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Abstract:

This project is about the new field of contemplative studies, a field that seeks to use “contemplative” practices, derived mostly (though not entirely) from religious traditions in academic settings, prominently including college pedagogy. First, this project seeks to understand how contemplative studies advocates persuade others (and themselves) that what they are doing is not “religion;” that is, how do they define “religion” in order to situate their own work as non-religious academic inquiry? Second, in the course of my textual and ethnographic research on contemplative studies, it has become apparent that this field adds to the growing rebuttal of religious studies critiques of mind-centered “spiritualities.” In contrast to analyses of “spirituality” as a consumerist conceit, such as Carrette and King’s *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (2004), many contemplative studies advocates are working to orient the field toward the use of contemplative practices to promote critical thinking, empathy, and activism. In this project, I analyze contemplative studies texts, my experiences at contemplative studies events, and my interviews with advocates to describe these two trends and try to put them in historical context.

RELIGION IN CONTEMPLATIVE STUDIES

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Religion

Syracuse University

May 2018

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Introduction:

Scene 1: Northampton, Massachusetts

On a warm August night in 2015, a group of college professors and graduate students gathers in a library reading room at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. Most are avid practitioners of meditation and other “contemplative practices.” They sit around the periphery in a communal rectangle. A lone participant-observer scans the room. In spite of the all-too-common stereotypes of “spiritual seekers”, not a pair of yoga pants is in sight. Any kale has been checked at the door. Crystals have been silenced or turned off. Instead, an intense and deadly serious discussion is underway.

The occasion is a halfway point check-in session at the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education’s annual Summer Seminar for Contemplative Pedagogy. Titled “Challenges for Contemplative Pedagogy,” the session has no explicit agenda other than recapping the challenges encountered since Sunday evening. The diverse audience of meditators, yogis, dancers, musicians, and counselors, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, secularists, and those combining two or more of these *does* have an agenda, and they are not feeling shy. They want to talk about race. The audience is majority white, but the energy in the room comes from women academics of color.

The facilitator, Dan Barbezat of the nonprofit Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, opens by arguing that contemplative practices are powerful ways of engaging with the world, rather than merely detaching from it. An African-American professor from Baltimore argues that contemplative practice is important for managing anger, time, and the limits of individual capacity in social justice struggles. A professor of English at

a prominent historically Black college urges the group to “investigate for ourselves through contemplative practice... what is our fear around? Who might that [be], why, and what might it be, deep down, that we’re afraid of?”

A professor of Italian commits to talk about “the sexism embedded in the language, and the racism embedded in the culture.” “I don’t feel good about myself if I’m not making a positive change,” she says. A young scholar-activist from urban Texas implores the group to take self-care seriously, to cultivate mindfulness to “keep us from falling into the abusive patterns that we stand up against each and every day,” to prevent “intimate violence among activists.” She asks the group to “commit to love ourselves, to give better to everyone else.”

The speakers are eloquent, erudite, pragmatic, and passionate. The participant-observer, a white man from New Jersey, feels himself becoming a participant, full stop. Detachment does not do justice to the issues being raised. In less lucid moments he realizes that nothing in his training has quite prepared him for this, that he never expected such passionate criticism and commitment from the “spiritual but not religious” crowd, and that it’s fascinating data.¹ The English professor who spoke earlier encourages the group to “be courageous and move through fear, because these are thick and difficult times.”

Scene 2: San Diego, California

In a vast outdoor pavilion, under a kind of hardened tent, abutting the harbor, a

¹ It surprised me because though I knew that some members of the “spiritual but not religious” lineage engaged in activism, I had little knowledge (at the time) that this was still occurring or that present manifestations centrally involved people of color.

prominent neuroscientist takes the stage. A world-renowned and mass-paperback-published researcher on meditation and the emotional brain, he addresses an audience of several hundred conference-goers from a range of scientific, humanistic, and professional disciplines. It is the early evening of November 10th, 2016. Less than 48 hours have elapsed since Donald Trump won the presidency. The neuroscientist correctly gauges the mood in the room and finds it in sync with his own. “I woke up yesterday with a fire in my belly,” he says. He rededicates himself to using his scientific vocation to further the cultivation of compassion and empathy in the face of anger and alienation no one could have guessed at one week before.

In updating the audience on the state of his work and on the field of mediation research more broadly, he makes an even more surprising statement indicative, perhaps, of the field’s own epochal shift. He acknowledges that many in this field have encountered (and/or made) claims to experiences beyond the bounds of what science typically considers possible. They involve extraordinary states of consciousness and encounters with supernatural forces. Instead of dismissing these claims, as many researchers would, he argues that when such claims come from people “whose sanity is robust,” they should be taken seriously. From such a prestigious podium, the statement is not just remarkable. It could be programmatic.

Scene 3. San Diego, CA.

The same hangar-sized tent, with an equally large audience, two days later. An African-American law professor, widely published on torts and civil rights law, delivers a mid-day keynote titled “Moving Together from Colorblindness to

ColorInsight: Contemplative Enquiry, Research, and Practice in the Work of

Transformative Justice.” She speaks of the value of meditation and other contemplative practices for unpacking the role whiteness and white privilege play in shaping academic spaces and the production of knowledge:

“It’s time, well past time actually... that we just stop doing that, that we recognize the value of the particular lives that we have lived, that our students have lived... the richness of that as a source and an inspiration and a sense of purpose, but also the blind spots that come with the fact that we’ve only lived one life... this is why we need each other. Haven’t we just learned that in this election cycle, at least in part, that we live in bubbles, that we live in worlds where we can really reinforce our particular point of view... and we’re shocked to see that there are entirely different worlds out there that we are disconnected from. We have been blinded from the experiences of so many different types of people. So it’s not just about race. It’s about class, it’s about sex orientation, immigration status, it’s about region...” “I’m just going to, with love, say yes, we do! But we’re going to do it together.... we don’t do things alone.”

These three scenes, taken from gatherings of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society and the Mind and Life Institute, fall under the new academic field of "contemplative studies." Contemplative studies is an interdisciplinary field that promotes the use of “contemplative practices” (often derived from “religions”) in settings from education, to therapy, to business management, to scientific research, and (recently and prominently) political advocacy. It trades on the claim that introducing such “contemplative practices” in each of these settings will enable better focused attention, more emotional awareness, increased empathy for others and for the self, enhanced learning, and improved models of conscious experience for academic study. It also frequently incorporates a desire to reform what advocates view as flaws in the model of knowledge production and the value on scientific power derived from the European Enlightenment. Advocates might teach contemplative practices to medical students to

reduce stress, diagnostic error, and burnout.² They might use them in religious studies classes to allow students to test and evaluate practices about which they are reading, or simply to focus and retain information better, and connect it to their wider social and ecological context.³ They might employ contemplative practices in classroom conversations about racism to help participants deal with strong emotions, more closely examine their own thoughts and reactions, and cultivate greater empathy.⁴ They might map the brain activity of advanced meditators to develop new methods for studying consciousness, checking measurements against practitioners' phenomenological reports to render this notoriously slippery variable a bit more stable and repeatable.⁵ They might

² Medical students and researchers participating in Brown University's contemplative studies program testify to this in a video from the initiative. See "Contemplative Studies." *ContemplativeStudies*. Accessed 2/23/2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvzcoV6GLq0>, 12/19/2012.

It was produced by the initiative, though I cannot find it on their Web site anymore.

Additional information on the medical school's current relationship to the contemplative studies program is available online. See "Concentration in Integrative Health and Contemplative Practices." *Brown Alpert Medical School*. Accessed 2/23/2018.

<https://www.brown.edu/academics/medical/education/scholarly-concentration-program/integrative-medicine>.

³ See interview testimony from David Germano, below, and overviews in Simmer-Brown, Judith, and Fran Grace, eds. *Meditation in the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Higher Education*. SUNY Press, 2011, and Barbezat, Daniel, and Mirabai Bush. *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*. Jossey-Bass, 2013.

⁴ See comments below on Rhonda Magee's keynote at the Mind and Life Institute's 2016 International Symposium for Contemplative studies. A video of the talk is available. See "2016 ISCS Keynote – Rhonda Magee." *Mind and Life Institute*, 12/6/2016. Accessed 2/23/2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xcNaWUt_uk. See also descriptions below of conference proceedings at the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education's 2015 *Building Just Communities* conference at Howard University.

⁵ For an accessible overview, see Davidson, Richard, and Daniel Goleman. *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body*. Penguin Random House, 2017.

For more technical approaches, see Thompson, Evan, Francisco Varela, and Eleanor Rosch. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Revised

even employ contemplative practices to seek to cultivate compassion and healing in high-pressure business and military environments, or reflect on their results to offer critiques of the epistemology and even ontology of academic knowledge production.⁶ I believe its history is traceable to the European Romantic movement's interest in "religious experience," empirical trends in colonial and postcolonial Asian thought, and the intersection of these currents in the American counterculture in the 1960s. Its reach is becoming wider, but what may be more remarkable is the influence it has achieved in elite intellectual spaces.⁷

Edition. MIT Press, 1991, 2016, and Thompson, Evan. *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*. Harvard University Press, 2007.

⁶ On corporate and military applications, see podcast and transcript from Mirabai Bush's interview with American Public Media's Krista Tippet. Available as "Mirabai Bush – Search Inside Yourself: Contemplation in Life and Work." *On Being*, 9/1/2016. Accessed 2/23/2018. <https://onbeing.org/programs/mirabai-bush-search-inside-yourself-contemplation-in-life-and-work-2/>.

For ontology, see comments from Rose Sackey-Milligan and reporting on Gregory Bateson and on AAR Contemplative Studies Group proceedings below.

⁷ As of February 2018, a brief Google search on "contemplative studies" turns up initiatives of various sorts based at Brown University, Syracuse University, Rice University, The University of Wisconsin-Madison, The University of Michigan, Oregon State University, the University of San Diego, The Pratt Institute, Wheaton College, Ramapo College, the University of Mary Washington, and West Chester University. Also among the first thirty or so results on "contemplative studies" are a psychoanalytically focused program affiliated with New York University and a research guide created by the academic library at the University of West Virginia. Major nonprofits include the Mind and Life Institute and the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. The Center's "Resources" Web page also lists, among other projects, The Center for New Designs and Learning in Scholarship at Georgetown University, The Mindfulness Research Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research at Stanford University, the UCSD Center for Mindfulness at the University of California, San Diego, various degree programs at Naropa University, the Graduate Certificate: Mindfulness Studies Specialization at Lesley University, the Master of Arts Program in Mindfulness Studies at Lesley University, the Interdisciplinary Certificate in Contemplative Inquiry at the University of North Carolina, Asheville, the Jha Lab at the University of Miami, the Lazar Lab at Massachusetts General Hospital, the Shamatha Project at the University of California,

Contemplative Studies exists primarily in academic and nonprofit settings. Its relationship to “religion” is complicated. It looks a great deal like various forms of individualized, mind-centered “spirituality,” but there are two critical differences between contemplative studies and other forms of “spirituality.”⁹ First, it has subtly shifted the norms of academic discourse, establishing itself as a field of nonprofit action and academic inquiry and acquiring world-class intellectual heft and serious institutional power. It has succeeded in bringing “religious” ideas to positions of the highest prestige in the academic world. Second, it seems to add to the ongoing refutation of the charge that “spirituality” is merely a consumerist conceit, that it can only come from and can

Davis, the Contemplative Sciences Lab and related Metro-Area Research Group on Awareness and Meditation at New York University, and David Vago’s neuroimaging laboratory at Harvard University (see “Higher Education Resources: Links.” *Center for Contemplative Mind in Society*.

<http://www.contemplativemind.org/resources/higher-education/links>. Accessed 2/21/2018). What may be more significant than its expanding reach is its concentration of power and resources in elite circles. The Mind and Life Institute is particularly remarkable in this regard for its close connections to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet and its ability to attract involvement from world class intellectual talent like the neuroscientists Richard Davidson and Amisha Jha, Harvard historian Anne Harrington, the science writer Daniel Goleman, philosopher Evan Thompson, and religion scholars like Harold Roth and John Dunne, and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction originator Jon Kabat-Zinn (for a list of current and past board members, see “People.” *Mind and Life Institute*. Accessed 2/23/2018. <https://www.mindandlife.org/people/>).

⁹ Forms of “spirituality” focused on changes in individual consciousness are described in, for example, Schmidt, Leigh Eric. *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*. New York: HarperOne, 2005; Bender, Courtney. *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010; Carrette, Jeremy R., and Richard King. *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*. New York: Routledge, 2011; Wilson, Jeff. *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014; and Jain, Andrea. *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

only reinforce privilege, political apathy, and selfishness.¹¹

As a scholar trained in religious studies, my first goal in this dissertation is to explain what this interdisciplinary field is doing, and to articulate the historical bases for its impact (1) on the norms of acceptable academic discourse, and (2) on what counts as argument and as knowledge in relationship to “religion.” I have kept “religion” in quotes thus far because I am treating it as a category, not a thing. Instead of deploying it myself, I am studying how others (specifically contemplative studies advocates) use it to situate *their* work.¹² My second goal is to show how, although contemplative studies has obvious family resemblances with contemporary and past forms of individualized, mind-centered “spirituality,” it complicates commonplace empirical and normative judgments about them, most especially the idea that they ignore or even encourage socially toxic forms of disengagement and individualism.

Contemplative studies draws “contemplative practices” from a variety of “religious” traditions and includes them in a toolbox of methods for changing the structure of perception and thought. It assumes an implicit theory of comparative religion, wherein the common ground between traditions is their techniques for

¹¹ Prominent examples of this critique include Carrette and King’s *Selling Spirituality* and Bellah et. al.’s analysis, especially of “Sheilaism,” in Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

¹² My inspiration to take this approach begins with J.Z. Smith’s programmatic claim that “religion is solely a product of the scholar’s study” (see *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, 1982). My thinking has also been refined by Peter Gottschalk’s amendment to that methodological guidepost. Gottschalk argues that scholars cannot control how others use the category of religion, and should study how others use it. See Gottschalk, Peter. *Religion, Science, and Empire: Classifying Hinduism and Islam in British India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

cultivating these states of consciousness. It attempts to bridge aspects of human life split between the spheres of “religion” and “science” by the Enlightenment and address what advocates perceive as social ills deriving from that split. And yet, it is not primarily a popular form. It is not even a fringe academic conversation. It is squarely in the academic mainstream and seems to have succeeded in bending the norms of academic discourse to get there. Talented and respected researchers pursue contemplative studies. In doing so they have begun a revolt against the typical disciplinary norms, epistemologies, and even (in rarer cases) ontologies of their fields. I hope to show that this swing of the pendulum can be understood as part of a long-running conversation on the boundary between “religion” and the world of academic knowledge. I also hope to show how the key architects of this latest push are situated within that history.

When I began to pay attention to contemplative studies, my longstanding interests in mysticism, religious experience, cognitive science, and the scientific study of consciousness met my later-breaking interest in broadly Foucauldian critical studies of the rhetorical and political power of science.¹³ I began this project on contemplative studies thinking that I would be a critic, specifically a critic of a hidden effort to use the rhetorical power of academic knowledge to prop up religious viewpoints, and possibly a lack of critical thinking about the relationship between mind-centered spiritualities and consumerism. More than anything else, time on the ground with advocates for and

¹³ In fact, when I was a senior in college, I was very interested in contemplative studies. I saw it, then, as a possible solution to my own personal questions about the relationship between religion and science. In a sense, I have read my own intuitions into contemplative studies and looked for them there, looking in part for an explanation for why contemplative studies was so intuitively appealing *to me* at that point in my life.

practitioners of contemplative studies shifted my view.¹⁴ I *do* think they could talk about “religion” in more sophisticated ways. The real surprise for me is that I have found myself in the position of cautiously defending them from charges of covert proselytization and overt consumerism.¹⁵ In particular, I am glad I decided to conduct interviews with contemplative studies advocates. I pursued this course primarily because of dissatisfaction with the field’s relatively limited print literature, and the knowledge that little of the research on mind-centered “spiritualities” includes ethnographic

¹⁴ The reader might ask why I undertook time-consuming and costly travel, let alone devoted an entire dissertation, to investigate people who I initially assumed were up to little of any substance and less that was any good. When I found my way back to contemplative studies as a doctoral student, my first thought was not “how does this work?” but “how are they getting away with this?” It annoyed me. I thought the use of “religious” materials this way was dishonest, and assumed that it concealed a project to use science to bolster “religion.” At that time, I was in a more Foucauldian mode/mood and originally intended to criticize contemplative studies as aggressively as possible. As I did more research, developed the project, and wrote my dissertation prospectus, contemplative studies came into the ambit of a question that emerged for me earlier in my graduate coursework. I remember the seminar well. It was the spring of 2012. We had read something about workplace applications of “spirituality” or “mindfulness” or some such thing (not anything identified as contemplative studies). Someone raised the obligatory and also totally legitimate point about such programs as forms of pacification designed to de-stress and numb employees, thus allowing them to be exploited more effectively. I raised what I thought was an interesting counterpoint - even granting that the intention is to pacify, *are we sure that is what will actually happen?* Could a corporation (and could we in the seminar) really predict what would happen if employees began to cultivate calm and compassion, to get better in touch with their bodies and their emotions? Might they become *harder* rather than easier to control? As I continued to do research, I found that some contemplative studies advocates, most prominently including those connected to the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society and its Association for the Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, were exploring something like the same question. They were approaching contemplative practices as a way to empower people rather than to pacify them, to help them see their situation more clearly, take stock of what internal resources they really had, and help them develop new ones.

¹⁵ As I will detail below, some advocates criticize what they see as the hidden “religious” agendas of some others in the field. Others, like Harold Roth of Brown University, have been the subject of such criticisms, not from others in contemplative studies but from university colleagues. Roth detailed this in our December, 2017 interview.

perspectives. I am not trained as an ethnographer but have come to appreciate the intellectual value of participant observation and face-to-face conversations, and gained invaluable information and context from my interviews.

Several years of textual and ethnographic research - reading the literature, attending conferences, and interviewing leaders and participants in the contemplative studies field - has compelled me to revise my initial assumptions about contemplative studies. I came into this project naively assuming I would find contemplative studies to be intellectually unserious; structured by and for middle-class white people; largely about managing internal states of stress and dissatisfaction, conceptualized in isolation from wider societal problems, and; shaped by an impetus, overt or otherwise, to defend “religion” from reductionist encroachments (and strenuously deny doing so). In this dissertation, I explain my reasons for revising those assumptions. The field is quite diverse and in some quarters, it is moving toward an explicit social justice orientation. Its leaders and members are not trying to surreptitiously “convert” anyone to anything.¹⁶ They are serious scholars from a range of academic disciplines, and in many

¹⁶ This is not to say that there is no value system being promoted here – but as Louis Komjathy argues in his 2018 study *Introducing Contemplative Studies*, many participants in the field are not quite *aware* of the degree to which their approach is shaped certain ways of thinking about “religion,” especially modernist currents in Buddhism and Euro-American forms coming out of the counterculture. One of my interview subjects, a religion scholar working in contemplative studies, similarly alluded to the heavy (and widely misunderstood or ignored) Buddhist influence in the field. I want to adopt that critique and expand on it to include the influence of colonial and post-colonial Asian thinkers and the discourse of “religious experience” originating the European Romantic movement. My research has also turned up counter-examples to this observation – namely heavier involvement of representatives of other traditions (albeit in a space largely *opened* by Buddhists), and the awareness on the part of at least some leaders in the field that it is “very Buddhist,” as Dan Barbezat of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society told me, and the desire to open it up to those coming from other backgrounds.

cases, they are trying to move the boundaries of those disciplines. They conceptualize and work with embodied experience in ways that challenge the epistemology and even (more rarely) the ontology of the mainstream academy, though they are increasingly mainstream themselves. They are critical but not cynical, curious but not credulous. The single, hopefully constructive criticism I have is that the field of contemplative studies could approach the category of “religion” in more sophisticated ways.¹⁷ My goal in addressing this as a religion scholar is to analyze and perhaps bring a more complex history to light, to provide more context for religion scholars and for contemplative studies advocates trying to address the role of the concept of “religion” in contemplative studies.

In the chapters that follow, I will provide a picture of what “contemplative studies” is, where it came from, and where it is going. Throughout, I will attend to how the field uses the concept of “religion,” its surprising inroads in the academic mainstream, and the work it does in complicating commonplace criticisms of mind-centered “spirituality.”¹⁸ I will survey the field’s literature and summarize my own interviews and

¹⁷ One could legitimately ask why contemplative studies advocates would talk about religion at all. They have to address “religion” when they argue that what they are doing is *not* religion. The argument is most often that “religion” involves metaphysical belief, whereas they are interested instead in practices and the changes in experience they generate.

¹⁸ A reader might justifiably ask how these aspects of contemplative studies are related. On an intuitive level, they are just the things that seemed most significant to me, as a religion scholar. They represent a new use of certain “religious” ideas in locations they are not usually found, and they represent a trend away from individualism and consumerism in mind-centered “spiritualities.” I do not necessarily think these two trends are deeply related. Indeed, it seems to be possible to do one without the other. Much contemplative studies research goes forward without an explicit social justice orientation (for example, sessions on philosophy of mind and on paranormal experiences I attended at a 2016 Mind and Life Institute conference), and works like Andrea Jain’s 2014 *Selling Yoga* have traced efforts to shift mind-centered “spiritualities” toward

my experience at contemplative studies conferences and seminars, attending to what its advocates do with “religion” and their evolving social justice orientation. I will also construct a history of the field and examine the ways it pushes against the usual boundaries of academic discourse. I believe that the rhetorical forms used in contemplative studies come from a long history of debates about the boundary between the “religious” and academic knowledge, debates influenced by the European Romantic movement, the work of colonial and postcolonial Asian thinkers and their American “spiritualist” and “metaphysical” counterparts, the global contacts and innovations that produced the Euro-American “counterculture” of the 1960s. I think of the historical narrative less as one of direct descent, and more as the story of the way certain rhetorical forms became available in the present environment.

In the remainder of this introductory section, I want to situate my investigation by briefly introducing the contemplative studies organizations I have observed, the advocates I have interviewed, and the literature I have studied over the past several years. This will serve as a snapshot of the larger project, the people involved in the field, their concerns, and some of the history that has helped bring them to this kind of intellectual work at this time. I will conclude this section with a brief discussion of differences between contemplative studies and “mindfulness,” which is a closely related but different phenomenon.

Organizations Observed:

In 2015 and 2016, I spent two summer weeks and one fall weekend with the

political advocacy in the absence of any concentrated work to change the norms of academic conversation.

Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (“ACMHE”), a division of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (“CMind”), based at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. I attended two of their Summer Seminars on Contemplative Pedagogy at Smith and in fall of 2015, their national conference titled “Building Just Communities,” at Howard University, a historically Black university in Washington, D.C. As I learned in interviews to be described below, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society originally maintained separate foci on higher education and on social justice, among other areas of work. The organization now focuses primarily on contemplative pedagogy as a way to work for social justice in and through higher education. Its founding director, Mirabai Bush, brings a long experience in bridging the 1960s counterculture’s innovations in mind-centered “spirituality” with political activism. The focus in the programs I attended was primarily on the direct application of contemplative practices to college teaching and learning (and especially furthering equality in and through college teaching and learning). As far as I could tell, the attendees were either from practically-oriented disciplines like social work, counseling, criminal justice, education, and law, or came to focus on the pedagogical aspects of their work in other fields, how to communicate their subject matter to students facing a range of prejudices and socioeconomic challenges. This pragmatic orientation is one of the distinguishing features of CMind and its ACMHE subsidiary, and most of those who identify strongly with the term “contemplative studies.”.

In the fall of 2016, I attended the International Symposium for Contemplative Studies, hosted by the Mind and Life Institute. The Mind and Life Institute emerged from the collaboration between the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet, the neurobiologist

and meditator Francisco Varela, the lawyer Adam Engle, and a number of other similarly inclined academics and Tibetan Buddhist monastics. It seems that there is (as of this writing) significantly more money and intellectual star power behind Mind and Life (certainly, the conference I attended was *much* larger and better-appointed than any ACMHE program). This meeting was sponsored by the Aetna corporation and the Hershey Family Foundation, and featured an opening roundtable with world-famous neuroscientist and meditation research Richard Davidson. The 2016 meeting was notable for its focus on the utility of contemplative practices for cultivating peace and equality in society. I was surprised because I had the impression (from members of the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, and from my own reading) that its focus would be on basic research and abstract philosophical inquiry, rather than immediate practical application in the contemporary political world. That impression did not entirely comport with reality, although there was more attention to the scientific and philosophical study of consciousness than I saw with ACMHE. I didn't get a great sense of who the rank and file participants were, but many more prominent platforms were given to those in the natural sciences and/or without projects explicitly focused on social justice.¹⁹

This general slant toward research made it all the more interesting when several keynote presentations *did* address immediate sociopolitical concerns. My Mind and Life experience showed me that leading figures in the contemplative studies field have either read religion scholars' critiques of "spirituality" or, more likely, have arrived at similar

¹⁹ As I will explain in detail below, a neuroscientist's poorly-received presentation at the 2016 ACMHE summer session occasioned a wider discussion of problematic experiences around race at Mind and Life events, and of the need not to defer uncritically to the authority of science.

critiques independently – though this did not change my overall impression that Mind and Life remains distinct from CMind in its size, membership, and organizational goals. Basic research *on* contemplative practice, rather than its application, remains a prominent goal. This orientation distinguishes Mind and Life from CMind (to some extent) and is also shared by those (like some of my interview subjects) who prefer the term “contemplative sciences” over “contemplative studies.”

What is most striking about these two organizations, though Mind and Life was built by scientists and Tibetan Buddhist leaders and CMind was built primarily by activists and academics outside the sciences and outside the direct influence of religious institutions, is that they seem to emerge from the same 1960s and 70s sphere of countercultural thinkers, institutions, and experiences.²⁰ Mirabai Bush and psychologist Daniel Goleman, a renowned meditation researcher and an important early figure in both CMind and Mind and Life, are both closely connected to countercultural leader Ram Dass, formerly Harvard psychologist and Timothy Leary collaborator Richard Alpert.²¹

²⁰ In *Introducing Contemplative Studies* (2018), Louis Komjathy echoes this claim, identifying the architects of the main contemplative studies organizations as “baby boomers” shaped by the “such... countercultural values as anti-authoritarianism, egalitarianism, experimentation, freedom, independence, justice, peace, progress, and so forth.” See Komjathy, Louis. *Introducing Contemplative Studies*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017, pp.24.

²¹ Don Lattin explains Dass’s path in *The Harvard Psychedelic Club: How Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, and Andrew Weil Killed the Fifties and Ushered in a New Age for America*. New York: HarperOne, 2010. I base my assertion about Goleman’s importance to Mind and Life on my interview with John Dunne and on Goleman’s account of his own path in *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them? A Scientific Dialogue with the Dalai Lama* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004). Mirabai Bush has collaborated with Ram Dass to serve as the treasurer of Dass’s Love Serve Remember Foundation and co-author *Compassion in Action: Setting Out on the Path of Service* (New York: Bell Tower Books / Crown Publishing, 1991) – see “Love Serve Remember Foundation.” *Ram Dass Love Serve Remember Foundation*. Accessed 1/21/2018. <https://www.ramdass.org/love-serve-remember-foundation/>.

All three, Dass, Bush, and Goleman, were heavily influenced by Hindu teacher Neem Karoli Baba, whom they refer to as Maharaji.²² In *Altered Traits*, Goleman's 2017 volume co-written with Richard Davidson, we learn that Goleman and Davidson were also at an early series of courses held by Buddhist teacher S.N. Goenka for aspiring Western contemplatives (Mirabai Bush of CMind was also in attendance).²³ The paths of the figures who founded CMind and Mind and Life have not been identical since then, but they were in the same place, at the same time, for largely the same reason – and with broadly similar eventual results. In the chapters that follow, I will show how their histories are connected to a longer history of debate about the boundary between “religion” and academic knowledge, one with ties to the European Romantic movement and to postcolonial Asian thinkers.

. She is also co-founder with Das and several others of the charitable Seva Foundation See “About.” *Mirabai Bush*. Accessed 1/21/2018.

<http://www.mirabaibush.com/about/>. See also:

“Ram Dass on Seva.” *seva.org*. Accessed 1/21/2018.

http://www.seva.org/site/PageServer?pagename=get_involved_videos_ramdass.

²² Mirabai Bush explains her experience with Neem Karoli Baba (“Maharaji”) in a 2016 interview with Krista Tippet on American Public Media’s *On Being*. See “Mirabai Bush – Search Inside Yourself: Contemplation in Life and Work.” *On Being*, 9/1/2016. Accessed 2/23/2018. <https://onbeing.org/programs/mirabai-bush-search-inside-yourself-contemplation-in-life-and-work-2/>.

Dass’s experience with Neem Karoli Baba is explained in his 1979 book *Miracle of Love: Stories about Neem Karoli Baba*. Dass and Goleman’s shared experience with this teacher is discussed at length in a video from the Ram Dass Channel on Youtube. See “Ram Dass and Danny Goleman Webcast.” *Ram Dass Channel*, 5/14/2014.

Accessed 1/21/2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZB3AQIH92hI&t=2442s>.

The Web site of the Neem Karoli Baba Ashram in Taos, New Mexico confirms that he was a Hindu, specifically a devotee of the god Hanuman. See “About Neem Karoli Baba.” *Neem Karoli Baba Ashram*. Accessed 1/20/2018.

<https://nkbashram.org/maharaji/about-neem-karoli-baba/>.

²³ See

Davidson, Richard, and Daniel Goleman. *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2017, pp. 19-40, 297-298.

Interview subjects:

Now, I will introduce my interview subjects, in part to make the point that despite their sometimes-unorthodox backgrounds, they are pursuing contemplative studies in mainstream academic spaces. For this purpose, it is sufficient simply to list who they are, what they do, and where they are positioned in the academic world. Identifying these individuals as members of something called “contemplative studies” seemed a little imprecise at first. Perhaps it still is. I was not initially sure I was exploring something that could be categorized as a distinct field.²⁴ Not all the projects described in the descriptive portions of this dissertation explicitly feature the term “contemplative studies” – but critically, *all of my interview subjects recognized it*, and the majority seemed to understand their work as part of it to one degree or another, even as they attested to the difficulty of defining its boundaries. The other primary characteristic they share is that they are all well-placed, working academics who study and / or advocate for the efficacy of contemplative practices for purposes apart from those of traditional “religious” institutions. Most, though not all, actively advocate their use in higher education settings. As noted at several points throughout, a few of my subjects did not accept the characterization of *their* work as contemplative studies, preferring instead the term “contemplative sciences.” This distinction first emerged for me late in the research process. I am not going to adhere to it because, as I describe in detail in my Epilogue, I

²⁴ For example, the term “contemplative studies” does not appear in the mission statement of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (see “Our Mission.” *The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society*. Accessed 2/3/2018. <http://www.contemplativemind.org/about/vision>). It also does not appear in Barbezat and Bush’s 2013 *Contemplative Practice in Higher Education*.

simply do not believe it works in practice. It does not fully describe what is actually happening on the ground, and the roots of contemplative studies and “contemplative sciences” are almost entirely the same. Though a few subjects objected to the term and prefer to refine it as “contemplative sciences,” they still attend major meetings like Mind and Life’s International Symposium for Contemplative Studies.

The first contemplative studies advocate I interviewed was Dan Barbezat, Ward H. Patton Professor of Economics at Amherst College and co-author with Mirabai Bush of *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, a text we will analyze in detail below. When we spoke in August of 2016, he was about to step down as executive director of CMind, a post he held since 2012. He held other roles in the organization since 2009.²⁵ He completed a Ph.D. in economics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1988, focusing at first on cooperation and competition between European states in the 20th century.²⁶ He currently studies the application of contemplative practices to higher education and the relationship between decision-making and the awareness of one’s internal state.²⁷ In our interview, explained how he used simple introspective practices in his economics courses to help students understand the role of desire in economic activity. He was more reticent than most about his own contemplative practice, tracing its origin only to his upbringing as an only child. Like many of the CMind members I met, he

²⁵ “Daniel P. Barbezat.” *Omega*. Accessed 12/27/2017.
<https://www.eomega.org/workshops/teachers/daniel-p-barbezat>.

²⁶

“Daniel P. Barbezat.” The Veritas Forum. Accessed 12/27/2017.
<http://www.veritas.org/person/daniel-barbezat/>.

²⁷ “Daniel P. Barbezat.” *Amherst College*. Accessed 12/27/2017.
<https://www.amherst.edu/people/facstaff/dpbarbezat>

seemed more interest in coming up with ways to use contemplative practices than in theorizing their nature and origin (this is a difference, though not a clear-cut one, with Mind and Life).

Michelle Chatman, whom I interviewed in August of 2016, is Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of the District of Columbia and a Fellow in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Interdisciplinary Research Leaders Program. She was previously Assistant Professor of Sociology and Anthropology there, and completed a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology at American University in 2013.²⁸ According to her LinkedIn page, she teaches courses like Restorative Justice, Sociology of Urban Youth, and Justice in a Multicultural Society. In her Robert Wood Johnson Foundation fellowship, she is conducting a "three year study on mindfulness and restorative justice as a violence prevention strategy among African American youth in DC." With support from CMind, she has established a Contemplative Learning Community at the University of the District of Columbia.²⁹ This group is focused on "using contemplative and introspective practices to enhance student learning, foster community, and inspire social justice awareness and activism."³⁰ In our interview and in her presentation at the 2015 ACMHE Summer Session on Contemplative Pedagogy, she described how her ethnographic experience in The Gambia, West Africa and her practice of the Yoruba Ifa tradition influence her understanding of contemplative practice and the form of her

²⁸ "Michelle Coghill Chatman, Ph.D." *LinkedIn*. Accessed 12/27/2017. "Michelle Coghill Chatman, Ph.D." <https://www.linkedin.com/in/michelle-coghill-chatman-phd-858a6647/>.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

contemplative approach to pedagogy. Her goal in contemplative studies is to apply contemplative practices to help people improve their lives.

Harold Roth, whom I interviewed in December of 2017, is Professor of Religious Studies and East Asian Studies at Brown University, where he is also Director of the Contemplative Studies Initiative. He completed a Ph.D. in East Asian Studies at the University of Toronto in 1981.³¹ He has done work in textual criticism of East Asian philosophical works, the analysis of the “inner cultivation” aspect of Taoist teachings, and the connection between those teachings and the Chinese philosophical work *Huainanzi*. “In developing these theories about the inner cultivation tradition,” his online research statement reads, “Roth broke new ground in systematically applying the methods of the philosophical analysis of different traditions of mystical experience to the classical Chinese religious traditions.” He also coined the phrase “contemplative studies” and has been a major force behind the development of Brown’s contemplative studies initiative (despite what he described to me as fierce resistance from colleagues).³² Roth explained that the origin of his work in contemplative studies began in his long practice of Rinzai Zen (he has also offered informal zazen instructions to students for years). This background helped him create programs for study and practice at the University of California, Los Angeles, the University of New Mexico, and a Zen center in Los Angeles. At these events, scholars gave lectures and monks taught contemplative practice sessions. Roth was able to observe a blending of scholarship and contemplative practice that influenced his efforts to develop the field of contemplative studies.

³¹ “Harold Roth.” *Researchers@Brown*. Accessed 12/28/2017.
<https://vivo.brown.edu/display/hroth#Research>

³² *ibid*.

Carolyn Jacobs, Dean Emerita and Elizabeth Marting Treuhaft Professor Emerita of the Smith College School for Social Work, spoke with me by phone in January of 2017. I asked her for an interview after she spoke at a closing roundtable at the 2016 Mind and Life meeting. She has primarily studied the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and in the functioning of organizations. While at Smith, she also directed the Contemplative Clinical Practice Advanced Certificate Program. She is unique in having served in leadership roles for the Mind and Life Institute, CMind, and the Buddhist-inspired Naropa University. She completed her Ph.D. at the Heller School of Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University and trained in spiritual direction at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation.³³ The Shalem Institute is based in traditions of Christian spirituality but draws on multiple traditions.³⁴ Her involvement in contemplative studies stems from her experience leading Catholic meditation retreats in the late 1970s. These retreats, which focused on using meditation to deal with trauma, led to her being invited to apply meditation to social work teaching at Smith. Her conception of contemplative studies is very broad, including scientific, humanistic, and pedagogical dimensions.³⁵

³³ “Carolyn Jacobs, M.S.W., Ph.D.” *Smith College School for Social Work*. Accessed 12/28/2017. <https://www.smith.edu/ssw/academics/faculty/emeritus-faculty-and-deans/carolyn-jacobs>.

³⁴ “About Us.” *Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation*. Accessed 12/28/2017. <https://shalem.org/about-us/>.

³⁵ Contemplative studies, Carolyn told me, must include the work in contemplative neurosciences that’s being done, like Davidson’s work. Humanistic work is important, too. “Part of what you’re looking at is this rich interdisciplinary exploration that’s occurring,” she said, “as they look at the limited understanding we have of the mind, how compassion gets developed there... Contemplative studies also applies this research to teaching in a way that allows an experiential component, allowing [students] to experience it, and explaining how it is experienced differently across many traditions.”

David Germano, whom I interviewed in November of 2016, is Professor of Religious Studies and Executive Director of the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia. He completed a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1992.³⁶ His main field of academic study is contemplative dimensions of Tibetan Buddhism. As he told me, he has a longstanding interest in Buddhist thought and practice, and found this study somewhat divorced from practice apart from the somewhat sterile practice of reading, writing, and criticizing books. He became interested in the other kinds of practices one might make central to learning, and began to study Tibetan contemplative traditions with this goal in mind. Along with the Contemplative Sciences Center, he has pursued a number of efforts to expand the reach and impact of higher education programs, including a detailed digital archive of data and materials from Tibet and a program connecting Tibetans with academics to help them build locally owned tourist enterprises.³⁷

Rose Sackey-Milligan, whom I interviewed in late August of 2016, is Senior Program Officer at Mass Humanities, an organization seeking to use humanistic study to improve life in Massachusetts, as well as co-director of C-Integral, a group that works to address social injustice through internal transformation.³⁸³⁹⁴⁰ Dr. Sackey-Milligan

³⁶ “David Germano.” *LinkedIn*. Accessed 12/29/2017.

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/david-germano-59a41210/>.

³⁷ “David Germano.” *University of Virginia College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Department of Religious Studies*. Accessed 12/29/2017.

<http://religiousstudies.as.virginia.edu/faculty/profile/dfg9w>.

³⁸ “Our Staff – Alphabetical.” *MassHumanities*. Accessed 12/29/2017.

<http://masshumanities.org/about/staff/>.

³⁹ “About.” *MassHumanities*. Accessed 12/29/2017. <http://masshumanities.org/about/>.

⁴⁰ “c-integral.” *c-integral*. Accessed 12/29/2017. <https://www.c-integral.org/>

completed a Ph.D. in Anthropology at the University of Connecticut.⁴¹ She served as Director of Programs at the Peace Development Fund from 1988-2000, and as Social Justice Program Director at the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society from 2004 to 2009.⁴² I approached Dr. Sackey-Milligan for an interview after her 2016 ACMHE summer session presentation on contemplative approaches to race and subjectivity. Her move toward contemplative studies, she said, came from the sense that a “spiritual” component was missing from her academic and advocacy work. Among the contemplative studies advocates I encountered, she was one of the most explicit about working in an ontology very different from that of the academic mainstream (though she is not the only one moving in this direction).

John D. Dunne, whom I interviewed in February of 2017, is Distinguished Chair in Contemplative Humanities at the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He co-founded the former contemplative studies initiative at Emory University, where he served as Associate Professor in the Department of Religion until 2016.⁴³ He completed a Ph.D. from the Committee for the Study of Religion at Harvard University in 1999, writing a dissertation on the Buddhist philosophy of Dharmakirti.⁴⁴ He studies Buddhist contemplative practices like mindfulness, especially in dialog with

⁴¹ “Rose Sackey-Milligan.” *One World in Dialogue*. Accessed 12/29/2017. http://oneworldindialogue.com/blog/essential_grid/owbw-rose-sackey-milligan/.

⁴² “Rose Sackey-Milligan.” *LinkedIn*. Accessed 12/29/2017. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rose-sackey-milligan-79343910/>

⁴³ “John D. Dunne.” *Center for Healthy Minds – University of Wisconsin-Madison*. Accessed 12/29/2017. <https://centerhealthyminds.org/about/people/john-dunne>.

⁴⁴ “John D. Dunne.” *www.johnddunne.net*. Accessed 12/29/2017. https://www.johnddunne.net/uploads/9/8/5/6/9856107/dunne_j_cv_2016-04-29.pdf

cognitive science.⁴⁵ He has served on the Mind and Life Institute's Program and Research Council and its Board of Directors, and as co-founder and co-chair of the American Academy of Religion's Buddhist Philosophy Group.⁴⁶ I approached him for an interview after attending his keynote presentation at Mind and Life's 2016 International Symposium for Contemplative Studies. My impression from our interview is that he has had a firsthand view of the formation of the Mind and Life Institute going back to his graduate work at Harvard.

Rachel Razza, whom I interviewed in October of 2017, is Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Science at Syracuse University, as well as serving as Co-Associate Director of the university's Contemplative Collaborative and Coordinator of the Mindfulness and Contemplative Studies undergraduate minor.⁴⁷ She completed a Ph.D. in Human Development and Family Studies at The Pennsylvania State University in 2005, and currently conducts research on the cognitive and social development of at-risk children, a range of factors contributing to children's ability to self-regulate, and mindfulness interventions in these areas. She teaches Child and Family Studies 452/652, Mindfulness in Children and Youth.⁴⁸ Her practical and clinical orientation to contemplative studies reflects the mission of Syracuse's David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics, which organizes a number of therapeutic and health-related professional programs under a single roof to promote "the health and well-being of individuals of all ages, their families, and their communities within the framework of

⁴⁵ "John D. Dunne." *Center for Healthy Minds – University of Wisconsin-Madison*.

⁴⁶ "John D. Dunne." *www.johnddunne.net*.

⁴⁷ Razza, Rachel. Personal Communication, April 2018

⁴⁸ "Rachel Razza, Ph.D." *Falk – Syracuse University*. Accessed 12/29/2017. <https://falk.syr.edu/people/razza-rachel/>

social justice principles.”⁴⁹ Dr. Razza’s introduction to contemplative studies came through her own longtime yoga practice.

I must now introduce two more interview subjects who chose not to be identified. I interviewed “Mary” in August of 2017. She teaches English at a community college in a Northeast metropolitan area. She developed her contemplative pedagogy by reframing techniques from her training in theater and improvisation in terms of contemplative practice. Mary uses these practices to help disadvantaged college students manage the additional strains that economic, political, and personal struggles place on their academic progress.

“Brian,” who teaches at a college in the northeastern US, holds a Ph.D. in religious studies and has been involved in contemplative studies since his graduate school days. He became involved because he was already working on an interdisciplinary approach to the study of contemplative practice, and appreciated the exchange between religious studies and the sciences (especially psychology and neuroscience) he found in contemplative studies. Brian gave one of the most nuanced accounts of contemplative studies of any of my subjects, describing his efforts to study “maps and idealized structures of human self transformation” from scientific and humanistic perspectives.

The picture of contemplative studies advocates that emerged in my interviews was one where the leading thinkers may divide, at least on a rhetorical level, into those who are comfortable with the contemplative “studies” moniker and those favor a somewhat different research agenda they call “contemplative sciences”– but there is little agreement on exactly what the field is or should be, in part because it so new. Despite

⁴⁹ “About Us.” *Falk – Syracuse University*. Accessed 12/29/2017. <https://falk.syr.edu/about-us/>.

this, I will argue that the contemplative studies (in all these incarnations) owes its ability to exist and grow to a history of dispute over what counts as “religion” and what does not. Among all my interview subjects, my view is closest to Brian’s – there is a great deal of unarticulated “religious” history here, and a fascinating effort to transfer ideas, practices, and values from “religious” discourse into the mainstream academy.⁵⁰ The rhetoric that makes this translation possible is powerfully shaped by the European Romantic movement and by the work of colonized and post-colonial Asian thinkers, takes place in the nebulous conceptual territory of “experience.” Contemplative studies likely would not exist without William Blake, Friedrich Schiller, and Friedrich Schleiermacher – but it also probably would not exist without its founders’ encounters with Asian teachers like Chogyam Trungpa, Neem Karoli Baba, S.N. Goenka, and the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet. It is truly a transnational and cross-cultural project, the product of a centuries-long negotiation over the meaning and value of “religious” ideas in the modern world, and the claimed ability of certain types of experiences to bridge the “religious” and the nonreligious. Many of its ancestors pushed against the perceived limitations of academic knowledge in ways that are strikingly similar to the innovations of its present-day advocates.

Literature:

The religious studies literature on contemplative studies is quite thin and marked

⁵⁰ Again, I am using religion as a second-order category here. I am not trying to define the category myself, but to understand how contemplative studies operates in spaces where its boundaries are permeable.

by a distinct dearth of straightforwardly etic or “outsider” perspectives.⁵¹ This dissertation may well be the first monograph to attempt such a study. Nearly all of the religion scholars who have written about contemplative studies, even in historical and critical modes, are active participants in organizations like the Mind and Life Institute and the American Academy of Religion’s Contemplative Studies Group. To my knowledge, Louis Komjathy’s 2018 volume *Introducing Contemplative Studies* is the only other book-length attempt to map the present state and the history of contemplative studies from a religious studies perspective. Komjathy, a professor of Religion at the University of San Diego and a co-founding member of the American Academy of Religion’s Contemplative Studies Group, writes as an advocate, practitioner, and constructive critic of contemplative studies as it currently exists. In his view, the field is hard quite hard to define, as it is “[still] in its formative moments.... The parameters of the field invite exploration and are open to debate.”⁵² Still, he is willing to define it as “an emerging interdisciplinary field dedicated to research and education on contemplative practice and contemplative experience, including possible relevance and application to a wide variety of undertakings.”⁵³ I believe Komjathy is correct in labeling contemplative studies a “paradigm shift” in the academic world, “a new model for research and education” defined in large part by “critical first-person discourse,” the practice (or at

⁵¹ Jeff Wilson’s 2014 study *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) is of great relevance to my project. In this chapter, I will only make brief reference to it when I distinguish “mindfulness” from contemplative studies, below. I will save a more sustained treatment for the history chapter.

⁵² Komjathy, Louis. *Introducing Contemplative Studies*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017, pp.13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp.13.

least the intention) of rigorously examining the contents of one's own consciousness.⁵⁴

This element, along with a commitment to personal contemplative practice and an ethical and social claim about its personal, communal, and intellectual benefits, define the field in his account.

Like several of my interview subjects (and indeed, like me), Komjathy feels that the field has several endemic problems, including a prevalence of simplistic ideas about religion in general (and Buddhism in particular), an unconscious or unacknowledged privileging of modernist Buddhism (especially its intersections with neuroscience), and a disproportionately white, affluent membership (Komjathy, 237-274). I share these critiques, but believe that my observations at CMind and Mind and Life in 2015 and 2016 suggest many highly placed members are aware of these issues, and changes may be afoot. In our interview, Dan Barbezat of CMind acknowledged the Buddhist background of his organization and his efforts to open it up to those without that background. In our interview and in her presentation at a 2015 ACMHE event, Michelle Chatman argued for (and enacted) the inclusion other traditions, including her own Yoruba tradition, among the lineages from which advocates may draw contemplative practice. Keynote speakers Evan Thompson and John Dunne addressed the complex nature of religious traditions at Mind and Life's 2016 International Symposium for Contemplative Studies.

My observations at contemplative studies events in 2015 and 2016 likewise confirm Komjathy's claim that the field is still largely dominated by affluent white people, but signs of change may be emerging. CMind has undergone a broad-based reorientation around race and social justice. Race relations were the central focus of

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.13.

ACMHE's 2015 Building Just Communities conference at historically-Black Howard University, and of the 2016 Summer Seminar (more so, I thought, than at the 2015 seminar). Meeting at Howard was likely an acknowledgment of the demographics of the field and of the need to include a wider range of people. Scholars of color were featured prominently at both events (and at the 2015 seminar), and CMind's board of directors and advisory council include African-American, Latinx, and Native American (and Jewish, Christian, and Hindu) scholars and activists.⁵⁵ Some contemplative studies advocates reported incidents of tone-deafness (at best) on race at both organizations, and in academia more generally. I understood Rhonda Magee's keynote at the 2016 ISCS (described above) as an attempt to address this from the one of the field's most prominent platforms. Komjathy is surely correct that Mind and Life, in particular, has privileged Buddhist and especially Tibetan Buddhist approaches, scholars, and contemplatives, and several of my interview subjects agree, but at the same time, in concert with the transnational history of intellectual exchange that helped produce contemplative studies - Tibetans are people of color. Komjathy's critique is certainly legitimate, specifically with respect to the inclusion of African-Americans and Latinx people, but contemplative studies has been a transnational and cross-cultural project from the beginning.

Komjathy also provides one of the only available attempts at a history of the wider cultural trends that enabled the emergence of contemplative studies. His history overlaps in large part with mine, though I have space to go into more detail on several specific topics and figures. He roots the history of the field in American interest

⁵⁵ "Who We Are." *The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society*. Accessed 1/12/2018. <http://www.contemplativemind.org/about/team>.

in Asian religious ideas, choosing the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions as a key moment when teachers of these religions were able to present their ideas to American audiences (he also links this event to contemporary developments like American transcendentalism, Theosophy, and the publication of Friedrich Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East*).⁵⁶ He credits the organizations they established with creating footholds in the United States, footholds whose influence culminated in the countercultural period and changed immigration laws of 1960s America. This brought more Asian teachers and residents to the United States at the same time that individualized "spirituality" was taking on new prominence and the second Vatican Council was encouraging inter-religious dialogue and exchange. It is thus no coincidence, he writes, that the founders of the field are almost all "baby boomers," those born between 1946 and 1964. Finally, he credits a heavy influence to westernized forms of Buddhism (Komjathy, 22-29).

I share all these analyses but wish to add, below, additional historical trends and layers of detail. First, I think the rhetoric used to argue that contemplative studies is "not religion" has some of its roots in the European Romantic movement, particularly in the idea of individual "religious experience." Second, it is my impression (from textual research and from my interviews) that many of the people who helped build contemplative studies were not just adjacent to the counterculture, but also were active participants who were strongly influenced by their own "religious experiences" and by Asian religious teachers like Chogyam Trungpa, S.N. Goenka, and Neem Karoli Baba.

⁵⁶ Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies*, pp.22-23.

Perhaps the only religious studies analysis of contemplative studies by a scholar who is not an active advocate comes from Kathleen M. Fisher, who teaches theology at Assumption College.⁵⁷ Writing in the January, 2017 issue of *Teaching Theology and Religion*, Fisher seeks to question several assumptions underlying contemplative pedagogy as well as possible negative implications of putting it into practice.⁵⁸ She questions the assumption that students bring deep spiritual needs to the classroom with the expectation that they will be met, citing contradictory bodies of social science evidence on the topic.⁵⁹ She also inquires whether contemplative studies advocates accurately describe “critical” thinking in more commonplace pedagogies, whether attention to one’s inner life necessarily fosters empathy and interconnection, and whether advocates have adequately dealt with the potential consequences of a new epistemology centered on emotions, spiritual experience, and holistic personal growth in the classroom.⁶⁰

Fisher’s last criticism is most relevant to my purposes here. She argues that a pedagogy actively focused on inducing spiritual experiences risks misrepresenting religious practices, causing potentially dangerous psychological crises which faculty are not prepared to address, and sliding into proselytization when professors assume that their practices will work for students.⁶¹ Contemplative studies advocates, she writes, may misunderstand the nature of contemplative practice and its connection to religious ritual.

⁵⁷ “Kathleen Fisher, Associate Professor of Theology.” *Assumption College*. <https://www.assumption.edu/faculty-profile/kathleen-fisher>, Accessed 1/22/2018.

⁵⁸ Fisher, Kathleen M. “Look Before You Leap: Reconsidering Contemplative Pedagogy.” *Teaching Theology and Religion*, Vol. 20, Issue 1, January, 2017. Pp.4-21.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.5

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.5

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp.13

Citing anthropologists Turner and Van Gennep, she argues that rituals enact belief systems. To practice them in a religious studies course may distort them by removing them from their context, rather than provide students with a deeper understanding of religious traditions in which they are embedded.⁶²

Fisher also takes issue with the common contemplative studies maxim that to employ contemplative practices in the classroom, teachers must have consistent contemplative practice regimens in their own lives. For her, it sometimes begins to look uncomfortably like proselytization. Citing one faculty member who feels “obligated” to introduce students to the practice that has so benefited that faculty member, Fisher asks: “[would] she feel equally obligated to introduce beliefs that benefit her physical, financial, or political well-being? Why are personal spiritual practices any more acceptable in the classroom than a professor’s religious or political preferences?” (Fisher, 17). My research suggests that personal spiritual practices are frequently perceived to be more acceptable because in contemplative studies rhetoric, they have been effectively walled off from “religion,” and treated as if they are universally accessible, repeatable features of human experience. I will explain how below. In constructing my analysis, I have attempted to defuse the “proselytization” charge by treating “religion” as a fluid, shifting category and tracing how it is defined, instead of classifying beliefs and practices as religious or non-religious. This methodological choice comes in part from having spent time on the ground with contemplative studies advocates and seeing that the majority of those working in contemplative pedagogy feel they are doing what they must to help students learn. As Mary, the English professor to underserved students, put it,

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp.15

“there is no other way.” Even David Germano, a religion scholar who dissents from much that happens under the banner of contemplative studies, told me that both he and most of his colleagues who have engaged the field have done so at least in part out of a desire to explore alternative methods of engaging and benefitting students. Few, he said, have “religious” agendas, and even those who maintain regular contemplative practices in their own lives constitute a minority.

Another religious studies perspective on contemplative studies comes from Thomas Coburn, former president of the Buddhist-inspired Naropa University.⁶³ Coburn holds a Ph.D. in comparative religion from Harvard University, is a scholar of the goddess tradition in Hinduism, and served as president of Naropa from 2003 to 2009.⁶⁴ He was also a founding steering committee member of the American Academy of Religion’s Contemplative Studies Group.⁶⁵ For my purposes, his most interesting writing related to contemplative studies is a 2005 article in the journal *Liberal Education*, titled “Secularism & Spirituality in Today’s Academy: A Heuristic Model.”⁶⁶ Coburn cites data on a range of changes in higher education with “potential to open out onto a spiritual horizon,” while acknowledging that most academics would be uncomfortable with such a

⁶³ Naropa’s Web site describes it as “Buddhist-inspired and nonsectarian... rooted in contemplative education, a teaching and learning approach that integrates Eastern wisdom studies and the arts with traditional Western scholarship.” See “About Naropa.” *Naropa University*. Accessed 1/24/2018. <http://www.naropa.edu/about-naropa/index.php>. I will argue below that events at Naropa are critical to the founding of contemplative studies.

⁶⁴ “President Emeritus Thomas B. Coburn.” *Naropa University*. Accessed 1/23/2018. <http://www.naropa.edu/presidents-office/president-emeritus/index.php>.

⁶⁵ “Contemplative Studies Consultation Proposal,” *College of Arts and Sciences – University of San Diego*. Accessed 1/19/2018. https://www.sandiego.edu/cas/documents/contemplative-studies/csc_proposal.pdf

⁶⁶ Coburn, Thomas B. “Secularism & Spirituality in Today’s Academy: A Heuristic Model.” *Liberal Education*. Summer 2005, pp. 58-61.

change, “given the debt of the academy to the Enlightenment, with its prizing of the cognitive mind and of objectivity, and its definition of a public sphere that is intentionally free of religious influence.”⁶⁷

Coburn argues that a move to include (an undefined) “spirituality” in higher education would not be a radical new innovation, but a return to a neglected part of the academy’s traditions.⁶⁸ He frames Naropa’s “contemplative education” as a shift *back* to a holistic balance of inner and outer educational objectives which, he, argues, previously characterized higher learning in the West, the Middle East, and Asia. To focus this point on contemporary university in the West, Coburn draws on an unexpected and significant source. He cites religion scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s 1975 book *The Role of Asian Studies in the American University* to make the case that “the tradition of liberal education that we inherit developed in two phases, one emphasizing ‘the personal-cultural, knowledge as understanding,’ the other emphasizing ‘the object-objective, knowledge as information,’ and these two phases ‘have never [been] quite integrated’ (Smith, 1975, 4).”⁶⁹ Coburn argues that bringing the “knowledge as understanding” pole back into focus, not in opposition to but in partnership with the scientific search for more and better information, will better prepare universities to meet the challenges of the

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.58

⁶⁸ Coburn refers to his recent move to Naropa, with its focus on “contemplative education,” as a personal step toward this goal (*Ibid.*, pp.58).

⁶⁹ Coburn, Thomas. “Anticipating the Emergence of ‘Contemplative Studies:’ Reflections on the Work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith.” In *The Legacy of Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, edited by Ellen Bradshaw Aitken and Arvind Sharma, SUNY Press, 2017, pp.60.

contemporary world, where “the secular and the spiritual intertwine and complement each other in complex and wonderful ways.”⁷⁰

Coburn’s insider analysis cuts remarkably close to the perspective I have constructed from textual and ethnographic research. I also view a shift toward contemplative studies as a shift *back* toward latent, yet real intellectual currents. The primary difference in my analysis below is that I focus heavily on the power of rhetoric derived from Romantic and colonial and postcolonial Asian approaches to the relationship between religion and science, and the ways these approaches seem to be moving toward mainstream academic legibility and legitimacy under contemplative studies.

John Dunne, whom we met above, has also articulated several relevant insights on contemplative studies using scholarship on religion. In the October, 2015 issue of *American Psychologist*, Dunne and Harvard historian of science Anne Harrington argue that much of the contemporary criticism of the rise of clinical, pedagogical, and managerial meditation regimes is premised on a misunderstanding of their history.⁷¹ They argue that mindfulness based stress reduction has moved into a wide range of spheres, from counseling and pain management to sex manuals and stock trading strategies, in large part because of the way it was articulated by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Unlike previous medicalizers of meditation (like Herbert Benson, he of the “relaxation response,”) Kabat-Zinn was not an “outsider” clearly appropriating a small sliver of an Asian tradition for a clearly defined pragmatic purpose. Instead, Kabat-Zinn was himself

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.61.

⁷¹ Harrington, Anne, and John Dunne. “When Mindfulness is Therapy: Ethical Qualms, Historical Perspectives.” *American Psychologist*, October 2015. Vol. 70, No. 7, pp. 621-631.

a Buddhist teacher first, and a scientist second, and insisted that the *ultimate* goal of mindfulness was really the transformation of the whole person towards love and compassion, rather than any discrete clinical outcome. Because of this framing, which did not locate mindfulness clearly in either secular or “spiritual” realms, MBSR could be appropriated by a vast range of interests, many of which seemed inimical to anything like its original Buddhist ethical framework. Harrington and Dunne argue that this was due in part, at least, to previous efforts to use various Buddhist theories and practices of meditation for therapeutic ends⁷² – so by the time Kabat-Zinn appeared on the scene, people already “knew” in vague, general way that Buddhist meditation had therapeutic benefits.

Harrington and Dunne’s conclusion about mindfulness is consonant with my goal in evaluating the closely related field of contemplative studies: “Because of the peculiar circumstances behind its historical emergence, therapeutic mindfulness sits today on an unstable knife-edge between spirituality and secularism, therapeutics, and popular culture. Understanding how we got here, and why we are exercised about the program in the ways that we are, may serve us as a first step in deciding how to move forward...”⁷³ I have an analogous goal in approaching contemplative studies from the perspective of the study of religion. I want to understand how it exists today and what historical conditions may have permitted it to appear at this time. My study differs first in taking a longer historical view to understand earlier precursors for American interests in mind-centered “spiritualities” and in tracing the ways in which contemplative studies has separated from

⁷² Examples include Erich Fromm’s collaboration with D.T. Suzuki and Herbert Benson’s work on “the relaxation response.”

⁷³ Harrington, Anne, and John Dunne. “When Mindfulness is Therapy: Ethical Qualms, Historical Perspectives,” pp.630.

the mindfulness movement. They share immediate historical antecedents but are not the same, as they have evolved under the influence of different people and in different institutional locations. Furthermore, mindfulness meditation is *one* contemplative tool coming introduced in contemplative studies (this is especially true in the CMind/ACMHE sphere).⁷⁴

Another religious studies perspective relevant to contemplative studies comes from Buddhism scholar David McMahan, of the Department of Religion at Franklin and Marshall College. McMahan's 2008 study *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* is a critical part of my historical lens for analyzing contemplative studies, and I will attend to it in detail below. For my purposes in this section, I will attend to his 2017 article "Buddhism and Global Secularisms" in *Journal of Global Buddhism*.⁷⁵ McMahan's analysis cuts very close to my own in a number of ways. In his effort to understand how

⁷⁴ In our 2017 interview and in a 2014 interview *Mandala* magazine, Dunne articulated another perspective very relevant to my analysis of contemplative studies. Responding to a question about the contemporary popularity of mindfulness, Dunne argued that: "...there are some basic features of liberal religiosity or spirituality in modernity that that style of mindfulness very easily adapts to. They go hand-in-hand to a certain degree. There is a whole story about the turn away from rationality and toward affect or emotion in the 19th century. Some people say that the paragon of this is Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, the 19th-century German theologian who basically says that true religiosity is about feeling. It is not about what you believe. Of course, with scientific rationality critiquing so much of what religions believe.. this is a way to kind of insulate religiosity from scientific rationality. See "An Interview with Buddhism Scholar John Dunne on Mindfulness." *Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition*, 2014. Accessed 1/13/2018. <https://fpmt.org/mandala/archives/mandala-for-2014/january/an-interview-with-buddhist-scholar-john-dunne-on-mindfulness/>. When we spoke in 2017, Dunne gave basically the same explanation for the rise of contemplative studies. My own analysis of the historical precedents for contemplative studies goes in a similar direction. One of my goals is to tell precisely this story about modern "religion" and the European Romantic movement in more detail. In our interview, Dunne made further observations about the relationship between "religion" and contemplative studies. I will describe and analyze these below.

⁷⁵ McMahan, David L. "Buddhism and Global Secularisms." *Journal of Global Buddhism*. 2017. Vol. 18, pp.112-128

the “religious” practices behind mindfulness have been integrated into “secular” American institutions like therapy and education, he argues that the “religious” and the “secular” are not naturally occurring kinds but instead constructed categories. He argues further that the boundary between them is permeable and in considerable flux, and that the way it is constructed has real-world consequences.

McMahan explains that in societies like the United States and (rather differently) China, inclusion in the “secular” or the “religious” often determines the status of a group or practice in relation to intellectual and political power and access. This is the approach I have adopted in studying how contemplative studies advocates situate their work in relation to their understanding of what counts as “religion.”⁷⁶ “In the religious-secular binary,” McMahan writes, “‘religion’ is often modeled on Christianity (especially in its Protestant forms) and construed as a matter of private belief, experience, and personal choice, while the secular is construed as a kind of neutral space of rational, public discussion and political activity in which sectarian matters and unfalsifiable matters of faith are put aside.”⁷⁷ This analysis is very close to my own perspective on contemplative studies, but as I argue below, contemplative studies trades on the presupposition that “religious” experiences *can* be integrated into the “secular” by abstracting them away from systems of belief.

McMahan argues that Buddhist practices have been brought into the realm of the secular by Asian and Euro-American actors who reframed them as empirical, naturalistic, and universal. The integration of Buddhism into the American version of the “secular” in

⁷⁶ For reasons of space, time, and department funding, I have not tried to address the concomitant category of the “secular” as it (surely) effects the construction of the category of “religion” in contemplative studies.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 114

particular has been so effective that many of its ideas and practices are actually able to evade constitutional challenges on government establishment of religion:

[mindfulness] has established itself firmly in some of the most powerful institutions in the US, and therefore the world... it is being taught in many government-funded institutions... *including many public universities that now have graduate programs in contemplative studies, and public middle schools and high schools, which are forbidden to promote religion.* Numerous government grants have been awarded to study clinical applications of mindfulness and meditative practices”⁷⁸

I will explain below the role that the concept of “religious experience” has played in the persuasiveness of efforts to recast Buddhist ideas (and others) as compatible with secularity, though I have not analyzed “the secular” in any detail. It is interesting, from my perspective, that McMahan mentions contemplative studies in the context of efforts to accrue the trappings of secularity to Buddhism, but effectively *does not distinguish* between mindfulness and contemplative studies or, for that matter, other “meditative practices.”⁷⁹ I think there are real distinctions, specifically that different figures and institutions are involved and that contemplative studies has more directly foregrounded social justice advocacy and has begun to include representatives of and practices from a range of traditions beyond Buddhism, perhaps even aiding them in appropriating some of the benefits of “secularity.”

Mindfulness:

In the course of researching this project, it has been challenging at times to distinguish contemplative studies from “mindfulness” or the “mindfulness movement.”

There will be more of this to cover in more detail below, but I need to clarify this

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.120, emphasis mine

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.120

distinction before moving to the main body of my study because many sources use terms like “mindfulness,” “meditation,” and “contemplative practice” quite interchangeably. The histories of mindfulness and contemplative studies do overlap significantly, some of the same people are centrally involved, and indeed contemplative studies probably would have had more difficulty advancing if mindfulness was not already loose in the culture doing something broadly similar, i.e., using predominantly Asian meditation techniques to rethink various spheres of activity outside of religious institutions.⁸⁰ However, it is my view that contemplative studies is distinct from mindfulness and even from the popular “mindfulness movement,” despite the fact that many advocates study and employ mindfulness meditation.

My interview subjects seem to be in broad agreement that contemplative studies and mindfulness *are* distinct, and that the primary difference is that contemplative studies includes a much wider range of contemplative techniques derived from a wider range of traditions.⁸¹ Two even located mindfulness as a subfield of contemplative studies. Brian, the religion scholar we met above, argued that mindfulness and contemplative studies

are both derivative of the broader transmission of Asian contemplative practices to the West, but that's pretty broad, and would also include all of American Buddhism, yoga, etc.; They both benefit from (and with mindfulness aim more to contribute to) the rhetoric of secularization and empirically-based conceptions of practice; But contemplative studies is much broader in scope insofar as includes all conceptions of contemplative within (and even beyond) religions, whereas [the mindfulness movement] is much more narrowly defined and connected to a (post-)Buddhist psychology.

⁸⁰ Similarly, Harrington and Dunne argue that previous forays of meditation in scientific and medical discourse seeded the grown with the idea that “meditation” had measurable, beneficial effects. Contemplative studies probably benefits from this dynamic *and* from the contemporary ubiquity of mindfulness.

⁸¹ I emailed them to clarify this question after our initial interviews.

Carolyn Jacobs told me that “mindfulness would be one dimension or area of research and practice in contemplative studies.” Dan Barbezat gave a similar answer, arguing that

‘Contemplative Studies’ is still being formed, so what it is exactly is [not] yet defined in a broad, accepted manner. However, whatever it is, it should not be equated with ‘mindfulness.’ (another term, of course, that is used in all sorts of fashions (even, once perhaps, in fashion...)) There are overlaps and their contemporaneous coexistence has influenced their developments (with what we could agree to call the ‘mindfulness movement,’ affecting contemplative studies far more than the other way around). However, I would say the main point is that contemplative studies (whatever that might precisely be) examines a far broader range of practices and modalities than those usually labeled ‘mindfulness.’

Rose Sackey-Milligan agreed, replying that

[The] mindfulness movement is subsumed under the larger field of contemplative studies. Mindfulness practice is merely one form, a mere doorway (among many others) into introspection and reflection. Mindfulness movement means there is a growing number of people recognizing the benefit of this one modality, one flower in a field of other flowers, so to speak.

John Dunne gave a somewhat different answer, but also made some of the same points. In a dissent we will explore more fully below, he insisted on distinguishing the mindfulness movement from contemplative studies and from contemplative *sciences*, which he argued is a separate field. He compared the three fields in terms of their orientation to research, interest in promoting contemplative practice, and concern to avoid the appearance of religious bias – but still said that “[contemplative studies and contemplative sciences] are both also concerned with practices other than mindfulness, so in that regard they do not overlap with [the mindfulness movement].

Available literature suggests that in some ways, contemplative studies is narrower than mindfulness. Mindfulness is an area of academic inquiry and medical practice,

and a mass culture phenomenon. Jeff Wilson reports that mindfulness has been widely applied (and massively monetized) in a vast array of industries, from self-help, to weight loss, to corporate management, to sex advice, and has been in some cases been integrated into Jewish and Christian practice.⁸² Contemplative studies is (thus far) mostly an academic and nonprofit phenomenon. Its institutional bases are primarily in nonprofits like the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society and the Mind and Life Institute, and university research centers and collaborative like those at Brown University, the University of Virginia, Syracuse University, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the University of Michigan.

In other ways, contemplative studies is broader than mindfulness. Despite what even some advocates describe as a persistent Buddhist slant or bias, contemplative studies has begun to include representatives of other religious traditions, such as those of the African diaspora, Judaism, Christianity, and Taoism. There has been some appropriation of mindfulness by other religious traditions after the fact, but interest in multiple traditions seems to be foundational for many contemplative studies advocates. This is especially true in the case of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society's literature and programs. In our August 2016 interview, Dan Barbezat told me that when he took over as Executive Director of the Center, he began to work toward the specific goal of including advocates from a wider range of backgrounds in the organization. Rose Sackey-Milligan told me of earlier CMind social justice work that included contributions from members of Diné and Chippewa traditions.

Though Buddhists have surely been vital to the history of contemplative studies, I

⁸² Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*.

will argue below that it might not exist without the key influence of Hindu teachers like Neem Karoli Baba and his American devotee Ram Dass. Finally, comparative religion, mysticism, and even interfaith exchanges are of central importance for some religion scholars involved in contemplative studies. The AAR's Contemplative Studies Group cites a 1971 conference of a wide range of religiously committed contemplatives (titled "Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action"), held at Houston's Rothko Chapel. The accompanying 1978 edited volume, titled *Contemplation and Action in World Religions* contains contributions from practitioners of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and African traditions.⁸³

Though not all advocates endorse such an expansive definition, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society's Tree of Contemplative Practices diagram includes more than two dozen techniques organized into the categories of stillness, generative, creative, activist, relational, movement, and ritual/cyclical practices.⁸⁴ Meditation is listed under "stillness" practices, but the word "mindfulness" does not appear anywhere on the page. Additionally, a review of the program for Mind and Life's 2016 ISCS in San Diego reveals a number of prominent Buddhist speakers alongside presenters and contemplative practice leaders (including Komjathy himself) from Taoist, Jewish, Christian, and

⁸³ "Contemplative Studies Consultation Proposal," *College of Arts and Sciences – University of San Diego*. See also Ibish, Yusuf, and Ileana Marculescu, eds. *Contemplation and action in world religions: selected papers from the Rothko Chapel colloquium "Traditional modes of contemplation and action."* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978.

⁸⁴ "The Tree of Contemplative Practices." *Center for Contemplative Mind in Society*. Accessed 4/3/2018. <http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree>.

Muslim perspectives.⁸⁵

This makes an interesting contrast to presentations of mindfulness by Jon Kabat-Zinn, whom Wilson credits as one of the two most important founders of the mindfulness movement (along with Thich Nat Hahn). The Web site for the University of Massachusetts Medical School's Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, where Kabat-Zinn oversees a mindfulness center, quotes his definition of mindfulness: "paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment to moment."⁸⁶ The page goes on to describe mindfulness in ways we find repeated in Kabat-Zinn's work:

MBSR spans a confluence of epistemologies and practices from two very distinct and until recently, divergent lineages, both committed to empirical investigation, albeit utilizing very different methodologies: that of science, medicine, and psychology, on the one hand, and that of Buddhist meditative traditions and their teachings and practices, known collectively as the Dharma, on the other. One reason MBSR proved viable in mainstream clinical settings is that the Dharma is in essence universal. Mindfulness, often being spoken of as "the heart of Buddhist meditation," and being primarily about the systematic training and refinement of attention and awareness, compassion and wisdom, is a manifestation of its universal applicability. In the present context, to recognize the universal character of the dharma, we use the term with a small "d."⁸⁷

The UMass Medical School page explicitly presents mindfulness as the product of the meeting of two universal systems of thought; medical science and Buddhism.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ "Keynotes, Master Lectures, Arts, and Contemplative Sessions." *Mind and Life Institute ISCS 2016*. Accessed 1/21/2018. <https://www.eiseverywhere.com/ehome/iscs-2016/schedule/>.

⁸⁶ "Introduction to Mindfulness." *Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society*. Accessed 1/18/2018. <https://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mindfulness-in-medicine/intro-to-mindfulness/>.

⁸⁷ "History of MBSR." *Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society*. Accessed 1/18/2018. <https://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mindfulness-based-programs/mbsr-courses/about-mbsr/history-of-mbsr/>.

⁸⁸ Kabat-Zinn takes a similar approach in print. In his 2005 book *Coming To Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness* (New York: Hyperion,

In contrast, Barbezat and Bush's 2013 *Contemplative Practice in Higher Education* (reviewed in detail below) explicitly includes examples of contemplative practices and experiences from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam along with mindfulness meditation. Some contemplative studies advocates situated in the study of religion, like Harold Roth and Thomas Coburn, partially ground their arguments for contemplative studies in the comparative study of religious experiences from multiple traditions.⁸⁹

The purpose of this introductory section has been to attempt to give a basic outline of the claims and goals of contemplative studies, explain where it exists institutionally, introduce my interest in it, method of study, and choice of sites and subjects, review the literature pertaining to the field, and explain how its advocates differentiate from "mindfulness." The next two chapter will survey literature by contemplative studies advocates and my experiences at contemplative studies gatherings to understand; (1) how advocates understand their work in relationship to "religion," and; (2) how contemplative studies adds to the refutation of normative critiques of mind-centered "spiritualities." Next is a chapter exploring the roots of contemplative studies in rhetoric derived from the European Romantic movement and colonial and postcolonial

2005), Kabat-Zinn argues that Buddhist-derived mindfulness meditation is best way to cultivate the universal human capacity for mindfulness: "Of all the meditative wisdom practices that have developed in traditional cultures throughout the world and throughout history, mindfulness is perhaps the most basic, the most powerful, the most universal, among the easiest to grasp and engage in, and arguably, the most sorely needed now. For mindfulness is none other than the capacity we all already have to know what is actually happening as it is happening" (*Coming to Our Senses*, 109). He argues for this point not by reference to comparative religion, as some contemplative studies advocates do, but by reference to the natural history of the human species, framing mindfulness as a capacity essential to ancient humans and preserved for today thanks to the effort of Buddhist monastics (Kabat-Zinn, 112).

⁸⁹ Both of these perspectives are presented in Simmer-Brown, Judith, and Fran Grace, eds. *Meditation in the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Higher Education*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2011, to be reviewed in detail below.

Asian thinkers responding to colonizers and missionaries. A final main body chapter discusses contemplative studies advocates' work to change disciplinary norms and boundaries and the roots of this work in countercultural "spiritualities." Finally, a closing epilogue seeks to address lingering questions.

Descriptive Chapter 1: Use of the Concept of “Religion”:

This chapter will focus on how contemplative studies advocates situate themselves in relation to the category of “religion.” This requires tracking how they define that category, what they include in it, and what they exclude from it, in print and Web literature, in conference proceedings, and in my interviews. I will not argue that contemplative studies “is” or “is not” really “religion.” I do not think either claim would have any useful meaning. This is not an exposé or a refutation. I will conclude by explaining how my perspective emerges from theory in the study of religion. My purpose in later chapters will be to historicize the pattern I see here, to introduce a wider context to conversations about religion in contemplative studies. I think the field uses particular aspects of the boundary between the “religious” and the “non-religious” to make certain features of “religious” traditions compatible with a new universality, to make them speak to human life and needs on a general level. In a pattern we will find consistently here and have the chance to historicize in a later chapter, religion is consistently presented as a *resource* for deriving contemplative practices and experiences the modern world needs to fix its intellectual and social ills. This pattern, I hope to show later, derives from a combination of Romantic and colonial and postcolonial Asian thought oriented toward an experiential, embodied form of “religion” with sufficient empirical credentials to survive against help reform the perceived excesses of the Enlightenment’s rationalism and misuse of scientific power.

In an August, 2016 interview, I asked Dan Barbezat of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society to define “religion” and “contemplative studies.” He

reinforced the conclusion that leaders in the field know it is still being invented on the ground, and readily say so as soon as anyone actually asks. There is a fair bit of uncertainty, though it's worth noting that nobody actively tries to hide this fact. "I'm loathe to define the field very clearly," he said, "because I believe that in order to be open enough to attract the widest variety of practices, we have to be very cautious how delimit the boundaries of those practices. When I started at the Center, it was very Buddhist-centric. What we've tried to do over the last four years is change that. If you look around at the distribution of people here, it matters."⁹⁰

Dan said his goal has been to work against some of the fissures that might otherwise appear around the definition of contemplative practice, so as to allow people from the widest possible range of backgrounds to work together under one umbrella. Conceived this way, he said, contemplative practice is quite difficult to define. It is more of "an orientation toward the world than any specific practice... we need to be patient because this community will be far more attractive to a far greater number of people... [and] what will arise will be very different for their involvement."

Anthropologist Michelle Chatman, who teaches in the Department of Criminal Justice and Youth Studies at the University of the District of Columbia and serves on the board of the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE), gave

⁹⁰ The 2016 summer session group he referred to was majority white, but less so than many academic gatherings. People of color hold prominent places in the CMind and ACMHE organizations and have served in numerous keynote speaking and leadership roles at the summer sessions and the Howard conference I've attended. This, combined with ACMHE's increasing focus on social justice (reflected to some extent in the Mind and Life Institute's 2016 International Symposium for Contemplative Studies), complicates the conventional religious studies wisdom that "spirituality" is for all intents and purposes a white, middle to upper class, and socially disinterested form of thought and practice.

me her definition in an interview several days later. Her answer, too, was reflective of a field that is still being imagined and created on the ground, in interdisciplinary and experimental spaces like ACMHE. “The definition I created for myself,” she said, includes the integration of introspective, first-person, reflective practices ‘for the distinct purpose of enhancing learning about one’s self, community, world... fostering action, you can say ‘social justice,’ too.” She went on to say that she would count as a success one student’s learning to parent more effectively through contemplative pedagogy as much as another’s motivation to work for social justice. The purpose, for her, is to “create a better condition, in a very broad sense [i.e., a better condition of life for individuals and society].”⁹¹

One of the points of (relative) consensus I find between contemplative studies literature and my interviews is how advocates define “religion” (I say “relative” because the religion scholars I spoke with dissented, but they are very much the minority in the

⁹¹ Other interviewees gave broadly similar (though not identical) definitions of contemplative studies. Brian defined the field as “studying the practices, the resultant experiences as they are described and reported,” in literature, rhetoric, claims, values, history, on the model of “something fairly close to classic religious [studies] scholarship.” Asked to define the field, Rose Sackey-Milligan replied: “I like the word contemplative studies because I think the term most adequately describes the various ways that one can (not connect but) one can discover, recognize that aspect of themselves that is beyond, that is not the person – an aspect of themselves that is conscious awareness, recognize the conscious awareness of what is really true about themselves.” Rachel Razza responded as a teacher and researcher in child and family sciences, defining the field to include “practices including some kind of awareness,” on the model of ACMHE’s Tree of Contemplative Practices. “Are they asked to be in the present moment, reflect on the material?” she continued. Contemplative studies gives students or therapeutic clients “some kind of space, time to just sit with the material, or with the experience that they’re having. See what rises for them in those different contexts.” Harold Roth shared with a PowerPoint presentation that defines contemplative studies as a field that ““Identifies the varieties of contemplative experiences; discovers scientific explanations for them; cultivates critical first-person knowledge of them; assesses their meaning and significance,” combining insights from the sciences, humanities, and creative arts (Roth, Personal Communication, December 2017).

field and haven't fundamentally changed my analysis of what is happening here). As Dan Barbezat told me, "religion begins where... students have to adopt a belief in something that is faith-based." In other words, by bracketing "religious" beliefs, contemplative studies is able to deploy practices, experiences, tools for working on the embodied human mind, which be used effectively *apart* from the theologies and the authority of the traditions that produced them. In contemplatives studies contexts where only religion-as-belief is recognized as "religion," a practice like mindfulness meditation - arguably every bit as Buddhist as the belief in the ultimate emptiness of form - may more easily be understood as *nonreligious* because it can be more convincingly separated from belief.⁹²

Nobody, in my experience, is trying to conceal any sort of "religious" agenda here.⁹³ This is just how most contemplative studies advocates (and indeed a great many other people) actually think about religion. Later in August of 2016 I asked the same question of Rose Sackey-Milligan. When I think of religion," she said:

"I think of dogma, really, a set of guiding principles, a set of rules, one singular perspective on the existence of God, a set of concepts and ideas that are espoused, embraced by a formal [leadership] and an institution that they represent. I would include rituals, prayer, meditation, song, the established set of conduct. It includes practices and ways of accessing, connecting, discovering divinity, but it is those ways or tools *plus something dogmatic, something prescribed, something*

⁹² When I asked Mary, of the metropolitan Northeast community college, how she defined religion, she gave an answer that was something of an outlier in my reading and interviews. She said that "religion," for her, primarily means Christianity. She did not seem to bring this concept into play in thinking about contemplative studies. Indeed, though she spoke of being influenced by Meredith Monk and Monk's association with Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa and Naropa University, her description of her actual classroom practice had no overt connection to "religion."

⁹³ I add this point because when I began the project, I suspected this was the case in contemplative studies. In a piece to be reviewed below, Judith Simmer-Brown rebuts a similar charge from colleagues who accuse contemplative studies advocates of trying to "proselytize" to students via contemplative practice in class.

accepted, protocol and conduct, and all of that could Catholicism, Islam, Judaism” (emphasis mine).

How, I asked, is CMind different from that? Her reply is consistent with most of the contemplative studies literature and the programming I have attended. While acknowledging the Center’s Buddhist roots, she said:

“I’m not teaching a set of dogmatic principles, a sacred text... I’m not teaching the word of God. I’m not offering a particular religious perspective, I’m saying here are some tools that can help you find peace, help you find joy, be more focused, discover the deeper sense of being, *which has nothing to do with God per se*. These tools are available to agnostics, atheists, anyone who recognizes their value... *a ritual, a tool used in religious settings, can be just as effective in nonreligious settings, such that religious settings don’t have a monopoly on the effectiveness of these tools for life... [contemplative practices are a] tool for individual transformative reflection... using the tools does not connote religion*” (emphasis mine).

Here as in most of the literature, “religion” is about belief, and belief is separable from contemplative and other practices, at least in principle. David Germano presented a more complex view that presaged an emerging internal division in the field, one which we will evaluate in more detail below. “Religion is my field of study,” he said, so “anything I say would be problematic.” What he did say is that there are many potential difficulties involved in moving practices from traditional to academic contexts. It is a process of translation that requires deep knowledge of, to borrow a linguistic metaphor, the “source” and “target” contexts. It *can* be done, but using contemplative practice effectively and communicating something of its traditional purposes requires in-depth knowledge of both (say) Buddhist traditions and contemporary higher education.

Brian, also a religion scholar, presented another differing view. He understands religion as a fungible category, one that contemplative studies advocates seek to disentangle from their work. He argued that “a huge part of this is to engage some notion

of the secular to bolster some part of [contemplative studies].” Asked how he understands contemplative studies in relation to the religion and to “the secular,” he pointed to a broad spectrum of investments. Some in the field, he said, are doing things that are virtually indistinguishable from theology, while others in organizations like Mind and Life don’t think what they do is religious despite their being surrounded by people deeply involved in religious traditions. Another group of participants, he said, “are really living this ambiguity.”⁹⁴

The excerpts from print and web materials, conference programming, and my interviews with contemplative studies advocates presented below will reinforce both the broad similarities and the divisions that seem to be taking shape within the field. Everyone is interested in expanding the range of states of consciousness that can be studied and used in academic contexts. The split, roughly between contemplative “studies” and contemplative “sciences,” concerns how these states should be studied, what they should be used for, and what value they have in relation to the larger project of knowledge production. To be brief – even despite Brian’s explicit assertion “ACMHE is a different conversation” from Mind and Life, I think it is highly questionable whether this distinction is absolute on the ground or in the historical record, so I mostly will not adhere to it and will treat what I’m studying as essentially one field.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Indeed, this largely matches my own view of contemplative studies, except that for the purposes of this project, I am not willing to place advocates’ actions into predetermined categories like “religious,” “secular,” “theological,” etc. I view contemplative studies advocates (and even their critical colleagues) as engaged in a negotiation over the meanings and the boundaries of those categories. I want to study *how they* think about religion to situate it in a historical context, *not* determine if they are or are not “religious.”

⁹⁵ I will explain why in my Epilogue.

Print and Web Sources:

Print sources in contemplative studies largely follow the pattern established by my interview subjects and conference experiences. In their 2013 book *Contemplative Practice in Higher Education*, Dan Barbezat and Mirabai Bush advocate a wide range of practices, from mediation derived from Zen Buddhism, to adaptations of the Christian monastic practice of *lectio divina* and labyrinth walking, to “beholding,” visualization, aikido, yoga, dance, “bearing witness,” and “pilgrimages to areas where social justice issues are highlighted.”⁹⁶ Not all these practices come from “religious” traditions, but I want to describe how these are dealt with because they are nonetheless a central concern of the book and because the way Barbezat and Bush use them will be relevant later on as we contextualize contemplative studies.

I will summarize their discussions of mindfulness and of contemplative writing practices to give the flavor of their volume and much of the rest of the contemplative studies literature deals with “religion.” They argue that mindfulness practice in classrooms is “a secular activity,” the cultivation of a “basic human capacity” to observe and regulate affect and attention. Despite this, they also emphasize that this capacity has been developed in a number of religion traditions, citing Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist examples. This move is of a piece with the broader pattern of reference to “the world’s contemplative traditions” in the literature, and it extracts experiential techniques from “religions” in the same way. Contemplative practices appear as a universal feature of “religions” and as something the modern world needs.

⁹⁶ Barbezat, Daniel, and Mirabai Bush. *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013, pp.10. *Lectio divina* is a Christian monastic practice of contemplative reading (Barbezat and Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, pp. 113-114).

In our January, 2017 interview, Carolyn Jacobs grounded contemplative pedagogy outside traditions in a similar way. Working with students or clinical clients from different traditions or from none, she advocated the physical act of breathing as a point of cross-cultural commonality on which to build. The comparison that anchors contemplative studies is grounded in the shared properties of the embodied mind. “In contemplative practices,” she told me in our January, 2017 phone interview, “you are constantly opening beyond the definitions of the tradition you find yourself in, but you don’t lose that grounding. The grounding gives you a place to stand... even as you might question or move the conceptual frameworks of that tradition.”

Barbezat and Bush’s chapter on contemplative reading practices follows the same logic. They argue that contemplative reading practices found in a number of “religious” traditions change the flow of attention in the act of reading, allowing more accurate and more meaningful engagement with texts. The rationale for contemplative practices and the negotiation with the concept of “religion” here are worth quoting extensively. These practices are useful because they initiate “a process of quiet reflection” enabling “more profound experience and understanding.” Students can let go of “distracting thoughts and opinions to be fully in the moment with the text” so its “full meaning” may be revealed.⁹⁷ The practices in question *come from* religious traditions, but do not themselves constitute “religion;”

By adapting this ancient practice, teachers are not attempting to elevate academic texts, even literature, to the status of scripture or sacred texts but are seeking to increase students’ engagement with and comprehension of their subject, guided by a method that has led monks and others to find the wisdom ‘hidden from most people...’ the adaptations described in this chapter are inspired by the formal monastic practice but are not the full

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.113

religious practice of, for example, lectio divina, although most share many elements of the original sacred process.⁹⁸

In a pattern that appears quite consistently, “religion” is defined by belief (i.e., “the status of scripture or sacred texts”), whereas “contemplative practices” are defined by changed experience of focal attention, deep engagement, and emotional awareness and control. Religions have developed pathways to a distinct type of experience that the modern world needs to free itself from its overemphasis on calculation and logic, and from the Cartesian epistemology behind it.⁹⁹ In the past, such experiences might well have been called “religious.” Here, the concept of “religion” moves away from “experience” and toward belief, and the experiences in question are called “contemplative” instead.¹⁰⁰ It bears repeating that I am not labeling contemplative studies as some kind of covert “religious movement,” whatever that would mean. Instead, I am trying to locate its use of the category of “religion” in reference to larger history of discourse about “religion” and “religious experience.”

Other interview subjects defined religion in ways that match Barbezat and Bush.

Carolyn Jacobs’ answer provides a good example and is worth quoting at length:

“The problem with religion is it just has so many negative connotations for people. People who are very comfortable with silence, deepening of presence, may believe in

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.113.

⁹⁹ In the history chapter and the chapter studying shifts in academic norms, both below, we will see that this same basic move has been (and is being) applied for a multitude of reasons, from philosophical and epistemological impasses regarding consciousness to concerns about destructive individualism and runaway technological power.

¹⁰⁰ One example that comes immediately to mind is James’s account in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, particularly the “noetic quality” he ascribes to apparently universal “mystical” experience. Interestingly, James’ other criteria, “ineffability,” “transience,” and “passivity,” do not map easily onto the states sought in contemplative studies. See James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 290-327.

God or no god, a sense of creation, nature. Religion would work if it wasn't in an institution. That's how you get spirituality and secular humanism. The problem is the institution. What people deeply long for can be found in religious traditions. What they really long for is communities they can practice and be present in. The problem is we have so many abuses in the name of God, sexism, homophobia, racism, all these converge in places in religious traditions and institutions *that mark what religion is for people*. It exists in every tradition that says come, accept me, except you need to change this or that. It makes people not feel safe to practice there. Thus the movement to a sense of spirituality in a community that's not caught in these in those institutions."

We can expand our picture of the approaches to "religion" in contemplative studies by reviewing several of the essays in Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace's *Meditation in the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Higher Education* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011). Naropa University Emeritus Professor Thomas Coburn's "The Convergence of Liberal Education" outlines a case for the relevance of contemplation in the modern university. The most interesting parts of Coburn's essay are the references to religion. First, in discussing the range of possible contemplative paths, from solitary monks and yogis to activists like King and Thich Nhat Han, he argues that "contemplatives, in all traditions and throughout history, have tended to live their lives along a spectrum [i.e., a spectrum from monastic to activist levels of social engagement]." ¹⁰¹ What interests me here is not this spectrum of degrees of social engagement but the deployment of the category of "contemplatives" and how it *situates* religious traditions. It positions them as keepers and cultivators of a particular natural kind of human experience that the modern world has largely lost, a type of experience it needs to heal the divides in its knowledge and its culture. This rhetoric, as we will see, comes to the present via the European Romantic movement and its cross-

¹⁰¹ Coburn, Thomas B. "The Convergence of Liberal Education and Contemplative Education – Inevitable?" in *Meditation in the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies*, edited by Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace. Albany: SUNY Press, 2011, pp.5.

pollination with colonial and postcolonial Asian thinkers producing empiricist readings of their own traditions.

Coburn's example for contemplative experiences of unbidden insight is equally interesting for the reader following references to "religion." He cites a passage from R.M. Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness* that also appears in James' "Mysticism" lectures in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This is one reason contemplative studies is getting a hearing in the study of religion (as in the AAR's Contemplative Studies Group). It harkens back to comparative, psychological, Romantic, and Transcendentalist origins and raises questions which, evidently, some religion scholars still want to pursue. It aligns to some extent with the "old school" of comparative religion. This approach, represented most prominently by Eliade and colleagues at the University of Chicago, and also frequently connected to James's work, employed a Romantic-inspired comparative religion as a way to isolate "sacred" human experiences of communal and cosmic unity and defend them against an encroaching secular materialism. The AAR's Contemplative Studies Group has indeed attracted participation from prominent scholars, like Jeffrey Kripal and like Ann Taves, who seek in various ways to update and revive some version of the comparative project.

On the other hand, in his essay in the Simmer-Brown and Grace volume, titled "Contemplative Studies: Can It Flourish in the Religious Studies Classroom?," Harold Roth of Brown University contends that religious studies departments ultimately cannot support contemplative studies initiatives. Contemplative studies, he writes, should instead be established as a separate academic field. In Roth's view, religious studies is hampered by "Eurocentric" and "ethnocentric" biases that prevent religion

scholars from taking claims to first-person religious experiences seriously.

The first of these biases is the idea that European scientific and philosophical systems contain “the only possible veridical models” of human experience. Closely associated with this view is the idea that all experiences are mediated by pre-existing conceptual frameworks. “Yet,” Roth argues, “mystical traditions all over the world argue that it is only when these mediating cognitive categories are stripped away that genuine intuitive knowledge and clear cognition can develop, yielding experience that is truly noetic, as William James put it.” It is our own ethnocentrism that drives us to stipulate from the outside what “the world’s great mystics” may or may not have experienced, “a form of ethnocentric hubris that parallels the assumptions of European imperialists who dominated the world in the name of their cultural superiority.”¹⁰² By assuming first that all experiences are constituted by cultural cognitive frameworks and by ruling subjective reports out of the sphere of the “observable,” we miss out on the opportunity to study “these internal experiences that for William James are the very heart of religion and that should be the very heart of any serious approach to studying both religion and human cognition.”¹⁰³

The logical pattern remains: religious traditions are prominent keepers of alternative types of consciousness that the modern world needs to adopt to counter (what advocates perceive as) its excessive emphasis on rationality and objectivity. The reference to James is even more conspicuous as it comes in the same volume as Coburn’s

¹⁰² Roth, Harold. “Contemplative Studies: Can It Flourish in the Religious Studies Classroom?” in *Meditation in the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies*, edited by Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace. Albany: SUNY Press, 2011, pp.25

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp.27

essay. Two religion scholars with opposed views on contemplative studies as a project for religion scholars both invoke the *Varieties*. Most interesting. If Roth and Coburn debated this issue, I suspect the debate would be about whether religious studies can revive and update its comparative project. When we discuss Romantic modes of comparison in the history chapter, we will have occasion to review early religious studies theorists whose influence is still shaping religion scholars' perspectives on contemplative studies.¹⁰⁴

Before moving on, I want to touch on Judith Simmer-Brown's essay in the *Meditation in the Classroom* volume. Titled "Training the Heart Responsibly: Ethical Considerations in Contemplative Teaching," the piece covers the very live issues of "religious" indoctrination of students and unjust appropriation of cultural practices from colonized societies. Simmer-Brown, a senior faculty member at Naropa University, argues that despite the objections of some religious studies colleagues, contemplative studies is not about indoctrinating students into Buddhism or any other "religion." She writes that many in religious studies assume that "the Protestant establishment is still working full-force... to bring an individualized, personalized understanding of spirituality back into the classroom, unencumbered by social and institutional understandings of religion."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ What has emerged between these essays and several of my interviews is that religion scholars are among the fiercest defenders *and the fiercest critics* of this use comparative use of religious materials in contemplative studies. The broader trend in the field is in favor of using comparative religion as a source for new approaches to subjectivity in secular settings.

¹⁰⁵ Simmer-Brown, Judith. "Training the Heart Responsibly: Ethical Considerations in Contemplative Teaching." In *Meditation in the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies*, edited by Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace. Albany: SUNY Press, 2011, pp.112

Simmer-Brown goes on to argue that the specters of proselytization and conversion are not in play here, since “within the Buddhist, Daoist, and Hindu expressions of religion... religious identity comes not so much from belief as from community, symbol, and practice.”¹⁰⁶ These anxieties, she writes, are primarily the province of religion scholars who define religion “as doctrinally based and mission driven, following the Western Protestant model.”¹⁰⁷ In other words, when working with “religious” materials in the classroom, we need worry about proselytization and conversion only if we believe “religions” by nature seek to proselytize and convert (i.e., to a new belief system).

Looking across these chapters in *Meditation in the Classroom*, the logical pattern that emerges is (1) contemplative practices come in large part from religious traditions; (2) they provide unique resources for training attention and for changing the meaning and the experience of higher education; and, (3) because they do not involve changing students’ metaphysical beliefs, they are not a concern in terms of proselytization or a threat to existing religious identities. We can draw a close analogy between this collection and the way Barbezat and Bush describe and situate contemplative practices. They, too, argue that contemplative practices will help heal much of the distraction and division that plague the modern academy, and modern society more broadly. Contemplation improves students’ performance, makes their experience more meaningful, and helps create more engaged, empathetic, and socially responsible people.

For a subtly dissenting view under the same broad umbrella, consider my

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.113

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.113

interview with David Germano. Germano argued that “religion” was not what was happening in his contemplative studies project. Like most of the other religion scholars with whom I spoke, he implied that *some* in contemplative studies were pushing this boundary too hard.¹⁰⁸ He argued that it simply is not correct to claim that Buddhism, Taoism, or any other religion is “not a religion” in a sense that would make it more compatible with secular academic pursuits than, say, Christianity. Religion scholars (Germano, Brian, and John Dunne) were consistently the most aggressive on this point – they dissented from the push to change the epistemological and even ontological norms of the academy, even as they supported the use of an expanded range of pedagogical techniques derived from religious traditions and the educational relevance of emotional and visceral dimensions of consciousness. This is true even as other religion scholars, like Harold Roth and Judith Simmer-Brown, remain among the strongest advocates for using contemplative studies to think through epistemological and even ontological (not just practical) implications of contemplative practice and experience.¹⁰⁹

Another articulation of contemplative studies may be found in a syllabus by Ann Klein of the Department of Religion at Rice University. The syllabus, titled “Knowing

¹⁰⁸John Dunne unambiguously classified contemplative studies advocates as “religious” and Brian argued that some were doing work basically indistinguishable from “theology.” Among my interview subjects, Harold Roth is sole the exception to this.

¹⁰⁹ Germano’s comments presaged what I would later learn about the split some advocates perceive between “contemplative studies” and “contemplative sciences.” Some advocates (among my interviewees, Germano, Dunne, and Brian) view contemplative sciences as the academic study of contemplative practices, and contemplative studies as the *promotion* of contemplative practices, with the goal of promoting religious ideas just below the surface. John Dunne later framed this for me by saying that in contemplative studies, participants feel free to “be religious,” and that academic questions about contemplative practices take an implicit back seat. In short, I am not surprised religion scholars have been the ones to raise this issue, but I *am* surprised at the way they have tried to resolve it. I will explain why in my epilogue.

Body / Glowing Mind,” is available through the Syllabus Project hosted by the contemplative studies initiative at the University of San Diego.¹¹⁰ Like most of the contemplative studies literature and most of the Web material as well, Klein’s syllabus is invested in the category of “contemplative practice” as something distinct and applicable across cultures, and especially as something separable from “religion”. Equally interesting to me is the claim that “a contemplative studies approach to religious material provides a creative and intellectually useful method for confronting the complexities of today’s inter religious multi-perspectival world.” The *role* that religion plays here is comparable to what we find in the contemplative studies literature – it is a source of practices and experiences that occur across cultures, that may tell us something about the nature of the human mind, and may help confront the challenges of our increasingly busy and interconnected world.

As of 2017, the Web page for the Contemplative Studies concentration in Rice’s religion graduate program compliments this syllabus.¹¹¹ The page argues that contemplative studies

“inquires into texts, art, ritual, philosophy, embodied practices, or myth with an interest in how these reveal, conceal, reflect, guide or otherwise engage the reader’s contemplative potential. This in turn invites a meta-inquiry into how we come to an intelligent understanding of our own experience, and what kinds of development, training, and intelligence (beyond simply intellectual) is intended in these practices. For these purposes “contemplative” refers to a broad spectrum of practices and inquiry oriented to subjective expansion, awareness, and stillness... Such work often means

¹¹⁰

“Knowing Body / Glowing Mind: A Contemplative Studies Approach to Buddhist Literature and the Western Mystic Gaze.” Klein, Anne C. Accessed 4/3/2018. <https://www.sandiego.edu/cas/documents/contemplative-studies/06Klein1.pdf>

¹¹¹ “Contemplative Studies.” *Rice University, Department of Religion*. Accessed 8/23/2017.

<https://reli.rice.edu/graduate/areas-concentration/contemplative-studies>.

looking into categories that other readers ignore—for example, inner vision and its connection to subtle energies or to levels and signs of deepening concentration.”

I read this passage as compatible, at least, with the wider pattern I have found in advocacy for contemplative studies. It embodies a strong interest in investigating different forms of subjectivity (and trades on the assumption that this is really possible, something that is still highly debatable in the humanities). Being located in a religion department, it also at least implies that religious traditions have a central role as source material in this investigation, prominently citing potential investigations of Buddhist and Christian contemplative materials. Interestingly, the concentration requires a two-semester contemplative practicum – another potential instance of the idea that different dimensions of subjectivity can actually be cultivated and used in academic spaces, including graduate training in religion. One significant difference between the Rice initiative and some other contemplative studies advocacy is its strong statement on the cultural embeddedness of contemplative practice – but even the effort to split the difference, as it were, and investigate *both* alternative experiences and their cultural framing in great depth is quite radical (or perhaps radically conservative) for the present moment in religious studies.¹¹² It speaks to the wider contemplative studies effort to take non-cognitive forms of experience seriously in teaching and research, and to the central role many advocates see religious traditions playing in this effort.¹¹³

¹¹² It is radical because of the extent to which, at least until the past several years, comparison and the study of experience have been disfavored in religious studies and in the humanities more broadly for several decades. As I explain in my epilogue, contemplative studies may be part of a wider shift in these trends.

¹¹³ This statement, on the same page as the rest of the description, reads “Such inquiry requires rigorous grounding in the epistemology and ontology of the system, since theories of mind and views of reality are intimately connected with how contemplative practices are structured, their relation to doctrine, and expected outcomes for the

The “Rationale” page for the Brown University contemplative studies initiative is especially salient for tracking the understanding of “religion” in contemplative studies.¹¹⁴ In a register familiar from Roth’s essay and Barbezat and Bush’s volume summarized above, it treats “contemplative practice” as a universal human capacity, citing the “contemplative states of consciousness” created by art, sports, and absorption in nature as much as by religious practice. What interests me is that despite the fact that we *could* articulate all this without reference to “religion,” (since contemplative experience is a human universal), “religious” traditions remains not only front and center, but also in direct dialogue with science. The Rationale essay argues that “the major meditation traditions of Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism have... developed a considerable sophistication in the *unbiased* investigation of subjective experience. *Indeed, some modern scholars such as B. Alan Wallace and Francisco Varela have concluded that these investigations constitute a valid science of the mind*” (emphasis mine). Jewish, Christian, and Muslim examples also appear, but not under the banner of “science.”

The Rationale essay continues with a description of “critical first-person” analysis students will perform in the contemplative studies program. The language is intriguing here. Critical first-person engagement means “direct” experiences of contemplative practices without any prior commitment regarding their efficacy. After this, students will be able to “step back and appraise their experiences in order to gain a deeper appreciation

practitioner. Each tradition has its own major mystics or contemplative philosopher whose work offers thematic structures into which the rigorous reader of texts and tradition can inquire.”

¹¹⁴ “The Rationale Behind Contemplative Studies.” *Brown University*. Accessed 4/15/2017. <https://www.brown.edu/academics/contemplative-studies/about/rationale>

of their meaning and significance.” By critically exploring contemplative practice and its applicability to their lives, “students will discover important dimensions of their nature as human beings,” gaining acute awareness of the present moment which “is at the heart of contemplative experience and the basis of compassionate action and will be able to understand its scientific basis and philosophical significance.”

The pattern we have been tracing appears here again. Contemplative practices and experiences (primarily derived from but not the same as “religion”) will tell us things about who we are and how our minds function that we cannot learn through traditional scientific or other academic methods. They will expand the range and acuity of our attention, making us more efficient, more creative, and happier, more deeply in tune with ourselves. Furthermore, they will make us better people by altering our awareness of our interconnectedness with others and the natural world. We will see below that the way contemplative studies advocates articulate the role of religion in the modern world may plausibly be linked to currents of discourse about religion traceable to the intersection of European Romantic and Asian colonial and postcolonial thought.

Conference Experiences:

At the contemplative studies gatherings I attended with the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education and the Mind and Life Institute, there has been far less focus on the definition of “religion” than there has been on the utility of contemplative practices for advancing scientific and medical knowledge and creating social change. However, it will be illustrative to make note of the *role* that religions play – they are still positioned as prominent sources of practices and states of consciousness

that can reform modern academic life, including, in this case, the experience of going to academic conferences. In her half of the opening address at the 2015 Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education Summer Seminar, Mirabai Bush narrated some of the history of ACMHE's parent organization, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. She told of its early set of interviews with 40 contemplative teachers from a variety of religious traditions, on the challenges of taking contemplative practices out of religious contexts and applying them in everyday ones. They were told, interestingly enough, that the practices have their own integrity, but would be hard to sustain without the presence of a community (my assumption is that creating such a community is part of the goal of ACMHE, both broadly and in the context of the intimate, informal Summer Seminars). This is recognized as an issue, she said, in all such traditions; "everywhere there is a way in which to awaken ourselves as human beings, there is a practice of bringing people together to do it," *sangha*, *comunidad*, beloved community, *minyon*. She quoted bell hooks' A Pedagogy of Hope on "building community so as not to perpetrate or perpetuate domination," and reported that community was one of the aspects of CMind most valued in interviews with 150 of the organization's fellows.

One major goal, then, is not simply stress relief or self-improvement, but something much closer to what activists (including the activists at these gatherings) call "self-care," working on the self with a community to renew and strengthen the capacity to work on behalf of that community. To some extent, the basis for this community is the understanding that contemplative practices have appeared in many different cultures. CMind's framing of this commonality incorporates (but does not strictly depend upon) the "world religions" schema that frequently features in comparative accounts of

religious experience.¹¹⁵ The observer watching for this schema won't be surprised by the inclusion of Buddhist and Jewish cognates for "community," but may not expect the inclusion of *comunidad* or "beloved community." There are "world religions" and perhaps "the world's contemplative traditions" in play here, but at least for ACMHE, the category is beginning to blur at its familiar edges. This could be a precondition for its use in pursuit of social justice, a result of that pursuit, or both – but again, look at the *role* of "religious" traditions. They are positioned as sources of the practices we need to bring our communities closer together.

In her 2015 summer session presentation, Michelle Chatman worked to expand the understanding of contemplative practice by explaining her own experience of African-American Christianity and of African and Afro-Caribbean religious and cultural practices. She argued that although contemplative practices are typically imagined as Asian in origin, a strong contemplative thread existed "not only within my religion - which is a little problematic - but within my life." She first explained her Baptist grandmother's "contemplative way," getting up in the morning and "spending time with the Lord," praying and singing. In line with the contemplative imperative to involve the whole self and body in the production of knowledge, she then briefly sang herself – immediately transforming the emotional and intellectual tenor of the room, waking up a slightly droopy mid-conference crowd and elevating the intensity and the seriousness of the discussion. Her singing was gorgeous, but clearly not just for enjoyment. I can say

¹¹⁵ Tomoko Masuzawa describes this framework and charts its (mostly Protestant apologetic) genealogy in *Invention of World Religions: Or How Protestant Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

that this was an effective practical demonstration of one of the central claims of contemplative studies, the idea that many modes of embodied action and perception are relevant to the production of knowledge. Michelle employed music in a way that (at least in my perception) drew her majority-white audience deeper into a discussion of race and mind-centered “spirituality” in America. She then narrated her experience, later in life, of living in The Gambia, West Africa and experiencing contemplative elements in the culture there. “I learned how to be with people,” she said, “just to share a human moment, a few moments together, and that was a contemplative time for me.”

Describing how her own contemplative experiences inspire her pedagogy, she said, “I have begun to really translate my sacred into a secular environment, and my students are really benefiting from it.” Again, it’s the *role* of religion that really stands out here and connects it to what we observed in the previous chapter. It is a source of practices that, if handled carefully, may be beneficial to students.

When we spoke one on one in 2016, I asked Michelle how she defines religion, and how she sees contemplative studies in relation to religion. Religion, she said, is the way a society or other group understands creation, the natural world, and themselves with respect. It is also, she argued, a social structure, an element of society that informs how people interact, their understanding of life and death, and the practices by which they reinforce their relationship to a supernatural creative force. “Within that,” she said, “I believe there are contemplative spaces within many religious expressions. They are of a

contemplative nature in that they are introspective, reflective, they stimulate first-person awareness of ‘Who am I? Where did I come from? What am I connected to?’¹¹⁶

As an example, Michelle summarized her 2015 summer session presentation on her own practice of the West African Ifa/Yoruba tradition. She said that while she sees significant overlap between religion and contemplative practices and wants to broaden the popular conception of where contemplative practices reside, her contemplative pedagogy does not involve certain aspects of her own religious practice, such as relating to divine beings. The aspects of her own practice that are relevant are those that help students attend to their own interiority so they can better attend to their connections to others and do good work. African and African-American traditions do not *yet* typically appear in most comparative analyses of contemplative practice, but contemplative studies may help change that. The idea that religions contain contemplative practices that may be (carefully) separated from them and used in secular settings re-appears here, but the range of religions under consideration has expanded.

Harold Roth’s master lecture at the 2016 ISCS, titled “What’s Critical about Critical First-Person Perspectives?” addressed the “religion” issue in broadly familiar ways that also served to illuminate the disagreement that exists below the surface in contemplative studies. The contrast between his talk and Buddhism scholar John Dunne’s master lecture at the same event was particularly acute and significant for understanding the internal tensions that exist in the field, especially in the Mind and Life

¹¹⁶ Her comments and her presentation *also* speak to the ways contemplative studies may be opening up the “world religions” construct and doing new things with it. The ACMHE space may have been created by Romantic-influenced counter-culturalists with strong Buddhist and Hindu backgrounds, but Chatman has brought what she considers contemplative dimensions of African-American Christianity and Afro-Caribbean religions into that space.

environment. Dunne did not use the term “contemplative studies” – Roth seemed very comfortable with the term, and we learn in the introduction his talk that he served as co-organizer for the 2016 ISCS meeting, which does have “Contemplative Studies” in the title despite its stronger focus on science. He sought to affirm the epistemic and practical value of special forms of consciousness cultivated in a range of contemplative traditions and situate them within “critical first-person” practice. The core of his presentation was the idea that contemplative traditions have cultivated nonintentional, “no-person” forms of experience that act as important compliments to first, second, and third-person forms of knowing. These, he argued, can be accessed in secular contexts, without adherence to traditional belief systems. They may be of particular relevance to the contemporary study of consciousness and to a more general re-integration of subjective experience into “rational humanistic and scientific discourse.” This form of experience is valuable because it “removes one of the main reasons subjective experience has been taboo in the sciences and humanities. Subjective experience *does not inevitability have to be biased* and hence distorted” (emphasis in original).¹¹⁷ This is perhaps the single strongest statement I have yet encountered of the ways in which many contemplative studies advocates seek to shift epistemological norms in the secular academic world, and of the role they see religion playing in that shift. “Subjective experience does not inevitably have to be biased” really is an extraordinary claim – it doesn’t just push back against

¹¹⁷ “ISCS 2016 – Master Lecture – Harold Roth.” *Mind and Life Institute*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdJtsS35cEI&t=2622s>, 11/28/2016, Accessed 8/17/2017.

sociological, neural, and Foucauldian reductionisms.¹¹⁸ It might be said to push back against Freud, Marx, even Kant, and the traditions of thought derived from their work.¹¹⁹ It reminds one of the Kantian Friedrich Max Muller's search for fundamental faculty for "perception of the infinite" beyond the spatiotemporal limits of perception theorized in Kant's epoch-making works.

Although they do not have identical goals or strategies, it is fair to say that there is an analogy to be made between what Muller tries to do with religion and what some contemplative studies advocates do with it. Both consider religious traditions conservators of forms of subjectivity that the modern world has excluded from the ambit of official knowledge. Some contemplative studies advocates, like Harold Roth and Louis Komjathy, argue that contemplative practice offers a critique of the boundaries of academic knowledge, of what counts as knowledge and even of what may be considered real. Others want to make it possible to explore what contemplative practices might accomplish in academic settings, especially insofar as these practices might help return the whole, embodied person to the center of the educational enterprise, but do not seek to change the most basic intellectual underpinnings of academic work. For reasons I will

¹¹⁸ Contemplative studies is overdue for a reading against both the early Foucault, an incisive critic of scientific power/knowledge and the discipline of bodies, and the later Foucault, a student of ancient and modern techniques of affective and ethical self-fashioning.

¹¹⁹ Indeed, in his 2008 *Religion East and West* article "Against Cognitive Imperialism," Roth ultimately takes this criticism back to the roots on Enlightenment epistemology in the philosophy of Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant, who emphasized rationality and the saturation of experience with cognitive categories, respectively. See Roth, Harold D. "Against Cognitive Imperialism: A Call for a Non-Ethnocentric Approach to Cognitive Science and Religious Studies." *Religion East and West*, Issue 8, October 2008, pp.9.

explain in the epilogue, some advocates prefer the term “contemplative sciences” to mark this distinction (I will also explain why I do not think they are correct).

In his 2016 ISCS talk “The Transdisciplinary Study of Contemplative Practice: Challenges and Opportunities,” John Dunne located himself firmly in the “contemplative sciences” category, presenting a strong contrast to Roth as he pointed to three problems he sees in the current study of contemplative practices. The first was “hubris,” the idea that Buddhism or neuroscience or any other discipline was simple, and that a single researcher could synthesize them alone. The second was objectivism, the idea that an objectively correct model of the world could be constructed untouched by the inherent limitations of human subjectivity. The third was what he called “affective mysterianism,” the idea that what makes humans human is ultimately a core of feeling that is untouchable by science. He pointed to this last one as the creation of Western culture in response to the fear of objectivism sucking the meaning out of the world and said, interestingly, that such a view is *not* in evidence in the Asian belief systems he studies, certainly not Tibetan Buddhism. He also remarked that resisting objectivism required admitting that our answers are going to be partial and provisional. He seemed to be attempting to stake out a middle ground between the Cartesian realism criticized in contemplative studies literature and the opposite pole of reifying subjective experiences as irreducible to (say) brain activity or cultural conditions. I attended the talk and re-watched it on Youtube; notably, given his comments in our later interview, he did not use the term contemplative studies.¹²⁰ I also do not think he mentioned the concept of “religion.” Dunne’s talk presents a striking

¹²⁰ “ISCS 2016 – Master Lecture- John Dunne.” *Mind and Life Institute*, 11/28/2016. Accessed 8/16/2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9Zke0AHouM>.

contrast to Roth: he explicitly argued *against* the idea that innate limits on human perception can be transcended, and called it “objectivism” to claim this is the case. I initially took him to be referring to scientific objectivism, but perhaps his comments had a wider intent than I originally noticed.

For all the provocative programming and the contrasting perspectives, what struck me most about my experience with Mind and Life in 2016 was the sheer intellectual, cultural and even financial capital it directs toward some (formerly?) unorthodox intellectual efforts based largely (though not entirely) on “religious” ideas. It is a forum for major public intellectuals like Richard Davidson and world leaders like the Dalai Lama. It is funded in part by the Hershey Family Foundation and by the Aetna medical insurance group. The whole program featured keynotes by major scholars from top universities. Though 2016 ISCS participants hold a spectrum of views on exactly what “contemplative studies” should mean, the organization was founded on and continues to be a forum for a radical rereading of the relationship between science and subjectivity (I will explain this in detail in a later chapter). Given that the source material for this rereading was largely Buddhist (filtered through indigenous modernizing trends and the American counterculture), it arguably constitutes a serious shift in the boundary between science and religion, in the extent to which “religious” ideas are able to explicitly and publically influence academic discourse.

At a meeting of AAR’s Contemplative Studies Group at the 2017 Annual Meeting, Louis Komjathy articulated perhaps the most expansive and radical version of this shift, one which questions not only the epistemology but the *ontology* of academic work. Komjathy drew on his 25 years of Daoist meditation practice to argue for “the

possibility of disciplined investigation of our own contemplative experience.” Though he presented on maps of the meditative body as presented in Taoist texts, artwork, and traditions, he told the audience he had found many of these maps *after* his own embodied experience was changed through meditation practice (for example, he found a traditional image of a twelve-story pagoda to corroborate, after the fact, his own experience of his head reaching the ceiling as twelve stories appeared in his trachea). In his experience “Taoist practice does result in ontological transformation, a new being,” an egoless experience of “the Tao encountered through, in, and as one’s own body.”

“I realize,” Komjathy continued, “this is a dissenting view in an academic space [but,] there are other ways of knowing, being, and experiencing.” Exploring these claims to different forms of knowledge and indeed of existence, of being, “requires at least some researchers to have direct, first-hand experience.” Komjathy concluded: “The body depicted in Taoist body maps is my body, and my body reveals the potential of the human body in general.” What at least some contemplative studies advocates proffer is a return to comparison and to embodied consciousness coupled with an expansion of the range of epistemological and even ontological assumptions under which we interrogate the nature of the body and the mind. A particular conception of “religion” is central to this maneuver. In a later chapter, I hope to explain how this came to be the case.

To pull all these threads together: a particular way of defining “religion” enables contemplative studies advocates to pursue forms of contemplatively-inspired political activism and to powerfully question practical or even epistemological and ontological norms of academic conversation and practice. I am not here to claim that any of this is morally right or wrong. What I do want to claim, and what I want advocates to consider,

is that it may be too simple to say “this is not religion, religion is belief, and we steer clear of belief.” I want to reframe this issue by locating contemplative studies’ way of defining “religion” as part of a long history of change at the boundary between “religion” and everything else. In other words, I believe there are a range of historical precedents for an embodied, experiential analog of ‘religion’ apart from traditional belief systems and the power of traditional institutions, and for the idea that this form of experiential ‘religion’ or ‘spirituality’ centered on the experiencing mind will restore some essential truth about human life that modern secular world has lost, and may even be able to collaborate with or reform science. My textual research, interviews and conference experiences demonstrate contemplative studies advocates disagree (sometimes broadly) on exactly what should be reformed, and how much.¹²¹ What strikes me, though, is that even the strongest advocates on the “sciences” side are taking prominent roles in organizations that seek to bring (“religious”) ideas, practices, and experiences from well outside the normal ambit of academic work into prestigious spaces of knowledge production, with the goal of making modern science and modern life more just and humane.¹²²

Theory:

Several theorists have inspired me to trace the construction of the category of

¹²¹ Dunne and Germano likely would not accept the label “advocates for contemplative studies” – and yet both attended the 2016 International Symposium for Contemplative Studies. Dunne presented one keynote, and his work appeared very important to the closing keynote presented by Evan Thompson.

¹²² I will explore the historical roots of this phenomenon in the history chapter and will argue, in the epilogue, that contemplative “studies” and contemplative “sciences” are not really separable, in part because of their shared roots in the history of discourse about religious experience.

“religion” in contemplative studies and how it allows advocates to situate their work in secular academic settings. Jonathan Z. Smith's work motivates me to question the way the concept of "religion" is used in contemplative studies. In his programmatic preface to the 1987 collection *Imagining Religion*, Smith argues that "there is no data for religion." Cultures have made reference to gods and other such beings from time immemorial, but the classification of gods and their attendant rituals and beliefs as a sphere distinctly separable from the rest of life is a modern gesture. We have only been imagining *religion* for the past several hundred years, and then only in certain parts of the world. Smith's work has fed the critical projects of Tomoko Masuzawa, Peter Gottschalk, and Russell McCutcheon, leading these writers and many other to treat the category of "religion" as a second-order classification made for a particular reason, not as a marking a "natural kind" of thing existing everywhere.¹²³ In short, "religion" is not a cultural universal, although the various behaviors and ideas that compose the concept may be so.

After Smith, many religion scholars take not "religious" beliefs, practices or experiences but instead the use of the *category of religion* as their object of study. As one of my teachers paraphrases Smith, "'religion' is not an object of analysis; 'religion' is an occasion of analysis."¹²⁴ To speak of religion, religions, or the religious is not then

¹²³ Masuzawa's perspective on this issue appears in *In Search of Dreamtime: The Quest for the Origin of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) and *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005). Gottschalk's comments appear in *Religion, Science, and Empire: Classifying Hinduism and Islam in British India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). I have in mind here McCutcheon's *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹²⁴ This is Dr. Gail Hamner's formulation, passed on in several graduate seminars.

simply to describe; it is to classify, to analyze. To give my own favorite formulation, religion is not a thing, but a word, a word used in many different ways to get many different things done. Things may be classified as "religious" to gain them special legal protections (as Winnifred Fallers Sullivan argues) or to rule them out scientific and educational spheres (as in the comical case of intelligent design creationism in the *Dover vs. Kitzmiller* decision).¹²⁵ Experiences in particular may be classified as religious to accrue to them the special epistemic status Martin Jay and Wayne Proudfoot describe.¹²⁶ Experiences or anything else may also be classified as *non*religious to enable their entry into secular scientific, educational, therapeutic, and professional spaces.

In an exquisite piece of erudite satire titled "Religious, Religion, Religions," Smith questions the composition of lists of "religions" and their ranking as major, minor, local, "world," global, indigenous, etc. Reflecting on his experience trying to get encyclopedia contributors to agree on what counts as religion and on which religions really count, he concludes that most academic lists of religions are shaped by scholars' academic, apologetic, and (especially) political interests. Who's included and how they are ranked is a function of the scholar's interest. This is hilariously illustrated by the category of "indigenous" religions - solely as it is applied to the residents of various Pacific archipelagos. Smith points out that the anthropological record on these geographically proximate groups shows their religions to be so different as to defeat any simple classification. This doesn't stop his fractious encyclopedia contributors from relegating them to the catchall category of "indigenous religions."

¹²⁵ Sullivan makes this case in *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

¹²⁶ I refer here to Jay's *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (2005), and Proudfoot's *Religious Experience* (1987).

To refine the reader's understanding of my purpose here, I will turn to a student of J.Z. Smith. In his 2012 book *Religion, Science, and Empire*, Peter Gottschalk critiques Smith's claim that "religion" is solely "a product of the scholar's study." Gottschalk argues in India under British colonial rule, the category of "religion" was *introduced* by scholars and missionaries in the employ of the crown, but was soon picked up and repurposed by the indigenous Hindu and Muslim populations. They used this new identity category to define themselves as distinct political interest groups - an outcome that would have been much less likely before imperial ethnologists and cartographers arrived with the certainty that these distinctions mattered, and subsequently began to parcel out administrative responsibility and actual territory along "religious" lines. Gottschalk's point is that while scholars must define "religion" for our own purposes, we fundamentally do not control the category. It pre-exists any effort of ours and is used in myriad ways that we are likely to notice and analyze only after the fact.

That is what I am trying to do with "religion" in contemplative studies. I am not trying to determine if it is "religion" or not. I am studying how its proponents use the *category* of religion to define what they are trying to do. They do not use the category the way most religion scholars do, although what drew me to them was the fact that, like scholars with degrees in "religion" and "religious studies," they represent an ostensibly secular academic discipline that must define what it does *over against* "religion." I want to know how contemplative studies advocates define religion and how they came to define it that way.

I must add an additional component to my theoretical lens at the behest of two of

my interview subjects, Brian and John Dunne, both of whom are trained in the study of religion. They have watched contemplative studies develop in their academic locations and participated to different degrees. Both made prominence reference to David McMahon's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* to understand the historical precedents for what they observed in contemplative studies.¹²⁷ McMahon's book provides vital historical data for my analysis of contemplative studies. He argues that a distinctly modern form of Buddhism emerged from a transnational encounter between Asian and Euro-American cultures beginning in the early 19th century. He explains how Romantic, rationalist, and secular impulses affected Buddhism and how "Western" culture has in turn been affected by Buddhist improvisations on these themes. The contemporary Buddhism that focuses heavily on meditation, changed consciousness, expanded sense of interconnection, and environmental concern owes a great deal to the absorption and redeployment of the Romantic critique of the European enlightenment. In fact, McMahon argues, these currents in modern Buddhism owe more to its encounter with Romanticism than they do to previous Buddhist tradition as such.

McMahon also describes the emergence of a modernist Buddhist approach to science that I find mirrored all but exactly in contemplative studies. Much as Donald Lopez has argued, as early as the colonial period, both European scholars and Asian political activists had a strong interest in finding in Buddhism a "rational" alternative to Christianity, a rebuke to European missionaries and a "religion" that could coexist with

¹²⁷ McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

“science.”¹²⁸ However, Buddhist thinkers did not passively absorb scientific ideas, but instead redeployed them for their own ends. They maintained both an interest in emphasizing and bolstering empiricist and rationalist currents in Buddhist thought and a strong resistance to scientific “disenchantment.” Specifically, they argued that Buddhist traditions offered both a truly scientific method of approaching mental phenomena and a nonmaterialist ontology that did not drain the world of significance. They fused scientific ideas with the Romantic critique of science, offering Buddhism as an *improvement* on both science and Christianity, capable of resolving the perceived contradiction between science and religion. Thanks largely to the Transcendentalist, Theosophic and other leanings of their Euro-American collaborators, they also came to present Buddhism as one expression of the contemplative core of all the world’s religions.

McMahon’s work provides a critical piece of historical information for which I have long searched - how it is that the priorities of the discourse of “religious experience” moved under the umbrella of a discourse that defines religion as “belief” and grants contemplative practices the empirical credentials of unmediated “experience.” McMahon shows that one possible source for this transition is Buddhist Modernism. The logic that defines religion as “belief” and as separable from the “contemplative” core of other religions derives in part from in Asian Buddhist thinkers’ efforts to distinguish Buddhism from (an aggressively missionary) Christianity. It derives the rest of its force from “nineteenth century metaphysical movements [which] saw the contemplative elements of all major religions as an interior science parallel to - and in some ways superseding -

¹²⁸ I refer here to Lopez’s *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

empirical science, with both of them reaching beyond specific claims of religious traditions to verifiable knowledge.”¹²⁹

Early Buddhist Modernism, which McMahon considers the ancestor of countercultural writers like Alan Watts and contemporary figures like His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, was driven by two crises of legitimacy, that of traditional Buddhism under pressure from colonizing Christianity, and nineteenth-century Christianity under pressure from science. He gives the example of Anagarika Dharmapala, who argued (at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions, no less) that Buddhism had anticipated by millennia scientific ideas about causation, cosmology, and evolution, was comparatively free of ritual, superstition, and hierarchy, and gave pride of place to individual experience. He used this new reading of Sinhalese Buddhism not only to deflect colonizing critiques, but to gain allies in his cause among Europeans and Americans.

Dharmapala, MacMahon writes, was a close associate of Henry Steele Olcott, cofounder with Helena Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society and quite likely the first American to formally become a Buddhist. McMahon’s analysis of Western religious reformers like Olcott and Paul Carus contains a wealth of information that is critical to my project, and it is worth addressing at length. Many reformers turned to scientized Buddhism out of a desire to reconstruct some form of religious worldview in the wake of Enlightenment critiques. Olcott’s Buddhism was a heavily edited rendering of Sinhalese tradition, one which emphasized elements that fit the “scientific” religion of Theosophy (science here referring primarily to Theosophy’s “occult science” of, among other things,

¹²⁹ McMahon, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, pp.205.

“latent powers for the production of phenomena commonly called miracles” - Olcott, quoted in McMahon, 99).

This was in response to the burgeoning cultural power of science and the corresponding crisis in the legitimacy of European Christianity. Much as Tomoko Masuzawa has argued in *Invention of World Religions*, one major factor contributing to this crisis was the new science of *religion*, which brought into focus the scale and the sophistication of the truth-claims of non-Christian traditions. Olcott and Carus both considered Buddhism the best candidate for articulating a new, science-proof “religion” capable of being absorbed into “the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century metanarrative of modernity, with its themes of reason, scientific and social progress, optimism and activism.”¹³⁰ Critically, though, neither was interested in Buddhism for its own sake, so much as for what they saw as its potential to construct a new religious worldview from the supposed primordial truth underlying all religions. What is most significant about Buddhist modernism for my purposes is the role in which it envisions religion. Like contemplative studies, sees religion as the custodian of states and powers of consciousness that are needed to save the modern world from itself.

McMahon does not say as much as I would like about religion as “belief” (in contradistinction to “experience,”) but this is the environment in which that strategy becomes connected to Buddhist Modernism. The motives of spiritualists and Asian anti-colonial activists overlap to create a new empiricist “religion” from heavily edited Buddhist traditions. McMahon *does* make a revealing analogy between the theory of the experiential truth at the core of all religions and *Rene Descartes’ effort to*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 110

accomplish what is essentially the same thing through philosophical analysis of thought and perception. Both Descartes and the spiritual critics of his modern epistemology seek a universally valid epistemology grounded in a mode of perception that produces truth on contact, without any regard to culture or history. This is a feature of the history of Buddhism and science that I would like contemplative studies advocates to hear. For all their (legitimate!) critiques of the alienation, exploitation, and environmental destruction connected to Descartes' separation of mind and world, to some extent their own discourse depends on this form of universalism.

In his 2007 *Journal of Consciousness Studies* article "The Rhetoric of Experience and the Study of Religion," Buddhism scholar Robert Sharf pursues a line of argument that closely parallels McMahon's.¹³¹ He argues that the evidence for a strong empiricist tradition existing from ancient times in Asian religions as "ambiguous at best." Many Buddhist scriptures, for example, are frequently (today) read as descriptive accounts of extraordinary changes in consciousness, but their own authors do not claim experience as the basis for their claims to authority. Furthermore, many medieval Buddhist thinkers were skeptical of experience as a source of religious authority precisely because it so hard to access, compare, and confirm across individuals.¹³²

In Sharf's account, "[t]he valorization of experience in Asian thought can be traced to handful of twentieth-century Asian religious leaders and apologists, all of whom

¹³¹Sharf, Robert H. "The Rhetoric of Experience and the Study of Religion." *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 11-12, pp. 267-287, 2000. Accessed 6/13/2017 at <http://buddhiststudies.berkeley.edu/people/faculty/sharf/documents/Sharf1998,%20Religious%20Experience.pdf>.

¹³² *Ibid.*, pp.272

were in sustained dialogue with their intellectual counterparts in the West.”¹³³ For example, the Indian philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan redefined true religion as empirical investigation of consciousness, to the point that “in a single stroke [he] could associate true religion with both personal experience and the empirical method.”¹³⁴ In Sharf’s history, as in McMahon’s, we can see Romantic and empiricist impulses fusing together in reinterpreted Asian religions, in responding to European colonization and the attendant Christian missionary ventures. Despite the widely held presumption that Hinduism and Buddhism are fundamentally about open-minded, accurate analysis of experience (as opposed to propositional religious belief or the performance of rituals), Sharf finds that “[i]n the end, there is simply no evidence of an indigenous Indian counterpart to the rhetoric of experience prior to the colonial period.”¹³⁵ Finally, it is worth noting that Sharf, like McMahon, draws an analogy between this modernist meditator’s mind and Rene Descartes’ conception of subjectivity. Experience (even if it is internal experience) is immediately available to the subject, who has an authoritative, irrefutable grasp of its contents.

When I apply these perspectives to contemplative studies, this is what I see: contemplative studies is a name for a number of distinct but related academic and nonprofit ventures working to use “contemplative practices,” which are largely but not exclusively derived from “religious” traditions, to change the nature of academic teaching and research and (not always but more and more frequently) and which claim to cultivate compassion, interpersonal and social harmony, and action for social justice. Exactly

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp.272

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.272

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.273

what it will mean in the future is very much up for grabs. Many diverse interests are involved and it remains to be seen whether the field will ultimately survive as a more-or-less coherent unit. It depends for its existence on the ability to separate its use of “religious” materials from the perception of actually advocating or practicing “religion.” Most of its advocates define “religion” as “belief,” and feel justified using practices outside their original context on something like this basis. A few do not feel this is sufficient, and seek a more historically rigorous way of arbitrating the “religious”-ness of contemplative studies. It is significant that those who have pursued the “sciences” / “studies” split most aggressively have all, in my experience, been religion scholars. At least two of them seems to want what I want – a more sophisticated conversation about religion in contemplative studies. In my mind, and for at least two of my interview subjects, the typical way contemplative studies deals with “religion” does not separate it cleanly from that category, but instead locates in the history of debate about the meaning of religion and its role in society. Still, I find it interesting that they are participating regardless. They are still engaged in the work of repurposing techniques from “religious” traditions to try to rethink academic work and pedagogy so they can include and utilize a fuller range of human experiences.

I want to close this chapter with one final observation on the shift contemplative studies has occasioned in the ability of “religious” ideas to influence academic discourse. In her 2010 book *The New Metaphysicals*, Courtney Bender describes and works to contextualize the practices of “metaphysicals” in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a longtime home of eclectic spiritual and scientific innovators, from Emerson and Thoreau, to

William James, Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, and Andrew Weil.¹³⁶ She observes people who work in a variety of capacities as they move between scientific lectures, yoga studios, organic food vendors, and an array of religious institutions, from mainline Protestant churches to the historic Swedenborg Chapel adjacent to the Harvard campus. Bender adopts this approach to solve one of the fundamental difficulties in studying “spirituality,” the tendency of people who identify as spiritual to eschew exclusive membership in a single religious institution. She finds instead that their understanding of what is real and what is meaningful for their own life and spiritual/religious practice develops as they move between these various institutional, scientific, aesthetic and consumer spaces.

Contemplative studies exhibits some similarity to the “metaphysical religion” Bender describes. First, its participants define their ideas and their identities across the boundaries not only of university disciplines but also by their involvement in various practices outside the usual sphere of academic enquiry. Many, for example, are college professors who are also deeply engaged in social justice work and contemplative practice, and consider all of these symbiotic. They readily make use of scientific discourses about the body and the mind to bolster their research (though they are not uncritical, as will be described below). Bender describes how the interest in (and appropriation of) scientific theories and claims among metaphysicals has lead scientists to begin to study the practical and physiological effects of various spiritual practices. Some have been found to have measurable effects, and health insurers are even beginning to cover them. However, Bender notes, the scientists tend strongly to reject the metaphysicals’

¹³⁶ Lattin, Don. *The Harvard Psychedelic Club*.

metaphysics; they do not accept the claims for supernatural action and meaning that often emerge from metaphysicals' practice.

These last points illustrate part of what has shifted with contemplative studies. First, contemplative studies makes use of networks that extend beyond the bounds of the academy, but also has major footholds *in* major academic power centers. Many contemplative studies practitioners are themselves scientists (concentrated particularly in neuroscience and psychology). Third, and perhaps most remarkably, scientists working in contemplative studies not only work side by side with others who implicitly or explicitly reject the default materialist metaphysics of the sciences, they actually express openness to the validity of other metaphysical perspectives. See, again, the first Mind and Life keynote described above, delivered by Richard Davidson of the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. A panel at the same 2016 conference focused explicitly on this issue, with participants from major universities sharing space with researchers who spoke openly of studying *real* supernatural events and experiences. I asked one participant, a scientist at one of the Cal State campuses, how his colleagues felt about his venturing into this area. He said most were open to it in principle, but did not follow him because they knew they would struggle to publish any resulting work. It seems that under the auspices of contemplative studies, that ice is beginning to crack.

Let us return for a moment to Brown University's contemplative studies initiative. The Web page for the contemplative studies concentration at Brown's Warren Alpert Medical School contains a most interesting line with no precedent anywhere else in

the literature or indeed in any of my interviews or any conference talk I attended.¹³⁷ In the paragraph setting out the concentration's mission, the language of "contemplative practices" drops out, and is briefly but conspicuously replaced by a reference to "beneficial practices (deemed "contemplative")." This is the first and, so far, only instance I have found where "contemplative practice" is *not* taken as a first-order category. It is interesting that at such a prominent point of translation into the knowledge of medical science, the practices in question are identified *primarily* as "beneficial" and only *secondarily* as "contemplative." Why has "contemplative" become interchangeable with (or even subordinate to) "beneficial" *only here*? The question it raises is why the language of contemplation needs to be used at all. As a scholar of religion who feels that some productive provocation on definitions is in order here, my answer is that "religion" is more important in contemplative studies than it is explicitly made out to be. Religion is positioned as a source of ideas and practices the modern world needs to repair its institutional and cultural norms through the cultivation of self-awareness and felt interconnection and obligation. The history chapter will aim to show how precedents for this type of thought were established through the encounter of Romantic conceptions of "religious experience" with colonial and postcolonial trends in Asian thought that sought to emphasize Buddhist and Hindu traditions' claimed empirical bent and compatibility with modern science.

¹³⁷ "Scholarly Concentration in Integrative Health and Contemplative Practices." *Brown Alpert Medical School Office of Medical Education*. Accessed 2/23/2018. <https://www.brown.edu/academics/medical/education/scholarly-concentration-program/integrative-medicine>.

Descriptive Chapter 2: Social Justice Advocacy:

In this chapter, I will attend to the ways in which contemplative studies advocates seek – in defiance of critiques of atomizing, consumerist “spiritualities” - to use contemplative practices to create a more just and compassionate world. I believe that rhetorical tools that Romantics and modernist Buddhists developed to critique and reform Enlightenment ideology function here to resist fissures in modern society produced by individualism, inequality, prejudice, and a dearth of ecological awareness.¹³⁸ The focus on cultivating contemplative experiences in academic spaces (and even at contemplative studies conferences) reflects the philosophical critique expressed in the literature. It is intended use contemplative experiences to counter a model of academic life as individualistic, competitive, and focused on producing discrete bits of knowledge and technological power, rather than understanding in their social and ecological context.

I will relate relevant conference and interview experiences, then review a few scholarly works that inform my perspective here, but first, I want to go straight to one of the sources of the contemporary critique of mind-centered “spiritualities.” Any study of anything in this orbit must address one of the foundational volumes in this genre, Robert Bellah et. al.’s *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985).¹³⁹ This sociological account chronicles the decline of communities of moral

¹³⁸ It is likely possible to trace these issues to aspects of the Enlightenment, but I will not attempt to do so here.

¹³⁹ See Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. I have adapted this summary of *Habits of the Heart* from a paper I wrote for Prof. Wallwork’s Classics in the Sociology of Religion and Morals seminar in 2012.

obligation in American civil society. The contributors trace this effect to several key changes that have advanced since WWII. Their central thesis is that Americans have lost the ability to balance their notorious individualism with any strong sense of obligation to their communities. The primary cause they identify is the prominent role of management theories in shaping major aspects of American culture. Such theories, they argue, have taught us to conceive of and experience ourselves as self-interested subjects seeking to make the most efficient use of our resources. This leaves us unable to think or even feel our way to communities organized around moral obligation to one another. “With the coming of managerial society,” they write, the organization of work, place of residence, and social status came to be decided by criteria of economic effectiveness.”¹⁴⁰ Just as managers allocate resources, so the contemporary American can “reorganize habits and styles of life experimentally to achieve a more gratifying private life.”¹⁴¹ The psychotherapist, anchor of countless modern lives, is likewise a “specialist in mobilizing resources for effective action, only here the resources are largely internal and the measure of effectiveness is the elusive criterion of personal satisfaction.”¹⁴² Strangely enough, they write, this way of experiencing the self and navigating the world is built through a variety of shared affirmations of individualism, like leaving one’s family of origin. Their conclusion is that this breakdown of traditional obligations has created a period of what Durkheim called *anomy*, a time when the old limits on individual aspiration fall apart and nothing new has yet appeared in their place.

¹⁴⁰ Bellah et. al., *Habits of the Heart*, pp.46

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp.46

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, pp.47

The Bellah group exemplified the new, deeply individualistic “civil religion” with the now-infamous story of “Sheilah,” a nurse whose personal devotional life (“Sheilaism”) they interpreted as mostly focused on making herself feel good. In their view, Sheilah and fellow “spiritual shoppers” treat their religious lives as consumer projects in search of the most efficient combination of traditional materials that will move them toward personal satisfaction. In response, the authors advocate broad action to create new communal bonds, reshaping aspects of education, government, and work to refocus collective experience on some conception of the common good. They want to rebuild a sense of communal interconnection and obligation, in part by “reappropriating tradition – that is, finding sustenance in tradition and applying it actively to our present realities,” insulating “communities of memory” against atomizing social forces.¹⁴³

Here, I could use contemplative studies to counter Bellah et. al. as many other writers have done, by making the case that this and other forms of “spirituality” can actually create bonds of communal solidarity rather than degrade them.¹⁴⁴ The field uses an idiom that often overlaps with the therapeutic, mobilizing psychic resources to expand the ambit of the self’s concern for others and capacity to act on their behalf. But, revisiting *Habits of the Heart* after spending several years around contemplative studies yields a more interesting question: are contemplative studies advocates actually *trying to do* what the Bellah group proposed? They are trying to use “traditional” ideas and practices to bend individual consciousness toward the visceral experience of

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp.292-293

¹⁴⁴ In *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, Leigh Eric Schmidt presents a history of spiritually inspired activism in America before directly defending “Sheilaism,” exonerating “Sheila” as a good person, like many others, doing what she could in a difficult world, and no worse for it, morally speaking.

interconnection and commitment to the common good. In a January, 2017 phone interview, Carolyn Jacobs, Dean Emerita of the School of Social Work at Smith College and a former leader at *both* the Mind and Life Institute and the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, described to me the search many contemplatively inclined people face for communities without the abuses of power they have experienced in religious institutions. Dr. Jacobs also told me that in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, she was looking to her contemplative practice as a resource for strengthening empathy and of resolve. “If I couldn’t sit every day and ground myself,” she said, “I would be out of my ever-loving mind,” but “practice requires action. You sit for a sense of grounding, but it doesn’t mean you’re comfortable on the cushion.”

“So,” she asked, surveying the terrain several days before the January, 2017 inauguration, “where is compassion?”¹⁴⁵ How do we begin to communicate again with people who feel they have been left behind? She advocated resistance to the temptation to retreat into contemplative practice, to avoid feeling others’ pain acutely. Jacobs envisions contemplative classroom spaces as safe places to practice silence and presence, especially for those who cannot find community in prejudiced or authoritarian religious institutions. Indeed, in my experience, contemplative studies sets out to create what we can legitimately call new rituals and communities that create and reinforce felt interconnection and obligation, rather than experiences of isolated individuality.

One of the most striking things about contemplative studies, especially but not only in the ACMHE context, is the way these practices are designed not only cultivate

¹⁴⁵ Jacobs, who has been around the field since its inception, told me that His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked Richard Davidson early on, “you study all these negative emotions, why can’t you study where compassion comes from?”

compassion, but to put it to use in the contemporary political arena.¹⁴⁶ The field's concerted effort to approach issues of social equity and justice separate them from other movements of mind-centered "spiritualities." They seem in some cases to be aware of the critiques of isolation, commodification, and toxic individualism in such movements, and work to remedy not only those problems, but also the wider systems of cultural and political power that enable them. For this reason, it seems, they are determined that contemplative studies will be neither "religion" nor classically-understood "spirituality." They intend to demonstrate, instead, that contemplative practices produce just the kind of states of consciousness that are needed to remedy exactly these social ills, even as they exist at academic conferences.

I will relate relevant portions of three events with the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education and one event with the Mind and Life Institute. The emphasis on social justice was especially prominent at the conferences, particularly those held by ACMHE. Mind and Life has a broad social agenda ("to alleviate suffering and promote flourishing by integrating science with contemplative practice and wisdom traditions... advance progress in human well-being"), but ACMHE focuses more and more explicitly on tools for grassroots political organizing and advocacy (and the teaching thereof).¹⁴⁷ I will include details not only about what was said at the conferences, but also about how the attendees conduct themselves between

¹⁴⁶ Two prominent keynote presentations at the 2016 San Diego ISCS, by law professor Rhonda Magee and philosopher Evan Thompson, would fit in this chapter, but I have described them in a later chapter instead to serve a different purpose.

¹⁴⁷ "Mission." *Mind and Life Institute*. Accessed 2/7/2018.
<https://www.mindandlife.org/mission/>

sessions, and about the settings and the programming, as the conferences themselves are designed as demonstrations of the utility of contemplative practice for activist scholars.

The ACMHE summer seminars I attended in 2015 and 2016 were held at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts (ACMHE's parent organization, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, is based at Smith).¹⁴⁸ There was much relevant information in Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush's comments at each Summer Seminar's opening circles. They show what was constant and what changed between 2015 and 2016. My first indication of the intense focus on contemplative practice, on changed patterns of thought, emotion, and attention that marks these gatherings, came when Barbezat opened the gathering on the first evening. He began by leading the assembled group in "a moment to settle and arrive," focused on gratitude. Gratitude for what, my

¹⁴⁸Participants stayed in Smith's connected Ziskind House and Cutter House dormitories and ate most meals in the buffet-style dining hall between the two buildings. Most of the conference programming took place in the Smith College Campus Center across the street. Its large Carroll Room hosted opening, closing, keynote, and contemplative practice sessions throughout the week. Smaller rooms throughout the building were used for concurrent and breakout sessions. Both weeklong conferences opened on Sunday evenings with light receptions in the quad between the Ziskind and Cutter buildings. In 2015, I travelled to the conference from Syracuse, NY, with two Syracuse University faculty members (professors of Inclusive Education and Composition & Cultural Rhetoric) and one graduate student from Cultural Foundations of Education. In 2016, I travelled to Northampton alone. The 2015 Building Just Communities conference was held in Howard University's Armour J. Blackburn Center. Its Ballroom hosted meals and keynote sessions, and other rooms throughout the building hosted concurrent and breakout sessions. Poster sessions and the closing were held in other multipurpose rooms throughout the building. ACMHE held a reception on the second night at the fantastic Sankofa Video Books and Café, on Georgia Avenue near the Howard campus. I drove down alone from Syracuse and stayed at an AirBNB several miles away. Combined with my non-morning-person nature, the extra time commuting and parking caused me to miss some of the earliest morning programming. I also skipped the opening evening of the conference to save time and hotel money, and arrived somewhat later than I planned on the first full day of sessions, thanks largely to inclement weather in New York and heavy traffic in Pennsylvania.

notes don't reflect, but I would later learn (in our interview) that Barbezat was then in his 11th year as director of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, which had barely survived significant turmoil and recently defined a new direction, about which more below. He went on to comment on what he understood as the extraordinary growth of interest in contemplative practice in all areas of higher education.

The 2016 opening circle touched on some of the same themes, and also showed what changed over the course of the year. Barbezat spoke first and again, began on the theme of gratitude. "I want to thank you," he said, "for all that you've cultivated to allow you to connect with other human beings," especially in a time when connection can become overwhelming, or even impossible. "And yet, it is [possible]." I noticed that Barbezat is quite skilled at modulating the room toward a "contemplative" tenor by speaking in a slow, soft way. Or perhaps the room was modulating him – he commented that when he is around contemplative practitioners and sees the range of techniques available to his students, his breathing changes.

Bush spoke next, and arrived at the theme of social justice more quickly than in 2015. She argued was time to step back and take stock of the general state of higher education and the effects contemplative practices were having there. She spoke of the potential for contemplative practices to disarm the competitive, instrumental, individualist ethos shaping higher education, from university mission statements to the experienced desires and goals of individual students. Instead of focusing, this time, on ACHME's history, she located its current mission in a historical narrative, citing a shift (beginning under Reagan) from the idea of education as a common good, to the idea of education as an individual good. "If contemplative practices are about anything," she

said, “they are about interconnection with each other, and if there’s anything we need now, it’s community with each other. We want to explore how contemplative practices can help... How do we bring what we know about these practices to the needs that are arising in our students?”

Bush announced a change in the 2016 program, intended to help participant attend to what arose in their conference experience. Participants were sorted into “home groups,” each led by a volunteer mediator. The stated goal of this change was to provide a space for participants to process not only the conference but also whatever they were bringing to it from their own lives. Noticeably absent in the 2016 opening circle was any mention of the concept of “religion.” This absence was reflected, to some extent, in the rest of the week’s program. I recall fewer (though still some) explicit references to religious traditions. My perception was that this summer seminar focused more heavily on social justice. That, as I’ve observed and as I’ve been told in interviews, is by design. Social justice used to be one “department” of ACMHE, as Dan Barbezat and Rose Sackey-Milligan both told me, but it is now the organization’s central focus. I wonder if the concern about “religion” receded as the focus moved toward social justice – whether it began to appear less relevant, or even less real, or if it simply slid to the margins of attention as more important issues moved into focus.

To drive home the points with which I opened this section, especially about contemplative studies and activism, I also want to review several contemplative practice sessions, panels and presentations at ACMHE events. One of the distinctive features of contemplative studies gatherings is the prominent place of contemplative practices on the program at academic seminars and conferences. ACMHE’s 2015 and 2016 Summer

Seminars and 2015 national conference featured yoga every morning as well as different contemplative practices scheduled throughout each day. These practices, taught by different conference presenters as well as outside instructors, ranged from mindfulness meditation and tai chi to less known practices focused on emotional awareness, compassion, and the experience of interconnection. I will detail several examples and analyze their significance.

At the 2015 summer seminar and the 2015 national conference, I participated in a compassion practice led by Mirabai Bush. In this practice, whose traditional origin I do not know, two participants stand eighteen to twenty-four inches apart and face one another, often making direct eye contact. They are encouraged to maintain eye contact, but advised not to force it, and permitted to close their eyes if it becomes uncomfortable (one must not push eye contact too hard, or, as Bush put it, “it can get weird.”) Both times I participated in this practice, we did it in a large group of thirty or more, standing in two concentric circles, each row facing the other. My partner the first time was a dance teacher from southern California; the second time, I was paired with an anthropologist from the Northeast. As participants face each other, the facilitator reads aloud a series of statements crafted to intensify the cognitive awareness and the visceral experience of interconnection. Some examples include; “this person has hopes, dreams, and fears, just like me;” “this person has experienced pain, just like me;” “this person will die, just like me.” It is an uncanny and powerful experience. I cannot imagine anyone leaving it unmoved. Many participants cry. The practice intensifies the experience of interconnection not only by describing it but by enacting it at a bodily level; it’s called eye contact for a reason.

The 2016 summer seminar featured a fascinating group practice carried out in the Smith Campus Center's Carroll Room. I don't have the name of the practice or of the person who facilitated it, but I will describe it nonetheless. It was a surprising exercise in spontaneous group performance. I believe it was designed to focus participants on awareness of their bodies (especially as opposed to their cognitive and linguistic capacities) and to demonstrate, by example, the emotional and even physical coordination and interconnection that can be realized between bodies. Participants were seated in chairs in two concentric circles taking up most of the room. The circles of chairs were about four feet apart, and participants sat facing each other. The facilitator instructed the group to make sounds representing their emotional state in response to a series of prompts. In general, these sounds were not supposed to be words, an instruction the participants followed. They mostly made sounds much closer to musical notes. Some of the prompts could be approximated as "make the sound that expresses how you feel about this gathering;" "make the sound that expresses how you feel about your own life right now;" "make the sound that expresses how you feel about the state of society right now;" "make the sound that expresses how you feel about the state of the world right now."

Assuming that everyone was relatively happy to be there, relatively concerned about world events, and politically oriented near the left-center-left norm of academia, the spontaneous, unison sounds all conveyed what seemed like appropriate emotions. What is more interesting is that some of these sounds were quite nuanced, coherently expressing complicated, possibly conflicted emotions. They were, to my relatively untrained ears, uncannily musical. A few among the more troubling prompts elicited sounds that seemed to express blended, subtle emotions in something approximating

complex musical chords. I am an amateur musician, at best, but they sounded “right” to me. Dissonances were communicative but not unpleasant. Although there were some trained musicians among the attendees, they were certainly in the minority. Whether they were louder or managed to guide the people around them, I don’t know – but even if that is what happened, I don’t find the event itself much less remarkable. One such spontaneous production was musically coherent enough for one attendee, whom I knew to be a professor of music, to move off the root note and add her own nuance to the resulting chord. I believe this practice was designed to focus participants on awareness of their bodies (especially as opposed to their cognitive and linguistic capacities) and to demonstrate, by example, the emotional and even physical coordination and interconnection that can be realized between bodies. Nobody really said so, but given the context, I feel safe assuming the larger purpose of the practice was to create a stronger bond of felt obligation among the group members. Perhaps it was also intended to teach this technique so others could employ it in their own advocacy work.

I was equally struck by the reception of one particular keynote presentation at the 2016 ACMHE summer session, presented by the late Catherine Kerr, a neuroscientist in the Department of Family Medicine at Brown’s Alpert Medical School, and a member of the contemplative studies initiative there. Kerr presented on the relevance of meditation research to the empirical study of the relationship between the mind/brain and the rest of the body. At one point in the talk, she summarized a theory she planned to critique and improve on via the study of contemplative practice. This theory, she said, conceptualized the body as the “dumb slave” of the brain. She went on to advocate understanding the relationship between the brain and the body as one of reciprocal feedback, rather than

monopolar control. I thought nothing in particular of this and went on taking notes, but I should have anticipated that this phrase (the “dumb slave” of the brain) would not go over well at a gathering focused on using contemplative practice to advance social justice.

Later that day I sat down in a large meeting room, anticipating some session or other, I think a contemplative practice hour. It rapidly became apparent that something was wrong. Instead of meditating, the assembled group held an impromptu debrief session on Kerr’s talk. The group found the phrase repeated above quite disturbing and was engaging, with part of the ACMHE leadership, in a discussion about what to do next. Rhonda Magee, who I think was speaking in a semi-official capacity as a then-member of the board of ACMHE, made a particularly illuminating comment. I have no notes and am working from memory here, but the gist of it was this: the phrase above was poorly chosen and highlighted much work left to be done in terms of empathy, especially empathy for people with different experiences of oppression. Moreover, the offending phrase should not carry programmatic force simply because it was uttered by a scientist. ACMHE, she said, respects multiple epistemological perspectives.

I will admit that when Kerr used this phrase, its possible significance went straight over my head. What brought the moral and epistemological points home for me was another incident Magee recalled. At the previous (2014) Mind and Life ISCS, a scientist presented research on a mindfulness-based intervention in an urban African-American community. Magee asked him if his team had done any research to make sure the community wanted such an intervention, and that the researchers understood the needs, goals, and culture of the people they were interested in studying. How exactly,

she asked, was mindfulness introduced? How was it located in the community? At this point in the narrative, I advise the reader to sit down. In answering Magee's question, the scientist said that he introduced mindfulness to the community through a well-respected grandmother, on whom he conferred the social status of "alpha chimp."

Still conscious? The point is that the scientist in question very much needed to rethink the influence of culture, history, and power on the effectiveness of his mindfulness intervention and on the way an audience of anyone-other-than-white-people would hear his words. It became a teachable moment for ACMHE - failing to take these dynamics into account resulted in deeply offended colleagues, a study of highly questionable validity, and quite possibly real harm to a community subjected to an ill-conceived experiment. A plausible contemplative studies response to this series of events would be to argue that a lack of empathy, including empathy for those most affected by historical and present structures of oppression, could be addressed through contemplative practice, precisely because it is understood as being able to foster experiences of felt obligation and interconnection.

The fall 2015 Howard conference, Building Just Communities, featured a panel titled "Creating Beloved Communities: Academic Capitalism, Adaptive Leadership, and the Contemplative Project." The presenters were from R1s and smaller regional colleges, and spoke of a variety of ways they were employing contemplative practices to deal with the perceived corporatization of higher education, and to reflect on the missions and the values of their respective institutions. They reported varying degrees of success and varying degrees of support (and/or opposition) from administrators.

Richard Chess, Director of the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of North Carolina, Asheville, spoke of his relatively positive experience introducing contemplative pedagogies on what is understood as the UNC system's flagship liberal arts campus. He described being given broad administrative latitude to explore contemplative techniques despite the changes that made the wider UNC environment hostile to such work (his current provost said "social justice is served when thought processes evolve" and received frameworks are questioned). Chess explained that the UNC system had been restructured around business imperatives and explicitly capitalist norms under former Republican Governor Pat McCrory, who closed several (privately funded!) social justice research centers and unceremoniously fired the system's president. Funding for academic programs, he said, is now being allocated based on how many students are employed immediately after graduation.

In the Asheville campus's liberal arts environment, however, Chess's efforts have thrived. He described designing a contemplative course on the meaning of productivity. "I approached it from a religious point of view in organizing a class around the Sabbath," he said. Chess started from the questions of value the tradition of the Jewish Sabbath raises about the meaning being a "productive member of society," what happens when students step outside the normative understanding of productivity, and whether a different kind of learning is possible in a "receptive" mode.

Dorothy Bach, Associate Professor and Associate Director at the Teaching Resource Center at the University of Virginia, described an institutional climate similar to what Chess described at Asheville (Virginia has a large and active Contemplative Sciences Center). Like Chess, she reported tensions between academic inquiry and the

priorities of a business-oriented board. The Contemplative Sciences Center, she reported, was originally intended as an Ashtanga Yoga center, was funded by a single donor, had many strings attached to its mission, and (in the eyes of many faculty) conspicuously lacked a social justice arm, especially for a project at such a historically white institution.¹⁴⁹ Bach spoke to serious issues helping people feel welcome on campus (particularly, to my ears, in the wake of the violent arrest of an African-American UVA student in 2015 – and as of 2017 this has surely increased after the white supremacist violence in Charlottesville). She reported students’ desire for a non-therapeutic option to resist a hostile racial climate and a generalized pressure toward conformity, and advocated contemplative practice as a solution. She seemed to feel that (at least at the time) the Contemplative Sciences Center could devote resources toward meeting these needs, but had not done so.

John Baugher, formerly of the University of Akron, then of Goucher College, described how at Akron, faculty and administration clashed to the point of dysfunction in the context of massive budget cuts. Many faculty, across disciplines, began adopting contemplative practices as a way to reflect on and clarify their values and their goals going forward. They realized, Baugher said, that what mattered was not the survival of a particular structure, but the manner in which they related to each other. One of the “liberating effects of organized dysfunction” was that through contemplative practice,

¹⁴⁹ As of today, it’s worth noting, the Center’s mission statement contains a conspicuous reference to inequity and social justice. See “Mission.” *Contemplative Sciences Center, University of Virginia*. Accessed 4/3/2018. <http://www.uvacontemplation.org/content/mission>.

faculty were able to develop new solidarity with each other on the basis of shared values, and create new and productive ways of engaging with students.

Another Howard session, “Practicing Intersectionality: Merging Contemplative Practice with Social Justice Pedagogy,” featured four practitioners describing their use of contemplative practice in teaching about and advocating for social justice. Beth Berila, a certified yoga teacher and Director of the Women’s Studies Program at St. Cloud University, argued for contemplative practice as a way to teach “intersectionality without hijacking.” It brings to the surface the fact that “we will never understand racism until we understand how it manifests for different people” and helps avoid the assumption that we know what someone else has experienced. “We need a way,” she said, “to bring our whole selves to the table” in this process.

Vijay Kanagal, who teaches Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration at the University of Vermont, described his experience having higher education Master’s students complete their final projects in a nontraditional (“contemplative”) mode. Instead of writing a final report, they must construct something like a diorama to express their personal understanding of the philosophy of education. In thinking about and trying to non-verbally communicate everything that’s brought them to that point as scholars, practitioners, and people, their intersectional identities (e.g., middle class, female, Hispanic, LGBTQ) emerge. They become more deeply aware of the complex range of factors that make them who they are and, in turn, shape their future students. This is a contemplative exercise, I assume, because of the way it changes the structure of attention to bring to the surface embodied histories that may not previously have been verbalized or even understood.

In a particularly illuminating presentation, Jennifer Cannon, of the Institute for Teaching Excellent and Faculty Development at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, described how she works to establish a contemplative classroom space (“not just as an add-on”) and to help students engage with difficult issues (e.g., intersecting race, class, and gender oppressions) from an embodied, contemplative perspective.¹⁵⁰ She said that in her work with teachers in training, the primary use of contemplative practices is helping white students unpack internalized privilege and white supremacy, “going *way* down” through layers of negative emotion to find the desire to become allies, some learning for the first time that they are indeed racist. She also frames the course in terms of political theory, especially the impact on her own life of feminist women of color like Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua, and bell hooks. “They were doing contemplative pedagogy decades before it was called contemplative pedagogy,” she said. In her undergraduate women’s and gender studies classes, “we were asked to feel in the classroom... it was really demanded of us that our bodies be in the classroom... there are epistemologies that live in our bodies. This is what we learn from Chicana feminism, this is what we learn from Audre Lorde.”

The organizers of the ACMHE summer sessions seem to wager that people will do their best intellectual and interpersonal work when they are enabled to be bodies in intellectual spaces, with as little friction as possible. For example, at the 2016 summer seminar, participants were sorted for the week into small “home groups” whose facilitators worked to provide more intimate settings for processing the experience of the

¹⁵⁰ The biographical information in my notes is confirmed by Cannon’s LinkedIn page. See “Jennifer Cannon.” *LinkedIn*. Accessed 2/7/2018. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jennifer-cannon-05b87961/>.

seminar (and whatever else people happened to be going through). The leader of my small discussion group actually encouraged me to skip contemplative practice sessions to go to the gym, as this is what works for me. She was right. I was far calmer and sharper for it, not only for the endorphins but also because full days of conferencing otherwise take a toll on my neck, back, and shoulders, to the point of impeding my focus. It also gave me freer rein to enjoy the uniformly excellent food in Smith's Cutter-Ziskind dormitory and not worry about gaining weight.

The building itself is pleasant and, critically for August, adequately air-conditioned. At a gathering like this, it is entirely possible to get in a full day of conferring and contemplating with like-minded colleagues and friends, eat happily, work out, go out for a drink after hours, sleep well, and get up to do it all again the next day. I can attest from personal experience that all these factors, in turn, further enabled me to think clearly and listen attentively throughout the week. I swear I have never felt so at home in my own body at any previous point in my life, and I was a much better conference-goer for it.¹⁵¹ This, I believe, was the organizers' express intention. The regularly scheduled contemplative practice sessions are the centerpiece this strategy.

¹⁵¹ On the other corporeal needs and desires that typically feature prominently on the academic conference agenda, ACMHE appeared to take an affirmative stance in 2015 and go a bit more agnostic in 2016. In 2015, a basket of male condoms and single-use lubricant packets was placed in the dorm bathroom near the showers I used (participants were divided by floor on the basis of gender identification; the Cutter-Ziskind dorm has both communal and single-occupant bathrooms). I regret not paying more attention to changes in this supply, as they might have helped me tell a richer story about the conference. Perhaps I should have photographed it every morning. *One would think* that such an unassuming, genuinely humanistic, and progressive group would have found at least a few occasions to make worthy use of the materials on hand, though I heard of almost nothing myself, through the walls or otherwise. For some unstated reason, the condoms and lubricant *did not* reappear at the 2016 summer seminar. I haven't yet gotten up the nerve to ask why.

ACMHE's gatherings aim to demonstrate the value of contemplative practice in a kind of recursive way, sustaining intellectual discourse about practice with the direct aid of practice itself.

This is as good a place as any to observe that the entire “vibe” or perhaps “feeling tone” of the summer seminars is quite unlike any other academic conference I have attended. As might befit conferences focused on interconnection, compassion, and self-care via contemplative practice, the lack of ego was refreshing. My subjective sense was that I was with people who took their work extremely seriously, but did not take themselves seriously. From where I was sitting, none of the leaders, presenters, or attendees felt themselves to be in competition with each other. I was a rank amateur contemplative, a pseudo-outsider-participant-observer, and consistently one of the two or three youngest people in the room. Nobody treated me any differently. Perhaps this is due to the preponderance of attendees working in education or in education-focused nonprofits, as well as counseling and spiritual direction, but I felt like I knew everyone very quickly. Both years, everybody seemed happy to be there together. My overwhelming impression was one of balance.¹⁵² The term “well-adjusted” feels too

¹⁵² Despite the subject matter and its historical lineage in the counterculture, I witnessed no drug use, and only very moderate, benign drinking. This is not to say the attendees (or the organizers!) don't know how to have fun (in the sense both of socializing together after conference proceedings and of maintaining a sense of humor during them). What was amazing was how easy it was for a few enthusiastic members to pull a bunch of academics out the door for what was, to all appearances, good clean fun on the last and second-to-last nights of each conference. The conference-goers displayed an intriguing ability to have lots of fun and not destroy anything, including their own dignity. I went out for karaoke in 2015, but chickened out before I was supposed to sing. I declined in 2016 but came downstairs later to find an impromptu dance party underway in the Ziskind dormitory. Several attendees had connected a laptop to a television in the first-floor lounge and were streaming dance music from Youtube, using the television's estimable sound system to ensure appropriate volume (and they didn't bother anyone – I

tame. One wonders if this is the result of having so many contemplative practitioners in one place for a week. If so, this in itself might lend some legitimacy to the concept of “human contemplative experience” as a universal potential.

The sense of balance at these gatherings is also significant for the work it did complicating common assumptions about American mind-centered “spirituality.” Here, contemplative studies seems to succeed in challenging what its advocates see as the excesses of cognitivist and instrumentalist ethics and epistemologies – without validating into any of the stereotypes about “spirituality” that stem from criticisms like those we reviewed from the Bellah group, above. They manage to explore what they understand as different forms of consciousness focused on embodiment and emotion, without losing one inch of their critical edge.¹⁵³ These conferences (and the attendees’ behavior) arguably demonstrate the strength of the theory by putting it into practice.

My experiences at the Mind and Life Institute’s 2016 International Symposium for Contemplative Studies had several distinct differences compared to my experiences with ACMHE, though I think the similarities are significant as well. This conference account will be much shorter than the previous one, as I spent the better part of two weeks with ACMHE, and only about 72 hours with Mind and Life. I will also discuss two Mind and Life keynotes in greater detail in a later chapter.

couldn’t hear a thing in my room). The lights were off, and the easel in the lobby had been rapidly converted from announcement board to front-end sign for Club Om, complete with an elaborately styled logo. I wish I had taken a picture. The assembled group was small, but included at least one organizer, one featured speaker, and one ACMHE board member.

¹⁵³ The only hint of an exception to this is the conversation about religion, which is why I am writing this dissertation.

As I will describe in detail in the next chapter, Mind and Life emerges out of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet's series of dialogues with Western scientists and philosophers. In basic outlines, Mind and Life shares some of the goals and practices of ACMHE but has a less direct focus on grassroots activism, a more intense interest in science and medicine, and a more pronounced air of intellectual power and prestige. Nonetheless, the two organizations share important historical predecessors, which I will outline below.

To sum up the difference between ACMHE and Mind and Life in the most concise way, the "vibe" was different (though perfectly welcoming). Though it's worth noting most of my ACMHE experiences were at weeklong collaborative seminars and this Mind and Life gathering was an academic conference, there was something a bit more, I don't know, *slick* about Mind and Life. Not slick in a bad way. Maybe "polished" is a better word. There was a palpable atmosphere of academic and cultural *power* that I didn't feel at any ACMHE event (this is not a criticism of either organization). Part of it was the much larger size of the gathering, and part of it was the vast and luxurious SoCal conference venue. The dissonance of leaving a dank Upstate New York fall for the sun and palm trees of San Diego (on the second full day of *trumpismo*) might have added to the feeling of moving disconcertingly up in the world.

Another difference might be that at least in some quarters, Mind and Life participants appear to remain comfortable pursuing work without any explicit social justice orientation. For example, I attended one panel I would classify under the (typically pretty apolitical) analytic philosophy of mind, where a presenter reflected on the relevance of contemplative experiences to the interpretation of early neuroscientific

experiments on free will. In the mix with the scientific and clinical panels were a number on contemplative approaches to business management, education, and addiction treatment, a dead-straight pragmatic seminar on writing contemplative studies grant proposals, and an extraordinary session on the purported reality and meaning of paranormal experiences in the context of contemplative practice. A look at the schedule of concurrent conference sessions reveals *some* focused on ACMHE-like social justice concerns, but these are a minority, and they share space with a range of other sessions focused on scientific, medical, therapeutic, philosophical, and managerial concerns, far more of which are quantitative in orientation.¹⁵⁴

Still, the 2016 ISCS featured more emphasis on social justice *than I had expected*. As detailed above, Richard Davidson opened the conference by telling how he'd woken up on November 9, 2016 with "a fire in my belly" to work harder to advance the science of compassion. Rhonda Magee made a powerful case for the relevance of meditation research to cultivating compassion, pushing back against bias, and helping redress injustices. In his closing lecture, philosopher Evan Thompson articulated critiques of individualistic "spirituality" that will be familiar to readers of Carrette and King, and argued that the *scientific* study of contemplative practices was being distorted by and reciprocally reinforcing a wider culture of atomistic individualism. So, while social

¹⁵⁴ Contemplative practice sessions were on the program, but they were scheduled fearsomely early in the morning and, with an hour's commute from a relative's apartment in the suburbs, I was unable to make any of them. See "Concurrent Sessions Schedule." *Mind and Life Institute ISCS 2016*. Accessed 2/7/2018. <https://www.eiseverywhere.com/ehome/iscs-2016/concurrent-sessions/#schedulesetop>.

justice might be one area of focus for Mind and Life and the main focus for ACMHE, the 2016 ISCS displayed few overt trappings of atomization or consumerism.

The Bellah et. al. critique of “spirituality” has some teeth, but although Mind and Life pursues a general idea of the common good and ACMHE much more explicitly seeks to remedy bias and oppression, it does not apply to either organization in any simple way.¹⁵⁵ At the beginning of this chapter, Carolyn Jacobs, who has served in leadership roles at Mind and Life, Naropa University, *and* ACMHE’s parent organization, asked where compassion could be found in present-day America. In defiance of the stereotypes about mind-centered “spirituality’s” cultivation of disengagement and consumerism, contemplative studies advocates are working to extend the reach of compassion into a myriad of ways and to demonstrate that contemplative practices produce just the kind of experiences needed to bring about social justice, even social justice at academic conferences.

Theory:

I will conclude by reviewing academic works that inform my perspective on contemplative studies advocates’ pursuit of social justice. In *Selling Spirituality*, Jeremy

¹⁵⁵ The ACMHE membership is diverse, ethnically and religiously, and the leadership is increasingly the work of people (and mainly women) of color; they strive for balance between self-care and social action; they not only take both poles seriously but also consider them inextricable from one another. Though some members are invested in what we would call religious pluralism, ACHME is focused on a more inclusive concept of social justice and has no overt theological project; though I think they could talk about religion in more nuanced ways, ACMHE is as intellectually serious as any other academic organization. Maybe I’m biased. I like them now. I like them enough that I applied for a job with them in the fall of 2015. I don’t think I’m biased enough to undermine my sense that I was expecting one thing from ACMHE and found something entirely different.

Carrette and Richard King argue that “spirituality” as typically practiced in contemporary European and American contexts is in fact a form of consumer behavior. They characterize the assembly of a personal repertoire of belief and practice as a form of “shopping” that illicitly appropriates elements of different cultures. The purpose of this behavior, they believe, is an ultimately fruitless quest for self-improvement and satisfaction. They consider “spirituality” a fundamentally self-focused way of life that not only distorts the various religious traditions thus collected but also mirrors and reinforces an exploitative form of global capitalism. The trade is in ideas as much as in self-help books, yoga pants, and biofeedback devices, and the “producers” of religious ideas are about as well compensated as the makers of yoga pants. Ultimately, Carrette and King feel that “spirituality” usually serves to justify excessive self-interest, distracting people from social ills and degrading their capacity for empathy and resistance. I will surely not be the first to find this analysis a bit reductive, though it certainly has teeth. And yet, as historians like Leigh Eric Schmidt and Andrea Jain have shown, there is no necessary connection between forms of spirituality, even those forms and the cultivation of selfishness.

Suffice it to say that advocates of contemplative studies have arrived independently at this same critique of spirituality. They are profoundly aware of the potential for missteps when attempting to work on one’s own embodied mind for the purpose of survival, happiness, and an expanded awareness of suffering and capacity for action. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society has made social justice programming the central feature of its agenda. Here I am not just reading off their Web site, though it is perfectly interesting. All told, over the past two years, I have spent

about two weeks with their membership and leaders, and conducted several one-on-one interviews with the same. Many of the people who attend and present at their conferences are scholar-activists directly engaged in social justice projects, whether this is culturally responsive teaching, criminal justice reform, intergroup dialogue, resilience training, or environmental conversation efforts. For many of them, this is the center of their professional lives and their primary motivation for pursuing their own contemplative practice and making such practice accessible to others.

This conclusion is, in a way, compatible with the Carrette and King's analysis. In their last chapter, they do leave open the possibility that some versions of spirituality will seek to reorient emotions toward altruism rather than toward overpriced yoga pants made by unscrupulous garment companies. Indeed, I have never heard a dissenter from the *Selling Spirituality* thesis say that Carrette and King *aren't* onto something, that their work doesn't identified a major trend.

Andrea Jain's *Selling Yoga* makes two points that also apply to my analysis of contemplative studies.¹⁵⁶ First, she demonstrates that modern postural yoga has developed in large part in response to consumer culture's imperatives toward health and fitness, even when these are imagined as spiritual or even "religious" values or objectives. In critical studies of yoga, the argument frequently ends there, but Jain goes further than most, arguing that postural yoga's consumer genealogy has not prevented its use by those morally opposed to an unthinking consumerism. Jain quotes a particularly illuminating passage from the sociologist Mike Featherstone: "As Durkheim pointed out,

¹⁵⁶ Jain, Andrea. *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

anything can become sacred, so why not the ‘profane’ goods of capitalism? If we focus on the actual use of commodities it is clear that in certain settings they can become de-commodified and receive a symbolic charge (over and above that intended by the advertisers) which makes them sacred to their users.”¹⁵⁷ Jain reduces the “commodity” and the “sacred” to the broader phenomenon of “value.” An advertiser’s work to distinguish a “brand” is analogous, in this way, to a ritual specialist’s efforts to demarcate the sacred and the profane. Second, Jain draws on Mircea Eliade’s work to argue that the “sacred” is always encountered via the mundane.¹⁵⁸ In principle, anything can become a hierophany, a channel for the sacred to enter mundane reality. For Jain, this classic Eliadian point illuminates and legitimizes the “religious” functions of modern postural yoga. These yoga systems have been produced with (and to some extent *by*) consumer culture, and yet continue to function “religiously.”

On a broader level, Jain draws on the discussions of the “sacred” and the “holy” by Eliade, Otto, and Durkheim to argue that “sacred” does not exclusively or necessarily imply “good,” or even a connection to anything modern persons recognize as “ethics.” She argues against Carrette and King’s claim that in contrast to modern postural yoga, ancient yoga systems served an ethics of social and environmental responsibility. For Jain, the sheer diversity, cultural specificity, and world-denying tendencies of ancient yoga systems make it impossible to claim that there has ever been a true essence or consistent doctrine of yoga, let alone an ethical orientation shared across yoga’s “original” contexts.

The upshot for contemplative studies is that its close family resemblances with

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.123

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.112

therapeutic and managerial applications of contemplative practices does not necessarily prevent its advocates from deploying the same practices in pursuit of social justice. Rather, this would have to be determined on a case-by-case basis.

Contemplative practices can function to pacify people, but they can also allow them the space to work productively on their legitimate social concerns. The field is still taking shape and exhibits varying levels of interest in progressive political projects between and within its major academic and nonprofit hubs.

To view the same set of issues from a wider angle, we can turn to Thomas Frank's 1997 study *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*.¹⁵⁹ As I will explain in the chapters to follow, the 1960s counterculture is an important historical precursor to contemplative studies. This vast social movement, which helped create an array of mind-centered "spiritualities" rooted in Romantic ideas and in empirical innovations in postcolonial Asian thought, features analogous tensions around participants' relationships to consumption. Frank outlines a range of counterintuitive connections between the youth revolt of the 1960s and changes in the theory and practice of advertising. Among the first people (after the Beat poets) to revolt against the stifling conservatism of "the man in the gray flannel suit" were the people who worked for him in the notoriously buttoned-down Madison Avenue advertising agencies. This internal revolt within one of the most powerful arms of postwar capitalism arguably *anticipated* the wider cultural shift we now just call "the sixties," gave newly independent young people a ready-made vocabulary to articulate what they

¹⁵⁹ Frank, Thomas. *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

sought, and likely set the terms of most Americans' engagement with this social movement. In Frank's deeply ironic story, Madison Avenue's mad men found themselves in the position to profit massively from an entire society that suddenly began speaking a countercultural language *they themselves* had all but invented. In the terms of postmodern theory, we might say that the counterculture is always already an "enduring commercial myth."¹⁶⁰

In the 1960s, advertising agencies were actually some of the first American institutions to be remade in the service of a profound faith in the "incompatibility of genius and hierarchy."¹⁶¹ Much as Andrea Jain argues with respect to yoga, what this means in practice is that *it is perilously difficult to distinguish "commercial" and "non-commercial" aspects of the counterculture* and its distinct style of spiritual activism that has been carried over into contemplative studies, in some cases directly so. "In the counterculture," Frank writes, "the ad men believed that they had found both a perfect model for consumer subjectivity, intelligent and at war with the conformist past, and a cultural machine for turning disgust with consumerism into the very fuel by which consumerism might be accelerated."¹⁶² It is a safe bet that through their notoriously aloof and sardonic (and completely revolutionary) Volkswagen Beetle ads, the Doyle Dane Bernbach agency persuaded more people to try on the *costume* of the counterculture than one hundred Woodstocks could have summoned to live out its most radical, challenging claims. This makes it all the more remarkable that some of the counterculture's most powerful ideas and strategies survive and thrive in today's contemplative studies (this

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.32

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp.103

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 119

will be part of the historical narrative in the next chapter). Individualistic rebellion sold like hot cakes then and now, but many thousands of young people *did* abandon American bourgeois society to build new ways of living in accord with their values. In the same way, many commercialized forms of mind-centered “spirituality” exist, but contemplative studies advocates are determined that they will not have the final word, and will not dictate the only possible meaning of yoga, mindfulness, or any other contemplative practice. In the chapters to follow, on the historical background of contemplative studies rhetoric and on the tradition of interdisciplinary inquiry it represents, we will see that this is no accident. Contemplative studies is rooted in traditions of thought that advocated sourcing ideas, practices, and experiences from “religious” systems in order to produce a changed consciousness – a consciousness marked by deeper harmony within the self, with the social world, and with the natural environment. It will be the work of the next two chapters to explain this history.

Historical Precedents: The Rhetoric of Religious Experience:

“Some things we know are good for us... it’s good for us to know ourselves in a thoughtful, intentional way... and to teach our students the same skill... and as an anthropologist I’ve seen other cultures that do this, sometimes through religious practice and sometimes just through the ways of the culture. It’s part of our indigenous knowledge, in terms of people connected to the earth, as opposed to the detachment produced by advanced technologies and economies.”

-Michelle Chatman, August 2016.

When I interviewed Michelle Chatman in August of 2016, she seemed to resist the idea that contemplative studies needs a field like neuroscience to confirm that contemplative practices “work.” This resistance to (but not rejection of) scientific authority points to what I think is the central claim that makes contemplative studies work in our historical moment, helps explain its historical origin, and helps make sense of how its advocates deal with the category of “religion.”¹⁶³

In the sixth letter in his 1794 work *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, the German philosopher Friedrich Schiller wrote:

It was civilization itself which inflicted this wound upon modern man. Once the increase of empirical knowledge, and more exact modes of thought, made sharper divisions between the sciences inevitable, and once the increasingly complex machinery of State necessitated a more rigorous separation of ranks and occupations, then the inner unity of human nature was severed too, and a disastrous conflict set its harmonious powers at variance. The intuitive and the speculative understanding now withdrew in hostility to take up positions in their respective fields; and with this confining of our activity to a particular field we have given ourselves a master within, who not

¹⁶³ I call it resistance and not rejection because, as we have seen, contemplative studies is suffused with interest in science, has engaged prominent scientists, and may depend in part on advances in the scientific study of the brain in order to exist its present form.

infrequently ends by suppressing the rest of our potentialities.¹⁶⁴

Late eighteenth century German philosophy might seem an odd place to begin analyzing the project of contemplative studies. And yet, in Schiller's letters on aesthetic education, we find concerns for intrapsychic harmony and its relationship with the nature and the production of knowledge comparable to those expressed in the contemplative studies literature today. As outlined above, I argue that the European Romantic movement, which counted in its ranks the poets William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and artists like Caspar David Friedrich, along with the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher and his contemporary Schiller, marks the beginning of the discourse of "religious experience" I see as the conceptual ground for contemplative studies. I believe that the rhetoric we will review in this chapter is a key component of the success of contemplative studies today. This way of thinking takes its first cue from Romantic desires to preserve an embodied, affective, experiential "religion" in the face of Enlightenment scientific critique. It then joins a pared-down version of these ideas to the anticolonial efforts of modernizing Asian thought to *reform* the Enlightenment, humanize science, and repair intellectual and social divisions created by perceived excesses of rationalist ideology and technological power. "Religion" is positioned as a resource for deriving the experiences that can bring these changes about. I hope to show how this way of thinking emerged in history.

Faculty mentors in the Department of Religion at Syracuse started me on this line of research several years ago, as I was beginning my project on contemplative studies.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, In a Series of Letters*. Translated by Elizabeth M. Wilson and L.A. Willoughby. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967, pp.33-34, emphasis mine.

For a project with an ethnographic component, though, it matters that at least some of my interview subjects can recognize themselves in the history I present. When I interviewed John Dunne, he connected this distinctive way of thinking about religion and experience to Romanticism, specifically to Schleiermacher. He also dissented sharply from the commonplace contemplative studies claim that practices and experiences could be separated from “religion” by separating them from traditional belief systems. Instead, he argued, this strategy owes a great deal to a way of defining religion that goes back to the Romantic period. I think he would agree with me that it is too simple to say “this is not religion,” when Schleiermacher and the other sources for this logic would say “this is the true meaning of religion,” or perhaps “this is the version of religion that can live in the modern world, the aspect of religion that the modern world cannot afford to ignore.”

We will attend to Schleiermacher shortly. For a moment, back to Schiller, whose letter condenses the concern for wholeness and its implications for intellectual work that motivated Schleiermacher and Blake to redefine “religion” as a mode of intensified subjective experience. The rise of Enlightenment science and of the modern State, he believes, created a rift in human consciousness, putting the body and the affective, intuitive life out of touch with the equally important faculty of abstract, logical thought. Schiller favors neither a completely unrestrained imagination nor the restraint of a state power that wishes to develop only the logical faculties it needs. One can hear echoes of the Common Core controversy as much as of contemplative studies: “True, we know that the outstanding individual will never let the limits of his occupation dictate the limits of his activity,” but “it is rarely a recommendation in the eyes of the state if a

¹⁶⁵ Professor Zachary Braiterman gave me the initial suggestion to look into Romanticism as a source for the logic that I think undergirds contemplative studies.

man's powers exceed the tasks he is set, or if the higher needs of the man... constitute a rival to the duties of his office."¹⁶⁶ Michelle is not coming from precisely the same place as Schiller, but it is possible to suggest how they have come to have similar concerns and advocate similar solutions to them.

I direct this chapter to my friends in contemplative studies as much as to my religious studies colleagues. My purpose here is *not* to build a linear, unbroken history back in time to a particular origin point for the ideas that contemplative studies advocates use to conceptualize and communicate their work. That would be impossible. Instead, the goal is to point to wider general trends in discourse, sensibilities, sets of ideas that provide some context for the emergence of contemplative studies in our moment.

Contemplative studies depends on rhetorical forms that originate with the European Romantic movement and with Asian thinkers responding to European colonialism. The idea in its most basic form is that the experiential and practice aspects of "religious" traditions can be abstracted from their associated belief systems and institutional power structures and applied in the everyday world. The broad common motive I see between the different instances reviewed here is the use of the category of "experience" to correct perceived excesses of Enlightenment thought and attendant scientific, technological, and political powers, and that "religion" for a resource in this task. This idea originates with the Romantic movement, profoundly anti-intellectual and specifically anti-Enlightenment in its earliest forms, and is repurposed by writers like William James, Evelyn Underhill, and Vivekananda, who seek to link the Romantic value on personal religious experience with the empirical precision, repeatability, and rhetorical power) of science. It has fused

¹⁶⁶ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, In a Series of Letters*, pp.37

on multiple occasions with colonial and postcolonial Asian thinkers' efforts to recast their own traditions as empirical and universal in response to missionizing and scientizing Europeans.

This hybrid way of arguing has moved in and out of prominence over time, and has not traced a linear path from its origin to today's contemplative studies. It was especially prominent around the beginning of the 20th century, returned to prominence again with the 1960s counterculture, then faded dramatically, and now has come back into the mainstream again since the late 1990s. I believe I can show important instances of direct, person-to-person influence on the last of these – basically, the most recent upswing depends in part on individuals and ideas shaped by the previous groundswell in the 1960s. We can also observe something of a trend line after the mid 1970s wherein some language dependent upon the concept of “religion” or explicitly tied to particular religious traditions begins to drop out of the conversations that became contemplative studies.¹⁶⁷ Curiously, as the theoretical underpinnings disentangle from any one “religion” or anything termed “religious,” a kind of revamped “world religions” model enters to provide an expanded range of sources for deriving universally available, transculturally viable contemplative practices.

This investigation is a response to my initial surprise upon encountering claims about the possibility and the practical and epistemological implications of contemplative experience that were, in my understanding, utterly at odds with the norms of the modern, secular academy. That perception was not wrong, though it may have been growing dated even as I first held it. How, I wondered, does this movement have a leg to stand

¹⁶⁷ It is still not clear to me why this last shift happened. Possibilities are explored in the Epilogue.

on? How are they getting anyone to listen to them? How are they successfully advocating these ideas to faculty colleagues, let alone university administrators and licensing and accreditation agencies? Frankly, I'm still not sure of the answer, but I think the picture becomes somewhat less murky with the knowledge that some of the rhetoric here is not exactly new. As far as the academic mainstream is concerned, it has been underground for a while, probably since the end of the 1960s counter-culture (a turning point cited by several interview subjects), but it has been around for at least a century and a half, serving various purposes in various places.

The examples in the loose historical timeline I will construct in this chapter seem to share a particular tactic (even if they sometimes share little else, in terms of their broader goals). If my readings are correct, they all seek to distill, from a variety of "religious" traditions, institutions, and writings, a range of individual "experiences" that return some lost something to the modern world. They marshal these experiences to counter the perceived excesses of the modern world's perceived cognitivism and atomism, to return legitimacy to human beings' experiences of embodiment, emotion, creativity, and interconnection with themselves, others, and the world. For some of the thinkers addressed below, these experiences are the true essence of religion. For others, they are the part of religion that is separable from belief, traditions, and institutions, the only part with a claim to be more universal than particular human histories and cultures.

Schiller, the German Romantic philosopher, is useful for pointing out the concerns of contemplative studies as part of a centuries-long conversation about the meaning and value of intellectual life, about what it means to be a "modern" person, about the proper role of intellect, emotion, body and mind, science and religion,

“humanity” and “nature” in the composition of our lives. Romanticism represented a response to perceived Enlightenment excesses on the side of reason, intellect, empirical science, and the rationally governed State.

Schiller’s fellow Romantics explicitly reformulate “religion” to counter the cognitivist, empiricist Enlightenment epistemology that had produced such devastating critiques of religious traditions, institutions, and cosmologies. William Blake’s *Auguries of Innocence* captures this spirit in its famous invocations of infinity in the palm of one’s hand (not in the heavens) and eternity in an hour (here, on Earth, in human bodies).¹⁶⁸ In “Mock On, Mock On, Voltaire, Rousseau,” Blake explicitly challenges Enlightenment thinkers who have wreaked such devastation on the intellectual standing of traditional Christianity; “The atoms of Democritus / And Newton’s particles of light / Are sands upon the Red Sea shore / Where Israel’s tents do shine so bright.”¹⁶⁹ Israel does not mean Israel the historical Semitic nation. Blake has no interest in that. Israel here has a symbolic meaning, the remnants of religious experience that survive the criticism of Enlightenment science.

Blake’s *Auguries* also makes a strong connection between the divine, the embodied mind, and the natural, a staple of Romantic experience eloquently expressed in William Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey.” Writing in 1798 near the ruin of the 15th century monastery along the border of England and Wales, Wordsworth links nature, divinity, and the human consciousness, and credits this

¹⁶⁸ Blake, William. “Auguries of Innocence.” *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43650/auguries-of-innocence>, Accessed 9/5/2016.

¹⁶⁹ Blake, William. “Mock On, Mock On, Voltaire, Rousseau.” *Bartleby.com*. <http://www.bartleby.com/333/266.html>, Accessed 9/5/2016.

insight to his intuitive experience:

“And I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean and the living air, and the blue sky, and in the mind of man: a motion and a spirit, that impels all thinking things, all objects of thought, and rolls through all things.”¹⁷⁰

The American Transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson likewise took his strongest cues from visceral experiences of the fundamental goodness and oneness of the human, nature, and God. In his influential (and at the time, deeply heretical) address to the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School in 1838, Emerson proclaims that:

“[T]he world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, of one mind; and that one mind is everywhere active, in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool; and whatever opposes that will, is everywhere balked and baffled, because things are made so, and not otherwise... *For all things proceed out of this same spirit*, which is differently named love, justice, temperance, in its different applications, just as the ocean receives different names on the several shores which it washes. All things proceed out of the same spirit, and all things conspire with it... *The perception of this law of laws awakens in the mind a sentiment which we call the religious sentiment, and which makes our highest happiness...* It makes the sky and the hills sublime, and the silent song of the stars is it. By it, is the universe made safe and habitable, *not by science or power. Thought may work cold and intransitive in things, and find no end or unity*; but the dawn of the sentiment of virtue on the heart, gives and is the assurance that Law is sovereign over all natures; and the worlds, time, space, eternity, do seem to break out into joy... *This sentiment is divine and deifying. It is the beatitude of man. It makes him illimitable. Through it, the soul first knows itself.*”¹⁷¹

Ontological claims like this are not normative in contemplative studies, but significantly, they are also not verboten. In an August, 2016 interview, I asked Rose

¹⁷⁰ Wordsworth, William. “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour. July 13, 1789.” *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45527/lines-composed-a-few-miles-above-tintern-abbey-on-revisiting-the-banks-of-the-wye-during-a-tour-july-13-1798>. Accessed 4/4/2018.

¹⁷¹ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “Divinity School Address: An Address Delivered Before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, Sunday Evening, July 15, 1838.” *American Unitarian Conference*, 2003. Accessed 4/12/2018. <http://www.americanunitarian.org/divinityschool.htm>. Emphasis mine.

Sackey-Milligan how she defined contemplative studies. She described it as a source of opportunities for participants to “discover, recognize an aspect of themselves that is beyond, that is not the person – an aspect of themselves that is... conscious awareness of what is really true about themselves. This aspect of the self is usually unrecognizable because we spend so much time in our mind, head, *as person*” (emphasis mine).

Contemplative tools, she said, can help us (as meditation helped her) stay as “*witnessing presence or consciousness... which is the truth, the truth of our existence, in this physical body... beyond sense of personhood*” (emphasis mine).

I asked Rose what changes for people when they learn to experience themselves this way. In recognizing that we are more than our physical bodies, she replied, that there is more, an invisible or formless dimension beyond what we usually conceive ourselves to be. “Once you’ve tasted that awareness, there’s tremendous liberation in that,” she said.

To recognize a deeper truth is immensely liberating, so that you find out you are not just the small, insignificant person that you are. That is tremendous. I can only speak personally, but you realize that certain aspects of your life are no longer as important as you thought they were, certain aspects become significant. *You realize that there’s a bigger truth that is directing much of life, and that you’re a part of. It’s also extremely humbling, it begins the process of shrinking your egoic sense of self, things begin to slowly fall away.* You’re more humble, you’re more kind, and you begin to recognize that what you’re experiencing is the same as what other people experience as their own body. It changes the sense of connection to others by showing how deep the connection is on that level, the sort of spiritual connection we’ve been talking about. (emphasis mine).

In explaining her understanding of the history and the importance of contemplative studies, Rose placed the field in a broad historical and ontological context. “It’s incredibly important for me because I really think that the contemplative field offers humanity a way out of these crises and chaos and conflict,” she said. “I think it’s part of

a process of the human mind, human consciousness, evolving, growing, changing, part of the natural process of things. It has meaning for me because I get to contribute, I get to share my experience with other people, not in a proselytizing way, but in a way where I can share my insights, observations, for people to reflect on. [The field] holds the promise, potential for *the evolution of human consciousness* in such a profound way, I can't see how I can't be a part of it. I just feel called to be where I am. It's not that I thought about it and decided to do it" (emphasis mine).

What Rose told me is not exactly derivative of Wordsworth, but I believe Wordsworth is part of the background that helps explain where we are now, as are the larger Romantic movement, Buddhist modernism, and the particular way these were brought together in the counterculture. The innovations condensed in Rose's remarks are brought into relief by the fact that early Romantics were much less articulate (if they were concerned at all) about the profound interpersonal, social, and environmental obligations Rose derives from this discovery of deep ontological meaning through the exploration of consciousness (this cluster of concerns is much more strongly tied to the 1960s counterculture, which will be addressed below. It draws on Romanticism, but is not identical with it).

My link between contemplative studies and the past 200-300 years of discourse about religion is the *role* in which this field situates "religion." It seems to me that contemplative studies locates "religion" in a familiar role in relation to the secular, scientific world of the university and of modernity more broadly. "Religions" are the primary sources of "contemplative" traditions, practices, and experiences that the modern world needs to embrace in order to resolve the cultural, epistemological, psychological,

and environmental problems of modernity. Contemplative studies advocates share with Wordsworth and Emerson the sense that though profound experiences like these may be derived from religion or even constitute the true nature of religion, engaging with them does not embroil one by default in the power plays of religious institutions and their traditional forms of authority. Participants in the field vary in their level of comfort with pushing back against the modern academy's normative, epistemological, and (occasionally) ontological assumptions, but in my view, it is remarkable enough that some feel, as working academics, that they have the latitude to try.¹⁷²

In this chapter, I derive my theoretical lens from the historian Martin Jay, the religionist Tomoko Masuzawa, and the philosopher Charles Taylor. Jay's study *Songs of Experience* has been central to my approach to contemplative studies.¹⁷³ Jay shows how "experience" has been a critical fulcrum for efforts to re-interpret the "religious" to accommodate and to critique the secular world. It moves religion away from institutional

¹⁷² To gain a better understanding of what many advocates understand themselves to be opposing, we can turn Parker Palmer's preface to Barbezat and Bush's *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education* volume. Palmer writes: "[When] I look at the malfeasance of well-educated leaders in business and finance, in healthcare and education, in politics and religion, I see too many people whose expert knowledge – and the power that comes with it – has not been joined to a professional ethic, a sense of communal responsibility, or even simple compassion" (Barbezat, Daniel, Arthur Zajonc, Parker J. Palmer, and Mirabai Bush. 2014. *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education : Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 18, 2018). Though he identifies more with the contemplative "sciences" camp, David Germano also told me that his initial engagement with contemplative practice in the classroom came from a desire to find different ways to connect with students and involve them more fully in class material. Most of the participants in his university's initiative, he said, came for the same reason. In my last chapter I will explore more of contemplative studies advocates' challenges to academic and wider cultural norms, inside and outside the classroom.

¹⁷³ Jay, Martin. *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

and traditional limits on individual conscience and frees it from dependence on the historical theologies that came under intense criticism after the Enlightenment.

Masuzawa's study *The Invention of World Religions* helps me understand how the logical core of contemplative studies (religion as repository of experiential practices) escapes both its original Christian iteration and its later Buddhist one to include representatives of many traditions and of many academic disciplines. Taylor's *A Secular Age* paints the broadest picture of the cultural tensions contemplative studies embodies and tries to resolve.¹⁷⁴

In contemplative studies discourse, contemplative practice and experience are what "religion" offers the modern world. They are presented as a solution to our toxic mind-body dualism and social isolation, alienating instrumental rationality, and dangerous political and environmental dissociation and exploitation that flow from it. The use of the concept of the "contemplative" to anchor this idea goes back to at least the mid 1960s. The style of thinking about "religion" on which it depends goes back further. Indeed, I think that the blend of ideas from Asian and Euro-American religion, philosophy, and science contemplative studies marshals as a corrective to modern ills can be traced in large part to the counterculture of the 1960s. In our interviews, Dan Barbezat, Carolyn Jacobs, and Rose Sackey-Milligan all testified to the formative influence of this period on what now exists as contemplative studies. One can plausibly trace the field's major ideas and even the thought and biographies of some major writers back to dialogue and countercultural thinkers like Thomas Merton, Ram Dass (Richard Alpert), and Michael Murphy, who variously used "religious

¹⁷⁴ Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

traditions” as sources for the transformation of consciousness to counter (precisely) dualistic and mechanistic epistemologies, social disconnection, and the destructive abuse of power. For example, Barbezat cited Merton in his 2015 summer session opening address, Mirabai Bush has long collaborated with Ram Dass, and Murphy’s thought, as we will see, was influential on contemplative theorist William Irwin Thompson.

For American and European thinkers, this positioning of "religion" vis-a-vis modernity may be traced back to the Romantic response to the Enlightenment in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For the Asian thinkers who have been equally influential in shaping contemplative studies, we can follow David McMahon and Donald Lopez’s studies of Buddhist modernisms in tracing the deployment of Romantic ideas in complex and multifarious response to the Enlightenment back to the colonial period, to colonized Asian peoples' responses to European scientific and missionary power. In *What Matters: Ethnographies of Value in a Not-So-Secular Age*, Ann Taves and Courtney Bender write that “experience is a term that crosses over various domains of secular and spiritual and religious, while carrying with it elements of its different uses in various institutional contexts and epistemological frames.”¹⁷⁵ This may be the single best way to summarize the dynamic at work in the formation of contemplative studies, with elements having jumped and *continuing* to jump between all of these domains. In this chapter, we will try to understand how the category of experience became so plastic, especially in its relationship with “religion.”

We may be able to derive the outlines of a more general explanation of this

¹⁷⁵ Taves, Ann, and Courtney Bender, eds. *What Matters: Ethnographies of Value in a Not So Secular Age*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, pp.19

transfer of ideas from Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*.¹⁷⁶ Latour argues that the distinctively "modern" way of thinking is characterized first by a separation between the spheres of nature and culture and, second, a peculiar blindness to the fact that they interact continuously. In fact, he argues, the very act of aggressively advocating for the separation of these spheres stops us from perceiving their constant interactions. How they interact in this case is the linking of the concept of the "religious experience" to a form of empiricism. Using the concept of religious experience in a comparative frame results in an empiricism quite close to the form Latour credits to Boyle; universal truths are intuited not by reasoning from first principles, but instead by corroboration from a community of witnesses.¹⁷⁷ Once religious experience is framed this way - once this Romantic concept has been remade within the conceptual armature of empiricism - it begins to function rather like a scientific claim, and suddenly encounters far less difficulty rebuffing questions about its origins in a cultural project with an explicit moral and political agenda. Latour might argue that this is possible in the "modern" world for the very general reason that, well, "we have never been modern." One way of describing my goal in this project is to say that I want to understand the history that made this *particular* instance of "translation" possible, and which events and concepts have allowed it to "purify" itself.¹⁷⁸ The very general reason

¹⁷⁶ Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Katherine Porter. Kindle ed. Cambridge: Harvester Wheatsheaf and the President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1993.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, see, for example, Locations 412, 513-518, 635-636

¹⁷⁸ Latour outlines a possible pathway for a Romantic agenda to cross-pollinate with science in his description of a unique (and recent) set of intuitive mental gymnastic he calls "the modern Constitution" (Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, location 313). The modern world, he argues, is sustained by fraternal-twin operations of "translation" and "purification" (Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*: see, for

the thinkers reviewed here undertake this “translation” is to correct perceived excesses of Enlightenment thought, on the grounds of the category of experience.

It is important for me stress that while I think contemplative studies probably wouldn’t exist without the renewed intersection of Romantic and Asian currents in the 1960s and 1970s, it is *not* identical or reducible to them. Something different is happening now. As Don Lattin describes in his 2010 book *The Harvard Psychedelic Club*, Timothy Leary was fired from Harvard University for pursuing research on psychedelics. Richard Alpert left Harvard, went to India, and returned as the countercultural luminary Ram Dass. William Irwin Thompson, the cultural historian and convener of the Lindisfarne Association, an important contemplative studies precursor, spoken openly of “counter-institutions” to counter the hegemony of the “military-industrial-academic complex” in intellectual life. His son, Evan Thompson, who teaches philosophy and cognitive science at the University of British Columbia, has not been fired despite publishing extensively on the intersections of Asian philosophy and cognitive science. Nor has Richard Davidson been fired from the University of Wisconsin. Harold Roth has not been fired from Brown (despite what he described to me as some colleagues’ best efforts in that direction!). This is because contemplative studies represents movements rooted in the 1960s (and, to be really thorough, Romanticism and postcolonial Asian thought) adapting themselves to speak a language the

example, Location 287-288). Translation is precisely what we see in the various projects that have tried to scientize (especially comparative) conceptions of “religious experience.” Hybrid formations *routinely* combine elements of the spheres “modern” culture intuitively separates into “nature,” “society,” “science,” “religion,” etc. In fact, if they didn’t, scientific conceptions of “nature” could never actually influence policy or morality. The parallel operation of “purification” specifically inoculates “moderns” against the perception of influence in the opposite direction, of society on science.

university understands. As Taves and Bender might predict, the unique valences of the category of “experience” (and especially “religious experience”) help make that possible.

This chapter will proceed by noting the strong resonances between contemplative studies and the discourses about religion I see as its most likely ancestors. A major part of the rationale for contemplative studies is the embodied, intuitive, emotional experiences of belonging, insight, and connection that contemplative practices are said to produce. It is likely that the earliest historical precedent for locating such experiences in religious traditions and using them to combat disconnection between thought and emotion, mind and body, self and world is the European Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Primarily a literary movement in earliest forms, Romanticism responded to what Charles Taylor describes in *A Secular Age* as the “disenchantment” of the world and the attendant disciplines of rational thought and sober conduct by reinterpreting “religious” ideas and emotions as embodied individual experience of passion and of connection to (God through and as) the natural world. The new ontology, practice, and personal and political ethos that (in Taylor’s account) preceded and enabled the “secular,” scientific world of the Enlightenment included philosophical understandings of human subjectivity that made enclosed individuality and rational thought central, to the detriment of embodiment, emotion, and intersubjective experience of others and of the natural world. It also excluded “religious” belief in a universe of things and creatures with ultimate moral purposes, a world of inherent and not only subjective meaning. This was also a world where God could not intervene in human affairs, and where the miraculous claims of the Bible and of popular

religion could not be seriously sustained in intellectual circles.¹⁷⁹ Romanticism used the rhetorical hinge of “experience” to respond to the Enlightenment in two closely related ways. One was the production of alternative accounts of human experience that emphasized the emotions, the body, the aesthetic, the natural, and (critically for Taylor’s analysis), the “authentic.” The second was the redefinition of “religion” as just such an experience. In *Songs of Experience: European and American Variations on a Universal Theme*, Martin Jay argues that religion was redefined in terms of personal experience to lessen its dependence on the kind of propositions that the Enlightenment’s cognitively focused epistemologies had undermined, like moral meanings inherent in the world, the historicity of Biblical miracles, and God’s continuing intervention in human lives. Religion as an irreducible, subjective experience was safer from these critiques and became a central site for the reaffirmation of the body and the emotions. Witness, for example, Blake’s reinterpretation of Christianity in terms of an embodied mysticism with deep interest in the emotional and existential depths of human subjectivity.

Jay cites the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher as the most important early innovator of the Romantic understanding of “religious experience.” Schleiermacher’s formulation of “religion” had great influence on both self-identified Christian theologians and on discourses about religion that were not confined to church institutions. Religion, Schleiermacher wrote, “does not wish to explain and determine the universe according to its nature as does metaphysics; it does not desire to continue the universe's development. Religion's essence is neither thinking nor acting but intuition

¹⁷⁹ This paragraph on Taylor is derived from my 2016 conference paper “Contemplative Studies and the Secular,” presented to the Contemplative Studies Group of the American Academy of Religion.

and feeling. It wishes to intuit the universe, wishes devoutly to overhear the universe's own manifestations and actions, longs to be grasped and filled by the universe's immediate influences in childlike passivity.”¹⁸⁰ He defined religion as “the sensibility and taste for the infinite.”¹⁸¹ Schleiermacher was raised in the Pietist tradition of the Moravian Brethren, a German Protestant group who already emphasized emotional connection with God over doctrinal orthodoxy. This context provides part of the explanation for the focus on experience in Schleiermacher’s hugely influential *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, but Jay emphasizes the parallel role of Romanticism in bringing experience to the fore.

Specifically, Jay reports that Schleiermacher had to convince his prominent Romantic colleagues that a particular understanding of “religion” was in fact compatible with the aesthetic life they opposed to the rationality of Deism and of Kantian moral philosophy.¹⁸² Schleiermacher shared with the Romantics “a high valuation of imagination or fantasy, the free association of ideas and emotions” and echoed “their valorization of multiplicity over simple unity” in his “celebration of the variety of religious manifestations in history, all expressing a primary human experience of piety” (Jay, 94). We will find this and other themes as old as Schleiermacher’s Romanticized religion becoming quite familiar as move forward in time to sketch the background for

¹⁸⁰ Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. Translated and edited by Richard Crouter. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp.22

¹⁸¹ Jay, *Songs of Experience: American and Universal Variations on a Universal Theme*, pp.99

¹⁸² In the Introduction to his 1996 edition of *On Religion*, translator and editor Richard Crouter argues that “to some extent [Schleiermacher’s] own circle constitutes the ‘cultured despisers’ addressed by the book” (Crouter, xvii).

contemplative studies. “Feeling, the immediate, embodied self-consciousness that subtends the faculties of will and thinking and indeed is prior to their very differentiation, is at the center of Schleiermacher’s psychological ruminations, as it was for most Romantics.” (Jay, 95).

Jay goes on to describe Schleiermacher’s use of the concept of *Leben*, or “life,” as a counter to the “excessive rationation” and “mechanical causality” of Enlightenment thought. *Leben* was experienced as “a living 'intuition of the universe'” connected to a preference for the experience of organic wholeness over analytical cognition. Finally, and importantly for my genealogical purpose here, Schleiermacher perhaps inadvertently gave clear articulation to a mode of defining and comparing religions that would shape two centuries of resistance to Enlightenment rationalism and reductionism. Jay argues that although Schleiermacher remained a Christian in his own mind and in his definitive works made Christianity the zenith of religion, “the radical implication of his argument was that primal religious experience was anterior to any one specific doctrinal or ecclesiastical order and subtended each of them. Although it was impossible to distill any generic ‘natural religion’ from all the concrete manifestations, one could infer experiential core that they all shared as expressions of *homo religiosus*” (Jay, 100).¹⁸³

The Romantic notion of *Leben* is not reproduced per se in contemplative studies, but the rejection of Cartesianism in favor of encounter with a living, agential world is profoundly resonant with contemplative pedagogy and with the theoretical

¹⁸³ *Homo religious* is a technical term religion scholars will readily associate with the work of Mircea Eliade, whom Jay curiously does not mention. Jonathan Z. Smith’s *Relating Religion* and Thomas Hakl’s *Eranos* provide accounts of Eliade’s debt to Romanticism and especially to Goethe. Neither Smith nor Hakl mentions Schleiermacher; perhaps Jay intends to allude to a connection between Schleiermacher and Eliade.

understandings of human biology that have grounded much of the scientific conversation around contemplative practice, exemplified by the works of Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch.¹⁸⁴

Finally, the mode of comparison that draws religions together as a class defined by a particular type of experience is one of the strongest links between contemplative studies and discourse on religion with strong roots in Romanticism. I argue that it is a direct ancestor of the category of “human contemplative experience” that now draws in a global coalition of “the world’s contemplative traditions” against the perceived excesses of disembodied rationalism and reductionism. Indeed, Jay argues that Schleiermacher’s use of this framework was of great importance for the theologian Ernst Troeltsch, whom Tomoko Masuzawa identifies (in *Invention of World Religions*) as a prominent early exponent of the “world religions” discourse that undergirds much contemporary academic and confessional work taking place (explicitly or otherwise) under the banner of pluralism. As we’ve seen, and as interview subjects have testified, the “pluralism” of contemplative studies has expanded the “world religions” framework to include a new range of traditions and practices as sources of inspiration, from Afro-Caribbean religious systems to yoga and mindfulness meditation outside traditional

¹⁸⁴First in concert with mentor Humberto Maturana and then with colleagues Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, the Chilean biologist Francisco Varela elaborated a theory of the nervous system as an “autopoietic” entity, self-organizing a selectively permeable identity in intimate exchange with the surrounding environment. Taking shape in the 1970s in contact with countercultural intellectuals from around the world, this theory probably owes as much to Romantic *Lebensphilosophy* and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty as it does to the modernist Buddhism of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, of whom Varela was a close associate. See Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (1991) and Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (2007).

contexts.

Jay's next historical waypoint is William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Drawing on Ann Taves' early work on "religious experience," he argues that James was the first to treat "religious experience" as a discrete object of study, a process he claims Schleiermacher initiated, but did not complete. James was not concerned to argue *for* religious truth claims so much as to argue *against* the prerogative of scientific modes of thinking to write the last word on the meaning of human experience. He was not interested in using religious experience to argue for the existence of alternate metaphysical planes, but instead wanted to show that certain types of experience stood on their own as irreducible either to thought or to brain activity. Religious experiences were given in the immediate perception of embodied, feeling creatures, creatures with no strictly logical reason to reject the worldview toward which James believed "mysticism" to point. Looking forward in time towards contemplative studies, it is at least interesting to take note of James as one of the first scientists to treat something like "religious experience" as a feature of human psychology found across cultures, making it at least an implicit potential of all human minds. James never says this, but he may inadvertently have set a precedent with which others after him have accomplished a great deal. I am again reminded of the category of "human contemplative experience," which is also used to defend the claims of our senses, bodies, and emotions against perceived excesses of rationalism and reductionism. We might actually see James as *less* epistemologically and ontologically bold than some of his contemplative studies inheritors, who are willing to make somewhat stronger claims about the value of contemplative experiences not only for the subjective benefit of the

individual, but for the understanding of the nature of the world and the place of our subjectivity within it.

The art historian Robert Rosenblum usefully condenses one of the broader effects of Romanticism that continues today, including in contemplative studies. In *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, Rosenblum refers to Romanticism as “spilled religion,” religion spilled into the subject’s individual consciousness and its relationship with nature and creative activity. “Orthodox religious expression was transformed into other kinds of new forms and symbols: sea voyages, lone figures contemplating nature, burials, Gothic architecture... many artists and thinkers even considered the possibility of making new religious systems to replace or to resurrect the enfeebled faith in Christianity.”¹⁸⁵

Isaiah Berlin’s classic study *The Roots of Romanticism* provides a necessary counterweight to Jay’s focus on “experience” by surveying the wider anti-Enlightenment cultural shift from which Romantic discourse on religion emerged.¹⁸⁶ His work highlights the fragmentary character of the Romantic influence on contemplative studies and its discursive ancestors. According to Berlin, the founders of the Romantic movement reacted strongly against the Enlightenment, mostly rejecting it. Contemplative studies advocates and their forebears, from Henry David Thoreau to Francisco Varela, have sought to reform the Enlightenment, to alter what Foucault aptly called the “power-effects of science,” frequently to redirect them to a variety of spiritual, political, and other

¹⁸⁵ Rosenblum, Robert. *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975, pp. 41

¹⁸⁶ Berlin, Isaiah. *The Roots of Romanticism: Second Edition*. The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, Book 45. Edited by Henry Hardy, Forward by John Gray. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

ends. Berlin finds the roots of Romanticism in poor German communities, especially those influenced by the Pietist movement, at the end of the Thirty Years' War (Berlin, 41). In the wake of that profoundly destructive conflict, young German writers, artists, poets, and philosophers reacted against the Enlightenment narrative of progress in general (as represented by France and French intellectual discourse, in particular).¹⁸⁷

Berlin's most concise summary of their concerns highlights both their deep ties to their own historical moment and the partial and heterogeneous nature of their influence going forward. They were primarily interested in "such values as integrity, sincerity, readiness to sacrifice one's life to some inner light, dedication to some ideal for which it is worth sacrificing all that one is... they were not primarily interested in knowledge, or in the advance of science, not interested in political power, not interested in happiness, not interested, above all, in adjustment to life."¹⁸⁸ The Romantics valued total dedication to a cause – any cause – above all else, above all ideas of right and wrong, true and false.

There are *some* overlaps with contemplative studies here, but conspicuous differences as well. I do not believe I have met or read any contemplative studies scholar who would deny an interest in science, in political power (of either the economic, governmental, grassroots, or intellectual variety), or (least of all!) in happiness. Interest in adjustment to the world varies between groups and individuals, as does the kind and degree of interest in science, but in all instances contemplative studies stands as an effort to reform existing intellectual, political, and moral structures, not overthrow them entirely (whatever a given individual may privately believe). They *do* believe in integrity,

¹⁸⁷ That Berlin, the Oxford philosopher, clearly relishes early German Romantic disdain for the French is one of the joys of this enlightening and entertaining book.

¹⁸⁸ Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, pp.10

devotion to meaningful causes, and dedication to deep, inner convictions, but I have met none who would endorse violence or other abuses of power in the pursuit of meaning.

In Berlin's analysis, early Romanticism moved against what he defines as the three central propositions of Enlightenment thought: all coherently posed questions can be answered; all the answers are knowable by anyone sufficiently trained and equipped to grasp them, and; all the answers will confirm and interlock with one another.¹⁸⁹ Berlin believes the reaction against this ontology began under the twin influences of Germany's military, intellectual, and cultural humiliation by France, and of the pietist movement, a Lutheran sect that emphasized "spiritual life, contempt for learning, contempt for ritual and for form, contempt for pomp and ceremony, *and a tremendous emphasis upon the individual relationship of the individual suffering human soul with her maker.*"¹⁹⁰ These events together occasioned what Berlin calls a "retreat in depth" in search of "that world which some evil fate has denied externally."¹⁹¹ Its earliest theorists were not international luminaries like Goethe and Schiller, but lesser-known figures whom Berlin describes as profoundly anti-intellectual and xenophobic, suffering from an exceptionally severe case of national "sour grapes." Their anti-intellectualism was closely tied to their disdain for all things French, including the thriving Enlightenment thought there. The French philosophers, they thought, were unable to grasp "the true purposes of men on earth and the true, rich, generous potentialities with which human beings had been endowed by God."¹⁹² Berlin distills what he sees as the earliest and some of the most impactful philosophical articulations of this critique in the work of the multifariously

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.27

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 43, emphasis mine

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.43-44

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, pp.47

unhinged though prolific German critic and poet Johann Georg Hamann. Hamann focused his criticism on what he perceived as Enlightenment thinkers' excessive reliance on logic, categorization, and comparison; these were "the way to miss all knowledge... to kill... to apply concepts and categories, hollow baskets, to the palpitating, unique, asymmetrical, unclassifiable flesh of living human experience" (Berlin, 53).

Among the other aspects of German Romanticism *not* shared by contemplative studies are a penchant for nationalism and a tragic, paranoid sensibility about art and life. This latter comes from the Romantic rejection of the enlightenment idea of an ordered, calculable universe. Some Romantics found joy in this mode of thinking, but it inspired others to create works of great tragic pathos, like *Don Giovanni*, whose title character embraced passion to the fullest and was ultimately destroyed by it. Contemplative studies scholars are often concerned with tragedy and trauma, with the greatest of problems, but their sensibility is not tragic.¹⁹³ Finally, Romantics took a deep interest in the expressive and transformative power of symbols and mythologies.¹⁹⁴ I have not seen myth or symbol addressed in any detail in any contemplative studies text or program. One can see a vague relationship to the Romantic idea that *nonlinguistic* symbol and mythic allegory most closely express the creative principle of self-organization at the root of existence and consciousness.¹⁹⁵ Contemplative studies emphasizes the practical and even epistemological value of silence, and comes from a tradition that insists on the

¹⁹³ ACMHE's members *and leadership* are some of the best-adjusted academics on the planet. Their work is serious in the utmost, but they are not. Karaoke enthusiasts of the first order, they certainly know how to have fun, but one doesn't really *worry* about them.

¹⁹⁴ Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, pp.115

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-117

limited, heuristic value of language and cognition for approaching reality, but nobody says anything about symbols or myths at contemplative studies gatherings.

At the ACMHE events I've attended, some presenters and attendees have attested to the influence of divine or spiritual powers in their contemplative lives. Many would probably accept the "mystical vitalism" of Schelling and his admirer Coleridge, with a few conditions.¹⁹⁶ In a pattern one can find without a doubt at Lindisfarne, Esalen, and Eranos, in the writings of Murphy, Varela, Eliade, parts of James, and arguably even someone like Thoreau the master surveyor and naturalist, science is not rejected *tout court*. Rather, contemplative studies continues a centuries-long debate over the nature and extent of scientific authority, and does so on the ground of "religious experience," or at any rate of a consciousness retuned with the aid of religious ideas and practices. I strongly suspect that many if not most contemplative studies scholars would accept (tacitly or otherwise) the Romantic idea that, as Berlin puts it,

There is no pattern to which you must adapt yourself. There is only, if not the flow, the endless self-creativity of the universe. The universe must not be conceived as a set of facts, a pattern of events, as a collection of lumps in space, three dimensional entities bound together by certain unbreakable relations, as taught to us by physics, chemistry, and other natural sciences; the universe is a process of perpetual self-creation... by identifying yourself with it, by throwing yourself into this great process, indeed by discovering in yourself those very creative forces which you also discover outside... by seeing the whole thing as a vast self-organizing and creative process, you will at last be free.¹⁹⁷

But within this framework or a similar one, whether it draws upon a Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, Jewish, Afro-Caribbean, transcendentalist, or psychological

¹⁹⁶ "For Schelling, God was a kind of self-developing principle of consciousness. Yes, God is alpha and omega. Alpha is unconscious, omega is full consciousness come to itself. God is a kind of progressive phenomenon, a form of creative evolution" - Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, pp. 113

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.139

vocabulary, or a hybrid of these, contemplative studies scholars have a range of differences with the Romantic movement. They remain invested in scientific knowledge, the building of institutions, advocacy for social justice, the value of the universal alongside the particular, and the power of classification, comparison, and the creation of categories, and the defense of very particular values (not just the passionate pursuit of any values whatsoever). They *do not* reject the Enlightenment. They seek to reform it. The Dalai Lama argues that Tibetan Buddhist contemplatives can aid neuroscientists in the study of universal human values, “secular ethics.”¹⁹⁸ Buddhist scholar B. Alan Wallace and education reformer Parker Palmer argue not for the replacement of science by subjective experience, but for the utility of contemplative practices in rethinking and improving the relationship between the scientific and the subjective, undermining hard Cartesian dualism and all its ethical problems while very much continuing to produce and value academic knowledge and advocate for political and social reform.¹⁹⁹ Although Friedrich Max Muller in the 19th century and Mircea Eliade in the 20th relied heavily on Romantic modes of morphological classification and comparison, neither rejected the project of knowledge in full. Each sought to turn it to the service of a different moral and spiritual purpose.

¹⁹⁸ *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*. H.H. Dalai Lama and Alexander Norman. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.

¹⁹⁹ Wallace, a former Tibetan monk who holds a doctorate in religious studies from The University of California, Santa Barbara, has made this argument across numerous works, like his 2011 volume *Meditations of a Buddhist Skeptic: A Manifesto for the Mind Sciences and Contemplative Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Parker makes this case in his forward to Barbezat and Bush’s *Contemplative Practice in Higher Education*, and in works of his own like *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

I see contemplative studies as, in part, a continuation of this project. Like most of the thinkers reviewed here, its advocates do not reject the Enlightenment because they cannot do so and hope to persuade anyone to accept their viewpoints. Instead, they seek to reform it, counter its perceived excesses while retaining its benefits. Indeed, many are themselves formed by the Enlightenment in powerful ways. Many of today's contemplative studies advocates are scientists themselves. What permits the rhetoric of "religious experience" to function in this manner? An explanation following from Taves and Bender's insight would note that the concept of "experience" aids them in fusing aspects of "science," especially its connotations of empiricism, with the emotional, corporeal, and creative aspects of existence the Romantics used to redefine "religion." On a more general level, Latour might argue that this movement is possible because, well, we have never been modern. We easily and almost unconsciously elide our prized distinction between facts and values, between the empirical and the normative, subjective aspect of our lives precisely because we have so powerfully convinced ourselves that these spheres can remain "pure."²⁰⁰

Tomoko Masuzawa picks up this thread in her study *Invention of World Religions*. She tracks the emergence of the modern system of listing ten to twelve "world" religions; such lists always include Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, with much variation after these five. European scholars' early attempts to

²⁰⁰ Again, with the exception of the earliest and most anti-intellectual Romantic thinkers, we are dealing here with people formed by the Enlightenment and interested in countering its perceived excesses, rather than abandoning it entirely. In Latour's terms, this mode of "translating" between empirical and Romantic ways of operating has moved in and out of prominence since at least the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, following no readily obvious trajectory (at least until the 1960s and 70s). The cultural and political gravitas of science, on the other hand, has trended steadily upward since then.

classify their beliefs in relief against various "others" (Jews, "Turks" or "Saracens," "idolaters," etc.) gave rise to a polemical distinction between Christian and non-Christian worlds. Events in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries conspired to expand the list and to change its theological valence. The coincidence of the colonial period with the rise of modern science and scriptural criticism helped occasion a period of profound questioning within European Christianity. As the colonizers' reports from abroad gave Europeans cause to question Christianity's sole claim to organize a civilization and save human souls, the theory of evolution and the documentary hypothesis cast doubt on its claims to historical truth at home. Masuzawa argues (and a glance at Friedrich Max Müller's *Introduction to the Science of Religions* well demonstrates) that what we now call the study of religion arose as a liberal Protestant theological project intended to shore up the status of Christianity against this onslaught. When the sheer number of different (and compelling) religious ideas became widely known, theologians invested in this project switched tactics. Masuzawa credits this innovation to Ernst Troelsch, who executes an almost imperceptible transition between the defense of Christianity and the defense of "religion in general." In an increasingly diverse early twentieth century religious landscape, scholars began to marshal religion ("in general") as a kind of global unity, an anthropological universal forming a united front against the threat of corrosive (and equally global) secularism. This cross-cultural essence of "religion" was the experience, in individual consciousness, of a reality transcending the material world and altering one's sense of connection to it.

The scholars who created this synthesis relied on a distinctly Romantic mode of classification and comparison. Masuzawa and J.Z. Smith both identify this mode as

"morphological" comparison. It depends on the inductive inference of meaningful unity on the basis of sudden, intuitive, emotionally charged realizations. The morphological thinker sees the unity of all religious experience in much the way William Blake saw the World in a Grain of Sand. Wordsworth's felt "presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean and the living air, and the blue sky, and in the mind of man" actually describes quite well the reality claimed to undergird all "religious experience." It is strikingly similar to the "perception of the infinite" Muller called the essence of religion. It also strongly resembles William James's account of mystical experience and many, many later articulations of the same concept. It sounds quite like Aldous Huxley's account of his experience of mescaline in a very Blakean book not coincidentally titled *The Doors of Perception*.²⁰¹ Its emphasis on intuitive, emotional, corporeal interconnection and the unity of human life with the surrounding world echoes in the modern discourses of mindfulness and contemplative studies, even if its metaphysical drift frequently does not. Contemplative studies *does* echo the discomfort with the hegemony of scientific modes of the thought that helped bring the Romantic critique into being, and it shares part of the Romantic solution: profound experiences of expansion, interconnection, and intuitive knowledge, derived from (if not ultimately identical with) religion. However, like these thinkers and like Masuzawa's morphologists, it attempts to reform the project of the Enlightenment rather than reject it.

Having read widely in the contemplative studies literature and attended events

²⁰¹ Huxley, Aldous. *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009.

with ACMHE, Mind and Life, and meetings of AAR's Contemplative Studies Group, it is fascinating to see examples of rhetoric about science, religion, and experience that closely resembles contemplative studies in early 20th century sources. Looking back to Chapter One, the reader may recall the quotation from Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace to the effect that contemplative practices constitute an ancient "science of the mind" that can be reconstructed today and can be used without courting dangerous entanglements in "religion." Because "religion" is defined by metaphysical belief, its practices focused on "experience" can be employed in everyday settings.²⁰²

I opened Evelyn Underhill's 1915 work *Practical Mysticism: A Little Book for Normal People* to find strikingly familiar claims about the "science" of "contemplative" practices woven together with quotations from Christian mystics and from William Blake.²⁰³ For Underhill, contemplation is a thoroughly "natural" human activity central to the practice of artists, poets, and mystics. Everyone experiences lower forms of "the contemplative consciousness" when deeply engaged in any passionate activity.

These experiences, marked by a loving absorption into the world and intuitive, creative, appreciative action, exist on a spectrum that includes everything from the everyday reveries of the craftsperson to the most extraordinary states of the so-called "mystics" (who here have a decidedly Christian and Neoplatonic cast). Their purpose is a reorientation toward the world of experience, brought on by changed practice of attention to the interconnection of the self and the world and the undergirding of both by

²⁰² It is worth emphasizing that my interview subjects *did not* cite early twentieth century sources – I include them in this rough historical timeline to demonstrate that the extent of the conversation of which they are a part.

²⁰³ Underhill, Evelyn. *Practical Mysticism: A Little Book for Normal People*. New York: Dutton, c1915.

divine power. They lead neither to quietism nor to excessive activity, but to deeper and more authentic engagement with the world. They put the symbolic constructions of the rational, conceptualizing mind in the shade and bring about an illuminated, more viscerally real experience of the world. They enable a state of consciousness that abandons dependence on concepts and achieves direct access to what is real. At several places in the text (e.g., pp. 97), they become without any warning or explanation a “Science of Love.”²⁰⁴

It is fascinating to hear Underhill articulating so many of the concerns that now animate contemplative studies: the concern for the naturalness of the practices, their necessity for correcting the philosophical errors of scientific rationalism, and their corresponding consistency with an amended rationalism, a “science of love” that can accommodate a Divine power at the heart of reality and an experiential mode of knowing that transcends logic and language. She also moves to counter the critique of “contemplative” spirituality as encouraging retreat from the struggles of the world (in her preface, written as the book goes to press and World War I begins in Europe, she argues that contemplative consciousness is *more* vital given the increased discord in her readers' world). Underhill is a contemporary of William James, and one can certainly hear his *Varieties* analysis of “mysticism” in her writing, especially as it concerns the “ineffability,” the “noetic quality,” and of course the “natural”-ness of mystical

²⁰⁴ Compare, for example, Arthur Zajonc’s 2008 *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowledge Becomes Love* (for an elegant contemporary statement of essentially the same ideas, especially the claim that a love of one’s subject matter is an essential part of a contemplative approach to scientific enquiry. See Zajonc, Arthur and Zara Houshman. *The New Physics and Cosmology: Dialogues with the Dalai Lama*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

experiences.²⁰⁵ Again, there is no intention to show a “progression” here. I am only trying to show the persistence of these rhetorical forms to make the best possible case for a long series of historical precedents – *not* direct or linear precursors – for the kind of thinking and persuasion that undergirds contemplative studies, namely trading on the category of (religious) experience to counter perceived excesses of Enlightenment thought. Although Underhill shows us that much of the rhetorical toolbox used in contemplative studies already existed in the early 20th century, it has moved in and out of prominence since then, influencing elite intellectual circles in the 1960s, then falling out of favor, only to return (with an even stronger institutional foothold) in the present moment. One trend visible since the last upswing is a gradual filtering-out of language directly rooted in “religion” alongside a kind of expanded “world religions” framework for delineating sources of contemplative practice.

In neat confirmation of McMahon’s and Sharf’s claims, nearly identical rhetoric

²⁰⁵ Here as in many of the other writings I’ve highlighted as likely sources for the conceptual and rhetorical underpinnings of contemplative studies, Romanticism looms large. *Practical Mysticism* is awash in references to William Blake, from a meditation guiding the reader in seeing Heaven in a wild flower to an epigraph on the original title page. Underhill quotes the same lines about “the doors of perception” that inspired Aldous Huxley and, later, Jim Morrison in their chemically-enhanced explorations of the frontiers of subjectivity. In context, it seems to aspire to many of the same goals - a reworked, mystically-inspired response to perceived excesses of rationalist thought and technical power, a response divorced from belief and institution, grounded in (avowedly direct) empirical experience. Underhill’s writing differs most strongly from contemplative studies discourse in its explicit metaphysical claims about the Divine ground of reality, and its lack of any strong statement on “religion.” Underhill never explicitly claims that “contemplation” is or is not a “religious” undertaking, though the claims for its naturalness and its scientific status certainly seem designed to resist its knee-jerk dismissal in secular circles. Her claim is that ideas and practices derived from religions can fix what ails the modern world, without violating the obligation to empiricism modern, secular people feel. It can reconnect the mind and the heart, “science” and “Love,” technological power and ethics.

appeared in the writings of the Indian philosopher and activist Swami Vivekananda more than 100 years before contemplative studies appeared. In his seminal work *Raja-Yoga* (1896), Vivekananda opens with a comparison between “science” and “religion” and the claim that all true knowledge is “based on experience... the scientist does not ask you to believe in anything blindly... he appeals to some universal experience of humanity. In every exact science there is a basis which is common to all humanity, so that we can at once see the truth or the fallacy of the conclusions drawn therefrom. Now, the question is: Has religion any such basis or not? I shall have to answer the question both in the affirmative and in the negative.”²⁰⁶

Like modern contemplative studies authors, Vivekananda draws a line between science and “religion” on the basis of their respective approaches to “experience.” The difference with contemplative studies is that Vivekananda, like some of the early Romantics, is most explicitly trying to change “religion” for the better. “Religion, as it is generally taught all over the world, is found to be based upon faith and belief, and in most cases consists only of different sets of theories; and that is why we find religions quarrelling with one another.”²⁰⁷ Vivekananda proposes a different view, grounding a panoply of religions in the transcendent experiences of their founders. “...it is clear that all the religions of the world have been built upon that one universal and adamant foundation of all our knowledge – direct experience.”²⁰⁸

We can see the familiar pattern – religion can be “saved,” as it were, modernized, by being rethought in terms of universally valid, repeatable experiences grounded in the

²⁰⁶ Vivekananda. *Raja-Yoga*. Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1955, pp. 7

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 7

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 9

properties of the human mind. Religion can be modernized on the model of empirical science. “The teachers of the science of Raja-yoga, therefore, declare not only that religion is based upon the experiences of ancient times, but also that no man can be religious until he has had the same experiences himself. Raja-yoga is the science which teaches us how to get these experiences.” Ancient traditions occupy much the same role here as in contemplative studies discourse; they are repositories of empirical techniques for the investigation and refinement of subjective experience (“a practical and scientifically worked out method of reaching this truth” – *Raja Yoga*, pp. 11). They have profound implications for the understanding of the mind and for the lives of human beings.²⁰⁹

Attending to century-old sources like *Raja-Yoga* is important for my project because of the context it provides for contemplative studies. It is true that Vivekananda understands his work as the reform of “religion,” and most contemplative studies practitioners understand their work as non-religious. What they share is the idea that religions – as a group – provide the modern world with techniques for epistemological and moral challenges it is otherwise incapable of resolving (Vivekananda decries the excessive emphasis on correct belief not only as unscientific, but also as an impediment to inter-religious harmony). In both cases, religion can contribute to the moral and intellectual wholeness and fulfillment of the modern world, as long as “belief” is deemphasized and “experience” is brought to the fore.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Vivekananda believes raja yoga can act as a modern, scientific religion, allaying the fear of death and creating happiness by showing humankind its truly infinite, divine nature. *Ibid.*, pp. 13

²¹⁰ This shift away from the original Romantic rejection of the Enlightenment happened rather quickly. It arguably appears in Thoreau, who employs his scientific knowledge to

We can see the persistence of the form and the goals of the discourse of religious experience into the early 20th century in Hans Thomas Hakl's study *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013). Here, we will also be able to begin to draw direct links from the general history above to specific people and events directly involved in contemplative studies. Hakl describes the formation of the early Eranos meetings from Romantic, occult, Theosophic and Jungian circles in interwar Europe. From the earliest gatherings, the conferences that eventually occupied Olga Frebe Kapetyn's famous Ascona retreat were concerned with religious experience as a point of contact between Asian and European religions, and as an antidote to scientific power gone rogue. The theme of the first conference was in fact meditation in the "East" and "West." Later acolytes included the historian of religion Mircea Eliade and the biologist Adolph Portmann, both Romantic thinkers concerned with the morphological classification of biological forms and with the experiential unity of religions as a bulwark against the perceived excesses of scientism.

Thanks to Hakl's text, I can draw an unusually direct line from Eranos to important contemplative studies predecessors. Hakl reports a conversation with Michael Murphy, founder of Big Sur's Esalen Institute, wherein Murphy told him that Eranos was a major inspiration for Esalen (Hakl, 286). Since the 1960s, Esalen has been a hub of spiritual and scientific exchange and innovation on the fringes of the academic world. In *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

further his experiential critique of 19th century American materialism and scientism. As we saw with Underhill and again with Vivekananda, neither of whom totally rejected science, most of the toolbox is there at the beginning of the twentieth century.

2012), Jeffrey Kripal writes that “Eranos and Esalen are related European and American countercultural weavings of radical religious experimentation, technical scholarship, and popular culture that provided the intellectual substance for broad cultural transformations.”²¹¹ Its founding was driven by William S. Murphy and by Richard Price, early figures in what has come to be known as the “human potential movement.” Kripal reports that both Murphy and Price were deeply disillusioned refugees from what Henry Miller called the “air-conditions nightmare,” the prosperous but sterile, rigidly conservative world of 1950s America.

Kripal likens the human potential movement to an “American tantra” for its efforts to explore untapped, possibly interconnected potentials of the human body in its spiritual and sexual dimensions. Its seminars approached these potentials at a crossroads of Asian religious ideas, the humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow and others, and the movement to expand consciousness through psychedelic drugs. Finally, Kripal argues that the style of thought Esalen helped found was the central theory of mind-centered “spirituality” undergirding the 1960s counterculture. Multiple interview subjects referred to this period as formative for contemplative studies. In particular, Dan Barbezat told me in 2016 that the “brand” (his word, his derisive air-quotes) employed by CMind and by Naropa University came out of the experience of the counterculture (we will have to occasion to discuss the significance of Naropa in more detail below).

We can find an important first-hand account of an early Esalen seminar in the writings of the literary historian and activist William Irwin Thompson. At the 2016 ISCS in San Diego, Harold Roth introduced William Thompson’s son Evan, a philosopher at

²¹¹ Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, pp. 6

the University of British Columbia, to present the closing keynote. His comments strongly suggested that the older Thompson's work and the contemplative "counter-institution" he founded represent important precursors to contemplative studies:

"Back in an era - it was the early Reagan years - when I was feeling particularly disheartened about the future of the world, the future of the country, the future of the planet, I discovered a book called *Darkness and Scattered Light*, by a man named William Irwin Thompson... who founded what you might call a 'contemplative incubator,' except it wasn't called that at the time, called Lindisfarne, where he brought together some of the leading contemplative philosophers and practitioners of the day. It was an ongoing project, and it was in that environment that Evan Thompson grew up... and he was really on board at the founding of the whole contemplative studies, contemplative sciences movement."

With these words, Roth directly linked the ISCS proceedings to William Thompson's "contemplative incubator." Roth was the co-organizer of this 2016 gathering, and connected the field to Thompson's work. Evan, the younger Thompson, is a major figure in his own right, and we will attend to his consequential keynote in detail in the next chapter.

As Thompson describes in *At the Edge of History*, he had grown disillusioned with his literature studies at MIT and used a graduate research fellowship to visit Esalen.²¹² He was skeptical of the sincerity and the wisdom of most of the assembled metaphysical adventurers, but did report finding great meaning in a communal dance with spiritual and erotic connotations. This part of the account appears to be affirmation of what Esalen was trying to do - to explore new kinds of sociality by focusing on the potentials of human embodiment and experience, even and perhaps especially when words do not quite succeed. In his own telling, in an essay titled "The Founding of the

²¹² Thompson, William Irwin. *At the Edge of History*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

Lindisfarne Institute in New York, 1971-1973,” Thompson reports that “I was able to resist losing myself in sex, drugs, and rock and roll at Esalen, but what really took possession of me during my conversations at the wine bar with Michael Murphy was the idea of the countercultural institution—of completely breaking away from academe and creating a completely different sort of institution.”²¹³ From a rhetorical perspective, he frames this experience on the model of a religiously significant altered state. It is what he had at Esalen *instead* of an experience of free love or better living through chemicals.

In later works of the 1970s, Thompson describes the Lindisfarne Association, the “counter-institution” he helped found, and in the process, shows us what I believe are very important predecessors to contemplative studies. In his 1974 work *Passages About Earth*, one can catch notes of Blake and Huxley as surely as one can glimpse the project of contemplative studies.²¹⁴ Thompson argues for “cosmic consciousness” as the perspective necessary for living in an era defined by the perceived scientific excesses of nuclear proliferation and behaviorist psychology. The consciousness to be sought is a visceral experience of our interconnection with the whole of the Universe, and of our dependence on it. Many contemplative studies advocates seek to use contemplative practices to cultivate the felt sense of interconnection and mutual obligation, between different strata of the self, between human beings and between human beings and the natural world. We will see that Thompson seeks a similar solution and applies it to very

²¹³ Thompson, William Irwin. “The Founding of the Lindisfarne Association in New York, 1971-1973, Part One.” *Wild River Review*. Accessed 4/2017.

<https://www.wildriverreview.com/columns/lindisfarne-cafe/the-founding-of-the-lindisfarne-association-in-new-york-1971-73-part-1/>.

²¹⁴ Thompson, William Irwin. *Passages About Earth: An Exploration of the New Planetary Culture*. Harper & Row, 1974.

similar intellectual and institutional projects.

In his gorgeous account of viewing the launch of Apollo 17 with none other than Carl Sagan, Thompson adopts a register that resonates with the epigraph from Blake's *Songs of Experience* that opens the volume. He contrasts the spirit of space flight to the deadening, flattening scientism embodied in Skinnerian behaviorist psychology - had we chosen to invest in the logic of Skinner instead of the myth of Apollo, "we would have robbed ourselves of the chance to become more than the identity dictated to us by our problems."²¹⁵ The space age requires not rational control but "the imagination with which to experience a new kind of science," a version of science that abandons the Cartesian subject-object schism and grasps the intimate intertwining of knowledge production and nature, down to the level of microphysics.²¹⁶ "There is new information coming in" Thompson writes, "and the more the mass of our total information expands to infinity, the more our consciousness must quicken to the speed of light." Consciousness needs to be expanded to meet the growth of information and of technical capability produced by science. For Thompson, one source of such a cosmic figure-ground shift is the practice of Tantric yoga. "Yoga," he writes, "changes the body and the relationship between consciousness and matter... by altering the very structure of matter and physical space-time."²¹⁷ The insights of yogis and quantum physicists overlap in their undoing of the boundary between the subject and the object, the self and the nature of the external world.

In the same *Passages* volume, Thompson makes a critique of 1970s university life that

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 6

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 8

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.51

not only signals his status as a predecessor of contemplative studies, but also shows just how much has changed since he convened the Lindisfarne Association. Thompson envisioned Lindisfarne as a “counter-institution” on the model of Murphy and Price’s Esalen Institute, a venue for innovation on the leading edge of spirituality, science, and culture that would not be welcome in the stolid behaviorist world of the university. Thompson writes that “the power of government and the authority of education are collapsed together into a single ideology called ‘the sciences of human management... Now big business and big government have been joined by big foundations and big education.’”²¹⁸

“In the mean time,” he writes in his essay on the Findhorn retreat center, a Lindisfarne predecessor, “we may relate to this new material [e.g., consciousness as the basis of reality, fields of planetary energy] immediately through mysticism and experience the New Age, or we may reject it by invoking the old parading of science and wait snobbishly for new men in white laboratory smocks to come along and tell us that it is alright to believe in power points.”²¹⁹ The difference today is that the contemporary effort to move contemplative practices into university setting *has* in large part waited for cover from the natural sciences.

Thompson shares contemplative studies’ critique of the modern university, in its focus on abstract knowledge separated from body, emotion, imagination, and the interconnectedness of the subject and the natural world. The difference is that at the time of this writing, major contemplative studies initiatives exist *at* world-class research universities, like Brown, Michigan, Syracuse, and the University of Virginia. We may

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-28

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 172

see reflections of Thompson's countercultural call for a revolution in consciousness in the Dalai Lama's program of "secular ethics" and Virginia's program to interfuse the whole of university life with "contemplative values." However, most contemplative studies initiatives have moderated this revolutionary impetus, and even the explicitly activist ACMHE attempts to empower its members to work for subjective harmony and social justice inside institutions of higher education. As Roth described above, William Thompson's son Evan grew up around his father's countercultural institution. Evan Thompson is now a star in the mainstream academic world and a major contemplative theorist, and presented a prominent closing keynote at the 2016 ISCS, before an audience of major scholars.²²⁰

A final point worth touching on is Thompson's "A Note on the Lindisfarne Association," at the end of *Passages About Earth*.²²¹ This section, too, illustrates both the strong commonalities between contemplative studies and earlier projects centered around "religious experience" and the critical lines along which it differs from them. Thompson describes Lindisfarne's mission, a counter-institutional "planetary culture" crossing political and cultural divides, as "neither world-denying mysticism nor world-destroying materialism; it is a Pythagorean synthesis of science, art, and religion; it is economics *and* ecstasy, preindustrial magic *and* postindustrial technology, myth *and*

²²⁰ Evan Thompson's countercultural *and* academic bona fides seem impeccable. In his 2014 book *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy*, in the context of explaining his current path, he mentions reading of Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* and learning rudiments of yoga practice from his father at a young age. He also co-wrote the groundbreaking study *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (1991) with Francisco Varela and Eleanor Rosch. I first read his work, specifically his 2007 study *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* in an analytic philosophy of mind seminar with the Syracuse University philosopher Robert Van Gulick.

²²¹ Thompson, *Passages About Earth*, pp. 187-191

history: in short, it is the embodiment of transcendence.”²²² The goal of contemplative studies could be thought of as a kind of transcendence, but the most advocates in the field consciously avoids such theologically-loaded registers, as we’ve seen above.²²³

Thompson, writing in 1973 from his chosen location *outside* higher education, is far less reticent about identifying his project as “religious” – and when he writes of *transcendence*, he invokes an essentially Christian frame of reference. Note, though, that this “religion” is framed less in terms of “belief” than in terms of personal experience, specifically the experience of the body and the other aspects of subjectivity, like dreams, that have been broadly rejected by modern epistemologies. It is, in short, a very Romantic form of religion, though in Thompson’s countercultural moment it is one shot through with deep social and environmental concern, as it is in today’s contemplative studies. It aims to use “religious” experience to reform the perceived excesses of the Enlightenment and the social forms it helped create, reconnecting people to their bodies, to their neighbors, and to the natural world.

Thompson uses this picture of religious experience to anchor bold metaphysical claims, describing the body as “a field of energy having more than three dimensions” and placing this concept at the center of Lindisfarne’s work.²²⁴ He goes on to argue that this work on the body is part of the growth of a “larger, supra mental consciousness” in

²²² *Ibid.*, pp. 187

²²³ The reader could legitimately ask why this is so – why this change, why now? The most complete answer is that I do not have a complete answer as of this writing. The trend-line I have been drawing from from Eranos to Esalen to Lindisfarne, and then on, seems to trace a person-to-person lineage of influence, but has provided me little in the way of evidence for exactly why these particular shifts in language were adopted, why nobody identifies what they are doing as “religion” and yet many draw a broad range of available contemplative practices from “religions.” I explore some possibilities in the Epilogue.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.189

parallel to the “planetary culture” he envisions suffusing institutions. His description of this new consciousness has such strong parallels with contemplative studies, I feel compelled to quote it extensively:

This consciousness is experienced through meditation, and at Lindisfarne the *techniques of meditation of the great universal religions are affirmed...* there are many religious centers today which are concerned with bringing people of all faiths and contemplative practices together, and so Lindisfarne is not unique in this. Lindisfarne, however, is unique in its attempt to *integrate art, science, and religion in a new definition of the educated man*. Just as the traditional *liberal arts* college offers “the Great Books” as the foundation for a person’s professional training and development, so Lindisfarne offers the great spiritual disciplines for the transformation of consciousness as the foundation for a person’s existence in the new planetary culture. Directly concerned with the interface between the esoteric and exoteric forms of thought, Lindisfarne *offers seminars in science and the humanities by scholars who are rooted in daily meditation practice*.²²⁵

Moving point by point, we can note first the claim that “meditation techniques” are a distinguishing feature of “the great universal religions.” If we grant for the sake of argument that there are “religious traditions” and that some are “universal,” then this claim might well be true. But why does it matter here? The key word is actually found in the quoted passage: the new consciousness we need and the techniques for reaching it are *universal*. They are a shared human potential. Thompson invokes the rhetoric of psycho-spiritual universals to stake a claim on the universal significance attributed to the Apollo program, the tenets of behaviorism, and the other projects of “men in white laboratory smocks.” Planetary culture must derive from psychological resources found in every corner of the planet.

Next, we can observe that experiences derived from religious traditions are the key to integrating the power of scientific knowledge with the affirmation of the value of art, imagination, corporeality, indeed subjectivity *tout court*, and including all of the these in

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190, emphasis mine

“a new definition of the educated man” (the behaviorism Thompson readily associates with the corporatized, militarized academy was infamous for its effort to exclude all such concepts from the science of behavior). In contemplative studies, contemplative practice is thought to be a central competency of an educated twenty-first century student, employee, and (depending on whom you ask) citizen. The parallel to ACMHE and to contemplative programs connected to liberal arts is particularly striking here, and considering the strength of the genealogical links between contemplative studies and Lindisfarne, this is not surprising.

Finally, the integration of contemplative practice into Lindisfarne’s intellectual gatherings mirrors not only institutes contemporary with it, like Esalen, but also the contemplative studies gatherings I have attended. Whether it was yoga led by a private instructor, tai-chi taught by a professor of poetry from Spelman College, or sitting meditation taught by Mirabai Bush, each day I spent with ACMHE began and ended with contemplative practice. Some program days also featured mid-afternoon sessions. The Mind and Life ISCS also featured early morning contemplative practice sessions, though I was staying with a relative an hour’s commute away and was unable to attend them. My own university’s Contemplative Collaborative also incorporates brief yoga and sitting meditation sessions into some of its programming. The point, then as now, is to incorporate alternative (which is not quite to say “altered”) states of consciousness into academic knowledge production and teaching. Roth’s remarks introducing Thompson’s keynote at the 2016 ISCS strongly suggest that the similarities between Thompson’s Lindisfarne Association and modern contemplative studies projects are more than coincidental, and are more than the similarities that might be expected of two endeavors

sharing a “moment” in history.²²⁶

My interview subjects echoed Thompson’s deep frustration with state of higher education, though they did not articulate its problems in exactly the same way. Without explicitly referring to the “military-industrial-academic complex,” David Germano described how he has become frustrated with where higher education is, and where it appears to be going, and became engaged in the project of finding “contemplative” solutions, broadly defined. Germano sees contemplative practices as helping to bridge the disconnect between the college students’ residential and academic lives (a view reflected in the campus-wide reach of the University of Virginia’s Contemplative Sciences initiative). Contemplative practice, he said, has the potential to help extend intellectual pursuits outside the classroom and bring existential, visceral concerns into the classroom. He also argued that contemporary classrooms employ a much too narrow range of learning practices, and that contemplative practice is a resource to connect with a wider range of students across a wider and more participatory range of learning modalities. Finally, the rubric of “contemplative sciences” may provide new opportunities to work across intellectual silos. We will see in the next chapter that resistance to strict disciplinary boundaries in contemplative studies is a legacy of Thompson’s period (and indeed of the specific institutions in which he worked).

Mary, the English professor at a community college in the Northeastern U.S., also spoke of her work in contemplative studies in ways that have significant resonances with

²²⁶ It is worth noting that in our December, 2017 interview, Roth told me that Lindisfarne was *not* a direct precursor to contemplative studies, or least not to *his* involvement in the field, which he rooted in his own experience in Zen contexts. I suspect he meant his own involvement because of the way William and Evan Thompson are linked to precursors of contemplative studies, prominently including Francisco Varela, and the way Evan Thompson is still a major player in the field.

the analyses behind the Lindisfarne Association, especially as they concern the purpose of higher education. In her contemplative pedagogy, she uses movement practices derived from theater and improvisation to help students re-root themselves in their visceral and emotional experiences, to return their bodies the center of their experience, and to be their whole selves in the classroom, even if they come to class with many structural challenges to their endurance, focus, and mental and physical well-being. Thompson, working from his MIT experience, would likely recognize this portrait of students who need contemplative practices to cultivate a fuller and healthier self-awareness, and to grasp of the wider social, political, and ecological context of their lives and their education, and to be healthier people, fundamentally more comfortable in their own skin. We can see the evolution of contemplative studies theory in the fact that Mary sees this need in community college students. Its range of application has been expanded dramatically since the 1970s.

Mary's comments link her work to another critical predecessor for contemplative studies – the Tibetan lineage holder and Naropa University founder Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche. She has derived movement-based contemplative pedagogy from Trungpa's Shambala tradition and from her deep background in theater. These two streams of practice came together, she explained, around Naropa University's engagement with the arts, exemplified in the work of major Naropa-linked figures like John Cage and Meredith Monk. In Mary's telling, Trungpa realized that in bringing Tibetan Buddhist practices to the West, he would have to present them in a different way. One avenue he took was to engage the theater community. Mary said she had been following the theatrical and musical innovations of Cage, Monk, and Brian Wilson for a long time

when she realized all of their work was connected to Naropa. As she tells it, her movement-based pedagogical practices are designed to help students focus on deeper aspects of their identities by first focusing their attention on their immediate bodily presence. This new focus gives them a more solid ground from which to explore what is really happening in their interior lives, who they really are, and what may be getting in their way. These goals align very well with the goals of the meditation practice Trungpa prescribes, as we will see below.

More contemporary contemplative connections: in our interview in the spring of 2017, John Dunne, a long-term participant and observer at the Mind and Life Institute, told me that one of its founders, the neurobiologist Francisco Varela, was a student of Trungpa, and subsequently of other Tibetan teachers. According to the Web site for the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (ACMHE's parent organization), co-founder and former executive director Mirabai Bush, whom we met above, also studied with Trungpa.²²⁷ Trained as a lama in Tibet, and then in Western philosophy and psychology at Oxford, Trungpa developed attempted to translate Tibetan Buddhism for a Western audience in the 1960s and 70s.²²⁸ He did so with great success, gaining significant influence in countercultural artistic and scientific circles.²²⁹

Possible precursors to ideas now found in contemplative studies appear in

²²⁷ "Who We Are." *The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society*. Accessed 1/12/2018. <http://www.contemplativemind.org/about/team>.

²²⁸ In his 1981 book *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (New York: Random House, 1981), Rick Fields describes how Trungpa, already a religious leader at age 20, studied at an English school in India after fleeing Tibet. His English mentor helped him procure a place at Oxford, where deeply absorbed Western intellectual and popular culture. This experience would set him up to fuse both into a unique and highly influential rendering of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism.

²²⁹ Wilson describes this well in *Mindful America*, pp.32.

Trungpa's 1969 work *Meditation in Action*. First among them is the idea that meditation can enable an unbiased view of the self, the world, and their relationship to one another. Very much in sync with his moment (writing in America in at the height of the counterculture), Trungpa begins by framing the Buddha as a "revolutionary" who "determined to accept nothing which he had not discovered for himself... His was real, positive revolution. He developed the creative side of revolution, which is not trying to get help from anyone else, but finding out for one's self."²³⁰

Trungpa's rhetoric condenses the concerns Americans and many others had in the late sixties - the need for major political change, questioning of religious traditions, spiritual innovation, and a harmonious existence alongside vast technological changes and their ecological risks. First, he claims that what really matters in Buddhism is "to get beyond the pattern of mental concepts which we have formed." This straightforwardly psychological vocabulary moves safely away from anything too religiosity. Trungpa argues for the importance of "mindfulness" in breaking down problematic conceptual frameworks without creating new ones, then makes a strong split from "religion" by drawing an analogy between "mindfulness" and science: "one must learn to be a skillful scientist and not accept anything at all. Everything must be examined through one's own microscope and one has to reach one's own conclusion in one's own way."²³² The meditator is a scientist and the meditation technique is a scientific instrument for the examination of one's own experience. Trungpa effects a translation between Tibetan Buddhism and something like the "medical gaze" Foucault describes in *Birth of the*

²³⁰ Trungpa, Chogyam. *Meditation in Action*. Berkeley Shambalah, c1969, pp. 12

²³² *ibid.*, pp. 13

Clinic: a mode of perception that produces unmediated knowledge on contact.²³³

Trungpa's 1973 work *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Boston: Shambalah, Revised ed., 2002) emphasizes the by-now-familiar theme of direct, unmediated, and unbiased experience of the mind and its relationship to the world. Though Trungpa argues eloquently against the "spiritual materialism" of clinging tightly to imagined, future goals of spiritual practice, one of the "goals" of meditation is the realization that "[f]undamentally there is just open space, the *basic ground*, what we really are. Our most fundamental state of mind, before the creation of the ego, is such that there is basic openness, basic freedom, a spacious quality; and we have now and have always had this openness."²³⁴ Progress (so to speak) in spirituality gradually helps us see through the preconceptions that cloud our understanding of our nature and of our relationship to the world: "we impose our preconceptions, our ideas, our version of things onto phenomena instead of seeing them as they are. Once we are able to see through our veil of preconception, we realize that it is an unnecessary and confused way of attaching handles to experience without considering whether the handles fit or not."²³⁵

Anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of Buddhism will recognize these ideas as fairly basic to common understandings of the teachings of the Buddha. Trungpa grounds them in a detailed account of Tibetan Buddhist psychology's model for the stages of the mind's spiritual development. What makes for interesting comparison with contemplative studies is that while the rhetoric of direct experience and the removal of preconceptions remains, the details of its roots in hybrid Buddhist-Western psychology

²³³ See Foucault, Michel. *Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. New York: Vintage, 1994.

²³⁴ Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, pp.122

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 207

are gone. The direct experience of one's own mind and the dissolution of preconceptions are, as we've seen, discussed instead as an enhancement to "critical thinking" available through the universal human potential of contemplative experience. This may well be true. What is significant for my project is the change in framing between *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* and, say, Barbezat and Bush's *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*. As Mary told me in our interview, the expansion of the range of traditions involved in contemplative studies opens it to a much larger and more diverse community, a community that recognizes the potential contemplative practices have to assist in learning. She argued that communities are beginning to recognize that contemplative studies has become diverse enough that it might help to facilitate learning in a diverse population.

What makes Trungpa's rhetoric of direct, preconceptual, natural meditative experience significant for my purposes (alongside his central role in the creation of Naropa University) is the strength of its resonances with contemplative studies literature and with older sources in the genealogy I've traced so far (and the direct references in a couple of my interviews, and CMind's online biography of its cofounder). The fact that this account of meditative experience situates it below or beyond the conceptual level in the natural constitution of the human mind represents a resonance between Tibetan Buddhist and European Romantic psychologies, a connection probably not lost on the Oxford-educated Trungpa and likely central to his audience's understanding of his thought. *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* was published in the early 1970s, when participants in the Euro-American counterculture were using Romantic and Asian resources to find peace with technological power through religious transformations of

consciousness. One could certainly think of James's account of the "noetic quality" of religious experience as a predecessor here (though he would have been far more skeptical about its actual utility for intellectual work). For that matter, one could raise Coleridge's "presence," a "sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused" moving in and linking together the world and the human consciousness.

Trungpa's discourse evolves in a direction that might lead to compassion for one's self despite experiences of abuse and oppression:

"Trust and compassion for one's self bring inspiration to dance with life, to communicate with the energies of the world. Lacking this kind of inspiration and openness, the spiritual path becomes the samsaric path of desire. One remains trapped in the desire to improve one's self, the desire to achieve imagined goals... Compassion has nothing to do with achievement at all. It is spacious and very generous. When a person develops real compassion, he is uncertain whether he is being generous to others or to himself because compassion is environmental generosity, without direction, without 'for me' and 'for them.' It is filled with joy, spontaneously existing joy in the sense of trust, in the sense that joy contains tremendous wealth, richness... Without this confidence, one cannot put meditation into action."²³⁶

His chapter on "the open way" may provide a final example of rhetoric that became central to contemplative studies, here approaching its contemporary form but set in explicitly Buddhist discourse. Trungpa argues that compassionate engagement with the world leads to patience ("*ashanti* paramita"), which in turn leads "energy, *virya*, the quality of delight, itself leading to "*dhyana*," the "panoramic vision of open meditation." This openness leads to a state termed "*prajna*, transcendent knowledge, the ability to see situations as they are."²³⁷

What's striking in comparison to contemplative studies is that while the pursuit of openness, patience, compassion, energy, and unprejudiced thought remain, the technical

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 100

Sanskrit terms do not. Alternatively, if they do appear, they may share the stage with ideas and practices explicitly derived from other traditions, and from outside the ambit of what we typically classify as religion. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society's "Tree of Contemplative Practices" diagram illustrates this well. It includes Buddhist, Christian, and other practices, for example yoga, t'ai chi ch'uan, aikido, lectio divina, journaling, labyrinth walking, dance, improvisation, music and singing. It also includes a fascinating open-ended category of "ceremonies and rituals based in cultural or spiritual traditions."²³⁸ The tree diagram is surely not intended to be authoritative or exhaustive, but it shows how the relationship between contemplative studies and (Modernist) Buddhism is evolving. My observations and interviews at their programs tend to corroborate this – although they do not provide a readymade explanation for why it is happening.

What *distinguishes* contemplative studies iterations of ideas that likely have an important debt to Trungpa is that they are *not* framed exclusively in the terms of a Buddhist tradition and that they do *not* emphasize the dissolution of the ego per se. Compassion, authenticity, openness, viscerally felt interconnection; yes, but no contemplative studies writer warns that the advancing meditator may discover that "the hollowness of empty space is drinking tea," as Trungpa does in *Shambala: Sacred Path of the Warrior*.²³⁹ Though many of my interviewees testified to the field's Buddhist roots, contemplative studies rhetoric does not explicitly center the idea of "religion" (like Thompson does) or the practices or concepts of any one "religious" tradition (like

²³⁸ <http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree> - Accessed 6/13/2017

²³⁹ Trungpa, Chogyama. *Shambala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*. Boston: Shambala, 2015, pp. 116

Trungpa does).²⁴⁰ I have seen evidence of this shift at ACMHE gatherings which have prominently featured presenters who have explicitly rooted their work in other traditions, such as Afro-Caribbean, Jewish, Taoist, and Christian traditions. So again, from the 1970s on, we see a lessened reliance on the language of “religion” and a parallel movement toward sourcing “contemplative” practices from a wide range of traditions.²⁴¹

Trungpa, and the move away from a frank, overt reliance on Buddhist concepts bring us to a critical point in the history of contemplative practice in America. They also bring us into the ambit of an inescapable question: how is the avowedly nonreligious field of contemplative studies connected to “mindfulness?” As we’ve seen, mindfulness meditation is a *part* of some formulations of contemplative studies, but it is not the whole field by any means. *Many* other theoretical, practical, and even ontological frameworks have moved into everyday spaces under the auspices of “contemplative practice,” a concept that does not behave in quite the same way as “mindfulness.” However - the mindfulness movement is a close relative of contemplative studies. Both movements have roots in the counterculture and many specific sites, events, and figures are arguably important ancestors of both of them, and both move “religious” techniques into everyday

²⁴⁰ Numerous interview subjects testified to a lingering, though often unspoken Buddhist orientation, despite the efforts to include contributions from other traditions. It would be interesting to do a follow-up study on interactions between this orientation and the current push to include representatives of other traditions.

²⁴¹ One *possible* reason why this happened, although I have no direct evidence for it, is that contemplative studies advocates are trying to differentiate their field from mindfulness, which draws almost exclusively on Buddhist ideas. Another possibility is that contemplative studies advocates want (or feel pressure) to make the field more inclusive, more open, not just more universal. As Dan Barbezat told me, this has been the intention behind his efforts and those of others to involve a much wider range of voices in ACMHE. I do not know if the same process is underway at Mind and Life, though I find it suggestive that Rhonda Magee, who related experiences of bias at an earlier Mind and Life event in a session at the 2016 ACMHE Summer Session, gave a keynote presentation on race and meditation research at Mind and Life’s 2016 ISCS.

spaces, although their rhetorical strategies for doing so are not identical. For a summary of these differences, as expressed by my interview subjects, refer to the Introduction.

This last section takes its cue from John Dunne, a religion scholar working at the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. In trying to explain his understanding of the history of contemplative studies, he inadvertently led me into the overlapping history of mindfulness. In a February, 2017 Skype interview, he shared the view that four figures were central to the rise of contemplative studies: the late Chilean neurobiologist Francisco J. Varela, the neuroscientist Richard J. Davidson, the psychologist Daniel Goleman, and the scientist and medical doctor Jon Kabat-Zinn, creator of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction.²⁴² He believes that after Varela's death in 2001, "Richie, Danny, and Johnnie" continued to play central roles in advancing the field.

Dunne's perspective makes an especially useful frame because he is a religion scholar who has been critical of some trends in contemplative studies and yet still works in what I have treated as the contemplative studies field. We will see that broad cultural trends, specific technological and theoretical advances, and chance personal encounters and profound subjective experiences combined to produce contemplative studies as it exists today.

In trying to reconstruct this history, something familiar has emerged for me, and it is useful in connecting Dunne's insight to our longer historical arc. In his 2007 study *The Serpent's Gift: Reflections on the Study of Religion*, Jeffrey Kripal argues for the existence of a peculiar pattern among mid-to-late twentieth century theorists of

²⁴² Mathieu Ricard, a Tibetan Buddhist monk with a Ph.D. in molecular biology, is another important figure, but I do not have space to analyze his role in detail here.

comparative religion.²⁴³ Many of them seem to have derived major personal and intellectual breakthroughs from sudden, unexpected, highly emotional, and ultimately transformative changes in their consciousness. Mircea Eliade had one such experience during a German bombing raid, and Henri Corbin had a comparable experience while very ill. Kripal suggests that such experiences were probably also of central importance for comparativists who came after Eliade and Corbin.

Significantly but perhaps not surprisingly, the same seems to be true of the founders of mindfulness and contemplative studies. Varela, Davidson, and Kabat-Zinn all apparently achieved major personal and theoretical advances in intense and to some extent non-rational states of consciousness, all of which have at least an atmosphere of “religious” or “spiritual” significance (Goleman recounts no such experience himself but has worked since the 1960s in a milieu powerfully shaped by claims to these experiences.). In trying to write the history of contemplative studies, it is important to include this point because religion scholars have argued that precisely this type of claim to transformative experience is central to self-perception of “spiritual” communities.²⁴⁴ In some respects they mirror James’ famous *Varieties* account: they are transient, ineffable at least in the moment, noetic to an extraordinary degree, and mostly passive.²⁴⁵ Such claims to experience often function to deflect social, cultural, and historical

²⁴³ Kripal, Jeffrey J. *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

²⁴⁴ In a February, 2013 interview with the Secular Buddhism podcast, Mirabai Bush of CMind told of the transformative meditation experience that launched her own career as a contemplative activist. See Meissner, Ted. “Episode 156: Mirabai Bush – The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.” *Secular Buddhist Association*, 2/17/2013. Accessed 2/21/2018.

²⁴⁵ See James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 290-327.

questions about the origins of religious beliefs and practices (frequently with no awareness on the claimant's part). Wayne Proudfoot makes this case in his 1985 study *Religious Experience*, arguing that thinkers going back at least to Schleiermacher have defined "religious experiences" in internal and affective terms that work to insulate them from certain kinds of criticism. In *The New Metaphysicals*, Courtney Bender explains that her "metaphysical" interview subjects framed their own experiences in the same way (to the point of seeming to answer questions she was not asking), narrating their own biographies in ways that implicitly resisted sociocultural explanations for their syntheses of mind-centered "spirituality" and science. Locating this pattern in the biographies of the founders of both mindfulness and contemplative studies helps demonstrate that they are, to some extent, branches of the same larger tree of experiential spirituality in America. They tell their own stories and authenticate their insights in a way that shows the influence of this wider history.

To explain how Varela, Davidson, Goleman, and Kabat-Zinn's ideas found their most receptive audience at the most opportune moment, we can turn to Jeff Wilson's landmark study *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*. It goes some distance toward explaining the intelligibility and the success of contemplative studies among contemporary Americans. We are already ready for meditation practices in quotidian settings *in part* because of the ubiquity of mindfulness (the other part, I have argued, is the history of science-religion exchange on the territory of experience). As I will explain in more detail below, I think Wilson largely misses (or at least underplays) a piece of cultural context that helps explain the rise of mindfulness as a medical and psychotherapeutic technique (the tradition of empirically-

inclined, experiential spirituality discussed above).

Wilson argues that the modern mindfulness movement reached a critical level of coherence in the same middle-1970s period in which we have just examined Trungpa and Thompson. Over the course of the decade, mindfulness was transformed from a fringe Buddhist practice known mostly among Asian monastics to a major center of thought, practice, and institutional investment in the United States. Wilson argues that mindfulness took off in earnest thanks to a range of Asian vipassana teachers, the thought and activism of the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, and the work of the Kabat-Zinn. He tracks several trends, the mystifying, medicalizing, mainstreaming, marketing, and moralizing of mindfulness, that help explain the ubiquity and the readily accepted “nonreligious” nature of mindfulness today. In short, the argument is that mindfulness represents the adaption of heavily edited Buddhist practices and ideas to the fundamental aspects of American culture. “Medicalization,” Wilson writes, “specifically grants mindfulness access to many new sites otherwise off-limits for mere spirituality, such as hospitals, schools, and other places where “nonreligious” culture tends to set the terms of acceptable discussion and practice.”²⁴⁶ He details a number of strategies by which advocates “hoist mindfulness out of a religious context and re-embed it specifically in a scientific, Western biomedical framework. Once this is accomplished, mindfulness becomes available as a resource for any American doctor, therapist, or scientist who wishes to adapt it to his or her interests and needs.”²⁴⁷

The “mainstreaming” of mindfulness is Wilson’s term for the adaptation of

²⁴⁶ Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*, pp. 77

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 77

Buddhist thought and practice to the lives of middle-class Americans.²⁴⁸ He describes a fascinating dynamic in which Asian Buddhist teachers and their American students have begun to apply techniques and philosophies of Buddhist monastics to the concerns of lay Buddhists. Monastic approaches to addressing pain, sorrow, and grief are ambiguous enough in English translation that they can be read as applicable to the struggles of non-monastic people rather than to the monastic effort to more directly remove attachment, end suffering, and seek *nirvana*. For one example among *many* contemporary fields of “mindful” effort, in the “mindful eating movement, Buddhism goes from being self-denying (indeed, denying the existence of a self-affirming,” helping participants lose weight, achieve enhanced health, and enjoy food more.²⁴⁹ The books that mainstream mindfulness are typically written by (and implicitly for) those with access to middle-class educations, professions, and lifestyles, and they are tuned to the generally world-, body-, and commerce-affirming attitudes of (liberal) Americans and American religions.

Wilson’s “Marketing Mindfulness” chapter chronicles a legion of branding tactics by which mindfulness has become “a label for supposedly mindful consumption, which is at root a tool for getting people to spend money and consume products that they might not otherwise purchase.”²⁵⁰ Much as “Zen” became broadly synonymous with “cool,” “spiritual,” and “artistic” in the 1950s and 60s, the term “mindfulness” has become “a generic appellation for anything good, healthy, spiritual, liberal, and so forth... when applied to seemingly unrelated consumer products [it] can help pry open a consumer’s wallet by associating a product with a general sense of spirituality, health, intelligence, or

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 104-132

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 113

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-158. The passage quoted here is from Wilson, 156.

civic-mindedness.”²⁵¹

These marketing strategies overlap with and presumably reinforce what Wilson calls “moralizing mindfulness,” the implicit (and sometimes quite explicit) linking of all things mindful with values at the liberal-Democratic-to-Green end of the American political spectrum.²⁵² “In the process of adapting mindfulness to the widest American market, and thus create the greatest potential for peace,” Wilson writes, “ advocates have simultaneously worked out a type of American Buddhist civil religion.”²⁵³ This civil religion is focused on correcting the profound “disconnection” of Americans’ lives, alienation “from their minds, bodies, surroundings, and each other.” Americans are “parenting mindlessly, eating mindlessly, working mindlessly, and generally living in a detached, distracted manner.”²⁵⁴ Both Kabat-Zinn and Goleman prominently promote this political orientation.²⁵⁵ Finally, according to Wilson, mindfulness advocates tend to see little conflict between the parts of the movement that explicitly seek world peace and the parts that equally explicitly seek to enhance the daily lives of individuals (and sell books).²⁵⁶

I think that Wilson’s book provides a critical component of the explanation for why people are ready to hear the ideas and adopt the practices of contemplative studies today. To put it simply, he shows how something very similar (though not identical) has already permeated American culture to an extraordinary degree, becoming an unremarked staple of medical, therapeutic, commercial, self-improvement, and some

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157

²⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 159-186

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 161

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 161

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 185-186

political discourse. In combination with the wider history of experiential spirituality we have traced to the 19th century, mindfulness can only further prime people working in all of these areas to accept the premises of contemplative studies. However, I do not think the explanation for mindfulness simply *is* the explanation for contemplative studies by default. In what follows I will demonstrate this by attending to the ways in which the histories of the two movements overlap, the ways in which they diverge, and the distinctions that still exist between the two fields, despite their obvious family resemblance. Close attention to the careers of Varela, Davidson, Goleman, and Kabat-Zinn, as recommended by John Dunne, will enable me to show how these histories play out.

What is most critical in Wilson's book, for my purposes, is when and where he locates (an admittedly inexact) starting point for the modern mindfulness movement in America. This is a fine place to focus in on the overlapping (and frequently also diverging) histories of mindfulness and of contemplative studies. If we were to give in to the Western predilection for simple stories of origin, he writes, a good place to start would be "the summer of 1974, in Boulder, Colorado, at a Buddhist summer school for hippies and alternative spiritual seekers established by a flamboyant exiled ex-Tibetan monk."²⁵⁷ This monk was none other than Chogyam Trungpa, who was running the Rocky Mountain Dharma Center when he decided to start a summer school called the Naropa Institute. Among the teachers and performers were countercultural luminaries like Ram Dass, Allen Ginsberg, and John Cage, though Wilson argues that the most important for the history of mindfulness were Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, both

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 32

of whom went on to play prominent roles in the Insight Meditation Society.²⁵⁸ They taught mindfulness together at Naropa, then toured the country leading meditation retreats.

Wilson misses one student of Trungpa, a teacher at the 1974 Naropa summer school who would later rise to international prominence for his work spanning theoretical neurobiology, cross-cultural philosophy of consciousness, and the scientific study of meditation as the co-creator and coordinator of scientific dialogues and conferences with the Dalai Lama. This was Francisco Varela, a central figure in the formation of the Mind and Life Institute and in some of the conversations that seem to have produced both CMind and Mind and Life. Much as the anthropologist Gregory Bateson was doing at about the same time, Varela drew links between modernist renditions of Buddhist thought and understandings of biology based on dynamical systems theory.²⁵⁹ Dynamical systems theory sought to understand the behavior of complex and self-organizing systems and their relationships to the environments around them. Historians have traced its inception to the works of the mathematician Henri Poincare, and shown its subsequent importance in mathematics, various branches of physics, and even biology.²⁶⁰ Both Varela and Bateson (about whom more in the next chapter) understood Buddhism and dynamical systems theory as languages in which to address countercultural concerns

²⁵⁸ This legacy came to the fore at the 2016 ISCS, when Insight Meditation Society cofounder Sharon Salzberg led a closing roundtable on the last evening of the conference. My impression was that the leadership and many of the attendees knew Salzberg and her work very well, and held in great esteem and affection.

²⁵⁹ According to Fields (*How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*. New York: Random House, 1981, pp. 317), Gregory Bateson also attended the 1974 Naropa summer school, and presented on “the evolutionary idea.”

²⁶⁰ Aubin, David, and Amy Dahan Dalmedico, “Writing the History of Dynamical Systems and Chaos: Longue Duree and Revolution, Disciplines and Cultures.” *Historia Mathematica* 29, 2002

about the interconnectedness of human beings with Earth and with one another. In fact, Varela had a three-year post as scholar in residence at the Lindisfarne Association just after Bateson completed his own.²⁶¹ Varela, however, was involved in some of the earliest applications of the tools of neuroscience to the empirical study of meditation practices.

In his 2007 study *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*, longtime collaborator Evan Thompson describes how Varela's work with mentor Humberto Maturana helped elaborate the concept of autopoiesis, which seeks to describe how living systems self-organize and relate to their "environments," which do not exist "objectively" but only in relation to the terms the system sets for itself, in order to maintain its own existence. In their 1991 study *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, Varela, Thompson, and psychologist Eleanor Rosch draw an analogy between autopoiesis and Buddhist ideas about the nature of the human mind. In particular, they draw on the Buddhist understanding of the solid, permanent "self" as an illusion. Instead they envision the human mind as a system involving the brain, the body, and the relationships these maintain with the physical and social environments. Thus they are able to synthesize biological applications of dynamical systems theory with Buddhist critiques of permanence, separate selfhood, and objective perceptual experience.

Biographical information on Varela is quite difficult to come by. John Dunne suggested I review Franz Reichle's 2005 documentary *Monte Grande: What is Life?* (New York: Icarus Films, 2005). This documentary portrays Varela as deeply interested

²⁶¹ William Irwin Thompson recounts this story in Franz Reichle's 2005 documentary *Monte Grande: What is Life?* (New York: Icarus Films, 2005).

in re-imagining biology beyond what he saw an artificial divide between “self” and “other,” and “mind” and “body.” He also believed that “mindfulness,” presented here *before* its rise as a ubiquitous cultural phenomenon, had great potential to reform the practice and the societal role of science.

Interestingly, *Monte Grande* makes the case that Varela’s intellectual pursuits were shaped by influences not directly connected either to science or contemplative practice. His interest in theorizing the connections between people and their worlds was spurred in part by his dismay at the military coup the rise of Pinochet in his native Chile. As he put it himself in the film, the coup profoundly shook his sense of reality and disrupted the plan and the purpose he saw as guiding his life’s work. He had planned, he said, to remain in Chile, do science, and help build the society he wanted to see, but the coup threw all this into chaos. By multiple accounts, it was *after* this traumatic series of events that he began to practice meditation. He speaks of his first meditation teacher, in Boulder, Colorado, to whom he put the question of the purpose and direction of his life. The teacher (Trungpa, curiously not named in the film) replied that instead of searching incessantly for an answer, Varela should suspend the question and get to know himself through meditation practice. This was a defining breakthrough for Varela, who came to believe that all humans could cultivate the skill of self-knowledge through meditation, that it inculcated a compassionate ethic, and that it was an absolute necessity for a science of consciousness. One commentator in *Monte Grande* also argues for the significance of what he calls a “psychedelic dream,” in which Varela felt he saw more deeply into the world than he had before, and was inspired to make a number of new connections.

In *The Embodied Mind*, Varela, Thompson, and Rosch detail the origins of their thought in the Naropa milieu. They write that the first conference on Buddhism and cognitive science occurred while Varela was teaching in the summer program at Naropa in the 1970s. This plausibly places Varela in Trungpa's orbit. The case is strengthened by the individual acknowledgment section wherein Varela thanks Trungpa and Tulku Urygen "for inspiration." The most detailed account comes from Goleman in his 2006 book *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them?*, his account of a March, 2000 Mind and Life gathering featuring Varela, the Dalai Lama, and Richard Davidson. Goleman describes in detail how Varela, a committed leftist fleeing the repressive rise of Pinochet in Chile, found himself first in Costa Rica and then at the University of Colorado, Denver. Adrift and without a goal, he met with Trungpa at the urging of Jeremy Hayward, a Cambridge-trained physicist who had left science to pursue Buddhism with Trungpa.²⁶²

A rationalist with no interest in Eastern philosophy or religion, Francisco nevertheless found himself intrigued by Trungpa's presence - his sharpness, his humor, his quirkiness. At one point as they talked, Francisco told Trungpa about his confusion and his sense of not knowing what to do. Trungpa gave Francisco a full, penetrating look and asked, 'Why do you want to do something? How about doing nothing?' At that, Francisco felt his mind stop. Doing nothing was a radical proposal for someone used to constant mental activity, to continual analysis. But as life had shown, sometimes all that doing just led to more confusion. Now *whammo* - suddenly there was an alternative, peace of mind, and it just might make sense. 'But how do you do that?' Francisco asked. 'I'll teach you,' Trungpa replied - and on the spot showed him how to meditate. Meditation became a kind of love affair for Francisco, a passion.²⁶³

Varela was also heavily involved in the early conversations between scientists and Tibetan Buddhist scholars that gave rise to both the Mind and Life Institute and some of the earliest scientific studies of meditation. Both these developments are of the utmost

²⁶² Goleman, *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them?* pp. 305-310

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 308

importance for the intelligibility of contemplative studies today. In the 2004 collection *The New Physics and Cosmology: Dialogues with the Dalai Lama*, edited by the physicist Arthur Zajonc (himself a central Mind and Life figure), a brief, unsigned history of the Mind and Life Institute chronicles Varela's influence on the organization.²⁶⁴ This account in particular (along with Dunne's testimony) points to his significance as one of the founders of what has become contemplative studies. It tells how Varela, a Buddhist since 1974, connected with the Dalai Lama while speaking at a 1983 Alpbach Symposium on consciousness. "His Holiness was clearly happy for an opportunity for discussions with a brain scientist who had some understanding of Tibetan Buddhism." Varela wanted to keep the conversation going and worked with American businessman (and Tibetan monastery veteran) Mark Engle to do so. Engle was already interested in pursuing such a venture, having learned from his teacher, Lama Yeshe, that the Dalai Lama was deeply interested in a dialogue between Buddhist and Western scholars. He and a friend, Michael Sautman, proposed such an encounter to the Dalai Lama, who gave them the green light to begin planning. At a 1985 meeting of the Ojai Foundation (also an early CMind sponsor), they and Ojai president Joan Halifax agreed to work together, focusing on "the scientific disciplines dealing with mind and life as the most fruitful interface between science and the Buddhist tradition." Varela assumed the role of scientific coordinator for the first Mind and Life meeting in 1987, and played this role again many times until his death in 2001.

This encounter set the stage for some the first studies of meditation with the new

²⁶⁴ I do not assume Zajonc wrote this history because it reappears, again unsigned, in Goleman's 2006 *Destructive Emotions* volume.

tools of neuroscience.²⁶⁵ Evan Thompson describes this early research in detail in his 2014 study *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Science, Meditation, and Philosophy*. In 1998, the Mind and Life Institute (founded after the third Mind and Life Dialogue in 1990) stepped up efforts to create interdisciplinary scientific research on meditation. Varela and Davidson would each perform studies in their labs (Thompson, pp.?). At the first Mind and Life dialogue on meditation research (the 2000 conference Goleman recounts), Varela presented his early, striking results to the Dalai Lama, who subsequently encouraged the assembled scientists to study how meditation practices might be beneficial in Western terms, and if they were, “to find nonsectarian and secular ways to teach them so more people could benefit.”²⁶⁶

Finally, Thompson reports that Varela had been working with other scientists on a series of *public* Mind and Life gatherings (like the one I attended in 2016). The first such gathering occurred at MIT in 2003, with many top researchers in attendance. Thompson calls the meeting “a turning point, a critical moment in the new field of collaborative research on the effects of contemplative practices on the brain and behavior – the field now called ‘contemplative neuroscience.’”²⁶⁷ “Instead of treating meditation as merely another object of scientific study,” Thompson writes, “contemplative neuroscience aims to create a new kind of mind science, where contemplative expertise plays an

²⁶⁵It is my assumption (cf. Wilson, 2014, and Rose & Abi-Rached, 2015) that this research, some of the first to translate “mindfulness” and other meditative practices into the language of neural activation patterns, is a central condition for contemplative studies’ rise to prominence and a major reason it is not written off as “religion. I elaborate on this possibility in the Epilogue.

²⁶⁶ Thompson, Evan. *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, pp. 69

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 70

investigative role as central and indispensable as experimental observation and mathematical analysis.”²⁶⁸ This new field owes its basic conceptual form to the “neurophenomenology” created primarily by Varela in concert with Thompson and Rosch.

The idea of contemplative expertise as an equal partner in the scientific study of the mind arguably goes back at least to early twentieth century Hindu and Buddhist modernizers, as outlined in McMahon above. It also evokes the Romantic idea of using an enhanced account of subjective experience (derived from “religion”) to counter the perceived excesses of the Enlightenment. For the more immediate history of contemplative studies, it brings us to the biography of Daniel Goleman. Goleman provides a good bit of biographical information in his 1977 work *The Varieties of Meditative Experience*. Our story thus far has been rather heavily Buddhist, but the conversations that have shaped Goleman’s contemplative studies work have a distinct Hindu influence. *Varieties* is addressed “to Neemkaroli Baba and Sayadaw U. Pandita, for Tara, Govindas, and Hanuman.” In his short foreword, Ram Dass recounts meeting Goleman in a Himalayan village, with about 20 other practitioners of a variety of contemplative forms, and learning of their shared struggle to integrate their scientific lives with their devotion to Neem Karoli Baba and interest in Buddhist meditation. “Dan could do the intellectual task of integration: provide a needed overview of the spiritual paths and the states of consciousness they traverse,” in the language of the scientific community Dass had long abandoned.²⁶⁹ In his own original preface and his introduction

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.78

²⁶⁹ Dass, Ram. “Foreword.” Goleman, Daniel. *The Varieties of Meditative Experience*. New York: Irvington Publishers. Distributed by Halsted Press, 1977.pp. xvi.

to an expanded 1988 edition, Goleman recounts how he began meditating in college, caught up in the “blossoming of interest in meditation like none the West had seen before” in the 1960s and 70s.²⁷⁰ As a graduate student, he went to Asia to study with meditation teachers on Harvard and Social Science Research Council grants.²⁷¹ The book originated in 1971, when Goleman and five others were in a Himalayan village awaiting a meditation teacher (whom Dass identifies as Munindra), with whom they planned to study. He never appeared. “Instead, there came a steady trickle of Westerners, sent by my Guru, Neemkaroli Baba... Among them were students of virtually every major spiritual tradition... Indian yogas, different sects of Tibetan Buddhism, of Sufism, of Christian contemplation, of Zen, of Gurdjieff, of Krishnamurti... I sorted out for myself the main similarities and differences among all these meditation paths.”²⁷² At this formative juncture in Goleman’s career, we have a veritable World’s Parliament of Religions in a Himalayan village, orchestrated to some extent by an Indian guru – but all of his delegates are Westerners. In Wilson’s account, Goleman goes on to play a significant role in the “medicalizing,” “mainstreaming,” and “moralizing” of mindfulness, later writing on emotional intelligence, mindful leadership, and mindful consumption (and, I would add, the Mind and Life dialogues, as participant and sometime chronicler).

Goleman himself recounts meeting Richard Davidson in 1972, when Davidson

²⁷⁰ Goleman, *The Meditative Mind: The Varieties of Meditative Experience*. Forward by Ram Dass. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988, pp. xxi.

²⁷¹ How did he get these grants? How were the decisions to fund these parts of his project made? Who made them? The answers are probably in a filing cabinet somewhere in Cambridge, and I hope to search for them at some time in the future.

²⁷² Goleman, *The Meditative Mind: The Varieties of Meditative Experience*, pp. xviii

was beginning his graduate study in psychology at Harvard.²⁷³ Davidson was interested in psychology and Asian thought as an undergraduate, had found Goleman's early work on the physical and mental effects of meditation practice (written during postdoctoral research in India) and had come to Harvard in part to work with him. Their first hours together have the random and improbable air of Varela's first encounter with meditation, and of Goleman's Himalayan parliament. Davidson sat next to Goleman in the first session of a psychophysiology seminar, without knowing what he looked like. After the seminar, Goleman drove Davidson home in his Volkswagen microbus, "its dashboard a gallery of photos of the Hindu yogis, Tibetan lamas, and other spiritual teachers I had studied with or encountered during my pilgrimage through India."²⁷⁴ The experience was deeply significant for Davidson, who said it "shattered his mind," and felt very strongly that he was in the right place to pursue his interests in Asian psychologies and the scientific study of the mind. It also led Davidson to travel to India himself to study with some of Goleman's teachers.

Goleman goes on to describe how Davidson's early studies bucked academic psychology's behaviorist orthodoxy, pursuing the neural bases of emotion and the pathways possibly linking cognitive and emotional processes. He did much of this research in relative obscurity until advances in neuroscience made it possible to give very strong empirical backing to theories of the interplay between thought and emotion, for which he gained recognition as a leader in the field. According to Goleman, Davidson's 1999 NIH grant application, the first in which he used the word "meditation," was "a sea

²⁷³ Goleman, *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them?* pp. 181-185

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 182

change in science; just five years earlier it would have been unfathomable.”²⁷⁵

Goleman never really spells out *how* Davidson became interested in meditation, or what he learned from Goleman’s teachers in India.²⁷⁶ Sea changes in science have been one of our central foci, though, and Goleman makes one statement that helps us locate Davidson in relation to the ethical revision of science undertaken by Romantic-inspired counterculturalists. Davidson has “an appreciation that in many ways the currency of modern culture is science, and that if we can address *issues in human consciousness* scientifically, we can bring them to the forefront of the culture in ways that would not just be acceptable but have great impact.”²⁷⁷ Davidson built an improbable scientific career resisting a behaviorist orthodoxy that shot down any discussion of subjectivity as unscientific. Goleman recounts how this orthodoxy was gradually eroded by neuroscience, but in this period, interest in meditation followed by experience of it in India hints at some level of involvement with the ideas of the counterculture. This kind of inquiry risks descending into minutiae of personal biographies, but because of the

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 185

²⁷⁶ I very much want to ask Davidson about this myself, but was unable to secure an interview. This is not his fault; he’s something of an international star in great demand, and his staff (and John Dunne) tried to arrange a time to for us talk, but it didn’t work out this time.

²⁷⁷ Goleman, *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them?* pp. 184, emphasis mine. This recognition of the rhetorical power of science might go some distance toward explaining the movement away from explicit “religious experience” discourse and overt Buddhism, and toward something presented as more fully universal or even scientific, like ideas from a wide range of “religious” traditions in contemplative studies. If so, as I address in the Epilogue, it likely has something to do with the fact that contemplative studies advocates can now speak in the language of neuroscience. Neuroscience may now be in a position to be deployed in the service of Romantic-style critiques of perceived Enlightenment excesses, such as the dismissal of subjective experience. Like many of the thinkers reviewed above, Davidson is a scientist, an inheritor of the Enlightenment, but seeks to reform it to legitimize what he sees as a more complete picture of human experience.

significance of the changes contemplative studies represents, I will attempt an admittedly speculative reading of the “issues in human consciousness” that animate Davidson’s work.

In a September 23, 2009 Google Tech Talk, Davidson gives a broad overview of ongoing work in the field of “contemplative neuroscience.”²⁷⁸ In his wide-ranging talk, He describes the “hybrid field” of contemplative neuroscience; “how the brain can be transformed through engagement with purely mental practices that have been derived from the world’s great contemplative traditions.” This research is rooted in the concept of neuroplasticity, the idea that the brain changes in response to experience. Contemplative neuroscience works on the assumption that this process can be harnessed to change deeply rooted patterns of mental function: “It is clear that the intentional deployment of specific mental training strategies can induce plastic changes in the brain which endure and which can transform our cognitive and emotional styles.”²⁷⁹ He also reviews the possibilities this field presents for studying experience in a laboratory (using expert meditators), and insights into the close relationship between the mind and the body, referring to the “propitious historical moment with the extraordinary possibility of serious interchange between neuroplasticity and contemplative practice.”²⁸⁰

He begins with the concept of “innate basic goodness,” the idea that human beings generally choose altruistic, prosocial behavior, which now has some experimental backing. To cultivate this, he advocates the study of contemplative practices thought to

²⁷⁸ “Transform Your Mind, Change Your Brain.” *Google Tech Talks*, 9/28/2009. Accessed 4/20/2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tRdDqXgsJ0>.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

strengthen the capacity for compassion, “nourishing a basic process which may already be present in the mind.”²⁸¹ Compassion, he said, can be likened in many ways to how scientists view language – it is an innate human capacity that almost always develops, given a conducive social milieu. What difference might it make, he asks, for a practitioner to be educated in the ethical framework in which practices are embedded, not just the techniques themselves? He goes on to discuss the preliminary results of studies that tried to document the behavioral and neurological effects of compassion meditation practices.

Davidson roots his interest in meditation in the same Harvard milieu Goleman describes. He recounts how he went on his first meditation retreat in 1972, while he was a graduate student at Harvard. He also describes how Harvard nearly dismissed him for his unorthodox research interests, and how he took a break from science knowing he would return one day. I assume the interim period is the time in India that Goleman describes. Davidson does not say anything specific about this, but does say that after meeting the Dalai Lama in 1992, he committed to himself and to the Dalai Lama that he would pursue scientific research on the potential benefits of meditation. He reports a “very profound understanding that now was the right time to come out of the closet and go public with this interest, and also to have the prospect of bringing the concepts and tools for neuroscience that we had honed so effectively in the study of negative states like anxiety and fear and sadness, and bring those same strategies to study positive mental qualities, virtuous mental qualities, like compassion.”²⁸²

Davidson also recounts a fascinating anecdote about early meditation research, in

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*

which he, Varela, and other researchers brought neuroimaging equipment to Tibetan monks in Tibet. They placed an electroencephalogram cap on Varela's head and began to describe how they hoped to measure compassion by correlating changes in brain waves with the stages of compassion meditation. As soon as Davidson and Varela stated this intention, the monks burst out laughing in unison. They were amused not so much at the prospect of measuring compassion as they were at the idea of measuring it in the brain instead of in the heart. Researchers in Davidson's lab would later discover that in advanced practitioners of compassion meditation, brain networks strongly linked with generating compassion synchronized with changes in heart rate, and correlated with subjective reports of increased heart rate. Davidson also describes the origin of "neurophenomenology" in Varela's thought and advocates for the importance of correlating neural measures to the disciplined subjective reports of trained meditators.

The first link to our longer story here is the utility of contemplative neuroscience, the collaboration between contemplatives and neuroscientists, in creating new, empirically-grounded ways to cultivate compassion. The second is the enthusiastic recognition of the *subjective* reports of trained meditators, and of their empirically confirmed insight into the close connection between recognizable changes in the activity of the heart and the cultivation of compassion. The behaviorism that dominated psychology when Davidson was a student – and against which the counterculture rebelled – ruled subjective experience out of science completely. The goal of using science to teach and grow compassion also syncs with the countercultural (and Romantic) imperative to realign science with the cultivation of the experience of affective, corporeal interconnection with the social and natural worlds. The use of perspectives well outside

the Western scientific and philosophical traditions to frame basic research also reflects the counterculture's intense interest in Asian thought as a tool to escape from conceptual boxes like mind/body, self/other, human/nature, and science/religion.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, the last of our four originators, is an interesting case in that among all the contemporary figures whose work I have reviewed in this project, he is perhaps the most explicit in the most places about the direct roots of his thought and practice in Buddhism. Nonetheless his personal and intellectual biography follow the basic pattern of Varela, Goleman, and Davidson. All were trained as scientists in the 1960s and 70s, all encountered meditation in the countercultural milieu that helped produce contemplative studies, and all were inspired by that experience to orient their scientific careers toward the empirical study and promotion of the personal and social benefits of contemplative practice. Like the other three, Kabat-Zinn's career has been shaped by profound chance experiences with meditation. Wilson, on whose account I will rely here, reports that Kabat-Zinn, already an associate of Goleman and Insight Meditation Society cofounder Jack Kornfeld, experienced a fateful "vision" of sorts at a 1979 IMS retreat. He saw in a flash how mindfulness meditation could be developed outside formal Buddhist practice and benefit vast numbers of people:

It struck me in that fleeting moment that afternoon at the Insight Meditation Society that it would be worthy work simply to share the essence of mediation [...] with those who would never hear it through the words and forms that were being used at the meditation centers... Why not try to make mediation so commonsensical that anyone would be drawn to it? Why not develop an American vocabulary that spoke to the heart of the matter, and didn't focus on the cultural aspects of the traditions out of which the dharma emerged... [because] they would likely cause unnecessary impediments for people who were basically dealing with suffering and seeking some kind of release from it.²⁸³

²⁸³ Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhism and American Culture*, pp. 84

Wilson argues most persuasively that Kabat-Zinn hit on a strategy of promoting Buddhism by *not* promoting Buddhism.²⁸⁴ In his works, Buddhist concepts are read in ways that shift them into terms Americans understand, changing them in the process. At a general level, the concept of “skillful means,” traditionally traced to the Buddha, offers Kabat-Zinn a license to alter certain emphases in Buddhist thought to adapt them to a different cultural environment. For example, plays on a connotation of “dharma” that points to “the laws of nature” to remove dharma from the cultural and historical particularities of Buddhism and move it into the realm of naturalistic thought and empirical validation. He also recalibrates the concept of “karma” to connote physical notions of cause and effect. Kabat-Zinn effectively subsumes the entirety of the Eightfold Path under “mindfulness” to bring “the heart of Buddhist meditation” in the center of modern biomedicine and the awareness of American society at large.²⁸⁵

Indeed, the structure of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction training is quite Buddhist, incorporating elements of vipassana, zazen, and yoga. It encourages participants to relate differently to embodiment, fear, suffering, and mortality via an “essentially Buddhist approach to the existential facts of pain,” realizing that they are “already whole” even if ill (Wilson, 92-93). Kabat-Zinn’s skillful rhetoric has allowed mindfulness move into a vast array of medical and therapeutic fields, and to enter the American consciousness as a “nonreligious” philosophy and technique:

Reconceptualizing mindfulness as a biomedical or psychological technique moves the expertise into the scientific realm and aligns it with secular, modernist ideals. It legitimates mindfulness through the gatekeeping authority of science and institutionalized medicine. This allows it to infiltrate spaces that are held as off-limits to many religious practices, such as hospitals and public schools... In the mindfulness movement Buddhist

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.103

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-91

practice has been removed from the realm of religion and professionalized to become the property of psychologists, doctors, scientists, and diet counselors, to be engaged in by clients instead of believers, who are not expected to take refuge, read scriptures, believe in karma or rebirth, or to become Buddhist.²⁸⁶

I think the lives and works of Varela, Goleman, Davidson, and Kabat-Zinn make sense as products of the counterculture's fusion of Romantic religious experience and modernizing interpretations of Asian traditions. They all center subjective experience of the body, of emotion, of interconnection and felt obligation, cultivated with practices derived from religious traditions, as a corrective to the atomized and technocratic world of postwar American life. They all sound like "metaphysicals" (not to mention scholars of comparative religion) in the central place they give non-rational, deeply emotional, and transformative experiences of insight and synthesis (in arguably "religious" settings) in their own biographies.

We can drive this point home further via the biography of one more attendee at an Indian meditation seminar, at nearly the same time, with some of the same people who were present at Goleman's retreat. Present along with Dass, Goleman, Goldstein, and Salzberg was CMind cofounder Mirabai Bush, on hiatus from graduate study and civil rights and antiwar activism at the University of Buffalo in Buffalo, NY. Bush relates this experience in a February, 2013 interview with the *Secular Buddhism* podcast.²⁸⁷ She explains that she took a break from study and activism to travel to Asia with the hope of finding a deeper meaning for the work she was doing. Her trip ended in India, where by chance she met Sharon Salzberg on the street. Salzberg invited her to a meditation retreat for Westerners in Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha is traditionally believed to have

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 103

²⁸⁷ Meissner, Ted. "Episode 156: Mirabai Bush – The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society." *Secular Buddhist Association*, 2/17/2013. Accessed 2/21/2018.

achieved enlightenment. Goleman identifies his retreat as hosted by Buddhist teacher Anagarika Munindra; Bush names Munindra's close friend, the Buddhist teacher S.N. Goenka, as the convener of the retreat she attended.²⁸⁸

Bush reports that many of the people in that seminar became "the beginnings of the Buddhist awakening in the U.S."²⁸⁹ She stayed a while longer in India, studying for a time with Ram Dass's (and Dan Goleman's) Hindu guru Neem Karoli Baba, whom she identifies as her primary teacher²⁹⁰. The ways of living she learned there inspired her to "live a life and create an environment that would be informed by Buddhism wisdom" upon her return to the U.S.²⁹¹ This led to her start a business (called Illuminations) structured around the Buddhist principle of right livelihood, develop ways to put compassion into action to reduce suffering with the Seva Foundation, and eventually work to found the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.²⁹²

²⁸⁸ In a 2011 article in *Lion's Roar*, Mirka Knaster and Robert Pryor, authors of a book on Munindra, describe him as a close friend and religious fellow-traveller of Goenka's for nearly five decades. See Fisher, Danny. "'There Is No Pizza in Nibbana:' Mirka Knaster and Robert Pryor on Anagarika Munindra." *Lion's Roar*, 12/28/2011. Accessed 6/20/2017. <https://www.lionsroar.com/there-is-no-pizza-in-nibbana-mirka-knaster-and-robert-pryor-on-anagarika-munindra/>.

²⁸⁹ Meissner, Ted. "Episode 156: Mirabai Bush – The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society." *Secular Buddhist Association*, 2/17/2013. Accessed 2/21/2018.

²⁹⁰ It fascinates me that this Hindu teacher is central to the contemplative training of two major figures in the development of contemplative studies, when so much of the direct Asian influence on the field has been Buddhist.

²⁹¹ In an interview with Krista Tippett on American Public Media's *On Being* program, Bush recounts working with Goenka, Tibetan teachers, and the Hindu teacher Neem Karoli Baba. See "Mirabai Bush – Search Inside Yourself: Contemplation in Life and Work." *On Being*. <https://onbeing.org/programs/mirabai-bush-search-inside-yourself-contemplation-in-life-and-work-2/>, 9/1/2016, Accessed 2/23/2018.

²⁹² Contemplative studies (as embodied in CMind and Mind and Life) has differentiated from mindfulness in that it embraces techniques from a wide range of religious traditions, as a number of my interview subjects testified. It is also less of a popular phenomenon,

Bush was already an activist when she came to contemplative practice. In the Secular Buddhism interview, she reports that the first time she sat to meditate, she had a glimpse of the interconnectedness of life and the world, the fact that we all suffer, and our shared desire to be free from suffering. She recalls thinking “I guess anyone who meditates is going to want to relieve the suffering of others,” but came to realize that “not everybody really sees it that way.”²⁹³

Bush’s next project was the Seva Foundation, a charitable organization that has worked to put a Buddhist understanding of compassion into practice in social action, using spiritual and countercultural circles to channel financial and scientific resources to restore sight to millions in Asia. “Out of the sixties there was this sense, people either became political activists, if they were holding the vision of that time, you either became a political activist, and very secular, or you became spiritual, and you left all that behind,” Bush said. “That was quite true for many years, but we felt in Seva that we were really working to embody both. So we started giving a series of retreats for social activists, and that led me to start the center for Contemplative Mind in Society. The mission there was to introduce contemplative practice, as well called it, which was the whole range [of Buddhist and many other practices] to introduce them into secular settings, to help people to integrate another way of being and knowing into the work that they’ve been doing.”²⁹⁴

and for now seems more confined to the academic and nonprofit worlds. Dan Barbezat told me that in the case of CMind, the expanded range of perspectives is intentional and was undertaken out of a desire to be more inclusive. The question of the influence of mindfulness on contemplative studies is addressed in Footnote 298, below.

²⁹³ “Mirabai Bush – Search Inside Yourself: Contemplation in Life and Work.” *On Being*. <https://onbeing.org/programs/mirabai-bush-search-inside-yourself-contemplation-in-life-and-work-2/>, 9/1/2016, Accessed 2/23/2018.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

The Center went forward exploring the range of possible applications in different areas of American life. They held a series of workshops with scholars across the board. Daniel Goleman was involved, Bush reports, establishing another link between the CMind and Mind and Life spheres. “What we discovered was that in each field... people... had very few opportunities to talk about and look at deep questions they had... often questions of morals and ethics, but also looking at their original motivations for going into these professional fields... there were questions that were essential to that field but [that] would arise once they began exploring their own minds, and allowing themselves to engage questions of the heart or basis of their professional commitment. [For example], in law, what is the relationship between justice, and law, and the truth?”²⁹⁵

The pattern we traced in the biographies of Varela, Davidson, Goleman, and Kabat-Zinn reappears here. Bush, a member of the baby boomer generation that drove the counterculture, experienced a major breakthrough in meditation practice. This experience gave her an altered understanding of reality and redefined her personal and professional path. It led her to attempt to bridge pursuits that modern culture tends to try to separate – in Bush’s case, business, activism, higher education, and values derived in large part from Buddhism (though she was also influenced by the Hindu teacher Neem Karoli Baba). I argue that these breakthroughs in thought have been possible because of the intertwined histories of modernizing discourses in Asian religions and the Romantic discourse of religious experience.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁶ My goal here is not to reduce Bush’s experience to its cultural context. Cultural context is what I am able to access because I am a humanities scholar (and, arguably, because I am not a contemplative practitioner myself). Do those who have profound experiences in meditation access a universal potential of the human body? Do they

I think Wilson places insufficient emphasis on the role of this dynamic in the rise of mindfulness and underestimates the potency of its continued influence on the evolution of American mind-centered “spirituality.” His analysis of mindfulness is critical to understanding how academics are ready to receive contemplative studies (especially as scientific, “nonreligious” therapeutically effective) today. He does briefly mention the connection between American Buddhism and intellectual underpinnings of the counterculture, like the human potential movement.²⁹⁷ However I suspect the historical trends that produced the counterculture (and contemplative studies) are more important to the intelligibility of mindfulness than he suggests.²⁹⁸

somehow encounter aspects of reality beyond the usual purview of the academy’s methodological naturalism? I do not know. What I am trying to understand is how it has become possible (again) to talk about these possibilities in academic settings.

²⁹⁷ Kripal describes the importance of the human potential movement in the evolution of contemporary spirituality in *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*.

²⁹⁸ A reader could fairly ask the inverse question – how has mindfulness influenced contemplative studies? Dan Barbezat addressed this issue as follows: “There are overlaps and their contemporaneous coexistence has influenced their developments (with what we could agree to call the ‘mindfulness movement,’ affecting contemplative studies far more than the other way around).” He did not elaborate on how mindfulness has influenced contemplative studies. My guess is that the very broad *popular* currency of mindfulness (as something nonreligious, scientifically grounded, and practically efficacious) helps contemplative studies gain traction in academic and nonprofit spaces. I derive the form of this hypothesis from Harrington and Dunne’s study of the rise of mindfulness. They propose that the early reception of mindfulness was aided by previous efforts to use Buddhist-derived meditation techniques in medical and therapeutic settings. Projects like Erich Fromm’s collaboration with D.T. Suzuki and Herbert Benson’s studies of the “relaxation response” helped produce a cultural climate where everyone “knew” that Buddhist meditation could be used for the practical benefit of laypeople (even non-Buddhist ones). Contemplative studies operates in an environment suffused with mindfulness discourse, and many advocates are mindfulness practitioners and teachers themselves. The terms are frequently used almost interchangeably, it seems, until you actually ask someone to distinguish them. In her 2015 study *Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy: Social Justice in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2015), professor, yoga teacher, and ACMHE regular Beth Berila says explicitly that she is using the terms “mindfulness” and “contemplative practice” interchangeably. But, critically, I do not think Jon Kabat-Zinn would accept that usage. He means something

In his “mainstreaming” chapter, Wilson writes that modern mindfulness, with its transfer of meditation from monastic to lay contexts and its consequent focus on making the most of pedestrian commercial and family life, has been the death of the countercultural Buddhism of the Beats and their readers. He contrasts the freewheeling, rebellious, anti-bourgeois ethos of Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums* to the sprawling landscape of guidance for “mindful” business, leadership, sex, birthing, parenting, eating, aging, underwater basket-weaving, etc.: “For Americans, then, the proper response to impermanence is drink as deeply as possible from the cup of life because it may be removed at any moment.”²⁹⁹ In his analysis, by which I am mostly persuaded, mindful Americans are essentially practicing a this-worldly, “practical benefits” Buddhism which actually has some Asian precedents. “Repeating (in their own unique way) the ancient pattern of creative reinterpretation to meet local needs and anxieties,” Wilson writes, Buddhist and non-Buddhist thinkers are “domesticating Buddhism for an American culture with different – but no less worldly or culturally determined – concerns than the Asian cultures from which they received Buddhism.”³⁰⁰

I have no reason to doubt that this analysis accurately describes a significant swath of American mindfulness enthusiasts. As Thomas Frank argues in *Conquest of Cool*, the larger counterculture has evolved with and even *as* corporate culture since its earliest days. However, this analysis frequently *does not* describe advocates of the field

very specific by mindfulness, something *not* interchangeable with, say, ACMHE’s open-ended concept of contemplative practice. So, the rising tide of mindfulness has likely helped lifted contemplative studies, but it may be a general popular idea of “mindfulness,” as much a looser kind of attitude or ethos, as the specific clinical framework of practices propagated by Kabat-Zinn.

²⁹⁹ Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhism and American Culture*, pp. 123

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132

of contemplative studies. Go to an ACMHE seminar or a Mind and Life Symposium (especially one three days after we elect President Trump), and you will not see America domesticating Buddhism – you will see Buddhism domesticating America.³⁰¹ More specifically, you will see what Americans of many spiritual stripes are working to accomplish in spaces created *in large part* by Buddhist and Buddhist-influenced (and some Hindu-influenced) participants in the counterculture.³⁰² It has been my consistent impression that by filtering *back into* powerful institutions under the auspices of contemplative studies, the radical ethos of countercultural spirituality has *gained strength* rather than petering out. Varela, Davidson, Goleman, and Kabat-Zinn may never have been dharma bums, but they may ultimately prove more effective in creating a more just and compassionate American society. Their work – some of it identified as mindfulness, some as contemplative studies/sciences - has helped create a space where world-class interdisciplinary scholarship is beginning to shift the ethical, epistemological, and even ontological grounds of academic institutions and knowledge production. Their research, writing, and perhaps even their own “religious experiences” have not just adapted Asian philosophies and practice to modernity – they are changing modernity.

In our August, 2016 phone interview, I asked Rose Sackey-Milligan how contemplative studies took shape at CMind. She made a very direct connection to the counterculture period of the 1960s. Many people, she said, influenced the development of contemplative studies there, including Mirabai Bush, Jack Kornfeld, and Ram Dass.

³⁰¹ Both processes are possible, though I see one, and not the other here. Buddhists have helped create a very unusual and potent intellectual space that diverse others are now entering and using.

³⁰² As McMahon helps us to show, they did so in large part by accommodating new readings of Buddhism to Western Romantic-empiricist impulses.

These individuals and many others went to India to explore contemplative practices and to “find themselves” more generally; “They were all in India together.” Out of those people and their own practices came the early beginning of the Center. “Cosmically,” she said, “if you want to think of it that way, they were part of a larger wave of spirituality emerging, an interest in Eastern forms of spirituality taking place in the US in the 1960s, more so than in the 70s and the 80s.” At this point in our phone interview I did a brief double-take and said “wait, I thought the counterculture was, you know... over. Right?” On the contrary, she said: “*This is the legacy of that. A real strong legacy that has continued, to the point that meditation has become mainstream*” (emphasis mine). If this is true, it represents a renewed vitality and range of influence for the Romantic discourse of “religious experience” and parallel and overlapping currents in Asian thought.

Carolyn Jacobs and Dan Barbezat expressed essentially the same view. Dan told me that CMind’s “brand” (in consciously derisive air quotes) comes out of the 1960s. Carolyn said the Cambridge circle described above, and their experiences in India, laid down critical foundations for contemplative studies (she included CMind’s Mirabai Bush in this group – more about this below). A number of them had been part of CMind, Mind and Life, and Naropa at various points (Carolyn is still part of Naropa and CMind). The lineage, she said, is out of Buddhism, and the 1960s. “They move forward out of the richness of a tradition they learned and experienced while they were there... they all spent extensive time in practice.”

In Carolyn’s view, which several other interviewees have confirmed, CMind, Mind and Life, and Naropa are not the same thing. They are related, but they have taken

different paths. Mind and Life was founded by the Dalai Lama, Varela, and Engles, originally as a forum for dialogues between Buddhism and science, and developed a strong scientific bent, and has stayed closer to Buddhist roots.³⁰³ CMind began as a venture to train people to apply contemplative practice to social justice work and higher education, and gradually expanded to include people from many fields outside the natural sciences. “It’s not a research-based organization,” Carolyn said. “Expect a different kind of pedagogical scholarship to permeate CMIND conversations.”

“Did they have any idea where this might go? I don’t know,” Carolyn said, reflecting on the India/Cambridge axis that helped produce the founders of contemplative studies. . I just know they knew... they moved on a path that clearly indicated that they had something major that they wanted to share, and had deep commitment in this world.” What I think has been shared is a new wrinkle in the continuing effort to use Romantic and Asian-inspired conceptions of individual experience to resist and reform the rationalizing and atomizing tendencies of the scientific culture that has grown out of the Enlightenment.

In a way the goal of this chapter has been to explain, in the longest feasible historical view, one of the ways in which meditation became mainstream, not in popular culture but in the academic mainstream and especially among a certain contingent of elite academics. Perhaps the key to the rise of contemplative studies is not the concept of “mindfulness” but “mind.” Looking back to the Romantic movement, to Buddhist and Hindu modernizers, to the counterculture and its contemporary descendants, we can see that the “mind” at issue is not just the human cognitive faculty. “Mind” – for Samuel

³⁰³ Though the 2016 ISCS program, described in the Introduction, may indicate that this is changing.

Taylor Coleridge as much as for the Mind and Life Institute – becomes a cipher for a much wider spectrum of *experience* including corporeal, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Recall that in their introduction to *What Matters: Ethnographies of Value in a Not So Secular Age*, Courtney Bender and Ann Taves argue that “*experience* is a term that crosses over various domains of “secular” and “spiritual” and “religious,” while carrying with it elements of its different uses in various institutional contexts and epistemological frames.” From this perspective, mindfulness and contemplative studies appear to be two branches from the same tree. They represent two of the most recent (and most successful) iterations of the argument for softening (if not collapsing) the distinctions between “mind” and “body,” “emotion,” “environment,” and “society,” then following out the ethical, epistemological, even ontological implications of this alternative conception of subjectivity, to the point of altering our commonsense boundary between “science” and “religion.”³⁰⁴

A comment from Brian gives us perspective on the magnitude of the shift and on the accomplishment it represents for those involved. The success of the dialogues between scientists and the Dalai Lama, he said, “opened an interest in ‘how do we study experience academically?’ *This was raised in our time first due to Buddhist influence in the West*” (emphasis mine). I would add only that both “the West” and particular groups of Buddhist and other Asian thinkers have been primed to make this advance in thought

³⁰⁴ Though contemplative studies is more of an academic and less of a popular phenomenon, intentionally draws on a wider range of traditions, and is working to amend a perceived over-reliance on Buddhism.

by the foregoing centuries of discourse on “religious experience” at the boundary between “science” and “religion.”³⁰⁵

However we can best classify distinct yet overlapping groups like ACMHE and Mind and Life, I think there is a strong case that they are succeeding in moving the needle on what counts as “religion” and what counts as “knowledge,” at taking certain ideas and practices out of the “religion” column and depositing them in the “knowledge” column. Given the inroads it has made in mainstream academic institutions, it may represent a greater success in this regard than any previous incarnation of the cultural trends from which it derives. I will explore more examples of (and precedents for) this phenomenon in the next chapter, and address possible causes for it in the Epilogue.

³⁰⁵ Contemplative studies, though, has widened this debate beyond the usual “Western” and Buddhist parties to, say, mindfulness, by including contributions from Jewish, Christian, Taoist, and Afro-Caribbean traditions. According to Rose Sackey-Milligan, Diné and Chippewa Native American representatives also were included in early social justice programs at CMIND.

Academic and Other Norms in Contemplative Studies' Predecessors and Present:

“We speak here... about the politics of the nervous system—certainly as complicated and certainly as important as external politics. The politics of the nervous system involves the mind against the brain, the tyrannical verbal brain disassociating itself from the organism and world of which it is a part, censoring, alerting, evaluating... We must... encourage systematic objective research by scientists who have taken the drug themselves and have come to know the difference between inner and outer, between consciousness and behavior. Such research should explore the application of these experiences to the problems of modern living—in education, religion, creative industry, creative arts.”

-Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (Ram Dass), in the Watts, Alan. *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness*. Foreword by Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert. New York: Pantheon Books, 1962³⁰⁶

Question: Where in the world, today, can Harvard psychologists talk like this, about issues like this - about the cultural and ethical context of science, the types of experience that should inform science, the vision of the human being our and our place in the universe that science should serve?

Answer: Contemplative studies. Contemplative studies represents a loosening of a configuration of academic and cultural norms around not only around “religious” ideas and forms of subjectivity, as we’ve seen, but also around disciplinary boundaries, the concerns academic disciplines will adopt, their epistemologies, and sometimes even their ontologies. This aspect of contemplative studies is as much a legacy of the counterculture as anything else.

Its ethos is rooted in part in a period when these boundaries became less rigid under the pressure of vast cultural change, in particular a rapid expansion of

³⁰⁶ Leary and Alpert refer to the idea of scientists literally taking psychedelics to experiment on their own consciousness. I employ this idea later on in a metaphorical way.

technological power and fears about its unethical use. It is not so surprising that in this period, ideas from the Romantic movement began to return to prominence to counter a behaviorist psychology that denied consciousness, a Cold War that threatened to destroy it, and a conformist culture that sought to rein in its corporeal, creative, and spiritual dimensions. In concert with modernist readings of Asian traditions (propagated by figures like D.T. Suzuki, Chogyam Trungpa, and Alan Watts), they sought to question the epistemological, ethical, social, and even ontological norms of what William Irwin Thompson called the “military-industrial-academic complex.” The radically interdisciplinary ventures of this period did not go away but continued developing in interdisciplinary spaces on the margins of the academic world, like Esalen, the Lindisfarne Association, and Naropa University. It is almost like countercultural scholars and activists have been “under ground” since the mid-70s, and have finally found an opening with the academic mainstream today, in the form of contemplative studies (in my concluding epilogue, I will offer some speculations as to why this has happened).

The reader may notice that at numerous points in this chapter, it will become difficult to discern whether it is disciplinary boundaries, ethics, epistemology, or ontology that is at issue. This is no accident and indeed, for contemplative studies advocates, it is by design. Like the counterculturalists of the 1960s and today’s scholar-activists, they perceive all of these dimensions as inextricably linked. Sometimes they target one in isolation, but frequently, as I will describe below, they go for all of them at once. At the center of the effort are “scientists who have taken the drug themselves” (so to speak), researchers, scholars and others who have worked to bring about changes in the structure of their experience of themselves vis-à-vis the world, including the social world.

University of British Columbia philosopher Evan Thompson’s closing keynote at the Mind and Life Institute’s 2016 International Symposium for Contemplative Studies shows how these currents have resurfaced in the contemporary moment (and as we saw above, Harold Roth’s introduction to this talk directly linked Thompson’s purpose to the countercultural ethos and institutions of the 1960s and 70s).³⁰⁸ In his address, titled “What is Mindfulness? An Embodied Cognitive Science Perspective,” Thompson articulated empirical, epistemological and ethical reasons to reimagine the scientific study of mindfulness in broad interdisciplinary terms. Being mindful, he argued, is not in the head, and not in the brain. Instead, it is an “embodied cognitive skill and social practice,” one whose origins and significance cannot, therefore, be described solely in the terms of neuroscience.³⁰⁹ For clarity’s sake, I will set off my description of his talk from my analysis of it.

Talk:

Thompson intended this argument as a corrective to two problematic ideas: that the place to look for understanding of mindfulness is the brain, and that being mindful is being nonjudgmental about your own mind. These two ideas are problematic because, Thompson said, they leave the body, social environment, and culture out of the study of mindfulness, and they feed “narcissism, excessive concern with our own private selves... Narcissism and the mass marketing of mindfulness to the individual consumer go hand in

³⁰⁸ “ISCS 2016- Closing Keynote – Evan Thompson.” *Mind and Life Institute*, 12/6/2016. Accessed 4/4/2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q17_A0CYa8s.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

hand.” Referring to the 2016 presidential election, he added “this past week has made us painfully aware of the larger social costs of this kind of affluent narcissism.”

“What mindfulness is or can be,” Thompson continued, “depends fundamentally on what social practices we enact.” It is possible to monetize mindfulness, to make it a consumer product focused solely on self-improvement. It is also possible to connect mindfulness to social justice, environmentalism, community-building, education, and care for those in need, in hospitals, pain clinics, mental health treatment, and hospice.³¹⁰

Analysis:

These are very interesting things for a philosopher of cognitive neuroscience to say. Thompson makes explicit connections between his work on the scientific and philosophical study of consciousness and the social, political, and environmental implications of that work. Philosophers of neuroscience are generally not known to do this in public. When they do, their perspectives generally don’t sound like they came from cultural studies, but Thompson is no ordinary academic philosopher.

Talk:

Thompson moved further into historical analysis and political critique, arguing that fetishized versions of Asian religions have become part of the way global capitalism sustains itself. Modernist Buddhism, he said, has had a hand in making mindfulness a commodity. Citing John Dunne’s work, he argued that critiques of “inauthentic” modernist Buddhism are not enough, since “while knowledge of tradition is very

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

important, tradition never speaks with one voice.” Appealing to tradition “cannot determine for us what mindfulness is going to be for us here and now. We have to decide that for ourselves, and the decisions we make depend on the kinds of social practices we want to enact.”³¹¹

Analysis:

These statements reveal a vastly more sophisticated understanding of “religion” than typically informs scientific analyses of contemplative practice (or, for that matter, of anything to do with religion). They signal a deeper form of interdisciplinary engagement. Philosophers of neuroscience typically do not cite religion scholars or make substantive use of their work. In fact, many of them, like Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Patricia Churchland, comment on “religion” at great length without consulting current scholarship on religion. Thompson is not quite interrogating the category of religion itself, yet, but is introducing a much wider range of academic knowledge on “religious” traditions.

Talk:

Thompson went on to criticize the “neuro-centric” rhetoric of contemporary mindfulness research as both empirically inaccurate and politically and ethically suspect. He rejected cognitive science theories that attempt to interpret the meaning of human neural activity in isolation from natural and social environments because these do not accurately capture the way the brain interacts with and depends on the body and the environment. Further, and just as importantly, “*this scientific construct loops back onto*

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

how we think about ourselves... we think of ourselves through the reified construct of the mindful brain” (emphasis mine). Philosophers of neuroscience rarely perform this kind of normative reflection on the social consequences of scientific theories, but Thompson is trying to change that in concert with many fellow-travelers in contemplative studies. His own theoretical perspective, the “enactive” approach developed in concert with Francisco Varela and Eleanor Rosch, draws explicitly on Buddhist critiques of reifying the mind and the brain. In his concluding comments, he set out a blueprint for rethinking the scientific study of meditation in these terms:³¹²

Talk:

Every scientific study of meditation should have an anthropologist, and ethnographer of science, and a cultural historian as part of the team... every scientific paper on meditation should have a reflexive treatment of the experimental investigation as itself a cultural practice that contributes to constituting the phenomena being studied... the point is to encourage us to be mindful of, and to take responsibility for, how our explanations and models are always contingent upon our questions and ways of framing the phenomenon that we’re seeking to understand.³¹³

Analysis:

Thompson is advocating here for meditation research that crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries, putting humanists and social scientists in collaboration with those studying the physical activity of the brain. Buddhism, which for most of its history is quite distant from the philosophical and cultural traditions underlying modern science, is nonetheless a theoretical resource here, but its contribution is very carefully defined and understood in its historical context, with the help of specialists in the study of

³¹² *Ibid.*

³¹³ *Ibid.*

religion. Finally, Thompson is urging scientists studying meditation to think, with the aid of social scientists, humanists, and Buddhist philosophy, about the ethical implications of how they conduct their work.

Talk:

In this address, Thompson made no mention of ontology. In his 2007 book *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*, he describes how the “neurophenomenology” he created with Varela and psychologist Eleanor Rosch refrains from making ontological judgments, including any stand in favor of the metaphysical naturalism of the sciences. These judgements, he argues, are simply beyond the ambit of empirical investigation.³¹⁴

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Analysis:

So where are we now, and why? To my perception, we are in a place where the boundaries between academic disciplines, between the sciences and the humanities, between science and “religion,” and between empirical and normative inquiry have begun to break down. We are also in a place where at least *some* researchers are willing to speak publically about different ontologies, or at least to resist a reflexive naturalism.³¹⁵ The last time the culture of the academy worked this way was the same 1960-1970s countercultural period when the founders of contemplative studies were completing their own educations and launching their careers as activists and cultural entrepreneurs.

As I argued in the previous chapter, Romanticism was a critical part of this mode of thought. So were “modern”-ized Asian traditions, reimagined in part with aid from Romantic ideals. I think it is safe to venture that one thing they share, at an abstract level, is a suspicion about reified categories. Romantics and Buddhists didn’t practice this suspicion for anything like the same reasons until the twentieth century.³¹⁶ Still, it makes a certain amount of sense that a movement owing much to particular innovations of Buddhism and Romanticism would systematically interrogate divisions between mind and body, body and brain, human and environment, self and society, science and religion, and normative and empirical modes of thought. Looking back at the kinds of

³¹⁵ This appears to be happening across academic disciplines in a renewed willingness to revalue experience, comparison, and even ontological exploration in critical theory and anthropology. Rosi Braidotti’s work on “posthuman” ontology typifies this trend, which I will address in more detail in my epilogue.

³¹⁶ Buddhists and Romantics have been interrogating reified categories independently for a very long time (Buddhists considerably longer). It is only in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries that their concerns began to converge in the manner typical of the counterculture.

interdisciplinary encounters that grew out the countercultural period can provide some context for the fluidity of norms we can see in contemplative studies today.

For example, in his study *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, Fred Turner argues for counter-intuitive connections between the worlds of countercultural art and thought and the technological productions of military research.³¹⁷ Turner's central figure is the (ex-military) tech entrepreneur Stewart Brand, founder first of the countercultural touchstone the *Whole Earth Catalog*, and then of *Wired* magazine. Brand became involved with Ken Kesey's notorious, Grateful Dead-connected Merry Pranksters performance troupe while still serving in the military. He brought with him the influence of a peculiarly interdisciplinary culture in Cold War scientific research, which was later transferred into the counterculture's broad, pseudo-Romantic effort to reform the Enlightenment. It was this milieu that nurtured the ethos of the *Whole Earth Catalog*.

Turner reports that the *Catalog* served as an ideological sounding board as well as a trade magazine for counterculturalists attempting to create new sustainable modes of living on the many rural communes that sprang up in the 1960s. From one side, their efforts to live in harmonious interconnection with each other, with the rest of the human world, and with the natural environment were bolstered by Asian perspectives on consciousness, read through the ubiquitous experience of psychedelic drugs. From another side, the same desires (along with the ecological understanding needed to run a farm) were supported by the rise of dynamic systems theory in biology, ecology, and information science. The peculiar fit between modernist Buddhism and dynamic systems

³¹⁷ Turner, Fred. *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

theory lies in their shared emphasis on the tight, even co-constitutive relationship between the “mind” and its surrounding environment.³¹⁸ We can see precursors of the contemplative studies emphasis on the interconnection of selves, societies, and ecologies in dynamic systems theory’s focus on the creation of life forms and subjectivities through processes of reciprocal interaction between organisms and their surroundings. As Gregory Bateson puts it in *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (1979), “most of us have lost that sense of unity of biosphere and humanity which would bind and reassure us all with an affirmation of beauty,” a problem Bateson intends to solve by describing “the pattern which connects” language, cognition, cellular functions and the behavior of whole ecosystems.³¹⁹

“We are stardust, billion-year-old carbon,” Joni Mitchell sang, “and we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.”³²⁰ The ambivalence toward science in this song (“Woodstock”) characterizes the movement Turner studies as well as contemplative studies and the historical predecessors we have reviewed. Technological power has moved to the center of human self-understanding, and also constitutes the greatest threat to human survival. Our bodies and brains are literally made from elements forged in the cores of supernovae, and yet this same atomic power threatens to destroy us unless we “get ourselves back to the garden.” If we are not wise enough to digest the fruit of the

³¹⁸ The best explanation of dynamic systems theory that I have ever seen is in Evan Thompson’s own work, specifically the 2007 volume *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*. He also makes an explicit analogy between dynamical and Buddhist conceptions of the way simultaneously produces its own reality and is inseparable from it.

³¹⁹ Bateson, Gregory. *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. Bantam Books, 1979, pp. 18

³²⁰ Mitchell, Joni. “Woodstock.” *Ladies of the Canyon*. Reprise, 1970.

tree of knowledge, our exile will only worsen._ Turner helps us understand the interdisciplinary nature of the countercultural project of conforming technological power to the needs of the whole earth, humans, animals, and the environment in the reciprocal interconnection described in systems theory. Systems theory, in turn, was able to draw aesthetic and spiritual support from modernist readings of Buddhism already popular in the counterculture and influential on leading scientific thinkers like Bateson and Varela.

It is important to point out, again, that the logic in use here is no simple reproduction of Romanticism. The counterculturists, from Varela and Bateson to Murphy, Price, and Joni Mitchell, were far bolder and far more synthetic in their approach to science than were the early Romantic writers - far bolder and far more specific than Thoreau, James, or Underhill, for that matter. Blake wrote that the atoms of Democritus and Newton's particles of light were sands upon the Red Sea shore, where Israel's tents did shine so bright. In "Woodstock," we *are* atoms, "billion year old carbon" - religious experience is the key to understanding this truth at a visceral level and living with, rather than rejecting, scientific knowledge. The perception of the tight link between Buddhist understandings of "emptiness," interconnection, and consciousness on one hand and the theory of computational and living systems on the other solidified the science-religious-experience nexus in an unprecedented way.

It is illustrative to turn to Bateson's landmark 1972 collection *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, a synthesis of systems theory and countercultural ideology, as lovely as any contemporary work and as a bonus, dripping with high-test British snark.³²¹ The second

³²¹ Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to An Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychology, Evolution, and Epistemology*. Chandler Publications for Health Sciences, 1972.

leaf in my library's 1972 Chandler edition features a blurb from none other than Stewart Brand, "Editor, Whole Earth Catalog": "In this invaluable book, systemic intellectual clarity and moral clarity convene and evoke a convincing ethic of what is *sacred*, what is right for life" (emphasis mine). Near the end of the acknowledgements list in the foreword, Bateson credits "the men who over the last 200 years have kept alive the idea of the unity between mind and body," among them "*William Blake*, the poet and painter, who saw 'through his eyes, not with them,' and knew more about what it is to be human than any other man."³²² In the book that follows, Bateson seeks to describe how Heaven, the wild flower, and the poetic imagination share patterns of organization, how mind, body, and ecosystem make sense together as part of a single context. As Brand blurbs above, the purpose of this inquiry has as much to do with ecological as with epistemological crisis – and Romanticism is centrally involved in Bateson's inspiration to tackle both.

In this ecology, "minds" are not transcendent loci of thought contained within the souls, the nervous systems, or even the *bodies* of human beings. "Mind" is instead a name for a system of information processing, in principle any system which adjusts its activity based on its own past and on incoming future influences. Bateson includes not only humans-in-environments but entire societies and ecosystems, and even the action of natural selection itself in the category "mind." This theoretical shift necessitates parallel revolutions in epistemology and in ethics, especially in terms of how we imagine our dependence on our environment. I could keep paraphrasing, but the original is just too good:

³²² *Ibid.*, xxii, emphasis in original

There are experiences and disciplines which may help me to imagine what it would be like to have this habit of correct thought. Under LSD, I have experienced, as have many others, the disappearance of the division between self and the music to which I was listening... this state is surely more correct than the state in which it seems that "I hear the music"... Blake [knew] that the Poetic Imagination was the only reality. The poets have known these things all through the ages, but the rest of us have gone astray into all sorts of false reifications of the "self" and the separations between the "self" and "experience."³²³

Bateson links the body, the mind, and the surrounding environment by dissociating the concept of "mind" from the conscious mental activity of human beings and re-describing it in terms of natural processes of information transfer and interpretation found at many levels of biological complexity. Our failure to understand this continuity between our minds, our bodies, and the natural environments that sustain them is the cause of mounting crises in our society, our selves, and our environment.³²⁴ Where Buddhism and systems theory connect here is the idea that we "suffer" (attachment, or ecological crisis) because of our failure to treat our "selves" as impermanent constructs of the larger ecosystem.

Because we reify our concept of self, we do not understand how we depend on our environment, and we are condemned to relate to it in an instrumentalizing way. We imagine self and society in conflict with nature, but as Bateson puts it, the organism that defeats its environment destroys itself. "I think," he writes, "that cybernetics is the biggest bite out of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge that mankind has taken in the last 2000 years. But most such bites out of the apple have proved to be rather indigestible -

³²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 463

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 482

usually for cybernetic reasons.”³²⁵ That is, our greatest technological advances frequently produce more harm than good because we lack a cybernetic (/Buddhist) understanding of the complexly interconnected world into which we throw them.

Bateson is hardly sanguine about the odds that governments will make wise, rather than destructive use of cybernetic theories, but recall Stewart Brand’s portentous blurb, above. Bateson’s synthesis of systems theory and “Eastern” “religions” has aided the larger countercultural project of return to a “sacred” way of life, a life premised on harmony between advances in scientific knowledge and the altered awareness produced by psychedelics and by religious experience. Coming viscerally to know ourselves as stardust, as billion-year-old carbon, is the only way to get ourselves back to the garden.

The point of going on like this about theorists from forty years ago is to show how contemplative studies’ shakeup of academic norms may owe a great deal to past efforts to use “religious experience” to humanize and redirect the rhetorical and physical power of science – which also depended heavily on rhetoric and even values derived from Romanticism and “modern”-izing currents in Asian thought. Bateson’s term as scholar in residence at William Irwin Thompson’s Lindisfarne Association was followed directly by that of Francisco Varela, whose relationship with the Dalai Lama has been central to the formation of contemplative studies theory and institutions, in particular the Mind and Life Institute. Among my interview subjects, John Dunne in particular spoke of the centrality of Varela to the formation of this field of inquiry, and he spoke partially from personal experience. Evan Thompson (William Irwin’s son) was a close collaborator and co-author of Varela, whose theory forms the basis of much of Thompson’s own work.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 476

We have already had occasion, in the previous chapter, to discuss the biography of Francisco Varela and his significance for the shape of contemplative studies/sciences today. Here I want to attend specifically to his own interdisciplinary articulation of the way contemplative perspectives produce a new scientific epistemology that carries deep ethical implications. In the *Monte Grande* documentary reviewed above, colleagues including H.H. The Dalai Lama refer to Varela as a very unusual scientist, one expert in his own field but also capable of engaging deeply with Western and Asian philosophy. We can find an illuminating expression of Varela's thought in an essay titled "Laying Down a Path in Walking: A Biologist's Look at a New Biology and Its Ethics," in the 1988 collection *Human Survival and Consciousness Evolution*, edited by Stanislov Grof and Marjorie Livingston Valier.³²⁶ Even the title of the collection points to the social, ecological, and ethical context in which the architects of contemplative studies saw their work.

Most biologists would probably say biology has an ethics in the sense of research performed with scientific integrity, and many would probably affirm a broader social mission of aiding the progress of knowledge, technology, or health. Varela has something more radical in mind. He claims at the outset to speak as a biologist and not a cultural historian, but he sure sounds like a cultural historian: "To me the chance of surviving with dignity on this planet hinges on the acquisition of a new mind. This new mind must be wrought, among other things, from a radically different epistemology

³²⁶ Varela, Francisco J. "Laying Down a Path in Walking: A Biologist's Look at a New Biology and Its Ethics." In *Human Survival and Consciousness Evolution*, Stanislov Grof and Marjorie Livingston Valier, eds. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.

which will inform relevant actions.”³²⁷ Varela wants to rethink the epistemological bases of biology because biology has become such an important source metaphors and of theoretical understanding in the contemporary world. He proposes a shift from a Cartesian understanding of mind and nature to one that is implicitly derived from Buddhist thought, as we saw above. Instead of thinking of a living system as one which interacts with a real “external” world by “representing” it, we need to think instead about autonomous systems that stand out from a background by virtue of its internal interconnectedness (and *not* true separation). One view imagines a relation of correspondence between internal and external, and the other imagines a relation of coherence, “an autonomous unit with an environment whose features are inseparable from the history of coupling with that unit, and thus with no privileged perspective.”

Varela imagines living systems (including minds) not as subjects representing real features of a real world, but as aspects of the world marked by particular kinds of organization, relating to the rest of the world on their own terms. As he explains it, the stable patterns the nervous system constructs for itself have much more influence on the “processing” of incoming information than do any aspects of the “external” world. The organism “relies essentially on internal coherences capable of specifying a relevant world.”³²⁸ This biology “expresses the possibility of a world view beyond the split between us and it,” carrying with it an ethics predicated on “permanently giving up certainty.”³²⁹

More precisely, it is based on giving up the tendency we living creatures have to bring forth a world, forget we have done so, and then to fixate on it as certainty. This

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.205

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 214

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 215

temptation of certainty is the solidification of self against other, of delimitation of national boundaries in opposition to other human societies; in brief, the source of suffering. It is also the pivot point that many traditional teachings have cultivated for centuries... My hope is that if modern science can rediscover *in its own way* this profound truth, then the ears of our contemporaries will be more open and receptive because of the authority that science carries in our Western world.³³⁰

The point of providing so much detail about Bateson and Varela is to illustrate some possible historical reference points for the interdisciplinary ethos of modern contemplative studies. The ways Bateson and Varela cross disciplinary boundaries to ask vast questions of the nature and value of knowledge, and the theories of interdependence they pioneered, also help explain the success with which groups like ACMHE have integrated contemporary theories of social justice into contemplative studies. In deploying Romantic and Buddhist rhetoric to advocate inquiry into the underlying ethos and the cultural and ecological consequences of scientific power from the perspective of alternative states of consciousness, they presage both the questions and the methods of interdisciplinary innovators in today's contemplative studies.

In her keynote at the 2016 ISCS, titled "Moving from Colorblindness to ColorInsight: Contemplative Inquiry, Research, and Practice in the Work of Transformative Justice," Rhonda Magee made an argument that overlapped with the perspectives of Bateson, Varela, and Thompson at one level, but added new layers as well.³³¹ For Magee as for these earlier thinkers, contemplative practices provide a way to think about the social and ecological context of science in a more sophisticated way. This work can only be conducted across disciplinary boundaries and across the typical

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.216

³³¹ "2016 ISCS Keynote – Rhonda Magee." *Mind and Life Institute*, 12/6/2016. Accessed 2/23/2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xcNaWUt_uk.

epistemological and ethical norms of the academic world. The innovation of Magee and others involved in the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society has been to expand the focus on interconnection to include a more explicit emphasis on social justice, specifically as it involves race, gender, and class, as part of the social and ethical context of knowledge production. For this keynote, as well, I will separate description of the talk and my analysis of it.

Talk:

Speaking several days after the 2016 presidential election, Magee, a specialist in race and immigration law along with contemplative pedagogy, told the audience that her talk was motivated in part by the fear and pain the election result created in communities of color. This opening gesture presaged the point of the keynote, the claim that one's sociopolitical location matters to the production of knowledge and helps determine what kind of science contemplative researchers will create. She called for a "shift in how we think about the work of contemplative science that actually opens up this question of justice and equity and ethics."³³²

"I'm really speaking to your heart," Magee continued. "I'm really speaking to the justice issues that animate your work, and I know and believe you wouldn't be here if you didn't have some way of finding your own ground in this topic." She asked the audience to look around the room for historical and cultural markers "that impact our opportunities and our life paths," consider how the human community at large was and was not represented in the (majority white) space, and consider the implications of that for the

³³² *Ibid.*

range of perspectives shaping the priorities of scientific studies of contemplative practice. If we continue to accept the norm of disinterested, ahistorical, individualistic thought and practice in the academy, what kind of knowledge will contemplative science produce? “We have been blinded to the experiences of so many different types of people,” she said, referring not only to the relative privilege of most in the audience but also the alienation and apathy that helped elect Donald Trump. “What does that do to the science we create,” she asked, “and who is being left behind as a result?”³³³

Magee’s next question surprised me. Earlier in the talk, she had referred to herself as “really more a person who applies your research, so I’m speaking to those in this room who may not have seen their research as being so relevant, really it is centrally relevant to the work that some of us are doing on the front line trying to change the world.” Now she moved in a more critical direction, asking why, in the explosion of meditation research over the past few decades, there has in fact been very little scientific research on the effects of meditation on bias.³³⁴ There have only been a few such studies. All of them are very recent. Nearly all of them involved people (and especially women) of color researchers. Why?³³⁵

Magee certainly echoed the interdisciplinary spirit of the early innovators of (what has become) contemplative studies, but her talk also shined a very bright light on

³³³ *Ibid.*

³³⁴ A number of my interview subjects referred to contemplative as primarily a humanistic field of inquiry distinct from the more empirically and physiologically focused field of contemplative *sciences*. There has been much interest in social justice and innovation in social justice pedagogy under the auspices of CMind, but there have been almost none of the laboratory-based studies most frequently identified with contemplative sciences (and the Mind and Life Institute). Indeed, two of my subjects cast this distinction in what sounded to me like polemical terms. I will discuss this further in my epilogue.

³³⁵ “2016 ISCS Keynote – Rhonda Magee.” *Mind and Life Institute*

an academic norm that has yet to be challenged in nuts and bolts scientific practice. She argued that unspoken norms of whiteness in the academic world prevented the majority of researchers from seeing race as *their* problem. She cited some of the few studies of meditation and bias, including one of her own, and argued that the meditation research community has failed to recognize the value of this work. “The practices actually do have an effect,” she said. “People say there’s nothing you can do about bias - that’s actually not true, and the work that we are doing is showing specific concrete benefits to a world that needs it, if we understood the value of this,” and invested institutional, intellectual, and emotional resources in making it real.³³⁶

Magee’s last point was that to change the academic norms that have made meditation research unresponsive to the specific experiences of nonwhite people, researchers themselves needed to explore the use of contemplative practices to work on their own biases and broaden their own capacity for empathy. They need to do that work before they will be able to more meaningfully include people of color. They can use a range of contemplative practices to reflect more deeply on “the suffering of communities that are not our own, and take it in, in a way that changes us.” They should move from there to community engagement and, she said, will *then* find people who are very willing and very able to engage productively with them. Magee ended her talk with a short contemplative exercise, asking the audience to reflect on the content and note what thoughts, emotions, and sensations arose as they did so, where in their bodies they felt them, and what aspects of their own identity made them someone else’s “other.”³³⁷

³³⁶ *Ibid.*

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

Analysis:

Magee explicitly described how scientists and those working for social justice need *one another* to develop each pursuit to its fullest potential. She asked scientists to include concepts of power and privilege, especially around race, in how they conceptualize their own knowledge production. Finally, in a move on the epistemological and ethical norms of scientific research, she explicitly asked scientists to cultivate alternative forms of awareness in order to respond ethically to the nature and the potential of their work and to their relationships with their fellow human beings. To put this in perspective, one might hear a talk something like this at the American Academy of Religion, the Modern Language Association, or even a continental philosophy section of the American Philosophical Association, but there wouldn't be a large number of scientists in the room, and meditation would not have been part of the program.

As we have seen in our readings of Thompson and Magee's keynotes at the 2016 ISCS, contemplative studies scholars' willingness to question normative, epistemological, ontological, and disciplinary boundaries may be rooted in their desire to correct what they see as failures to recognize interconnection. Sometimes the unrecognized interdependence is between thought and emotion; sometimes it is between consciousness and the environment; sometimes it is between scientific knowledge, political power, and systems of oppression. Implicit in Magee's keynote, in Davidson's 2016 ISCS introductory remarks, and in my interview with Carolyn Jacobs was the concern that Trump's election resulted in part from *liberals'* failure to empathize with and remedy the suffering and alienation of some of Trump's strongest supporters. It is

possible to think of this focus on interconnection as the hybrid product of Romantic and Buddhist concerns.

Recall William Irwin Thompson's desire in the early 1970s to create a contemplative "counter-institution" to counter disconnected ways of knowing and living. The framework for contemplative studies was created by people in various degrees of rebellion against the epistemological, ethical, and even ontological norms of what William Irwin Thompson called the "military-industrial-academic complex." In his study *At the Edge of History*, Thompson leaves his graduate program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology because the culture there fails to connect the power of scientific knowledge with concern for nature and for others. He comments on how this environment affected the people working in it. Those who were stars in the professional world suffered breakdowns in relations with partners and families because they were actively trained out of relating to the world in bodily and emotional terms.

What we have seen thus far in contemplative studies is unprecedented success in moving *back into* the academy with these values in mind. As if bringing Thompson's ambition full-circle by design, some contemplative studies advocates have gone further. For example, Mirabai Bush, the cofounder of CMind whom we have met repeatedly throughout, has made strategically chosen inroads with industry and the military. She has helped create contemplative interventions for Google and, of all places, the United States Army. In her September 2016 interview with Krista Tippet on American Public Media's *On Being* program, Bush describes how she created Google's *Search Inside Yourself* employee training program with help from Daniel Goleman and longtime Google

employee Chade-Meng Tan.³³⁸ Tan tried to start a meditation program at Google himself, and got no takers. Then, he called Bush, who was running CMind at the time. “What we identified,” she tells Tippet, “was that people, employees there are all quite young, very smart, graduated at the top of their class from MIT or Stanford, had been in front of their screens most of their lives. So, after talking for a whole day and figuring out what was going on there, I suggested that we could offer the same practices, but emphasize the practices that more directly cultivate emotional intelligence and that we could frame it in a different way.” Bush called on Goleman (“who was also in Bodhi Gaya with us back all those years ago”) to give a talk at Google on the importance of emotional intelligence in the workplace. 140 Googlers came, and the program got off the ground. As of September, 2016, more than 2,000 had taken it. In a January, 2013 *New York Times* column, Bush describes the effects she saw as she taught Googlers to meditate.³³⁹ “Data-driven Google engineers questioned the value of developing capacities that can’t be quantified, but many of them learned better ways to communicate. One engineer told me his wife had noticed a change in the way he listened to her. She asked him: ‘What happened to you?’”³⁴⁰ This statement represents a significant reversal of Thompson’s experience, 40 years prior, of the top-flight MIT grads of the world. Thompson found MIT unmoveable and toxic, its denizens intellectually mighty but socially and emotionally stunted. He felt forced to found a “counter-institution” in response. Bush managed to reach the same population in the heart of the tech industry.

³³⁸ “Mirabai Bush – Search Inside Yourself: Contemplation in Life and Work.” *On Being*

³³⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/06/jobs/teaching-meditation-techniques-to-organizations.html>, accessed 6/23/2017.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Perhaps even more surprising is Bush's experience teaching mindfulness with the United States Army. Bush, who drove war resisters to Canada in her Buffalo, NY student days, described this venture to Tippet in their 2016 conversation: "I mean, for me, going through all this, the big thing has been just when I thought, 'Oh, I'm beyond thinking in terms of self and other, it's all us.' And then I'm confronted with another invitation, like to the Army, and I discovered that within me, it turned out I didn't think it was all us, I thought that they were really different."³⁴¹ Bush helped create a program to retrain soldiers who had been taught to treat overwhelming force as the first option. In Iraq and Afghanistan, this approach harmed them and the local population. "And they had to learn to go into a situation and be aware of what was going on and then use force only as a last choice," Bush said. "And it took deconditioning and time and it took some real mindfulness and in the process it was really helping to support life — save life — their own and the people in the communities. And so I felt like it was a good thing to do."

In a September 2016 interview on the Be Here Now Network's podcast, Bush explains her work with the army as the outgrowth of the teachings of Neem Karoli Baba.³⁴² In the course of living out the imperative to "love the spirit of Maharaji in others," Bush tells how she has been "drawn into places where you could hear that I'd spent all these years in alternative realities."³⁴³ She describes a retreat for corporate executives, whom she had previously written off. The last meditation session featured a compassion practice for all sentient beings, which the teacher listed at length. At the end,

³⁴¹ "Mirabai Bush – Search Inside Yourself: Contemplation in Life and Work." *On Being*

³⁴² "Mirabai Bush – BHNN Guest Podcast – Ep. 03- Evolving Love." *Be Here Now Network*, 9/28/2016. Accessed 6/24/2017. <https://beherenownetwork.com/mirabai-bush-evolving-love/>.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

all of the executives were crying. It was a breakthrough experience for Bush. “It’s just us,” she realized. “It’s always just us.”³⁴⁴

Her work with the Army began in 2008 with a call, followed by a visit, from an Army chaplain seeking solutions for burnout among soldiers and chaplains. At the time, many soldiers were suffering through a cycle of repeat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Army had an average of one chaplain per thousand troops. The chaplains themselves were burning out and suffering vicarious trauma. Bush wondered how to her work could be made relevant to the military. She recalled that Ram Dass taught a seminar on the *Bhagavad Gita* at the first Naropa seminar in 1974, and drew on the insight that “action without attachment” is very difficult to put into practice. The rest of the *Gita*, she said, teaches that “the way to hear the right place to act is meditation and other forms of yoga, including devotion, study, service... so that you understand the interconnection of all life and its moral implications.”

“I decided I really needed to listen to him,” she said of the Army chaplain who approached her. After conducting studies on meditation’s effect on resilience in Army medics and chaplains, she planned a small meeting between meditation researchers and military officials.³⁴⁵ It grew rapidly, to the point that it had to be held in the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., attracting great interest from the military and meditation research communities. “Pretty much everybody in that room thought that they would never be in a room with the other people in that room,” she says of this experience. The two sides of the exchange had a deep impact on one another. “I loved those guys,” Bush said. “I really felt like I was able to see the humanity and love and suffering in all of

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

them... that's been such an important teaching for me.”³⁴⁶

Bush's explorations of meditation in business and military contexts are perhaps the most surprising of contemplative studies' many leaps across commonsense boundaries.³⁴⁷ They represent the ethos and the strategies of the counterculture completing an ironic full circle. Some of those who “dropped out” have come back to “straight” society and are working to change the “military-industrial-academic complex” from within. The last boundaries they are crossing are the ones that defined their movement in the first place.

After this much detail on this many hippies, the reader may be wondering: how does all this connect back to contemplative studies, and to its historical sources in Romanticism and in modernizing Asian thought? Look back to the epigraphs from Michelle Chatman and from Friedrich Schiller at the beginning of Chapter 2. Look back at Evelyn Underhill, Swami Vivekananda, and William Irwin Thompson. The point, in the broadest possible strokes, is to use contemplative practice - not quite twenty-first century code for “religious experience,” but close, in terms of its function - to reconnect dimensions of human life and of our dependence on the wider world that have been separated by the perceived excesses of Enlightenment thought. In the last analysis, some contemplative studies advocates are living out the claim that the “military-industrial complex” itself can be rejoined with and reformed by the introduction of contemplative

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁷ Her experience is also surprising for the significance of the influence of the Hindu teacher Neem Karoli Baba, guru to Ram Dass as well as contemplative studies pioneers Bush and Daniel Goleman. This influence complicates contemplative studies' largely Buddhist genealogy. The same could be said of Ram Dass himself, a longtime collaborator in Bush's nonprofit service work, and the first person named in the acknowledgements in *Contemplative Practice in Higher Education*.

practices. Once again, religions offer experiential resources for repairing the fractured modern world, but one need not “be religious” to access them.

Epilogue:

In the preceding chapters I hope to have articulated some steps toward a persuasive answer to the question of how contemplative studies advocates think about what they are doing and how they persuade others to accept their ideas. This epilogue seeks to outline some new questions that have appeared in the course of my research and writing of this project. There are aspects of contemplative studies and its appearance in the current moment that I have not been able to explore fully in a project of this size and time scale.

The first question concerns a division between what seem to be two poles of interest within the field. This split, between advocates of “contemplative studies” and “contemplative sciences,” was not readily apparent until late in my writing process. I had seen references to both, but somewhat blithely assumed that advocates understood the same thing by them. My first clue appeared in my interview with David Germano, who told me that the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia was *not* named to imply that its goals were the same as, say ACMHE. When I asked him to define contemplative studies, he argued that one meaning is the humanistic enterprise of studying contemplation. It can also function as a code word for contemplative pedagogy, which often includes people who do not necessarily have expertise in any particular contemplative tradition. A third meaning is studies of contemplation involving scientific as well as humanistic methods. Germano prefers the term “contemplative sciences” for this third type of research since because (he says) the term “studies” implies an

exclusively humanistic approach (as in cultural studies, gender studies, religious studies).³⁴⁸

This distinction seems to signal a dissent within the broader of field inquiry I have been calling contemplative studies, especially in terms of its epistemological and ontological critiques of the rest of the secular academic world. Germano's comments on "the secular" (and, by implication, "religion") do not directly address this issue, but I think they connect his comments to other scholars' advocacy for contemplative "sciences" over against contemplative studies. Germano is sympathetic to "religious" people who wonder why there is no place for their ideas and practices in the academy, especially in light of the obviously false idea that "secular" people have no biases, assumptions, etc. Some very sophisticated people, he said, look at this situation and say "why not include other systems of thought?" At the same time, he argued, the academy has its own standards, practices, and activities. If one really wants to pursue intellectual life from a religious perspective, there are other places to do that.

³⁴⁸ I am not entirely sure he intended to apply this meaning to each and every project at UVA's Contemplative Sciences Center. I do not believe he wanted to imply that everything happening there had to include both scientific and humanistic work. For example, the center's Web site lists a course at UVA titled "Community Engagement, Social Entrepreneurship, and Contemplation," which seeks the "integration of contemplative practices, values, and ideas with a range of service activities at the University of Virginia, including community development, international development, humanitarian aid, and social entrepreneurship... to institute a sustainable component of the U.Va. curriculum which will offer rigorous training in the basic intellectual framework and skill sets necessary to be effective agents of change." It is cross-listed between nursing, public policy, religious studies, and global development studies. It has no obvious empirical component. See "Community Engagement, Social Entrepreneurship, and Contemplation." *Contemplative Sciences Center*. Accessed 2/11/2018. <http://www.uvacontemplation.org/content/community-engagement-social-entrepreneurship-contemplation>. Germano also told me that most people involved in the UVA initiative were interested first and foremost in finding new ways to engage students.

The “secular” academy, Germano continued, is a place to foster critical thought and to take rigorous approaches to various topics. At the same time, it is (or should be) a place to help students learn and develop as whole people. College can be a much more powerful learning process, a much more beneficial experience, if these two aspects can be connected. He sees contemplative “sciences” as capable of connecting these two dimensions.

John Dunne engaged the “sciences” / “studies” divide in a more direct way. When I asked him how he became involved in contemplative studies, he argued strongly against using the term to describe his work. “That’s a term people in the humanities use,” he said. In his view, “contemplative studies” is about *doing* contemplative practices, “not seriously asking academic questions about them.” In his analysis, discussed briefly in Chapter 2, contemplative studies takes a rhetorical cue from a form of liberal, anti-institutional spirituality traceable to Schleiermacher. He linked it to “a certain style of religiosity that is about feeling,” and is designed to insulate itself from scientific critique (“if it’s all feelings, it can’t be belief”). Under this model, he said, religion becomes non-empirical, not institutional, but experiential and private – and so turns out to be compatible with science, after all. This style of religiosity, he argued, is the target of discourses like mindfulness – “it gets configured in a way that fits the modern ‘spiritual but not religious’ form... That means it has to be really not empirical... but then we say it is empirical in a way.”

Dunne defined contemplative sciences in terms of resisting this impulse to treat the claims of liberal spirituality as if they are obviously true, or rather as if they are not claims at all but transparently true, unremarkable descriptions of the mind and the world

as they really are. McMahon's "Buddhist modernism" thesis is getting articulated in Varela's work, he said. Specifically, "there are features of some nondual Buddhist styles that are amenable to being imported into that context" which "align for totally different reasons with a kind of cultural moment." Still, in his words, it is "totally wrong" to say that being nonjudgmental is a feature of Buddhist practice. Rather, pre-existing Buddhist practices were very appealing from the perspective of this style of liberal spirituality that begins with Schleiermacher. Contemplative sciences advocates (among whom Dunne included the Dalai Lama) try to work outside this style of religiosity. On the other hand, "*the contemplative studies people feel free to be religious*, the contemplative science people do not... In contemplative studies it's totally part of their work" (emphasis mine).

I do not think that "religiousness" is a plausible basis for separating contemplative studies and contemplative sciences. Even granting that those on the contemplative "studies" side are "religious" for taking other traditions and sometimes other ontologies so seriously in an academic setting, they are not alone. There are precedents for such a strategy in contemporary feminist and anthropological theory. Feminist scholars like M. Jacqui Alexander and Gloria Anzaldua write openly of their experiences with religious practices and supernatural forces, and they think with these experiences in their academic work. Anthropologists like Eduardo Viveiros de Castro argue that instead of imposing their own ontology on their subjects' reports, ethnographers should try to let their own fundamental assumptions about reality interact reciprocally with those of their subjects. It has long been a concern of feminist and critical scholars not to reflexively impose a culturally specific ontology on the findings of their research, and still less on the individuals who act as their "data." So, what *should* happen when practitioners of a

variety of intellectual traditions begin to offer insights into the academy's own empirical and pedagogical challenges?

Religion scholars most of all should be in a position to address this problem. We should keep in the front of our minds the closely related conclusions of scholars like J.Z. Smith, Tomoko Masuzawa, Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Ann Taves, Peter Harrison, and Peter Gottschalk that "religion" is not a natural kind. "Religion," as Smith puts it, is always a second-order category, and its use always reflects the interests of the one doing the categorizing. So what does it mean to say that contemplative "studies" advocates feel free to be "religious?"³⁴⁹

I agree with meditation practitioners of multiple stripes in saying that in all these cases, intention matters. Germano, Dunne, and Brian all averred that it was wrong to elide the differences between traditions of contemplative practice and academic inquiry, most especially in an effort to *surreptitiously* bolster a religious viewpoint by presenting it as "nonreligious" or "scientific." They all argued that there was a vitally important difference between asking critical, academic questions about contemplative practices and working to promote contemplative practices. In my experience, people on the contemplative studies side are rarely interested in converting anyone to anything, they are aware of the ambiguity built into what they are doing, they are usually very transparent about what they are doing, and they promote contemplative practices because they have

³⁴⁹ Of those more closely identified with contemplative "sciences" and closer to the Mind and Life Institute, I think Germano provided me with the most nuanced answer to this question. Earlier in our interview, Germano spoke of the difficulty of translating traditional practices into classroom contexts without a thoroughgoing knowledge of *both* the tradition in question and of higher education. In my interpretation, he is concerned with the integrity of "religious" traditions *and* with the independent traditions of academic inquiry.

found them to be useful. My only critique – and maybe it is more of a suggestion – is that they could understand what they are doing not in binary religion / not-religion terms, but instead in terms of a long-running debate about what counts as knowledge, what forms of experience have epistemological value, and what systems of thought and practice may provide meaningful perspectives on experience. Indeed, bringing such a perspective into play is one of the central points of this entire project.

With all due respect to everyone involved, I do not think the division between contemplative studies and contemplative sciences exists in practice. If the Mind and Life Institute and centrally important figures in its history, like the Dalai Lama and Richard Davidson, never conceived of their project as contemplative studies, well, why are their biannual global conferences titled “International Symposium for Contemplative Studies?” As I hope to have shown in some detail in Chapter 2, all the central Western actors in the founding of the Mind and Life Institute began as practitioners of *exactly* the kind of individualized “spirituality” Dunne connects to Schleiermacher. Francisco Varela, arguably the most significant of any of these figures, was a student of Chogyam Trunpga, Rinpoche *and* a collaborator of the current Dalai Lama, two of the most important contemporary exponents of what McMahon calls Buddhist modernism. The American counterculture’s encounter with Hindu and Buddhist teachers is *central* to the intellectual formation of important figures at both the “sciences” and the “studies” poles. These young scholars and scientists integrated Asian ideas into *exactly* the experiential, anti-authoritarian mode of liberal “spirituality” we (and Dunne) have traced to the Romantic movement. As I argued above, the founders of contemplative studies/sciences attest to the central importance for their careers of what William James would have undoubtedly

classified as “religious experiences.” Both the Mind and Life Institute and the Association for Contemplative Mind in Society are, in my reading and firsthand experience, *inextricable* from the confluence of Buddhist modernism and individualist spirituality in the mid to late 20th century.

I would believe a claim that some advocates are trying to put this division into practice now for good intellectual reasons. Dunne and Germano certainly have valid concerns, but I do not see, for example, the Mind and Life project as separable from the straightforwardly humanistic and activist ACMHE, which absolutely promotes contemplative practice and sees no issue at all with doing so. First of all, ACMHE stalwarts Rhonda Magee and Dan Barbezat spoke at the 2016 ISCS, with Magee delivering a prominent keynote. Furthermore, their presentations may be evidence that the concerns of the two organizations are beginning to converge. That the leadership saw fit to invite them makes it reasonable to suppose that they thought the membership needed to hear what they had to say. Given the exigencies of scheduling, they undoubtedly made this decision before The Trumpening served liberal white people notice that racism still exists.

I also think it is important to emphasize again what I dare call the radical nature of Richard Davidson’s opening address on the first night of the 2016 ISCS. He spoke at an academic conference as one of the world’s preeminent scientists, and yet openly invoked an ethical and political orientation for his work and for the work of the Mind and Life Institute. Even more surprising, he advocated taking seriously the claims of advanced and otherwise balanced contemplative practitioners to have experienced things we would call “supernatural.” What do we make of this? One thing I make of it is an extra layer of

skepticism about the idea that contemplative “sciences” and contemplative “studies” can be so easily separated. I am convinced that neither is separable from the confluence of Buddhist-modernist and Romantic thought in the counterculture. I do not believe either has really diverged from this history of discourse about the role of religion in modern society (Davidson certainly hasn’t). As a religion scholar of roughly the J.Z. Smith persuasion, what I have to say about them is that, based on their shared origins in countercultural religious experience, some charge of essential “religiousness” could be equally well applied to both of them, but instead ought to be applied to neither of them. It doesn’t really do any analytical work. Both are instead part of a long-running dispute over what “religion” means and what role “it” will play in modern society, what forms of experience and what forms of knowledge modern society will count as legitimate.³⁵⁰

Now, as repeatedly promised in enough footnotes to run around the world twice – *why* is contemplative studies seemingly succeeding in affecting this dispute? Recall that Brian credited the Buddhist-modernist encounter with the counterculture, and the resulting contemplative studies / sciences movement(s), with no less an accomplishment than resurrecting the serious scientific study of consciousness. It is likely that this movement was well-positioned to capitalize on the explosion of neuroscience research of the 1990s and 2000s, which was enabled by new technologies for measuring the activity

³⁵⁰ Here, I even have to critique Brian a little bit. He argued on the one hand that “religion” is a fungible category, and that one must always attend to who is using it and what they are trying to do with it. Yet I feel he had a preconceived idea in mind of what religion was, and wasn’t, given his comments that many people involved in Mind and Life don’t think of it as “religious” despite being surrounded there by “religious” people. I think he hit the nail on the head when he argued that people in contemplative studies *want* their work perceived as nonreligious... but the conclusion I would derive there is that *to the extent that anyone takes them seriously, they are succeeding in altering the boundary between what is “religious” and what is not.*

and structure of the brain. This, to me, seems like a plausible explanation for the changes observed in our History chapter - the move away from explicit reliance on renewed “religion,” the reduced reliance on Buddhist rhetoric and techniques, and the adoption of a kind of expanded “world religions” framework to delineate resources for the claimed cross-cultural human potential of “contemplative practice.” Scientific backing confers the rhetorical benefits of repeatability and universality. It makes it possible to represent contemplative studies in terms of human potentials and experience presumed to exist worldwide. It makes it easier to justify the claim that no “religious” beliefs – only universally available, repeatable practices and potentials of consciousness – are at stake in contemplative studies.

Francisco Varela, who performed some of the earliest neuroscientific studies of religion with Davidson and others, held something like this view, believing that advances in neuroscience were critical renewing the scientific study of meditation and of subjective experience more broadly. Brian endorsed it, as well. It is also likely that the closeness of contemplative studies, both theoretically and historically, to certain currents in psychology contributed to its rapid expansion within research and practice in university settings. It shares important intuitions and even some historical links with the humanistic psychology that provides the theoretical basis for fields as diverse as business management, psychotherapy, social work, education, and law enforcement. The work of the British sociologist Nikolas Rose (and one work co-written with Joelle M. Abi-Rached) may provide the most fertile ground for following up on the relationship between brain science and the rise of contemplative studies, especially if one wishes to

do so from the perspective of critical theory.³⁵¹ Basically, on the one hand the field is perilously close to one of the most potent contemporary forms of “biopower,” and on the other hand its leaders are increasingly aware of this (Thompson’s ISCS keynote is a strong indicator of this awareness).³⁵²

In his 1998 study *Inventing Ourselves: Power, Psychology, and Personhood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Rose provides a critical history of the contemporary architecture of psychiatric power. He writes that over the course of the 20th century, psychological theories have come to provide the primary vocabulary in which Europeans and Americans think about themselves. He also argues the closely related point that psychology now provides the empirical and ethical backing for various forms of institutional and political authority, from corrections, to social work, to education, to business management. Modern authority based in psychological knowledge of the nature of human subjectivity can legitimize its claim to govern (its) subjects ethically, so long as (in step with a new psychological conception of ethics) it can plausibly claim to enhance “the capacity of individuals to exercise authority over themselves.”³⁵³ We can find contemplative studies proponents, like Rhonda Magee and Evan Thompson, making similar critiques of the use of contemplative practices simply to regulate the self, to become more hedonically satisfied or better adjusted. It is my belief that when Magee spoke of the need to affirm multiple ways of knowing, and

³⁵¹ See Rose, Nikolas, and Joelle M. Abi-Rached. *Neuro: The New Brain Sciences and the Management of the Mind*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

³⁵² An earlier version of this project (expressed, for example, in my dissertation prospectus), included a planned Foucauldian study of the way contemplative studies exploits the rhetorical power of science. For reasons of space and feasibility, that component of the project will have to wait for another day.

³⁵³ Rose, *Inventing Ourselves: Power, Psychology, and Personhood*, pp. 63, 41-65

when Thompson advocated including ethnographers and cultural historians on contemplative studies research teams, they were in part resisting the transformation of contemplative practice into a form of narcissism and conformity, not to mention the ease of its transition into a technology of management.

It is not just that the discourse of contemplative studies is broadly similar to the humanistic psychology that, in Rose's view, provides the theoretical underpinnings of many forms of authority. The efforts by Varela, Davidson, Goleman, and Kabat Zinn to join contemplative practices and experiences to theories of the mind and brain coincide with (and may well reciprocally strengthen and be strengthened) by a wider cultural shift toward imagining the self in biological and especially neurobiological terms. In their 2015 study *Neuro: The New Brain Sciences and the Management of the Mind*, Rose and Joelle M. Abi-Rached argue that:

Key mutations - conceptual, technological, economic, and biopolitical - have enabled the neurosciences to leave the enclosed space of the laboratory and gain traction in the outside world... neurobiological conceptions of personhood... have latched onto... the many sites and practices that were colonized by psychology across the twentieth century - from childrearing to marketing, and transformed them in significant ways.³⁵⁴

The tremendous currency of the vague idea that science has confirmed "Buddhist meditation works," as Donald Lopez puts it, is powerfully enabled by the fact that this "confirmation" has come from neuroscience. The biopolitical control of bodies couldn't be further from the agendas of contemplatives like Mathieu Ricard and countercultural scientists like Varela and Davidson, *but* it is possible to imagine how their work on the neuroscience of meditation has been picked up by these forces. Rose and Abi-Rached

³⁵⁴ Rose and Abi-Rached, *Neuro: The New Brain Sciences and the Management of the Mind*, pp. 9

write that:

Practices such as ‘mindfulness’ have swiftly migrated from being self-managed radical alternatives to other forms of ‘governing the soul’ to become yet another element in the armory of the psychological, psychiatric, and lifestyle experts trying to persuade their clients to improve themselves by becoming mindful. And we can see how the practices of self-improvement, focusing on each person’s capacity to manage themselves flexibly and adapt in a world of constantly changing demands, do aim to produce the forms of subjectivity that might be able to survive in the new patterns of work and consumption that have taken place over the last twenty years.³⁵⁵

Rose and Abi-Rached capture both the radical, countercultural roots of the mindfulness and contemplative studies movements and their contemporary appropriation by interests that are decidedly not radical or countercultural. Their claims on this issue closely parallel Wilson’s analysis of the “mainstreaming of mindfulness.” Rose and Abi-Rached describe a range of “truth-effects” that have accrued to the discourse of neuroscience since the field’s beginning in the mid-twentieth century. Reference to studies of the brain has become a common strategy for legitimizing “expert” interventions into individual and social life. This is in part an outgrowth of a style of “medical perception” going back to the period Foucault analyzed in *Birth of the Clinic* and extending, Rose and Abi-Rached argue, into the contemporary neuroimaging boom. The alleged visibility of any phenomenon - a disorder, the effect of a drug, or the effect of meditation practice - via magnetic resonance imaging or a number of other ways of modeling the metabolic, chemical, and electrical activity of the brain seems to make that phenomenon *real* without any further interpretation.³⁵⁶

The “objectivity effect” of this artifact of medical empiricism works in tandem with another change Rose and Abi-Rached analyze - the relatively recent rise to

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 23

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-81

prominence of the concept of neural “plasticity.” Plasticity refers to the various ways neural pathways change their organization in response to experience. While the desire-cum-obligation to reform the self through concerted effort is by no means new, Rose and Abi-Rached do suggest that plasticity is the discovery that made the brain - newly visible, that is, *quantifiable*, thanks to advances in medical imaging - a project of social concern and a target of “expert” interventions.

However, Rose and Abi-Rached argue that this is not so much because plasticity has raised truly *new* questions about the self or desires to alter it, but rather because invoking plasticity adds a veneer of “objectivity” (to say nothing of *quantifiability*) to any contemporary call to reform the self. As they put it, “there is clearly an ‘elective affinity,’ to use Max Weber’s term, between between this emphasis on plastic, flexible brains and more general sociopolitical changes that prioritize individual flexibility across the lifespan to accommodate to rapidly changing economic demands, cultural shifts, and technological advances - and that demand a constant labor of self-improvement on the part of today’s citizens.”³⁵⁷ They go on to argue that the new invocations of the neural basis of self-improvement constitute a new “authority” underpinning an older “radical democratization of self-fashioning” starting in the 1960s. Contemplative studies’ investments in science and in modern “techniques of the self” call out for a full Foucauldian analysis with modern critical theory and science and technology studies in tow. I may pursue such a project in the future, but it is worth remembering that the ideological orientation of contemplative studies is beginning to align with those of critical theory and science and technology studies.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 223

Mind and Life and ACMHE are not one thing, but there seems to be enough common historical ground and sufficient crosstalk between them to argue that the leading researchers and advocates on “contemplation” form a fascinating interdisciplinary collage. They seem to be enacting a new mode of intellectual life and I would wager that neuroscience is helping them. They want to hear from and are influenced by lawyers, physicists, teachers, dancers, poets and neuroscientists, not just on TED but in the thick of their professional lives. I cannot prove but have a strong hunch that the very general association, impressionistic association of meditation research with the contemporary prestige of neuroscience gives many contemplative scholars and advocates the rhetorical cover they need to begin talking to each other about subjectivity again. This is not to say that there is a cynical manipulation at work here. It is simply to suggest that some of the rhetorical firewalls that used to separate these fields (and used to separate some of them quite powerfully from *any* serious discussion of consciousness as more than epiphenomenal) are weakening. These discussions don’t make people as nervous as they used to. That apparently includes discussion of different epistemologies and ontologies, even “religious” ones, in very prestigious academic spaces. It does not seem to be very difficult to persuade large numbers of people that this is a legitimate and desirable thing to do. I think the perceived closeness of contemplation research and the study of the brain goes some way toward explaining why (how far, exactly, is a problem for another book).

Contemplative studies may also signal changes in the academic landscape beyond movement at the boundaries of “secular” academic knowledge. It trades on the assumption that comparison and communication between cultures is possible - including

the comparison of experiences and the cultivation of empathy with others who have had vastly different experiences. Even the scholars most directly focused on social justice projects in feminist and postcolonial veins have adopted what might, in those circles, be called a “strategic essentialism” of the shared human potential for contemplative experience and transformation.

Within religious studies, it has joined with and fueled a full-on revival of the comparative (and scientific) study of religious experience, including the proposition that there exists some form of *universal* potential for contemplative experience actualized in many religious (and non-religious) contexts.³⁵⁸ Outside religious studies, it rather transparently borrows the world-religions paradigm and expands it to include a range of specific indigenous traditions. It has seemed to me since the beginning of my research that there is a tacit rejection of postmodernism underway here, a wager that difference is not ultimate, and is perhaps (in a rather Buddhist way) ultimately illusory – important here and now, in the life of human beings with human perceptions, but not the ultimate truth.

Contemplative studies may also be part of a wider interest in expansion of the epistemological and even ontological frameworks available for intellectual work, and an increased interest in strategic deployments of comparison and universalism. Recent works in critical and anthropological theory seem to point to such a trend. Rosi

³⁵⁸ A few examples include Jeffrey Kripal’s comparative works on mystical experience, sexuality, and the possible potentials latent in human bodies (for example, his 2006 volume *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion*), Ann Taves’ manifesto for the comparative, interdisciplinary study of religious experience from scientific and humanistic perspectives (2009’s *Religious Experience Reconsidered*), Edward Slingerland’s proposal for the same (2008’s *What Science Offers the Humanities*), and the continued existence of the Cognitive Science of Religion Group at the American Academy of Religion.

Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (Malden, MA, USA: Polity, 2013) seeks to think differently about the place of the human subject in the world by including animals, plants, ecosystems, and even nonliving matter as citizens of a single planet. Her work reads like a kind of Deleuzian Gregory Bateson. For Braidotti, it is not just that all life is interconnected (in a way that it would be possible to describe in terms of ecology), but that life must be incorporated into a new conception of what matter is. Braidotti reads the natural self-organization of matter into living and other ecological systems through a Deleuzian / Spinozist vitalism. We and the animals and the plants and the weather are self-organized expressions of the "generative vitality" of matter itself.³⁵⁹ We are all together threatened a form of capitalism that discovered how to manipulate and commodify the building blocks of "life itself."

Braidotti employs a new framework she calls "zoe-egalitarianism" to undo the ontological priority usually given to the (implicitly white, male, capitalist) human subject of most philosophical discourse. *Zoe* includes both human beings and "the wider scope of human animal and non-human life."³⁶⁰ It is "the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself" which "stands for generative vitality... *Zoe*-egalitarianism is... the core of the post-anthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded, and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism."³⁶¹

That's Life with a capital "L," It is not only a basis for theorizing interconnection and facilitating the comparison of different socioeconomic situations around the world,

³⁵⁹ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, pp. 60

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.60

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 60

but a different conception of what is threatened by advanced capitalism, of what exists to preserve and to fight for. It is intended as a different judgment about what is real. The subject is not a reasoning being over against inert matter. Nor is the subject purely or necessarily human. Agency and moral worth are located inside and outside human bodies, let alone human minds.

Most interestingly, Braidotti's ontology reorders the relationship between the humanities and the social and natural sciences. She derives her insights in part from advances in neuroscience, genetics, and biotechnology that seem to demonstrate the emergent, self-organized nature of life and of subjectivity (I saw no mention of Francisco Varela's fusion of systems theory and Buddhism, but he is almost certainly a reference point). The new framework is "an affirmative reaction of social and cultural theory to the great advances made by the other culture, that of the sciences."³⁶² The goal is to think in terms of "what contemporary, bio-technologically mediated bodies are capable of doing... an expanded, relational self that functions in a nature-culture continuum and is technologically mediated."³⁶³

Braidotti, who is no minor player in critical theory, explicitly rejects methodological naturalism and openly embraces a form of vitalism. By these lights, she is simultaneously more radical and more Romantic than a theorist like Gregory Bateson, though she never refers to Blake. On one level, it should be obvious that an ontology rooted in Deleuze and feminist theory would be "materialist" and "secular," but once Life with a Capital L enters the conversation, I can understand the impulse to reinforce both of those points.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 60

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 61

We can see a similar opening toward previously disfavored modes of inquiry and lines of questioning in *Phenomenology in Anthropology: A Sense of Perspective* (Indiana University Press, 2015), edited by Kalpana Ram and Christopher Houston. In their introduction, the editors argue that phenomenology's effort to "show how experience and perception are constituted through social and practical engagements" has both particularistic and universal dimensions.³⁶⁴ Similarities and differences are illuminated by attention to the corporeal orientations that form the "background" of people's thoughts and actions. The explicit wager is that everyone has such a background, and every such background is configured differently by cultural and political forces.

Ram and Houston argue that there is much anthropologically relevant information that can only be accessed this way, including the ways embodied experience is altered by trauma and warfare.³⁶⁵ They imply that without this intervention, anthropology will be missing something: "while the anthropologist is deeply attuned to culture, phenomenology takes us even deeper, thanks to its attention to the elements that make up a background."³⁶⁶ Furthermore, they suggest that phenomenology can be adapted to avoid the mistakes in previous universalistic projects. They argue that "[in] this combination of the universal and the particular, phenomenology contains elements of anthropology's original charter that sought to maintain a sense of human generalities

³⁶⁴ Ram, Kalpana, and Christopher Houston. "Introduction: Phenomenology's Methodological Invitation." In *Phenomenology in Anthropology: A Sense of Perspective*, edited by Kalpana Ram and Christopher Houston. Indiana University Press, 2015, pp. 1

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 2

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 17

while pursuing empirical investigation of the particular and the concrete.”³⁶⁷ They hope to avoid repeating the ways in which older anthropological theories implicitly and explicitly legitimized imperial, colonizing forces and racial and gendered hierarchies of power. By attending to “sensorial, corporeal, cultivated, interactional, distributed, collective, political, ethical, and individual” dimensions of experience, they hope to locate the traces of these forces in the bodily background of perception and work to remove the arbitrary biases they create³⁶⁸

Ram and Houston make no ontological innovations like those in Braidotti’s work, but like her (and like contemplative studies), they urge a return to a form of reformed universalism, to consideration of embodied experience, to comparison, and to the comparison of experiences. All these gestures are tempered by and employed in the service of the full elaboration of the influence of imperialist, racist and patriarchal systems on anthropological knowledge. What these authors seem to be saying, along with contemplative studies, is “we have absorbed the legitimate postmodern insights about power, rhetoric, and difference, and now must return to strategic forms of universalism and now must return to strategic universalizing moves if are to continue making progress on the injustices the postmodern critique sought to address.”³⁶⁹

Without having heard it said out loud, I could easily read into contemplative studies the claim that focusing *too much* on difference can actually impede progress toward more just and equitable relations between people. The “sciences” contingent contends that we can ask academic questions about experiences which do exist, have neurobiological

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 2

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 2

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*,

correlates, and may be comparable across cultures. The “studies” contingent operates on the assumption that bodies enable meaningful, intuitive communication and even some level of identification with others across all kinds of boundaries. That is the wager of the compassion practice I described in Chapter One, and of Bush’s felt imperative to “see Maharaji in everyone,” even military commanders. In my perception, contemplative studies activists are working to stake out a middle ground between the modernist (Western, colonizing) claim to know the other better than the other knows herself, and the postmodern claim that the other cannot be known. This is a legacy of the countercultural desire for renewed interconnection with the environment (as opposed to limitless extraction and construction) and with others (as opposed to oppression and war). Buddhist conceptions of interconnection, co-dependent origination, and the ultimate emptiness of form mingle in a strange hybrid with Romantic desire for intensified experiences of spiritual, interpersonal, ecological, and physical intimacy.

The traditions of activist thought that influence ACMHE in particular are deeply rooted in postmodern theories of power and identity, and yet also represent challenges to the walls they occasionally threaten to put up between people. Recall Jennifer Cannon’s talk from the 2015 Building Just Communities conference; despite the fact that “theory” as we know it insists on the foundational, almost ontological status of difference, Cannon brought her audience back to the fact that feminists of color like Lorde and Anzaldua insisted on the importance embodied experience for learning and for activism. In my own experiences of coursework and reading in feminist and postcolonial theory, the goal has often seemed to be theorizing the true extent and nature of difference in order to convene more just and authentic encounters. No one behaves as if it is impossible, in

practice, to compare experiences, although is a strong focus on the preparatory work that has to be done beforehand. I think that is what contemplative studies advocates seek. They are alright with embodying contradictions because they seem to have more pressing things on their minds. Much of the field is dedicated to classroom pedagogy and political advocacy. They pursue contemplative practice and contemplative pedagogy, however loosely defined, because for their purposes *these things seem to work, and in some settings, that's enough.*

I also suspect that the brain boom and the subsequent legitimization, at least on a rhetorical level, of contemplative practices has allowed other subterranean academic desires a path into the light of day. The academy as a whole is very bad at dealing with “religion” and with religious people. We know this well in religious studies. We hear about or experience disbelief or disinterest in the fact that some people in the academy are “religious” in something like the colloquial sense of the word. One colleague told me about working with a political science doctoral student who studied the Middle East and had *only* dealt with Islam in terms of the modern political phenomenon of Islamism, and hadn’t spent a second on Islamic *cultures*, despite their great age, vast diversity, and vital importance for understanding the region. In classes outside my department, I have seen almost unbelievably gross generalizations about “religion” pass for gospel in the works of world-renowned and thoroughly well-intentioned writers.

All this is to say that when something like contemplative studies appears on the scene, perhaps it should not be surprising that many academics enthusiastically embrace the opportunity to re-engage something like “ritual” or “spirituality.” If one is committed to rituals besides those of the faculty senate, a university campus can be a tough place.

Again, the field of religious studies makes a fine example: many of our colleagues came to universities to escape oppressive forms of religion and to rework their relationships to traditions without the strictures of doctrinal authority, *but not to abandon “religious” traditions entirely*. In our January, 2016 interview, I asked Carolyn Jacobs how she defined “religion.” Drawing on her experience training clinical social workers and working in contemplative studies, she argued that:

The problem with religion is it just has so many negative connotations for people. People who are very comfortable with silence, deepening of presence, many believe in God or no god, a sense of creation, nature, etc. The problem with religion is, religion would work if it wasn't in an institution. That's how you end up with spirituality and secular humanism. The problem is the institution. What people deeply long for can be found in religious traditions. What they really long for is communities they can practice and be present in (emphasis mine).

The simple fact is that someone who flees an oppressive religious community in search of a community in which to “practice and be present” *may not find it* in the academy, despite the strong likelihood they will find a kind of intellectual freedom they could not have had previously. On a more general level, recall David Germano's comment that many colleagues embraced contemplative pedagogy out of increasing frustration with the failure to educate whole students - bodies, emotions and all. Even those without personal contemplative practice experience recognize an opportunity to begin to remedy an atomistic, instrumentalist, amoral model of knowledge production.

One final speculative point, inspired by another comment from Carolyn Jacobs: in our interview in early January of 2017, she asked, “where is compassion?” Her question was in reference to the broad situation in the United States in the wake of Donald Trump's election to the presidency. I was fairly sure that on one level, she was

referring to the epic failure of compassion represented by Trump's campaign and election, but the next thing she said was "how can we have conversations with people who feel overlooked?" How, she asked, can we understand where people are coming from when they've been failed by public education and pushed out of jobs by economic and technological shifts? She offered contemplative practice as a tool for inhabiting the complex reality of the world in 2017.

If I couldn't sit every day and ground myself, I would be out of my ever-loving mind... Practice requires action. You sit for a sense of grounding, but it doesn't mean you're comfortable on the cushion. It moves you to engage with human suffering, and you will feel the pain in ways you don't want to. I don't care how many books you read about it. If you don't sit in your own practice world, you will wind up more disturbed and immobilized... if you haven't incorporated a practice in your own life that allows you to hold distress, uncertainty, suffering...

I initially heard Carolyn's claim that "It moves you to engage with human suffering, and you will feel the pain in ways you don't want to" as a reference to the people at most immediate risk from Trump's policies. Reading over our interview now (February of 2018), while fuming about his latest abuse and pondering whether anger will be productive or destructive in the long run, I wonder if she wasn't also referring to people who voted *for* Trump out of a sense of alienation and desperation. Those of us to the left of center do *not* want to identify with *those* people – I certainly don't, most of the time. In Carolyn's comments on the phone, along with Rhonda Magee's and Richard Davidson's references to "alienation" in their ISCS addresses, it's hard not hear a subtle suggestion that we don't write off the other half of America. Are people attracted to contemplative studies today because it gives them a way to address some inchoate discomfort with a politics of division and distrust?

Maybe I *want* to hear this because the centrist-Democrat habits of my teens and

twenties die hard. Maybe I just don't want to think this situation is quite as bad as it frequently appears to be. Or maybe, to borrow a Buddhist idiom, some contemplative studies advocates are looking for ways to practice, as in cultivate and extend, compassion toward *all* beings, even beings in schlocky red hats. Can you see Maharaji in Donald Trump? I can't. Is that productive? Is it *right*? I don't know. Maybe contemplative studies is here to help us resolve that question.

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