *Homegrown Gurus.* Also, for more on the influence of satsang culture, especially in the 1990s in the United States, see Frisk, "The Satsang Network."

[383] Little India Desk, "Russell Brand Marries Again."

before had been a consciousness-altering experience and that he is "one of the great teachers I've met."[384]

Brand's positioning of himself in 2012 as a newcomer to religion, then, is noteworthy. His hedging with a thick set of qualifiers ("I suppose" and "sort of" in the above quote), may be inferred as an attempt to distance himself from any tradition-specific allegiance. Such a tendency is congruent with SBNR's typically fierce need to assert independence from organized religions, to locate their spiritualities as outside institutional control, to avoid committing monogamously to membership in a single spiritual path, and to practice a smorgasbord of contemplative techniques.

Not only does Brand himself attend Hari Krishna temples and do Transcendental Meditation on a regular basis. but he has become one of TM's most famous faces, along with other A-list comedians such as Jerry Seinfeld, Amy Schumer, and Ellen DeGeneres.[385] He has spoken publicly for the David Lynch Foundation, an organization that offers TM at no cost to so-called at-risk groups, such as prisoners, veterans, students, and the homeless. It might be said that Brand and TM are involved in a cultural conversation that locates them both as part of the culture of the SBNR with respect to their engagement with the secular elements within inherently spiritual milieus.

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[384] Kirtan London, "Radhanath Swami (introduced by Russell Brand) at Kirtan London Launch."
[385] A list of famous people who do TM exists on the Transcendental Meditation site, https://tmhome.com/experiences/famous-people-who-meditate/.

4.2.2. Affective Shifts Deployed to Disarm

Another part of Brand's appeal relates to his use of affective shifts during a given performance or interview. My overall sense is that he uses these to accommodate the variety of social classes that compose his audiences, and to mollify those from the secular West who have a typically uneasy relationship with spiritual authority figures.

Shifting his manner of discourse, he can be heard sliding between a lowbrow persona, palatable to the uninitiated, and a more learned one as can be heard in interviews or on his talk show, *Brand X with Russell Brand* and his YouTube news show, *The Trews*. The "lowbrow" affect effectively paints him, and his spiritual discoveries, as earnest, naive, and unthreatening. Hackles are less likely to be raised by a wide-eyed lad with poor grammar who comes across as if profound wisdom is an object he just stumbled across, like a shiny marble found in the gutter. Furthermore, he often uses the first-person when speaking on the spiritual, which functions as an important marker separating him from Western wannabe gurus. In other words, Brand effectively encodes himself as someone in a process of discovery, that is, as one of the common people. Brand's regular-Joe vernacular and confessional use of first person, respecting the credo of the SBNR that the "inner self" must be respected as the locus of epistemologic determinations, perform the function of allowing him to be seen as backing away from professing any real knowledge of, or commitment to, a particular tradition. Not interpreting him as proselytizing, the public then senses that they can let their guard down against truth claims that would surely rankle some.

In sum, Brand's childlike wondrousness, his dumbing-down of Vedanta into a set of simple maxims (whereas he shows in other moments that he is quite aware it is a

several-millennia-old body of complex philosophy), is an affectation that I have suggested functions to dispel any threat to his fans of spiritual self-importance.

When he makes these affective shifts, often abruptly, he may launch into a didactic mini-lecture on his spiritual worldview, in which he speaks not just of his own experience but of a "universal" path to "truth." In the following passage he answers with an earnest delivery to the interviewer's question by, in effect, keeping it personal. The questioner asks whether Brand might have recently begun to want to contribute something "bigger" through his work of late. He responded:

> I think I want to be really truthful now. For me what's happened is, when I was a little kid I felt troubled, and then I was a drug addict, and that was kind of troubling, then I got successful and had some money, and that's kind of, in a different way, troubling. And what my personal experience has been ... obviously I can only speak with any degree of integrity about my own experiences. But what I'm discovering ... [is] the only thing that's really important is my spirituality, my relationship with myself, a higher power, and the way I treat other people.[386]

This simplicity, the universality of its redemptive tone, then shifts in the following passage, in which he expresses his excitement about the insights his yoga practice has helped him to garner:

> What I think those things do ... it [*sic*] increases your awareness of other forms of reality, [of an] objective oneness of all things…. There is an ultimate frequency from which all other frequencies are derived; they know this in physics now;

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[386] 3News, "Extended Interview: Russell Brand."

they've always believed it in Vedic philosophy—that there is one unifying field of energy—the big bang in science ... what's that thing? Quantum entanglement ... everything is One ... and you can recognize that if you are prepared to temporarily annihilate your belief that you are [merely] a material individual. The senses of course are there for the necessary survival of the human vessel; but we are surviving now.… We've got everything we need. So we need, I think, [now] to be constantly aligning ourselves with the ultimate reality, with the ultimate oneness. Yoga helps me to do that, Transcendental Meditation helps me to do that, sex helps me to do it, [and] sometimes playing with my cat helps me to do that. It's not about an ethical or moral evaluation or judgment of which part of reality is better or higher … but just accepting that there's a higher reality of which we are all part.[387]

After somewhat lengthy and rapid-fire explanations of ultimate reality like this, he may then revert to the more well-recognized comedic material that made him famous. My assessment is that Brand shifts registers from the personal to the universal-philosophical-spiritual, back to the immanent, secular, human-centric, and then uses humor to diffuse the intensity level. To communicate a serious message, one strategy he employs is to put a joke at the end to make people relax when his cosmic material is getting more "out there." This is Brand, at first portraying the audience and then the response inside his own head: "'Oh my god, what's he talking about? He's going on about the cosmos and the universe!' ... 'You'd better say something about a dick or some balls or a bum hole or something!' And then I do, and they relax."[388]

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[387] 3News, "Extended Interview Russell Brand."
[388] 3News, "Extended Interview Russell Brand."

Let us focus on the switch between three of the affective registers here. The flip-flop from earnest and wide-eyed wonderment to connecting conceptually with existing spiritual-philosophic systems, back to sardonic humorist and social commentator, I hypothesize, may be employed to provide a sort of multitiered access to him. Fans have their pick of at least three Russell Brands: the simple, stripped-down everyman bloke, the universalist spiritual philosopher with a conscience, or the material-worldly comedian. If they don't prefer one of these, another will be forthcoming. Also, again, this shifting between personae assures his secular fans who might otherwise worry that he has been duped by a guru or has converted to a New Age cult that his caustic wit is as sharp as ever and he has not abandoned them, nor the world, nor his roles as progressive social change agitator and norm-transgressor.

SBNR fans may feel comforted not only by the levity brought through his comedic register, but by the fact that, even though he appears to have access to spiritual wisdom, he didn't become a world-denying ascetic, and neither, it is implied, must they. This is another example of metamodernization along the lines of Foster and Grosso, who seem to take pains to show ordinary human feelings and emotions as not opposed to the goal or path of spiritual fulfillment. Brand also does not dress or act the part of a guru, and he certainly does not himself seem to eschew sensory delights nor indicate that anyone else should, either.

Some may catch the fact that, in moving across and between these personae, he has sought to convey all of them as related. When asked by an interviewer whether he thinks his audience wants "yoga-practicing Russell Brand or ... Russell Brand, author of chaos," Brand replies, "They're all the same person, so they are getting all of it. When

I'm doing a show, I'm talking about sex and chaos and mayhem, but I'm looking at the relationship between [them] and divinity, and higher things, and there *is* a relationship."[389] In this sense, Brand is consciously bringing a performed aporia to his audiences.

What he is enabling might also be thought of as a form of interreligious dialogue, inclusive of secular perspectives. When enacting the meeting of the secular, the contemporary spiritual, and the ancient, the performance of these combined worldviews seems to occur in a manner that doesn't reduce or essentialize, nor pit them against one another, nor assert the supremacy of any one, but rather accounts for all of them.

I want to make the point that these bridges to the "wisdom traditions of the East"—Brand's as well as Foster's and Grosso's—are not just doctrinal or ideological. What I am trying to speak to here is the performance of these combinative worldviews to create something that doesn't reduce or essentialize, nor pit them against, nor assert the supremacy of any one, but rather accounts for all of them—again, a hallmark of the metamodern aesthetic. In so doing, I assert that the pairing of two seemingly diametrically opposed individuals, such as the Dalai Lama and Brand, begins to make a particular kind of sense when viewed from an SBNR soteriology that circumvents hard and fast bifurcations of good and bad, immanent and transcendent, savior and sinner, meaning and no-meaning. Rather, that range of *human vicissitudes* I mentioned earlier is welcomed and thereby draws the secular and spiritual audiences and their perspectives together. "The deal now," as I've written elsewhere, describing the subtext and tone of metamodernism, "is to celebrate expressions of human frailty and foible that are so

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[389] 3News, "Extended Interview Russell Brand."

authentic as to defy previous narratives of what's accepted, expected, or desirable" ...

"[and to revere] those instances in life ... in which humanity is revealed to be as quirky

and lovably strange, charmingly vile, base, *human*, as it is."[390] In short, the two figures

found themselves on stage together not in spite of but directly due to Brand's reputation,

his often-transgressive orientation, and the manner in which he delivers it.

4.2.3. Russell Brand's *Messiah Complex*

Another instance of Brand's combining of epistemic positions is his comedy show

Messiah Complex, which toured around the world in 2013 and 2014.[391] To fully grasp just

how replete with religious material this performance is from start to finish, one must

watch it. A promo for the show reads:

> *Messiah Complex* is a mental disorder where the sufferer thinks they might be the
>
> messiah. Did Jesus have it? What about Che Guevara, Gandhi, Malcolm X and
>
> Hitler? All these men have shaped our lives and influenced the way we think.
>
> Their images are used to represent ideas that often do not relate to them at all.
>
> Would Gandhi be into Apple? Would Che Guevara endorse Madonna? Would
>
> Jesus be into Christianity (wow man you're blowin' my mind!!). Should we even
>
> care what they think considering Gandhi slept with naked girls in his bed,
>
> Malcolm X dealt drugs and Che Guevara smelt funny? All great people are
>
> flawed, all of us, flawed people are capable of greatness and for every identifiable
>
> icon there is an anonymous mob of unrecognised bods doing all the admin and

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[390] Ceriello, "That's AWEsome!"
[391] Brand, *Messiah Complex.*

heavy lifting. This show looks at the importance of heroes in this age of atheistic disposability. Plus there's sex. Obviously.[392]

Here is a very brief outline of some of the show's contents: With the salvific figures of Gandhi, Che Guevara, Malcolm X, and Jesus assembled on stage as backdrop to him, Brand first describes each in admiring terms in a largely secular sense—for their humanity and strong progressive values—then "humanizes" them with a discussion of their flaws, described as necessary narratives that will likely make the audience uncomfortable. "Human heroes are incapable of fulfilling their roles of gods because they are flawed; they are not distilled divine qualities as gods are supposed to be, but flawed, even in the case of truly great men like Gandhi.… But we've got to deal with it."[393]

While taking each of his saintly subjects down several pegs, Brand also metacritically puts himself on a parallel level to them by making plenty of fun of his own messiah complex and disarming his own authority and appeal as a celebrity. Early on in the show, he asks rhetorically, "What causes someone to think they're Jesus?" with a mix of self-deprecation and as someone who has himself earnestly taken up the inquiry. The performance consistently oscillates between deference and disdain, mockery and sincerity, the juxtapositions both creating an "unsettling subversion"[394] that is itself nothing new in comedy but also somehow feels like a cogent social message when delivered by Brand. How?

A few more details of the performance may help: Brand enters and exits the stage to the background tune of Depeche Mode's "Personal Jesus," whose lyrics include:

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[392] ATG Tickets, "Shows."

[393] Brand, *Messiah Complex*.

[394] The phrase "the promise of unsettling subversion" is again borrowed from Nuzzo, "Foucault and the Enigma of the Monster."

Your own personal Jesus

Someone to hear your prayers

Someone who cares

Your own personal Jesus

Someone to hear your prayers

Someone who's there

Feeling unknown

And you're all alone

Flesh and bone

By the telephone

Lift up the receiver

I'll make you a believer

I will deliver

You know I'm a forgiver

Reach out and touch faith[395]

This opening, in asserting the audacious notion that he would position himself as an

embodied, sexualized version of a Christ figure that one can "reach out and touch," sets

up a self-reflexive performance of multivalency right out of the gate. Other daringly

blasphemous moments include Brand's pointing out the ludicrousness of portrayals of

Jesus himself wearing a cross around his neck—"Spoiler alert!"—again disarming

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[395] Martin Gore, lyricist, "Personal Jesus," performed by Depeche Mode, recorded May 1989, track 1 on Depeche Mode, *Violator*, Mute Records, 1990.

religion for secular audiences and making them more receptive to hearing about his quite earnest feelings for the spiritual heroes he has called upon and blatantly spiritual beliefs of his own, such as when he asserts, "We already have divine creative energy within us." Or when he asks, "What can unify us?"[396] But the major message of this performance is that, as all of the world's religious creeds have tried to say, the solution for our social ills, secular or religious, may just come down to "being nice." By the show's end, he has made several jokes using the double entendre of a "second coming," finally finishing his act in the position of a crucifix.

4.2.4. Fan Responses to *Messiah Complex* and to Brand

It is interesting though perhaps not unsurprising to note that a significant number of response comments to *Messiah Complex* and to other videos posted by fans on YouTube posit Brand, himself, as a certain type of savior. Here are a few comments, listed here anonymously, as found on YouTube and Facebook (all grammatical and spelling errors are in the original):

> "Thank god 'someone famous' just gets it! He can spread the word of truth"
>
> "I'm excited someone like him is talking about this. I'm ready for the shift. We've been waiting a long time for this."
>
> "I absolutely love his wisdom."

This commenter maps the Christ mythology onto Brand directly:

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[396] Brand, *Messiah Complex*.

Many people have tried to get on the centre stage to put these ideas forwards. I don't think Russell ever truly thought it would be him that would be at the centre of the media attention. He has used his position wisely and turned many a planned public character assassination to his advantage. Jesus had many followers and he stood on a hill and preached to a multitude. The media mountain that Russell Brand stands on can be measured in incomprehensible volumes of views on YouTube, multinational television channels, the radio, the stage. This [exceeds] the following that Jesus apparently had in his living years. This is too often played down or ignored. We fail to see when something of significance is happening too often in our age. Strange things are happening all around us yet they are brushed off. We are at a point of intense psychological revelation. He is one of many who are trying to help people understand our predicament. For people who are strongly attached to the current paradigm this is a scary time.... Jesus said the same in other words, Russell Brand is great and Jesus [is] also ... showing us the true Love without interest at all…. [A] long long time ago we could have avoided the greed that is the real enemy inside us giving way to the destruction of the planet, destruction of the family society and people of all nations. Economy is a great science and it's [*sic*] technology today too ... but is not showing the aspect [that] who's driving the economy is possessed by a spirit of greed, ambition and selfishness. Jesus [presented] us of these ways of being and now we see the results, Russell sees the same too.... [W]ill he give his life for this purpose I wonder.

Many commenters, such as this one, connect with Brand's "Eastern philosophy":

This is basically the core teachings of Eastern philosophy.… We exist as a constant but we change invariably. Eastern philosophy may sound contradictory at first but then it explains perfectly the complexities that we cannot explain with linear logic. Yin and Yang is the embodiment of everything in the universe, and that is the truth. And lastly with Yin and Yang comes the law of Oneness and unity.

4.3. A (Meta)Modern-Day Shiva: Russell Brand's Transgressive Shape-Shifting

Russell Brand performs both as a neo-Hindu, spiritual common-man philosopher and as a secular actor. Brand's statement about being new to religion demonstrates the sense that spiritualities of the SBNR (following the New Age before them) may center not on the beliefs of a tradition but on contemplative practices, as verified by individual experience. Often those practices have been partially or wholly dislodged from their home traditions. Beliefs may be loosely held, combined, essentialized, or even largely ignored; the traditions that tolerate that (read: "Eastern" ones) as I have noted above, have tended to do well with SBNRs.[397] In this section I will discuss how the performance of Brand helps one understand how the Western appropriation of Indian philosophic schools of

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[397] In *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity,* Paul Heelas wrote that the importance of the experiential is one of four controlling narratives in the New Age. "The historical development of the NA has seen a shift in emphasis from writing and reading to practising spiritual disciplines" (47).

Vedanta and Tantra has helped shape and form the spiritual but not religious, and how popular culture has both *reflected* this transference and also has had its hand in *shaping* it.

Vedic principles would be familiar to an SBNR population through the amalgamated "Eastern religions" concept that has come to the West and has been especially visible in recent decades through Neo-Advaita Vedanta and Westernized Buddhism, as referred to here. Though Brand does not typically name his specific religious influences, other than TM (which itself has managed to dissociate from its originating tradition of Vedanta), his spiritual philosophies bear an unmistakable resemblance to perennial philosophies and transpersonal psychology principles that found their origins in, and did plenty of intermixing with, Western Hinduisms and Buddhisms.[398]

Let us now turn to Tantra, or Neo-Tantra, that other Vedic-originating and Western-modified tradition, familiar since having woven its way through the 1960s counterculture the Beat Generation, and the aforementioned cultural influencers prior. I have commented here about the attraction to transgression, to certain kinds of excess, and to cultural forms and figures that showcase a means of inhabiting both the light and dark as coming alive again in the current cultural sensibility unfolding. Theory-wise, metamodernism may be uniquely able to explain the emphasis on a simultaneity of light and dark vectors, held or contained

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[398] Jorge Ferrer would likely identify Brand as part of what he calls "first-wave Transpersonalism" which he locates in the 1980s and 1990s and is typified by preferences for universal spirituality over organized religions; influence of Asian religious philosophies, and evolutionary mysticism leading to nondual realizations. Brand also has characteristics of Ferrer's "second-wave Transpersonalism" such as its "emphasis on the embodied, relational, socially engaged, and pluralistic." Ferrer, "Transpersonal Psychology and the SBNRM."

in single individuals. This is the relationship between neo-Tantra and metamodernism. Now I will turn the causal focus the other direction to try to shed more light on Brand's forwarding of the popularization of Asian religious and spiritual traditions.

Given Brand's spiritual proclivities and the way he weaves them into his performances—so marked by a welcoming of human contradictions and excesses—the parallels to Vedic originating philosophic traditions are rather difficult to avoid. Without mentioning Tantra, he has declared "puerility, scatology and revulsion are the gelignite for consciousness. That's where you explode ideas and with that new terrain, like a forest fire, new things can grow."[399] With comments like that, it is not hard to go as far as to say that Brand makes the spiritual mythos of Shiva, and hence Vedantic and Tantric traditions, available to the West in a somewhat new manner. He can himself, without difficulty, be read as a living demonstration of Shiva. He performs the possibility of access to a multiplicity of identity narratives, one that is inclusive of human foible and Bataillian carnival/festival and disruption ("There's [*sic*] a lot of ideas I want to disrupt"[400]), that promises fruitful instabilities and unsettling subversions but also indicates how a place is made for the concern for community, individual felt experience, and social responsibility.

Brand seems to identify, not only personally but professionally, with the label *transgressive*: "Comedy is dangerous; that's why I like comedy; it's

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[399] Brand, *Brand: A Second Coming*.
[400] 3News, "Extended Interview: Russell Brand."

subversive."[401] To revisit an earlier quote from Brand, he regards comedy as an "inherently transgressive" medium, whose purpose is "exploding the serenity of the moment; exploding what people assume to be the truth in any given moment." And then, "Comedy is constantly aware of the invisible reality that supports the reality within which we consensually live." In this quote he uses a metacritical lens—one that combines a basic postmodern tenet of reading the world as text with the Neo-Advaitan/Buddhist concepts of the samsaric realm and of a witness consciousness—to examine the idea of an invisible reality and the idea that not only can one witness from a distance its machinations but the imperative to then engage in exploding assumptions about ordinary reality.

As part of Hinduism's triune set of major deities, along with Brahma and Vishnu, Shiva in all his polyvalence is perhaps the most overt among them: Shiva as destroyer, as a yogi—an ascetic—and also as lover. Crudely speaking, the Shiva of Brahmin philosophy is an ascetic while the Shiva of the Tantric cults is sexualized; but he appears often in his dual aspect—this dual nature being the operative point. The essential teaching of the multiple manifestations of Shiva, Wendy Doniger (writing as Doniger O'Flaherty) writes, is that *no single myth* contains the key to understanding this god's multiple forms, manifestations, and varied relationships to the cosmos.

According to Doniger, the message in the literature dating back to the *Puranas* that explains the paradoxical, transgressive, worldly-mischievous yet ultimately transcendent character of Shiva, is this: "The apparent contradictions in

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[401] Brand, *Brand: A Second Coming*.

[Shiva's] individual variants are merely *incomplete views of the whole.*"[402] The figure of Shiva "brings to a head the extreme and therefore least reconcilable aspects of the oppositions which, although they may be resolvable in various ways on the divine level, are almost never reconciled on the human level."[403] The emergence of metamodernism and the SBNR are the contexts in which such seemingly fundamental divisions are regarded as increasingly *more* reconcilable, and figures that inhabit such human contradictions are seen as perhaps not only more palatable but even more necessary.

Doniger explains that in the Vedic mentality, the assumption behind the mythos was of an *equivalence of opposites*. That is, the connecting point from human to god is not through a specific or consistent character trait nor a positive-negative continuum or vector, wherein a figure is godlike in her goodness or demon-like in her badness; but rather one is compelled to relate to an elemental quality or force like a god presents in all of its valences at once.[404] Shiva's asceticism and eroticism (*tapas* and *kama*) are not diametrically opposed in a moralistic sense, for example. They are seen as forms of heat.[405] Furthermore, *lust*, as a force or quality, Doniger explains, is regarded both as the cause of something positive, a generative force, or, as an enemy, destroying and causing havoc in multiple ways. Neither the "good" nor the "bad" interpretation is meant to win out over the other. This typification ushers in a very natural comparison of Brand to Shiva. That Shiva himself doesn't change ultimately, while different aspects of his eternal

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[402] O'Flaherty, *Siva,* 3, italics mine.
[403] O'Flaherty, *Siva*, 36.
[404] O'Flaherty, *Siva*, 33–35.
[405] O'Flaherty, *Siva*, 35.

nature manifest, is, for all intents and purposes, Russell Brand's spiritual belief as well as his performance and his message.

In sum, though he does not himself practice as a Shaivite per se, in the end, Brand's worldly excesses seem to balance with the excess of surrender. He might be styling his own soteriology with self-conscious irony—lampooning the very idea of himself as savior while performing/creating the very possibility, as seen in his *Messiah Complex*.

4.4. The Politics of Vulnerability and Sustained Questioning

In previous chapters, I have mentioned television shows that toggle between playfully irreverent and thoughtful or sincere treatments of religion and suggested that the particular appeal of this combination of secular and spiritual comes with the rise of the SBNR. I have also alluded to how Brand makes frequent use of these connections. Ultimately, his multivalent persona makes sense for audiences because it draws from the sociocultural soil in which the current SBNR has developed, which I have been referring to here historiologically and epistemically as metamodern.

Certainly, he is not the only comedian to do so. But there is a marked difference between his metamodern content and approach and that of other comedians, whose performances of commentary on religion might be seen as exemplary of other epistemic sensibilities. Comedy like Bill Maher's, for example, can be considered more postmodern in that the flavor of the irony is divisive and jokes are generally at someone else's expense. They are meant to make one side look hopelessly silly against the obvious

superiority of the other (Maher's) side. By contrast, Brand seems to see himself as a bridge-builder, often consciously using the comedic moments to forge connection between sides and to angle back to his own ethical and spiritual beliefs in kindness and unity. Most important for this discussion is that Brand is able to shift from smart-ass to sincere, seemingly without losing either his secular or his spiritual audience.

Brand was asked by an interviewer, "Why do you think we love people so much who make us laugh?" His answer: "Laughter is a response to fear and I think we're all afraid of the knowledge that one day we're going to die, and when you laugh temporarily you are relieved and unburdened from the knowledge of the inevitability of death, and you are united by something [with others].… It's unifying, ain't it? It's animal and primal and beautiful."[406] Comedy, he continues, is "about fallibility and failure and weakness and … about vulnerability perhaps more than anything else."[407] Stand-up is his greatest delight because it is "immediate and it's untrammeled."[408] This seems intended as a calculated approach to carving a space between—between fears of death and of life, between fear and relief from fear, between the primal and the poetic, the secular and the sacred, and perhaps even between the *little-s self* and the *Higher Self*.

Michael Carden has written about the effect of comedic approaches to religion, such as camp, which attempt "a curious admixture of reverence and ridicule"[409] in terms of the use of parodic sacred imagery and ritual and the importance of laughter at one's own incongruities. Camp works by "enabling a temporary detachment from that with which one has fervent involvement 'so that only ... after the event, are we struck by the

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[406] DrunkInAGolfCart, "Part 1."
[407] DrunkInAGolfCart, "Part 1."
[408] DrunkInAGolfCart, "Part 1."
[409] Carden, as discussed in Hume and McPhillips, "Introduction," xix.

emotional and moral implications.'"[410] Camp, Carden feels, performs at least two kinds

of work: one, as "a creatively transformative strategy for sustaining identity positively in

the face of social proscription" (thereby a kind of application of postmodern identity

theory) and two, "as cultural practices, camp and religion/quasi-religion have elements in

common and share some characteristic traits.... Both employ incongruous

juxtaposition."[411] Also, this mode of temporary detachment "facilitates 'the re-imagining

of the material world into ways and forms which transform and comment upon the

original.'"[412]

In Carden's essay he refers to the usages of camp by homosexuals to comment

upon queer identities. I am borrowing this idea to ask if the "admixture of reverence and

ridicule" in comedy like Russell Brand's may also act as a means of sustaining other sorts

of liminal identities and whether what is occurring for audiences may be a kind of fruitful

decentering, an opening to a between space that is analogous to the mystic's decentered

state in the sense I have drawn the analogy in chapter two.

Carden suggests that comedy and religion can work as a pair. Since "the 'camp'

moment of playful ironic laughter relies on an underlying fervent involvement, religion is

constantly invested with 'camp' potency." I noted this application to Russell Brand in the

sense that he plays with religious themes as something to laugh at and as something

through which to derive meanings about one's ultimate sense of reality and place in it and

to break apart boundaries that would separate these acts. Carden cites Mark Jordan on

how the potency of the confluence of comedy and religion is grounded in the

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[410] Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," 28, qtd in Carden, "Enchanting Camp," 82.
[411] Carden, "Enchanting Camp," 82.
[412] Bronski, *Culture Clash,* 42, qtd in Carden, "Enchanting Camp," 82.

"simultaneity, the inseparability of reverence and ridicule ... lifting the curtain once again to giggle—and then dropping it solemnly back into place."[413]

James Brassett comments on the ability of certain comedians, including Brand, to bridge the comedic and political. He describes the creation of an empowered third space via negotiations of ambiguities. Brassett writes that "comedy can question and bring to light important dimensions of the everyday politics of market life," with what he calls "the subversive understanding of market subjectivity: in terms of emotion, absurdity, and tragedy."[414] Some forms of comedy facilitate the creation of a critical distance, allowing for subjectivity that he sees as similar to political acts of resistance in that they both address ambiguities related to power and agencies and have the potential to undo these constraints.

Summarizing Brand's comedy, Brassett writes: "In his routines, Brand has turned to a sustained questioning of the state form of politics and its role in upholding structures of domination and inequality on a global scale."[415] We might also note that his delivery of spiritual beliefs amounts to a sustained questioning of social-constructionism and its role defining the contemporary concept of self as "limited." Similar to how he shares his spiritual agenda, "he locates his critique in terms of the imagined narrative of politics, the media discourses that present stories about 'heroes and villains' which inculcate fear and secure support for the system."[416] This can be translated without much stretch into the argument that he mounts for how awareness of an "ultimate reality" is kept at bay, in part, by social forces that stand to gain from disempowered populations. Limiting political

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[413] Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom,* 182, qtd in Carden, "Enchanting Camp," 82–83.
[414] Brassett, "British Comedy," 170.
[415] Brassett, "British Comedy," 180.
[416] Brassett, "British Comedy," 180.

forces that he makes fun of, say, for example, conservatives' fear of immigrants, are made implicitly analogous to fear of a broader, more inclusive awareness of universalized spiritual body—for those viewers who should wish to consider this level of commentary. It is not necessary that an audience member buy into both levels of critique, though, to participate in his exposition.

In the end it seems that Brand's performance works almost as a secular spirituality itself, creating an option for nonreligious audiences to sign on to his spiritual universalism or his progressive political positioning, either or both as potentially salvific. In any case, Brand is an example of an entertainer who understands "the role of the media in performing a political centre."[417]

In 2012 Brand was reaching into the arena of political commentary with his talk show *Brand X with Russell Brand*. In the second season of the show, a segment known as "Totally Unacceptable Opinion" was added, in which representatives of controversial extremist organizations, such as the Westboro Baptist Church, were invited to engage not only with him but with people at whom the hate group aimed its hatred. In the case of Westboro Baptist Church, a group of homosexual men were invited to the stage. Here Brand performed a rather unique social feat as a mediator of extreme divisiveness, engaging the group representatives with respect, though also challenging their positions—in effect modeling how radical disagreement might not have to result in unpleasantness for sensationalist purposes.[418] This aligns with my notion that metamodernism can act as a kind of interreligious dialogue in that it negotiates between

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[417] Brassett, "British Comedy," 186.
[418] Brand, "Official Video: Russell Brand Interviews Westboro Baptist Church."

the secular, the spiritual, and the religious. In this instance we see it in a literal sense as well as a metaphorical one.

Overall, writes Brassett, Brand's humor draws on his "ability to draw together—and subvert—apparently separate issues, [giving] it an interesting reflexive function ... [an] affective depth ... a reflection on alternative political narratives, raising awareness for socialism and spiritual growth" and an "involving" dimension of engaging, and posing an answer, to the question of resistance.[419] Comedy may act as a means of "denaturalizing resistance" away from the tropes of opposing or overcoming. So comedic interventions of the political sort may both allow for critical distance and engage the imaginal, the relational. Brassett feels that Brand's performance is an attempt at inclusion of the upcoming generation in the critiquing and reshaping of society,[420] acknowledging the desire and even the felt sense of right and/or obligation for all sides or perspectives to have their seat at the table.

What about Brand's spiritual interventions (or better, invitations)? His ideas for progressive social reform seem themselves to be undergirded both by a Bataillian notion of "excessive expenditure" of laughter and spectacle, and by his metaphysics—one secular/constructivist, one spiritual/universalist—together, a kind of contemporary nonduality. I would submit that Brand's discursive choices also serve to call up a sustained questioning of psychosocial and metaphysical constructs, contributing to viewers' own inquiries into the nature of the self and of reality. This is particularly apparent in his performances where this-worldly meets otherworldly and micro- and macrolevel deconstructions and reconstructions combine and collide. As I have tried to

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[419] Brassett, "British Comedy," 186.
[420] Brassett, "British Comedy," 179.

convey here, it is his seamless shifting from bawdy humorist to devotee to social activist through which Brand instantiates the notion that a narrative of sincere spirituality can exist alongside sociopolitical and comedic interventions. The belief that "we are all one" and the quest for personal spiritual awakening here are not seen as negating the call for revolution but rather perhaps as an invitation to engage on any or all projects, according to one's calling.

4.5. Spiritual Celebrities' Outings, Performatism, and the Making of "an Odd Kind of Sense"

In this section I would like to try to understand the support Brand receives for his public spirituality as contrasted with the reception of Shirley MacLaine's public admissions of her spiritual visions and beliefs in the 1980s. Both actors and authors who have spoken freely about their universalist perennialist beliefs in public, these two make for a compelling juxtaposition—New Age to SBNR, pre- to post-social media. MacLaine has been a topic of analysis by scholars of religion, anthropology, and communications, who have seen her as a representative of the New Age.[421] I believe this will be the first scholarly reading to epistemically situate the New Age side of her career. MacLaine sometimes had a challenging time with the press and with some talk show hosts when she shared her spiritual awakening and her views with the public. Was she lambasted for her views themselves or for her manner of sharing her views? One suspects, given the

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[421] See respectively Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*; Hess, *Science in the New Age*; and Haig, "Meta-Modern Culture."

postmodern time period, some of both. I have examined each of their receptions and circumstances to ask whether one can conclude that the general acceptance of celebrities' religiosity and spirituality has shifted with the metamodern turn.

When MacLaine was invited onto talk shows in the postmodern 1980s, the hosts were as eager to hear about her acting career as well as her New Age beliefs and claims of paranormal or supernatural experiences. These were brought up sometimes politely, but the tone in the background of these earlier appearances included a sneer of humoring the "woo-woo" lady. She was understood as legitimate fodder for the secular world's scorn and derision. The resultant tone also conveyed that while MacLaine was in step with the New Age, the New Age was out of step with postmodernity, part of which was an active distancing from truth claims and ideas of transcendence.

I mentioned above Russell Brand's apparent skill at disarming secular audiences. Another manner in which this may be achieved is in playing "himself" or a close facsimile, in some of his movies. For example, he plays the "narcissistic rock star with a heart" in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* and reprises the role in *Get Him to the Greek*. In parodying himself he speaks the language of self-reflexivity, parody, irony. MacLaine has also played versions of herself as a New Age enthusiast. In *Defending Your Life* (1991), for example, she plays a character working in the "past lives pavilion" in the afterlife. Her character of Kate Westbourne, in the 2001 film *These Old Broads*, is a New Age enthusiast. The latter film gives a more winking-ironic and self-referential portrayal that would be consonant with a postmodern sensibility.

Building from these observations, as well as my earlier statements about Brand's use of discursive shifts, here is what I suggest happened for Shirley MacLaine in terms of public reception of her spirituality to make her seem the more polarizing of the two: The narrative about the ontological shift she undertook, her understanding about the nature of reality, and the persona she took on as spiritual sage squares as New Age modernist and asked too much of 1980s secular audiences seeking entertainment, that decade being the nexus of cultural and intellectual interest in postmodernism in the United States and Western Europe. To wit: she portrayed a sudden awareness that brought on a fundamental change to a higher level of being as well as awareness of another life in which she reports being the brother of an ancient entity channeled by JZ Knight. Her natural alliance with the New Age's inherent emphasis on the light, the positive, the spiritually pure and transcendent that I covered in chapter two, pushed this polarity further. Also, certain strains of orientalism of the time would have included some measure of skepticism about a contemporary Western white person—an entertainer, no less—having access to spiritual wisdom. Historically, "the wisdom of the East" has been much more acceptable in the eyes of Westerners when it came in the form of an Asian person. (Such orientalism continues to be part of contemporary spiritualities, such as the SBNR. However, one notes that Russell Brand has come up in a time period when many more teachers of Eastern spirituality are Western and white.)

Moreover, MacLaine's narrative of spiritual realization was of a self split into parts. As Hanegraaff points out, the New Age utilized the split as one of its central tropes: MacLaine's "real self", channeled entity Seth's "multidimensional self," and Starhawk's

"deep self," all fairly equivalent versions, each perform this same split.[422] MacLaine's view is that the "real self" is whole and complete, as opposed to the ordinary version of self that most people go through life believing is all there is. This hybrid of soteriologies combines the ideal of a higher self supporting the Christian belief in an omnipotent, perfect being, with the Vedantic belief in an Atman/Brahman. Additionally, the use of *life as school* and *enlightenment as graduation* as controlling metaphors (that is, if one learns well one can avoid future incarnations) can also be seen as an extension of Vedanta and Buddhist philosophies. The Christian narrative, also, requires that the ordinary self be flawed and incomplete and in need of intervention by a higher source to reach a state of completion. So these stances are interwoven in New Age soteriology.

Regarding the split self, Hess comments on MacLaine's use of what he calls the *negative Other* or the *skeptical Other,* situated as oppositional to the New Age ontological claims she makes. In her autobiographical books and movies, "Shirley" is both the self having the New Age experiences and realizations, and at other times, the person evaluating her experiences. She is by turns the incredulous experiencer, and the a rational-minded skeptic, though never at the same time. This second self addresses the expectations of the reader/viewer who may wonder if MacLaine might be unable to evaluate the audacity of her claims by normally accepted means (a nice way of insinuating "mental problems"). MacLaine's negative Other thus combats such modernist epistemological norms and accommodates postmodern skepticisms. Also, as Hess writes, "By showing her own doubts about the new ideas she is encountering, she portrays her

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[422] Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 212–18.

'conversion' experience as a gradual awakening. She never completely jettisons her skeptical side but eventually she grants more and more room to her New Age voice."[423]

Oprah Winfrey called attention to the criticisms MacLaine has received when the latter appeared as a guest on her show in 2011. Winfrey did so in a way that normalized the non-ordinary. She asked: "Do you consider yourself now, as the world is evolving, and people are beginning to see things differently and opening up to a ... global and universal view of the world, do you feel somewhat redeemed?"[424] By situating MacLaine's experiences and beliefs as a kind of "new normal" that earlier audiences may not have had the capacity to understand—yet—she performs a kind of redemptive or legitimizing move, both as regards MacLaine's history and public reception, and as regards the kind of non-ordinary beliefs and encounters that should, according to Winfrey, now be viewed as in the realm of the possible.

Matt Lauer followed suit when he interviewed MacLaine on NBC's *Today* on March 15, 2016. His tone was consistently neutral, polite, and curious, when he asked about the ontological visions and experiences she has shared publicly. Asking her to explain about the mechanisms of her past life apprehensions, he said, "Help me understand this: When you start to have these feelings, connecting with a past life, are they subtle moments, or do they hit you like a brick?" Lauer then seamlessly transitioned to discussing her new book and the film around which it is based. Since his questions and responses carried no tonal inflection of belief or disbelief, he could then switch to freely

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[423] Hess, *Science in the New Age*, 50.
[424] OWN, "Shirley MacLaine's Reaction to Criticism."

gushing about her career—about MacLaine as a totality, neither as a single nor a divided self: "You are legendary, and you are iconic, and one of my favorite people to talk to."[425]

Contrast all this with Russell Brand, whose universalizing is more palatable to the public today. Though he voices his spiritual ideas didactically some of the time, he never employs a *negative Other* narrative. Rather, his affective shifting performs a kind of inclusivity of all perspectives. Not an either/or but a both/and. He also avoids asserting himself as a teacher per se. The subtext with Brand and other metamodernized spiritual figures is, in effect, "you are like me." Furthermore, the SBNR's amalgamated "Eastern" teachings are of use to the secular-friendly teachers who can also articulate ideas consonant with Vedanta and Buddhism, such as when they claim that they are not teaching anything, that there is in fact nothing to "learn" and no wisdom to attain, as with Foster and Grosso. Also, with Brand, he has faced ordinary struggles we can identify with. There appears to be nothing behind the curtain—he is all out there for anyone to see. And in the end whatever is seen that may be uncomfortable is immediately taken as fodder for a good laugh.

On the subject of celebrity spirituality and Winfrey in particular, Laderman notes about the phenomenon that is "Oprah" that her wealth and celebrity do not detract from her spiritual authority; "Indeed, her celebrity status and enormous wealth only reinforce her sacred standing in contemporary culture."[426] But we should recall that Winfrey's central message is framed nonreligiously: "Live your best life." Brand's is similarly secular: *Treat each other well. Be truthful. Be kind.* As is the philosophy of another arguably metamodern comedian, Ellen DeGeneres. By contrast, Shirley MacLaine's

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[425] TODAY, "Shirley MacLaine."
[426] Laderman, *Sacred Matters*, 80.

narrative involves at least some amount of attempting to convince people to make room for belief in specific spiritual concepts, visions, truths. I mentioned in the last section the idea of "sustained questioning" as a rhetorical strategy. MacLaine, a product of the modernist New Age, does not question so much as answer.

4.6. Performatism: Surreal but Sustainable

Raoul Eshelman theorizes *performatism*, both as a concept of post-postmodernism similar to metamodernism, as previously mentioned, and as a means of understanding a certain kind of contemporary performance. Published in 2008, Eshelman's *Performatism* is described on its back cover as "the first book to describe systematically the epoch after postmodernism, as it is unfolding." And in fact, of the handful of other terms that overlap partly or largely with the post-postmodern terrain that the term *metamodernism* seeks to carve out, *performatism* is perhaps the most useful. Performatist works, Eshelman writes, cause the reader or viewer to accept a reality, to grant its ostensivity within a particular frame. Once relaxed into the narrative established by that frame, the reader/viewer can step into other frames made possible in the context of that outer frame. This is something seen in metamodernist films where we find a "double frame" involving some fantastical, supernatural, paranormal, or otherwise non-ordinary element that the viewer has no choice but to accept within the structure of the story. Later the audience discovers through what I have called an *affective reclamation* something important in the fantasy in which the character is living that cannot be disregarded, something that in fact makes the entire emotional reality of a scene come together and make an odd kind of sense. Simone

Stirner calls the performatist subject "a new kind of subject that establishes itself in spite of disruptive forces in an act of belief."[427]

In such a double-framed reality, the more fantastical premise is *surreal but sustainable* (a theme with Russell Brand's work—thinking, for example, of his stage appearance with the Dalai Lama), and at the same time it never subsumes or replaces the other, more normative reality. That is, by a kind of double framing, the metamodern performance or artwork manages to maintain the existence of a more typical consensus reality while simultaneously keeping the "special" reality that is real (perhaps an internal or affective reality that is real to a certain character) alive.

Eshelman's typification of a *post*modern novel, film, or other visual artwork may be useful by contrast. He cites the film *Being John Malkovich* as exemplary. A postmodern artifact "might present two equally plausible, parallel plot lines that remain undecidable within the confines of the work.… To escape this conundrum, we are forced to turn outside of it—to an open, uncontrollable context. Author, work and reader all tumble into an endless regress of referral that has no particular fix point, goal, or center."[428] When identities shift seemingly randomly, the viewer cannot easily invest in the characters' lives; instead she pulls herself outside of such attachments, to a wider frame. The postmodern does not tend to try to expand from there, but in effect lands on a sentiment something like, *You see, no inherent meaning can be found—only a frame.*

The performatist or metamodern art form, by contrast, returns to the viewer or reader's gaze or reading (which means that, yes, she is still there, subjectivity intact); But the metamodern reader/viewer's journey to the outer frame, returns; and precisely

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[427] Stirner, "Notes on the State of the Subject."
[428] Eshelman, *Performatism,* 1.

because she is not trying to find a single center or meaning (as in modernism), she can

plunge in to engage herself directly in this recognition of no-center. Then what may be

offered is a communal moment—a reflective witnessing of the interesting place "we" (the

characters, along with the reader/viewer, it is implied) find ourselves. Or, sometimes

more exuberantly, an all-out celebration of the gift of personal freedom reflected back to

the viewer, one that incorporates, rather than distances, her. Put differently, a character's

extreme "quirk" can in effect support the validity of alternative emotional truths.

Eshelman refers also to "sacrificial, redemptive acts," which are as much performative as

they are metamodern.[429] Importantly, these become not strictly intellectual engagements

but emotional ones.

    The metamodern aesthetic sensibility, beyond merely tolerating a given quirky

character as an oddity, will show community members creatively, even playfully,

welcoming the fantasy element without needing to abandon their own realities and norms

to allow room for another's. This is evident in the encounters with the monstrous Other in

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, as I discussed in chapter three. "Process"—being with the

Other—is typically conveyed as more valid, more creative, more life-giving, and in the

end more effective, than a quick solution to the oddity of the Other that would try to

"rectify" the oddity (as mentioned in the metamodern monstrous typology, examples of

"modern" solutions to the Other involve pathologizing the difference, then solving the

problem of the monster by medicating, shunning, or killing).[430]

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[429] Eshelman, *Performatism*, 79.
[430] Films that exemplify the metamodern in the figuring of an oddball character who sets up this double-frame include *Lars and the Real Girl*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, and *American Beauty* (see Eshelman for a rich treatment of the latter), and the oeuvres of director Wes Anderson and director, writer, actor, performance artist Miranda July.

With performatism, and one reason it is so useful in the present context, one accepts figures who exceed boundaries, who are quirky, transgressive, ordinary or non-standard, and who are now more or less "allowed" to be so in one frame that then affects another level of reality. This is an aspect of the metamodern turn that can explain the reception of someone like Brand who does not adhere to a single definition, role, or persona. MacLaine's New Age universalisms would always be at odds with the modernist epistemic configuration's insistence on rational, either/or reality (though embraced as Truth with that capital T by some spiritual seekers). Again, her truth claims threatened a heretofore rational, univocal sense of herself as a career entertainer and caused a loss of credibility; whereas, the multiple-framed, *life-as-movie* sensibility makes a multiplicity of identity narratives more normative. It may even suggest the idea that one is *meant* to shift between them.

Increasingly, as I commented earlier, we are all in a certain sense film stars with shape-shifting capacities. The availability of technology, the mediatization, and the encouragement or even expectation to make ourselves into media objects (and subjects, and directors, actors and audience) make the younger generations all the more responsive to narratives designed to move widely as memes. Making a film, even a silly video of one's cat, makes one forever aware of life as frames of film, of how moments are constructed and, in our current time, rapidly fed to the viewing public. Our lives are increasingly staged to be consumed and appropriated. And the fourth wall has a permanent, gaping hole in it.[431]

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[431] See Apkon *The Age of the Image,* especially the chapter, "All the World's a Screen," for more on how some of the first trends in viral videos were representations of the metamodern "quirky."

Returning to the reception of Brand, at least one cultural critic has asked after the strange way that the many public gaffes, flaws, and foibles of Russell Brand don't seem to deter fans. Simon Miraudo roundly critiques the comedian's separate performances then declares himself nonetheless as big a fan as ever. "Is Russell Brand actually at his best when he's at his worst? Is it only in the mushroom cloud of his embarrassments that his comedy—and activism—actually works?"[432] The title of the essay is significant: "The Second Coming: In Defense of Loving Russell Brand." In social activist mode, Miraudo reminds readers, Brand went through a period of preaching to the British fans that they should refrain from voting, which some have called disastrous; Brand's 2014 book, *Revolution*, was cited as an example of his extending irresponsibly out of his area of expertise. Also Miraudo gives Brand low marks for his acting in certain of his films. He reflects a metamodern sensibility when he says,

> A fusion of [Brand's] messianic aspirations with stories about his stumbles might finally allow him to communicate with audiences of all stripes…. *The Guardian*'s George Monbiot describes Brand's politics, "[They're] rough and inchoate, but he doesn't claim to have all the answers.... Brand's openness about his flaws makes him a good leader." Brand's humbling in the political realm has only made him more relatable, sympathetic and self-deprecating. Unwittingly, he's found himself in a position where we want to listen to him *more,* because of these very humiliations.[433]

Miraudo seems to be attuned to the performatist multiple frames in which Brand's flaws and gaffes can coexist with his other identities, and the idea that these various

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[432] Miraudo, "The Second Coming."
[433] Miraudo, "The Second Coming."

sensibilities needn't compete or cancel one another out but might in fact enhance Brand's public reading and response.

The fact that his past transgressions are an accepted part of the package bolsters my metamodern reading of contemporary saviors as those who embrace the light *and* the dark. Formation of religious/spiritual identities around multivalencies as I have pointed to in Brand illustrates the ongoing *rescripting of the sacred*, to again borrow verbiage from Santana and Erickson's title.[434] And furthermore, this current sense that spiritual and religious identities are continually being written and shaped may in turn be bringing millennials—who, if the stereotype holds, feel that their creativity, agency, and participation, in any setting, are a birthright—in line with the mode of "salvation" that Russell Brand offers: pluralistic, open to transcendence that is soteriologically combined with, even dependent on, a decided immanence—a conviction that what happens *in* the world matters.

4.7. Conclusion

My suggestion here has been that postmodernism's death of the subject has become metamodernism's resurrection, as exemplified in the rise and multimodal popularity of a figure like Russell Brand. Theorization of a metamodern cultural shift was explored both as a way to account for certain oxymoronic aspects of SBNR spirituality and specifically as a means of naming an aesthetic that grows up around the felt experience of living with the reflexive awareness of being between epistemes. Brand's

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[434] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture*.

performance and public personae, if I have interpreted them even partially correctly, resonate with SBNRs who are actively putting emotional sincerity and concern for the world back "in" and who also understand the efficacy—personally, socially, and spiritually—of exploding the serenity of any moment that threatens to become too staid. So it is in these terms that the manner by which Russell Brand conveys his various identities—a kind of performed soteriology—is significant for our understanding of secular spiritualities in the contemporary West. Brand's performance was shown to bridge several contemporary identities: an ironically dressed sex symbol in stylish boots and purposefully tattered jeans who can joke on stage with the Dalai Lama; attend yoga class; publicly pontificate on his personal spiritual views, including promoting Transcendental Meditation; lead (or, sometimes, incite) a political protest rally; testify as to the efficacy of specific social programs for recovering addicts; and then return to his shockingly overt, licentious comedic material. Brand is a contemporary SBNR seeker on an ancient spiritual path, earnestly championing justice in today's fraught sociopolitical scene, while destabilizing his audiences with outrageously salacious jokes. The cultural force of this dialectic of Brand's makes him a thought-leader for secular spirituals writing their narratives in a different way.

In as much as Brand exemplifies the historical relationship of transgression to spiritual transformation, this set of identity narratives brings to mind the SBNR's shift toward inclusivity of the aforementioned *vicissitudes* of human beingness—a bridging of the above several modalities—not so much into a whole but as an oscillating set of identities.

Chapter 5

Reframing Postmodern Spiritualities: Problematizing Metamodern Ethics

Popular and scholarly usages of the term *postmodern* as applied to religions show that the term is employed in disparate ways. In this chapter I will discuss uses of postmodern Christianity and Buddhist postmodernism in an effort to bolster my argument that the term *metamodern* would in some cases be a more helpful and also a more apt term, particularly with regard to treatments of the mystical, supernatural, and non-ordinary. This will be followed by an explication of a particular way that contemporary Western Buddhism has arguably been influenced by metamodernism.

The other theme of this chapter is ethics. The concrete examples given in the previous chapters were intended to exemplify instances of metamodernism as found in popular culture's conveyance of experiences of, beliefs about, or fascinations with non-ordinary realities. Ideally, these chapters have provided some illustrations of the heuristic work my delineation of metamodernism and epistemic mapping is meant to do. I have been asking what an episteme, and what metamodernism, should be considered capable of signifying and what it should perhaps not be charged with signifying. Regarding this

question of application, it is inevitable that the manner in which ethical topics or stances receive treatment should surface. I have made the topic of ethics present here in showing the following: why the SBNR would evince signs of increased pluralism and tolerance of other viewpoints in general and religious and spiritual viewpoints specifically (chapter two); how metamodern monsters present a different way of engaging the Other over all (chapter three); and how Russell Brand's secular-spiritual performativity engages a sense of a social ethos simultaneously in "real life" and as performance in entertainment media (chapter four). This chapter, initially addressing the label *postmodern religion*, expands on these discussions to elucidate the work of the epistemes and the particular challenges inherent in metamodernism and ethics, both as theorized by scholars and as utilized by the general audience, as this episteme takes shape in the contemporary imaginary.

5.1. Postmodern Spiritualities?

As mentioned previously, the sheer variety of uses of the term *postmodern* often leads to confusion and obfuscation. The terms *postmodern religion* or *postmodern spirituality/ies*, specifically *postmodern Christianity* and *Buddhist postmodernism*, are no different. In my view, these terms are ultimately related to the emergence of the SBNR and the metamodern epistemic turn. They are also examples of the term *postmodern* being made to signify a few different things at once. What these terms might have in common is their deployment of the term *postmodern* to hold the tendencies and shifts that have begun to reveal themselves in the current period, when dynamics of secularization and re-enchantment circle each other.

In some texts linking religion and postmodernism, the term *postmodern* is used to periodize—to locate a specific movement as occurring in the postmodern time period. Other times, the term is meant to conceptually describe the background assumptions underlying a spiritual or religious perspective and to describe what particular sorts of meaning one is presuming to come across—that is, if not "modern" meanings, then what? I have wondered too if perhaps what seems to me an inherently oxymoronic phrase—*postmodern religion*—might sometimes be deployed for the rhetorical effect of highlighting competing onto-epistemological impulses—spiritual seeking/religious beliefs held concurrently with the eschewing of truth claims and metanarratives, deconstructing of meanings alongside acknowledgment of the desire for human connection and community-building. Of course, texts may seek to do more than one of these at once. I will use Hume and McPhillips's thesis from their influential *Popular Spiritualities* as an example text to discuss the above.

Midway through the first decade of the 2000s, these authors wrote that "post-modern religion encourages a disintegration of old dichotomies such as fact and fiction, real and imaginary" and that "multiple choices about one's place in the cosmos leads to a spiritual bricolage ... and inventiveness" and offers "experimental forms [of religion] based on individual preferences."[435] If this sounds similar to characteristics I am attributing to metamodernism here, that is no accident.

It is important to reiterate that epistemes, at least in my understanding and utilization of the concept, will necessarily, unavoidably overlap one another.[436] Again,

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[435] Hume and McPhillips, *Popular Spiritualities,* xvi–xvii.
[436] Foucault himself has flip-flopped on this point, writing in *The Order of Things* that there could be no simultaneity—only one episteme could operate at a time but in other works taking the position that overlap was possible (168).

rather than seeing them as operating like light switches (either on or off), it is important to see how each sets the stage for subsequent developments in the next. Clasquin-Johnson writes that metamodernism, though combinative in character, is not to be thought of as Hegelian in seeking to triumph over the earlier epistemic realities or bringing them "into an all-encompassing synthesis." He writes, "Indeed, for the metamodernist project to succeed, the contrasting forces it attempts to bring into dialogue must, I submit, continue to exist and even to thrive. Both modernism and postmodernism must exist as viable alternatives to act as boundary conditions between which the metamodern thinker can oscillate ... (or ... hold simultaneously)."[437] "Metamodernism, as an artistic and literary function of metamodernity," Stephen Knudsen adds, is in fact "not new, but it has been evident a long time, running alongside postmodernism's still-intact trajectory.… Metamodernism brightened into prominent view in the late 1990s, but that was not a cut-and-dried opening salvo and it certainly was not, and is not, a wholesale displacement of postmodernism."[438]

For instance, certainly there is no complete "turning back" after postmodernism's instantiations of such concepts as fracture and bricolage, and, to add to the list, irony—an implicit means of expression of the reflexive awareness of one's position as a multiple. Therefore, it should not be hard to see that concepts, techniques, or aesthetic choices like fracture, bricolage, and irony, usually associated with postmodernism, will sometimes also underlie metamodern cultural forms. Chapter two provided some instances of how the tone and intention—the overall usage of aesthetic choices of a given artifact—are what can be used to differentiate the postmodern from the metamodern.

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[437] Clasquin-Johnson, "Towards a Metamodern Academic Study," 4.
[438] Knudsen, "Forward," 66.

It is a common generalization to say that a postmodern cultural sensibility operates on a level of purposeful superficiality, referencing the surface level(s) of what is experienced. Or, more aggressively, that postmodern artifacts may purposely obfuscate and showcase destabilizations with the goal of fracturing of meaning(s). Punk rock is an example within easy reach. But because the various art forms to which the term *postmodern* is attached have, in truth, a variety of impulses and histories that they are claiming to be "post" of, even this generalization may lead to confusion. For example, in postmodern architecture, the impulse was to regain the ability to present flourishes and complexities after the emphasis on austerity in modern architecture and to reassert contextualization—acknowledgement of place, time, and history. Whereas in postmodern film and literature, the fracturing of sense of place and time, messing with narrative structures, and the troubling of modernist assumptions as to how one understands the divisions between identity groups, including race, class, and gender, were some of the guiding intents—in the main each bending toward a purposeful destabilizing of a deconstructive sort. This metamodern sense of an oscillation seems to be a kind of acknowledgment of both contextuality and embodiment—that you can't be everywhere at once, and that, especially of late, "you" aren't a "one" occurring only "once" either. Kripal encapsulates this idea with the pithy phrase, "We are narrative paths, not stable mountains."[439] Millennial metamodernism, as I have discussed earlier, seems to rely on both such an ontology—an oscillative inclusivity—and on having a personal stake in the meaning-making.

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[439] Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, 300.

Brian McHale has written a useful primer on how to understand how various cultural domains (architecture, music, literature, and others) "postmodernize" at different times and in different ways, if they do at all. These domains, he writes, even if "driven by the (presumably uniform) 'cultural logic' of a historical moment ... [are] also driven by the internal dynamics of specific fields, differing from field to field." Postmodernisms emerge "early and decisively" in some. (McHale gives architecture and dance as examples.) A rule of thumb he proposes is that "fields where modernisms have been sharply defined, conspicuous, aggressive and successful give rise to comparably well-defined postmodernisms. In other fields, those with heterogeneous and contested modernisms, such as film, painting, or literature, the term 'postmodernism' is correspondingly optional, dispensable, or problematic."[440] Further uses of his rubric by others toward analyses of metamodern culture as they proliferate should prove interesting.

The purpose here, however, is not to sideline the present inquiry in the quagmire of what is and is not "postmodern" in the arts (as McHale suggests, given the variety of glosses on what is modern, we have sets of nesting dolls to contend with), but to see if we can home in a little more closely on what metamodernism arises as a response to. Also, perhaps it bears stating here that when truth claims, onto-epistemological stances, and their erasure are involved, we are ipso facto in the terrain of the religious.

To be intentionally simplistic for a moment, postmodernism's driving impulse is to carve out an other-than-modern. The wholesale destabilizing of truth claims is one thing metamodernism mounts a response to. My own feeling, with apologies for the

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[440] McHale, "What Was Postmodernism."

anthropomorphizing, has been to regard metamodernism as calling postmodernism's bluff about its self-satisfied conclusions. Must we be so doctrinaire in our erasure? Must fracture necessarily feel anti-generative? In this era in which embodiment receives more attention in the theory world, these conclusions even more glaringly seem to run counter to embodied experience. More incisively, Eshelman writes of the mechanism postmodernism employs:

> Postmodernism sees in form not an antidote to meaning, but rather a trace leading back to already existing, semantically loaded contexts. Every fixation of meaning is dispersed through cross-connected forms; every use of form links up with already existing meanings; every approach to an origin leads back to an alien sign. Searching for itself, the subject quickly ends where it began: in the endlessly expanding field of the postmodern."[441]

This describes how postmodernism escapes positing a "*there* there." Now, to aim this back in the specific direction of religions and spiritualities, if such a postmodern hermeneutic can be said to have any congruency, to correspond at all with what the (generalized) term is signifying for wide usage, then it would seem that techniques of fracturing and bricolage need to connote at least some of the generally acknowledged postmodern conditions, such as dispersal, lack, absence, and deconstruction of truths. To add to this list from Mark C. Taylor's theorizations of postmodern theologies and religiosities, there is also the recognition of not knowing "where we are"—and of being "in a time between times and a place which is no place."[442] (Conversely, and again indicative of its multiple uses, to be postmodern is described by theologian Kevin

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[441] Eshelman, "Performatism," 1.
[442] Taylor, *Erring,* 6.

VanHoozen as "to have a *heightened* awareness of one's situatedness: in a body, in culture, in tradition, in language."[443])

My point here has been that when we consider how each of postmodernism and metamodernism engages experimental forms of religion and spirituality, even if both utilize combinatory impulses and techniques of acknowledging fracture, boundary, slippage, and so forth, in their outcomes they come to relay quite different messages or feelings. For those cultural artifacts that connote presence, generativity, that are destabilizing in what I have called a "constructive" sense, that deliver an overall feeling of a cautious optimism and trust in others, I aver that a more apropos term than postmodern is in order. The implicit declaration is akin to *I am here. We are here. No matter how small or ordinary or how sometimes erased I may feel, something that is unable to be contextualized away underlies my sense of being.* Due in part to having followed postmodernism (and also, due to its absorption of certain tenets from Asian religious traditions, which will receive more treatment presently) the metamodern sensibility seems to convey that individuals do not have to "know" or be stuck to one notion of exactly what they are, or where. But at the same time, as I have tried to show, metamodernism also asserts a capacity to protect against the elision of important differences, due to its emphasis on personal experience and subjectivities.

To circle back to Hume and McPhillips: to my thinking, using *postmodern* to cover territory of belief, community building, re-enchantment, and subjective spiritual engagement requires stretching the term uncomfortably sideways, asking it to encompass more than it should. If we are to comprehend movements such as the SBNR, we need to

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[443] Vanhoozer, "Pilgrim's Digress," 73, italics mine.

be able to refer to impulses to re-enchant, acknowledging, along with these two scholars, that "lack of faith in traditional mainstream religions has resulted in deinstitutionalization and distrust of dogma and doctrine, yet it has not resulted in a secularized world that is devoid of spirituality."[444] Jason Josephson-Storm puts an even finer point on it: "The death of God does not necessitate the death of magic, and if anything, secularization seems to amplify enchantment."[445] Hume and McPhillips wrote in 2006 that there is an "inner hunger" for spiritual expression; that "people are searching for community, meaning and something sacred or supernatural"; that the sacred is being "unearthed in unlikely places"; and that "the post-modern demonstrates a profound move toward new understandings of self and spirituality, spirituality and the environment, and self-reflexive spirituality that often leads to social change and political activism."[446] As such, I cannot help but feel that these statements quite aptly name something *post*-postmodern. It would be understandable that *postmodern* was their term of choice since there was, at that time, little conceptualizing of a post-postmodern (outside of the field of literary studies where the term has been considered for nearly two decades to be no longer particularly current[447]). In any case, this fact points to another reason for auditioning a more descriptive term: the field of the study of religion, as inherently interdisciplinary as it is, would benefit from being more up to speed with contemporary literary and critical theory.

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[444] Hume and McPhillips, *Popular Spiritualities*, xvii.

[445] Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment,* 31–32.

[446] Hume and McPhillips, *Popular Spiritualities*, xvii.

[447] The acknowledgment of postmodernism as "dead" is made forcefully by a number of scholars of literary and cultural theory in "What [in the World] Was Postmodernism?" See, especially, Edmond, "The Uses of Postmodernism," whom I have quoted here. Certainly, some scholars of religion have been asking whether and what is after postmodernism, especially as the question informs the secularism debate. But few seem to have ventured with any specificity beyond posing the question.

Though it feels premature to be looking back on 2006 just yet, I believe that as we begin

to do so from another few years or a decade hence, we will likely locate the zenith of the

development of the metamodern sensibility—or whatever alternate term for it that may

stick in replacing the vaguely ouroboric "post-postmodernism"—as occurring just about

the time the authors in *Popular Spiritualities* were writing.

5.2. Ontologies that Oscillate

Having established occasional overlap with the postmodern, we can see how some

of the specific sensibilities that characterize metamodernism are springboarding from

postmodern concepts. As I have shown with the example of *Buffy* in chapter three,

metamodern works often eschew grandness for small, local moments of authenticity.

(However, another metamodern aesthetic is to toggle between the tiny and the epic.[448]) I

like to say metamodernism thinks to "check on the children."

After the supposed "end of history" and after 9/11,[449] as Vermeulen writes, some

philosophers and cultural theorists in the early 2000s sought to "rethink History,

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[448] See Dember, "After Postmodernism."

[449] A number of theorists locate the end of postmodernism or of postmodern-style irony with 9/11, after *Vanity Fair* editor Grayden Carter declared the end of the age of irony on September 18, 2001. Edward Rothstein wrote on September 22, 2001, in the *New York Times* that "Attacks on U.S. Challenge Postmodern True Believers,'" (Rothstein, "Connections.") which Lee Konstantinou writes was, at that moment, a call for "a return of the real." See Konstantinou, *Cool Characters,* 7. Significant for religious and popular culture studies, Nina Power writes, "something of a pious or neo-theological tone crept into theory, as biblical figures and themes such as Saint Paul, Job, the Multitude and Exodus were mined, albeit in a materialist way, to provide new accounts of contemporary universality, theories of work, and, ultimately, a way out of here…[C]limate change and religious revivals collided [as cinema] continued to develop its haunting and otherworldly capacities." (See Critchley, "Theoretically Speaking"—this is an article attributed to Simon Critchley, but in which two other writers, Nina Power and Timotheus Vermeulen, author large sections.)

reconceptualize the present and re-imagine the future by (re-)connecting the dots between previously deconstructed points of view."[450] If modernist meanings were constructed beforehand (narratives determinatively set in place) and postmodern meanings were retroactively constructed (dependent upon the context of and the instigation of a narrative), what might the metamodern both/and reaction look like?

One of the more easily identifiable metamodern aesthetic tones is smallness, as I called it in chapter three (or minimalism, the tiny, innocence, childlikeness, meta-cute[451]). Perhaps suggestive of a rebirth of one's subject status, that sort of aesthetic register is put to use reinstating permission for "values" of simplicity in response to beauty, hope, and sincerity.[452] It should be pointed out that such values are not premodern. Metamodernism, in a sense, counters the *pre-trans fallacy* that would interpret such simplicities as a return to a time prior to the birth of individualism. Irony, in combination with the pull toward authenticity or honesty—what Dember refers to as *ironesty*—is present as self-reflexivity via the oscillating between epistemic positions. Some other specific sensibilities were detailed in chapter three, and I will not recapitulate them here. They tend to point toward acknowledgment of inclusivity—in short, that *it's all there in the mix*. Negation and decentering may even be present as possibilities but not as the end game.

In all honesty, I am not certain if this approximates the meaning behind Vermeulen and van den Akker's placing of oscillation at the center of metamodernism. (Or if it can indeed be said that they intended to do so, or if it was to some degree done by their

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[450] Vermeulen, in Critchley, "Theoretically Speaking."
[451] Greg Dember identifies "meta-cute" as a metamodern aesthetic strategy in "After Postmodernism: Eleven Metamodern Methods."
[452] It may also be the countering of postmodern celebrations of excess that came to be seen as economically and ecologically problematic by critics of late capitalism.

followers, seizing upon the concept as a kind of meme.[453]) In any case, I imagine that my

definition and usage angle more toward the ontological and even mystical than most

theorists would be attempting to claim. I use the word *mystical* trusting that as this

exposition nears its end, readers not already versed in the literature of mysticism studies

will have a sufficient sense of what I mean to connote by the "ontological and mystical"

here. Kyle Karthauser puts my meaning in less spiritual language: "Though we aren't

terribly far into this new epoch, we do have enough hindsight to see how and why we got

here. Once we plunged over the edge of totality into the kaleidoscope of *différance*, once

we accepted the futility of Unity on the grandest scale, where else was there to turn?" The

next step in which we currently reside, Karthauser says, is "a development of the

micronarrative thinking encouraged by Lyotard. No Absolute Truth, no, but contextual, in

situ mini-truths that provisionally gesture at ethical, moral or aesthetic universals."[454]

That these ethical gestures are meant to be taken as *provisional* should at this point

be clear. Vermeulen and van den Akker have written that the periodizing usage of

oscillation is there to show that the metamodern period is *not* one characterized by

"synthesis, harmony, reconciliation, and so on" and that oscillation's in-betweenness is a

"dialectical movement that identifies with and negates" one that overcomes and

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[453] The popularization of *oscillation* for metamodernism enthusiasts may have had to do with a "Metamodernist Manifesto," written by performance artist Luke Turner in 2011, the first point of which is, "We recognize oscillation to be the natural order of the world." The last point of the manifesto ends with "We must go forth and oscillate!" From my own observations, this document seems to have been widely seen as foundational for general audience readers on metamodernism. Also, Strathclyde University Glasgow, Scotland held one of the first academic conferences on metamodernism in September 2014, which was titled, "Oscillate: Metamodernism and the Humanities."
[454] Karthauser, "The Awesome."

undermines more solid positioning "while being never congruent with these positions." This is, again, what they have referred to as a *both/neither* dynamic. [455]

Balm conceived of metamodernism's end-dynamic as "an ethics of care for the other" and "interconnection" prior to Vermeulen and van den Akker's "oscillation." She regards interconnections as a means of "grasp[ing] the complexity of contemporary cultural phenomena." When she writes, "In their interconnection and continuous revision lie the possibility of grasping the nature of contemporary cultural and literary phenomena,"[456] the line of difference between the Dutch scholars' *oscillation* and Balm's *interconnections* seems thin though still significant. And there are other issues with both terms with respect to my own deployment of metamodernism here. Greg Dember argues for oscillation to be considered but one mechanism among others that drives and protects *felt experience,* which he locates as the center of the metamodern sensibility.[457]

I see these terms as doing different sorts of work. They certainly do for the present exposition. The concept of oscillation is useful for my suggestion of the operative mechanism of this particular ontological engine. *Interconnection* may reflect what some individuals who call themselves metamoderns feel. Clasquin-Johnson thinks so, and feels it will give rise to the SBNR. Echoing Abramson, who borrows the term "as if" from Vermeulen and van den Akker, who themselves show how their concept was drawn from Kant's negative idealism,[458] Clasquin-Johnson writes that metamodernism has "an optimistic response to tragedy," one that will be "an ongoing process, not a static choice between two competing ontologies" and will "enable certain religions to return to their

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[455] van den Akker, and Vermeulen, "Periodising the 2000s," 6, 10.
[456] Balm, "Metamodernism in Art."
[457] Dember, "After Postmodernism."
[458] Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," 5.

roots within the context of this new, connected world. A new form of religiosity will evolve that oscillates between (or simultaneously adheres to) deep reserves of traditional spirituality and radical personal freedom. Dare we call it 'spiritual but not religious'?"[459]

Balm writes, "My definition of metamodernism involves transcending extremes, sublimating them into a new stage, a progression rather than vacillation. Moreover, nothing can develop or grow on grounds that are continuously moving."[460] These ideas deserve a more thorough analysis than I can give at this juncture. I will state that recognizing the ground as indeed constantly moving is precisely the dynamic that I am wishing to postulate as the fertile space in which my concept of the heterotopic liminality of secondhand mysticism takes place—the active crossing of those boundaries being theorized in chapter two as the generative moment. This is from a perspective as a (small *g*) gnostic scholar, always on the lookout for the activities and forces generative of a third thing. From my own experiences as a practitioner in Asian contemplative traditions, furthermore, I would assert the ontological capacities of the apprehension of existence in and as a flux. Any perception of an entirety, of Being available in and as the most nonstatic of moments could (with apologies to T.S. Eliot) only be seen as a still point if located in a turning world.

Believing that such a perspective explains in part why individuals have become attracted to the concept of metamodernism (among myriad reasons), I therefore angle here for metamodernism to demonstrate this non-affixing property—its secular-mystical potential—that is, containing the potential to shift, widen, or alter in tiny moments, and in "big AHA!" moments, one's sense of self and world; or that which is felt as inside and

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[459] Clasquin-Johnson, "Towards a Metamodern Academic Study," 8–9.
[460] Balm, "Metamodernism in Art."

that which is outside of the self; or that which is at once one's person, one's community, and the global society. One member of my Facebook discussion group on metamodernism who is a visual artist referred to how this quality is felt as an influence, writing: "I'm of the notion that metamodernism can help me to discover my own truths through art. The tension of it all. And somehow the existence between the polarities reveals a personal truth for me in my work."[461]

The other problem I have with "interconnection" is actually rather ironic, given what I have just written. The word connotes epistemological resolution, a stopping point perhaps more characteristic of universalist truth claims, and ironically, of religions: it connotes a perennialism that scholars of religion are trained to broach with extreme caution. My own experiential evidence aside, with "interconnection" I envision the general reader feeling the psychological pull to take sides along the binary lines drawn in the Forman-Katz debate, one side feeling the need to recapitulate the argument for *pure consciousness*—an ontological insight fashioned on the notion of a state of independence from epoch or culture—against the other side's Katzian epistemological foreshortening that, at its most extreme constructivist (Katz's own view was admittedly more moderate), can be summed up thus: *If we can't replicate it or prove it, it is inadmissible evidence. Therefore, we won't consider its veracity*. Bringing the general public past that historical debate's two-sidedness to where contemporary gnostic scholars of mysticism, such as Kripal, Ferrer, and Wolfson have cleared theoretical space and have invited the search for a third thing, is one of my purposes in pursuing the present topic. Put differently, the

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[461] Jordan Wayne Lee, personal correspondence, March 2, 2018.

gnostic scholar doesn't know how metamodern she is, and the metamodern enthusiast doesn't know how gnostic she is. Each side might like to know.

That said, while what a perennialist ontological resolution, such as the word *interconnection*, connotes does not quite work for my purposes, I do want to make the important point that metamodernism does not dismiss its honest likelihood, particularly if we alight there momentarily without too heavy a soteriological "hope" weighting the branch. Again, I don't know that this is what the Dutch scholars or any other scholars tackling metamodernism mean for the term *oscillate* to convey. My interest at any rate in delineating metamodernism's oscillation as generative, supportive of "big AHAs!"—of the possibility of non-logocentric, non-ordinary, or mystical apprehensions—is also in how it manages to not claim to buttress any sole conclusion, including not preferencing secular or spiritual hermeneutical readings.

5.3. Troubling the Metamodern Ethics

My thoughts on "personal stake" and pluralism, and the discussion above on the possibilities of ontological inclusivity notwithstanding, I wish to avoid giving the impression of metamodernism being synonymous with any *specific* ethos. Here I will add to the reasons I gave in the introduction chapter. Many theorists take pains to clearly indicate that metamodernism has no inherent agenda—political, ethical, philosophical, or otherwise. By contrast, Dumitrescu (Balm), who was, again, one of the earliest scholars theorizing a metamodern shift, did propose the ethical as metamodernism's dominant

modality.[462] Another of her definitions of metamodernism is as "an emerging paradigm characterised by an overriding search, by artists, average people, and societies, for authenticity or self-realisation and for a balanced fulfilling existence."[463] Alison Gibbons, literature and stylistics scholar, also situates metamodernism as "concerned with global ethics" and with humanist commitments. She writes that metamodern fiction "has the ability to raise the consciousness and conscience of the general public."[464]

I am not so much in disagreement with these perspectives as I am concerned about the danger in their misapprehension, of essentializing metamodernism as a program supporting certain ethical stances and not others. The topic of how exactly metamodernism may be said to support the raising (I would prefer the more neutral *shifting* here) of consciousness and conscience is indeed central in this dissertation and, as previously noted, is a point of fascination in terms of its usage as a theoretical tool in the study of mystical and "big AHA!" consciousness-shifting events. But it does not call for any such events to occur so much as it reports on the conditions underlying current events. As Konstantinou points out, moreover, the "incredulity toward metanarratives" (from Lyotard's influential definition of postmodernism that most theorists of metamodernism freely co-opt) "could seem politically liberating or threatening" if social homogeneity of any 'public sphere' gives way to "myriad counter publics, each of which deploys incompatible standards of value."[465]

That said, if an episteme describes a (rough) time period's (often invisible) ontological and epistemological anchors and the discursive means used to engage them

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[462] Dumitrescu, "What Is Metamodernism and Why Bother?"
[463] Dumitrescu, *Towards a Metamodern Literature*, 169.
[464] Gibbons, "Take That You Intellectuals!" 31.
[465] Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 14.

(such as aesthetics, ontological beliefs, soteriologies), admittedly, certain of these epistemic anchors will have tendencies to attract individuals who themselves pursue an agenda or take a political, social, or ethical stance. So, while none of the epistemes could be properly said to have "goals," they do classify the manner of engaging drives toward truth/Truth (that is, with a small and a large *T*), and, as such, describe the qualities found in the cultural artifacts of a time period that themselves necessarily reflect certain feelings and sentiments. And so on—What I describe is perhaps unavoidably somewhat tautological, given that an episteme necessarily both reports upon and influences what is happening.)

Discussions of specific applications of postmodern religion, namely postmodern Christianity and Buddhist postmodernism, now deserve some specific remarks, which will hopefully shed more light (and/or reveal more questions) as to metamodernism's relationship to the ethical. These brief treatments should be taken as both preliminary and general, an attempt to draw comparison to historical and religio-cultural uses of the epistemic terms more for the purpose of getting the questions out on the table than for attempting to provide an exhaustive treatment of these vast topic areas. Likewise, the scope of possible points connecting postmodernism and Asian philosophies in particular is vast. Viewing postmodernism as setting the stage for social assimilation of metamodern sensibilities will make it possible to explore with more specificity certain Buddhist and Vedantic philosophic tenets that have become assimilated into the Western secular and secular-spiritual imaginary.[466]

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[466] The current project generalizes about core metamodern characteristics, such as its reflexive *life-as-movie* and *fluid identity narratives*, as possible secular analogs to Indian philosophic concepts. However, due to the complexities and deep histories of both Indian and postmodern philosophies, the bulk of this line of thought must necessarily be undertaken under separate cover.

5.4. "Postmodern Christianity"

A cursory review of the literature shows that references to postmodern theologies, to the idea of a postmodern Christian God, and to the topic of "Christianity in a postmodern world" go back to the late 1980s and early 1990s; whereas the specific term *postmodern Christianity*—my immediate interest here—seems to gain traction in the early 2000s. Having puzzled over what occurs for me as a paradox of calling a religion "postmodern," I became interested specifically in how Christians who identify with that term are utilizing it, and what sort of work it does for them in terms of their religious affiliation. The salient point that will be argued in this brief summation, which I am sure the reader has already predicted, is that some aspects of postmodern Christianity sound much less post than metamodern.

What I have come to surmise is that Christians who embrace the term may mean it partly in a periodizing sense, acknowledging that the tenor and form of their religious expression occurs as part of the contemporary, collective cultural backdrop, which they call postmodern. But also, they mean to highlight something distinct in the way their churches minister and the manner in which practitioners engage their Christian beliefs, as

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A future project will explore more explicitly whether and how concepts such as Vedantic *witness self* (*Sākśīn*) or Buddhist *dependent origination* (*Pratītyasamutpāda*) have been assimilated to Western SBNR spiritualities such that they have informed metamodern reflexivities and multivalencies that I outline here.

having specific contemporary characteristics.[467] It is my understanding that this can

include the encouragement of very open and outward questioning of faith.

In "That's So Meta: The Post-Postmodern Church," de Bruin infers that the label

of postmodern is the current state—at least of the faction of Seventh-day Adventists he

analyzes—but points to a gap in that this label is not so relevant for younger generations.

He writes, "Most of the church in the West is postmodern. [However,] the church is not

ministering to postmodern people. The church is postmodern people ministering." As

someone born in 1979, he portrays his religious upbringing as a post-postmodern one.

"My dad is postmodern; I'm something else altogether. I am not from the generation that

left the church; I am part of the generation that wasn't raised Christian. I am not in the

generation that stopped reading the Bible; I am in the generation that doesn't know the

Bible."[468]

Speaking about the use of the term *postmodern Christianity*, Dember adds these

general observations about the so-called postmodern religious culture of some

Evangelical forms of worship:

> The terms "Postmodern Christianity" and the "Postmodern Church" have been
>
> used to identify movements within Evangelical Christianity that emphasize
>
> personal and organizational humility, compassion towards human imperfection
>
> (for example, by replacing the term sinful with "broken"), uncertainty alongside
>
> faith, the value of dwelling in the tension between opposites, grass-roots, place-

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[467] As John W. Riggs has stated in *Postmodern Christianity: Doing Theology in the Contemporary World* about the utilization of this episteme as a qualifier, "Postmodern Christianity has shared with all prior Christian theologies the need to borrow conceptual systems in order to express what it means and why its claims should be true" (140).

[468] De Bruin, "That's so Meta," 11.

based community over top-down hierarchies, unconventional meeting places such

as living rooms, cafes and even bars, casual dress at religious gatherings,

inclusion of popular culture elements in worship, reaching out across faith

boundaries, and at times the combination of very conservative theology and/or

doctrine alongside these less conventional elements. I would propose that the term

metamodernism, once it finds its way into the menu of epistemic options, better

describes this Christian movement than postmodernism does.[469]

The Emerging Church in particular has been described as

not restrained by institutional expectations…. Whereas the heady polarities of our

day seek to divide us into an either-or camp, the mark of the emerging Church

will be its emphasis on both-and.... It will bring together the most helpful of the

old and the best of the new ... due emphasis will be placed on both theological

rootage and contemporary experience, on faith and feeling, reason and prayer,

conversion and continuity, the personal and the conceptual.[470]

These last two quotations show several characteristics of postmodern Christianity

and of the emerging church that fit with the metamodern sensibility. To be clear, while the

appeal of this kind of alternative worship and shifting of the culture of "church" can be

considered as reflective of the influence of the metamodern cultural sensibility, I do not

suggest that the church doctrine and theologies themselves are metamodern. Rather, what

I refer to as the metamodern elements are that this is a type of church is willing to

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[469] After having participated in interreligious dialogue sessions with Evangelicals who identify
with the term Emerging Church, Dember and I began noticing the similarities in character and
feeling with some tenets of metamodernism. Greg Dember, personal conversation with author,
n.d.

[470] Mosby, *Emerging and Fresh Expressions of Church,* 20–21. See also Larson and Osbourne,
The Emerging Church, 9–11.

challenge long-held conventions of worship behavior and is interested in breaking down barriers between the sacred and the secular—to cross a divide, as it were—to deliver its message, which, in the case of the Christian church, would be considered epistemically speaking as a traditional and/or modern message, inasmuch as it is faith- and certainty-based. Time will tell if or when the Christian conception of postmodernism might shift to align with the label of *metamodern*, which seems to suit its affective and relational elements especially well.

Lastly, as mentioned at the outset of this section, theological uses of the term *postmodernism* that assess how traditional and modern Christianity copes with the postmodern episteme are a different topic that I do not attempt to cover here. I will mention only that there is some acknowledgment of an epistemic shift. Graham Ward wrote in 2012 in "Theology and Postmodernism: Is It All Over?" that "some aspects of the postmodern condition have been accentuated. But it is not the same postmodern condition of the 1980s and 1990s."[471]

5.5. "Buddhist Postmodernism"

A number of contemporary popular writers as well as a smaller number of scholars of religion have drawn parallels between postmodern philosophy and the central tenets of Asian religious philosophies, particularly Vedanta and Buddhism.[472] Implied in

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[471] Ward, "Theology and Postmodernism." Ward concludes that "some aspects of the postmodern condition have been accentuated. But it is not the same postmodern condition of the 1980s and 1990s" (467).

[472] See especially Coward, *Derrida and Indian Philosophy,* and Loy, *Lack and Transcendence.*

the phrase *Buddhist postmodernism* is an epistemic typological scheme that accounts for traditional and modern Buddhisms, as well. David McMahan and Stephen Batchelor both engage such an epistemic mapping explicitly, though each schematizes differently, and they arrive at different conclusions. Both, however, point to retraditionalizations as well as modernizations[473] and postmodernizations of Western Buddhisms.

Batchelor, a Western dharma teacher-scholar, is a prominent voice for a decontextualized, secular Buddhism that he refers to at times as postmodern. On the portability and the de- and recontextualization of Buddhisms in the West, Batchelor has written, "Within the last hundred years the teachings of the Buddha have confirmed the views of theosophists, fascists, environmentalists, and quantum physicists alike…. There may well be as many kinds of Buddhism as there are ways the Western mind has to apprehend it…. So, it is hardly surprising that Buddhists today instinctively home in on elements of postmodernity that resonate with their own understanding of the dharma."[474] (His comment presumes that the current day's dominant epistemic is postmodernity.) Batchelor could also be describing metamodernity, as he writes of contemporary forms of Buddhism that "focus on change and uncertainty rather than assured continuity, through emphasizing contingency, ambivalence and plurality."[475]

He connects the influence of Eastern spiritualities on postmodernity through the contemplative practice of mindfulness: "By paying mindful attention to the sensory immediacy of experience, we realize how we are created, moulded, formed by a

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[473] Citing McMahan and Jeff Wilson, Gleig notes that "Western adaptations of Buddhism increasingly demonstrate an interest in more traditional elements of the religion that were neglected in the modernization process" ("From Buddhist Hippies," 27).
[474] Batchelor, *Secular Buddhism,* 145–46.
[475] Batchelor, "Buddhism and Postmodernity."

bewildering matrix of contingencies that continually arise and vanish."[476] That said, he

continues, "Whatever features of postmodernity may be apparent in Buddhism, it would

be foolish to describe Buddhist thought as 'postmodern'—for the simple reason that

Buddhism has undergone no phase of modernity to be 'post' of. Buddhist cultures have

evolved according to the grand narrative of their own Enlightenment Project."[477] (By

Enlightenment Project here he is comparing the Lyotardian concept to the European

Enlightenment's introduction of narratives of certainty and progress through science and

reason. The Buddhist grand narrative, it may be said, is of spiritual enlightenment.)[478]

Batchelor later inquires more closely about whether or how Buddhist guiding

metaphors are, or can be, rearticulated in postmodern terms. The concept of emptiness, he

points out, seems to similarly "celebrate the disappearance of the subject, the endlessly

deferred play of language, the ironically ambiguous and contingent nature of things." But

Buddhism's ethical commitment to nonviolence and its "therapeutic approach to the

dilemma of human anguish," he notes, make it supersede that epistemic category.[479]

What he finally describes runs astonishingly close to the underlying concepts of

metamodernism as I have articulated them with respect to religions in my thesis here: a

"gradual dissolution of a transcendental basis for self," which "nurtures an empathetic

relationship with others." SBNRs, contemporary Western Buddhists, and such actors may

be able to let go of Buddhism as "a grand, totalizing narrative that explains everything"

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[476] Batchelor, *Secular Buddhism*, 149.

[477] Batchelor, *Secular Buddhism*, 147.

[478] In his monograph, Batchelor points to two forms of reformed contemporary Buddhism that he says are more explicitly driven by what he calls the grand narrative of enlightenment and that "remain entranced by a legitimating myth of…a universal emancipation," (147–48). The point to be taken is that not all Buddhisms should be thought of as driven by the same soteriological schemas per se and that some convey as more modernist than others.

[479] Batchelor, *Secular Buddhism*, 148.

and thus will be "freed to embark on the unfolding of our own individuation in the context of specific local and global communities.… Instead of erecting totalizing, hierarchic institutions to set our grand narratives in brick and stone, we look to imaginative, democratic communities in which to realize our own petits recits: small narratives.... Such a view is inevitably pluralistic."[480] These conclusions align with my sense as to why contemporary Western secular spiritualities become more immanent and more concerned with the interiority of the Other.

McMahan also considers Buddhism along a spectrum of epistemic positions. He wraps each of modernism and postmodernism, however, under the term *modernism*, calling modernity and postmodernity subsets, so this terminological difference needs to be taken into account. Modernist Buddhisms are distinguished from more traditional ones by such factors as "reinterpretation and demythologization of traditional doctrines, vigorous world-affirmation, hybridity with western discourses of emancipation," and psychologization.[481] One quite layered modernization that has occurred from both the Asian side (the home court, as it were) and the Western side, is that each side has "proffered the theme of the rescue of the modern West—which they have claimed has lost its spiritual bearings through modernization—by the humanizing wisdom of the East." However, he writes, "in order for the rescue to succeed … Buddhism itself had to be transformed, referred, and modernized—purged of mythological elements and 'superstitious' cultural accretions," to make a proper case for "its compatibility with scientific, humanistic, and democratic ideals."[482]

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[480] Batchelor, *Secular Buddhism*, 150. Batchelor borrows from Lyotard here.
[481] McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism,* 23, 252.
[482] McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 5–6.

Taking it as self-evident that the various Buddhisms exhibit a great deal of difference, my view is nonetheless that no epistemic label can encapsulate a religion—that is, Buddhism cannot be generalized as postmodern, or modern, or metamodern—but that some directional moves may make for what we can call a postmodern, modern, or metamodern aspect to it. One such move is *Engaged Buddhism*, as typified by Vietnamese-born Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. This is a recent form of Buddhism that strives to bring a service component to the fore in terms of interpretations of what contemporary Buddhist sanghas do. This detraditionalized form has commonalities with forms of personal or privatized spirituality,[483] such as evidenced by the New Age and the SBNR. McMahan writes, "The appropriation of Buddhist meditation and analysis of mind by New Age spirituality and psychotherapy is one example of the relative privatization of religion in the West and is a significant part of the contemporary interpretation of Buddhism in Europe and North America [which has] increased the cultural capital of Buddhism in certain western circles [and] has also radically decontextualized particular elements of the tradition."[484]

Ann Gleig considers the potentially "postmodern characteristics" of contemporary Western Buddhism in her research on the community of Buddhist Geeks. Her 2014 research found a virtual, and occasionally real life, community.[485]

Much of Buddhist Geeks is devoted to celebrating how technology and social media is being used to both aid traditional Buddhist practices and enable the

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[483] McMahan includes this caveat about calling engaged Buddhism an example of detraditionalization: "Certainly Buddhism throughout its history has carried forth various programs of…sociopolitical engagement" (*The Making of Buddhist Modernism,* 250).
[484] McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 251.
[485] The Buddhist Geeks community was a ten-year project that has now been disbanded by the originators.

emergence of radically innovative forms of Buddhism. This essential affirmation and embrace of technology signifies a discernable shift in the dialogue between Buddhism and technology.[486]

An epistemic update may offer an additional way to understand such trends, particularly those that take a "world-affirming approach to Buddhism in which all aspects of contemporary daily life ... are legitimated as potential sites for Buddhist awakening" and, as Gleig also emphasizes, which recognize the unique emphases brought to Western Buddhist practices by Generations X and Y.[487] My assessment is that these characteristics point strongly to the influence of the metamodern epistemic shift—an emergence out of the fractured postmodern soil that has been explored as a home to some theorizations of Western Buddhisms.

Gleig also notes that a "fundamental optimism" and "a celebratory attitude toward combining virtual and digital spaces" have emerged from such gatherings.[488] This kind of comfort and playfulness around technological and spiritual intersectionality could also be understood in the context of the metamodern sensibility. Furthermore, the playful, contemporary language *Buddhist Geeks* and *#Hashtag meditation*—immediately placing seemingly dichotomous elements into relationship in a manner that does not seek to deconstruct or tear them down (as in postmodernism) nor to set one against the other as a right versus wrong or winner versus loser (as in bifurcative modernist narratives) but rather to forge creative conjunctions, communities in communication, out of their oscillative, dynamic meeting—is at the heart of the metamodern cultural sensibility.

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[486] Gleig, "From Buddhist Hippies," 19.
[487] Gleig, "From Buddhist Hippies," 21, italics mine.
[488] Gleig, "#Hashtag Meditation."

Gleig's paper title itself, "#Hashtag Meditation, Cyborg Buddhas and Enlightenment as an Epic Win: Buddhism, Technology and the New Social Media," utilizes tools and jargon central to the millennial post-postmodern vernacular (such as hashtagging and *epic win*).

One potential point of interest about the two examples of religious "postmodernisms" I mention here is that, unlike the way the postmodern as a culture of irony and removal is often maligned, religious postmodernisms are not inflecting the term with a kind of "sad truth about society" tone, or lamenting the nihilistic dead-endedness or bemoaning the troubling aspects of late capitalism that Jameson so influentially pointed to. They also do not look suspiciously at networks of "loose forms of belonging" and the fluidity of identities as fostering of "soft responsibilities" of the kind that lead to a kind of breakdown of communities, as Ward does.[489] The examples here of postmodern Christianity, Buddhist postmodernism, and Hume and McPhillips's secular-spiritual postmodern, seem to be looking for that term to do the work of locating a human beating heart and a sense of community and promise. It is unknown whether these recent attempts I have spoken of here to claim the term *postmodern* but reshape its meanings come as a consequence of being unaware of theorizations of the post-postmodern.

5.6. Tough Talk on Experience

Clasquin-Johnson, also a scholar of Asian religions, has made the observation that metamodernism approximates certain Vedantic and Buddhist positions that have been

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[489] Ward, "Theology and Postmodernism," 471–73.

absorbed osmotically in the contemporary Western SBNR milieu. He writes that

metamodernism has the unique ability to be a container for paradoxes, needing neither to

literalize nor to rationalize, nor to show one point of view as "winning," nor to

deconstruct. He feels that this is done by "an essential acknowledgement of differences"

but also the "psycho-spiritual technology" of, for example, the Zen koan, where

suspending the urge to "solve" the paradox is the point.[490] This echoes several of my

points about the unique way that this episteme finds positions between positions, as well

as its potential relationship to Asian religious tropes.

That Asian-originating religious philosophies and contemplative practices are

commonly appropriated as "spiritual technologies"—as practices directed at a personal

experience of mental health or at the goal of awakening or enlightenment—certainly has

significance in accounting for their popularity in the West, as well. The experientially

minded SBNRs balance a number of paradoxes, feeling that a personal mystical

encounter or apprehension of a spiritual truth is what makes their practice seem more real

or more concrete, and validates the spiritual tradition, but also being aware that too much

"selfing" causes suffering.

As Western teachers of Vedanta and Buddhism and also transpersonal

psychotherapists seem to take pains to point out lately, emphasizing one's experience can

also simultaneously validate and reify the self or ego. In the world of New Age and

SBNR spiritualities, this would (theoretically) be glossed as a negative, though in the

language of psychotherapy it is also a sign of personal growth. In this final section, I will

discuss three articles in popular Buddhism magazines (popular as in found near the

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[490] Clasquin-Johnson, "Towards a Metamodern Academic Study," 5.

check-out at most natural food stores, and popular as in the intended audience), two from *Shambhala Sun* magazine (now called *Lion's Roar),* a publication founded by the Tibetan Shambhala lineage, and one in *Tricycle* magazine (subtitled *The Buddhist Review*), both catering amiably to all forms of Buddhism and thus to SBNRs.

The title of a 2013 article in *Shambhala Sun,* "When Ego Meets Non-Ego," shows understanding of paradox and emphasizes a both/and perspective on the value of their meeting. The article is subtitled, "Western psychology and Buddhism—together they offer us a complete diagnosis of the human condition."[491] The author writes, "Buddhism and Western psychotherapy attempt to provide a comprehensive model of the mind and to address human suffering at its deepest level. While Buddhism and Western psychology can conflict with or complement each other in myriad ways, today a growing number of professionals are appreciating the synergy of the two disciplines."[492] The goal of Western psychotherapy is understood as an actualized self, enabled to experience states of happiness. But both Buddhism and psychotherapy as traditions are means of "'shining a light on the rejected, unprocessed parts of the psyche.'"[493] This reflects back to my discussion of the soteriological shift that differentiates the SBNR from the New Age.

Another recent article, "Are You Looking to Buddhism When You Should Be Looking to Therapy?" in *Tricycle* first takes an either/or position on the two, but then offers another view. The author begins by mentioning Buddhist meditation teacher and clinical psychologist Jack Engler's influential study from thirty years ago that began from his observation that many people who come to Buddhism are looking for the kind of help

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[491] Miller, "When Ego Meets Non-Ego," 53.
[492] Miller, "When Ego Meets Non-Ego," 54.
[493] Miller, "When Ego Meets Non-Ego," 55. Here, Miller quotes Tara Brach, psychologist and insight meditation practitioner.

specific to psychotherapy. C.W. Huntington Jr. notes that since that time, "this conflation between Buddhist practice and psychotherapy has only deepened." The difference, in Huntington's words, is that the latter is "dedicated to a method of *healing* that leaves the conventional structure of self-as-agent intact as the focal point of attention, whereas Buddhist spiritual practice engages in a sustained, methodical *dismantling* of our customary preoccupation with self-centered experience."[494]

Huntington then examines the contemporary neuroscientific work of psychiatrist Jeffrey Schwartz with OCD patients (relevant as related to the view that their condition of ego-dystonic thinking is "to some extent … a familiar dimension of everyone's mental life"). This work involved teaching them a technique derived from his own mindfulness meditation practice and "'affording the patient an impartial, detached perspective on his own thoughts,'" —the first of several stages of developing, in effect, a kind of witness consciousness.[495] Subsequent stages were more overtly psychotherapeutic. Huntington then considers foundational concepts in Buddhism, such as the first Noble Truth, that he avers virtually define the human as wired for "a primal discontent inherent to even the most exalted states of concentration and bliss."[496]

However, the either/or Huntington sets up next changes the valence somewhat: "[E]ither let go of the self and its world without reservation," he writes, "or embrace them both wholeheartedly, just as they are … the first [being] the expression of insight or wisdom, the second, that of boundless empathy and universal compassion."[497] Rather

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[494] Huntington Jr., "Are You Looking to Buddhism," 62, 64.
[495] The witness consciousness is significant as a major *pramana* or "means of knowledge" for Vedanta.
[496] Huntington Jr., "Are You Looking," 65.
[497] Huntington Jr., "Are You Looking," 104.

than an ultimatum, this could be read as him giving Western practitioners two approaches to deal with the mind, depending upon which form of expression they feel more attracted to. For SBNRs and their Buddhist-affiliated contemporaries seeking a way to validate their relationships to this-worldly social concerns, this may suit them well.

The paradox of seeking states of happiness as against the clear understanding that the Buddhist practices are not meant as a means to this end is of course nothing new. From my own experience in satsangs, in Buddhist sanghas, and on meditation retreats, I would say that in most every session, an attendee brings this up in some form or another as their personal aporia. The point is also being made ever more frequently in publications popular with the Western SBNR and Buddhist practitioner, in articles that seem meant to serve as public disabusings to followers of the idea that the goal or outcome of engagement with Asian spiritual traditions should be a happiness experience.

Or any experience at all. Robert Sharf, writing that "religious experience is a relatively late and distinctively Western invention," makes this summary assessment about how Westerners came to their ideas of Asian religions' emphasis on experience: "The valorization of experience in Asian thought can be traced to a handful of twentieth-century Asian religious leaders and apologists, all of whom were in sustained dialogue with their intellectual counterparts in the West."[498] He references influential figures such as D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966), whose version of Zen "owes as much to his exposure to Western thought as it does to indigenous Asian or Zen sources.... In the end, his unrelenting emphasis on an unmediated inner experience, is not derived from Buddhist sources so much as from his broad familiarity with European and American philosophical

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[498] Sharf, "Experience," 99.

and religious writings."[499] If Suzuki and other monolithic figures come to their version of their religious tradition through the already-filtered Western version, leaving Westerners with philosophies, tenets, and practices that upheld certain expectations felt to be erroneous by others, there are teachers today who seem intent on chipping away at a reframe.

The pointed use of such *tough talk* by spiritual teachers is exemplified in another 2013 article in *Shambhala Sun* magazine. On the cover is the title of a featured article from Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse, "Not for Happiness." That this title is so prominently displayed seems indicative of the shift that has made Western readers open to taking in such a provocative statement. Making prominent the idea that the Buddhist path is laden with difficulty would not seem to be a selling point for the glossy magazine cover. This type of magazine certainly still counts on a romanticized version of Asian traditions and a readership whose desire for blissful states will sell *zafus* and *zabutons*, chimes, retreat packages, and other meditation-related goods and services. So, the fact that we now can see such an austere pronouncement directly on the front cover strikes me as significant.

McMahan writes that among the extreme expressions of the tendency to decontextualize Buddhism are its presentation "as one among 'techniques' for providing personal meaning, blissful experiences, self-improvement, and … like many other products, as a quick remedy for a wide variety of problems" of the worldly sort.[500] Huntington warns that "pristine unassailable mental health is often assumed to be the

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[499] Sharf, "Experience," 101. McMahan adds that Suzuki's influence on modernization came through amalgamating Zen with concepts from Western traditions of Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and psychoanalysis (24).
[500] McMahan, *The Making of*, 251.

ultimate goal of all study and practice of the dharma. The problem, however, is that it isn't."[501]

The subheading of the article, "Are You Looking to Buddhism When You Should Be Looking to Therapy?" administers this warning: "[I]f it feels too good, it's probably not Buddhism. But if you want real transformation, if you want painful honesty and deep uncomfortable change, then read on."[502] So-named *New Age* notions of Buddhism are criticized:

> The aim of far too many teachings these days is to make people "feel good," and even some Buddhist masters are beginning to sound like New Age apostles. Their talks are entirely devoted to validating the manifestation of ego and endorsing the "rightness" of our feelings, neither of which have anything to do with the teachings.… Dharma teachings … were definitely not designed to cheer you up. On the contrary, the dharma was devised specifically to expose your failings and make you feel awful.… It is such a mistake to assume that practicing dharma will help us calm down and lead an untroubled life; nothing could be further from the truth. Dharma is not a therapy.… Dharma is tailored specifically to turn your life upside down—it's what you sign up for.… If you practice and your life fails to capsize, it is a sign that what you are doing is not working. This is what distinguishes the dharma from New Age methods involving auras, relationships, communication, well-being, the Inner Child, being one with the universe, and tree

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[501] Huntington Jr., "Are You Looking," 62.
[502] Khyentse, "Not for Happiness."

hugging. From the point of view of dharma, such interests are the toys of samsaric beings—toys that quickly bore us senseless.[503]

Not to say that these sorts of warnings have not been issued over the decades past to Western enthusiasts of Asian religions. Chögyam Trungpa wrote,

> The problem is that we tend to seek an easy and painless answer. But this kind of solution does not apply to the spiritual path, which many of us should not have begun at all. Once we commit ourselves to this spiritual path, it is very painful, and we are in for it. We have committed ourselves to the pain of exposing ourselves, of taking off our clothes, our skin, nerves, heart, brains, until we are exposed to the universe. Nothing will be left. It will be terrible, excruciating, but that is the way it is.[504]

His even more famous quote advising an audience at the beginning of a lecture in the mid-1980s, oft quoted and almost never cited, was "My advice to you is not to undertake the spiritual path. It is too difficult, too long, and is too demanding. I suggest you ask for your money back, and go home. This is not a picnic. It is really going to ask everything of you. So, it is best not to begin. However, if you do begin, it is best to finish."[505]

The mantra can be heard across the Neo-Advaita and Neo-Zen satsang circuits, as well. For instance, addressing misconceptions of spiritual bliss and reframing it as essentially a hit-and-miss epiphenomenon, Adyashanti writes,

> It is important that we know what awakening is *not*, so that we no longer chase the by-products of awakening. We must give up the pursuit of positive emotional

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[503] Khyentse, "Not for Happiness," 36.
[504] Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism,* 81.
[505] Trungpa qtd in Badiner and Grey, eds. *Zig Zag Zen*, 55.

states through spiritual practice. The path of awakening is not about positive emotions. On the contrary, enlightenment may not be easy or positive at all. It is not easy to have our illusions crushed. It is not easy to let go of long-held perceptions. We may experience great resistance to seeing through even those illusions that cause us a great amount of pain. This is something many people don't know they're signing up for when they start on a quest for spiritual awakening.[506]

In perusing such publications, one notes generally that emotional states that are *not* "happiness oriented" are now increasingly being permitted, encouraged even, in contrast, again, with the New Age era's positive-thinking eliding the difficult emotional states. Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse continues, "If ... disconcerting truths rattle your worldly self-confidence, be happy.… To feel depressed is not always a bad thing. It is completely understandable for someone to feel depressed and deflated when their most humiliating failing is exposed. Who wouldn't feel a bit raw in such a situation?"[507] *A Course in Miracles* also includes caveats akin to this. So, rather than saying it is only now that spiritual leaders are finding it necessary to engage in such tough talk, I mean to say that it becomes more observable, more public, more normative, to lovingly confront oneself. Metamodernism was presented in chapter two as an avenue for a naming of and reclamation of the not-so-positive, or what I referred to there as *the light and the dark* of the human as an aggregate, especially in that the SBNR seeker may see an aesthetic mirroring of the same sentiment in secular culture.

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[506] Adyashanti, *The End of Your World,* 16, emphasis in original.
[507] Khyentse, "Not for Happiness," 36.

Khyentse's observation that some Buddhist masters begin to sound like New Age apostles shows again the critical tone toward the commodification of all things "Eastern." On the other hand, that proliferation and orientalization of the "wisdom of the East" has brought more exposure to these ideas of difficulty and darkness helping to surface authentic emotions, and of bringing the ability to witness one's own mental processes. These of course are elements that mirror processes in psychotherapy.

In sum, the origins of and opinions about the role of experience in Asian practices that contemporary Westerners may have been misconstrued in the contemporary period, and the conflation of psychotherapy and Buddhist practice may be, as Huntington feels, "to the detriment of both."[508] I am not here to dispute either of these readings but to point out that because SBNRs continue the New Age's habit of picking and choosing from a menu of spiritual items, they are not likely to be turned off by what these sorts of histories that Sharf points to unveil. In fact, they are likely to prefer a both/and approach. Moreover, based on the popularity of movements such as the Buddhist Geeks and *Engaged Buddhism*, it is likely that SBNRs may double down on their search for spiritualities that can act as containers for authentic emotions and experiences, and which are perceived as possible in embodied, immanence-based registers, and that they will insist upon these spiritualities bringing benefit to both personal and social domains.

The reader wondering whether there is a contradiction present in how the tough talk I've spoken of relates to metamodernism deserves credit for having followed the pieces of the argument that evince paradox. I have noted that Asian religious practices tend to be meant to take emphasis off of personal experience, yet I've also stated that

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[508] Huntington Jr., "Are You Looking," 106.

metamodernism emphasizes and even protects personal affectivity and interiority. I've cited the opinion that dharma practitioners should be prepared for misery, while writing in the previous chapter that metamodern spiritual approaches can include plenty of playfulness. This chapter is intended to make the point that this difficulty and deep searching are not the least bit incompatible with metamodernism. The concluding section will address these apparent incongruities further.

5.7. Conclusion

I hope I have shown here why it would be a mistake to think of metamodernism as a "feel good" sensibility or as one that somehow has an agenda to help the world heal or to help people get along with one another. On this slippery point I have tried to be as clear as possible: felt experiences are not necessarily pleasant or warm and fuzzy. They needn't be driven by a hope for world peace or a condition in which tensions that exist between forces are resolved. (Any larger teleological goal and any such metanarratological solution-making would need to be considered suspiciously *modernist*, in any case.)

Also we must contend with the fact that the metamodern period has produced a president who arguably won votes by choosing feelings over facts.[509] I have written

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[509] To be clear, though I do not tend to favor labeling the entirety of an individual with one epistemic label or another, I *do* argue in an essay that the current president's approach to "truth" positions aspects of his affect and his strategy as *postmodern*. Abramson, on the other hand, has declared Trump a "'metamodern human'—a mash-up of the naïve and the knowing, the plebeian and the elite, the absurd and the dead-serious." See Kolowich, "What Is Seth Abramson Trying to

elsewhere that the manner in which the current president (and Bernie Sanders, as well), in the last United States presidential election, appealed to voters "reflect[s] something peculiar to the metamodern cultural shift—which we classify in part by a specific kind of refracting of reality through subjunctive lenses (like movies and reality TV shows) and also in part by the propensity [for the public] to choose based on what excites a sense of authenticity and feeling."[510]

I also have objected to the usage of epistemes as delimited by the idea that a given episteme is a force driving actions in the direction of a *specific* ethical or qualitative outcome. By definition they cannot have agendas to do or to convey anything. They are a report on a large swath of conditions that make up a composite. The important point easily missed is this: all epistemes must necessarily deal with ethics since they deal with humans' ideas of truth, knowledge, and meaning; and precisely because they deal with humans' ideas and ideals, all epistemes must necessarily also allow for, and *account for*, a range of ethical conclusions and outcomes.

The modern episteme may be said to be characterized by grand narratives of progress. What kind of progress and to what end has clearly run the gamut in terms of ethical stances and outcomes. Modernism did not produce all Hitlers nor all Albert Schweitzers. The postmodern episteme may be said to be characterized by relativistic,

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Tell Us?" I have written that this approach *also* reflects that which appeals to new *metamodern* sensibilities in specific ways that we would be wise to examine. See Ceriello, "The Metamodernity of Trump's."

[510] In this article I quote John Oliver in his exposé of Trump University on *Last Week Tonight*, during which Oliver finds a "playbook" from the now-defunct Trump University. In the document instructors are told, "'You don't sell products, benefits or solutions—You sell feelings.' And that is what is happening now," Oliver points out (referring to the presidential campaign). "Crowds at a Trump rally may not be able to point to a concrete benefit or solution he offers. But they know how he makes them feel." Oliver, "Trump University," qtd in Ceriello, "The Metamodernity of Trump's."

constructivist conclusions. Within those wide parameters, artifacts of postmodernism have also offered a range of ethical or post-ethical ideas. Postmodernism did not produce all Charles Mansons nor all Gloria Steinems nor all bell hooks.

What I have tried to suggest here is that while the same must be true of metamodernism, this episteme is trickier since its emphasis tends to fall on subjectivity, interiority, and felt experience—characteristics with which personal ethics come by default. This fact I believe has led some to the idea that certain kinds of ethical considerations or outcomes will inevitably result, forgetting that a range of possibilities will be present, as with the other epistemes. Either that range *must* be possible or metamodernism is not an episteme comparable to, or capable of being in dialogue with, modernism and postmodernism.

Previously I mentioned that epistemes may be considered "the epistemological unconscious of an era." However, it is important to note that this era should be considered no longer so unconscious to the actors in it. Given the acceleration of self-reflexivity starting with postmodernism and continuing into the millennial period as assisted by technology and media practices, actors understand themselves as located in a given context and timeframe more so than ever before.[511] To keep with a metaphor previously deployed, we would say that more fish are understanding themselves as swimming in something called *water*. In fact, this was already true of postmodernism, according to McHale: "From the very outset, postmodernism was self-conscious about its identity as a period, conscious of its own historicity, because it conceived of itself as historical,

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[511] McHale, "What Was Postmodernism?"

coming after something, namely modernism—a historicity encoded in the very term 'postmodernism.' Postmodernism periodized itself."[512]

However, with metamodernism we have something of an advancement in this self-periodization. It is more than that. The increase in what I previously called *hyper-self-reflexivity* (chapter three) or *life-as-movie* (chapters two and four) will be very important as a factor in the shaping of the episteme. Never before have actors felt the kind of culturewide sense of agency to decide for themselves what an episteme—what metamodernism—means for them than exists today.

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[512] McHale, "What Was Postmodernism?"

Chapter 6

Conclusion: "And Yet ... We *Are* Elsewhere"

Five years ago Ward wrote, "It is far too premature to announce the demise of the

postmodern condition while two of the primary forces behind that condition—the rise of

neoliberal economics and the liquid realities of information—morph into ever-new

guises.… And yet," he concludes, "we *are* elsewhere."[513] This project has been an

attempt to outline the possible shape and contour of that elsewhere, to help fill in some of

the color and shade in the portrait already in progress, and specifically to bring such a

view to bear on the study of comparative mysticism and contemporary spiritualities.

What attracted me to the idea of this characterization of the post-postmodern was

that it conveys an understanding of shifting ontologies that mirrors the mystical and

makes sense of the current interest in it, while also being an entirely secular theorization.

Simone Stirner writes, "[The metamodern] subject is a coherent self that re-introduces the

possibility for identification, affection and selfhood, although not in a naive, unreflective

way."[514] It is the study of comparative religion and contemporary spirituality that can

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[513] Ward, "Theology and Postmodernism," 481.
[514] Stirner, "Notes on the State."

make sense of such a set of ontologies to which she refers. And metamodernism can contextualize the Kripalean gnostic reversals and reflexive rereadings via the oscillative function, allowing access to multiple modalities of understandings. The ambiguities and questionings built into such are reflected in the previous quote from Karthauser: "No Absolute Truth, no, but contextual, in situ mini-truths that provisionally gesture at ethical, moral, or aesthetic universals."[515]

I have said that the "resolving" of tensions between epistemic views is not what metamodernism is attempting. This is in part because the dynamism of human vicissitudes, the *metamodern awesome*, as I called it earlier, is part of the reclamation of affect and protection of felt experience. The New Age's modernist grand narratives are what millennials have found wanting. Instead, the younger generation's recognition of the interiority of each subject, if I am correct here, has already made a shift toward appreciating perspectives different from one's own. I have cited the increased inclusivism and pluralism seen in metamodern millennial SBNRs as one example. Studies on fandoms showed another. The example of *Buffy*'s earnest and exceptionally engaged fandom—individuals who seem to derive ethical and even religious meanings from the show support hundreds of virtual and real-life (RL) communities centered on these meanings they make. The reception of Russell Brand's multimodal affect and secular spirituality is another.

Schemas for metamodern social programs or metamodern political platforms have been proposed such that one can align as a kind of "card-carrying metamodern" of sorts. When people claim "metamodern" as an identity category, they often seem to be taking

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[515] Karthauser, "The Awesome."

metamodernism as a movement that one can make a choice to join. Saying "I'm metamodern!" could also mean "A lot of the cultural artifacts that I really like are metamodern!" but in my assessment enthusiasts of metamodernism in the general audience category (i.e., non-academics) more often mean the former. Clasquin-Johnson reifies this perspective, reporting that "metamodernists see it as more than just a methodology. It is also a movement, a prescriptive view."[516] (Though he does not specify to which group's credo or prescription he refers.) Certainly I have called the SBNR "metamodern"—shorthand for *a metamodernism-informed contemporary spiritual phenomenon*. But we need to exercise caution with these attributions. That many have confused a political or ethical position with an episteme makes the explication of what metamodernism "is" both more difficult and more important.

This cultural move to affiliate thus is fascinating because of what it indicates about some individuals' urgent desire to establish a next new narrative of social restructuring. Future work on these populations will prove interesting and helpful not only for those of us working on the theorizing end but also as we look ethnographically to understand current contemporary millennial and plural spiritual populations.

Professor of English and film studies Robert McLaughlin is one who sees a social mission coming out of post-postmodern literary movements, perhaps not in the form of any specific goal but rather a reinvigoration or a zeal toward addressing the social sphere at all. Ashlie Kontos citing McLaughlin talks of a reenergizing of "'literature's social

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[516] Clasquin-Johnson, "Towards a Metamodern Academic Study," 3.

mission, its ability to intervene in the social world' ... by reclaiming language and repudiating the postmodern prevalence of 'detachment from the social world.'"[517]

In a different academic sphere, Robert Fuller asked whether the so-called unchurched spiritual traditions "are capable of promoting a balanced spirituality": "Most of the world's highly regarded spiritual traditions have tried to strengthen both our capacity for receptivity (i.e., contemplative awareness of our innerconnection with a wider spiritual universe) and our capacity for agency (i.e., moral action that makes us effective agents of wholeness-making in the surrounding world)." He concludes that

> unchurched spiritual systems have an uneven record in promoting these dual
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> spiritual concerns.… A good many of those who find themselves 'spiritual but not
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> religious' have fought their way to a set of beliefs and practices that enables them
>
> to reject a purely materialistic view of life. To this extent, our unchurched
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> traditions have enabled a sizable percentage of Americans to achieve as mature a
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> spiritual orientation to life as can be reasonably expected in our contemporary
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> world.[518]

Indeed, we might ask whether the SBNR, or other contemporary unchurched spiritual affiliations with sufficient numbers as to be considered as a group, avails itself of any particular social mission. Whatever such "maturity" might entail, I feel strongly that our readings of millennial SBNR's approach to or sense of social mission should reflect its complexity.

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[517] McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern Discontent," 55, qtd in Ashlie Kontos, "I Just Want to Believe," 2. Thanks go to Ashlie Kontos for making me aware of McLaughlin's essay.
[518] Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious,* 11–12.

On one hand, from a metamodern perspective, any success they might attain will be partly in spite of itself, as a metamodern-inflected idea of "mission" would tend to be written not as grand but as personal. That is, the locus of meaning and agency would be centered on the individual. It would stand to reason that, as individuals' self-reflexive awareness increases and the language and practices of cultivating it (e.g., the popularity of *mindfulness* as a simple technology for reckoning with an individual moment) become more culturally normative, narratives of progress with pre-scripted outcomes naturally start to become less relevant.

To put it another way, the metamodern perspective tacitly refutes the assumption that meaningful moments must necessarily add up to any composite soteriological or social outcome. I am not suggesting so much that specific social agendas would be deemphasized but that they would not be thought of as grand fixes to all social ills. If one's felt experience includes some story lines wrapping up and other narratives taking their place, the sense conveyed is that there is no grand salvific end, no single story line. As the young activists from the February 2018 Parkland shooting in Florida proclaim, they are not treating gun control as a political issue and are neither on the left nor the right. They simply want to feel safe in school. Not only that, but as I mentioned in chapter two, young SBNRs see no reason they should not have a place at the table. They are unconvinced by the argument that they are too young to understand the scope of the issues.

On the other hand, the metamodern swapping out of soteriologies for story lines that emphasize personal, felt experience might indicate the potential for an increased emphasis on social mission. The pundits who delight in calling out millennials'

selfishness and their entitled behaviors perhaps miss the way in which individuals of

these newer generations are more likely to take the state of the world much more

personally. If we assume the millennial SBNR to be the spawn of unchurched seeker

spiritualities that began appropriating tenets of influential Asian philosophies such as the

Vedanta and Buddhism over a century ago—especially from those monistic traditions

that present global issues as directly reflecting an individual's inner, spiritual issues, and

vice versa—we have to presume that metamodern millennials may in some respects

inherit "a sense of historical perspective, and an awareness and responsibility over one's

place within it."[519] To put it plainly, the metamodern savior is not a removed, perfected,

immaculate, unified, transcendent oneness. If there is to be saving, it will be ordinary,

warts-and-all, human-led and accountable to life here on Earth.

As for the future of something like the SBNR as a movement, an epistemic

framing as I have done here speaks to why it would be likely to have some teeth as part

of this contemporary cultural shift. If my conclusions as to its connection to

metamodernism are accepted, whether SBNR beliefs, philosophies, and practices (and,

not irrelevantly, their consumer habits) will be sustainable or will be supplanted by the

next spiritual fad will necessarily be connected to the staying power of metamodernism.

Just as postmodern sensibilities began to undo the acceptability of the New Age as an

identity and each began to give way as their operative narratives stopped fitting with the

current-day constituents, there is every reason to expect the same of metamodernism and

the SBNR. That said, the wide pluralistic net that each casts and the fact of

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[519] Craig Pollard frames the metamodern shift through his observations of the ways
"contemporary artists in all disciplines are able to address the past and its influence without
conceding to it as a passive or inevitable force." Pollard, "*That* Future Islands."

metamodernism being by nature absorptive, allowing for paradox and for contradictions of other epistemes to be creative fodder, rather than seeking to supplant them, may be expected to contribute to the SBNR's or other such contemporary secular-spirituality movement's longevity.

It must be underscored that the epistemic model overall recognizes that any cultural sensibility is the product of tensions between various elements including liberal or progressive and conservative or "alt" forms of religion and culture, with their attendant social views and mores. What happens next for the SBNR is therefore predictable only by such myriad factors. Identities associated with "progressive spiritualities" (such as the SBNR, Nones, etc.) are naturally a work in progress, moving alongside other "emerging ideological and organizational structures."[520]

It may be a revelation to some that the radical reflexivities creating culture today encompass a surprising variety of political and social views. As I explained in chapter five, an episteme is neither an ethics nor a politics. Though there is also nothing apolitical or amoral about metamodernism. That said, the overall emphasis on individual felt experience and of the *both/andness* of fluid identity narratives as distinct from making an either/or choice, may be somewhat more likely to give way to views or stances that are more progressive in the end. But metamodern sensibilities that tend toward protecting one's interiority and subjectivity may also produce and/or protect the interiorities of individuals with any number of hoped outcomes, ideologically speaking.

For example, metamodern aesthetic sensibilities such as playfulness, quirkiness, childlike wonder, fluidity of identities, and utilization of irony in a braided sense with

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[520] Lynch, *The New Spirituality*, 19.

other epistemic guiding truths, can arguably be found deployed in projects that align with the political right. In the United States, some branches of the alt-right may be read as utilizing metamodern reflexivity to engage in what must objectively be seen as quite effective media campaigns, some of which support right-wing agendas.

Dale Beran's tracking of the 4chan subculture's influence on the alt-right has arguably metamodern implications (although Beran does not make use of the term *metamodern*). He has written that at least one highly influential faction of individuals now deemed alt-right did not set out in particular support of a candidate or platform as much as they were against what they saw as a liberal hegemony in effect getting between them and their PlayStations. Under the cloak of anonymity, groups of media-savvy apoliticals on 4chan that he studied made fun of the antics of both the political left and right during the election, up until the point at which Hillary Clinton was perceived to have stomped on their cultural meme—Pepe the Frog. This 4chan group then put their energies behind the Republican candidate. In this example, the political alignment is not as important as the felt experience of a community or culture of fun. In fact the 4chan individuals are much more interested in aligning as anti-political or in mucking up the business-as-usual machinery, according to Beran.[521]

Kelton Sears further explains how the culture of trolling contributed to the overturning of the campaign of Clinton, all hinging upon the September 12, 2016, article on Clinton's web page in which she calls out Pepe the Frog, a popular cartoon figure embraced by certain 4chan communities, as a symbol of the alt-right. Thus, in short order, it became one. "In one fell swoop, she both legitimized a band of trolls and

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[521] Beran, "4chan:The Skeleton."

officially handed it sole ownership of a powerful meme."[522] This act, which some believe

changed the tide of the presidential election, can be interpreted as the 4chan community

prioritizing its collective felt experience—of its culture, and its fun, really—and reacting

to the threat of being stomped out by social-justice warriors.

This phenomenon, both political and apolitical, has certain undeniable

metamodern undertones, especially in the current U.S. political culture in which "left and

right are in some sense outdated ideas," Sears writes. "The new division in politics is

between those who favor the current global hegemony and those who are against it. Like

the Hollywood heroes, right and left have been competing to become this new radical anti-

status quo party. And so far, in both Europe and America, the right has won."[523] It seems

that the "winners" are at least in part determined by which grouping is more capable of

"going meta."

Whether any of the 4chan individuals would count themselves as SBNR is

unknown. Subsequent works on metamodernism will certainly need to attempt to track

the metamodern components of political phenomena that align more toward the right.

They may share with the SBNR the sense that standing with feet in different camps,

maintaining a fluidity of identity narratives, feels more "normal," more acceptable. And in

this sense they also make cultural performance out of a metamodern sensibility. The

both/and may look different from that perspective, but it is nevertheless a kind of human

and cultural impulse through which both sides could, theoretically, be seeking

relationality.

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[522] Sears, "Seizing the Memes of Production," 7.
[523] Beran, "4chan: The Skeleton."

The reason to take careful note of how these sensibilities play out should be clear. For some on (or ascribed to being on) the alt-right, their dominant sensibility may revolve around the right to have one's felt experience—including views or emotions that may be seen as not socially acceptable by some—not extinguished or theorized away. So, a reflexive sensibility does not equate to a homogeneous perspective of personal or cultural sensitivity. But the performance of subverting what some see as the dominant liberal paradigm that threatens to subsume or squash something felt to be of value is what I suggest is a common metamodern aspect between those with varying ethoi.[524]

The content of one's felt experience is not at issue here as much as the honoring of anyone's felt experience. So not "Everyone should feel what I feel," but "This is my inner world, and I ask to be seen." Any underlying systematic negation of other perspectives or any relativity-based washing away of difference, are not inherent to the metamodern episteme but left over from prior to it. Recall that metamodernism reacts against postmodernism's retreat from taking stances—of any kind—and, as Dember has asserted[525] and I have concurred here, protects *all* felt experience, even as there may be opposing ethical stances, as we saw in the example of *Buffy* in chapter three or Russell Brand inviting the Westboro Baptist Church members to his show as mentioned in chapter four. It would be too simplistic to say that difference is somehow now magically more acceptable under metamodernism. However, if one were to say that there is a metamodern-informed manner of addressing social tensions, it might include looking for the common humanity of all actors in the face of disagreements, for example. As the multiple frames of the movie version of reality integrate as a normative everyday frame,

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[524] Credit is due to Greg Dember for explication of this idea.
[525] Dember, "After Postmodernism: Eleven Metamodern Methods."

there may be more room to accept figures who exceed boundaries. Whether or according to what rubric such individuals *should* be accepted is a very different question.

As Alasdair MacIntyre wrote as early as 1985, "We live in a specifically emotivist culture" with a kind of "reduction of morality to personal preference," meaning that "morality has become a matter of individual taste," and amounts to "emotional satisfaction … a culture where the rightness of desires is tantamount to desires having rights; a culture where feelings ... have come to exercise very considerable 'ethical' authority ... sometimes exercising psycho-ethical tyranny."[526] It is an amazing sentiment to hear coming from more than thirty years ago, since it seems far more true now than it did in the postmodern 1980s.

Perhaps we can also put the epistemic mapping schema to use to understand the fears of this emotivist cultural expression. Some of the fears and concerns people are evincing are likely about a felt attack on traditions or institutions deemed sacred. Pew polls have reported religious affiliations on the wane for the last decade or more. Pockets of pop-culture sacrality and the *communitas* of the alternative cultures they give rise to can hardly be understated and may very well confuse those who do not understand them. Cusack and Farley write that not only have popular culture, the internet, and new communications media "radically transformed the climate in which religious affiliation and personal identities are negotiated," but that "embattled religious institutions in secular modernity, and the modern secular state itself, with its exaltation of science and technology, can be viewed as being under siege by the unsanctioned and powerfully renascent occult and paranormal."[527] Some may fear the engines of progress-driven

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[526] Alasdair MacIntyre, qtd in Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life*, 196–97.
[527] Cusack and Farley, eds., "Religion, the Occult" p. 1–2.

modernity. And sometimes the attack may be thought to come via a perception of (postmodern) rebuff of both traditional and modern values—one reading of the work of kitsch, irony, and cynicism. It is not clear whether those fearing the downfall of a moral society have spent much time considering if the current neoliberal climate might also be engaged with thoughtfulness, reverence, hope, and creativity.

There is no doubt that innovative, community-minded, spirituality- and value-driven responses have arisen. Will they be enough, these interlocutors wonder, to combat the forces of greed and the orientation of self-spiritualities toward self-satisfaction? What do we make of the "entitled" youth audacious enough to sue the government for failing to ensure a healthy, livable future, or those walking out of school to protest the failure to keep them safe? With these sorts of activist impulses in mind, as metamodernism continues to be analyzed we will need to dig deeply underneath surface-level criticisms of youth to ask if their impulses (instead or also) reflect a creative manner of grappling with the situation in which they stand. A characterization by Jerry Saltz of a recent wave of metamodern artists strikes me as one that is relevant to artists, activists, spiritual seekers, and young entrepreneurs: "At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind—what Emerson called 'alienated majesty.'"[528] Craig Pollard comments, "Metamodernism is an artifact of

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[528] Saltz, "Sincerity and Irony Hug It Out." I enjoy that Saltz's comment brings religion via Transcendentalism full circle with the historiographic backdrop to my analysis.

engendered forms of cultural production that can be read as strategies for negotiating the leftovers of postmodernism and the cultural climate in which we find ourselves."[529]

It would be important also to examine whether the ideas of MacIntyre, and of Heelas, Scholem, and Hanegraaff whose urgent concerns opened chapter two, originate in a project of seeking "the answer" to the problem that a given epistemic situation presents (Certainly neo-liberal commodification of spirituality is implicated in each of their concerns). If addressing such concerns hinges upon identifying a definable, guiding metanarrative, a singular "true" or "real," there may then be a failure to see that an oscillative relationship to things like spiritual beliefs, for example—neither banking on nor disowning them—may make room for innovation in terms of strategies for coping with the world as it is. Some of the metamodern feeling-based ideas will probably confound modernist-informed ethicists who might not recognize the moves of their youngers as salvific. The creation of nonliteral, meta-ironic memes and other such trifling-looking activities as forms of communication that actually are community-building are not well-understood by the predigital generations.

Finally, I close with a general comment on the effect of all this for scholarship in comparative religion. Debates dominating mysticism studies have for decades hinged upon the familiar bifurcation pitting universalism and constructivism, which I have framed here as the product of modern and postmodern views colliding. As I hope I have shown, what the distinguishing of metamodernism does usefully is to call attention to the full reflexive awareness of the human penchant to seek a grand theory and the simultaneous contemporary understanding that history will continually belie that effort.

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[529] Pollard, "*That* Future Islands Performance."

My admittedly audacious project has been to try to contribute to the theorization of an updated, third space where the human penchant toward grand, all-encompassing meanings and theories, and the twenty-first-century human experience of contextuality, are experienced and reflected culturally, secularly, and spiritually.

Moreover, metamodernism concedes the conundrum that has confronted academic comparativism—namely that there is no neutral language with which to compare. And yet its logic gives some address to the scholarly project of neither reducing the understanding of one religion to the terms of the other nor devaluing or dismissing the "subjective mélange" that ultimately results. The construct is still in development, even in the academic fields in which it has been most actively used. As work on theorizing this burgeoning episteme grows and matures, new insights will be possible within the field of religion.

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