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*The Rhetoric of Experience and the Study of Religion**

*The exercise of thought cannot have any other outcome than the negation
of individual perspectives.* — Georges Bataille

I

One might expect an essay on the term ‘experience’ to begin with a definition, but immediately we confront a problem. To define something entails situating it in the public sphere, assuming an objective or third-person perspective *vis-à-vis* the term or concept at issue. The problem with the term ‘experience’, particularly with respect to its use in the study of religion, is that it resists definition by design; as we will see, the term is often used rhetorically to thwart the authority of the ‘objective’ or the ‘empirical,’ and to valorize instead the subjective, the personal, the private. This is in part why the meaning of the term may appear self-evident at first, yet becomes increasingly elusive as one tries to get a fix on it. (Gadamer places experience ‘among the least clarified concepts which we have’, 1975, p. 310.)

In spite of (or perhaps owing to) the obscurity of the term, experience as a concept has come to play a pivotal role in the study of religion. The meaning of many religious symbols, scriptures, practices, and institutions is believed to reside in the experiences they elicit in the minds of practitioners. Moreover, a particular mode (or modes) of experience, characterized as ‘religious’, ‘spiritual’, ‘visionary’ or ‘mystical’, is thought to constitute the very essence of religion, such that the origin of a given tradition is often traced to the founder’s initial transcendent encounter, moment of revelation, salvation, or enlightenment. This approach to religious phenomena is not confined to academic discourse alone; many lay adherents feel that the only *authentic* form of worship or scriptural study is one that leads to a personal experience of its ‘inner truth’. Consequently, scholarship that does not attend to the experiential dimension of religious practice is dismissed by many as reductionistic.

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Some scholars go further. Not content with limiting the range of the term ‘experience’ to particular individuals, they go on to speak of the ‘collective experience’ of an entire community or culture. Attention to the collective or ‘lived’ experience of a religious community is touted as one way of overcoming cultural bias — our tendency to view the beliefs and actions of people different from ourselves as backward, foolish, or bizarre. If we can bracket our own presuppositions, temper our ingrained sense of cultural superiority, and resist the temptation to evaluate the truth claims of foreign traditions, we find that their *experience* of the world possesses its own rationality, its own coherence, its own truth. This approach, sometimes known as the phenomenology of religion, enjoins the ‘imaginative participation in the world of the actor’ in order to arrive at ‘value free’ and ‘evocative’ descriptions (Smart, 1973, pp. 20–1).

This use of the concept ‘religious experience’ is exceedingly broad, encompassing a vast array of feelings, moods, perceptions, dispositions, and states of consciousness. Some prefer to focus on a distinct type of religious experience known as ‘mystical experience’, typically construed as a transitory but potentially transformative state of consciousness in which a subject purports to come into immediate contact with the divine, the sacred, the holy. We will return to the issue of mystical experience below. Here I would only note that the academic literature does not clearly delineate the relationship between religious experience and mystical experience. The reluctance, and in the end the inability, to clearly stipulate the meaning of such terms will be a recurring theme in the discussion below.

II

It is not difficult to understand the allure of the rhetoric of experience in the modern period. Both Western theologians and secular scholars of religion found themselves facing, each in their own way, a host of challenges that, for the purposes of this essay, I will group under the two headings of *empiricism* and *cultural pluralism*.

By empiricism I refer to the notion that all truth claims must be subject, in theory if not in fact, to empirical or scientific verification. This was a potential problem for modern theologians, as many essential elements of theological reflection are simply not amenable to empirical observation or testing. By emphasizing the experiential dimension of religion — a dimension inaccessible to strictly objective modes of inquiry — the theologian could forestall scientific critique. Religious truth claims were not to be understood as pertaining to the objective or material world, which was the proper domain of science, but to the inner spiritual world, for which the scientific method was deemed inappropriate.

Unlike the theologian, the secular scholar was not necessarily invested in the truth claims of any particular religious tradition. However, scholars of religion do have a vested interest in the existence of irreducibly *religious* phenomena over which they can claim special authority. That is to say, other academic disciplines — history, anthropology, sociology, or psychology, for example — could (and

sometimes did) claim to possess the requisite tools for the analysis of religion, a claim that threatened to put the religion specialist out of a job. By construing religion as pertaining to a distinct mode of 'experience', the scholar of religion could argue that it ultimately eludes the grasp of other more empirically oriented disciplines.

The second challenge for both theologians and secular scholars was that of cultural pluralism. By the twentieth century it had become difficult for Christian theologians to simply ignore the existence of non-Christian traditions, much less to smugly assert Christian superiority. But to take other traditions seriously entailed the risk of rendering Christianity merely one of several competing systems of belief. In privileging religious experience theologians could argue that all religious traditions emerged from, and were attempts to give expression to, an apprehension of the divine or the ultimate. Differences in doctrine and forms of worship are to be expected due to vast differences in linguistic, social, and cultural conditions. What is key, however, is that as a response to a fundamentally human (and thus pan-cultural and ahistorical) sense of the transcendent, all religious traditions could lay *some* claim to truth. This allowed Christian theologians to affirm the validity of Christian revelation without necessarily impugning their non-Christian rivals.

Cultural pluralism was no less a problem for secular scholars of religion, who had to contend with the knowledge that the category 'religion' was itself a cultural product. Many, if not most, non-Western traditions lacked an indigenous lexical equivalent for 'religion' altogether, and attempts to define or stipulate the nature of religion were often tainted with Western presuppositions. Like the theologian, the scholar of religion found the very existence of his ostensible subject of expertise open to question. By appealing to non-tradition-specific notions such as the 'sacred' or the 'holy' — notions that blur the distinction between a universal human experience and the posited object of said experience — the scholar could legitimize the comparative study of religion even while acknowledging the specifically Western origins of the category itself. The scholar could then argue that if places such as India or Japan or pre-Columbian America lacked an indigenous term for religion it was not because they lacked religious experience. On the contrary, every aspect of their life was so suffused with a sense of the divine that they simply did not distinguish between the secular and the sacred.

III

The ideological aspect of the appeal to experience — the use of the concept to legitimize vested social, institutional, and professional interests — is most evident when we turn to the study of mysticism. As mentioned above, mystical experience is generally construed as a direct encounter with the divine or the absolute, and as such some scholars claim that the 'raw experience' itself is not affected by linguistic, cultural, or historical contingencies. Obviously, a given individual's understanding and articulation of such an experience will be conditioned by the tradition to which he or she belongs. Thus a Christian might talk about witnessing

the Holy Spirit, a Hindu about absorption into Brahman, a Buddhist about the extinction of the self. But if one is able to see beyond the superficial, culturally determined differences between these accounts one discovers a single unvarying core. Or so goes the argument advanced by William James (1961/1902), Rudolf Otto (1958/1917), Aldous Huxley (1946), W.T. Stace (1960) and Robert Forman (1990), among others. Needless to say there are important differences in the views of these scholars, but all more-or-less agree that it is possible to distinguish between a core experience (or core experiences) proper, and the divergent culturally conditioned expressions of that core. Such a position led naturally to attempts to isolate the universal features of mystical experience through the analysis of 'first-hand reports'. William James, for example, proposed four such features, namely, noetic quality, ineffability, transiency, and passivity (1961); Rudolf Otto speaks more loosely of 'creature feeling', awefulness, overpoweringness, energy, and fascination (1958). Others reject the essential features approach altogether in favour of a looser 'family resemblance' model, and several scholars argue that not one but two or more primary experiences exist, distinguishing, for example, between 'introvertive' and 'extravertive' types (Stace, 1960).

This understanding of mystical experience, sometimes known as the 'perennial philosophy' (a term popularized by Huxley's 1946 book of that title), proved quite influential among scholars of religion. But how is one to make conceptual sense of such an experience? One popular explanation goes as follows: logically we can, and indeed must, distinguish the object of consciousness from the *knowing* of that object; otherwise, we would be indistinguishable from insentient robots or automatons that are able to respond to stimuli without being conscious of them. There is, in other words, a residue in all conscious experience that cannot be reduced to the content of consciousness alone. This knowing factor, variously referred to as pure consciousness, prereflective experience, the true self, the *cogito*, and so on, is the proper object of a mystic's self-knowledge. Mystical experience consists in the direct, though somewhat paradoxical, apperception of, or absorption into, the knowing subject itself. Since this experience of pure subjectivity is free of individuating ego, mystics are led to speak of being one with the world, or one with the absolute. (If some theistically oriented mystics avoid explicitly monistic language, it is due to the doctrinal constraints imposed by their respective dualistic traditions.)

This is, of course, a highly simplified account of the perennialist position, and its defenders do not speak with a single voice. Be that as it may, in the past few decades this approach to mysticism has come under concerted attack from a number of scholars, notably Gershom Scholem (1969), Steven Katz (1978; 1983; 1992), Wayne Proudfoot (1985) and Grace Jantzen (1995). The objections are manifold. To begin with, critics note that we do not have access to mystical experiences *per se*, but only to texts that purport to describe them, and the perennialists systematically misconstrue these texts due to their *a priori* commitment to the perennialist position. Read impartially, there is little internal evidence to indicate that these very disparate accounts are actually referring to one and the same experience.

Besides, the very notion that one can separate an unmediated experience from a culturally determined description of that experience is philosophically suspect. According to Katz, 'neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated' (1978, p. 26). In other words, mystical experience is wholly shaped by a mystic's cultural environment, personal history, doctrinal commitments, religious training, expectations, aspirations, and so on.

Yet another problem with the perennialist position emerged as scholars turned to the intellectual genealogy of the category 'religious experience' itself. The concept turns out to be of relatively recent, and distinctively Western, provenance. Wayne Proudfoot traces the roots of the idea to the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who argued that religion cannot be reduced to a system of beliefs or morality. Religion proper, claimed Schleiermacher, is predicated on a feeling of the infinite — the 'consciousness of absolute dependence' (see, for example, Schleiermacher, 1928). According to Proudfoot, this emphasis on feeling was motivated by Schleiermacher's 'interest in freeing religious doctrine and practice from dependence on metaphysical beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions' (1985, p. xiii; see also Jantzen, 1995, pp. 311–21). Schleiermacher's strategy proved fruitful: the notion of religious experience provided new grounds upon which to defend religion against secular and scientific critique. The 'hermeneutic of experience' was soon adopted by a host of scholars interested in religion, the most influential being William James, and today many have a difficult time imagining *what else* religion might be about. Yet prior to Schleiermacher, insists Proudfoot, religion was simply not understood in such terms, and it is thus incumbent upon us to reject the perennialist hypothesis in so far as it anachronistically imposes the recent and ideologically laden notion of 'religious experience' on our interpretations of premodern phenomena.

IV

The claim that religious experience is a relatively late and distinctively Western invention might strike the reader as dubious at best. Did not mystical experience play a central role in the religions of Asia since time immemorial? We read repeatedly that Asian mystics have charted the depths of the human psyche, explored a vast array of altered states of consciousness, and left behind detailed maps so that others may follow in their footsteps. Hinduism and Buddhism, to pick the two best-known examples, are often approached not as religions, philosophies, or social systems, but rather as 'spiritual technologies' intended to induce a transformative experience of the absolute in the mind of the practitioner. Thus, while the emphasis on experience might be relatively new in the West, this is clearly not the case in the East. Or so one might suppose from the plethora of writings on the subject.

But not so fast. The notion that Asian religions are more experientially rooted than their Western counterparts is one of those truisms so widely and unquestioningly held that corroboration of any kind is deemed superfluous. But when we

turn to premodern Asian sources the evidence is ambiguous at best. Take, for example, the many important Buddhist exegetical works that delineate the Buddhist *marga* or ‘path to liberation’ — works such as ‘Stages on the Bodhisattva Path’ (*Bodhisattvabhumi*), ‘The Stages of Practice’ (*Bhavanakrama*), ‘Path of Purity’ (*Visuddhimagga*), ‘The Great Calming and Contemplation’ (*Mo-ho chih-kuan*), ‘The Great Book on the Stages of the Path’ (*Lam rim chen mo*), and so on. These texts are frequently construed as descriptive accounts of meditative states based on the personal experiences of accomplished adepts. Yet rarely if ever do the authors of these compendiums claim to base their expositions on their own experience. On the contrary, the authority of exegetes such as Kamalasila, Buddhaghosa, and Chih-i, lay not in their access to exalted spiritual states, but in their mastery of, and rigorous adherence to, sacred scripture (Sharf, 1995a). This situation is by no means unique to Buddhism: premodern Hinduism was similarly wary of claims to authority predicated on personal experience (Halbfass, 1988).

The notion that meditation is central to Asian religious praxis might seem to support the thesis that Asian traditions exalt personal experience. But here too we must be cautious: contemporary accounts of Asian meditation typically *presume* that they are oriented toward meditative experience, and thus such accounts must be used with considerable caution. Besides, while meditation may have been esteemed in theory, it did not occupy the dominant role in monastic and ascetic life that is sometimes supposed. (This point is often overlooked by scholars who fail to distinguish between prescriptive and descriptive accounts.) Even when practised, it is by no means obvious that traditional forms of meditation were oriented toward the attainment of extraordinary ‘states of consciousness’. Meditation was first and foremost a means of eliminating defilement, accumulating merit and supernatural power, invoking apotropaic deities, and so forth. This is not to deny that religious practitioners had ‘experiences’ in the course of their training, just that such experiences were not considered the goal of practice, were not deemed doctrinally authoritative, and did not serve as the reference points for their understanding of the path (Sharf, 1995a). Indeed, as we will see below, personal experience, no matter how extraordinary, *could not* serve as such a reference point precisely because of its ambiguous epistemological status and essentially indeterminate nature — a point appreciated by not a few medieval Buddhist exegetes.

The complementary notions that Asian religious traditions are predicated on mystical experience, and that meditation is a means to induce such experience, are so well ingrained that it might be useful to pause for a moment to consider their provenance. The valorization of experience in Asian thought can be traced to a handful of twentieth-century Asian religious leaders and apologists, all of whom were in sustained dialogue with their intellectual counterparts in the West. For example, the notion that personal experience constitutes the heart of the Hindu tradition originated with the prolific philosopher and statesman Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975). Like his European and American predecessors, Radhakrishnan argued that ‘if philosophy of religion is to become scientific, it must become empirical and found itself on religious experience’ (1937, p. 84),

and 'it is not true religion unless it ceases to be a traditional view and becomes personal experience' (1937, p. 88). Thus in a single stroke Radhakrishnan could associate true religion with both personal experience and the empirical method. Radhakrishnan did not stop there, however, but went on to place the rhetoric of experience in the service of Hindu nationalism. He argued that if 'experience is the soul of religion,' then Hinduism is closest to that soul precisely because it is not historical, but based directly on the 'inward life of spirit' (1937, pp. 89, 90).

Radhakrishnan's intellectual debt to the West is no secret. Although he was educated in India, he was steeped in Western philosophical and religious thought from an early age, and his specific interest in experience can be traced directly to the works of William James (1842–1910), Francis Herbert Bradley (1846–1924), Henri Bergson (1859–1941), and Baron F. von Hügel (1852–1925), among others (Halbfass, 1988, p. 398). Radhakrishnan held numerous academic posts in India and England, including the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford, and his writings are filled with appreciative references to a variety of American and European thinkers popular at the time, from Evelyn Underhill (1850–1941) to Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947). What is curious is not that he should have placed his synthesis of Western and Indian philosophy in the service of an overtly apologetic and nationalist project, but that given this project he is nevertheless considered by many to be a credible 'native source' on the subject of traditional Hinduism.

One can, perhaps, find antecedents of Radhakrishnan's hermeneutic in the writings of Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905), an early leader of the Western influenced Hindu reform movement Brahmo Samaj, who held that the teachings of the Vedas may be affirmed through one's own experience. However, Tagore, like his predecessor Rammohun Roy (1772–1833), was intimately acquainted with Western thought in general, and Christian critiques of Hinduism in particular. His exegetical writings, and his work for the Brahmo Samaj, were directed toward the 'purification' of Hinduism so as to stay the growing influence of Christian missionaries and their converts. In the end there is simply no evidence of an indigenous Indian counterpart to the rhetoric of experience prior to the colonial period (Halbfass, 1988).

Western conceptions of 'Asian spirituality' are equally indebted to the writings of that indefatigable proselytizer of Zen Buddhism, D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966). According to Suzuki, religious experience is not merely a central feature of Zen, it is the whole of Zen. In his voluminous writings Suzuki advanced the notion that Zen eschews all doctrine, all ritual, all institutions, and is thus, in the final analysis, not a religion at all. Zen is pure experience itself, the experiential essence lying behind all authentic religious teachings. Zen is associated, of course, with particular monasteries, forms of worship, and works of literature and art, but these are all mere 'fingers pointing at the moon'. The moon is none other than the unmediated experience of the absolute in which the dualism of subject and object, observer and observed, is transcended. This view of Zen has become so well established that many hesitate to speak of Zen at all for fear of being censured as insufficiently experienced.

Suzuki, like Radhakrishnan, places this understanding of Zen in the interests of a transparently nationalist discourse. Suzuki insisted that Zen is the wellspring of Japanese culture, and that the traditional arts of Japan — tea ceremony, monochrome painting, martial arts, landscape gardening, Noh theatre, etc. — are all ultimately expressions of Zen gnosis. Japanese culture naturally predisposes the Japanese toward Zen experience, such that they have a deeply ingrained appreciation of the unity of subject and object, human being and nature. This is in marked contradistinction to the excessively materialistic and dualistic traditions of the West.

Suzuki's musings on the 'Japanese mind' must be understood in the context of Japan's sense of technological and scientific inferiority *vis-à-vis* the Occident in the earlier part of this century. In the final analysis, Suzuki, like Radhakrishnan, attempts nothing less than the apotheosis of an entire people. And like Radhakrishnan, Suzuki's emphasis on experience owes as much to his exposure to Western thought as it does to indigenous Asian or Zen sources. In fact, Suzuki's qualifications as an exponent of Zen are somewhat dubious. Suzuki did engage in Zen practice at Engakuji during his student days at Tokyo Imperial University, and he enjoyed a close relationship with the abbot Shaku Soen (1859–1919). But by traditional standards Suzuki's training was relatively modest: he was never ordained, his formal monastic education was desultory at best, and he never received institutional sanction as a Zen teacher. This is not to impugn Suzuki's academic competence; he was a gifted philologist who made a lasting contribution to the study of Buddhist texts. In the end, however, his approach to Zen, with its unrelenting emphasis on an unmediated inner experience, is not derived from Buddhist sources so much as from his broad familiarity with European and American philosophical and religious writings (Sharf, 1995c).

Suzuki's early interest in things Western was wide-ranging, and included such fashionable quasi-religious movements as Theosophy, Swedenborgianism, and the 'Religion of Science'. The latter doctrine was the brainchild of the German-American essayist Paul Carus (1852–1919), who worked as editor at the Open Court Publishing Company in La Salle, Illinois. Carus was convinced that once the 'old religions' were purified of their superstitious and irrational elements, they would work in conjunction with science to bring humankind to the realization that there is no distinction between the immaterial and the material — between mind and matter. Carus was particularly attracted to Buddhism, which he felt was close in spirit to his own philosophy.

Suzuki was initially drawn to Carus after reading *Gospel of Buddha*, a compendium of Buddhist teachings compiled by Carus and published in Open Court's 'Religion of Science' series in 1894 (see Carus, 1915). Carus had taken available European translations of Buddhist scriptures and, through the use of careful selection, creative retranslation, and outright fabrication, managed to portray the teachings of the Buddha as humanistic, rational, and scientific. Suzuki, who had been asked to translate the *Gospel* into Japanese, was so impressed with Carus's work that he arranged to travel to America to study under his tutelage. Suzuki was to remain in La Salle for some eleven years, and it was toward the end of this period that he became familiar with the writings of William James.

Suzuki appears to have been responsible for introducing James' work to his high-school friend Nishida Kitaro (1870–1945). It was through Nishida, who was to emerge as Japan's leading modern philosopher, that the notion of a distinctively religious mode of experience took hold in Japan. Nishida's first philosophical monograph, published in 1911 under the title *Zen no kenkyu* ('A Study of the Good', see Nishida, 1990), was dedicated to the elucidation of *junsui keiken*, or 'pure experience', a notion culled directly from James. But the context of Nishida's 'pure experience' was much removed from that of James. James sought to overcome the substance ontology that continued to infect classical empiricism, and to this end he proposed a pragmatic account of experience that avoided the reification of either subject or object. Nishida, on the other hand, was interested in integrating Western philosophy with his understanding of Zen, and consequently his notion of pure experience seems to function both as an ontological ground that subsumes subject and object, and as a psychological state of heightened self-awareness.

Suzuki seized upon Nishida's notion of pure experience and made it the central element in his exposition of Zen. And it proved to be an effective hermeneutic strategy, for here was an approach to Zen that was both familiar and attractive to Suzuki's Western audience. The irony of the situation is that the terms used by the Japanese to render 'experience' — *keiken* and *taiken* — are both modern neologisms coined in the Meiji period (1868–1912) by translators of Western philosophical works. (As far as I have been able to determine, *keiken* was first used to render the English 'experience', while *taiken* was used for the German *erleben* and *Erlebnis*.) There simply is no premodern Japanese lexical equivalent for 'experience'. Nor, I would add, is there a premodern Chinese equivalent. Chinese translators borrowed the Japanese neologisms in their own renderings of Western texts.

The interest in religious experience among twentieth-century Asian intellectuals is not difficult to fathom. Like their Western counterparts, Asian apologists were forced to respond to empiricist and pluralist critiques of their religious heritage. But Asian intellectuals had another threat with which to contend as well, namely, the affront of Western cultural imperialism, sustained as it was by the West's political, technological, and military dominance. Asian intellectuals, many of whom were educated in Christian missionary schools, were deeply aware of the contempt with which Occidentals viewed the religious culture of Asia. Castigated as primitive, idolatrous, and intellectually benighted, Asian religion was held responsible for the continent's social, political, and scientific failings. This is the context in which we must understand the Asian appropriation and manipulation of the rhetoric of experience. Men like Radhakrishnan and Suzuki would not only affirm the experiential foundation of their own religious traditions, but they would turn around and present those traditions as more intuitive, more mystical, more experiential, and thus 'purer' than the discursive faiths of the West. In short, if the West excelled materially, the East excelled spiritually. This strategy had the felicitous result of thwarting the Enlightenment critique of religion on the one hand, and the threat of Western cultural hegemony on the other.

The polemics of Radhakrishnan, Suzuki, and their intellectual heirs has had a significant impact on the study of religion in the West. Few Western scholars were in a position to question the romanticized image of Asian mysticism proffered forth by these intelligent and articulate 'representatives' of living Asian faiths. Besides, the discovery of common ground offered considerable comfort. The very notion that religious experience might function as a universal in the study of world religions evolved, in many respects, out of this cross-cultural encounter. In time the dialogue grew into a veritable academic industry, complete with its own professional societies, its own journals, and its own conferences and symposia, all devoted to the comparative study of 'Western' and 'Eastern' thought. The striking confluence of Western and Asian interests prevented those on both sides from noticing the tenuous ground on which the exchange had been built.

V

Seemingly oblivious to matters of historical context, arguments continue over the nature of mystical experience to the present day with no resolution in sight. The issues have not changed: scholars disagree over the extent to which mystical experiences are shaped by prior culturally mediated expectations and presuppositions, over whether one can separate a mystic's description of her experiences from her interpretations, over the existence of so-called 'pure consciousness' devoid of intentional objects, over competing schemes for typologizing mystical states, and over the philosophical and ethical significance, if any, of mystical experience. (*The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* alone has, of late, seen fit to publish an article a year on the topic; see Barnard, 1992; Forman, 1993; Shear, 1994; Short, 1995; and Brainard, 1996.) What is curious in these ongoing discussions is not so much the points of controversy as the areas of consensus. Virtually all parties tacitly accept the notion that terms such as 'religious experience', 'mystical experience', or 'meditative experience' function referentially, that is, their signification lies in the signifieds to which they allegedly refer. Hence scholars of mysticism are content to focus on the distinctive characteristics and the philosophical implications, if any, of religious or mystical experiences without pausing to consider what sort of thing 'experience' might be in the first place.

What exactly *do* we mean by experience? The dictionaries provide several overlapping definitions, but for our purposes we can focus on two more-or-less distinct usages. The first is to 'participate in', or 'live through', as one might say 'I have combat experience' or 'I have experience with diesel engines'. This use of the term is relatively unproblematic; it does not elicit any particular epistemological or metaphysical conundrums since the referent of the term would seem to lie in the social or public sphere. The second more epistemological or phenomenological meaning is to 'directly perceive', 'observe', 'be aware of', or 'be conscious of'. Here there is a tendency to think of experience as a subjective 'mental event' or 'inner process' that eludes public scrutiny. In thinking of experience along these lines it is difficult to avoid the image of mind as an immaterial substrate or psychic field, a sort of inner space in which the outer material world is

reflected or re-presented. Scholars leave the category experience unexamined precisely because the meaning of experience, like the stuff of experience, would seem to be utterly transparent. Experience is simply given to us in the immediacy of each moment of perception.

This picture of mind clearly has its roots in Descartes and his notion of mind as an 'immaterial substance' (although few today would subscribe to Descartes' substance ontology). And following the Cartesian perspective, we assume that in so far as experience is immediately present, experience *per se* is both indubitable and irrefutable. (While the *content* of experience may prove ambiguous or deceptive, the fact that I am experiencing *something* is beyond question.) The characteristics of immediacy and indubitability galvanized the 'hermeneutic of experience'. Experience, construed as the inviolable realm of pure presence, promised a refuge from the hermeneutic and epistemological vagaries of modern intellectual life. Just as some scholars of literature would invoke 'authorial intent' as a way to overcome ambiguity in the interpretation of literary works (see esp. Hirsch, 1967), the notion of experience promised to ground the meaning of religious texts and performances through an appeal to the experiences to which they refer. (The analogy is more than fortuitous: 'authorial intent' and 'religious experience' both occupy the same highly ambiguous but ultimately unassailable 'ontological space'.)

Yet the problem is unavoidable: if talk of 'shamanic experience', 'mystical experience', 'enlightenment experience', or what have you is to have any sort of determinate meaning we must construe the term 'experience' in referential or ostensive terms. But to do so is to objectify it, which would seem to undermine its most salient characteristic, namely, its immediacy. So we are posed with a dilemma: experience cannot be determinate without being rendered a 'thing'; if it is a thing it cannot be indubitable; but if it is not a thing then it cannot perform the hermeneutic task that religious scholars require of it — that of determining meaning. We will return to this point below.

But first I must respond to the following inevitable rebuke: the fact that a scholar such as myself should have a difficult time 'situating' the locus of religious experience merely attests to his own spiritual impoverishment. If only I had a taste of the real thing I would quickly and humbly forgo my rueful attempt to explain away such phenomena. Indeed, I would sympathize with the difficulty mystics have in expressing themselves. Do not mystics repeatedly allude to precisely this problem, that is, the problem in conceptualizing that which transcends all concepts?

This objection would seem to rest on an appeal to ethnographic evidence, to the witness of real mystics or religious adepts with first-hand experience of nonconceptual states. Of course, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that, according to the historical critique summarized above, the category 'experience' is itself of recent provenance, and thus the testimony of mystics of old, who talk in rather different terms (not to mention in dead languages), is going to prove ambiguous at best. So let us keep things simple and select a contemporary religious community that (1) unquestionably valorizes religious experience, and (2)

possesses a sophisticated technical vocabulary with which they describe and analyze such experience.

Vipassana or ‘insight’ practice (also known as *satipatthana* or ‘foundations of mindfulness’) is a Buddhist form of meditation that is popular in Theravada communities in Southeast Asia. (It is also influential among Buddhist enthusiasts in the West.) It must be noted that the specific techniques propagated today under the *vipassana* rubric, with their unequivocal emphasis on exalted meditative states, cannot be traced back prior to the late nineteenth century, and thus they are an unreliable source for the reconstruction of premodern Theravada. (The techniques were reconstructed in the modern period on the basis of scriptural accounts; see Sharf, 1995a). Be that as it may, contemporary adepts believe that their experiences in meditation tally with the ‘descriptions’ of progressive soteriological stages found in Buddhist scriptures. They thus treat the ancient scholastic terms pertaining to stages of Buddhist practice as if they designated discrete experiences accessible to contemporary practitioners. The claim that adepts in *vipassana* can clearly recognize and reproduce the various stages mentioned in canonical sources has encouraged some scholars to treat Theravada meditation theory as a sort of empirical phenomenology of altered states of consciousness that can be applied to non-Buddhist as well as Buddhist phenomena (Sharf, 1995a, p. 261).

On closer inspection, however, we find that the scriptures upon which the *vipassana* revival is based (primarily the two *Satipatthana-suttas* and the *Visuddhimagga*) are often ambiguous or inconsistent, and contemporary *vipassana* teachers are frequently at odds with each other over the interpretation of key terms. For example, Buddhist sources categorize the range of available meditation techniques under two broad headings, *samatha* or ‘concentration’, and *vipassana* or ‘insight’. Judging from scriptural accounts, one would presume that it would be difficult to confuse the two; both the techniques and the goals to which the techniques are directed differ substantially. *Samatha* practices, which involve focussing the mind on a single object, are supposed to result in an ascending series of four ‘material absorptions’ (or ‘trances’, *rupa-jhana*) and a further series of four (or five) ‘immaterial absorptions’ (*arupa-jhana*), that bestow upon the practitioner various supernatural powers. *Vipassana*, on the other hand, involves the disciplined contemplation of seminal Buddhist doctrines such as impermanence or nonself, and leads directly to nirvana or full liberation. Nirvana is achieved in four successive stages known as the ‘noble attainments’ (*ariya-phala*), the first of which is called *sotapatti* or ‘entry into the stream’. While *samatha* is an effective means to acquire specific spiritual powers, such as the ability to levitate or to read minds, only *vipassana* leads to enlightenment proper. Since the soteriological ramifications of *samatha* and *vipassana* differ so markedly, one would suppose that the experiential states with which they are associated would be easy to distinguish on phenomenological grounds.

All contemporary Theravada meditation masters accept the canonical categories outlined above. But curiously, despite the fact that these teachers have ‘tasted the fruits’ of practice, there is little if any consensus among them as to the

application of these key terms. On the contrary, the designation of particular techniques and the identification of the meditative experiences that result from them are the subjects of continued and often acrimonious debate. More often than not the categories are used polemically to disparage the teachings of rival teachers. Since all agree that *vipassana* leads to liberation while *samatha* does not, *samatha* is used to designate the techniques and experiences promoted by one's competitors, while *vipassana* is reserved for one's own teachings. Other teachers may *think* they are promoting authentic *vipassana* and realizing stages of enlightenment, but in fact they are simply mistaking *jhanic* absorption for *sotapatti*, the first stage of enlightenment achieved through *vipassana*.

I do not have the space to explore the *vipassana* controversies in detail here (see the full account in Sharf, 1995a). Suffice it to say that there is simply no public consensus in the contemporary Theravada community as to the application of terms that allegedly refer to discrete experiential states. Not surprisingly, the same is found to be true in Japanese Zen. Again, it is important to remember that, pace much of the popular literature on Zen, premodern Zen masters rarely emphasized exotic experiential states, and terms such as *satori* ('to understand' or 'apprehend') and *kensho* ('to see one's true nature') were not construed as singular 'states of consciousness'. Be that as it may, some contemporary Zen teachers, notably those associated with the upstart Sanbokyodan lineage, do approach Zen phenomenologically. In other words, they unapologetically present Zen practice as a means to inculcate *kensho*, which they understand to be an unmediated and transitory apprehension of 'non-duality.' Some Sanbokyodan masters go so far as to present certificates to students who achieve *kensho* to validate and celebrate their accomplishment.

Even if the Sanbokyodan understanding of *kensho* does not accord with classical models, one might suppose that it is nevertheless an identifiable and reproducible experience. After all, it is verified and certified by the masters of the school. But once again the ethnographic evidence points in another direction. One quickly discovers that eminent teachers from other living Zen traditions (Rinzai, Soto, Obaku) do not accord legitimacy to Sanbokyodan claims of *kensho*. This might be dismissed as mere sectarian rivalry or sour grapes. But even within the Sanbokyodan itself there has been a long-standing controversy surrounding the verification and authentication of *kensho* experiences that has threatened to result in schism (Sharf, 1995b). In modern Zen, as in Theravada, eminent meditation masters prove unable to agree on the identification of a 'referent' of terms that supposedly refer to specific and replicable experiential states.

The lack of consensus among prominent Buddhist teachers as to the designation not only of particular states of consciousness but also of the psychotropic techniques used to produce them (*samatha* versus *vipassana*) belies the notion that the rhetoric of meditative experience, at least in Buddhism, functions ostensibly. Critical analysis shows that modern Buddhist communities judge 'claims to experience' on the basis of the meditator's particular lineage, the specific ritual practice that engendered the experience, the behaviour that ensued, and so on. In other words, a meditative state or liberative experience is identified

not on the basis of privileged personal access to its distinctive phenomenology, but rather on the basis of eminently public criteria. Such judgments are inevitably predicated on prior ideological commitments shaped by one's vocation (monk or layperson), one's socioeconomic background (urban middle-class or rural poor), one's political agenda (traditionalist or reformer), one's sectarian affiliation, one's education, and so forth. In the end, the Buddhist rhetoric of experience is both informed by, and wielded in, the interests of personal and institutional authority.

The modern Theravada and Zen reform movements discussed here are of particular import, as both claim to possess an elaborate technical vocabulary that refers to a set of exotic but nonetheless verifiable and reproducible experiences. Clearly, if these experiential states are not determinative, then the baroque visions, ineffable reveries, and exotic trances associated with various other mystical traditions inspire even less confidence that the rhetoric of experience functions ostensibly.

VI

At this point the reader may well be growing impatient. Surely, even if mystics and meditation masters cannot always agree among themselves as to the designation or soteriological import of their experiences, it is clear that *something* must be going on. Those Buddhist meditators are clearly experiencing *something* in the midst of their ascetic ordeals, even if they cannot ultimately agree on whether it should be called *jhana*, *sotapatti*, *kensho*, or whatever. The vigorous and often exuberant language used by mystics the world over to describe their visions, trances, and states of cosmic union must refer to *something*.

This objection attests once again to our deep entanglement in the Cartesian paradigm, to the lingering allure of what Richard Rorty has called the 'glassy essence' or 'mirror of nature' view of mind (1979). This is not the place to plunge into the hoary controversies waged under the auspices of 'philosophy of mind'. Rather, I will defer once again to an ethnographic case that underscores issues of immediate relevance to the study of religion.

Consider, for a moment, a distinctly contemporary form of visionary experience: reports of alien abduction. There are now hundreds if not thousands of individuals from across America who claim to have been abducted by alien beings. A number of apparently reputable investigators have found the abductees' stories compelling, in large part because of the degree of consistency across the narratives (e.g. Mack, 1995; Bryan, 1995). For example, many of the abductees 'independently' report encountering the 'small greys' — short hairless humanoid beings with large heads, big black eyes, tiny nostrils, no discernible ears, and a thin slit for a mouth which is apparently little used. (The small greys communicate telepathically.) Their torsos are slender, with long arms and fingers but no thumb, and they sport close-fitting single-piece tunics and boots (Mack, 1995, pp. 22–3). After being transported to the alien craft, abductees report being subject to various medical examinations and procedures, many of which focus on the

reproductive system. The abductees are then returned, usually to the place from which they were first spirited away.

The vast majority of the abductees have no initial recall of the episode at all. They may be aware only of an unaccountable gap of a few hours or so, and a lingering sense of anxiety, confusion, and fear. They are able to fill in the blanks and reconstruct the details of their abduction only with the help of therapy and hypnosis.

The abductees, known among themselves and in the literature as 'experiencers', come from a wide variety of economic and social backgrounds. According to investigators, as a population the abductees show no significant prior history of, or propensity toward, psychopathology. Many of the abductees insist that prior to their alien encounter they had no interest in, or exposure to, reports of abductions, UFOs, or other 'new age' phenomena. In fact, the one thing on which both believers and sceptics agree is that the abductees are on the whole sincere; they are not consciously fabricating the narratives for personal fame or profit. On the contrary, the abductees are convinced that their memories accord with objective events, and they stand by their stories even when ridiculed or ostracized by neighbours and relatives. Investigators sympathetic to the abductees' plight report that they manifest the sort of confusion, stress, and chronic anxiety characteristic of 'post-traumatic stress syndrome'. In fact, the psychological disorders suffered by the abductees, and their own steadfast belief in their stories, constitute the closest thing we have to empirical evidence for the abductions.

Despite the pleas of a few prominent investigators such as John Mack, most scholars are understandably sceptical. Sceptics can cite the striking absence of corroborating physical evidence, as well as the questionable methods used by investigators. As mentioned above, many abductees have no memory of the event until it is 'recovered' by therapists who have made a speciality out of treating victims of alien abductions. Finally, folklorists are able to trace the origins of many central elements and motifs in the abduction narratives — the physiognomy of the aliens, the appearance of their spacecrafts, the ordeal of the medical examination, and so on — to popular science fiction comics, stories, and films of the past fifty years. The scholarly consensus would seem to be that the abductions simply did not take place; there is no *originary event* behind the memories.

The notion of originary event is crucial here. Clearly, we will not get far by denying the existence of the memories themselves. Our scepticism is rather directed at what, if anything, may lie behind them. We suspect that the abductees' reports do not stem from actual alien encounters, but that some other complex historical, sociological, and psychological processes are at work. Whatever the process turns out to be (and we are a long way from an adequate explanation of the phenomenon), it is reasonable to assume that the abductees' memories do not faithfully represent actual historical occurrences.

One might argue that scepticism with regard to the existence of aliens does not imply that there is no *other* determinate historical event at the root of the memories. The memories must refer back to *some* previous incident, even if the nature of this

incident is systematically misconstrued by the credulous abductees. Memory is fickle.

This has been the approach of some psychoanalytically oriented observers, who treat the alien encounters as 'screen memories' that cloak an early repressed trauma such as childhood sexual abuse. The problem with this hypothesis is that the epistemological problems raised by postulating repressed memories turn out to be, in many respects, of the same order as those associated with alien abductions. Childhood trauma has been the *etiology du jour*, and is typically only 'recovered' in a therapeutic encounter with a specialist whose training and institutional investments predispose him to this specific diagnosis. In the end childhood trauma is as elusive a beast as the aliens themselves (see Hacking, 1995).

Several scholars have drawn attention to the religious patterns and motifs running through the abduction narratives. The reports are reminiscent, for example, of tales of shamanic trance journeys, in which the subject is transported to an alien domain populated by otherworldly beings with inconceivable powers and ambiguous intentions. Many abductees are entrusted with important spiritual messages to be propagated among the human race, messages about the importance of peace, love, and universal brotherhood (Whitmore, 1995). Moreover, the role of the therapists who help to elicit and shape the abduction narratives is analogous to the role played by priest or preceptor in more established religious traditions. The question is unavoidable: is there any reason to assume that the reports of experiences by mystics, shamans, or meditation masters are any more credible as 'phenomenological descriptions' than those of the abductees?

It should now be apparent that the question is not merely whether or not mystical experiences are constructed, unmediated, pure, or philosophically significant. The more fundamental question is whether we can continue to treat the texts and reports upon which such theories are based as referring, however obliquely, to determinative phenomenal events at all.

VII

But I have felt so many strange things, so many baseless things assuredly, that they are perhaps better left unsaid. To speak for example of the times when I go liquid and become like mud, what good would that do? Or of the others when I would be lost in the eye of a needle, I am so hard and contracted? No, those are well-meaning squirms that get me nowhere.

— From *Malone Dies* by Samuel Beckett.

Consider the taste of beer. Most would agree that beer is an acquired taste; few enjoy their first sip. In time many come to enjoy the flavour. But what has changed? The flavour, or merely our reaction to it? More to the point, how could one possibly decide the issue one way or the other? Something seems fishy about the question itself.

This is one of a series of illustrations and anecdotes used by the philosopher Daniel Dennett to undermine the concept of *qualia* (1992; see also Dennett,

1991). Qualia (the singular form is *quale*), is a term proposed by philosophers to designate those subjective or phenomenal properties of experience that resist a purely materialistic explanation. (The notion is an attempt to capture that aspect of consciousness that, say some, could never be reproduced by a ‘thinking machine’.) In short, qualia refer to the way things *seem*. ‘Look at a glass of milk at sunset; *the way it looks to you* — the particular, personal, subjective visual quality of the glass of milk is the *quale* of your visual experience at the moment. *The way the milk tastes to you then* is another, gustatory *quale*’ (Dennett, 1992, p. 42). As it is never possible to communicate exactly how things appear to us (how could we ever know whether your experience of red is precisely the same as mine?), qualia are construed as essentially private, ineffable, and irreducible properties of experience.

Dennett thinks the whole notion of qualia is wrong-headed, and employs a series of ‘intuition pumps’, such as his musings on the flavour of beer, in order to undermine our confidence in the existence of intrinsic properties of experience. ‘If it is admitted that one’s attitudes towards, or reactions to, experiences are in any way and in any degree constitutive of their experiential qualities, so that a change in reactivity *amounts to or guarantees* a change in the property, then those properties, those ‘qualitative or phenomenal features’, cease to be ‘intrinsic’ properties and in fact become paradigmatically extrinsic, relational properties’ (Dennett, 1992, p. 61). And if these most salient aspects of experience are in fact extrinsic and relational, one must relinquish one’s picture of experience as a determinate *something* that occurs someplace ‘inside the brain’, in what Dennett calls the ‘Cartesian theater’ (Dennett, 1991). In short, one must give up what, in the Cartesian view, is a fundamental attribute of experience: its privacy.

In a somewhat similar spirit I have suggested that it is ill conceived to construe the object of the study of religion to be the inner experience of religious practitioners. Scholars of religion are not presented with experiences that stand in need of interpretation, but rather with texts, narratives, performances, and so forth. While these representations may at times assume the rhetorical stance of phenomenological description, we are not obliged to accept them as such. On the contrary, we must remain alert to the ideological implications of such a stance. Any assertion to the effect that someone else’s inner experience bears some significance for *my* construal of reality is situated, by its very nature, in the public realm of contested meanings.

Before we throw out experience altogether, however, we must take stock of what is at stake. The appeal of the rhetoric of experience lay in its promise to forestall the objectification and commodification of personal life endemic to modern mass society. By objectification I refer to the projection of the ‘subject’ or ‘self’ into a centreless physical world of ‘objective facts’ amenable to scientific study and technological mastery — a projection that threatened to efface subjectivity altogether (Nagel, 1986). The flip side of objectification has been the rampant alienation that characterizes modernity — the sense of being rootless and adrift, cut off from tradition and history. Into this vacuum rushed the experts — sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and even scholars of religion — who

claimed to understand *my* memories, *my* dreams, *my* desires, *my* beliefs, *my* thoughts, better than I. We are understandably reluctant to cede such authority to a guild of specialists, no matter how enlightened or well intentioned they may be. Our last line of defence has been the valorization of the ‘autonomous self’, construed as a unique and irreducible centre of experience.

This raises a host of complex political and philosophical issues concerned with the modern notion of selfhood and self-determination, issues that, for lack of space, I am unable to pursue here. As students of religion, our more immediate theoretical concerns are hermeneutic: How are we to understand people very different from ourselves without somehow effacing the very differences that separate us? Scholars have become acutely aware of the methodological problems entailed in using *our* conceptual categories and theoretical constructs to comprehend the world of others. In addition, recent post-colonial and feminist critiques have forced us to focus on the asymmetrical relationship between the investigator and his or her subjects. We are wary of the intellectual hubris and cultural chauvinism that often attends scholars as they claim insight into the self-representations of others, especially when those others are at a political and economic disadvantage. And again, the one defense against the tendency to objectify, to domesticate, to silence and eviscerate the other has been to sanction the other’s singular and irreducible experience of the world.

Therein lies the rub. We believe it politically and intellectually essential to respect diverse ‘worldviews’, but at the same time we are hesitant to abandon the hermeneutic suspicion that is the mark of critical scholarship. We want to valorize the self-representations of others, yet we balk when ‘respect for others’ places undue demands upon our own credulity. Most draw the line, for example, when it comes to acceding the existence of the small greys. And well we should; a critical investigation of the abduction phenomenon can only begin once the decision has been made to look for alternative explanations — explanations that do not involve the existence of interloping aliens.

One strategy to negotiate this impasse has been to empower experience by affirming the truth of the experience narrative, but only to the one doing the narration. This strategy, which is closely allied with the phenomenological approach to religion mentioned above, tends to fragment reality into ‘multiple objective worlds’ (Shweder, 1991) — a consequence that does not seem to trouble many scholars of religion. In her book on near-death experiences, for example, Carol Zaleski engages in a critical historical analysis of the sociological and mythological factors that have contributed to near-death narratives in both medieval and modern times. But, somewhat incongruously, she concludes her sophisticated contextual analysis by insisting on the inherent truth value of the experiences themselves. Zaleski manages this by identifying the ‘other world’ described in the near-death accounts with the ‘inner psychological world’ of the subjects themselves. This allows her to valorize the near-death experiences as a ‘legitimate imaginative means through which one can instill a religious sense of the cosmos’ (1987, p. 203). Zaleski is thus able to countenance the experiences

without subscribing to the fantastic cosmologies — the baroque views of heaven, hell, and everything between — that attend them.

Felicitas Goodman, in her study of spirit possession, goes a step further, assuming a decidedly agnostic stance toward the existence of the spirits reported by her subjects.

The experience of [the] presence [of spirits] during possession is accompanied by observable physical changes. We should remember that whether these changes are internally generated or created by external agencies is not discoverable. No one can either prove or disprove that the obvious changes of the brain map in possession or in a patient with a multiple personality disorder, for that matter, are produced by psychological processes or by an invading alien being (Goodman, 1988, p. 126).

Goodman's agnosticism is but a small step away from John Mack's qualified acceptance of the existence of alien abductors.

This methodological stance is made possible by the peculiar nature of claims to experience, particularly religious experiences that are, by definition, extraordinary. Reports of mystical or visionary experiences can be likened to reports of dreams in so far as it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the report of the experience from the experience itself. In a philosophical examination of dreams Norman Malcolm argues that the dream report is indeed the *only* criterion for the dream, and thus to report that one has dreamed *is* to have dreamed; there is simply no other criterion for the dream's existence (Malcolm, 1959). Malcolm concludes that dreams are therefore not experiences, a claim that has more to do with how he stipulates the meaning of 'experience' than with the nature of dreaming itself.

Scholars such as Zaleski and Goodman (as well as Steven Katz and other 'constructivists') tacitly, if not explicitly, adopt a similar perspective toward religious experience. They acknowledge that there is no way to tease apart the representation of a religious experience from the experience itself. Malcolm would argue that if the two cannot be separated — if the only criterion for the 'experience' is the report itself — then one cannot claim to be dealing with an experience at all. But Zaleski and Goodman move in a different direction, treating the reports as if they provided unmediated access to some ordinary phenomenal event. The constructivists seem to assume that since the historical, social, and linguistic processes that give rise to the narrative representation are identical with those that give rise to the experience, the former, which are amenable to scholarly analysis, provide a transparent window to the latter.

While we might laud the humanistic impulse that motivates this line of reasoning — the desire to countenance a diversity of 'worldviews' — it fails to grasp the rhetorical logic of appeals to experience. The word 'experience', in so far as it refers to that which is given to us in the immediacy of perception, signifies that which by definition is nonobjective, that which resists all signification. In other words, the term experience cannot make ostensible a *something that exists in the world*. The salient characteristic of private experience that distinguishes it from 'objective reality' is thus its unremitting indeterminacy. At the same time, the rhetoric of experience tacitly posits a place where signification comes to an end, variously styled 'mind', 'consciousness', the 'mirror of nature', or what have

you. The category experience is, in essence, a mere place-holder that entails a substantive if indeterminate terminus for the relentless deferral of meaning. And this is precisely what makes the term experience so amenable to ideological appropriation.

Again, I am not trying to deny subjective experience. (Indeed, how would one do that?) I merely want to draw attention to the way the concept functions in religious discourse — in Wittgenstein's terms, its 'language game'. I have suggested that it is a mistake to approach literary, artistic, or ritual representations as if they referred back to something other than themselves, to some numinous inner realm. The fact that religious experience is often circumscribed in terms of its nondiscursive or nonconceptual character does not mitigate the problem: that nothing can be said of a particular experience — that is, its ineffability — cannot in and of itself constitute a delimiting characteristic, much less a phenomenal property. Thus while experience — construed as that which is 'immediately present' — may indeed be both irrefutable and indubitable, we must remember that whatever epistemological certainty experience may offer is gained only at the expense of any possible discursive meaning or signification. To put it another way, all attempts to signify 'inner experience' are destined to remain 'well-meaning squirms that get us nowhere'.

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