

Marrone, Tancredi

[Kripal, Jeffrey J. The superhumanities: historical precedents, moral objections, new realities]

Religio. 2024, vol. 32, iss. 1, pp. 235-237

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2024-37852>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.79959>

License: [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International](#)

Access Date: 14. 06. 2024

Version: 20240606

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

selves exclusively in rational discourse devoid of any mythical content. Maybe we truly cannot. However, perhaps precisely at a religious studies conference, the myth should not be presented as a conclusion but rather as a research question. Perhaps, while looking mesmerized at our image (however immensely beautiful we find it), we should not forget the river and how it shapes and forms our thinking. In sum, it was precisely the first keynote of an international scholarly conference in which I would expect the greatest and fully explicit degree of “river awareness”. And I believe Marshall McLuhan would agree with me.

ZUZANA KOSTIČOVÁ



Religio: Revue pro religionistiku

32/1, 2024, 233-235.

<https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2024-38107>

This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Jeffrey J. Kripal, The Superhumanities: Historical Precedents, Moral Objections, New Realities,

**Chicago: University of Chicago
Press 2022, 256 s.**

ISBN 978-022-68-2024-8.

In his text, Jeffrey J. Kripal wishes to condense the totality of his studies and experiences into a series of metaphors and observations aimed at reformulating and redirecting the purposes, intentions, and emotions behind religious studies and the field of the Humanities. But what are the Superhumanities? “That core idea goes like this: Pursue diversity until the end, make it more radical, render it ontological. In short, do not just decolonize history, religion, literature, or society, as academics like to say.

Decolonize reality itself.” (p. 14). This approach is not concerned exclusively with conventional intellectual epistemologies but rather with the inclusion and integration of a gnostic and intuitive hermeneutic approach to the field of the Humanities extrapolated from the comparative Study of Religion. In each of the chapters of his book, Kripal explores the principles and the manifestation of the Superhumanities in various contexts. These are theoretical, academic, historical, ethnographic, anecdotal, and literary.

In the first chapter, he illustrates his theory derived from a concerned observation of the state of the Humanities as an academic discipline, too limited by its hermeneutic approach to fully perceive the totality of the various manners in which humans express themselves. The metaphor that he uses is that of the game of chess, which symbolizes human interaction. Contemporary Humanities concern themselves exclusively with the movement of the chess pieces representative of human social and political interactions. The superhuman perspective instead would allow the researcher to understand that the chessboard is not the only game in existence, meaning that there are other human experiences founded on different principles and dynamics. A perspective that he relates to Hermetic Monism is a broadened perception of reality that stands above the rest and can see the vastness of human expressions and perceive them beyond socio-cultural borders. This perception, however, is informed by altered states of consciousness. The latter states, he believes, are best found in religious narratives of miracles and extraordinary events, which, thanks to his comparative studies, he extends conceptually into the realm of science fiction and of popular superhero comics, another artistic and philosophical expression of the Superhuman. These narratives are replete with incredible events and miraculous experiences that rely on hope in the possibility of becoming more than human. The methods are present in many religious expressions from Western Mystery cults to Hindu and Buddhist tantric practices, and ancient Egyptian civilizations, but also in science fiction, through

which technology is interpreted as a means to transcendence. By practicing special techniques or pursuing science that attempts to empower humans, an individual can obtain this particular perspective, which in turn can also lead to remarkable synchronicities and gnostic revelation.

The second chapter delves deeper into Kripal's analysis of the contemporary hermeneutic stance of academia. The object of study, he continues, is reduced to mere socio-political masks and games; the analytical approach is based on critique, breaking down the object of study into small unanimated components. The possibility of addressing gnosis and paranormal or mystical experiences as significant and inspirational is repelled. This academic perspective chooses exclusively to observe the chessboard and nothing more. It does not contemplate the existence of other games and does not wish to broaden its perceptive lens. It refuses to include other ontologies, other truths, other hermeneutics other than itself. This intellectual approach, Kripal continues, is alienating and hostile to the general public. It never has anything positive to say and does not try and master what it is trying to critique; it requires extensive training and the acquisition of specialized language which is increasingly distant from that of the average person. He describes, for example, this kind of academic treatment in the case of Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), whose philosophy was reduced in this context exclusively to nihilistic social constructs while the fact that his thinking was substantially inspired by altered states of consciousness was ignored. A similar treatment was reserved for the works of William James (1842-1910), a strong Pragmatist who was, however, inclined to use mind-altering substances for the direct exploration of consciousness, which he coupled with research into the paranormal. Kripal expands his description to the idea of the left and right – respectively, the creative and rational – halves of the brain, as proposed by Iain McGilchrist (1953), and the emphasis that is placed on the rational side at the expense of the artistic and gnostic aspects. This he compares to another example of intellectual dualism in

Paul Ricoeur's (1913-2005) hermeneutics of trust and suspicion, the latter more in line with the academic ideals of critique as opposed to the former, which would be interested in addressing phenomena that are not measurable. He concludes, however, that neither brain sides nor hermeneutics should be predominant and that the pursuit of the middle path is ideal, not unlike the ones described in Buddhist texts.

In the third chapter, Kripal continues by expanding on the duality of human nature leading to his concept of Man as Two. This is a human that lives both in the social rational world and in the world of intuition or altered states of consciousness, between things that can be described and classified and things that cannot. This faculty Kripal points out, echoes the capacities of mystical insights obtained and discussed by Jakob Böhme (1575-1624) and Meister Eckhart von Hochheim (1260-1328) as well as to the principles of esotericism in India and Buddhism, with their ideas of being both an observer and a creator and thus able to live in two different worlds. Muslim mystical authors such as Al-Ghazzali (1058-1111) and Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (1170-1208) also present examples of the Man as Two in their writing, a state that they consider attainable by everyone. Here Kripal wishes to reinforce the presence of this double persona in all religious expressions. The faculty of the Man as Two is the capacity to balance the two aspects of the human, which reside both in science and religion, but also as reason and intuition; they must be able to communicate but neither should be predominant. As a matter of fact, one should not be too swayed by the descriptions of supernatural qualities but rather consider them exaggerations of natural faculties. For Kripal, one of the reasons for the suppression of the Superhuman in the humanities in the West is related to the scholastic approach taken by Christianity; it is too concerned with classification and control over the metaphysical and imposing its hermeneutic exclusively. If imbalance is achieved on the side of Gnosticism and mystical experience, it can result in religion becoming a bastion of unshakeable dogmas attempting to control ideas and experience

and eventually form an exclusive institution of the divine, which has been responsible for multiple horrors throughout history.

In the fourth and final chapter, there is the culmination of all of Kripal's ideas where he presents the various fields of study in which he perceives the presence of the Man as Two. These cover feminism, comic books, otherness, hybrid religions, postcolonial theory, ecocentrism, queer-ness, and psychoanalysis. The stories found in these fields are replete with references and descriptions that share similarities to the mystical states of religion and the technological powers presented in science fiction, as mentioned in the previous chapters. These are two contexts in which the individual is depicted as being on the path to becoming something greater than, and transcending itself. In each of these fields, Kripal illustrates the manifestation of features descriptive of the Human as Two, who has the capacity to move and experience multiple levels of reality and possibly move from one game to another. These features are found in the outsider position, marked, on the one hand, by pain, suffering, and rationalizations of mystical effects, but, on the other and as a consequence, by the capacity to see and jump from one reality to the next in a social-political context but also in a phenomenologically mystical sense – the capacity to see reality from above, from a Hermetic divine perspective, which is again found in multiple cultural expressions, a perspective which also becomes self-reflective. Ultimately, anthropocentrism is also overcome through this gnostic perspective, resulting in a more global and ecological view of existence. In the concluding remarks, Kripal summarizes his ideas and observes how inevitably the totality of human cultural expression and its evolution deal with increased levels of self-consciousness, self-awareness, and collective awareness.

The text provides interesting comparative insights into the sources he presents, these spanning culture and history, yet always maintaining the objective of integrating the gnostic perspective with the intellectual. Topics such as religion and science fiction are connected on multiple levels,

such as aesthetically, experientially, mythologically, and evolutionarily. The narrative style is engaging and reflects an appreciation for the intuitive, creative, and artistic side of the humanities while at the same time reminding the reader that it is necessary to also maintain a solid critical mindset. Within the context of scholarship, this text finds its place within a genre of its own, tackling the 'other', the indescribable, and the bizarre. Although the current research framework in religious studies has returned to the study of altered states of consciousness as a consequence also of the psychedelic renaissance and the elicitation of religious experience, it is understandable why many readers may choose to be critical of his ideas. The integration of this new modality of investigating religion and the humanities can be perceived as an attempt to undermine academic rigor; however, Kripal has no such intention. Indeed, he wishes to leave much of the understanding of the Superhumanities to the reader, acknowledging that although he is writing about the Superhumanities, he is necessarily limited by his own perspective and his own research; rather, he is inviting personal exploration. Overall, Kripal provides a good toolbox and food for thought both with regard to the study of the Humanities and the reconceptualization and valorization of religious studies.

TANCREDI MARRONE



Religio: Revue pro religionistik

32/1, 2024, 235-237.

<https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2024-37852>

This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).