

---

REVIEW ESSAY

**Reimagining Religious Imagination,  
in Theory and in Practice**

---

Adrian Ivakhiv

University of Vermont Environmental Program,  
153 South Prospect Street, Burlington VT 05405, Canada  
aivakhiv@uvm.edu

Jack Miles, *Religion as We Know It: An Origin Story* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2020).

T.M. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

David Morgan, *Images at Work: The Material Culture of Enchantment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination: Revealing and Making the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Flip: Epiphanies of Mind and the Future of Knowledge* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2019).

Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

With all the trends that mark the current study of religion—postsecularism, decolonization, the affective and sensorial turns, ‘lived’ and ‘everyday religion’, queer theory, and all manner of new materialisms and ontological entanglements—one thing (or two) that can hardly remain untouched is the way in which religion is *imagined*, and the way in which imagination is itself taken to be a central feature of religion.

There are of course many tomes continuing to be published on the words, texts, utterances, and rhetorics of religion. But few would question that images and the work of imagination—the concerted production of imaginal realms and ‘imaginaries’—remain essential to most of what is considered religion. At least one scholar (Hanegraaff 2020: 77) has even proposed that we rethink religion as ‘imaginative formations’, in place of the ‘discursive formations’ that remain a popular frame for the field. The present essay could be considered a contribution to that.

Yet, as several recent volumes make clear, it is the more primary question—what *is* religion, and what *isn't* it?—that is at stake in some of the recent reconceptualizations of the religious imagination. Jack Miles’s *Religion as We Know It: An Origin Story* presents a good summary of the arguments for religion being considered not at all a ‘natural kind’, but something that emerged from a history that is Christian, Western, and ultimately colonial: Christian especially in its connection to early Christianity’s separation of a religious domain from the ethnic and cultural spheres within which ritual practice was embedded in Judaism and imperial Rome; Western in its development via an encounter with its others, especially Islam, Judaism, and the ‘paganisms’ of its (real and imagined) past; and colonial in its application to the peoples encountered through the aggressive spread of European Christendom around the world.

Miles is no deconstructionist; his general editorship of the *Norton Anthology of World’s Religions*, with its six volumes devoted, respectively, to Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, duplicates all of the tropes of the ‘world religionist’s’ craft. (This short book is an adaptation of his introduction to the *Anthology*.) Yet the *Anthology’s* focus on *practice* over *belief*, and Miles’s own rigorous historicization of its central term, *world religions*, make clear that religion is not universal except insofar as its imposition through colonization, power, and epistemic force has created an impression which we can hardly wish away any longer. ‘Through most of world history’, Miles admits early on, ‘in most parts of the world, what we are accustomed to call religion, ethnicity, and culture have been inextricable parts of a single whole’ (p. 31). He could have mentioned art, economics, governance, law, food procurement, and other things, with the simple addition that while these may have been ‘a single whole’, they may also have been carved into categories unrecognizable to us, categories that don’t all map onto the ones to which we are accustomed.<sup>1</sup> But for all of that,

1. This point is effectively made, for instance, in Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin’s recent *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities*

here we are: 'religion' has taken a lot of work to create, but it is here, and the *Norton Anthology* tells us what some of its most widely spread variants (viewed retrospectively) have looked like in their many manifestations over time.

Taking a step back from the work of creating 'religion' as a phenomenon, we come to the creation of gods, spirits, and the other sorts of elusive entities religions tend to specialize at creating. T.M. Luhrmann's *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* aims to clarify this sort of production. The book is in fact an excellent case study of how *practice* has become central in the scholarly interpretation of religion, but also how a focus on practice can become ensnared in some knotty suppositions. Luhrmann is a leading light in the anthropology of religion; she is widely interviewed and cited, pens *New York Times* op-eds, and her books win awards and lengthy *New Yorker* profiles. Her research has focused on so many different religious communities—American Evangelicals, Black and Latino Catholics, Orthodox Jews, Anglo-Cuban Santería initiates, Indian Parsi Zoroastrians, Pentecostals in India and Africa, and British neo-Pagan ritual magicians—that by now its insights can be considered well-honed and thoroughly road-tested.

As suggested by her title, *How God Becomes Real* presents a kind of ontological constructivist perspective on religious beings, which are not real *ipso facto* (or *ex nihilo*; choose your metaphor) but must be *made* real. The reality of gods, spirits, and 'religious' and 'invisible' beings is something that is *accomplished* through the work and effort of their devotees, and this puts such entities on a different ontological plane than 'ordinary', 'factual', 'things of the everyday world' (p. 19). 'Spirits', she writes, 'are different in kind from ordinary objects' (p. 14). 'Mundane beliefs adjust to the empirical details' (p. 10), whereas 'supernatural beliefs' do not, because they are held much more tightly *due* to the cognitive and affective labor it has taken to produce them.

The argument is a familiar one to those who have followed Luhrmann's writing in the years since *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, her tremendously rich 1991 account of ceremonial magicians in southern England. A key concept in that work was 'interpretive drift', the activity by which one set of assumptions gets replaced by another through the repeated and communally supported effort at learning to see, hear, and perceive the world differently. One might, following Jacques Rancière (2004), call this a 'redistribution of the sensible', and it is in its focus on

(2016), and in well-known earlier work by Talal Asad (*Genealogies of Religion*, 1993), Brent Nongbri (*Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, 2013), Tomoko Masuzawa (*The Invention of World Religions*, 2005), and others.

sensibility, sensitivity, and their cultivation that Luhrmann's work continues to compel, even as she has applied it to such a disparate array of case studies. At times this argument brings her into close contact with other forms of ontological constructivism, such as those of Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and others she cites (mostly) in passing (and mostly approvingly).

The argument she weaves is expertly presented, with a tremendous array of empirical material to support it. There is a pitfall, however, that sneaks into her writing at key moments, where she appears to smuggle in unacknowledged and unquestioned assumptions about what religion is and is not. Recall that the key distinction in her argument is between things that are self-evidently real—things that are 'natural', empirically perceived, and known to be part of the everyday furniture of the world—and others that manifestly are not, and that therefore have to be *made* real. Luhrmann's emphasis is always on the various activities that make them real: the building up of rich and detailed 'paracosms' (via stories that can be serialized and reiterated in multiple forms), the 'talent and training' it takes to learn to pay attention to how gods and spirits respond to one's prayers, to become absorbed in those responses such that they change one's life, and to otherwise make the 'faith frame' (a key term in this book) as seemingly real as is ordinary reality. A second volume could equally describe the same number of ways in which gods and spirits come to *lose* their reality—which would of course be a volume on secularization at the societal level, or 'deconversion' at the individual level, and which would call for a third, on post-secularism; but perhaps that is asking too much.

In a key passage, Luhrmann writes,

What rituals do is to remind people that gods and spirits matter... People need rituals because people do not in fact treat their religious beliefs... that a helpful god is real the same way they treat their beliefs that trees grow upward and coconuts fall down... The idea that there is an invisible other who takes an active, loving interest in your life is in many ways preposterous and takes effort to maintain, even in a community that has never been secular. It takes intention and attention. (p. 17)

In other words, there is 'a mode of thinking in which gods and spirits really matter, and a mode of thinking about the *ordinary world of rocks and dogs and what to buy at the store*' (p. 21, emphasis mine). Luhrmann is drawing a line here between what is empirically self-evident, 'ordinary', and 'really out there', and what is not. 'The deep anthropological puzzle', she writes in the book's closing sentence, 'is how people come to feel intensely that invisible beings matter to their lives—how the invisible world comes close to humans and looks back, alive' (p. 184).

But is it the *invisibility* of gods that makes us have to work harder with them, or is it what they *do* for us? The subatomic world that is 'seen' by physicists through sophisticated machines in laboratory settings is no more visible to most people than the spirit world, yet the former doesn't amount to much (again, for most people), while the latter may if it brings *results* that count. The trees growing up and coconuts falling down do not matter much, unless of course they are essential to survival (or fatal, both of which they could be under the right circumstances). There is, I would suggest, an important difference between the empirical visibility of 'matters of fact', in Bruno Latour's parlance, and the existential presence of 'matters of concern', but the two of them do not necessarily line up against the dichotomy of the visible and the invisible, or the obviously and not-so-obviously real.

What this dichotomy misses, then, is that the rituals are not just reminding people that their gods and spirits matter. It is the work those entities are believed to perform that matters, and that matters much more than those rocks and 'what to buy at the store'. For any deities worth their salt, this is the work of healing from illness, comforting in the depths of despair, and otherwise transforming their subjects in the midst of the most concerning crises and challenges of life. Whether it is done by gods and spirits (and their shamanic facilitators), or by hospitals, therapists, and modern medicine, those kinds of things—healing, repairing a community after a social rift or the sudden loss of an important leader's life—take time and effort. And just because that effort has been offloaded to medical laboratories, universities, and decades of research does not mean that the effort has not been made. There is no free lunch, one might say, when it comes to illness, death, grief, hunger, warfare, disaster, and life's other exigencies—which is where those gods and spirits (or medical and therapeutic powers) are needed most.

How they do that is not just by the tricks of the fiction writer's trade (she often compares religious beliefs to *Harry Potter* books or the 'parasocial' reality taken on by television characters for their fans). Luhmann reassures us that 'The evidence still suggests that invisible beings are understood as *differently real* from everyday objects everywhere' (p. 19, emphasis mine); they are of a different ontological order than 'everyday objects'. She acknowledges that 'A god is not of course thought to be a fictional character by persons of faith', but then immediately slips up with the following: 'Nonetheless, the experience is parasocial because its content occurs largely inside the person's head, using his or her imagination' (p. 20)—as if the lessons of the embodied, extended, embedded, enactive, affective, and imaginal turns in the cognitive study of religion ('4EA plus I', let's call it) were rendered

irrelevant to where the experience of gods or spirits (or healing or transformation) was occurring.<sup>2</sup> The greater trajectory of Luhmann's argument works its way out of this problem by clarifying that what matters is how the 'inner' and 'outer', or what we might call subjectivity and objectivity, get blurred—in an area she comes to call the 'in-between'. But she pays too little attention to the way in which the world itself is already 'in between', a point I'll develop in reference to a few of the other books under review here.<sup>3</sup>

Matters of concern, then, may come couched in the symbolic language and efficacy of gods, or of science, or of energies, mana, spirit, orgone, or any other construct which is made real not because of its empirical elusiveness, but because it is central to how things that matter are made operant within a culture. How those things are made operant is what is important. For religious realities—or indeed *any* realities—to 'work' for people, they need to be lodged within a coherent network of activities, commitments, and 'enchantments', as David Morgan describes them in *Images at Work*. And the efficacy of that network is real because it is coordinated, maintained, and kept in place by the world around us, a world of buildings and structural arrangements, relevant images and designs, and other material presences—a world that is not at all invisible, and that in fact mediates what will be visible and what will be rendered invisible for us. The world has its 'distributions of the sensible', and the idea that religion is entirely different in its distributions than, say, a scientific, secular world is presupposed here, without being

2. The '4E' approach to cognition is well established; see Albert Newen, Leon de Bruin, and Shaun Gallagher, eds. (2018). The addition of the 'A' for 'affective' has been used in reference to the work of a growing number of cognitive scientists and philosophers, including Andy Clark, Shaun Gallagher, Michael Wheeler, and John Protevi. The addition of 'imaginal' is my own suggestion.

3. More nuanced understandings of the practical, aesthetic-sensorial, and affective work of reality-making can be found, for instance, in Giovanna Parmigiani (2021), 'Magic and Politics: Conspiratoriness and COVID-19', and Sabina Magliocco (2012), 'Beyond Belief: Context, Rationality and Participatory Consciousness'. Both see reality as a product of processes of cognitive, affective, and communal engagement aimed not so much at explanation (of what is real) but at participation. Science and ordinary common sense are ways of participating in a world; so are magic and religion. All carve up what needs to be treated as relationally real, significant, and personal (whether gods or just other humans) and what does not (and can therefore be treated as part of the 'furniture' of the world). If climate, weather systems, and other Earthly forces are taken to be part of the world's furniture, not something to be respectfully engaged with and obliged, then they themselves will push back. This materiality is also engaged in David Morgan's *Images at Work*, reviewed here and in some of my own work (e.g., Ivakhiv 2001, 2018).

actually defended.<sup>4</sup> Luhrmann's focus on what believers do to make their 'faith frames' real is a welcome antidote to all the efforts asking why believers believe things that are evidently false, but it misses the ways in which 'faith frames' are not just *religious* frames, but are all of the manifold ways in which worlds are shaped, enacted, and mediated by human and nonhuman objects and forces of all kinds, some of which are visible or audible, and others of which are removed from sensory expression but built on relations of trust, persuasion, and delegation. One might say that to the extent that we live in a common world, whether 'religious' or not, we live in a 'faith frame'. We live committed to that world.

If it is life in its difficult depths that is central to religion, then it is surely imagination—our capacity to read and make use of the images, signs, and meanings through which that image-rich world coheres—that allows us to navigate those depths. David Morgan's *Images at Work: The Material Culture of Enchantment* (2018) helps us understand how important images are to these reality-making operations. Morgan, a professor of religious studies at Duke University, has established himself as a leader in the field of religion and visual culture with such previous books as *Visual Piety* (1998), *Protestants and Pictures* (1999), *The Sacred Gaze* (2005), *The Lure of Images* (2007), and *The Embodied Eye* (2012). *Images at Work* is one more in a long line of persistent and insightful studies of *Homo-imago*, the image-bearing species, but this time takes his explorations into a more networked and ecological frame of reference. In a spin on actor–network theory that Morgan calls 'Enchantment Network Theory', he describes images as

technologies that act on human beings, as well as on others—gods, the dead, the living, malignant forces, animals, and the world around us. Scarecrows frighten birds; icons are conduits to the saints they depict, and they have often been used in processions to fight the plague or protect cities from invaders; works of art are devices for moving us, refining our sensibilities, enlightening our minds and spirits. (p. 60)

The scarecrows, icons, and works of art (or internet graphics) are hardly invisible; they are as real and material as anything. They work when they bind us within an 'extended social apparatus' (p. 92), a

4. This of course ignores the many forms of naturalistic religiosity and modern 'enchantment' that scholars like Bron Taylor, Michael Saler, Jane Bennett, and others have in various ways pointed to; see, e.g., Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (2010); Landy and Saler (eds.), *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* (2009), or indeed many previous issues of this very journal.

network that allows agency to flow and circulate between humans, nonhumans, trans-humans, and whatever else, real or imagined, in an efficacious way. 'The power of the saint acts through a meandering confluence of dreams, relics, a devotee's pain and desire, the stories of the saint's life and death, institutional rites, processions into the countryside, and the testimony of fellow pilgrims' (p. 94), to all of which we can add economic and property relations, webs of pilgrimage routes, political machinations, and much else.

Morgan's book provides a brilliant analysis of such extended networks and 'ecologies' of material and non-material forces. Its understanding of 'enchantment' as something that may 'precede religion, magic, science, and art' (p. 11) and that 'is located *both* in the mind *and* in the world', with belief and practice being 'co-constitutive' in its production (p. 20), has much to add to the understanding of the 'in-between' that Luhmann and others struggle with. He examines the interplay of belief and 'make-believe', the enchantments of *artifice* and of *artifact*, across a range of examples spanning ancient Greek narrative, Roman divination, Orthodox Christian icons, amulets and votive figures, ritual sacrifices, saints' relics, divination practices, Pacific coast tribal masks, early modern manuscript illustrations, spirit photographs and portraits of deceased family members, table manners, fairy tales, war postcards, celebrity photographs, personification in the naming of NASA spacecraft, automobility and its fetishization, subway turnstiles, meanings found in slabs of rock, the *Wizard of Oz*, and so much else. The work of the material world is central to all of this. For instance, in the case of religious images that 'exhibit the features of having been made by human beings *and* having made themselves', this dual nature makes them products of culture and nature, 'metamorphosing' from 'one to the other' and thereby 'exert[ing] power over us' (p. 68).

Far from being located merely 'in the head', then, belief, for Morgan, is a kind of 'condensed' and 'sedimented practice' that 'stabilizes experience' by engaging people 'with those who taught them, those with whom they practice, and those who benefit or suffer from the practice' (p. 30). 'The world builds us and we build it, or rather the life-world that feels and appears to us as the *real* world' (p. 169). Enchantment, he argues, is both 'an engine of human culture' (p. 29) and its 'glue' (p. 173). It encompasses sedimented practices incorporating '[w]ords, actions, objects, occasion, forces, gods, and people' (p. 69) in dense networks of 'operational' engagement, such that the world comes to be made up of alternate possibilities for network-building. Consequently, when the agency of saints, icons, incense, chanting, and pilgrimage is replaced by that of sanitation, pasteurization, molecular biology, or the rapid manufacturing



of vaccines, it is not because the latter are easier to 'believe' or to 'make real' than the former (as Lührmann would have it). It is because the networks of enchantment that bind people into compelling worlds have frayed to the point where new networks might be established. Both are forms of enchantment that occur side by side, and they are sometimes in conflict with each other. Not unlike Foucauldian power relations, their effects emerge at the local scale at which they are applied; and when one set of enchantments is in crisis (due to colonization, genocide, civilizational collapse, and so on) and another set presents itself, what happens is not 'secularization' but a changing of the guard.

Disenchantment, in this sense, 'can be a useful means of opposing other people's enchantment and securing one's own' (p. 75). The iconoclasm of one set of disenchantments—for instance, in a Protestant missionary's active debunking of the 'idolatry' of his subjects—is intended not just to displace those subjects from their cultural and religious coordinates, but also to make them available to another, rival set of 'enchanting' coordinates—the One God, the Holy Spirit, the promise of Western civilization, and so on. The same, I might add, can be said of science (in its many forms), conspiracy theory, populist politics, or whatever else. The sacred canopy is built of connections, commitments, and material relations; it gains its sanctity from those commitments. Which of them are 'religious' and which are 'secular' or 'scientific' (or seemingly 'obvious') is a question one particular culture has come up with to distinguish itself from others, but it may not be the pertinent one for the world at large. When 'enchantment' is understood to be the 'nonrational work toward making a home in the universe' (p. 171), and 'the embodied search for a world that works in one's favor' (p. 172), as Morgan puts it in his conclusion, then it is something we are all fated to do for as long as that universe is there for us.

And so, we return to the core of what I've been getting at here: the work of imagination in creating the 'imaginative formations' Wouter Hanegraaff nudged us toward explicating. A variety of approaches can be found in the recent literature on imagination, from the neurocognitive to the phenomenological to the aesthetic and literary. But none, to my mind, have presented as powerful an attempt to theorize it as has Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei in *The Life of the Imagination: Revealing and Making the World*. If its scope is lesser than Eva Brann's monumental 1992 volume *The World of the Imagination*, the conceptual clarity it presents is, for me, more satisfying. Gosetti-Ferencei, who is a professor of philosophy and Kurrelmeyer Chair in German at Johns Hopkins University, begins with as clear and understatedly insightful definition of imagination as I have come across: imagination, she writes, is 'the presentational

and transformational activity of human consciousness' (p. 26), where 'presentational' refers to 'something that is brought to the fore or made present for consciousness' (p. 28), and 'transformational' refers to the possibility of 'change' in the 'object or expression of imagining' (p. 30). Paying detailed attention to the broader 'cognitive ecology' within which imagination unfolds, Gosetti-Ferencei analyzes the aesthetic of jazz music, for instance, by situating it as a response to the conditions of African-American history and urban life, such that it becomes a 'simultaneous expression and transcendence of the situation of individual, historical, and cultural consciousness' (p. 252).

Like jazz, religious expression can similarly be seen as a presentation and transformation of intersecting and mutually enfolding social and environmental conditions. In its more conservative formulations, the religious imagination attempts to depart from a reality perceived as disorderly, if not unhinged, so as to find comfort in a return to what is known. Fortunately, since religion activates so many of our cognitive and sensory modalities—it commonly involves sound, music, vision, word, rhythm, movement, cosmology, and so much else—it would seem to afford the greatest potentiality for change in our relation to the conditions that beset us. If, as Gosetti-Ferencei concludes, an 'ecologically stable future' will 'require us to shift our self-conceptions as human beings, devise new conceptions of our existence on the earth, and balance a different understanding of nature with exigent as well as future human concerns' (p. 256), then understanding the capacities for imaginatively dealing with and transforming reality will require understanding the role of all of our sensory, narrative, and interpretive resources.

Where Gosetti-Ferencei develops her argument about the imagination with the caution, patience, and sober deliberation of a Husserlian phenomenologist, Jeffrey Kripal, in his latest foray, shouts from the rooftops like a cosmic evangelist. Over the last few decades, Kripal has barreled forward on a rollercoaster-like exploration of all things spiritual: from mystical eroticism at the heart of Christianity and Hinduism to neo-Gnosticism, research on the paranormal, superhero comics, and the mindbending cosmic communion of reported UFO encounters. The author or editor of over a dozen books, Kripal holds the J. Newton Rayzor Chair in Philosophy and Religious Thought at Rice University. In *The Flip: Who You Really Are and Why It Matters* (2019), he unleashes a proudly self-declared manifesto in favor of a dramatically expanded view of the world in which extraordinary experiences are not peripheral or epiphenomenal—weird things that become meaningful only because of the meaning-craving tendencies of humans—but are central to experience and life itself. Mystical experiences, Kripal argues, are actual

openings into reality, glimpses of a cosmic unity that subsists beneath the veneer of the ego-and-body-bound separation that gnostics would see as an imprisonment in matter. They are versions of the ‘flip’ of the book’s title—‘moment[s] of realization beyond all linear thought, beyond all language, beyond all belief’ that come to us ‘sudden, unbidden, or traumatically catalyzed’ (pp. 12-13) and that, crucially, represent the bigger ‘tipping point’ he wants to unleash on the world, where mind or consciousness comes to be seen ‘as an irreducible dimension or substrate of the natural world, indeed of the entire cosmos’ (p. 11). This flip, he hopes, will ‘spiritualize’ our ‘shared humanity’, resulting ‘in a new *cosmic comparative* perspective that reorients us within an immeasurably larger vision of who we are as a species of the cosmos and what we might yet become’ (p. 16).

The argument is not new (certainly not in the popular literature on spirituality, human potential, and ‘new paradigm’ thinking), and Kripal’s freewheeling and somewhat rambling exposition of cases in point—‘flipped scientists’ and otherwise sober scholars describing first-person experiences they have few tools by which to make sense of—alongside lists of quantum ontologies and kindred philosophies, does not exactly result in a case to convince all skeptics. If anything, I see this book as an expression of one of Kripal’s key ideas, which he calls the ‘filter thesis’. *The Flip* is a ‘filtered’ and somewhat undisciplined glimpse into the mind of Jeffrey Kripal—which, by his own reckoning, is a variation on the mind of the ‘One World’ that encompasses everything, even as our own individual realities are merely filtered versions of it. While that idea may sound outlandish, I will spend much of the remainder of this essay exploring Kripal’s larger thesis as it is expressed in the more disciplined and comprehensive 2017 volume *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* (2017). It is there that Kripal’s thesis about imagination comes to the fore (though it is a bit lost in the buffet-like richness of the whole volume), and where its import is demonstrated through a much more complete exposition of Kripal’s research *oeuvre*.

*Secret Body* is, as Kripal describes it, a ‘kind of Reader’ combined with memoir and manifesto. Somewhat like his earlier *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (2001) in its mix of the spiritual and erotic with the autobiographical, but more expansive and career-spanning, *Secret Body* serves, effectively, as a ‘greatest hits’ package remixed with personal reflections on the contexts, subtexts, and alter-texts of Kripal’s research over three and a half decades. It is held together by the author’s drive to make sense of the strangest experiences known to occur to people, but also by his thesis, rendered in a variety of forms, about the ‘loopy truth’ of consciousness

as 'doubled', both 'us' and 'not us', and about its relationship to the imagination (p. 5). 'We are the characters up on the screen. But we are also the projector projecting them' (p. 8). The 'other dimensions of mind and reality' that communicate with us through extraordinary religious experience 'are *us communicating with us*', he posits (p. 8). In the background of all of this is the scholarly project Kripal describes as 'the comparative study of religion as a philosophical, political, moral and spiritual force in the world of vast, still unseen implications' (p. 8). Among the many rich veins in this volume are Kripal's analysis of 'the twentieth century study of mysticism as itself a kind of mystical tradition' (p. 103); the indebtedness of comparative religion to the American counterculture, and of William Blake's connection to that counterculture; scientific and literary variations on what Kripal calls 'evolutionary esotericisms'; the importance of the Esalen Institute in the emergence of the 'spiritual but not religious' movement; plenty of other connections between popular culture and religious creativity (for instance, between *The Wizard of Oz* and Theosophy); and Kripal's reflections on his own experiences with Christian monasticism (and its homoerotic undercurrents) and as an object of venom from Hindu nationalists for his first book *Kali's Child* (1998).

Most pertinently for the present essay, however, is Kripal's argument about the imagination. 'We desperately need', he writes, 'a new theory of the imagination (or a revived old one), one that can re-vision the imagination not as simply a spinner of fancy and distracting daydream but also, at least in rare moments, as an ecstatic mediator, expressive artist, and translator of the really real' (pp. 5-6). This theory is connected to the 'filter thesis', which Kripal ascribes to Aldous Huxley, Frederick Myers, William James, and Henri Bergson, among others, which asserts that instead of body-encapsulated consciousness being an 'upward' construct of evolving species like ours, it serves more as a 'block' on what is present, allowing in only what is needed for evolutionary and survival purposes. 'We are but filters and reducers. We are caves. We are splitters. And so our job is to reduce the immenseness to banality and the cosmic sameness to cultural, social, and individual difference' (p. 197). The corollary, however, is that there is so much more out there—a sea of energy and information surrounding us, which has the potential of breaking in unsolicited; and that this is exactly what happens in extraordinary experiences. Kripal also proposes a 'dual-aspect monism' as an alternative conception, which has us not filtering but splitting, rather like the symmetry break of wave-particle duality, where ordinary, phenomenal experience has broken off from the One World that gives rise to it, such that some features of it are experienced as body and some

as mind, though in their origins they are inherently both (if not more). In both cases, extraordinary or paranormal experiences, including those that have given rise to many of the world's religions, 'point to or gesture toward' that One World (p. 199). Far from being distractions on the path, as some mystics argue, such experiences 'inspire' and 'reveal', functioning 'as semiotic signs or symbolic traces that *signal* the relations between the mental and material domains' (p. 199). In this, they serve as semiotic, social, and ontological 'shocks' with the 'potential to change the fundamental structure and behavior of the real within the experience of a person and community' (p. 239). A tricksterish, confounding, paradoxical, and anti-structural or deconstructive quality (Kripal links them to Derridean deconstruction) is thus part of their nature and what gives them their potency.

Kripal's definition of the creative (and, by definition, religious) imagination is surprising in that instead of tracing it to Henry Corbin's notion of the 'imaginal', as is often done these days, where creative imagination functions as an intermediary realm between the empirical world of the body and the ideal world of the mind and spirit, he argues that the term comes from the earlier writings of pioneering psychological researcher Frederic Myers. The latter contrasted the 'imaginal' (from 'imago') to the 'larval' based, perhaps bizarrely, on entomological understandings of the stages of insect life. The 'image' or 'imaginal stage', for Myers, was the 'final adult form of an insect's metamorphosis.... Just as the larval stage of an insect looks nothing like the imago of its adult form..., so too the functioning of the human imagination can metamorphose into extremely strange but astonishingly effective forms, which Myers called imaginal, after his beloved bugs' (p. 235). For Myers, then, the imaginal was something like the 'human potential' that Kripal's favorite counter-cultural think tank, Esalen, would come to espouse and aim to cultivate, like the imago out of an insect's larva.

Whatever we make of this strange genealogy of the imaginal (and I am not convinced), Kripal's redefinition of the term as a kind of 'future stage' of humanity offers up a non-dualistic variation on Esalen cofounder Michael Murphy's manifesto-like *The Future of the Body: Explorations into the Future Evolution of Human Nature* (1993), which makes it a kind of continuation of the human-potential project of the post-Aldous Huxleyan counterculture. Ultimately, this redefinition of imagination does two interesting things. It poses an alternative to Corbin's notion of the imaginal, which for all its fruitfulness has tended toward a 'conservative' interpretation of religious imagination as taking us 'back' to previously revealed sacred truths. In Corbin's case, these were the truths of Islam, though his perennialism saw them as consonant with deeper

truths at the heart of all genuine religion. Instead, Kripal seems to propose a 'One Truth' that is forward moving and evolving in a kind of Whiteheadian, processual, open-ended way, and which communicates with humans by 'breaking through' and deconstructing our perceived truths to urge us forward toward novelty.

Secondly, in contrast to Gosetti-Ferencei's humanism, which posits imagination as a transformational capacity of humans, Kripal is proposing that it opens us to a *transhuman* force, something much larger than what we can possibly conceive of in our rational *or* imaginal efforts, that requires others (whatever form they take) to speak to us and that destabilizes and ultimately restructures us in the process. To be fair, sometimes his wordings sound familiarly humanist (though it may be a Teilhardian, deified humanism, or what he calls a 'secret humanism'), as when he writes: 'In truth, I think the gods *are* us, but that we are not ready to see this yet. I think they are the unconscious, unintegrated part of us speaking to the conscious integrated part of us' (p. 309). At other times, he pushes beyond the 'anthropocosmic' safety of such a future-human 'us', writing of an 'irreducible Other', an 'Alien' and 'Stranger' (p. 420), 'an undetermined mystery that has been shaped into countless forms in the mirrors of our embodied minds and historical bodies, very much like Philip K. Dick's Valis or Stanislaw Lem's Solaris' (p. 413). The science-fictional references here are of a piece with Kripal's expansive set of philosophical reference points, and in this they suggest what may be the most original and untamed form of speculative ontology to come from the comparative study of religion: one that not only, as in Fox Mulder's *X Files* slogan, *wants* to believe, but that *knows* the truth is genuinely 'out there' and that it will always remain out there, scrambling us as we move, however jerkily, toward it. This truth is one that can never be contained within a set of dogmas or tenets; it is ungraspable and undelimitable.

For all of that, Kripal has structured *Secret Body* as a kind of guided exploration through a series of no fewer than twenty such tenets, which are presented consecutively over the course of the volume and then as a list in an appendix. He calls these 'gnomons', which serve both as 'gnomic' and as 'gnostic' aphorisms or maxims intended to synthesize, somewhat provocatively, his own somewhat outsider-like engagement with the 'swirling currents of pedagogical, social, and hermeneutical interaction' within and outside the study of religion (p. 9). The gnomons mostly take us outside the parameters of this essay (they concern comparativism, reflexivity, heresy, sexuality, tantrism, counterculture, the humanities, trauma, and much else, in addition to the themes I have already covered). But they are underpinned by Kripal's optimistic take

on religious *experience* (and any kind of ‘paranormal’ experience) as a doorway toward the future, while understanding religious *organization* to constitute an all too human effort to contain and control whatever that doorway may come to represent. In this, I see Kripal as a kind of (*Thousand Plateaus* era) Deleuzo-Guattarian of religion: one who wants to pursue its offerings as ‘lines of flight’ that can deterritorialize us if we allow them to. The implication, which Kripal does not explicitly state, is that it is not religion that is the focus here, but experience itself: experience at its most open, surprising, and radical, to be interpreted and speculatively transformed through the narrative and imaginative capacities we have and that we continue to develop as we move forward into the complex pluriverse of the cosmos we share and explore together. This is the study of the farthest reaches of the religious imagination as a kind of ontological project.

Kripal refers, both in *The Flip* and the latter sections of *Secret Body*, to a ‘cosmic humanities’ and a ‘new comparativism’ that places experience at the center and that values it to the extent that it throws us open to something beyond ourselves. The difficulty here is that even deciding what to compare is always already a culturally conditioned project. When Kripal attempts to define ‘the nature of consciousness itself’, which is to be the center of the ‘new comparativism’, he writes of:

...that Other of the Human...that has expressed itself in countless bodies and countless cultures in countless irruptions, omens, revelations, magical acts, precognitive dreams and mystical experiences. I mean the burning ‘I Am’ bushes, haunting ghosts, egoless enlightenments, lightning struck shamans, possessing spirits, throwing poltergeists, and revealing angels (and aliens) of the history of religion. (p. 400)

But this list already assumes that all of these things are equally, or at least similarly, *extraordinary*: that magical acts or precognitive dreams are not the norm (as they may be in some cultures) but are as ‘super-normal’ as egoless enlightenments (which may not even make sense in some cultures). If they are all on the side of what transcends or disrupts the norm, then what is that norm? Is it, for instance, the liberal, bounded, ‘socially constructed ego or social self’ (p. 415), which as Charles Taylor (2007) and others have shown is a modern, Western construct and hardly a universal one? Kripal fully recognizes the importance of reflexivity (both self and cultural reflexivity) in the new comparativism, calling his approach a ‘heuristic device’, a ‘shifting, flexible poetics’, and even an ‘apophatic anthropology’ in which at least half of that anthropology cannot even be described (pp. 413-14). So even if his own understanding of the human and its ‘Other’, or ‘the Human as Two’ as he often calls it, is as modern, Western, and time-bound as any, it is intended not as a last

word, but as a provocation toward something ‘so fantastic’ it cannot even be named (p. 421).

This brings me to the final volume to be discussed here, Mary-Jane Rubenstein’s *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters* (2018). Rubenstein’s earlier work, especially *Worlds Without End: The Many Lives of the Multiverse* (2014), has established her as one of the most interesting scholars working in the field of science and religion, in which she holds a professorship at Wesleyan University. *Pantheologies* takes her further into the constructive mode of developing an ontology that is both scientific and religious in its contours, and that is as radical as anything penned by Kripal. Where Kripal points, repeatedly if fleetingly, to a set of philosophical and scientific discourses that might begin to account for the expanded conception of consciousness, mind, and reality he hopes to elicit, Rubenstein demonstrates what a more patient philosophical exegesis might do toward that same end. And where Kripal had called for a new theory of the imagination, and Gosetti-Ferencei had proposed what such a theory might look like from (and within) an exclusively *human* perspective, what Rubenstein attempts to do in this book is to give it a *body*—one that happens to coincide with the body of the universe.

*Pantheologies* presents a conceptual genealogy of ‘pantheism’ that shows why this term has been seen as ‘monstrous’, both compelling and threatening, in the history of Western thought. Perceived alternately as the horrifying and the desirable blurring of all distinctions—between God and world, right and wrong, virtue and vice, male and female, mind and body, and so on—pantheism has served as a kind of ‘limit-position’ marking the boundary of what can be respectably conceived. Rubenstein’s goal is to show how this boundary has served as the fecund site of a series of projects, from the scientific to the philosophical, that lay out the contours of an immanent, emergent, and ‘pluralistic pantheism’ suitable to a world on the cusp of climate destabilization with all its associated stresses (of political strife, economic implosion, class resentment, cultural clash, and all the rest). She does this by undertaking a critical reappraisal of pantheistic currents in Spinoza, Bruno, the Stoics and Epicureans, and connecting them both to scientific thinking—from quantum physics and nonlinear biologies to Lovelock’s Gaia, Margulis’s symbiogenesis, and Einstein’s speculations on God—and to the speculative ontologies of ecofeminists, new materialists and animists, immanent naturalists, and speculative realists (including the ‘usual suspects’ like Latour, Stengers, Haraway, Barad, and Viveiros de Castro, among others). In the process, she unearths a plausible conception of a universe that is the source and result of not only religious experience, but all experience—a ‘ceaselessly multiple, destructive-creative, animate



materiality that both produces and emerges from “all things” in their various worldings and re-worldings’ (p. 148).

This is, of course, not an ontology to end all ontologies, and certainly nothing like a religion to end all religions. It is not about practice in the sense that Kripal and Luhrmann studied the practice of religion and/or extraordinary experience. The usefulness of Rubenstein’s project, as I see it, is to draw from the past and present, from science and from philosophy, a set of imaginative proposals that can contribute to the project of making sense of the world today across the gaps between religion and science. Much of the book engages with counterarguments that have been made against pantheism for centuries: for instance, about how it disables any distinction between good and evil, or how it subsumes all differences. Ultimately, her pantheism is a *theism* only in the sense that it engages the divine in ways that the other new ontologies generally do not do, with the partial exception of Latour’s. And unlike most of the other books reviewed here, it engages deeply with feminist philosophies and, at significant moments, with Indigenous and Black/Africana perspectives. But where Kripal’s and Luhrmann’s efforts discuss the mind–body duality a great deal, either attempting to overcome it or to at least posit an ‘in-between’ that helps span it, Rubenstein’s book comes much closer (as did Morgan’s) to attending to the actual materiality of the world.

What the pantheologies of her title affirm, she writes, ‘when they say “all things are divine” is that all things participate—to greater or lesser intensity and to all manner of competing, collaborative, and disjunctive ends—in multiple, ongoing processes of cosmic makings and unravelings’ (p. 176). In affirming ‘a proliferation of shape-shifters, tricksters, and demiurges’ in place of a ‘single, anthropomorphic creator’ (p. 177), these pantheologies do not open up the floodgates in which ‘anything goes’, but rather acknowledge the necessity to take responsibility for how we engage with them amidst the already open floodgates of a partially mysterious universe. ‘The most threatening’ (to Western tradition) ‘and therefore most promising’ pantheism, for Rubenstein, is not the ‘all is one’ kind, but ‘the mixed-up, chimeric kind, whose *theos* is neither self-identical nor absolute, but a mobile and multiply-located concatenation of pan-species intra-carnation’—these are gods who are ‘events’ that ‘would be discovered, sustained, killed off, resurrected, shared, transmogrified, and multiplied between and among temporary clusters of relation’, showing up ‘in unforeseen crossings and alliances’ (p. 190).

Rubenstein’s project is ultimately a philosophical one, and in this it is of a different order than either Luhrmann’s engagements with larger religious communities or Kripal’s with the free-range mystics of the

paranormal. In suggesting connections between science, religion, and contemporary theory, Rubenstein's efforts are fruitful for making sense of many of the latter kinds of experiences, and more refined than Kripal's suggestive provocations. In their focus on the multiple materialities and ontologies of an already culturally pluralistic world, they can also complement the kind of analysis undertaken by Morgan (and others) on the material cultures of enchantment.

There is of course a colossal gap between the actually existing practices of 'deity making' and 'enchantment' described and interpreted by Luhmann and Morgan and, on the other hand, Rubenstein's or Kripal's constructive philosophical proposals for rethinking both deity and ontology in general. Kripal laments this gap in a chapter of *Secret Body*, where he describes the extreme 'cognitive dissonance' he experiences upon his annual visits home to rural Nebraska. He proposes that the American Academy of Religion 'should host a panel on a single question: "So, what does your family think of what you think?"' and predicts it may result in a 'vast therapy session' (pp. 297-98). While we may not all go home to (a very white) rural Nebraska, the fact that religion and its enchantments remain such a deep part of so many people's identities, and at the same time that they keep changing—that religious creativity continues to provide many of us with objects and processes for our studies—suggests that the future of religion, including the future of its relations with science, remains wide open and unpredictable. These books demonstrate that the reimagination of religion, of deity, of humanity, and of reality itself, is alive and thriving in writing by scholars of religion today.

### References

- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
- Barton, Carlin A., and Daniel Boyarin. 2016. *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press).  
Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823271221>.
- Brann, Eva. 1992. *The World of the Imagination* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield).
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 2020. 'Imagining the Future Study of Religion and Spirituality', *Religion* 50.1: 72-82. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2019.1681103>.
- Ivakhiv, Adrian. 2018. *Shadowing the Anthropocene: Eco-Realism for Turbulent Times* (Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books).
- . 2001. *Claiming Sacred Ground: Pilgrims and Politics at Glastonbury and Sedona* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).
- Landy, Joshua, and Michael Saler (eds.). 2009. *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).  
Doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvr33bqt>.

- Luhmann, T.M. 1991. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).  
Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1991.18.3.02a00140>.
- Kripal, Jeffrey J. 1998. *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- . 2001. *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Magliocco, Sabina. 2012. 'Beyond Belief: Context, Rationality and Participatory Consciousness', *Western Folklore* 71.1: 5-24.
- Masuzawa, Tomoko. 2005. *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226922621.001.0001>.
- Morgan, David. 1998. *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- . 1999. *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- . 2005. *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520938304>.
- . 2007. *The Lure of Images: A History of Religion and Visual Media in America* (New York: Routledge).
- . 2012. *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press).  
Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520952140>.
- Murphy, Michael. 1993. *The Future of the Body: Explorations into the Further Evolution of Human Nature* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam).
- Newen, Albert, Leon de Bruin, and Shaun Gallagher (eds.). 2018. *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition* (New York: Oxford University Press).  
Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198735410.001.0001>.
- Nongbri, Brent. 2013. *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300154160.001.0001>.
- Parmigiani, Giovanna. 2021. 'Magic and Politics: Conspirituality and COVID-19', *JAAR* 89.2: 506-29. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfab053>.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (trans. Gabriel Rockhill; New York: Continuum).
- Rubenstein, Mary-Jane. 2014. *Worlds Without End: The Many Lives of the Multiverse* (New York: Columbia University Press).  
Doi: <https://doi.org/10.7312/columbia/9780231156622.001.0001>.
- Taylor, Bron R. 2010. *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press).  
Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520944459>.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press/Belknap Press).