The New Metaphysicals

Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination

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INTRODUCTION

Long Shadows

I walked quickly down Quincy Street in Harvard Square on a cold night in January 2002, heading toward a meeting of the Mystical Experiences Discussion Group. The group met biweekly at the Swedenborgian Church of the New Jerusalem; I had been attending the group somewhat regularly as part of my research among contemporary mystics and metaphysical practitioners in Cambridge, Massachusetts. My daily routine sent me down Quincy almost every day, and I rarely registered my surroundings, save when the sugar maples were at their full color in the fall or lilacs in bloom in May. On this bitter night, however, I unexpectedly found myself walking with heightened awareness. That day had been a busy one, most of it spent transcribing interviews, including one I had conducted the previous week with Wes, an "energy intuitive," who at the end of our interview had read my energy by placing his hand on my wrist. In the afternoon I had read a student's paper on Jewish-Zen meditation practice and puzzled over a few passages in William James's essay on pragmatism. Now, running late for the meeting, I took note of this particular street's history and its resonance with my research on spiritual life in America. Walking past William James's and Oliver Wendell Holmes's family residences, I realized that those were the very buildings where many of the central ideas and arguments I had been reading about had been first been argued and penned. Despite my tardiness and the bitter wind, I paused for a moment to take in the unobstructed view of the architectural juxtaposition before me. The tidy, gothic chapel sat in the shadows of Harvard

University's brutalist skyscraper, William James Hall, an arrangement that gave metaphorical shape to the ways that Swedenborg's rational scientific mysticism (espoused by William James's father, Henry Sr., and other Cantabrigian luminaries) has been cast in the shadows by liberal definitions of religious experience espoused by James and his contemporaries. Conversations and controversies about religious experience, how or whether it can be pursued, and how union with the divine transforms one's understanding of the self and its relations to others continue nonetheless at the chapel and at myriad other places in Cambridge.

This is a book about the central presence of individual religious experience in American spiritual cultures and practice. It investigates how this experience is produced, practiced, and articulated in one American city. *The New Metaphysicals* considers how particular cultural, theological, and even scientific legacies make experiencing and touching the divine possible. Religious experiences were a central lingua franca for Cambridge's spiritual practitioners. Numinous, unexpected experiences, mystical experiences of "flow," and daily synchronicities, dreams, and the like shaped the worlds in which spiritual practitioners lived. Their stories were dense with detail and presented occasions for extended, changing, and conflicting interpretations.

When mystics and spiritual practitioners met face to face, their primary focus was often on experience as well. They talked about their meanings and proper interpretation, and together pondered their authenticity. They debated whether experience could be practiced or self-initiated, and how experience changed their bodies. All the while, they worked together to elicit felicitous circumstances for future experiences and drew upon past experiences to evaluate relations with intimates and strangers. And, as they did, they likewise shaped their relations to the past in ways that refigured the traditions of which they were arguably a part. These activities signaled participation in a history that was carried in practice rather than in other forms of memory: the pivotal importance of religious experience in these living articulations positioned practitioners within religious traditions that are indicated through arguments about how experience itself works. These religious practices complicate the importance of traditions, theologies, hierarchies, and institutions, given that they simultaneously reproduce and hide their genealogies.

While this volume focuses throughout on key issues of experience, it began with a set of questions about where (and in fact whether) spiritual identities, practices, and discourses are produced in similar ways to other religious identities, practices, and discourses. I wanted to know how and where people became "spiritual not religious," and what kinds of structures supported their narratives and practices. I thus ventured into an ethnographic study of spirituality in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with the goal of developing a working map of various spiritual practitioners and networks by observing as many settings and interviewing as many leaders and participants as possible.[1] Ethnographic research was necessary, I reasoned, given that most sociological analyses of spirituality focus on individuals and draw almost exclusively on individual-level data (interviews and survey methods) to investigate and evaluate the spiritual.[2] Perhaps as a consequence of these methodological choices, sociological and popular descriptions and analysis have had little to say on the topic of spirituality's production or reproduction. Indeed, most sociological and popular accounts agree that American spirituality is a religious condition that emerges in a new way in the crucible of late twentieth-century social dislocations. New levels of religious seeking and increasing numbers of unaffiliated individuals are indicative of (or the consequence of) ongoing social fragmentation and weakening social ties, increased social mobility, and growing education levels.[3] These studies present spirituality as an individual project, brought forth by the conditions of a society that values the individual.

It quickly became clear to me that the popular and sociological visions of contemporary spiritual seekers as cultural and theological orphans adrift in fragmented, post-religious worlds miss the mark. My work proceeded apace, and as I became familiar with the various networks and internal distinctions within the spiritual networks of Cambridge, I also began to pay more careful attention to the city's spiritual pasts. These pasts were first evident in architecture, as my walk down Quincy Street on that bitterly cold night suggests, but they were also evident in practice. The Swedenborgian Chapel and the Theosophical Society were important centers for a large range of spiritual groups (as were other religious organizations, the local library, an adult education center, and a spiritual bookstore). The city is proud of its record of harboring religious and secular freethinkers, progressives, and experimenters.

Locating my study in Cambridge thus demanded that I think about the location of contemporary spirituality not just in organizational terms but also in geographical and historical terms.[4] Indeed, historians

of American religion regularly present a portrait of American spirituality that contrasts strongly with the sociological. In these narratives, the new age and "contemporary spirituality" are emanations of other religious forms, including American metaphysical and harmonial traditions[5] that increasingly serve as the cultural lodestones through which they reimagine the nineteenth century's transnational intellectual networks and engagements with the contradictions of modernity. Although the majority of these historical studies remain focused on the nineteenth century, they evocatively suggest that such connections continue.[6] Cambridge itself plays an important, if not a central, role in these narratives. Prominent figures in Transcendentalism, Spiritualism, Christian Science, mind cure, Theosophy, and Vedanta have important Cambridge chapters: Emerson's famous speech to the Harvard Divinity School, Sarah Bull's turn-of-the-century comparative religion "salon" on Brattle Street, and Henry James's depictions of social reformers and mediums in *The Bostonians,* and others come to mind.[7] In addition, Cambridge has been the setting for ongoing interactions between Americans and "Asian religions," and of many groundbreaking experiments into religious consciousness and experience.

As I went about my research increasingly intrigued by these narratives of historical continuity, I nonetheless began to wonder in earnest whether such histories mattered at all to the people I met at the Seven Stars bookshop or whom I witnessed "soul singing" at a local arts festival. For whom did it matter that hundreds of mesmerists practiced in and around Boston in the 1800s or that William James had taken to the stand to defend their right to practice?[8] Did the people who attended an occasional lecture at the Spiritualist Temple or who enrolled at yoga classes at the Theosophical Society think about these places or about why the events they pursued were so frequently lodged in these settings? Many of the people I met in Cambridge were wholly uninterested in these pasts, and while some were aware of such figures and knew a bit about them, the labors of past Cantabrigians were quite incidental to their pursuits. When on the rare occasion a spiritual practitioner in Cambridge mentioned a Phineas Parkhurst Quimby or a William James, it was to call attention to a shared and timeless quest for knowledge, and not to place themselves within a conventional historical trajectory that included earlier figures such as these.

The histories of Cambridge's metaphysical pasts and their resonance within the present continued to raise and reframe theoretical questions about how religious traditions are carried through space and time, and how these processes shape their felt qualities in the present.[9] How is a

tradition felt and carried when its very practice and theology claim a different reading of history and the past than what we generally understand to be carried in traditions? How do practices central to metaphysical and mystical traditions work within the stories that both practitioners and scholars tell about spirituality? While Cambridge's role in answering these questions is particular and peculiar, it is not my intent to restore a forgotten historical narrative to either "spirituality" or "Cambridge."[10] Rather, it is to use both within an inquiry about how forgetting and remembering are linked to practices of various kinds, including practices of experiencing, writing, reading, and speaking.[11] In studying the space and texture of spirituality in Cambridge, I became more attuned to the ways that particular metaphysical, mystical, and harmonial traditions thrive within and through practices that locate and dislocate, historicize and dehistoricize, spiritualize and secularize, embody and offer escape from embodiment.[12]

Spiritual, Metaphysical, and Mystical: Entanglements

Defining spirituality and locating it within social life is notoriously difficult. Much like religion or experience, spirituality is bedeviled not by a lack of definitions but by an almost endless proliferation of them. Most definitions—including those that are historical or genealogical, as well as those that are psychological, perennial, or neurological—have served to protect, defend, debunk, or claim certain territory for the spiritual; these definitions confound more than they illuminate. When we look closely at this proliferation of definitions, we see that each articulates claims about the truth and veracity of spirituality (or religion). But most of these distinctions, particularly those that describe spirituality as a category distinct from religion, are relatively new. As I hope to make clear, the fuzziness, indistinctness, and multiplicity of definitions suggest that we have more to gain by observing how the term "spirituality" is used, and how distinctions within it make some practices and engagements more or less possible.

I begin thus with the view that spirituality, whatever it is and however it is defined, is *entangled* in social life, in history, and in our academic and nonacademic imaginations. Most definitions of recent vintage suffer by defining spirituality as a distinct category of action or activity (or mental state); they likewise seek to extract something essential from it, often trying to find the common denominator of spirituality that exists within the various social locations where it is encoun-

tered. But these entanglements at least partly constitute spirituality's framework and shape the paths through which people engage it. Given this, extracting spirituality or mysticism from the institutions where it is lived out both distorts and mischaracterizes the phenomenon, and draws attention away from the conundrums it poses and the possibilities it allows. It is necessary to engage spirituality, historically, institutionally, and imaginatively without pulling it completely together into a single thing. Our way into such inquiry is aided in this respect by sociological theories that approach cultures and traditions as loosely bounded, heterogeneous, and dynamically changing.[13] From this vantage, we can observe claims to identify pure or authentic religious or spiritual traditions as the labor of specific interests. Such efforts take place within (and likewise have a hand in shaping) the pluralistic, heterogeneous, and nonunified social worlds in which we live.[14]

This perspective has been particularly helpful in placing the spiritual in Cambridge, where few spiritual groups were freestanding alternative religious institutions. Most groups and practices are, rather, connected in one way or another to mainstream religious groups and congregations, to spas or alternative medicine clinics, or to local artists' networks and gallery spaces. Similarly, only a handful of my respondents identified as "spiritual." Most emphasized their practices or commitments to specific modes of engaging the divine that they pursued in some of these social settings, for example, telling me to "write down in your notes that I'm a Reiki teacher," or, as another told me, "I'm a yogi, and an artist, and a singer and a writer, and a mystic—and who knows what else I might be becoming?" While my respondents tended to reject broad labels, they nonetheless recognized that others were fellow travelers, and that a number of groups and institutions promoted similar interests. Everyone I spoke with could identify other spiritual practitioners, groups, and individuals in Cambridge, and their own maps and connections helped to round out my portrait. Some of my respondents hopefully suggested that these groups were "emerging" into a new spiritually enlightened movement that would alter the landscape around them. Despite these desires and hopes, what appeared more evident to me is that "spirituality" was both an identifiable "something" and at the same time shaped by constituent parts and practices that operated and thrived within distinct settings. As I will discuss throughout the volume, but particularly in chapter 1, spiritual forms have thrived and been shaped by entanglements with the secular, including its powerful engagements with modern science and progress.[15]

A second set of entanglements involve questions of history. Thus,

in addition to using the term "spiritual practitioner" to talk about the people I met in Cambridge, I also call them "metaphysicals" and "mystics" to call attention to the ways their practices are centrally engaged with and entangled in specific American religious trajectories. In other words, respondents are metaphysicals and mystics insofar as they participate within recognizable, historically meaningful definitions of experience and mysticism, and engage in practices that give these concepts social heft and religious validity. Using these terms alongside the more familiar "spiritual" is thus a reminder that our modern spiritual worlds are shaped as much by developments in American religious thought that took shape at the turn of the last century as by more recent developments in the "me" generation. My approach to understanding spiritual practitioners in this light has been to ask how metaphysical and mystical pasts are reproduced in institutions, language, and practice that make spirituality work.

A third set of entanglements that extend beyond the institutional and the historical requires more attention at the outset, namely the entanglements of "spirituality" and "religious experience" in sociological understandings of religion in America.

Sociology, Religious Experience, and Religious Individualism

My focus on the practices of experience might seem strange from within the sociological tradition, where religious experience receives little attention; at first blush, it may even seem to fall outside of the discipline's purview altogether. In some sense it may be outside of the category of "practice" as well. While sociologists occasionally report on the prevalence of religious experiences in various religious groups, or note the importance of collective rituals and effervescence, little in the last four decades of sociological research on religion has offered either a robust or a critical sociology of religious experience. We might think of this as being merely the result of disciplinary boundary work. In other words, religious experience has largely been understood to be a matter for psychology, science, or perhaps theology, rather than sociology. But why is this the case, and how is it that religious experience has taken on the kinds of attributes that makes it apparently uninteresting to sociologists, or perhaps impervious to sociological method?

One possibility is that religious experience, by its nature, is individual, isolated, unexpected, and thus difficult to study with sociological tools or methods.[16] Yet this answer, which surfaces occasionally in so-

ciological studies, seems less than satisfactory once we recognize that this commonplace understanding of religious experience is a "relatively late and distinctively Western" concept, wherein religious experiences are individually experienced events, occurring by dint of natural, biological, or perhaps divine forces.[17] While the many strains of empirical investigation and philosophical commentary on religious experience make it quite difficult to chart out a single story line of this development, we might say in a brief sketch that our current understandings developed in large measure as ideas that resisted Enlightenment critiques of religion and religious reason. These critiques emphasized the irrationality of belief and prompted theologians to shift the space of religious authority from the head (and reason) to the heart (and experience). Experience, located in the emotions and affect, and in other religious "organs," became the key to marking religion's unique truth. As Martin Jay notes, the transformation shifted a broadly based European notion of religion as "*adherence* to belief, either rational or willed, in certain propositions about God and His creation" to a *property* or *condition* "understood as devotional or pious behavior derived from something akin to an emotionally charged, perceptual experience of divinity or the holy."[18]

Wayne Proudfoot identifies Christian theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher's theological argument for religious experience as establishing the "best case" for this definition of religious experience, and traces Schleiermacher's influence on the hermeneutics of Dilthey, Otto, and others. Proudfoot outlines the logical inconsistencies embedded in Schleiermacher's account, demonstrating how arguments for independent, apprehendable religious experience are better understood as texts that teach the rules of the game through which religious experiences take on particular shape as noncommunicable conditions, protected from various forms of "reductionism."[19] Religious experience "formulated the rules for the identification of the numinous moment of experience in such a way as to prevent the 'reduction' of religious experience by its being subsumed under any explanatory or interpretative scheme. . . . If it can be explained, it is not religious experience. The criterion by which the experience is to be identified precludes certain kinds of explanation. What purports to be a neutral phenomenological description is actually a form designed to evoke or to create a particular sort of experience."[20] While a posteriori accounts of such experiences can be subject to inquiry and evaluation, given that they are mediated by language and the need for communication, the experience "itself"

remains outside of this realm of investigation and thus impervious to falsification.

Protective strategies such as these reinforced the distinction between the experience itself and its cultural elaboration. These strategies continue to surface from time to time in sociological treatments of religion. For example, in the *Heretical Imperative,* Peter Berger argues that religious traditions initially derive from individual religious experiences, calling such events "irreducible" and impervious to social and cultural analysis. Berger argues that "religious experience . . . *comes to be* embodied in traditions, which mediate it to those who have not had it themselves and which institutionalize it for them as well as for those who had." The process through which raw, analytically inaccessible religious experiences are translated and domesticated into specific cultural-historical traditions is "a constant in human history," stating further that the socially constructed elements of religion, that is, traditions and cultures, are based upon original experiences. Drawing on Mircea Eliade, Rudolph Otto, and others who also propose a priori experience as a fundamental element of human existence, Berger charts a path for a nonreductionistic approach to religion by drawing on a long sociological and theological tradition that claims that religious experience is fundamentally external to and prior to culture and structure.[21] While sociologists rarely now draw on this distinction directly, it remains in place, reverberating, as we will see, in sociological distinctions between experiences and their accounts.

Thus, even as sociologists might criticize psychology's focus on abnormal and peak experiences and its oversimplification of the role of social groups and cultures in shaping religious experience,[22] many sociological studies of religious narratives preserve the distinction between an experience and its account, its immediate individual feeling and its post hoc social iteration.[23] As one critic has observed, making a theoretical distinction between experience and account continues to free sociologists and others to analyze "the mystical claims of religion in terms of social realities," without requiring sociologists to reduce the claims to their interpretations. In short, it holds out the possibility that the reality of religion remains external to the human sciences.[24]

Thus, while sociologists rarely focus explicitly on these distinctions, the practices that set apart experiences from accounts, and that place sociological expertise only on one side of the divide, not only reinforce a particular understanding of experience but also play a role in reinforcing the natural and given characteristics of individual religious

experiences. As historians tell us, the discussions and conceptions of a universally available religious experience that took shape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided enormous resources for theologians, laypeople, and social scientists to make the case for a universal religious sentiment. American intellectual elites of the late nineteenth century interpreted the writings of German romantics, Asian philosophical texts, neo-Platonic and hermetic texts, and their own religious encounters as evidence for this universal religious sensibility. As Leigh Schmidt argues, such ideas presented the possibility for a universal religion "of the spirit, not dogmatic, ecclesiastical, sacramental, or sectarian, Protestant as much as post-Protestant." American (as well as European and Asian) academics established practices of comparative religion that were often rooted on phenomenological claims that the "world's religions" shared an underlying core of experience.[25] The "ahistorical, poetic, essential, intuitive, and universal mysticism" served ultraliberal Protestants and liberal secularists well. This newly universal mysticism, far from serving as a privatizing and domesticating belief, instead was used to develop worldly engagement with religious others and to seek out the similar truths of religious experience within non-Christian religious traditions.[26] These understandings of experience also were set into play as modern societies made distinctions between religion and science, Western and Eastern religions, and premodern and modern Christianity.[27]

If religious experience was individual, and in its best sense not only independent of religious traditions but the generator of all religious traditions and cultural forms, then it made sense to investigate experience not with sociological tools but rather with psychological or psychical (or scientific) tools and methods. Modern psychological techniques and apparatuses made it possible to observe and document experiences and frequently also to elicit or prompt similar experiences; a captivated public was enthralled by the new sciences of psychology and medicine that were developing to test and "prove" experiential knowledge of the divine.[28] These forays into the science of experience were far from purely academic, as American religious liberals embraced science and scientific methods, and both argued and hoped for demonstrations that "'true religion' was 'religion in general' and authentic religious experience and naturalistic theories of religion were not incompatible."[29]

We can see that these concepts of religious experience clearly informed and shaped the work of early sociologists of religion, who used religious experience as a constituent part of their typologies of religious social organization. Both Ernst Troeltsch and Joachim Wach identify a

type of "mystical" religion that emerges from noetic individual experience and that for this reason has difficulty organizing in robust social forms. Wach notes that mysticism "points to a type of religious experience . . . that concerns the individual and innermost self. . . . We feel justified in stating that 'isolation' is constitutive of mystical religion." Wach cites Rudolph Otto's understanding of numinous religious experiences when he argues that religious experience is "ultimately uncommunicable" and thus "generates" a kind of religion that is not social at its base. Says Wach, "There remain mainly two forms of sociality in which the mystic will participate: human companionship in what concerns all daily life and mutual support in the protest directed against traditional religious forms and institutions." Individual religious experiences as a priori experiences have the ability to regenerate religious organization.[30] Nonetheless, a mysticism that takes shape outside of churchly settings also becomes a rhetorically valuable anti-religion: it is improperly socialized religion.

Neither Troeltsch nor Wach believe that Christians should pursue mystical forms. Indeed, Troeltsch warns that experiential religion often leads to the evaporation of religious collectives. While such views may sound somewhat antique from our current vantage, they continue to circulate (both implicitly and explicitly) in recent scholarship on American spirituality, where the possibility of individual, unmediated religious experience and its presumed dangers to the religious community remain firmly entrenched.[31] Examples of unmediated religious experiences often appear in sociological studies of spirituality, whether in claims about the distinctions between experiences (individual) and accounts (social), in survey data that prompt individuals to recall personal experiences and link them to social processes,[32] or in recent studies that argue that individual experience is a component of "spiritual but not religious" identity.[33] It is particularly this last set of studies that concern us in this volume. It is precisely the individual, abnormal type of religious experience, which has developed within a long set of interactions among sociology, philosophy, hermeneutics, and theology, that provides a space for sociologically meaningful "religious individualism" to emerge and take (changing but definite) shape as a category of religious expression; and it is precisely these conversations that we must investigate before analyzing Americans' spiritual expression.

Without intellectual and social scientific grounding for a self-generated (or divinely generated) religious experience, our current view of the "spiritual but not religious" would take on quite different meaning than it currently does. There is not much distance between Wach's

description of mysticism and Bellah and colleagues' critique of Sheila Larson (and Sheila-ism) in *Habits of the Heart.* Among the numerous articles that cite "Sheila-ism" as a shorthand for religious individualism, most agree with Bellah that Sheila's religion and her experience mark her as a *bricoleur* in an indeterminate shopping-mall of faith; personal experience drives to personal selection of religious goods, religious expressions, and self-determination.[34] That said, given that we have reasons to investigate religious experience with a more complicated genealogical and generic understanding of the changing definitions of religious experience in various academic fields, it behooves us to return to the question of individual spirituality as it has developed in relation to these naturalized understandings of experience. Yet if we take a view that religious experience as we currently understand it nonetheless carries its histories at least in part in its practices and the ways that it operates to protect itself and to shape certain subjectivities, then a focus on experiential practice becomes necessary. It also invokes a fourth set of entanglements.

Ethnographic Entanglements: Cambridge, Experience, and the Ivy League Professor

The foregoing passages suggest another possibly disconcerting wrinkle that accompanies writing about contemporary spirituality and religious experience. Namely, the emerging and changing understandings of religious experience that my respondents practice and think with are shaped in conversations and engagements (both imagined and real) with academic and scientific interest in the same. Understanding the role of scholarly activity in the genealogies of religious experience in fact leads us to see that scholars, while not central to metaphysical and mystical pursuits, nonetheless have been far more than spectators on the sidelines of changing understandings. Indeed, for the last one hundred years, scholars, including scholars working in the Boston area, have played important roles in shaping the debates about and the appearance and meaning of religious experience. Consequentially, undertaking a study of religious experience in Cambridge means embarking on a project in which scholarly discourses (including social scientific discourses) about experience are already afforded religious meaning by spiritual practitioners. Researchers and the technical terms they employ are often "caught" in ongoing debates among metaphysicals about

the authority and reality of religious experiences, making the study of spirituality entangled in one more respect.

The role of scholarly authority in ongoing struggles over the meaning of religious experience should have been evident to me from the very first evening of my field research, when I ventured into the Swedenborgian Chapel on a gorgeous night in the late spring of 2001. Earlier in the week I had noted a flier on a streetlight in Cambridge's Central Square announcing a lecture to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of William James's lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience.* I arrived a few minutes early, walked up the left side of the Chapel, and slid into an empty pew directly behind three men. They appeared to all be in their early thirties, perhaps graduate students I thought, as they were passing a bound manuscript back and forth among them and talking about it animatedly. I struggled to catch the direction of their conversation over the ambient chatter, but before I could hear too much, the Chapel's minister stood to introduce the evening's speaker. Professor Eugene Taylor, a researcher, author, professor of psychiatry at Harvard's Saybrook Graduate Center, and former president of the Cambridge Swedenborgian Society took the lectern.

Professor Taylor, a noted interpreter of William James's views on religion and psychology, started his lecture with a biting critique of *The Metaphysical Club.*[35] I had just finished reading Menand's history of pragmatism through the remarkable friendships and connections among William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, and others, and followed Taylor's chapter-and-verse critique with great interest. Taylor complained at length that Menand had ignored Swedenborg's central influence on James and Peirce, and larded his critique with stories of James's religious yearnings and hints that he had recently discovered a box of James's papers that shed light on these topics.[36] Taylor positioned himself as James's champion (and by extension, Swedenborg's as well) against scholarly work that, like Menand's, ignored James's methodological pluralism and religious ecumenism.[37]

Moving his attention from Menand to James's place in this history, Taylor reiterated the fascinating story of the continued positive force of Emanuel Swedenborg's philosophies and mystical writings on American psychology and philosophy. These histories have been relegated to the shadows, Taylor said, and would remain there so long as scholars view pragmatism as a secular philosophy. The audience followed with full attention as the avuncular professor unfurled this story, familiar to those who had read his more popular volume on the intertwined

histories of "psychology and spirituality" in America.[38] Sitting there, however, pen in hand, I couldn't help but wonder if many in the audience wouldn't find his criticisms of Menand's new volume pedantic. The book was hardly well read at that point, and, beyond that, Taylor focused almost exclusively on internecine academic arguments about James's intellectual influences and methods. It was not until much later that I would come to understand just how religious this talk was; I completely missed the high drama invoked in Taylor's explication of the ongoing, vital struggle over the realities of religious experience and the strengthening claims of experiential reductionism. Likewise, I failed to grasp how Taylor, himself a professor, had marshaled Menand and his book as new players in an unfolding epic familiar to many in the sanctuary.

Contemporary understandings of religion, religious experience, and spirituality are not only "studied by" historians and sociologists, they are also forged in ongoing interactions between groups of scholars and laypeople. Religious actors and groups actively laid claim to the findings of social scientists and experimentalists, sometimes adapting scholarly research for their own purposes. And thus, while ethnographers are sometimes (possibly correctly) criticized for making too much of the effects of their presence on their research sites, it makes sense to inquire into scholars' roles in articulating and legitimating the worlds of experience I moved within during my field research in Cambridge.

One legacy of past social scientific investigations is that the questions about what religious experience was and how it could be studied became a matter for scholars and "experiencers" alike. As the discourse and practices of identifying scientifically valid experiences entered the lay worlds of religious people in the early twentieth century, giving their experiences power in new ways, mainstream social scientists became less actively interested in investigating the experiential through the "methodologically plural" and inductive frames that earlier generations had engaged, and scholars like Taylor still pressed for. Even though few contemporary scholars play by the rules of these earlier investigations, spiritual practitioners in Cambridge often approach the world of research through this lens and, moreover, engage scholars like myself with a very different vision of what a "scholar" is and how she relates to these communities. What I said, what I wrote, and what I heard was actively shaped by apparitions of various past and present scholarly investigators.[39]

The ubiquity of scholarly observers and collaborators in these worlds was clear at every turn. Spiritual practitioners and mystics were aca-

demic name droppers and eager to elaborate their own academic pedigrees (or apologize for their lack thereof). Many told me that they collaborated with local scientists and professors who were researching (for example) alchemical anti-aging remedies and energetically produced music. A spiritual belly dancer talked to me at great length about published anthropological studies documenting women's spiritual practices in Northern Africa, and gave me the names of professors whom I should contact to learn more. Christian Scientists and alternative healers kept close watch on (and sometimes participated in) the research of Herbert Benson's mind-body research group at the Harvard Medical School. Almost everyone knew about other scholars who were actively at work, continuing the traditions of investigation that my respondents understood to validate and authorize their practices, projects, and truths.

In this field scholars were not unusual figures, but rather had particular roles, and perhaps privileges and duties, when it came to investigating spiritual matters. In ways that I did not expect or quickly realize, I was "caught," as Jeanne Favret-Saada suggests, in a web of relations. Many have noted that ethnographic work is a type of barter or exchange, usually unequal. Favret-Saada extends this further, noting how she became caught up in the structures of relations among witches, bewitched, and unwitchers during fieldwork in rural France merely by employing good ethnographic practices of "listening." She notes, "It is always the other person who decides how to interpret what you say." "Just as a peasant must hear the words of the annunciator, if he is to confess that he is indeed bewitched, so it was my interlocutors who decided what my position was . . . by interpreting unguarded clues in my speech."[40] As an outsider to the local dialect and customs, Favret-Saada believed that she shared with her respondents a perception that she was fully outside of the bounded world of hexes and curses, but as she comes to understand, there is no position *for* an outsider in this system. The only positions within the world of witchcraft she entered were those of the bewitched, witches, and unwitchers: what she learned about witchcraft in the region was ultimately shaped through others' positioning, and "catching" of her academic self.[41]

Favret-Saada writes that her failure to recognize that her respondents were talking to her as if she were an unwitcher was exacerbated by what she believed was a profound disconnection between her academic world and that of her respondents. In contrast, I found myself "caught" as a consequence of my unexamined presumption that my respondents and I shared the same sense of the world. After all, we

more-or-less shared language, education, geographical proximity, and so on. I expected that we likewise shared a basic understanding of the various positions that we inhabited: that we (for example) shared an understanding of what professors and researchers did, and thus how I would go about my work and what this would mean. And it was indeed unquestionable that my respondents recognized me as a professor and researcher. What they understood that researchers did however, particularly within the orbits of metaphysical networks, was highly inflected by the books they read, the institutions they engaged, and the practices embedded within contemporary spirituality.[42]

As I have already noted, dominant social scientific understandings of contemporary spirituality suggest that it has no culture to speak of, that is, that it is an individual rather than a collective phenomena. Depicting metaphysicals as people without a past suggests that the cultures that metaphysicals are connected to do not strongly shape them nor demand much from them. They come under scrutiny for being suspect, inauthentic, purchased, mediated through the market and other corrupted influences. Reinforced by individual-level surveys, uncritical reviews of "shopper" and "seeker" spirituality, and so on, it is easy to imagine that there is no culture that might catch a researcher.[43] There are no witches or bewitched. But as my own and others' engagements with spiritual and metaphysical practitioners make evident, there are in fact cultures that catch people in relations to each other. And, as I learned, professors and researchers are caught in particular ways by these imaginative webs. Had I listened differently to Taylor's lecture, some of these structures and the role that scholars play within Cambridge's particular mystical communities may have been more evident. But in my early field research, I was not so aware.

Although I eventually began to understand the peculiar and special roles that religious studies scholars, and social scientists in particular, continue to play in shaping the worlds of experience that I encountered and lived within, I found it both illuminating and somewhat comforting, late in my fieldwork, to come upon an account of Hugo Münsterberg's visit to Edgar Cayce in Thomas Sugrue's hagiography of the trance channeler. This popular account opens with a cold day in 1912 when a stranger steps "off the Pullman." The stranger "spoke quickly, and with a thick German accent," demanding to see Cayce. Four pages later, he introduces himself to the psychic as "Dr. Hugo Münsterberg, of Harvard. I have come here to expose you. There has been entirely too much written about you in the newspapers lately." Münsterberg's

impertinent questions, gruff manner, and general rudeness (he dumps all of Cayce's books on the floor) are met at every turn by friendliness, even though the denizens of the small Kentucky town find Münsterberg insufferable. One quips, "You've got to expect that sort of thing from Yankees. They don't know any better, poor souls." Cayce's wife, ever sighing, then asks, "Why don't you get some decent school to investigate you. . . . Harvard is just a pesthole of Republicans."[44]

As amusing as Münsterberg's comeuppance might sound at this remove, Sugrue's set piece has a more serious purpose, namely to bring readers who might share Münsterberg's critical position into Cayce's world and to redeem such skepticism in service of metaphysical inquiry. Sugrue recounts how Münsterberg watches Cayce treat a patient through a doorway that connects two rooms, one large, one small. At the end of one such session, the psychologist traverses the boundary between the rooms and, to everyone's surprise, entreats the patient to follow Cayce's suggested treatment. "If I were you I would do exactly as he says. From what I have heard, and from what the people I have talked with who claim his readings have helped them I would say that some extraordinary benefits have come from these experiences." Münsterberg then addresses Cayce, who is tying his shoes. "Young man, I would like to know more about this. I have never encountered anything quite like it. I would hesitate to pass any opinion without a long and thorough examination. But if it is a trick, I am convinced you are not yourself aware of it." Cayce spiritedly answers that he, too, would like to know more. "If it is a trick, doctor, I would like to know about it before I go too far and cause some harm."[45] Münsterberg shakes Cayce's hands, turns on his heel, and leaves on the next train, the scholar's manners found but his certainty lost. The skeptical, antagonistic Ivy League professor has become a man who is just as bewildered by Cayce as the others.

Sugrue never paints Münsterberg as a convert. The Harvard professor is a powerful figure in this narrative precisely because of his continued skepticism, which Sugrue expertly marshals to the side of the scientific claims for the realities of mystical experience. The aging Ivy League professor who stands in the doorway becomes a broker between pure belief and pure science. He opens up an imaginative space where rational skeptics in pursuit of the truth find not belief but "realities." These realities baffle the explanatory power of scientific paradigms and thus demand the development of new research techniques that will get to the bottom of things. Sugrue's Münsterberg and Eugene Taylor oc-

cupy a similar position, where commitments to scientific inquiry and to such a conception of truth point beyond what is currently known, and "beyond" the tools we have to assess them.

Münsterberg is a most unlikely character to stand in as a messenger in any of these respects. A German-born émigré hired by James to the Harvard psychology faculty, Münsterberg explored the power of "suggestion" in his research and commented on its power of healing in his "immensely popular" *Psychology and Life*. Münsterberg argues that healing can take place through mechanisms of "suggestion" that tap into a physiologically sourced unconscious that prior generations incorrectly believed stemmed from divine agents. It seems unlikely that Cayce's abilities would have been particularly interesting to Münsterberg, given that his research focused almost exclusively on the mechanics of the healed rather than of those of the healer. As he noted, "for the man who believes in the metaphysical cure, it may be quite unimportant whether the love curer at his bedside thinks of the psychical Absolute or of the spring hat she will buy with the fee for her metaphysical healing."[46]

Münsterberg is a familiar stock type in spiritual and metaphysical literature: Sugrue is trading heavily within a genre where the voice of learned men (and occasionally women) and other scholarly adepts are marshaled to testify to spiritual truths. Whatever Münsterberg's actual purpose for traveling to Kentucky, Sugrue transforms them into a familiar metaphysical morality play wherein a researcher confronted by the fruits of spiritual activities begins to ponder anew what he really knows. Although scholars rarely notice that they have been appropriated in these ways, when they do, they do not find it enjoyable to have the tables turned. When a psychic reported that she had heard from Münsterberg after his death, and that his word from beyond the grave was that "Spirit return is a truth," his biographer wrote in dismay that the good psychologist "was appropriated . . . by the public to meet its own needs."[47] "Appropriation" might be too strong a word, however, given that even though religious experiencers, mediums, and mystics were "catching" scholars, it likewise remains the case that scholars continue to "catch" metaphysical believers in our own developing webs of significance. The study of contemporary spirituality is made more difficult by the fact that the practice and self-understanding of many spiritual practitioners is already engaged at some level with scholarship and scientific research projects. Recognizing these practices, however, will move us a long way toward better understanding the social and cultural positions of these religious forms.

Looking Forward

The following chapters address various ways that metaphysical cultures and religious experiences are produced and practiced in contemporary Cambridge. The chapters focus, in turn, on *institutions* (fields of production), *language* (discourse), and the practices of *bodies, times,* and *spaces*. "Shamans in the Meetinghouse" addresses the social location of spirituality and experience in various institutional fields, and asks if we might understand spirituality as religion that is produced in secular institutions or settings. "Becoming Mystics" focuses on the discursive power of forming authoritative accounts of religious experience, first demonstrating how formal testimonies shape and occlude social ties, and then demonstrating how the lived practices of experiential accounting transforms and challenges sociological distinctions between experience and account. "Tuning the Body" investigates metaphysicals' two (or more) bodies, one visible and one invisible, that they seek to encounter and train in order to hold constant, powerful contact with the divine. The following chapters, "Karmic Laundry" and "Zooming Around," address, in turn, how metaphysicals understand their place in space and time, through the practices of reincarnation and various other kinds of time and space travel. These chapters in addition demonstrate how spiritual practitioners live within metaphysical realities (experiential realities) that expand their orientations toward the world and to their place in it, through articulating and placing them in perennial, universal histories. In each of the chapters, I am attentive to the ways contemporary practices resonate with the perennialist and universal aspirations of earlier metaphysicals and mystics, and likewise consider how these resonances unravel the claims that the past might otherwise make on the present, thus shaping contemporary spirituality as new rather than old, emergent and free rather than indebted in any way to what has come before.

With these themes in mind, I return briefly in the conclusion to some of the issues I raise here, including the entanglements that sociologists of religion might fruitfully engage in historically sensitive analyses of contemporary spiritual practice. Sociologists might come to better engage American religions in all of their breadth and scope by identifying the varying genealogies of religious experience that recombine within it. Such an analytical project will undoubtedly require thoughtful engagement with the contributing role of social scientific evaluations of religious experience, both in sociology's understanding of religion's place in modern society and (to a lesser degree) in spiritual

practitioners' self-understandings. Likewise, such an analytical project will demand that social scientists engage directly with what appears at first blush as uncomfortable parallels in many scholarly and religious imaginations of modern American religion.

This book's opening vignette condenses many of the thematic tensions that I elaborate in the chapters ahead. In ways that I came to appreciate only recently, but that I imagine many of my Cambridge respondents have long understood, something happens in those brief moments when I tell a story about a cold winter's night on Quincy Street. History, landscape, emotion, and intellect converge in a way that still feels new and unique, and that points toward something that has yet to be said. As this book demonstrates, my metaphysical acquaintances and I found similar stories to have quite different powers. Nonetheless, we each in our own way imagine that such stories properly told will elicit new questions about the allure of divine experience for modern Americans.