



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

## **Comparing Religions: Reflexive Re-Readings**

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For the past few Tuesday evenings, I have been teaching a class here at UUCF based on the religion professor Jeffrey Kripal's book Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms. And I would like to share some highlights from Kripal's conclusions about where we find ourselves on the other side of the comparative process, having compared the world's religions in light of both modern science and our own direct experience."

In particular, I would like to focus on Kripal's final chapter, "Reflexive Re-readings: Looking at the Looker." To begin unpacking that title, let me begin by saying that there is a famous phrase in linguistics that, "**To know one is to know none.**" I have found that claim to be true in my own experience with studying languages, and perhaps you have as well. I had a wonderful Language Arts teacher in Elementary school, who required us to do extensive work in diagramming sentences, so I gained a relatively strong grasp of English grammar. But when I started to study German in high school, I felt like the bottom dropped out of what I thought was a

fairly sophisticated understanding of English. I began to much more clearly perceive the deep structure of English, when I had another language with which to compare it.

*“To know one is to know none”* — because despite how it can feel from the inside, it is arguably impossible to know even one language fully unless you have another language to compare and contrast it to. And the more languages you learn — and the more you apply the insights of evolution, psychology, sociology, and other related fields to the phenomenon of human languages — the deeper your understanding will go about the underlying dynamics of all human languages and how that lends insight into the human condition.

The same is true, Kripal invites us to consider, about religions: *“To know one is to know none.”* You can spend your whole life immersed in one religious tradition, but never see the underlying dynamics that emerge if you began to *compare* many religious traditions. But Kripal wants to push this process one step further: to investigate if through a robust comparison of all the world’s religions — in light of all we know in the twenty-first century from psychology, sociology, evolution, neuroscience, and related fields — if we might begin to trace the dynamics *underneath* the human phenomenon of religion.

Remember the subtitle of his final chapter (“Looking at the Looker”). One of the epigrams from Kripal’s final chapter is from the late Matt Tonnies’ book *The Crypto-Terrestrials*, where he writes that, “Instead of looking at the screen, what I want to do is to turn around and look the other way.... I want to steal the key to the projectionist’s booth, and then, when everybody has gone home, I want to break in.” That’s what Kripal wants us to do with religion.

What, then, is the phenomenon of “religion” that Kripal wants look behind the curtain of — and perhaps discover, as Dorothy did in Oz, a frail wizard, who is all too human? There are many definitions of religions, but here’s one that Kripal invites us to consider: “The history of

religions [is] humanity's millennia-long encounter and struggle with the anomalous, the powerful, the really, really weird stuff that does *not* fit in, that does *not* make sense.”

Now, in a sermon back in March, I shared with you some about Kripal's own mystical experiences and the ways he has sought to understand those experiences through his training in psychoanalysis and his position as a well-respected professor of religion. But in addition to the “really, really weird stuff” that has happened to him, what has also motivated Kripal to continue working at the intersection of academic rigor and individual mystical experience is that every time he takes the risk of opening up about his personal experience, he finds that many people come up to him later in private — including often other academic Ph.D.s — to share an instance of “really, really weird stuff” that happened to them.

Here's one example. Kripal writes,

I was lecturing at a major research university. Afterwards, as usually happens, really as *always* happens, a colleague asked me if she could tell me a story. She then proceeded to describe the following series of historical events.

A few years before our conversation, she had sent her four-year-old son up to a petting zoo north of the city with their nanny. At 10:06 a.m. she got a sudden “flash” of a picture in her head of her son screaming in his car seat at the back of her car and of the car filling up with what looked like white smoke, which she did not understand. She knew it was a serious car crash, as she could also “feel” the impact in her child's body — viscerally. She immediately called her nanny. They were already at the peering zoo. She instructed the nanny to come home immediately and to drive very slowly. They got home just fine.

The next day the boy wanted to go back to the petting zoo. He had, after all, not been allowed to stay the say before. So the mother decide to drive him up herself this time. On the way there, a car made a sharp turn in front of them on the highway, and a crash ensued. The son was screaming in the back car seat. The airbags deployed and filled the car up with white powder or “smoke.” The mother turned around to check on her son: that was when the flash from the day before re-played, like a precise “video re-run,” as she put it. The man who hit them offered to call the woman’s husband after the crash, since the woman could not get to her phone. The emergency call registered on her husband’s phone at 10:08 a.m....

Was this woman seeing in to the future? Or was the future, perhaps as her future self, reaching back to her present self? Also note that, by acting on the precognitive vision (and hence by preventing the child from a full visit at the zoo), the mother actually helped cause the future event to happen (since the child now wanted to return). Or did the vision from the future intend a warning, causing her to be more careful and cautious the next day, and this way helped prevent a much more serious event? (366)

Now, of course, we can all put on our skeptical caps, and begin to try and poke holes in the veracity of this anecdotal account. But Kripal invites us to consider that even science — through Einstein’s Theory of Relatively and through contemporary Quantum Mechanics — is showing us how space and time are *relative* as well as how “spookily entangled” reality is on the quantum level, what is sometimes called “quantum weirdness.”

Kripal calls the worldview he is espousing the “School of the More,” which is an allusion to the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Harvard psychologist William James’ classic book The Varieties of Religion Experience in which James writes about becoming “conscious that [a] higher part of one's self is coterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of one’s self. . . .” By no means, however, is either James or Kripal saying that we can or should try to make a leap *from* a felt sense that there is “More” about the universe that what can be rationally proven through the scientific method *to* the existence of “God.” Kripal thinks that reality is much more complex, messy, and in-flux than traditional views of “God” usually allow.

Rather, keep in mind what we outlined earlier about the study of linguistics (“to know one is to know none”) and the title of Kripal’s final chapter (“Reflexive Re-readings: Looking at the Looker”). In linguistics, the reflexive case refers back to the subject, such as “I help *myself* to dessert” or “They saw *themselves* in the mirror.” I became much more aware of reflexivity in English grammar when I studied German in which verbs much more frequently take the reflexive case. In German, you would not say, “I’m shaving.” You would explicitly add the reflexive pronoun, “I’m shaving *myself*” (*Ich rasiere mich*).

And when Kripal talks about the “School of the More” and “Reflexive Re-readings of Religion,” what he means is that the academic study of religion has repeatedly exposed that the sources of religion points *not* to a supernatural source, but reflexively *back to* human culture. As Xenophanes said more than 2,500 years ago, it was no coincidence that, “the Ethiopians [who were dark skinned] worship black gods and the Thracians [many of whom had blue eyes and red hair] worship gods with blue eyes and red hair. . . . And If oxen, horses, and lions had religion

(and hands), they would no doubt paint their gods to look like oxen, horses, and lions” (Kripal, *Serpent* 63-4).

But here’s where Kripal sees a twenty-first century twist. Even after we pass religion through the skeptical fire of all that we have learned from Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and so many others — and even after we see the ways that religion points *less* to a “God out there” and *more* reflexively back to human nature, human psychology, and human sociology — we “discover that [human] nature is something quite extraordinary in itself” — perhaps something “More” (Kripal, *Comparing*, 368). In Kripal’s words, in a reflexive re-reading of religion, **“the ‘angry ghost’ of poltergeist events becomes the ‘ghost of anger’ of parapsychology — still human indeed, but a most extraordinary kind of human, who is clearly violating the way in which the world is supposed to work by reason’s rules”** (368).

From a related perspective, John Caputo, an emeritus philosophy professor at Syracuse University says it this way: **“I am trying to open thinking and practice to the event that is playing itself out under the name of ‘God.’”** Or to extend our linguistic metaphor, he says, **“The several religions differ from one another in ways that are broadly similar to the ways that languages differ from one another....** [There is] no more sense to ask what is the true religion than what is the true language.... [They are] different vocabularies doing different things.” But despite these very real differences between different language and different religions, there is also a shared sameness in that they are all *human* languages and *human* religions — and there are ways in which *both reflexively point back to human nature*, even as human language and human religion, in turn, also point *beyond themselves* to the ways there there is “more” to this universe that we humans have the capacity to know. As Shakespeare’s Hamlet said to the dying Horatio, **“There are more things in heaven and earth... / than are**

**dreamt of in your philosophy.”** Or to take the more contemporary example, the scientist J. B. S. Haldane said about the implications of quantum mechanics: **“The universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose.”**

For me, the writings of the twentieth-century Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung have been among the most helpful I have found for understanding this postmodern perspective on religion. And one of the most helpful metaphors I have found for understanding Jung is to **imagine our ego (the part of ourselves that we are consciously aware of) as the tip of an iceberg** that is floating above the surface of the ocean. An equally important part of ourselves is our *individual unconscious*, which is the much larger part of the iceberg that is beneath the surface of the water. In this metaphor the “more” we have been discussing, what Jung called the ‘*collective unconscious*,’ is the ocean: “the sea of mind and being out of which the individual psyche, that is, the person, ‘freezes’ into hard form and and comes into existence, at least for a time, before it is melted back into the ocean...”

And Jung taught that the two best ways he knew of for becoming more conscious of both our individual unconscious and of the collective unconscious is to **pay more attention during the day to synchronicities (Jung’s term for “meaningful coincidences”) and more attention during the night to our dreams.** An extreme example of a synchronicity, of course, is our earlier story of the precognitive experience that happened to Kripal’s colleague twice at precisely 10:06 a.m. And if you are interested in dreamwork, the easiest way I’ve found is the TTAQ method, which stands for “Title, Theme, Affect, Question.” Keep a journal by your bed, and record your dream in the first-person singular (“I”). Then, go through the TTAQ four steps, asking yourself:

1. “What **title** does this dream want itself to have?” It can often help to just write down the first thing that comes to mind.

2. “What **themes** surfaced in the dream?”
3. “What was the **affect** (“the dominant feeling experienced”)?”
4. Finally, instead of asking, “What does this dream mean?” try asking, “What **question** is my dream inviting me to ask?”

For more, I recommend my UU minister colleague Jeremy Taylor’s excellent book The Wisdom of Your Dreams.

All that being said, there are modern neuroscientists, who strongly argue that our “**mind is a purely local, material process that blips out when the brain blips out.**” But for those of you who experienced the “School of More,” I will end with what Kripal called “the Parable of the Radio,” adapted from the neuroscientist David Eagleman’s bestselling book Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain:

“Imagine that you are a Kalahari Bushman and that you stumble upon a transistor radio in the sand. You might pick it up, twiddle the knobs, and suddenly, to your surprise, hear voices streaming out of this strange little box.... Now let’s say you begin a careful, scientific study of what causes the voices. You notice that each time you pull out the green wire, the voices stop. When you put the wire back on its contact, the voices begin again.... You come to a clear conclusion: the voices depend entirely on the integrity of the circuitry. At some point, a young person asks you how some simple loops of electrical signals can engender music and conversations, and you admit that you don’t know — but you insist that your science is about to crack that problem at any moment.”

Assuming that you are truly isolated, what you do not know is pretty much everything that you need to know: radio waves, electromagnetism, distant cities,

radio stations, and modern civilization. You would not even have the capacity to *imagine* such things. And, even if you could, “you have no technology to demonstrate the existence of the waves, and everyone justifiably points out that the onus is on you to convince them.” You could convince almost no one and you yourself would probably reject the existence of such mysterious, spirit-like waves. You would become a “radio materialist.”

“I’m not asserting that the brain is like a radio,” [Eagleman says] “but I *am* pointing out that it *could* be true. There is nothing in our current science that rules this out.” [For Kripal,] this is where the historian of religions steps in. There are, after all, numerous clues in the general history of religions that rule the radio theory in, and that suggest — though hardly prove — that the human brain may well be a kind of transmitter or receiver of consciousness. [Kripal writes,] the historian of religions, this one anyway, says to the open-minded neuroscientist: “Looker, look here!” (388)