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## **RELIGION AS EXPERIENCE: the convergence of INDIA and the WEST since 1770**

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### **Abstract**

My paper explores how the understanding of human perception and specifically its ability to grasp the numinous has developed in the West since seventeen-seventy, and how it has increasingly related to the experiential Vedantic tradition of India.

Beginning with the thought of David Hume, the first person in modern times to insist on the exclusive primacy of experience as a basis for valid perception and knowledge, I touch on the thought and discoveries of savants who built on that presupposition. I conceive of four historical groups in the West, each of which contains:

1. A primary theoretician.
2. A savant who applied the theory to practical situations.
3. A savant who worked on an interface with other disciplines.
4. A "mystic" who added new dimensions to the whole discussion.

The overall findings of each of these four groups are then compared with the discoveries and teachings of a contemporary sage in the Vedanta tradition.

In the West these figures are distinguished by their qualifications in Western science, including psychology and philosophy. In India, the selected figures are recognized as masters of experiential religion and its traditional framework of explanation extant in India.

My thesis is that what Western savants arrived at as a group is mirrored and complemented in the more holistic thinking of the great Indian spiritual figures who were their contemporaries. I show how India has contributed to the West's ongoing development in the world of spiritual perception and experience, particularly in more recent history.

The West has experienced a progression from an initial struggle to assert the validity of the inner worlds of experience (countering materialistic reductionism), and on to a more robust exploration of the interior world of the spirit. There is also emerging a psycho-technology to explain and develop those worlds, not only trans-personally, but also trans-traditionally.

*I also illustrate the progression of ideas in the text with color images that suggest in a more holistic framework the interconnections and influences discussed in the text.*

### **KEY WORDS:**

Experiential religion, science and religion, spiritual psychology, India-West complementarity, evolution of Western psychology, integral psychology.

## Introduction

### What is the meaning of *experiential religion*?

*Religio*, the Latin root behind the word religion, is usually interpreted as referring to dogma, tradition, received opinion and an obligation to comply with them.[1] However, behind the noun *religion* and its received meaning, also lies the Latin verb *re-ligare*, to bind back together.[2] This raises the question: What is bound back, and to what? From the standpoint of experiential religion, the human psyche is bound back to the divine or God, which it recognizes as in some way integral to itself. This happens, first through *perceiving* the divine; second through establishing an ongoing relationship with it; third through exploring it; fourth, through working out systematically its relationships with all other domains of our experience; and fifth, through automatically sensing the divine in and through everything.

Here we arrive at what is later crystallized out into dogmas and rigid social hierarchies based on them. If this primary fivefold process of experience behind such dogma and hierarchy is not vigorously maintained, the tendency is to progress to compulsion to accept such constraints, as has been witnessed historically time and again, as in the Christian Inquisition and the stultification of the Hindu caste system. Such dialectic has led, at the present time, to the current movements which reject religion and promote *spirituality*. [3] The focus in this discussion is on the process of experience, the source of “data” in religion as in the natural sciences, which leads to discovery and maintains the vitality of the discipline in dialog with the intellectual constructs (dogmas) of its own activity.

### Experience in the history of religions

Prior to the Middle Ages, human society, Indian and Western, recognized that there are some who are motivated from within rather than from the dictates of the external world. They often caused social upheavals and fell foul of the authorities, sacred as well as secular. They were, nevertheless, regarded as holy, and institutions were built up around them in order to help others model their lives on their example. In the Medieval period, however, a tendency arose to intellectually systematize and unify belief systems or methods of practice, bringing in even methods of coercion to enforce dogma and consolidating power in the hands of a tiny élite.

In the modern period there was a revolt against the intellectual straightjacket of the Middle Ages, which resulted in the Protestant Reformation in Europe, based on the premise that the experience and conscience of the individual was paramount in religious life. In India at the same time, the impact of Islam wakened the Hindus to the untenability of the rigid social system and the role it was playing in the stasis of their spiritual culture, [4], leading to the much more humanistic movements led by Kabir, Dadu and Guru Nanak, despite the fact that mainstream Hinduism was tending to ossify its outer forms to protect itself from alien culture. Tantra, the grassroots - but immensely democratic and powerful - system of spiritual practice, began to be studied by the upper classes and molded into a more “civilized” form for wider use in Hindu society. [5]

By the nineteenth century the Western Enlightenment had embraced humanism and the dogma that only the material world is “real” or worthy of human attention. At the same time, there were several Hindu organizations, such as the Brahmo Samaj, setting out on Western-style social change, without sufficiently serious consideration of how it related to their own experiential tradition to engage their more orthodox cohorts. In the West, God was “dead” [6], and in India, the social system - the traditional support of religion - was up for radical review.

## The last two hundred and forty years: transformation of emphasis

### a) Methods

The physical reductionism and emphasis on didactic intellectualism of the Enlightenment effectively led in the West to a radical fragmentation of knowledge into the realms of science, art and religion, each with its own exclusive criteria of valid experience. [7] Concurrently, in India the challenge of Western modernity was calling for new interpretations of its ancient, experience-based worldview, the diametric opposite of matter-based rationalism.

The seventeen-seventies saw the beginning of radical work on physical reductionism and didactic intellectualism in the West, followed by a galaxy of thinkers who carried on the study over the next two hundred and forty years. At the same time, some of the leading luminaries in Vedanta were beginning to articulate a much more democratic and humanistic form of their ancient worldview, which previously had tended to a rather “otherworldly,” absolutist viewpoint.

Here we will observe the turning-point at the beginning of this period in the West, and then proceed to take a bird’s-eye view of how four groups of successive thinkers opened out the subject. In each group we shall cover four Western savants and one recognized, outstanding practitioner of Vedanta in India. Each group is color coded to suggest a progression from one context to the next in the ways indicated.

With regard to the thinking we perceive in the Western groups, my criteria of selection are:

1. Primary theoretician: Red - primarily rationalistic and didactic.
2. Applying the theory to practical situations: Orange - connection of theory and fact.
3. Interfacing with other disciplines: Yellow - moving beyond the dichotomy of theory and fact.
4. A “mystic” who added new dimensions: Green - exploring the depth dimension of all of the above.

The Indian side is taken to stand for:

5. Summation and complementarity: Blue - seeing the whole gamut as a totality and integrating it into a unified whole. This convention is also extended to the Western savant, David Hume, who is regarded as giving the most radical statement of Western departure from rationalism, the “initiator” of the whole experiential process discussed in this paper.

I follow this plan on the assumption that, in view of the fragmentation of knowledge in the West, we can get a more complete picture of Western thought by considering the combined views of four contemporaries, each working in a different domain, with each domain represented by its characteristic color. I use color in an attempt to suggest the underlying worldviews, paradigms, states of consciousness, if you will, that not only inform the work of each savant and each group of savants in each historical time frame, but also connect them in numerous ways too long-winded to trace verbally in this presentation. By following a coherent sequence of colors indicating the chronological and intellectual progressions taking place, I also hope to demonstrate other underlying connections between the groups, so that we end up with a unified vision of the whole endeavor. This approach is, you might say, “the right brain approach”, intended to supplement and complement the “left brain” content of this presentation.

From the Indian side, the selection of a recognized Vedantic adept means, by definition, that we are looking at a person recognized as a master of the entire experiential realm, qualified to respond experientially to the spectrum of views pertaining to that realm and thereby providing us with a complementary synthesis of those views. I invite the reader to judge for him or herself just how valid this assumption is.

**b) The first period - late eighteenth century:  
Western Enlightenment is radically challenged**



***David Hume (1711-1776): Experience as the primary method of knowledge***

David Hume, a product of the Scottish Enlightenment, stated in his *Treatise on Human Nature* and his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that human knowledge is primarily based on the direct perception of natural objects. Hume argued that human knowledge did not rely on merely rational theories and “proofs,” which was the primary approach of the Enlightenment, attributed to Descartes.. On that assumption, he deconstructed Self, God and miracles, and also causation itself, all of which were nothing but intellectual deductions with no demonstrable, unchanging relationship to perceived facts.. [8] Thus he cut the ground, not only from under religious beliefs, but scientific beliefs as well, for the theory of causation is one of the bedrock beliefs of natural science.

In sum, Hume commenced the great experientialist revolution that was about to take place in Western thought, though pegging it entirely to the realm of physical perception with no quarter for anything more subtle or interior.

The portrait of Hume shows him surrounded by a blue border to indicate his “honorary” status as a summer-up of the whole new Western way of looking at the world. At the same time he is firmly embedded in a world still deeply rationalistic and didactic (red), though [ALT shading towards orange, where new horizons are opening out. I place next to this portrait a total picture of all of the possibilities (spectrum of colors) through which my study will move, placing Hume at the bottom in the red domain, his unique contribution to a whole new mindset that will open out like a flower as we proceed.

**c) The second period - 1770-1860: Philosophy and psychology of religious perception: early Western explanations independent of the Indian**

**1. *Primary theoretician: Immanuel Kant (1724-1804):  
Experience refined to include a priori categories***

Hume’s challenge awakened the maturing philosopher Immanuel Kant from his “dogmatic [rationalistic] slumber” [9] and prompted him to postulate, in a more experiential mode, that the human mind has propensities to perceive in certain patterns, which he called *a priori* categories, in and through which we make sense of what we see and organize **our** perceptions into knowledge. Among such a priori “modes of the mind” were the perception of time and space and the sense of causation to which they give rise. These were nothing less than the experiential foundations of the magnificent achievements of Newtonian science, in which Kant (and just about everyone else) stoutly believed.

Furthermore, in order to apply these categories and reach synthesis, there must be a quality of transcendence or detachment from the process itself [10], an insight of central importance to the subject of religious experience.



However, Kant, like Hume, is silent on the question: How can we actually perceive or experience God, or indeed: Is it possible to do so?

Kant, in my view, has moved beyond mere material experientialism to a more nuanced exploration of its meaning, giving us [one of the greatest concepts of the workings of the mind in modern Western history, which will prove so fruitful in all that is to come. I therefore give him his status as a (red-bordered) theorist, as well as placing him above Hume in the orange, shading into yellow of the worldview opening up.

## **2. Applying the theory to practical situations - Jakob Fries (1773-1843): "Feeling" as a priori in religion**

Jakob Fries was a German philosopher who stated, "The feeling on which faith is really based is the instinctive sensation of the Eternal in the Finite." [11] For him, this entails a form of knowledge nothing less than *a priori*; and, in addition, greater and deeper than experience in space and time, [12] suggesting a hierarchy of perception from the "natural" to the "infinite."

He went to great lengths to make clear that, though such knowledge of the ineffable is not something that lends itself to verbal expression, it is not simply uncritical imagination or fancy. Furthermore, the experience of Love which accompanies such experience is for Fries the key idea, which takes his thinking immeasurably beyond Kant's. [13]



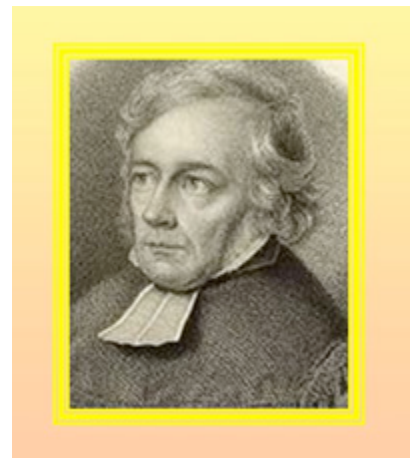
It is possible that Fries's awareness of the work of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) contributed to his theory. Mesmer's experiments in hypnotism were drawing attention to the subconscious mind [14], which may have suggested to Fries the possibility that there is, in addition to the consciousness with which we associate reason in the West, not only a lower form (the subconscious), but also a higher form, in which the type of experience of which Fries spoke could validly exist.

As an extension of Kant, and operating within basically the same worldview, Fries is represented as existing within the same orange-going-on yellow world; but as someone who opened out Kant's work, he is represented as slightly further on in the approach to yellow, higher up on the "map". His role as someone who applied theory to the practical world "entitles" him to an orange border.

## **3. Interfacing with other disciplines - Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834): Feeling as filtered through the mind**

Friedrich Schleiermacher, another German philosopher of the period, agreed with Fries about the nature of religious experience but focused particularly on the relationship of such experience to concept (which he predicated with speculative science). He asserted that experience and concept exist together and are organically interconnected. [15]

Putting the subjective experiencer at the center, and working on the principle that nature should become the perfect symbol and organ of mind, he developed a four-quadrant approach to the equation of morality: individual and universal/ a product of the individual with relation to the community and also a principle representing as well as classifying and ruling nature. This provided a theoretical framework for possibilities of dialog between



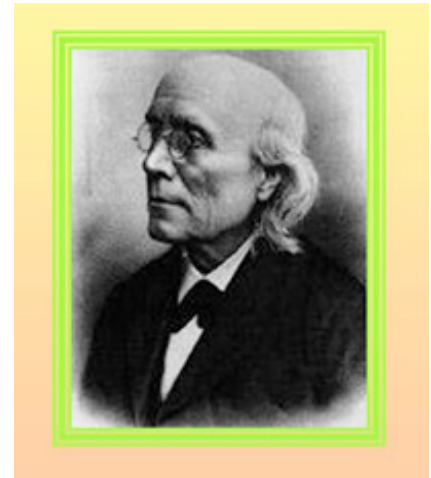
subjective religious experience and the objective world in which it expresses itself. [16] Thus he had a profound impact on the philosophical field of hermeneutics, the discipline of interpretation, which by that time included comparative religion.



Schleiermacher inhabited essentially the same world as Kant and Fries and therefore appears with the same background. But, as one who opened out the theme a step further to other disciplines, he acquires a yellow border, a position slightly higher on the evolutionary progression.

#### 4. A “mystic” who added new dimensions - Gustav Fechner (1801-1887): living in and through “feeling”

Gustav Fechner, the first to quantify human perceptive responses, specifically to measured stimulation, [17] is regarded as the father of scientific psychology. He intuitively discovered that “the abstract lives in the concrete” and everything is alive and conscious. [18] Further, he held that “The more inclusive forms of consciousness are in part constituted by the more limited forms,” but are not the mere sum of them.” [19] Nor was the Absolute, which Fechner postulated as the apex of the hierarchy of consciousness, a conceptual given; it was, as befits the mind of a scientist, a hypothesis to prove or disprove – which was the challenge of a consciously lived life.



As a natural scientist, Fechner kept the faith with Kant, but also contacted or “felt” his own inner divine, à la Fries. Fechner went on to experience and document, as far as he could with the methods then available, the hierarchy that exists within conscious experience. He also explored the fact that there are no intrinsic limitations as to how things may experience, be experienced, or relate to one another in the domain of “feeling.” He may thus be said to have taken up Schleiermacher’s hermeneutical notions and carried them into the domain of actual, lived experience. This was an overall summation as well as exemplification of the researches of his earlier contemporaries.

Our portrait of Fechner shows him still working within the basic Kantian “world” of orange going on yellow, but now adding the “green” frame of actual, personal experience. I regard this as opening up the theme radically. Fechner carries our understanding toward the “world of yellow,” where dichotomies are transcended; and also makes the findings of the whole preceding group of savants more easily relatable to what was going on in India. I therefore find this remarkable man at the highest edge of the orange-yellow world.

#### 5. Indian summation and complementarity - Ramakrishna (1836-1886): India finds a contemporary experiential voice

Ramakrishna, a rural Bengali innocent of Western or formal Indian education, immersed himself in the experiential aspects of traditional Hinduism and later also of the Christian, Islamic, Buddhist and Sikh religions. He proved himself to be a genius in realizing their content as well as their common core experiences and in explaining them to others.

Like Fechner, he saw the whole universe as conscious. In the temple in which he worshipped he saw:

The Image was Consciousness,  
The altar was Consciousness...  
All was Consciousness. [20]



His ability to relate to all manner of people - from illiterate Hindu devotees to the most sophisticated graduates of the British universities - can be looked on as a practical demonstration of how it is possible, à la Schleiermacher, to live utterly according to the

precise context presented to one and to be completely apposite to it, helping others to understand, deepen and enrich their own lives.

For Ramakrishna, Fries's insight about the core of religious experience was not an essay in "feeling", but an actual fact: God can be *seen*. [21] Despite his most unusual experiences, it seems that Ramakrishna was not out of line with contemporary thought (so much influenced by Kant), but was highly coherent and rational. This is suggested by the fact that he has attracted to himself some of the most brilliant minds and original thinkers of both East and West, [22] who seemed to have understood Ramakrishna's significance to contemporary needs, not only in the physical world, but also in the emotional, intellectual and intuitive realms.

**As an example of Vedantic summation and complementarity, we find Ramakrishna with a blue border and placed at the central point between the ending of the Kantian, exclusively Germanic line of development and the beginning of the more American phase that followed. I regard him as the summary of what went before and the starting point of the next "round," moving up toward a more yellow-dominated world, indicating the attempt to remove dichotomies entirely.**

**Summary and conclusions** - The second period: Late eighteenth to early nineteenth century  
In this section I have considered how four German savants of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries went beyond reductionistic rationalism, exploring the inner template of experience (Kant); the nature of religious experience (Fries); how such experience may be compatible with rational discourse (Schleiermacher); and its empirical, internal contours (Fechner).

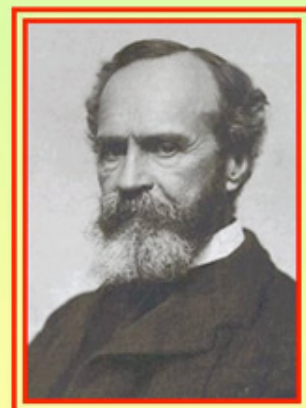
At the same time, Ramakrishna, as unknown to the Herrs Professor as they were to him, was demonstrating exactly what they were talking about, and adding a whole library of phenomena, such as different levels of trance states in which different types of phenomena existed, with different levels of logic and explanation for further investigation. We can only surmise why there seems to have been such extraordinary parallels between the two cultures at that time.

#### **d) The Third Period (1878-1913) - Late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Inductive methods applied to the theories; Western pragmatism and eastern response**

In this group we find a common thread of active phenomenological investigation of the assertions made by the German professors of the previous period. Working in the West, the Indian spokesman emphasizes the utility of Indian metaphysics in understanding the levels of experience being unearthed in the West and the practicability of Indian methods of self-transformation in dealing with them.

##### **1. Primary theoretician: William James (1842-1910), the pragmatic empiricist**

In William James's 1902 book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, [23] which is considered one of the classics in the field of experiential religion, we find large numbers of scientifically sanctioned case histories which demonstrate that religious experience is a perfectly natural part of human life. James's pragmatic criteria of the validity of religious experience was that it gives meaning, uplift, conviction and happiness to people in all walks and conditions of life. He resisted any pressure to conform religious experience to any particular dogmatic mold, though he did differentiate between "unhealthy" and "healthy" manifestations of it. [24] James asserts that mystical experience is the ground of all other religious experiences, and characterizes mystical states as primarily *ineffable* (defying expression in words) and *noetic* (conveying knowledge, but plumbing depths beyond the discursive



intellect). Two other, less constant, characteristics are: *transiency* (not sustainable indefinitely) and *passivity* (during the experience the will seems to be in abeyance). [25] After discussing the nature of mysticism in yoga, Buddhism, Sufism and Christianity, James reaches these conclusions: Mystical states carry conviction for those who experience them, but for no one else; nevertheless, they break down the exclusive authority of rationalistic states, and strengthen monistic and optimistic hypotheses. [26]

James then goes on to endorse the “feeling” promoted by his German predecessors, and also to plead for a more experimental approach to the subject, suggesting that, ultimately, “If [philosophy] will abandon metaphysics and deduction for criticism and induction, and frankly transform [itself] into a science of religions, [it] can make itself enormously useful.” [27]

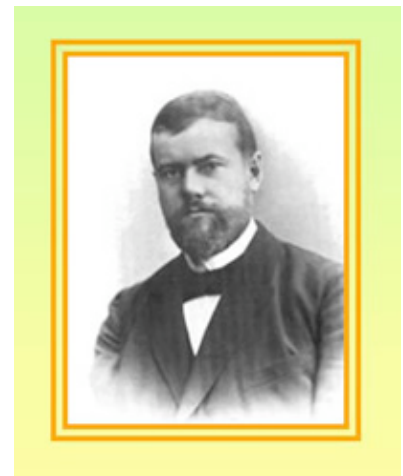
Like Schleiermacher, James saw that the acceptance of the world of religious experience could produce in human imagination a “Living God,” infinitely more real and meaningful than anything either religion, science or the Hegelian monists could come up with. In such a world, where the divisions and categories of intellect had little direct relevance, our present world would be seen as variety in oneness on the one hand, and on the other, that religious pluralism, or the acceptance of the one in the many is the way to reach the widest and deepest understanding. [28]

As with all of our primary theoreticians, James’s portrait has a red border, but with a different format, indicating a new “set” of savants. Under the impetus of his paradigmatic forbears, he is now moving into a yellow - shading into green world, not only removing dichotomies, but also seeking to see all the foregoing possibilities in a connected way. He is placed above Kant, the earlier major theoretician, as he is building (as has everyone else) on the same paradigm of experiential religion.

## 2. Applying the theory to practical situations - Max Weber (1864-1920): Religion in the social and economic context

Max Weber was a German scholar, considered to be one of the fathers of sociology and also of economics, [29] who dedicated the last part of his life to an in-depth study of the sociology of various religions of the world. The experiential argument seems to have convinced Weber, for from his own personal viewpoint, mystical knowledge is a perception of the overall meaning of the world. [30] From there, he set out to study how the systems stemming from such experience impacted the “non-religious” world.

His magnum opus was *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, published in 1904. There he showed how the aims of certain ascetic Protestant denominations, particularly Calvinism, shifted toward rational means of economic gain as a way of demonstrating that they had been blessed. [31] Weber then went on to study the religions of China, India and Judaism, adducing the evidence for their impact on their cultures.



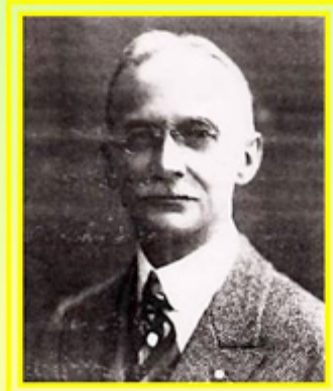
What is remarkable is Weber's assumption that religious experience generates a sufficiently identifiable “power” or force that can lead to huge movements that radically affect history and human culture. If true, this finding is something that must be factored in as evidence of the importance and validity of religious experience.

Following my visual conventions, Weber’s portrait shows the orange border of the thinker opening out the subject to the practical world, within the framework set in this “yellow-shading-into-green” stage. Further to illustrate my conception of what is going on, I place him a little higher on the spiral.



### 3. Interfacing with other disciplines - James Mark Baldwin (1861-1934): Creating tools for more precise study of religious experience

The American scholar James Mark Baldwin is primarily known as a philosopher, psychologist and historian. In his textbook, published in 1893 [32], he specifically mentions that "Perception is the apperceptive or synthetic process of mind whereby the data of sensation take on the forms of representation in space and time," [33] while "The higher reaches of apperception in conception, judgment, and thought give rise also to characteristic emotional states" [34], thus agreeing in principle with all that I have discussed thus far, but using a much stricter separation of purely psychological content from the philosophical and particularly the theological, a trend we note in this group of scholars. This multifaceted scholar was a pioneer in fields directly related to religious experience, specifically the evolution of mental stages in consciousness and the separation of different disciplines, thus permitting more precise, systematic frames of reference for ongoing study of the subject. [35] His work gave rise to both structuralism and post-structuralism, disciplines which insisted on looking at the *context* of experience, influenced by the increasing priority to place the study of religions in a historical perspective.



Baldwin's work in opening out the subject even further in the climate created by James and Weber is represented visually by a yellow border, with a repeat of the yellow-green "world" I propose as the backdrop to all the efforts of this group. He has a slightly higher position on the "conceptual evolutionary spiral".

### 4. A "mystic" who added new dimensions - Richard Bucke (1837-1902): Systematization begins

Richard Bucke was a distinguished Canadian psychiatrist who in 1901 published an account, along with his scientific analysis of its meaning, of a personal experience which he called *Cosmic Consciousness*. [36] He described it as "accompanied by intellectual enlightenment or illumination, which alone would place the individual in a new plane of existence – would make him a member of a new species. To this is added a state of moral exaltation, an indescribable feeling of elevation, elation and joyousness, and a quickening of the moral sense, which is fully as striking as and more important both to the individual and the race than is the enhanced intellectual power. With these come what may be called a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life, not a conviction that he shall have this, but the consciousness that he has it already." [37]



Professor Bucke reviews cases of what he considered cosmic consciousness from almost all of the major world religions as well as secular life. He concluded that, far from being an "abnormal" state, cosmic consciousness is, in fact, the highest point on the scale of human evolution. Working *à la* Baldwin, Bucke marshals evidence for and delineates the evolution of human consciousness from the state of childhood up to cosmic consciousness. In addition, he asserts that, as the earlier levels of consciousness have become the property of all modern individuals, so will cosmic consciousness become, with time, the human norm. [38]

Bucke's work supported, exemplified, and expanded that of his contemporaries. William James wrote to him: "You have brought this kind of consciousness 'home' to the attention of students of human nature in a way so definite and inescapable that it will be impossible henceforward to overlook or ignore it... It is an addition to psychology of first-rate importance." [39]

As the mystic of this group, Bucke's portrait has a green border and is placed at the upper point of this group, moving on toward the turn of the overall "spiral" I am developing here.

## 5. Indian summation and complementarity - Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902): Communicating with the West in the language of experience

Swami Vivekananda was a monastic disciple of Ramakrishna who is said to have attained the highest levels of consciousness. A close and esteemed friend of William James, he was offered the chair of Eastern Philosophy at Harvard University in 1896. [40]

Vivekananda strongly validated experience as the very core of religion - without which there could indeed be no religion - but not necessarily or exclusively involving *feeling*. For the swami, the divine or Spirit can be experienced directly as the clear purpose of a worker in the course of work; as directed feelings of devotion to the divine; as the knowledge of Spirit knowing itself directly; and as a deep, intuitive experience of oneness with the universe, accompanied by a vast grasp of how all of its parts interrelate and can unite. In addition to generalizing the scope of religious experience the swami also demonstrated that it can be cultivated

by yoga or conscious effort, guided by the protocols worked out over millennia of Indian experience. He referred to these as *internal science*, a discipline with great potential for opening out new vistas on the subject in the West.



Vivekananda also unveiled the view that religious experience was not merely "the evolution of nature" (through as many as five levels of consciousness [41], including cosmic consciousness), but also "the manifestation of Spirit," [42] in and through the phenomenal world. He thus strengthened the already dawning understanding in the West that religious experience falls, in practice, into different levels, each with its own phenomena and logic. At the same time, he provided a coherent rationale for precisely the sort of work done by Weber and Baldwin – systematic, rigorous studies of the systems and structures that form around religious experience (Weber), and interior experience in general (Baldwin).

Vivekananda worked with the hypothesis, "We must learn that the same thing can be viewed from a hundred different standpoints, and yet be the same thing." [43] He demonstrated an amazing ability to relate to people from the most orthodox of all the major religions to proponents of Transcendentalism, New Thought, Christian Science, Theosophy, secularism, and science. Here was testimony as to what might be expected of a culture that emphasizes experiential religion. Here, too was at least one working hypothesis of the manner of thinking that would emerge from it - the forerunner, as was Baldwin, of post-modern, contextual thinking. However, in Vivekananda's case, this was deeply rooted in actual experience, not merely in verbal analysis.

Vivekananda's portrait takes its place above the other turning-points and central links in the spiral, with a blue border in the same format as his "group," half-way between the yellow-green "world" and the succeeding green-blue "world" he connects.

**Summary and Conclusions - The Third Period: Late nineteenth to early twentieth century**  
During this period all of our Western thinkers seem to accept the conclusions of their predecessors

about the validity of experiential religion. Now familiar with the data of the world's religious traditions, these theorists are mainly focused on practical demonstrations and applications of their predecessors' theories:

- James a review of religious phenomenology;
- Weber of social and cultural results of religious belief;
- Baldwin of the developmental modes of understanding experience and translating it into action;
- Bucke an in-depth examination of the levels of consciousness that empirically present themselves to anyone who is actively exploring religious experience.

Swami Vivekananda's exegesis in the West, though rational and even scholarly, [44] was largely experiential rather than intellectual. It conveyed in words how religious experience impacts the natural world in many different guises, rather than giving didactic explanations for it. He challenged the West to come up with scientific explanations for the huge mass of coherent subjective phenomena found over the millennia in India. Thus he provided the link between Western objectivity and Asian subjectivism. And, perhaps as a method to enable the West to do so, Vivekananda presented ways and means to *actualize and apply* in the subjective life of the individual all that was being discovered about experiential religion, and thus make it an integral part of Western culture.

#### **e) The Fourth Period - Early to mid-twentieth century: Development of evolutionary theories: "religious experience" grapples with India and "goes professional"**

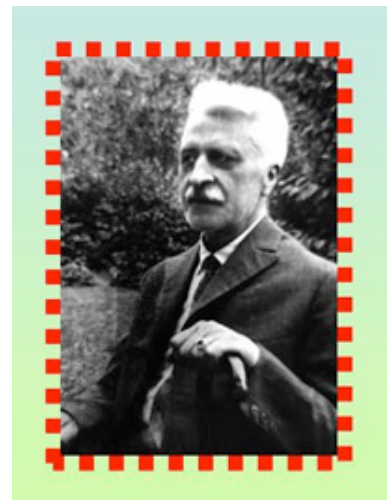
In the early twentieth century Western thinkers had accepted the validity of experiential religion and were investigating it more deeply, factoring in data and explanations from the world-religions, with which the West was becoming quite familiar. These included the need for systematic spiritual practice and the discovery that inner experience is hierarchical in nature.

##### **1. Primary theoretician - Rudolph Otto (1869-1937):**

##### **Groundbreaking East-West studies and an awareness of levels of experience**

Professor Rudolph Otto spent his life teaching philosophy in German universities. In 1917 he published *The Idea of the Holy*, a book credited with stimulating the upsurge of a sustained interest in the subject of religious experience [45] after the First World War.

Otto coined the word *numinous* to describe the mode in which the mind undergoes religious experience. He provided a number of epithets of the numen or holy as it is experienced: the *tremendum* or awe-ful, the *majestas* or overpoweringness, the feeling of energy or urgency, and the attracting or *fascinans* [46]. He pointed to how these different qualities had been emphasized and expressed in various historical traditions. In so doing, he also raised the question common to his contemporaries: How to reconcile the experience of the numinous with rationalism [47], and with the infinite number of forms rationalism perceives?



Otto raises another, important question: How can we cultivate and experience for ourselves the numinous, the holy? He made it clear that the numen was not grasped immediately like a sense-perception or a concept. It had to be approached indirectly, through a series of mental steps or stages of assimilation. The various experiences and other mental states of the subject at each stage must be taken into account until there was an opening out, which permitted the mind to enter the numinous space. [48] Otto and his contemporaries also insisted that "History develops our capacity and manifests the holy." [49] This adds to religious experience a decidedly this-worldly element, which holds out the possibility for systematic evaluation.

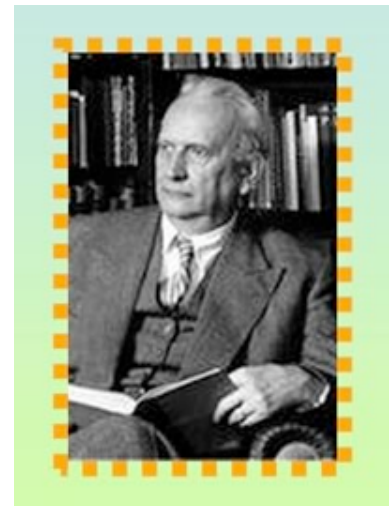
Finally, Otto propounded the idea that the same numen is experienced in all religions and is the basis of the *salvation* which was more and more returning as a topic in Western academic discourse.

Otto's portrait shows him as the red-bordered primary theoretician entering a new phase in a different border format and a green-blue world, where we are approaching a more complete synthesis of the central issues and all that went before.

## 2. Applying the theory to practical situations - Karl Jaspers (1883-1969): Historical perspectives on religious experience

Karl Jaspers was a German psychiatrist, psychologist, and existentialist philosopher. [50] Like his contemporaries, Jaspers understood that experience of what he called "the Encompassing beyond rational comprehension" occurred in a hierarchical way, which he delineated in three realms of being:

- a. Da-sein, or consciousness in general and Existenz. He defines this in his *Philosophy and Existence* (1938) as "the indefinable experience of freedom and possibility that constitutes the authentic being of individuals who become aware of the encompassing by confronting such limit-situations as chance, suffering, conflict, guilt, and death." [51];
- b. God.
- c. Our "normal" state of consciousness.



Jaspers adds the dimension that "Divine Light penetrates all the levels of Encompassing and corresponds to Reason, [52] the ligament of all the states of the Encompassing within us." [53]

Along with his contemporaries, Jaspers was much concerned with *how* these levels are accessed and experienced. He approached the subject in a very generic way through the concept of "ciphers," or symbols for different levels of experience of the transcendent. He proposed: "What is essentially important is, among the phenomena of the great but particular cipher-world, *the struggle for the assimilation to the central cipher that penetrates and leads all the ciphers*. From such a center, the attitude to all the ciphers and the relation to the ciphers are determined." [54] This was nothing less than the Vedantic insight into yoga expressed in technical Western language.

Like Otto, Jaspers felt that the history of the three great sources of religion – China, India and the West - demonstrated that each tradition had, in its own way, penetrated to "the unity of revelation of Being," referring to the sameness of how the divine is experienced in comparable levels of consciousness across cultures. [55] Jaspers went on to delineate his concept of an Axial Period between 800-200 BCE, during which the same major paradigm shifts occurred in all of the major religious cultures of the world.

Inhabiting much the same (green-blue) world as Otto, but carrying his concepts and insights more into practical use, I surround Jaspers's portrait with an orange border in the same format as Otto's, and at a slightly higher place on the upward path.



### 3. Interfacing with other disciplines - Pyotr D. Ouspensky (1878-1947): A radical analysis of the different dimensions involved

Pyotr Ouspensky was a Russian journalist and mathematician who demonstrated with geometrical examples four different dimensions of perception and how they differ from each other, principally in their conception of time. Thus he deconstructed three-dimensionality, along with the theory of causation which belongs to it, as the only way to conceptualize our world. [56] Like his contemporaries, Ouspensky was a Kantian and familiar with Eastern thought, which emphasizes evolution of consciousness as the primary mode of learning. He stated: "In order that objective knowledge shall transcend the limits of the three-dimensional sphere, it is necessary that the conditions of perception shall change." [57] As part of this program, Ouspensky addresses the ancient call to transcend the senses and matter, to know *You are That*. This is an axiom from the millennial Vedic scriptures, which he declared to be the fundamental axiom of higher logic. [58] What this means is that an individual must first accept the proposition that he or she has within him or herself the deepest consciousness that opens out into what was previously called divinity or God. He emphasizes that, at the deepest level, issues of objectivity and subjectivity are permanently resolved and we live in direct communication with the Tao, or the deepest reality.



This is a far-ranging work, clearly rooted in the imperative for direct experience and covering everything from mainstream science to the outer reaches of mystical experience. Ouspensky draws together into a more or less seamless whole all the dimensions pertaining to religious experience available at the time, while making a number of original contributions of his own.

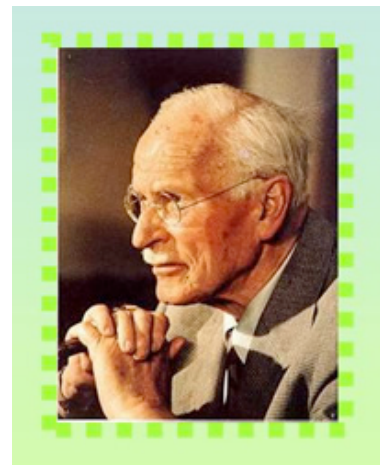
In later life, after meeting Gurdjieff [59] and assimilating his practical methods for self-transformation, Ouspensky devoted himself to working, essentially as a guru, on the spiritual development of a circle of close followers in England and later America. Among others, he influenced Gerald Heard, the British broadcaster, writer and guru, and Aldous Huxley, the British novelist and essayist, [60] who attended his classes in London and later went on to disseminate Ouspensky's ideas and bring them into the Western mainstream.

I think of Ouspensky as inhabiting much the same worldview as Otto and Jaspers. We therefore see him in front of the same green-blue background, with a border in the same style, but yellow in color, indicating a further development of insight, for which he is at a slightly "higher" level on the path.

### 4. A "mystic" who added new dimensions - Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961): Developing a psychological presentation of religious experience

C. J. Jung was a man who made his inner experiences public, [61] and, like Fechner and Bucke, was a scientist. He graduated in medicine at the University of Basel, Switzerland, in 1900. From there he went on to psychiatry, where he made considerable contributions to psychic measurement and assessment, and became an intimate of Sigmund Freud. He developed an entirely original psychology designed to help people to "evolve" from primitive, uncontrollable consciousness to states that were clearer, more explicit, under conscious control, and susceptible to integration with other worldviews. This is a process he called *individuation*, [62] which he fostered by an in-depth study of myth from all over the world.

Like his contemporaries, Jung explored the Asian religions to





expand his understanding of self-transformative processes, conducting a seminar in Zurich in 1932 on the psychology of kundalini yoga. [63] He was quite open about the difficulties faced by rationalistic Westerners in embarking on such a project. He opined that the degree of abstraction involved in accessing the higher chakras would be altogether too much for his Western audience to bear in practice. This was because what is involved is actually the perceiving of Purusha [the ultimate Reality *as experience*] as the center of things [64] and the world as one's own subjective experience, a reflection of one's psyche. [65]

Jung did not dismiss such experiences as irrelevant. He believed that, given time and more practice, Westerners would indeed be able to evolve to such supramaterial experience and create a wholly different world based on their experiences. They would, like the Indians who had pioneered this internal science for millennia, be able to experience Thatness, deep karmic impressions, and other spiritual entities. He felt this was achievable even though the West tended to consider these experiences as "abstract"; for, in reality, they were as "touchable, visible, and audible" [66] as the physical world presently was to the West.

However, Jung felt that it would be more beneficial for the West to develop its own, indigenous methods for the practice of yoga, rather than getting bogged down in Indian esoterica. He noted that much that originated in India was poorly understood, even in India, and certainly did not present itself in ways that connected readily with Western rationalism.

The last thirty plus years of Jung's life were spent, among other things, as a *de facto* guru to his patients and followers, much criticized by those who take a more reductionist, or political view [67]. As we have seen along many of these paths we are exploring, this is almost a natural outcome when anyone goes more deeply into the experiential realm. No matter that Jung's work is not taken very seriously in many academic institutions, it has been very significant in practical ways that affect large numbers of people. Jung was very involved in and supportive of indigenous religions. This was particularly true of the neo-paganism, reasserting itself in the Europe of his day in the form of Wicca, which has now established itself as a recognized religious denomination, accepted even by the Armed Forces of the USA! [68a] Jung was also the inspiration behind the [founding of Alcoholics Anonymous, [68b] an organization which, along with its myriad offshoots, has proven so successful in motivating addicts of one sort or another to find deeper, spiritual, meaning in their lives and permanently to reform themselves.

Jung's portrait shows him in the same domain as his three contemporaries, with the same green-blue background and border design. But, as the "mystic" of the group, his border is green and he has moved slightly further toward the next domain.

## 5. Indian summation and complementarity - Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950): India propounds a worldview of spiritual evolution

Aurobindo Ghosh, like his Western cohorts, differs significantly from his cultural predecessors by virtue of his degree of exposure to the "opposite" culture, having received his entire education up till the age of eighteen in England. Thenceforward in India he immersed himself in the study and practice of traditional Indian wisdom., on which he later brought out a comprehensive oeuvre. in his perfect English. (69) Like that of his predecessors, Aurobindo's system was integral, harmonizing the millennial insights of India with the rational, humanistic demands of the West, what we might call the "horizontal" trans-traditional aspect of religious experience.

Vertically (that is, within any human being) he insisted that the human body was a fit recipient for the spirit, unlike the traditional Indian



view of the body as something unclean. [70] What was in some ways central and most specific to Aurobindo's work was his view, pioneered by Swami Vivekananda, of spiritual evolution combined with that of involution or manifestation. Aurobindo emphasized that evolution of consciousness included three factors: *widening, heightening, and integration*. [71] Integration included the process of "ascent through descent", [72] or a return from the deepest states of consciousness to what we think of as "ordinary" consciousness and its concerns. He was convinced that only through the kind of depth experience he was advocating would any metaphysics [what is created as an explanation of experience] be compatible with everyday experience. This was for him (as for most contemporary Vedantic teachers) an absolute imperative.

Aurobindo is credited with enunciating the following systematic and coherent map of human spiritual experience:

- physical
- sensation/perception
- vital-emotional
- lower mind
- concrete mind
- logical mind (reasoning)
- higher mind (systems)
- illuminated mind
- intuitive mind
- overmind
- supermind
- satchitananda. [73]

Many Western scholars now accept this as a workable model of the hierarchy of religious or spiritual experience, conforming in many respects not only to the traditional spiritual hierarchies. This also parallels the empirical findings of people like Baldwin, Piaget and their successors, and the insights of Fechner, Bucke, Jung, and to a lesser extent James, Otto and Jaspers. It also encompasses the research findings of the multitude of scientists who have applied the methods of empirical research to the model [74] – though none have, as yet, been able to demonstrate the deeper levels described by Aurobindo, based on the millennial testimony of the Indian tradition.

Aurobindo acquired a large following, not only of Indians, but also of Westerners. He became an acknowledged guru with a huge Ashram at Pondicherry. His followers began to spread over the world, one notable example being Haridas Chaudhuri, the founder, along with Frederic Spiegelberg, of the now famous California Institute for Integral Studies in San Francisco. Their manifesto is: "Integral studies seek and express a unifying vision of humanity, nature, world, and spirit. Integral studies at the school also emphasize the importance of integrating all aspects of learning: the intellectual, the experiential, and the applied." [75]

Aurobindo contributed considerable synthesis and also a very substantial new insight to our subject, at least by Western standards, thus moving our "path" toward the next (blue-violet) worldview. I therefore place him within a blue border (still echoing the border format of his contemporaries), and situated at the center of the path above the other "turning points" in our trajectory.

### **Summary and Conclusions - The Fourth Period - Mid-twentieth century:**

In this fourth period we have seen a much greater exchange between East and West. The central conviction about and interest in experiential religion is now engaging with issues of how experience relates to rational explanation. It is also addressing issues of self-transformative practices, of historical development, of the innate hierarchies that are empirically noted as one carries on practice. Questions are being asked about religious phenomena across any such structures and how experience can express itself in real time in the physical world. This increasing complexity seems to differentiate this group of thinkers from those who were working primarily before World War I.

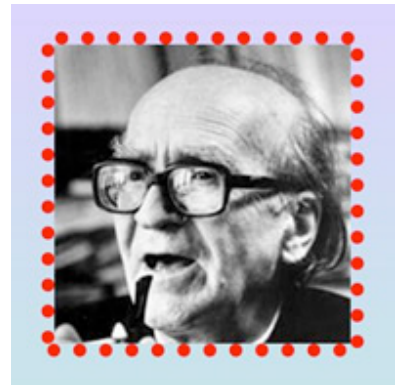
In the Western materials we see, to a greater or lesser degree, the underlying idea that there is some sort of evolutionary process of consciousness which is common to all religions. This conceptual thread provides a “common axis” around which to organize the disparate discoveries about religious experience developed in the early to mid twentieth century. At the same time, Westerners begin to assume the role of the guru, in India traditionally considered essential in the development of religious experience of deeper levels of consciousness. Our Indian savant, Aurobindo, provides a total worldview of the human potential to experience religious reality. He ties it in more completely with Western notions of evolution, balanced by involution or manifestation of experience in recognizable forms in the outer world. As a result, we begin to see the effects of the work of these religious thinkers on the social and intellectual worlds.

#### **f) The Fifth Period - Explorations of the variety surrounding religious experience in the second half of the twentieth century**

I shall now consider the work of more or less contemporary scholars. This is work which is still under assessment and in some cases quite controversial. My goal here, however, is to trace as far as possible the main trends of their thought, with a view to seeing what contributions they have made to my theme. I will consider whether they provide any pointers as to the future of experiential religion, both in the world of theory and of practice.

##### **1. Primary theoretician - Mircea Eliade (1907-1986): Deconstruction of non-experiential religion begins**

Mircea Eliade was a Romanian philosopher and historian of religion, who taught at the Sorbonne in Paris and for twenty-eight years was the Chair of the History of Religions Department in the University of Chicago. In India he studied with the famous scholar of Indian philosophy, Surendra Dasgupta, whom he regarded as “my guru”. [76]



For Eliade “The sacred is pre-eminently the *real*, at once power, efficacy, the source of life and fecundity. Religious man’s desire to *live in the sacred* is in fact equivalent to his desire to take up his abode in objective reality, not to let himself be paralyzed by the never-ceasing relative of purely subjective experiences, to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion.” [77] This is clearly taking a stand in the experience itself and speaking, not as an outsider, but as an advocate. Eliade’s desire was to present the phenomena of the sacred in all their complexity and not only in so far as they are *irrational* [that is, other than understood by desacralized rationality]. He strove to present the sacred in its entirety and as opposed to the profane. [78]

Eliade’s thinking was based on a number of ideas on religious experience which have subsequently become standard in academic thinking on our subject. These include the notion of *hierophanies*, or physical manifestations or revelations of the sacred. Often, but not exclusively, these present in the form of symbols, myths and ritual. [79] On this basis he built the myth of eternal return, in which human beings could understand and live in non-historical, sacred, or cyclic time. This is time which progresses, not linearly as in the modern West, but in a spiral formation, “returning,” though in a more elevated way, a number of times, and mediated through myths and symbols, which refer to and solemnize “new” beginnings after ritualized “endings”. [80]

Eliade supports his thesis from the entire range of religious experience, particularly the more intellectually undeveloped, where such “pure” versions of experience are more readily apparent. He traces how historical time becomes more and more superimposed on the sacred, particularly in the

Abrahamic religions, but also in Buddhism. This leads in modern times to the need to “kill God” in favor of the human. Sacred space and time have been almost completely abolished. [81] Lost as well are the notions of myth, yoga, return, transcendence, correspondence and cosmic consciousness, all of which had been, of course, under scrutiny by the scholars I have been discussing.

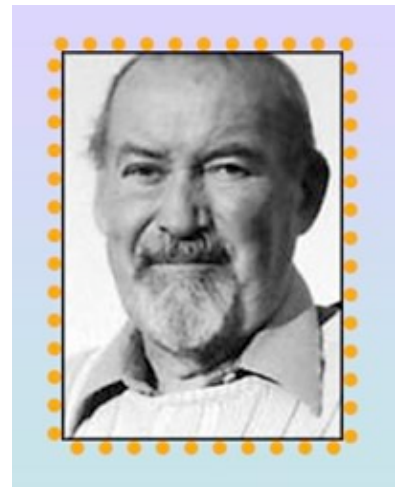
However, Eliade maintains that the non-linear, sacred experience still remains available to varying degrees: No matter how we may strive to desacralize the world, we are still controlled by our unconscious, equivalent to mythic images and figures [82] and in many ways even modern institutions such as movies, psychoanalysis, military organizations, and psychic crises of all dimensions, exist to direct us back to the sacred space where we rightfully belong. [83]

With Eliade we begin our trajectory within the domain of blue (integrated vision of the whole picture) opening out into violet (the as yet unnamed potential we are moving toward). I therefore surround his portrait with a red border in a new format.

## 2. Applying the theory to practical situations - Ninian Smart (1927-2001): Further breakdown of the subject

Ninian Smart, a Scottish scholar of religious studies, graduated not only in philosophy but also in Sanskrit and Pali, the latter the language of the Buddhist scriptures. He taught religious studies in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia.

Professor Smart states, in alignment with his contemporaries: “In brief, what the great religions claim, against radically secular ideologies, is that there is a Beyond or an Unborn, and this is somehow accessible to the religious experience of the human race, and is not just a philosophical speculation or a theory about the world.” [84] Like Eliade, Smart felt that religious experience could and should be looked at from many different dimensions. He systematizes these as follows and defines in the broadest way, using largely humanistic and phenomenological language:



- a) Experiential.
- b) Mythological.
- c) Ritual.
- d) Doctrinal.
- e) Ethical.
- f) Social.

Smart went on to explore with great empathy and circumspection the core values of religion across all its different forms. With some degree of controversiality, he championed the concept that “phenomenologically, mysticism is everywhere the same,” [85] but is differently interpreted within the different religions. This is an important issue, the answer to which will have to wait until more sophisticated observations have been made on subjects actually undergoing mystical experience. [86]

In exploring all the highways and byways in which religious experience may find self-expression, Smart was particularly interested in defining the areas where particularly India/West religions – the immediately apparent major divide in religious phenomena – seem to differ from each other. He points, in line with his contemporaries, to the Indian method of looking at experiences and the phenomena they generate as lying on different levels of development [87] as a practical and experience-based key to finding the solution. He also addresses the many fields opened up by Eliade, including that of how humanism, the “fad” of modern times, can be related to religious experience. He also examines how science, which lies behind so much of humanism, can be reconciled with religion. These are all issues



implicit in our subject, but, for all practical purposes, not overtly addressed until the group of scholars I am now discussing.

Smart is represented in the contemporary “blue-violet worldview” of Eliade; and as a person applying the concept practically, with an orange border echoing the pattern of his “group.”

### 3. Interfacing with other disciplines - John Hick (1922 - ): How the different aspects might hold together

John Hick is a British theologian and philosopher of religion, best known for his work on religious pluralism. His work has been pursued, among other places, in California, and in Birmingham, where he is also a Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Research in Arts and the Social Sciences.



Professor Hick points out that experience may be mediated by pre-determined mindsets, resulting in explanations which fall under the rubric *religious*, generating endless variety of religious forms. This unmediated perception of what he generically calls the Real is “information. . . received by a direct influence, analogous to telepathy between two human minds, and then transformed into visual or auditory terms.” [88] This latter type of experience, in Hick’s opinion, is what is usually meant by the word *mystical*. And “Such mystical experiences are themselves of two main kinds, which have been distinguished as unitive and communicative.” [89] As an indication of this difference, Hick tells us that communicative mystical experience takes the form of visions and so on, while the unitive experience is that of oneness with God, or Reality. But, whatever the phenomena we observe, Hick insists on an acceptance of the underlying Real – however we may interpret it – as an indispensable criterion of religious experience, no matter how it is expressed. [90]

Hick’s contribution to the notion of an evolutionary grid that had been appearing more and more clearly in the work on religious experience, emphasizes an important feature: “At each level of awareness – natural, ethical and religious – we exercise a cognitive freedom which is at its minimum in relation to the immediate physical environment and at its maximum in relation to that ultimate environment of which the religions speak.” [91] He thus openly espouses the hierarchical view of such Oriental texts as the *Mandukya Upanishad* and the ox-herding series in Zen. But such a hierarchy is not absolute. Hick quotes from the Buddhist Nagarjuna: “There is nothing whatever which differentiates samsara [involvement in relative, phenomenal existence] from nirvana [transcendental experience traditionally considered quite “other than” samsara]... There is not the slightest bit of difference between these two.” [92] What this means is that from the most developed level of consciousness the world and God, sacred and secular, first and fourth level consciousness (as in reference 41 above), are not in opposition, but working together in a total picture which transcends all such interpretations.

But, whatever the nature of the experience, the rules of human cognition apply: How the experience is described will depend on the cultural and personal conditioning of the experienter. This insight was similarly enunciated some millennia BCE in the Indic tradition: “The Real is one – sages name it variously,” [93] an insight also supported in the Islamic tradition by Ibn al’Arabi. [94] This view of personal experience is resurfacing nowadays in the form of post-modernism, which during the mid-nineteenth century injected the imperative that the interpretational slant of any statement must be taken into account. This adds to the discussion of any experience a large number of considerations from which it had previously been free.

From these and other elements, Hick synthesizes his view of religious pluralism: there is a central, common core of experience with certain basic features and structure, but which takes on myriad forms as they are reported by the infinitely varied people who experience in different conditions of

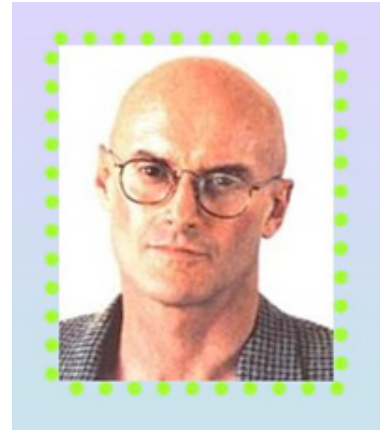


time, space, and causation. What remains to be done is to study systematically the available phenomena in order to arrive at a sure interpretation of the overall picture of religious experience.

Hick carries the view of Eliade and Smart into a wider overview and, therefore his portrait has a yellow border in front of the same background as his contemporaries.

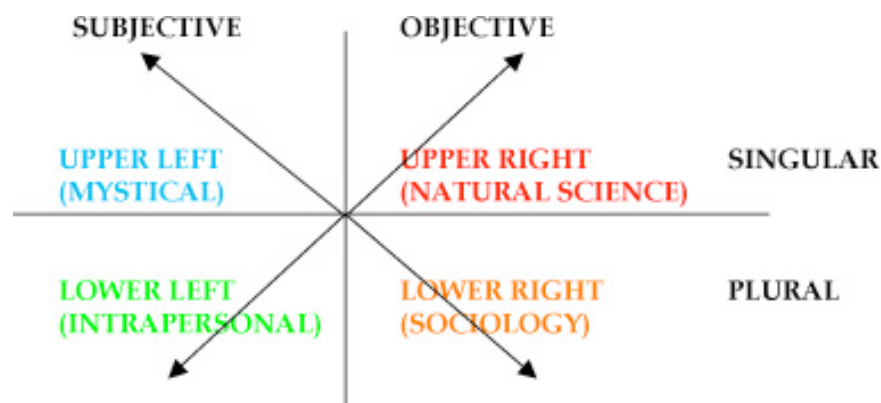
#### 4. A “mystic” who added new dimensions - Ken Wilber (1949 - ): The beginnings of an integral framework

Ken Wilber, although a graduate in chemistry and biology, is also a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. He is known for his unusual ability to integrate data from many fields of inquiry and to relate them to the traditional views of experiential religion. Wilber professes that there is a supra-personal Reality or what he calls Spirit, working in and through the domain of human perception, speaking in many different languages and modes. At the same time, Spirit is offering us the insight to bring all of the voices together harmoniously and integrally, without diminishing any of them . [95]



Following through on that vision, he proposes [96] an integral, four-quadrant approach (Figure 1), in which the left quadrants represent subjective perception, and the right quadrants objective perception (colors mine):

**Figure 1. Wilber's four-quadrant diagram**



The upper quadrants represent the perception of a single person, and the lower the perceptions of groups. Because all elements are merely different forms of the same Spirit, each quadrant has equal value, despite its difference of form from the others.

Another principle proposed by Wilber is that of holons: each more complex entity is made up of smaller holons. Each holon, on any level, has the capacity to transcend itself and be included in a larger holon, without losing its own identity. This, too, is basic to Indian thinking, pioneered conceptually in the West by Leibniz, Whitehead, Harsthorne and Griffin [97], and well-articulated by William James. James, basing his thinking on Bergson [98], tells us that the basic principle is that no form is ultimate and all can metamorphose and combine with others in highly creative ways beyond our rationalistic scientific presuppositions.

Wilber proposes that we must factor in the evolutionary history of every single entity (represented by the diagonal, arrowed lines), giving it its due. If we cross-compare between quadrants, we must compare entities of comparable evolutionary status if we are going to get meaningful results. He also

makes the important point that matter is not “lower” than spirit – it is merely its “outer” form, a notion that fits very well with modern Vedanta. In a similar way, sociology is the outer expression of interpersonal relationships. And, *pari passu*, spirit is the inner form of matter; interpersonal relationships of sociology. It behooves us to factor in all four quadrants in our thinking, giving proper due to all of them and working at integrating them with each other.

Wilber marshals evidence from a dizzying array of research in all four quadrants, matching experiences in different fields from prehistory up to postmodernism, thereby suggesting, if not demonstrating, the correspondences between them. [99] As of 2006, he purports to be able to give the “address” of anyone on the whole, complex vertical-horizontal model he has constructed, not only within the two-dimensional quadrants and on the vertical evolutionary scale, but also in the many different strands of development [100] he is discussing. It is very easy to get bedazzled by all of this, and indeed, to wonder what it has to do with experiential religion. It seems fair to say that his model brings to our attention the need to relate religious experience systematically and coherently to other dimensions of reality in order to complement our inner, subjective world and also to communicate with others. From another standpoint, if we present ourselves as objectively standing at one specified address, with no claims to superiority or privilege, the chances of objective communication with others are highly increased. And when communication is improved, the environment for spiritual evolution and experience is considerably enhanced.

As a contemporary of Eliade, Smart and Hick, Wilber’s portrait is seen with the same blue-violet worldview background. As the “mystic” of the group his portrait has a green margin.

## 5. Indian summation and complementarity - Ramana Maharshi (1878-1950): Naked experientialism

Ramana Maharshi was a simple, apparently unremarkable South Indian boy who went through a massive spiritual experience at the age of sixteen, from which he emerged an enlightened sage. This was unusual, even for India, and marked him out as almost unique in ways which later proved to be very relevant to the Westerners who came to India in large numbers to see him.

After his experience he moved to the Arunachala Hill near Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu, where he remained for the rest of his life. Contemplating this small hill was for him tantamount to listening to the guru, or communing with God, if such there were. For Ramana, Arunachala was his father, his mother, the guru, the remover of ego, the eternal Om, vision of the eye, hearing of the ear, giver of fearlessness, all beauty, all love, his only beloved, even beyond the Self. [101]



Perhaps because Ramana’s religious experience was almost completely *sui generis* and was so universal, for a Hindu he placed very little emphasis on any of the traditional Indian methods of spiritual development, such as ritualistic worship, prayer, scriptural study, discrimination between the unreal and the real, or even formal meditation. However, he did write a brief commentary on meditation and the path of knowledge in his major, early work *Self-Enquiry*. His primary mode of teaching was interacting with others, and his mature teaching style was largely total silence. Those who came to see him were transfixed by the serenity, love and profound understanding he radiated, particularly from his large, luminous eyes.

Ramana highlights realization or communion with the Self. Rather than identifying himself deductively with the Atman or other abstract formula or dogmas, he asks, “Who am I?” [102] not only in meditation or in a formal religious setting, but in and through all activity whatsoever. The idea is to get inductively

to the very bottom of any experience and touch what exists in, through, above, below it. He was convinced that, asked earnestly enough, this simple question would take anyone to the immediate experience of who he or she truly were: one with the divine and the entire universe.

This was a powerful practice, compatible with the humanistic, practical outlook of contemporary times, suitable not only for his large Indian following, but also the large numbers of Westerners who sought him out. Among these were Henri le Saux [103] and Paul Brunton, [104] both of whom experienced non-dual Self-awareness in his presence. Both went on to lifetimes of study and realization as well as extensive writing about the nature of higher or deeper states of religious experience, from the standpoint of a person actually going through it.

Although Ramana is a very early contemporary of this group, I nevertheless present his portrait in front of the same background, placed centrally to indicate his pivotal role in moving the whole dialectic to a new phase, and with the blue border of the summarizer and complementary view.

### **The Fifth Period - Late twentieth century: Summary**

During this period, building on the notion of evolution of consciousness, the focus is on the phenomena associated with religious experience, East and West. Various efforts are made to work toward some way of relating them coherently, particularly sacred and secular, [105] the various elements involved in the structure of religions, [106]; religious pluralism, [107] and integral matrices. [108] All of these present us with a dazzling and at times confusing array of facts and interpretations, all around the central core of how the numinous is experienced and expressed.

In India, Ramana's extremely humanistic, inductive method of tapping into experience seems like a counterweight to the work of his Western contemporaries. It appears to be a way not only of finding one's own, unique, spiritual "address" in the highly complex universe which seems to emerge from the realm of inner experience, but also a stable place from which to explore all of the other "addresses" in the spiritual cosmos.

### **Overview and conclusions**

In selecting my materials for this study, I have concentrated on mainstream thinkers and mystics, in the West trained in one or other of the systematic sciences, and in India recognized by their own tradition as masters of the mystical world. In the Western post-Enlightenment group I have sought to present four different points of view in any period under study, with a view to giving a rounded presentation.

1. Primary theoretician.
2. Applying the theory to practical situations.
3. Interfacing with other disciplines.
4. A "mystic" who added new dimensions.

At the same time, the view of each of the Indian mystics is taken, almost by definition, to be intrinsically integral, a criterion validated by his ability to complement the issues addressed by all of his Western contemporaries.

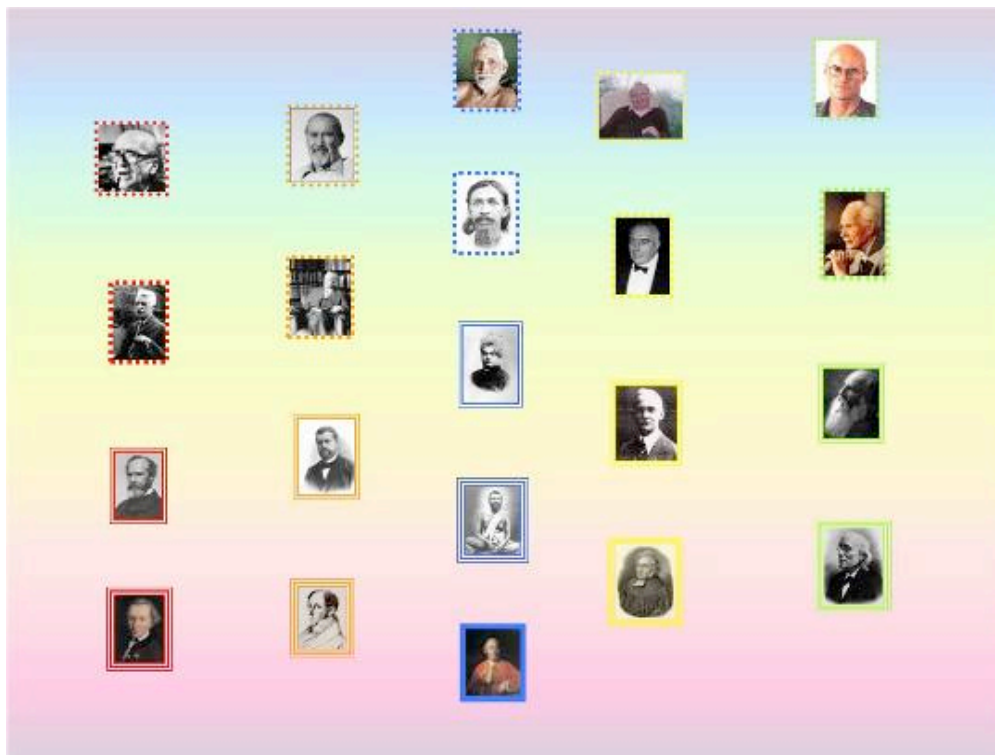
I have regarded as primary theoreticians Kant, James, Otto, and Eliade, all recognized as ground-breaking in the field of human religious experience. Fries, Weber, Jaspers, Smart are included under the rubric "*Applying the theory more directly*," because they attempt to open up the discoveries of the primary theoreticians and reformulate them in ways susceptible to further verification. The further question of how the basic insights of the first two groups lend themselves to dialoging with other fields of knowledge is addressed by Schleiermacher, Baldwin, Ouspensky, and Hick, under "*Interfacing with other disciplines*," while the opening out of any line of thought into mystical experience is addressed under "*A 'Mystic' who added new dimensions*," including Fechner, Bucke, Jung, and Wilber.

Taking an overview of each group, we can see within it a dynamic of opening the subject out from the first presentation and a gradual deepening of content as we move towards the “mystic” at that level. Similarly, as we progress historically from group to group there is a definite deepening of understanding and a greater willingness to accept that experience speaks for itself and does not need to respond to any externally imposed intellectual criteria of validity. The scholars are more willing to admit feeling, transcendence and so on as not only valid in themselves, but central to the whole religious endeavor, and to holding together a whole new way of thinking about the phenomenology of religion and how it can be remapped in order to include all types of people within it harmoniously.

Finally, we note that as time passes, the recognition of Eastern religious systems which hold experience as *the* central criterion of religious validity becomes more and more definite, beginning clearly with William James, and ending with Western savants acknowledging their gurus, while become such themselves. Such observations and processes do not appeal to rationalistic people. However, it seems clear that the more deeply one goes into the phenomenology of experiential religion, issues of transverbal spiritual transmission arise and must be addressed, along with the nature of an illumined saint, the effectiveness of systematic practice (yoga) in attaining higher states of consciousness, evolution of consciousness itself, and so on. In general, the further “into” any Western foursome one goes, the more awareness of India there is: as mystics themselves, Fechner, Bucke, Jung and Wilber have the most understanding of their generation and also the greatest capacity to incorporate what they have learned from India into their own way of thinking.

All of these ideas have been visually demonstrated by the individual portraits and also the “chart” (Figure 2) of the evolutionary unfolding of the whole dynamic. These are meant not as absolute representations, but to suggest an overall view of the dynamic behind this events presented in this paper. Here I would like to recapitulate their content, but in a different format. I present for your consideration a total view of our thinkers, this time laid out according to the principles of Wilber’s four-quadrant matrices. In addition to Wilber’s designations of Upper/Lower and Internal/External, I add color coding to connect this method with our own “panoramas” used thus far. This is the thinking behind this image:

**Figure 2. Overall positioning of philosophers**



1. Equating the upper right quadrant (“natural science”) with red, the color of didactic rationalism which still dominated at the time of the first, “Kantian” group, we find the Herrs Professor lined up along the evolutionary axis of that quadrant.

2. Under lower right quadrant (“sociology”), which I equate with the climate of connection of theory and fact (orange) which dominated the period of James’s group, we similarly see the four savants of that group lined in evolutionary sequence along the orange axis.

3. Similarly, in the lower left (“intrapersonal”) quadrant the four savants, beginning with Otto, who did not hesitate to interface with other disciplines, moving beyond the dichotomy of theory and fact (yellow) are seen on the evolutionary line in the yellow dimension.

4. Finally, in the upper left (“mystical”) quadrant related to green or exploring the depth dimension of all of the above, we find our contemporaries who are more willing to speak from their own avowed experience, beginning with Eliade and spreading out along the green evolutionary axis.

For Hume, the thinker who started the whole thing, I reserve a special place at the center, where he good-naturedly smiles at us through what may be a peep-hole from another, previous dimension with a similar layout. But space of course precludes us from going there.

This presentation is simply to show how the data fit quite well into the Wilber matrices, thus providing evidence for their cogency. Many comments could be made here, but the primary one I would like to make is that the “evolutionary series” in each quadrant corresponds to the progression along the five-fold “roles” played in each group, and how they hang together. Also note that the inner evolutionary progression within each quadrant corresponds to the overall progression of the worldviews of the savants, a point I have tried to make verbally above.

Thus, the graphics illustrate in a more intuitive way the dynamics of this entire paper.

Despite the varying degrees of exposure to Eastern trends, I believe I have shown that there is a remarkable balance between East and West at all stages. At every stage, the Eastern mystic seems to be tapping into the same truths as his Western contemporaries, but bringing to them a much more experiential dimension, as well as complementing the researches of the West. Over time, a rather interesting switch of roles seems to take place between East and West, which began with Ramakrishna’s infinite complexity and the philosophical baby steps of Kant and Post-Kantians; while now the West is complexifying, and India is radically simplifying.

In taking stock of our historical analysis of how our understanding of religious experience has changed within the last two hundred and fifty years, we find nearly a century of slow consideration and discovery following Kant’s ground-breaking critiques. The speed with which change took place accelerated considerably in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Thereafter, change seemed to occur every fifty years or less, indicating an increasing interest in the subject, more available data, and more radical and perhaps more committed personal approaches.

These huge shifts of understanding that have been going on have included many other thinkers and experiencers besides the ones I have chosen to discuss here. Some additional names that come to mind include Ram Mohan Roy and Rabindranath Tagore, who radically revisioned the role of religion in the cultural life of India; and in the West, A.N. Whitehead, , Gerald Heard, , and Joseph Campbell, whose work dealt with religious experience from a systematic and scientific point of view, influenced by Indian thought. I have omitted these and many others largely on account of lack of space.

In addition, there is also the large Transpersonal Psychology movement, with its intellectual center at the Institute of Transpersonal Studies (ITP) in Palo Alto, California, the hub of a growing worldwide movement. This academically-accredited, scientifically oriented postgraduate institute trains thinkers, researchers, therapists and religious leaders. In order to be accepted for study at ITP, a basic



requirement is that the candidate be formally admitted to a religious tradition (which as often as not includes having a spiritual advisor or guru) and is regularly practicing meditation or other recognized religious practices.

If the above information is not sufficiently suggestive that major changes have occurred in our attitude toward religious experience, we might also consider that Dr. Dean Hamer, the director of the Gene Structure and Regulation Unit at the U.S. National Cancer Institute, has written a book entitled *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into our Genes*. This controversial discovery was featured in the October 25, 2004 number of *Time Magazine*, and has been batted about in many formats, raising, of course, major issues of just in what space religious experience occurs and how it takes place. Will this be our next big discussion? That any hard core scientist would write such a book can only mean that religious experience is making its mark, flushing out the diehards to fight in the open. May the best ones win! Which probably means everyone, if we have learned the lesson of what this essay is saying.

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