



The Cult of Ecstasy: Tantrism, the New Age, and the Spiritual Logic of Late Capitalism

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Hugh B. Urban

THE CULT OF ECSTASY:
TANTRISM, THE NEW
AGE, AND THE
SPIRITUAL LOGIC OF
LATE CAPITALISM

American Tantra (tm) is a fresh eclectic weaving of sacred sexual philosophies drawn . . . from around the world both ancient and modern . . . “American” mean(s) . . . fresh, innovative, fun, free multicultural, creative, energetic, optimistic. There’s something in the United States’ constitution about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We are innovative teachers . . . of this exciting blend of Sex and Spirit in a New Paradigm Relationship.

In American Tantra (tm) it is vital to embrace our sexuality . . . and celebrate it in every aspect of our daily life. . . . [M]aking love is a galactic event!

We intend to co-create neo-tribal post-dysfunctional multi-dimensional sex and spirit positive loving and juicy generations of gods and goddesses in the flesh. On the Starship Intercourse we greet and part with: ORGASM LONG AND PROSPER! (PAUL RAMANA DAS, “Celebrating Sacred Sexuality: American Tantra [tm]”)¹

The cult of the Orgasm succeeded the cult of Mammon as the basic passion of American life. (DANIEL BELL, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*)²

¹ Paul Ramana Das, “Celebrating Sacred Sexuality: American Tantra (tm),” reprinted on *The Church of Tantra* website (<http://www.tantra.org>).

² Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (London: Heineman, 1976), p. 70.

Since the first discovery of Indian religions by European scholarship, it would seem, the category of “Tantrism” has held a central and dominant, yet also profoundly ambivalent and conflicted, role within the Western imagination. Infamous for its use of sexual practices and its explicit violation of caste, Tantrism has been a continuous source of mixed horror and fearsome power, of moral repugnance and tantalizing allure. Throughout early Orientalist scholarship and missionary writings, Tantrism was quickly singled out as the worst example of all the polytheism and licentiousness that was believed to have corrupted the Hindu tradition in modern times. “The nonsensical extravagance and absurd gesticulations” of Tantrism, as H. H. Wilson laments, “have become authorities for all that is abominable in the present state of Hindu religion.”³ Yet rather remarkably, in our own generation, Tantrism has been celebrated throughout contemporary literature—both scholarly and popular—as the most positive, life-affirming aspect of Eastern spirituality and the one most desperately needed by the overrationalized, disenchanting West. As Philip Rawson argues, “In complete contrast to the strenuous ‘No!’ that official Brahmin tradition said to the world, Tantra says an emphatic ‘Yes!’ . . . Instead of suppressing pleasure, vision and ecstasy, they should be cultivated and used.”⁴

Nowhere is this modern fetishization of Tantrism more apparent than in the recent proliferation of New Age and New Religious movements, where it is commonly praised as the Cult of Ecstasy or the art of “Sacred Sexuality.” It is, according to most popular definitions, the unique form of spirituality that combines sensual pleasure with the pursuit of liberation, hedonism with transcendence. Indeed, the same category of Tantrism that had once been regarded by Orientalist scholars and missionaries as the very worst, most depraved aspect of the Indian mind has in our own time been celebrated as a much-needed liberation of sexuality, a glorification of the human body, and an empowerment of women. “The art of Tantra,” as one Tantric guru, Swami Nostradamus Virato, puts it, “could be called spiritual hedonism, which says ‘eat drink and be merry, but with full awareness’ . . . Tantra says yes! to sex; yes! to love.”⁵

In what follows, I will plunge headlong into this striking phenomenon of Tantrism’s growing appeal in Western popular culture at the close of the millennium. Here I will build upon some of my earlier work on the

³ H. H. Wilson, *Essays and Lectures, Chiefly on the Religion of the Hindus* (1828; reprint, London: Trubner, 1846); cf. Monier Williams, *Hinduism* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1894), p. 129.

⁴ Philip Rawson, *The Art of Tantra* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), p. 2. The most recent argument for the liberating and empowering nature of Tantra is that of Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁵ Nostradamus Virato, “Tantric Sex: A Spiritual Path to Ecstasy,” reprinted on *The Church of Tantra* website. As *Tantra: The Magazine* defines it, “Tantra is life in balance . . . Tantra

construction of Tantrism in the Orientalist imagination,⁶ by carrying the genealogy of Tantrism into our own generation of the late twentieth-century consumer capitalist West. Whereas many recent scholars have argued that Tantrism has been largely ignored, repressed, and marginalized in Western discourse,⁷ I will argue, on the contrary, that Tantrism has in fact been central to both academic and popular discourse about India in the twentieth century. Indeed, it has in many cases clearly been exaggerated and exploited, marketed as the most tantalizing, titillating, and erotic aspect of the exotic Orient itself. According to many popular authors, Tantrism is the very essence of the liberated, holistic spirituality that characterizes the New Age as a whole—a spirituality that would no longer repress the human body, sexuality, and the desire for material prosperity but integrate them with the need for spiritual nourishment. Some of the most influential leaders of the New Religions—such as the controversial Tibetan master, Chogyam Trungpa, or the notorious “Guru of the Rich,” Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh—made Tantrism the center of their radical spirituality. And in our own day, Tantrism has spread wildly, not only throughout popular literature, magazines, and videos, but also through the medium of the Internet, where we may now attend the *Church of Tantra*, sample the “Sensual and Spiritual Software System,” and discover “Ecstasy on Line.”⁸

With its apparent union of spirituality and sexuality, sacred transcendence and material enjoyment, Tantrism might well be said to be the ideal religion for late twentieth-century Western consumer culture—what I would call, adapting Fredric Jameson’s phrase, “the spiritual logic of late capitalism.” Using some insights of Jameson, Daniel Bell, David Harvey, and others, I will argue that there is an intimate relationship between the recent fascination with Tantrism and the current socioeconomic situation of the West, which has been variously described as “late capitalism,” post-Fordism, postindustrial capitalism, or disorganized capitalism.⁹ A great

is practiced by Native Peoples the world over, through profound respect for All that Is. It is also practiced through the respect of the divine feminine worshipped in her physical form through attending the needs of Mother Earth as our own body” (*Tantra: The Magazine*, Tara issue, no. 1 [1991]: 3).

⁶ Hugh B. Urban, “The Extreme Orient: The Construction of ‘Tantrism’ in the Orientalist Imagination,” *Religion* 29 (1999): 123–46.

⁷ This is the argument made by Douglas Renfrew Brooks, *The Secret of the Three Cities: An Introduction to Hindu Śākta Tantrism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), preface.

⁸ On Rajneesh, see my article, “Zorba the Buddha: Capitalism, Charisma and the Cult of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh,” *Religion* 26 (1996): 161–82; on Trungpa, see Stephen T. Butterfield, *The Double Mirror: A Skeptical Journey into Tibetan Buddhism* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1994). On Tantra on the Internet, see Nik Douglas, *Spiritual Sex: Secrets of Tantra from the Ice Age to the New Millennium* (New York: Pocket Books, 1997), pp. 309 ff.

⁹ On the concept of late capitalism, see Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural*

many scholars have lamented the growing threat of late capitalism, globalism, and consumer culture to traditional religious belief. As Bryan S. Turner put it, traditional faith is far more threatened by “Tina Turner and Coca Cola” than by rationalism or modern science.¹⁰ And yet, as recent scholars such as Mike Featherstone persuasively argue, the spread of Western capitalism throughout the globe does not necessarily sound the death knell of religion; on the contrary, a growing number of alternative religions, as well as new spins on old traditions, have found remarkably innovative ways to capitalize on the technologies and marketing strategies of modern business and have even flourished within the volatile world of late capitalism.¹¹ It is precisely this kind of fit with late capitalist society—a fit not unlike that of Weber’s Protestant ethic and early capitalism—that we see in many new religious movements and their appropriations of Tantrism. Indeed, Tantrism could be said to represent the *quintessential* religion for late twentieth-century consumer capitalist society. It would be difficult to imagine a more appealing form of religiosity for this new kind of capitalist society, which, as Featherstone puts it, has abandoned the early Protestant ethic of inner-worldly ascetism and self-restraint in favor of a hedonistic lifestyle of desire and mass consumption.¹²

After a brief genealogy of the terms *tantra* and *Tantrism* in the Indian and Western imaginations (Sec. I), I will examine the rapidly growing popularity of Tantrism in Western popular culture, as exemplified in the careers of neo-Tantric gurus Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh or Chogyam Trungpa, the spread of Tantrism throughout books, magazines, videos, and the Internet (Secs. II, III). Finally, I will explore the striking fit between contemporary versions of Tantrism and the socioeconomic condition of late twentieth-century consumer capitalism (Sec. IV).

Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991); Scott Lash and John Urry, *The End of Organized Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987); William Halal, *The New Capitalism* (New York: Wiley, 1986); Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: NLB, 1975); Claus Offe, *Disorganized Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); and David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (London: Blackwell, 1989).

¹⁰ As Bryan S. Turner argues, “The threat to religious faith is the commodification of everyday life. . . . What makes religious faith . . . problematic in postmodern society is that everyday life has become part of a global system of exchange of commodities which are not easily influenced by . . . religious leaders” (*Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism* [London: Routledge, 1994], p. 10).

¹¹ “Modernity, with its processes of rationalization, commodification and disenchantment does not lead to the eclipse of religious sentiments, for while formal religions may decline, symbolic classifications and ritual practices . . . live on at the heart of the secular social processes. As Durkheim pointed out, anything can become sacred, so why not the ‘profane’ goods of capitalism?” (Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* [London: Sage, 1990], p. 121).

¹² Mike Featherstone, “The Body in Consumer Culture,” in *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, ed. M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth, and B. S. Turner (London: Sage, 1991), p. 172.

I. WE “POST VICTORIANS”:¹³ THE ALLURE OF TANTRISM AND THE TITILLATION OF ITS LIBERATION

The moment one hears the word “Tantrism,” various wild and lurid associations spring forth in the Western mind which add up to a pastiche of psycho-spiritual science fiction and sexual acrobatics that would put to shame even the most imaginative of our contemporary pornographers and eclipse the achievements of our hardest erotic warriors. (JACOB NEEDLEMAN)¹⁴

Tantrism, as Herbert Guenther aptly observes, has long been and still remains perhaps “one of the haziest misconceptions the Western mind has evolved.”¹⁵ A word that conjures the most outrageous and titillating fantasies in the modern mind, it is also one of the most vague, ambiguous, and befuddled items in the modern vocabulary of religious studies.

The Sanskrit word *tantra* has appeared since Vedic times with an enormous diversity of meanings, denoting everything from *siddhānta* (conclusion) to *Śrutiśākhā* (a branch of *Śruti*, i.e., the Vedas), *itikartavyatā* (set of duties), *prabandha* (composition), or *śāstraviśeṣa* (a particular *Śāstra*).¹⁶ In its earliest appearances in the Ṛg Veda (10.71.9) and Atharva Veda (10.7.42), *tantra* denotes a kind of weaving machine or loom; later, in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (XIV), the range of the term is extended to refer to the chief portion or essence of a thing; and still later, as we see in the works of Śaṅkāra, the term is used to denote simply a system of thought (e.g., *Kapilasya Tantra*, meaning the Sāṃkhya system).¹⁷ However, according to Sir Monier Williams, the term has also been used throughout Sanskrit literature to signify, not only “any rule, theory or scientific work” (*Mahābhārata* 13.48.6), but also “an army, row or series” (Bhāgavata Purāṇa, 10.54.15) or even “a drug or chief remedy.”¹⁸

¹³ Here, I am, of course, playing off of Michel Foucault’s phrase we “other Victorians” (*The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* [New York: Viking, 1981]).

¹⁴ Jacob Needleman, “Tibet in America,” in *The New Religions* (New York: Crossroad, 1970), p. 177.

¹⁵ Herbert Guenther, *The Life and Teaching of Naropa* (New York: Oxford, 1971), p. 102.

¹⁶ S. C. Banerji, *A Brief History of Tantra Literature* (Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1988), p. 1. For a good discussion of the term in Buddhist studies, see Donald Lopez, “The Heart Sūtra as Tantra,” in *Elaborations of Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sūtra* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996): “Tantra functions as a lamented supplement in the European construction of an original Buddhism . . . tantra is emblematic of the category of the other in Indian religion, that factor in contradistinction from which an orthodoxy is defined by the Western scholar. Tantra, so generally excoriated as non-Buddhist, as popular, as degenerate . . . proves to be the condition for the very possibility of representing an original Buddhism” (pp. 22–23).

¹⁷ Banerji, p. 1 (see also Chintaharan Chakravarti, *The Tantras: Studies on Their Religion and Literature* [Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1963], p. 1).

¹⁸ Monier Williams, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899), p. 436.

Various authors have suggested a range of etymologies for the term, some defining it as “shortening” or reduction, others tracing it to the noun *tanu* (body), and still others deriving it from *tantrī* (to explain) or *tatrī* (to understand). However, most recent scholars agree that the term probably derives from the root *tan*, to spread or weave, and, by extension, to explain or espouse. Thus, it is perhaps most commonly used (much like the word *sūtra*, which derives from the verb “to sew”), to designate a particular kind of treatise.¹⁹

As André Padoux points out, however, most of the texts that we consider to be Tantric do not define themselves as “Tantric”; at most they might refer to other tantras (saying *tantrāntare*, in another tantra), or they might include at the beginning a section called the *tantrāvatāra*, which describes the “descent” of the text. It is true that India has long known the word *tantraśāstra*, “the teachings of the tantras,” and the adjective *tāntrika*, as distinguished from *vaidika* (Vedic), “to contrast the aspect of religion cum ritual from orthodox non-Tantric Hinduism.” However, as John Woodroffe had already noted in 1922, the abstract category “Tantrism” is clearly a modern Western construction.²⁰

It is, moreover, a category with an extremely troubled history. One of the most pervasive themes throughout contemporary literature on Tantra—in both its popular and scholarly forms—is the notion that this tradition has been consistently ignored, marginalized, and even actively repressed by Western scholarship. As Brooks argues, this “unwanted stepchild in the family of Hindu Studies,” has been a persistent source of shame and embarrassment to genuine scholarship. Brooks’s own work is thus presented as an act of retrieval that will completely revise our traditional, prejudiced, and distorted understanding of Hinduism: “The Tantric traditions . . . are routinely treated as trivial or tangential to the mainstreams. These historical patterns of scholarly neglect . . . reflected the prejudices of Western scholars. Tantrism . . . was considered morally suspect and antinomian. Just as our previously deficient understanding of Christianity has been corrected by considering mysticism . . . so our understanding of Hinduism will be revised when Tantrism . . . [is] given appropriate scholarly attention.”²¹

¹⁹ See Banerji, p. 2; cf. Chakravarti, *The Tantras*, pp. 1 ff.; Lopez, “The Heart Sūtra as Tantra,” p. 13.

²⁰ André Padoux, “Hindu Tantrism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1986), p. 273; See John Woodroffe, *Shakti and Shakta* (New York: Dover, 1978), p. 54. “The word Tantrism assuredly is a Western creation. India traditionally knows only texts called Tantras. These texts . . . fall far short of covering the entire Tantric literature; nor are only Tantric texts called Tantras” (Padoux, “A Survey of Tantric Hinduism for the Historian of Religions,” *History of Religions* 20, no. 4 [1981]: 350).

²¹ Brooks (n. 7 above), p. ix. See Sanjukta Gupta, Teun Goudriann, and Dirk Jan Hoens, *Hindu Tantrism* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), p. 3. This rhetoric of repression and liberation is even more pronounced in New Age discussions of Tantra: “Sex as an art form has yet to

While I do indeed have great respect for Brooks's valuable work on south Indian Tantra, I must point out that this claim is, so far as I can tell, quite clearly inaccurate. It is true that the body of texts known as Tantras has long been misunderstood by Western scholars; yet even in the nineteenth century, Western scholars and popular writers appear not to have trivialized or marginalized the Tantras but, in fact, to have been fascinated by, often preoccupied and obsessed with, the seedy, dangerous world of the Tantras. And surely, ever since the pioneering work of Arthur Avalon, and continuing with the scholarship of European historians of religions such as Mircea Eliade, Heinrich Zimmer, Aghananda Bharati, and many others, the category of Tantrism has become one of the most pervasive topics in contemporary discourse about Indian religions. In short, far from being denied and ignored in modern literature, Tantrism appears to have become among the most widely discussed, the most fashionable, faddish, sexy, and, above all, the most marketable of all forms of South Asian religion. Indeed, as Guenther had already remarked as early as 1952, "The Tantras—there is hardly any other kind of literature that has met with so much abuse . . . or that has so much fascinated those who . . . thought the Tantras to be a most powerful and hence strictly guarded means for the gratification of bodily urges."²²

Surely no other form of Hinduism or Buddhism has generated as much literature in the past twenty years, both scholarly and popular. One need only peruse the shelves of any bookstore or scan the websites of the Internet to see that Tantrism has come to captivate the Western popular imagination no less than it has the academic. Not only may we now read of *Ecstasy through Tantra* or *Tantra: The Art of Conscious Loving*; not only may we view any number of videos such as "Intimate Secrets of Sex and Spirit" or attend workshops such as "Extended Orgasms: A Sexual Training Class"; but we may also surf the "Software of Love" where we encounter (in dazzling graphics and fully linked hyper-text) *The Church of Tantra* and *The Multi-Orgasmic Man*, which are among the many sites now setting up shop on the information superhighway.²³ In short, as Rachel McDermott aptly observes in her study of the Tantric Goddess par excellence, Kālī: "Interest

mature in the West. Social repression and internalized guilt have prevented Westerners from a frank and joyous exploration of sexuality . . . The Orient did not consider sex apart from spirituality . . . All variations of sexual postures were venerated as ideals . . . The parameters of sexual behavior in the East extend way beyond the West's narrow spectrum of normalcy" (Nik Douglas, "The Kāma Sūtra and the Sixty-Four Arts," on the *tantra.com* website [www.tantra.com]).

²² Herbert Guenther, *Yuganaddha: The Tantric View of Life* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1969), p. 3.

²³ The term "Software of Love" comes from Nik Douglas's website (www.tantraworks.com). Tantric websites include: *The Church of Tantra* (www.tantra.org), which has subsites and articles such as "Lesbian Sacred Sexuality," "American Tantra," "Sacred Orgasms," and

in Tantra . . . has skyrocketed in recent years, with magazines championing it, websites whose sole purpose is to illustrate it, and newsgroups whose conversations center around its use. The portrayal of Tantra in the majority of these sources is rather strange, as it is so eclectic as to be almost unrecognizable from an Indian standpoint."²⁴

In this sense, "Tantrism" would appear to play much the same role in the modern imagination as did "sexuality" itself during the Victorian era, as Michel Foucault has so insightfully described it. Far from simply prudish and repressive—as the predominant modern rhetoric would have it—the Victorian era was in fact saturated with a deeper interest in and an endless discourse about sexuality. "What is peculiar to modern societies is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as *the secret*."²⁵ Conversely, our own generation—the generation of we "other Victorians"—is seemingly obsessed with the rhetoric of "liberation," coming out of the closet, and freeing ourselves from the prudish bonds of the Victorian era. "If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition . . . then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself . . . outside the reach of power . . . We are conscious of defying established power . . . We know we are being subversive. . . . What stimulates our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation and manifold pleasures."²⁶ So too, I would argue, much of the contemporary rhetoric about the repression or censorship of Tantrism reflects a similar obsession with the scandalous, seedy, and sexy side of Tantra, and with a similar claim to "liberate" Tantra from the prudish Victorian biases of our scholarly forefathers.

II. TANTRA, AMERICAN STYLE: (NEO-)TANTRISM AND THE NEW AGE

It's wondrous, exhilarating and true; you can use sexual pleasures as a guide to spiritual fulfillment. Not only is the sensual path enriching and joyful; but it's delightfully accessible with Tantra . . . Looking forward to a future in which sex is accepted as a spiritual practice,

²⁴ "Sex-Magic Process: The Psychology of Ecstasy"; *Tantra.com* (www.tantra.com); *Oceanic Tantra* (www.oceantantra.com); *TantraWorks* (www.tantraworks.com); *Skydancing Tantra* (www.skydancing.com); and *Hindu Tantrik Home Page* (www.hubcom/tantra). For a good bibliography of popular works, see the appendix to Douglas, *Spiritual Sex*.

²⁵ Rachel McDermott, "Kālī's New Frontiers: A Hindu Goddess on the Internet" (paper presented at the conference, "Kālī: Goddess of Extremes," Barnard College, September 20–22, 1996), pp. 11–12.

²⁶ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

spiritual sex liberates both body and soul. A revolutionary movement sure to be a watershed for sexuality in the coming millennium, spiritual sex celebrates the mystical aspects of sexuality while revealing the secrets that allow men and women to reach a zenith of ecstasy. (On-line advertisement for NIK DOUGLAS, *Spiritual Sex* [http://www.TantraWorks])

In the United States sexuality is everywhere except in sex. (ROLAND BARTHES)

If Tantrism has recently become surprisingly fashionable in Western academic circles, then it has become nothing less than a central preoccupation and driving force in more popular spiritual literature. Known by the various titles of “Neo-Tantrism” or American Tantra, it has become perhaps the quintessential expression of that fusion of sensuality and spirituality which is, according to many advocates, the very essence of the New Age.²⁷

The category of the New Age is, of course, every bit as vague, amorphous, and polyvalent as Tantrism. Most often, the term is used to refer to an enormous heterogeneity of different spiritual movements, lifestyles, and consumer products—“a blend of pagan religions, Eastern philosophies, and occult-psyche phenomena. The Euro-American metaphysical tradition and the counterculture of the 1960s together constitute the occult underground.”²⁸ A variety of authors have attempted to provide definitions—or at least typologies—of the chaotic body of phenomena known under the title of the New Age. According to Gordon Melton, the defining characteristic of the New Age is the ideal of “transformation”—both personal and cosmic—or the idea that both we and our world are evolving, and that we can actively direct this transformation.²⁹ Roy Wallis, on the other hand, suggests two fundamental traits in the New Age: first, “an attitude of ‘epistemological individualism,’ a belief that the individual is the locus of the determination of truth”; and second, “an ideology of revelational indeterminacy, a belief that truth may be revealed in diverse ways through diverse agents.”³⁰ Finally, Robert Ellwood expands his list to seven primary characteristics of the New Age: an emphasis on healing; a desire to be modern and use scientific language; eclecticism; a monistic and impersonal ontology; optimism; an evolutionary view; and an

²⁷ See Douglas, *Spiritual Sex*; Andre Van Lysebeth, *Tantra: The Cult of the Feminine* (New York: Wiser, 1995), p. 353.

²⁸ Michael York, *The Emerging Network: A Sociology of New Age and New Religious Movements* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), p. 34.

²⁹ Gordon Melton, *New Age Encyclopedia* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), p. xiii.

³⁰ Roy Wallis, “Reflections on When Prophecy Fails,” *Zetetic Scholar* 4 (1979): 119–36.

emphasis on psychic powers.³¹ Given this enormous variety of conflicting definitions, some authors have suggested that the various movements we call “New Age” are really nothing new at all, but simply the latest manifestations of a long tradition of alternative spirituality in America.³²

Yet, as Paul Heelas has recently argued, beneath their tremendous diversity, there are in fact some basic unifying themes that pervade the many phenomena we collectively label New Age. Above all, he suggests, the dominant tropes included “the celebration of the Self and the sacralization of Modernity”—that is, the fundamental belief that the individual human self is inherently sacred, divine, or even identical with God, and an affirmation of many basic, widely held values of Western modernity, such as “freedom, authenticity, self-responsibility, self-reliance, self-determinism, equality, and above all the self as a value in and of itself.”³³

Indeed, in more recent years, there has even been a growing movement within the New Age toward a sanctification, not only of the self and modernity, but also a sanctification of material prosperity, financial success, and capitalism itself. In contrast to the early 1960s countercultural rejection of materialism, more recent New Agers have shifted to an affirmation of material wealth, searching for a harmonious union of spirituality and prosperity, religious transcendence and success in capitalist business: “God is unlimited. Shopping can be unlimited,” according to Sondra Ray, best-selling author of *How to Be Chic, Fabulous and Live Forever*.³⁴ Since at least the early 1970s, this “world-affirming” side of the New Age had begun to emerge in movements like EST, Scientology, and the Human Potential Movement; and it came into full flower during the power generation of the 1980s, with Shirley MacLaine, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, and a wide array of gurus promoting the union of spirituality and financial success through books and videos such as *Money Is My Friend, Prosperity Consciousness*, or *Creating Money*. For this more worldly side of the New Age, “the more spiritual you are the more you deserve prosperity,” and “being wealthy is a function of enlightenment.”³⁵ Still more obvious,

³¹ Robert Ellwood and Harry Partin, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1988), pp. 14–15. For other definitions, see James Lewis, “Approaches to the Study of the New Age Movement,” in *Perspectives on the New Age*, ed. J. Lewis and J. G. Melton (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 1–12.

³² See Gordon Melton, “A History of the New Age Movement,” in *Not Necessarily the New Age* (New York: Prometheus, 1988), p. 3.

³³ Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 169.

³⁴ Sandra Ray, *How to Be Chic, Fabulous and Live Forever* (Berkeley: Celestial Arts, 1986).

³⁵ Sanaya Roman and Duane Packer, *Creating Money* (New York: Kramer, 1988), p. 18; Leonard Orr and Sondra Ray, *Rebirthing the New Age* (Berkeley: Inspiration, 1989), p. xiv.

of course, is the fact that the New Age has itself become a highly marketable phenomenon, and the catch-all label is used to sell a vast array of consumer products: books and videos; health foods and diet supplements; crystals; amulets; rings or incense; clothing; ritual implements; services such as workshops, classes, and training seminars; and retreats—the list is quite endless. In sum, as Heelas comments, “Today . . . we have New Age leaders praising capitalism and teaching that it is fine to work and succeed within the system . . . teaching that there is nothing wrong with materialistic consumption . . . and providing training to engage managerial efficacy.”³⁶

It is hardly surprising, then, that many New Age practitioners have turned to the Indian tradition of Tantra—a form of spirituality that, it would seem, not only affirms the divinity of the human self, but also seeks the union of sensuality with spirituality, material enjoyment with otherworldly bliss. The Western appropriation of Tantra had already begun in the late nineteenth century with the Theosophical Society and Madame Blavatsky’s descriptions of the mysterious masters who dwelt in forbidden Tibet, the heartland of Vajrayāna Buddhism. The massive text of her *Secret Doctrine* is itself supposed to be based on a previously unknown Tibetan text rediscovered by Blavatsky.³⁷ Already by 1905, in fact, we find the first establishment of an official “Tantrik Order in America” by the rather eccentric figure, Pierre Arnold Bernard (born in 1875 in Leon, Iowa, as Peter Coon). Centered in Nyack, New York, Bernard began to publish an “International Journal: Tantrik Order,” and he quickly attracted

As Marvin Harris comments, “Much of the current spiritual thrust . . . constitutes a misunderstood attempt to save America’s dream of worldly progress by supernatural means—rather than a reaction to Western materialism . . . The new religious consciousness is directed to the material world” (*America Now: Why Nothing Works* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981], pp. 141–43).

³⁶ Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, p. 68; cf. Heelas, “Cults for Capitalism: Self Religions, Magic and the Empowerment of Business,” in *Religion and Power: Decline and Growth*, ed. J. Fulton (London: British Sociological Association, 1991), pp. 27 ff. As York comments, “Part and parcel of the process of transformation . . . at the heart of the New Age are the facilitating organizations and businesses . . . who have arisen to assist this process. These include those teaching techniques ranging from yoga and meditation, martial arts, and various healing techniques (psychological therapies, alternative medicine), and those marketing . . . New Age products (health foods, vitamins, . . . books, tapes, and incense) . . . [M]any New Agers . . . are adamant that the capitalist profit motive is fully compatible with New Age ideals” (p. 40).

³⁷ See Alfred Percy Sinnett, *Esoteric Buddhism* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1885); H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1971). For a good discussion of the Theosophical Society’s appropriation of Tibetan Buddhism, see Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 48 ff. Interestingly enough, however, we should note that Blavatsky and her disciples did not identify Tibetan Buddhism as “Tantrism,” and they in fact went to some pains to distinguish it from the disreputable and scandalous Tantric tradition.

a wide range of largely upper-class, wealthy disciples and also quickly aroused intense scandal and controversy among the rather prudish Victorian society around him.³⁸

However, it was really with the pioneering work of Sir John Woodroffe (a.k.a. Arthur Avalon) that Tantrism entered fully into the Western discourse. Surely one of the most eccentric and perplexing figures in the history of British India, Woodroffe lived a kind of dual or secret life: in his outward, exoteric life, he served as a respected judge on the High Court of Calcutta, even while, in his inner life as “Arthur Avalon,” he was an intimate student of the texts and traditions of Hindu Tantra. Although Woodroffe himself presented a highly rationalized, purified, and “deodorized” image of Tantra, his numerous works and translations quickly sparked the imaginations of scholars and seekers throughout the Western world.³⁹

Inspired by Woodroffe’s pioneering work, Tantrism soon became a central topic in the works of this century’s greatest Indologists and historians of religions: Mircea Eliade, Heinrich Zimmer, Aghananda Bharati, and Giuseppe Tucci, to name but a few. For Eliade, perhaps the most influential scholar of comparative religions in this century, Tantra is nothing less than a new “valorization” of the powers of nature, a vindication of the human body and sexuality, which had been repressed by the dominant patriarchal society. For Eliade, Tantrism represents a kind of living remnant of the oldest, most primordial layer of Indian consciousness, dating back to the pre-Aryan days, when popular religion and worship of the Goddess had not yet been overtaken by the priestly, androcentric Aryans. Embodying the “great underground current of autochthonous spirituality,” the “irresistible Tantric advance in the medieval period implies a new victory for the pre-Aryan popular strata.”⁴⁰ Similarly, as the German Indologist Heinrich Zimmer argues, Tantrism represents the deepest heart of Indian religion as a whole (and thus forms the culminating chapter of his classic *Philosophies of India* [1956]). As a spiritual path that sacralizes the human

³⁸ On the mysterious and fascinating case of Pierre Bernard (1875–1955), see Douglas, *Spiritual Sex* (n. 8 above), pp. 191–205, “Tantrik Order in America,” in J. Gordon Melton, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989); and the website devoted to Bernard (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/~stringer/welcome.htm>). Bernard’s method included sexual practices and attracted both wealthy clients from New York’s powerful elite society and the scrutiny of the police, who suspected him of seducing his pupils.

³⁹ On Woodroffe’s moralizing reform of Tantrism, see Jeffrey J. Kripal, “Woodroffe, Sir John,” in *Encyclopedia of Hinduism and Indian Religions* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, in press). According to Woodroffe’s rather sanitized version, Tantra is ultimately one with the pure, rational monotheistic tradition of the Vedas and the Vedanta: “The Tantra śāstra . . . has been for centuries past one of the recognized scriptures of Hinduism, and every form of Hinduism is based on Veda and Vedanta” (p. 63; cf. pp. 385, 587, 589).

⁴⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 202–12, 259.

body and sexuality, Tantrism offers a much-needed corrective both to the life-denying ascetic traditions in Hinduism and, more important, to the life-denying, prudish, and repressive Christian traditions in the West: "In the Tantra, the manner of approach is not that of Nay but of Yea . . . The world attitude is affirmative . . . Man must rise through and by means of nature, not by rejection of nature."⁴¹

With the countercultural revolution and sexual liberation of the 1960s, Tantrism finally entered into the Western popular imagination in full force. If the 1960s may be said to represent a new freedom for sexual exploration, together with a new interest in alternative, non-Western, and Oriental religions, then Tantrism could well be said to be at the very center of new spirituality of the Aquarian Age. For it seemed to embody both the countercultural revolt against prevailing Judeo-Christian values and the new positive celebration of the human body, sexuality, and sensual ecstasy. Now mingled together with various other occult movements such as Neo-pagan witchcraft and the sexo-magic teachings of the "Great Beast" Aleister Crowley, and now traced back to ancient Egypt, Neolithic sculpture, and the lost city of Atlantis, Tantrism had finally come into its own in the Western imagination: "During this period, social sexual and spiritual conventions were broken down in the name of art and freedom. Writers and poets wrote more directly than ever before about . . . homosexuality, drug experiences, hedonism . . . and anarchy . . . The radical no-nonsense nature of Tantric teachings made them very attractive to the sixties generation. Psychedelic mind expanding drugs, uninhibited sex, and the quest for spiritual experiences took on new meaning . . . in the context of Tantra. Tantra helped legitimize the sixties experience, helped give it spiritual *and* political meaning."⁴²

Indeed, not only did the 1960s and 1970s witness a new spiritual interest in Tantrism, but we also find Tantrism penetrating deeply into Western pop culture, with rock star Mick Jagger even producing a sexo-psychedelic film on "Tantra." "Tantric symbols appeared everywhere, on T-shirts, buttons, posters and record albums . . . Tantric designs were painted on several of the Beatles' cars. Jimi Hendrix had Tantric yantra diagrams painted on his guitar and his cheeks."⁴³ For many of this generation, the Tantric wedding of spirituality with sensuality, otherworldly transcendence with this worldly ecstasy, seemed to represent the very essence of the dawning Age of Aquarius and the very heart of the many blossoming New Age movements: "As the New Age manifested, traditional Tantra was transformed into a Tantra for the masses, a neo-Tantric cult of sensual pleasure with a spiritual flavor. Because of its radical sexual and social stance, Tantra is

⁴¹ Zimmer (n. 4 above), p. 576.

⁴² Douglas, *Spiritual Sex*, pp. 219, 221. On the "Neo-Tantrik" sex-magic of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), see Douglas, *Spiritual Sex*, p. 206 ff.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

well on the way to becoming a pop religion . . . This goddess/god within is the essence of Tantric truth and the prime hope for the future. In the twenty-first century Tantra will . . . bless those prepared to deal with the new spiritual reality . . . in the flowering of the Age of Aquarius which commenced in 1962.”⁴⁴ With this general background, let us now look briefly at two of the more influential Tantric gurus of the late twentieth century—Chogyam Trungpa and Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh—and then explore the wide-reaching role of Tantra on the Internet—the power of “ecstasy on line.”

THE DANGER, THE POWER AND THE MADNESS OF TANTRIC WISDOM:
CHOGYAM TRUNGPA AND THE LIGHTNING BOLT OF TANTRA

Many people in America have heard about Tantra as the “sudden path”—the quick way to enlightenment . . . Exotic ideas about Tantra are not just misconceptions; they could be destructive. It is dangerous and fruitless to practice Tantra without first establishing a firm ground in Buddhist teachings.

This warning has been given hundreds of times: “Don’t get into Tantra just like that . . . It’s dangerous.” . . . Every Tantric text . . . begins with that warning: Be careful, think twice . . . don’t take this carelessly. But interestingly, *the more you put students off, the more interested they become.* (CHOGYAM TRUNGPA, *Journey without Goal*)⁴⁵

Born in Tibet in 1939 and dying in the United States fifty years later, Chogyam Trungpa stands out as one of the most infamous and controversial of Tantric gurus in the late twentieth-century Western imagination. As he recounts in his own autobiography, and as we can piece together from the very colorful narratives of his disciples, Trungpa led an amazing life of adventure, tragedy, fame, and scandal.⁴⁶ Brought into this world in a small tent village in the Tibetan mountains, he was identified by Buddhist monks at age eighteen months as the reincarnation of the recently deceased abbot of Surmang monastery. Thus named the eleventh Trungpa of the Karma Kargyupa tradition, he took monastic vows at age eight and led a rigorous life of study, meditative discipline, and ritual practice. In 1959, he fled the brutal new communist regime, leading three hundred Tibetans

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 345; cf. Van Lysebeth (n. 27 above), p. xiii.

⁴⁵ Chogyam Trunga, *Journey without Goal: The Tantric Wisdom of the Buddha* (Boston: Shambhala, 1985), pp. 1, 57–58; my emphasis.

⁴⁶ For an autobiographical account, see Chogyam Trungpa, *Born in Tibet* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971). For a good scholarly critique of Trungpa’s work, including the translation of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, see Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, pp. 76–81. For an analysis of Trungpa’s sexual scandals from a feminist perspective, see Rita M. Gross, *Soaring and Settling: Buddhist Perspectives on Contemporary Social and Religious Issues* (New York: Continuum, 1998), pp. 60 ff.

through the mountains to refuge in India. Having taught himself English, he traveled to Oxford in 1963; and finally, after being injured in a car accident and paralyzed on his left side, he came to the United States in 1970, at the height of America's countercultural revolution, sexual liberation, and search for new alternative realities through drugs, Eastern mysticism, and any other intense psychic or physical experiences.

When he arrived, however, Trungpa was far from what most Americans expected in a Tibetan lama. Caring little for asceticism or austerity, Trungpa dressed and lived lavishly, freely partaking of food, alcohol, drugs, and the simple pleasures of a wealthy life. Known for wearing expensive suits, riding in a chauffeured Mercedes, retaining servants who waited on him hand and foot, and living in the finest suites of expensive hotels, Trungpa seemed a far cry from most Americans' ideas of ascetic yogis meditating on snowy mountain tops: "The Americans were shocked by his appearance and demeanor. He had divested himself of his robes. He ate what he liked, consumed any quantity of alcohol, smoked and freely joined [in] ingesting psychedelics . . . He understood his own crazy-wise conduct as a counterpoint to the widespread disease of spiritual materialism."⁴⁷

None of this prevented Trungpa from establishing a powerful following of eager American adepts in Boulder, Colorado, where he founded his Naropa Institute in the 1970s. Indeed, his American disciples seem to have relished his erratic behavior, worshipping Trungpa as the ideal crazy-wisdom guru who could shock the bourgeois capitalist West out of its complacency. "Trungpa's first American students included large numbers of counterculture dropouts, refugees of the collapsing New Left . . . amateur yogis in rebellion against the materialism of their parents . . . By the time I met these students, Trungpa had changed them into ordinary citizens wearing suits and ties. They drank, smoked cigarettes and ate meat."⁴⁸ Acting in a consistently "unpredictable and incorrigible" manner, Trungpa was regularly late for his own lectures, often arriving inebriated and sometimes downing a few beers in the course of his teachings. "During meditation he was occasionally seen to nod off, but on other occasions he would sneak up on unsuspecting meditators to squirt water at them with a toy pistol."⁴⁹ In order to shock his disciples out of their "spiritual materialism"—that is, the overattachment to religion, which the ego tends to turn into yet another object of selfish pride—Trungpa would periodically break up his meditations with raucous parties, bouts of drunken abandon, or orgies: "Trungpa had disciples carry him around naked at a

⁴⁷ Georg Feuerstein, *Holy Madness: The Shock Tactics and Radical Teachings of Crazy-Wise Adepts, Holy Fools and Rascal Gurus* (New York: Paragon, 1991), p. 73.

⁴⁸ Butterfield (n. 8 above), p. 38.

⁴⁹ Feuerstein, p. 73.

party, broke antennas off cars and handed them to a student, spent days speaking in spoonerisms. Assuming that the ego . . . will subvert any material it is given . . . these masters attempt to wake people through extreme behavior which challenges their everyday behavior.”⁵⁰

All of this seeming hedonism and madness, Trungpa explained, was only part of his own characteristically radical and direct spiritual method. His was the way of the tiger—a quick, direct but also highly dangerous and potentially deadly path to liberation:

Here comes Chogyam disguised as a hailstorm
no one can confront him
. . . He cannot be defeated
Chogyam is a tiger with whiskers and a confident smile
. . . He escaped from the jaws of the lion.⁵¹

This Tiger-guru was therefore not afraid of using the most violent, most seemingly shocking and dangerous tactics in order to help liberate his disciples. According to Trungpa, anything is permissible for the guru, as long as it is for the ultimate good of his devotee: “What if you feel the necessity for a violent act in order ultimately to do good for a person? You just do it.”⁵²

This, for Trungpa, is the very essence of Tantrism and the Vajrayāna path. As the lightning bolt path, Tantra is both the quickest and the deadliest, the easiest and the most easily abused of spiritual means: it is a path that attempts, not to repress the lower impulses of passion, sensuality, and violence, but instead to harness these darker energies as the most potent fuel propelling us to liberation: “Passion, aggression, and ignorance, the source of human suffering, are also the wellspring of enlightenment. Afflictions like AIDS are not merely disasters but accelerations toward wisdom . . . They can be transformed into Buddha-mind.”⁵³ On the Vajrayāna path, the Tāntrika attempts to drink the poison of desire and to transform it into divinizing ambrosia. And perhaps most potent of all is the energy of sexual desire—arguably the strongest force in human nature and therefore also the most powerful fuel toward spiritual freedom. The experience of orgasm is one of the most common Tantric metaphors, and

⁵⁰ Richard Grossinger, *Waiting for the Martian Express: Cosmic Visions, Earth Warriors, Luminous Dreams* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1989), p. 19. As Rick Fields comments, “boisterous parties followed long meditation sessions, and students with purist attitudes found themselves swept away like so many autumn leaves into the chaos” (*How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), p. 310.

⁵¹ Chogyam Trungpa, *First Thought, Best Thought: 108 Poems* (Boulder, Colo.: Shambhala, 1973), p. 7.

⁵² Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987) p. 107.

⁵³ Butterfield, p. 7.

often in physical expressions of spiritual union, the divine male and female, active and passive forces come together in perfect harmony and ecstatic communion: “In Trungpa’s teaching style, sexual passion was accepted as a reflection of our basic goodness and could even be a way of experiencing enlightenment. His favorite metaphor for giving in to the dharma was having an orgasm. ‘You just do it’ . . . all at once.’ He referred to arousing *bodhicitta* as ‘tickling the clitoris of the heart’ . . . Trungpa and Tendzin were both notorious for the number of their sexual partners or consorts.”⁵⁴

Not surprisingly, the Tantric path is also a potentially deadly one—a path that demands that the disciple surrender his or her entire self, life, and being to the ruling authority of the guru, who alone can guide him or her through this difficult, dangerous ordeal. “Working with the energy of Vajrayāna is like working with a live electric wire,” Trungpa warns, “[I]t is better not to get into Tantra, but if we must get into it, we had better surrender. We must give up the idea of survival . . . We surrender to the fact that we cannot hold on to our ego.”⁵⁵ The guru must be accepted as the absolute, unquestioned authority—and in fact as the supreme deity, the incarnate form of the Divine Reality, which will shatter the false ego of the disciple and lead him to liberation. As Trungpa put it in one lecture to his students, “Thank you for accepting me as your friend, teacher, DICTATOR”; and as Butterfield reflects on his own experience, “Trungpa . . . seemed bent on stoking the agony by acting so bizarre that I wondered if he was capable of ordering us all to commit suicide. On the night of the Vajrayana transmission he rambled from subject to subject in a series of blazing non sequiturs . . . waited until we were dozing off and then shouted ‘Fat!’ or ‘Fuck You!’ into the microphone loud enough to burst our eardrums . . . then free associated his way into elocution word lists.”⁵⁶

When we look more closely at the complex history of Trungpa’s following in Boulder, however, we might wonder whether he heeded his own advice as to the potential danger of his Tantric teachings. Indeed, the history of his life and community is a disturbing history of turmoil, emotional violence, and scandal. Trungpa’s socially objectionable behavior had begun to be made public as early as 1975, when a young poet, W. S. Merwin, and his Asian wife attended an intensive three-month seminar with Trungpa. At the beginning of the course on Vajrayāna Buddhism, Trungpa suddenly interrupted the seminar with a rather raucous Halloween party. Arriving quite late and quite intoxicated, Trungpa began to ask people to undress; then he took off his own clothes and had himself carried

⁵⁴ Butterfield, p. 107. “[T]he separation between samsara and enlightenment, good and evil, is . . . an artificial convention. The poisons . . . the neurosis, aggression, envy and pride are not rejected but experienced as forms of buddha-mind” (ibid., p. 32).

⁵⁵ Trungpa, *Journey without Goal*, pp. 25, 53.

⁵⁶ Butterfield, p. 140.

around naked on the shoulders of his students. Merwin and his wife soon decided that the party had gotten out of control and went to their rooms to pack. When the couple repeatedly refused Trungpa's order that they join the party, locking themselves inside their room, a band of drunken disciples kicked in their windows and dragged them forcibly before the master. Trungpa then proceeded to insult Merwin's wife with racist remarks, threw a glass of *sake* in the poet's face, and had the pair stripped in front of everyone. One student was apparently courageous enough to oppose the mob mentality, but his pleading was rewarded only by a punch in the face from Trungpa.⁵⁷

Even more disturbing events surround Trungpa's American disciple Thomas Rich, renamed Osel Tendzin, who was appointed his successor in 1976. An alcoholic like Trungpa, Tendzin was also known to have had sexual relations with female students—even after he was diagnosed with AIDS—and so infected at least one of his many disciple-lovers with the virus. As such, Butterfield suggests, he is a striking embodiment of the very real danger of the spiritual “poison” of the Tantric path: “The tantric Buddhist way of handling passion may lead to disaster, and . . . no matter how great a master we become the danger never disappears.”⁵⁸

Most of this shocking and outrageous behavior, however, was kept strictly secret by Trungpa's disciples. In keeping with the traditional Tantric injunction for secrecy and the need to keep these powerful, dangerous, and potentially misunderstood teachings hidden from the eyes of the masses, such events were held strictly secret among the inner circle of closest initiates. “To be part of Trungpa's inner circle you had to take a vow never to reveal . . . some of the things he did. This co-personal secrecy is common with gurus . . . It is also common in the dysfunctional family systems of alcoholics and sexual abusers. The inner circle puts up an almost insurmountable barrier to a healthily skeptical mind.”⁵⁹ In sum, as Butterfield reflects on his own experience with Trungpa and this radical brand of Tantra, it was indeed, as the master had often said, much like the experience of sexual intercourse—an intense, shocking, yet also potentially damaging and emotionally crippling encounter: “It was like jumping from a cliff into a quarry pool— . . . You just do it, he said, ‘like having

⁵⁷ Feuerstein (n. 47 above), p. 75; Merwin's story is told by him to Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), pp. 466–70.

⁵⁸ Butterfield (n. 8 above), p. 110.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 100. “The Naropa institute embodies a feudal priestly tradition translated onto a capitalistic setting. The attraction it has is oddly reminiscent of the attraction of the aristocracy had for the rising middle class in the early days of capitalistic expansion. These middle-class children seem drawn not only to the discipline but also the trappings of hierarchy” (Peter Marin, “Spiritual Obedience: The Transcendental Game of Follow the Leader,” *Harper's*, February 1979, p. 47).

an orgasm'—an image that had uncomfortable associations with getting screwed."⁶⁰

THE GURU OF THE RICH: BHAGWAN SHREE RAJNEESH AND NEO-TANTRISM

Tantra does not believe in improving your character . . . Tantra says—
If you are greedy, be greedy . . . If you are sexual, be sexual, don't
bother about it at all. Society cannot tolerate such a teaching. (BHAG-
WAN SHREE RAJNEESH)⁶¹

Surely among the most infamous, colorful, and outrageous of the modern Tantric masses was the notorious Indian holy man and self-proclaimed "Guru of the Rich," Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. A close contemporary of Trungpa, and surely his equal in infamy and scandal, Rajneesh has probably been the single most influential figure in the birth of "Neo-Tantrism," or a brand of Tantric sex marketed explicitly for a New Age, Western audience. "Rajneesh offered everything Westerners imagined Tantra to be: a free love cult promising enlightenment, an exciting radical community and the opportunity to rise up in the hierarchy . . . Rajneesh slipped comfortably into the role of 'Tantra Messiah' . . . Largely because of Rajneesh, Tantra reemerged as a New Age Cult in the 1970s and 1980s."⁶²

Born in Jabalpur, India, in 1931, to a family of twelve, where the parents died at an early age, Rajneesh Chandra Mohan was raised by his grandparents—an elderly, wealthy, and high-class Jain couple who are said to have spoiled the young Rajneesh, treating him like a "Raja." From a very early age, Rajneesh reports experiencing various ecstatic experiences, finally achieving "full enlightenment" in 1953, at age 21. While at college at Jabalpur, the young Rajneesh suffered a traumatic period of depression, anorexia, and an attempted suicide; yet he finally emerged from his crisis in an intense spiritual breakthrough to self-realization—"an inner explosion," as he put it, in which he left his body and realized his true inner nature.⁶³

After receiving his master's degree in 1957, Rajneesh taught philosophy for nine years at the University of Jabalpur. In 1967, however, he decided

⁶⁰ Butterfield, p. 140.

⁶¹ Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, *Tantra: The Supreme Understanding* (Poona, India: Rajneesh Foundation, 1974), p. 190.

⁶² Douglas (n. 8 above), *Spiritual Sex*, p. 15.

⁶³ For Rajneesh's biography, see my article, "Zorba the Buddha" (n. 8 above); Lewis Carter, *Charisma and Control in Rajneeshpuram: The Role of Shared Values in the Creation of a Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Susan J. Palmer, "Charisma and Abdication: A Study of the Leadership of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh," *Sociological Analysis* 49 (1988): 1–21. More popular accounts by disciples and ex-disciples include: Yati, *The Sound of Running Water: A Photobiography of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh* (Poona, India: Rajneesh Foundation, 1980); Hugh Milne, *Bhagwan: The God That Failed* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986); James Gordon, *The Golden Guru: The Strange Journey of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh* (New York: Viking, 1987).

he could no longer keep his enlightened knowledge to himself and left the academic world to gather disciples and teach the spiritual life. His rather radical teachings very quickly aroused enormous controversy in the Indian community, however, as he urged his disciples to indulge all their physical desires, even as he viciously attacked national heroes such as Mahatma Gandhi (whom he ridiculed as a masochistic chauvinist pervert).⁶⁴ By 1971, Rajneesh had begun to call himself “Bhagwan”—that is, Blessed One or God—and built himself an Ashram in Poona, India, where he hoped to begin a new utopian community as the seed of a new civilization. Bhagwan’s highly lucrative new civilization, however, soon came into increasing financial and legal problems with the Indian government: in fact, Bhagwan and his devotees were eventually forced to flee the country in 1981, trailed by some \$5 million in debts and a host of police and tax collectors.

Announcing himself as “the Messiah America has been waiting for,” Rajneesh took refuge in the United States—the land (as he described it) of freedom, opportunity, and unfettered capitalism.⁶⁵ After a brief stay in a New Jersey mansion, he and his now large following bought a 64,000 acre ranch in Antelope, Oregon, which they dubbed their own new city and ideal society, “Rajneeshpuram.” Quickly growing into a remarkably lucrative financial complex, Rajneeshpuram amassed some \$120 million in revenues in its short four-year existence. Meanwhile, Rajneesh’s following had spread not only throughout the United States but also through Europe and India, claiming over twenty-five thousand members at its peak and growing into an enormously diverse, multifaceted international business complex.⁶⁶

The group very soon, however, came into conflict with its American neighbors: first with the local residents of Antelope’s peaceful retirement community, whom they attempted to displace and push out, using terrorist tactics such as dumping animal parts on the lawns of local officials and reportedly distributing salmonella bacteria in local restaurants and grocery stores; and second, with the U.S. government, which undertook an investigation of Rajneeshpuram’s claim to both “church” and “city” status and, by extension, its exemption from income tax. Finally in 1986, the Oregon attorney general decided that Rajneeshpuram violated the church-state separation clause of the Constitution. Rajneesh and his disciples, meanwhile, had also come under investigation for their various criminal

⁶⁴ Feuerstein, p. 65.

⁶⁵ On Rajneesh’s procapitalist spirit, see below, sec. iv; cf. my article, “Zorba the Buddha” and Carter.

⁶⁶ On the remarkably successful business structure of the Rajneesh movement, which developed into a complicated system of parent companies and subsidiaries, spread out through a range of secular and spiritual enterprises, see my article, “Zorba the Buddha” and Carter, pp. 77 ff.

activities (which included counts of electronic eavesdropping, immigration conspiracy, lying to federal officials, harboring fugitives, criminal conspiracy, first-degree assault, attempted murder, burglary, racketeering, and arson).⁶⁷

In itself, Rajneesh's philosophy was neither terribly original nor terribly profound, being for the most part an elaborate, if rather ingenious, synthesis of a wide range of philosophical and religious ideas drawn from an enormous array of sources. Bhagwan's vast body of writings is itself a kind of postmodern pastiche: a crazy hodgepodge of ideas drawn from a remarkable range of sources, from Plato and Aristotle to Shankara, Lao Tzu, and Jean Paul Sartre—though he had a special fondness for the more radical figures such as Nietzsche, Gurdjieff, and Aleister Crowley. His teachings are, as one observer put it, a rather eclectic “potpourri of counterculturalist ideas: strive for love and freedom, live for the moment, self is important, you are okay . . . the fun ethic, God is within.”⁶⁸ An explicitly self-parodying, self-deconstructing guru, Rajneesh claimed that his entire teaching was nothing more than a joke, a farce, or a game—the ultimate game: “Nothing is serious. Even your disappointments are laughable. To become a Sannyasin is to enter the ultimate game. Once you decide to be a disciple you enter another world. Then it is a play . . . it is the ultimate game . . . You have played at being a husband, wife, mother, being rich, poor . . . This is the last game. Only you are left.”⁶⁹

Perhaps above all, however, Rajneesh's teachings center around the Indian tradition of Tantrism—or, more accurately, what he calls his own unique brand of “Neo-Tantrism”—a path specially geared to the desires of a late twentieth-century Western audience. Tantrism, for Rajneesh, is essentially an “iconoclastic brand of spirituality”—“an antinomian philosophy and moral anarchism.”⁷⁰ As a “religionless” religion or even anti-religion, Neo-Tantrism is a path radically beyond conventional morality, beyond good and evil, founded on the explicit rejection of all traditions, established doctrines, and values. “Morality is a false coin, it deceives people, it is not religion at all,” he warns, “a man of real understanding is neither good nor bad. He transcends both.”⁷¹ For Rajneesh, the cause of all our suffering is the distorting socialization or “programming” of cultural institutions such as family, schools, religion, and government. All meta-narratives or overarching theories about the universe are only so many fictions, imaginary creations used by those in power to dominate the masses.

⁶⁷ Carter, p. 237.

⁶⁸ Bob Mullan, *Life as Laughter: Following Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh* (Boston: Routledge, 1983), p. 44.

⁶⁹ Rajneesh, *The Art of Dying*, cited in Kate Strelley, *The Ultimate Game* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

⁷⁰ Feuerstein (n. 47 above), p. 67.

⁷¹ Rajneesh (n. 61 above), *Tantra*, p. 55 and 6.

True freedom can be achieved only by deconstructing all metanarratives, by liberating oneself from the confining structures of the past. One must be deprogrammed and dehypnotized: “You are programmed by family, acquaintances, institutions. Your mind is like a blackboard on which rules are written. Bhagwan writes new rules on the blackboard. He tells you one thing is true and next that the opposite is true. He writes and writes on the blackboard of your mind until it is a whiteboard. Then you have no programming left.”⁷²

According to Rajneesh, Tantrism, in strictest contrast to established institutions and social structures, does not deny or repress life or the body—rather, it is the ultimate affirmation of sensuality, passion, physicality, and pleasure: It is the supreme “*Just Do It!*” religion, which accepts and celebrates life in all its sensuality, transience, and contingency. “This is what Tantra says: the Royal Way—behave like a king, not like a soldier . . . You live moment to moment, enjoying moment to moment . . . Why bother about tomorrow? This moment is enough. Live it!”⁷³ Indeed, even the evil, sinful, and perverse side of life, even the most selfish and seemingly immoral sides of the human ego must be affirmed and accepted as innately divine. Far from imposing moral restraints and ethical strictures, Tantrism celebrates human nature in all its most flawed, weak, and even seemingly “evil” dimensions: “Tantra says—If you are greedy, be greedy; don’t bother about greed. If you are sexual, be sexual”: “Tantric acceptance is total, it doesn’t split you. All the religions of the world except Tantra have created split personalities, have created schizophrenia . . . They say the good has to be achieved and the bad denied, the devil has to be denied and God accepted . . . Tantra says a transformation is possible . . . Transformation comes when you accept your total being. The anger is absorbed, the greed is absorbed.”⁷⁴

Above all, Tantrism centers around the power of sexuality—a power that is at once the strongest, most intense force in human nature and also the one most severely repressed, denied, and distorted by modern Western society. Precisely because the traditional Christian West has suppressed sexuality, Rajneesh argues, it is sexuality that must be liberated if modern Western students are fully to accept and actualize their innermost selves: “Freud . . . stumbled only upon the repressed sexuality. He came across repressed people. Christian repression has made many locks in man where energy has become coiled up within itself, has become stagnant, is no longer flowing. . . . The society is against sex: it has created a block, just near the sex center. Whenever sex arises you feel restless, you feel guilty, you feel afraid. You shrink back, you don’t flow . . . That’s why

⁷² A Sannyasin informant, cited in Carter, p. 48.

⁷³ Rajneesh, *Tantra*, p. 157.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 190, 98–99.

I teach dynamic methods: they will melt your blocks."⁷⁵ "In starkest opposition to this life-denying, prudish Western attitude, Tantra is the path that accepts and absorbs everything, above all the sexual impulse. As the strongest power in human nature, sex also becomes the strongest spiritual force when it is finally accepted and integrated into the total person. "Tantra says everything has to be absorbed, *everything!* . . . without any condition. Sex has to be absorbed, then it becomes a tremendous force in you. A Buddha . . . a Jesus, they have such a magnetic force around—what is that? Sex absorbed."⁷⁶

In order to help his disciples achieve this state of full self-acceptance and full absorption of the sexual impulse, Rajneesh advocated a variety of yogic, meditative, and other psycho-physical disciplines. Most of these, we might note, came at a significant cost, ranging from fifty dollars for a one-day introduction to Rajneesh meditation to \$7,500 for a complete three-month rebalancing program. Among the most powerful of these techniques was a uniquely Rajneeshian method known as "Dynamic Meditation" or "Chaotic Meditation." As a kind of "microcosm of Rajneesh's outlook," its explicit aim was to "shock habitual patterns of thought and behavior" and so open the individual to ecstatic freedom and liberating bliss. After an initial stage of concentration and yogic breathing, the chaotic meditation would culminate in an ecstatic, uncontrolled state of "letting the body go, without restrictions"—"allowing the body to do whatever it wants," including dancing, gyrating, laughing, crying, shrieking, or rolling on the ground, allowing the inner *Shakti* or divine power to move through the body as it will.⁷⁷

But probably the most important—and financially the most lucrative—of these spiritual techniques was Rajneesh's unique brand of Neo-Tantrism. Because young people in the West are terribly repressed and sexually dysfunctional, Rajneesh argues, a central part of the spiritual path must therefore be to liberate them from their sexual hang-ups, to free the pent-up sexual tension, and thereby to achieve bodily and spiritual wholeness. Many of his practices thus involved group sex—"therapy intensives," as he called them—which were "designed to bring about a catharsis followed by transformation of consciousness."⁷⁸ Former disciple Hugh Milne, for example, recounts that one of the most popular practices in the early Rajneesh movement was a form of ritual sex in which males would eat ripe mangoes from between the legs of female partners. (Rajneesh himself, we might note, is said to have had a special fascination for his

⁷⁵ Rajneesh, *Yoga: The Alpha and the Omega* (Poona, India: Rajneesh Foundation, 1981), pp. 21, 157.

⁷⁶ Rajneesh, *Tantra*, p. 100.

⁷⁷ Rajneesh, "Experiment in Dynamic Meditation," in *The Mystic Experience* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsida, 1977), pp. 72 ff.

⁷⁸ Feuerstein, p. 70.

female devotees. According to Milne, he regularly fondled and masturbated his female disciples, selecting them on the basis of their breast size and allowing only the most generously endowed to join his inner circle.)⁷⁹

The ultimate aim of Tantric practice is precisely to achieve this final aim of full self-acceptance; to love ourselves wholly and completely with all our sins, vices, greeds, and sensual desires; and to realize that we already are “perfect.” Once we accept our sensual, physical, and desiring nature, once we release the pent-up repressed sexual side of ourselves, we discover that we are already divine. We already possess truth, freedom, and infinite power within ourselves. We already are “God”: “Tantra accepts you in your totality . . . This is the most fundamental thing in Tantra, that it says you are already perfect . . . Perfection does not have to be achieved. It simply has to be realized that it is there. Tantra offers you enlightenment right here and now—no time, no postponement.⁸⁰ . . . Ecstasy is your very nature. You are truth. You are love. You are freedom. *Moksa* means liberation: when one is totally free . . . You are already there . . . If you can stop all doing for a single moment the energy converges and explodes . . . Then *you become a god.*”⁸¹ Rather ironically, few if any of Rajneesh’s disciples appear to have ever achieved this godlike status; on the contrary, most of his followers appear to have faced intense disillusionment and despair after their once powerful movement collapsed, their guru had deteriorated into a drug-addicted recluse, and their dreams of total sexual-spiritual liberation transformed into tools of greed, manipulation, and exploitation. After the government investigation in 1986, the self-proclaimed “Guru of the Rich” would be deported and would later die in his homeland, while his disciples would face a wide range of serious criminal charges and many years in prison.

III. ECSTASY ON LINE: SEX MAGIC AND THE SOFTWARE OF LOVE ON THE INTERNET

Tantra is like the Internet—expanding exponentially, links everywhere, innovative, crosscultural, knowing no boundaries, and changing day by day. Information on Tantra . . . is everywhere now . . . Surf the net . . . check out the scene, and ask yourself, “Isn’t this truly a most exciting time? All the barriers are down. Initiation could be but a few clicks away!” (NIK DOUGLAS)⁸²

Finally, one of the most fascinating and still unexplored aspects of Tantrism and New Age spirituality lies in the ever expanding digital spaces of the Internet. The role of technology in general, and the World Wide Web in

⁷⁹ Milne (n. 63 above), p. 186.

⁸⁰ Rajneesh, *Tantra*, p. 100.

⁸¹ Rajneesh, *The Goose Is Out* (Antelope, Oreg.: Rajneesh Foundation International, 1982), p. 286.

⁸² Douglas, *Spiritual Sex*, p. 397

particular, is still one of the most poorly understood aspects of the New Age; indeed, New Religious movements appear to have capitalized upon and exploited the possibilities of the Internet in ways that will take the rest of us decades to catch up. As a variety of recent observers have commented, the Internet—like technology in general—opens up vast new possibilities for both oppression and liberation, capitalist exploitation and personal empowerment. “Digital reality contains alternative possibilities towards emancipation and domination,” as Arthur and Marilouise Kroker put it.⁸³

On the one hand, there is no doubt that it can and increasingly is being used as yet another extension of consumer capitalism; it advertises big business to all points of the globe and all aspects of human consciousness. At least as it functions today, as we see through a growing proliferation of on-line malls and superstores such as *Amazon.com*, the primary use of the World Wide Web seems to lie in advertising and commercial enterprises rather than social or spiritual liberation.⁸⁴ But on the other hand, as Jenny Terry points out, the Internet, like all technology, can be and is also used in all sorts of creative and subversive ways never dreamed of by its creators. Indeed, this medium, which was originally designed for U.S. military use, is now one of the primary vehicles for the spread of New Age spirituality and the seemingly “arch-subversive” teachings of the Tantras. With its general anonymity and the possibility of logging on without any indication of one’s gender, race, or physical appearance, the Internet offers remarkable new possibilities for the imagining and reimagining of the self.⁸⁵

So too, with its ability to unite individuals from all points of the globe, irrespective of geographic boundaries, sex, or race, the Internet also holds the potential to create new “virtual communities,” alternative social groups, and even “ritual gatherings” in the cyber-sphere. Already, we can

⁸³ Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker, *Hacking the Future: Stories for the Fleasheating 90s* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), p. 78.

⁸⁴ The more pessimistic critics warn that the Internet signals the end of communication and even of human bodily experience as we know it, with the dissolution of all reality into the “hyper-real” world of simulations (see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* [New York: Semiotext(e), 1988], pp. 1–20; Kroker, p. 78). As Andrea Slane observes, “The virtual communities formed on the Internet allow people to be whomever they want, freed of the constraints of corporeality, geographical confinement and socially inscribed identities . . . however, this anonymity and fluidity also have a price—the possibility of losing true identity” (“Romancing the System: Women, Narrative Film and the Sexuality of Computers,” in *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life*, ed. J. Terry and M. Calvert [London: Routledge, 1997], p. 77).

⁸⁵ Jenny Terry, “Introduction,” in Terry and Calvert, p. 7. See Elizabeth Reid, “Text-Based Virtual Realities, Ideology and the Cyborg Body,” in *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: Contemporary Issues in Cyberspace*, ed. Peter Ludlow (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996): “The player has no constant identity. MUD characters need not be any fixed gender or appearance but may evolve, mutate, morph over time and at the whim of their creator. All of these phenomena place gender, sexuality, identity and corporeality beyond the place of certainty” (p. 327).

now enter a wide array of “virtual temples” to experience on-line ritual encounters with a host of cyber-deities. We can even become members of virtual churches, covens, and other alternative communities, which are allegedly free of the hierarchies and other authority structures that confine mainline religions.

The Tantric cyber surfers have been among the first to capitalize on the new possibilities of the Internet. As Rachel McDermott suggests in her study of the Tantric Goddess Kali, we are now witnessing a remarkable global dialectical play between Indian and Western imaginations, between ancient Tantric traditions and late twentieth-century net-surfers, mediated by the strange new world of cyberspace.⁸⁶ In the last few years, the teachings, texts, and rituals of Tantrism have become among the most widespread of the various alternative spiritualities available on the Internet. Through the seemingly egalitarian and democratic medium of the Internet, Tantric websites profess to offer a more accessible, non-elitist brand of tantrism, a form of Tantric sex available to anyone regardless of status or education. Indeed, one need only enter the word “tantra” into any good search engine to generate several hundred sites, bearing titles such as “Sacred Sex—Karessa, Tantra, and Sex Magic,” “Extended Orgasm: A Sexual Training Class,” “Ceremonial Sensual Pleasuring,” or “Oceanic Tantra” (in his recent volume, *Spiritual Sex*, Nik Douglas includes an appendix listing some twenty pages of on-line sex magic possibilities). “The enormous variety of sexual fantasy scenarios offered in the media, over the phone, and on the Internet tells us that nowadays nothing is off limits . . . Using the information superhighway we can get on with finding out who we really are . . . what our sexual fantasies really are and how we want to live them out. We can do this interactively and anonymously, irrespective of country borders . . . In the years ahead, Tantra data on the information superhighway will lead spiritual travelers directly to their goal.”⁸⁷ Thus, we find a rapid proliferation of “ritual spaces,” in which individuals disconnected in physical space can enter virtual temples to participate in on-line Tantric pujas. The net surfer can now enter a number of Tantric temples and mandalas and experience virtual *darshan* of a host of Tantric deities, all at the click of a mouse and via a high-speed modem and the appropriate software.⁸⁸ When we enter the “Temple of Kali: Goddess of Destruction” site, for example, we find a virtual temple, complete with mysterious doorways, sacred objects, and a serpent

⁸⁶ McDermott (n. 24 above), p. 30.

⁸⁷ Douglas, *Spiritual Sex*, p. 323.

⁸⁸ See Gregory Price Grieve, “Imagining a Virtual Religious Community: Neo-Pagans and the Internet,” *Chicago Anthropology Exchange* 21 (1995): 87–118. There are now a number of on-line temples such as the Kali Mandir (<http://www.kalimandir.org/pujashop/index.html>), Temples of Tantra (<http://www.tantraWorks.com/Shakti.html>), Temple of Jvalamukhi (<http://www.dakinitantra.com/jvalamukhi>), and *The Ultimate Temple* (<http://www.grapho.net/temple>).

guarding a cryptic parchment. And when we enter the “Bitch from Hell” site, we can encounter the destructive Tantric Mother, in all her terrifying power and awesome potential:

I am the Bitch from Hell
 I think you know me well
 I am the dark goddess
 Kali, Hecate, Medusa, Lillith, Ereshigal.⁸⁹

Ultimately, its advocates claim, the on-line rituals and cyber-sexual encounters of the Internet offer truly transformative, even utopian possibilities. As Douglas suggests, they help “re-program” the human “bio-computer” itself, rewriting the psychic software of individuals who have been sexually deformed or badly programmed by mainstream Western society: “In the twenty-first century, Tantra will ‘come out of the closet,’ taking its rightful place as the most relevant tool to aid spiritual evolution for both men and women. It will awaken and empower the latent genius within each of us. How? by helping us reprogram our biocomputer with the spiritual software that tantra offers.”⁹⁰ The goal of this spiritual reprogramming is nothing less than a completely mind-blowing experience of ultimate orgasm—a hyper-real cyb-orgasm that utterly transcends the finite, limited kinds of sensual pleasure we achieve in ordinary human intercourse. According to an article “Sexual Energy Ecstasy,” reproduced on *Tantra.com*, “Real Tantric sex blows your mind completely because it takes you beyond all our conceptions of everyday reality—you taste the transcendental unity . . . The oneness of Tantric experience . . . is radical oneness. It rips your mind off. . . . The point of Tantric sex is that it will take you out of your head and down into your body . . . Tantra is about learning to let go of the mind and discover your supreme self hidden in the heart.”⁹¹ Such is the striking irony of the cyber-world: by participating in on-line ecstasy through the Internet and by achieving cyb-orgasm via modem, mouse, and video screen, we are also said to achieve the ultimate *physical* experience, to achieve full realization of our bodily and sexual nature.

⁸⁹ Website, *I Am the Bitch from Hell* (<http://www.ion.com.au/yoni/bitch.html>). For a good discussion of this and other sites, see McDermott, “Kali’s New Frontiers,” p. 8. Other Tantric Goddess sites include: *Mother Kali* (<http://www.yorkweb.com/mythopoeia/Motherkali.html>), and English translations from Mahānirvāna tantra by Mike Magee (<http://www.hubcom.com/magee.tantra/kali3.html>).

⁹⁰ Douglas, *Spiritual Sex*, p. 307. “We can access Tantric knowledge by reprogramming . . . our biocomputer. By exploring our potential as . . . creative sexual beings we can rid ourselves of confining sex- or gender-negative conditioning” (*ibid.*, p. 308).

⁹¹ David Ramsdale and Ellen Ramsdale, “Sexual Energy Ecstasy,” reprinted on the *Tantra.com* website.

IV. BE ABSOLUTELY SELFISH! TANTRISM AND THE SPIRITUAL LOGIC OF LATE CAPITALISM

Tantra has a very beautiful thing to say to you, and that is before you start serving anyone else, be absolutely selfish. How can you serve anybody else unless you have attained your inner being first. *Be absolutely selfish.* (BHAGWAN SHREE RAJNEESH)⁹²

“Tantrism” as the supreme affirmation of the human body and sexuality, as the liberation of the individual self from social and cultural constraints, and as the attainment of ultimate bliss and ecstasy beyond all values, beyond all good and evil, pure and impure—is this in fact the innermost truth of any actual Indian religious tradition? Or is it rather the deepest fantasy of Western consumer capitalism, the most extreme affirmation of materialism, hedonism, and egotism, now projected on to the exotic mirror of the Eastern Other?

At least as it is portrayed in contemporary popular discourse, Tantrism, I would argue, is in many ways the ideal expression of and religion for late twentieth-century consumer capitalist society. It suggests a remarkable fit with the particular cultural and economic formation of late twentieth-century Western society, which has been variously dubbed “post-industrialism” (Bell), “post-Fordism” (Harvey), “disorganized capitalism” (Scott Lash and John Urry, Claus Offe), or “new capitalism” (Halal).⁹³ Yet, whatever its name, most observers agree, the contemporary global economic system is by no means postcapitalist. On the contrary, it is hypercapitalist, or, in Ernest Mandel’s terms, a purer form of capitalism than any seen before, one which allows for the most powerful and successful application of capitalist principles to all aspects of human life. Since the early 1970s and, above all, since the abandoning of the gold standard and the subsequent “dematerialization” of money, there has been a shift from the “Fordist” economics of modern industrial capitalism to a more pervasive process of “flexible accumulation.” In the global marketplace of post-modernity, funds can be transferred and exchanged instantaneously, from any point on the planet, through a network of constantly shifting and increasingly flexible corporate structures and modes of consumption.⁹⁴

⁹² Rajneesh, *Tantra* (n. 6 above), pp. 109–10.

⁹³ On late capitalism, see n. 9 above; see esp. Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*; Lash and Urry (n. 9 above); Mandel (n. 9 above); Offe (n. 9 above); Harvey (n. 9 above); and Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism or the Cult Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 53–93.

⁹⁴ As Harvey summarizes, “modernist” or “organized capitalism,” which predominated in the West up to the 1970s, may be characterized as: profit-centered big business; the centralization of industrial banking and regulated national markets; complex managerial hierarchies; a concentration of capitalist relations with relatively few industries; and monopolistic corporate power. Later capitalist or disorganized capitalism, on the other hand, may be characterized as: a deconcentration of corporate power away from national markets; increasing

At the same time, late capitalism has also gone hand in hand with a series of marked shifts on the cultural level. As Fredric Jameson summarizes it, the “cultural logic of late capitalism” is characterized first by a general loss of faith in any kind of grand, totalizing, or unifying view of the world and human history (a death of “metanarratives,” to use Lyotard’s phrase), and second by a concomitant sense of intense fragmentation, pluralism, or “heteroglossia,” which mirrors the pluralism and bewildering diversifications in consumer society itself: “The growth of consumerism, modern forms of credit, mass travel, expansion of global information systems, and the establishment of a world communication system have resulted in important social, cultural and personality changes . . . The consequence is a profound pluralization of life-worlds . . . The coherence of the old, closed, communal world has given way to a kaleidoscope of modern pluralism which . . . can be associated with the presence of a world-market system which breeds life-world pluralism.”⁹⁵

Instead of the construction of any unifying metanarrative, the dominant logic of late capitalism is thus one of “pastiche” and “bricolage”—the freewheeling syncretism of wildly diverse elements drawn from disparate historical and cultural eras, patched together solely by the whim of the individual consumer. Today, we “no longer produce monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffle the fragments . . . of older cultural productions, in some new . . . bricolage: metabooks which cannibalize other books.”⁹⁶ And instead of the ideals of unity, order, coherence, or harmony, as Terry Eagleton comments, the late capitalist aesthetic is that of physical intensity, shock-value, immediate gratification, and ecstatic experience: “Its stance toward cultural tradition is one of irreverent pastiche and its contrived depthlessness undermines all metaphysical solemnities . . . by a brutal aesthetics of squalor and shock.”⁹⁷

internationalization of capital; increasing independence of large monopolies from state regulation; cultural fragmentation and pluralism, coupled with the undermining of traditional class or national identities; a decline of industrial cities and a deconcentration from city centers to peripheral areas; and entrepreneurial individualism (*The Condition of Postmodernity*, pp. 291–98).

⁹⁵ Fredric Jameson, “Post-modernism and Consumer Society,” in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. H. Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), p. 99. As Terry Eagleton comments, “We are now in the process of awakening from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of totality, into the laid back pluralism of the postmodernism, that heterogeneous range of . . . language games which has renounced the urge to totalize” (“Awakening from Modernity,” *Times Literary Supplement*, February 20, 1987).

⁹⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism* (n. 9 above), p. 96; cf. Harvey, p. 54.

⁹⁷ Eagleton, p. 10. As Jameson comments, “there is very little in either the form or content of contemporary art that society finds intolerable or scandalous. The most offensive forms of this art—punk rock or sexually explicit material—are all taken in stride, and they are commercially successful” (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories, Practices*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan [London: Verso, 1988], pp. 27–28).

The final and perhaps most obvious aspect of late capitalism, however, is the progressive extension of the logic of the marketplace to all aspects of culture. In the “market-like conditions of modern life,” as Jürgen Habermas puts it, everything tends to become a commodity that may be bought and sold, from art to politics to religion itself.⁹⁸ Now forced to compete in the commercial marketplace alongside other secular businesses and industries, religion itself tends to become yet another consumer product within the supermarket of values; the religious believer, meanwhile, is free to choose from among a wide array of possible beliefs and to piece together his or her own personalized spiritual pastiche: “Weber’s metaphor . . . of religion striding into the marketplace of worldly affairs and slamming the monastery door behind, becomes transformed in modern society with religion placed very much in the consumer marketplace . . . The tendency is for religion to become a private leisure pursuit purchased in the market like any other consumer lifestyle.”⁹⁹

Finally, as the logic of the marketplace has spread to all facets of human life, it has also brought with it some fundamental shifts in our attitudes toward the body, physical pleasure, and desire. As Featherstone, Turner, and others suggest, there has been a fundamental shift from the early-capitalist attitude based on the Protestant work ethic, frugality, thriftiness, and innerworldly asceticism to a late-capitalist attitude based on mass consumption, physical pleasure, and hedonistic enjoyment. In consumer culture the human body ceases to be a vessel of sin or an unruly vessel of desires that must be disciplined and subjugated—rather, the body is now the ultimate source of gratification and fulfillment. “The new consumptive ethic . . . taken over by the advertising industry celebrated living for the moment, hedonism, self-expression, the body beautiful, progress, freedom from social obligation.”¹⁰⁰ As Turner adds, “The growth of a consumer culture . . . has given a special emphasis to the surface of the body. In the growth of a consumer society with its emphasis on the athletic/beautiful body we see a major transformation of values from an emphasis on the control of the body for ascetic reasons to the manipulation of the body for aesthetic purposes.”¹⁰¹

All of these general cultural aspects of late capitalism, I would argue, appear in striking, often shockingly exaggerated form, in the various New

⁹⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “Legitimation Problems in the Modern State,” *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1974). On the “commodification of everyday life and the impact of mass consumer cultures on the cultural system,” see Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. x.

⁹⁹ Featherstone, *Consumer Culture* (n. 11 above), pp. 112–13; cf. Terry Eagleton, “Capitalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism,” *New Left Review* 152 (1985): 60–73.

¹⁰⁰ Featherstone, *Consumer Culture*, p. 114.

¹⁰¹ Bryan S. Turner, *Regulating Bodies: Essays in Medical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 47. As Featherstone comments, “Images of the body beautiful, openly sexual and associated with hedonism . . . emphasize the importance of appearance . . . Discipline and

Age appropriations of Tantrism. First, as an avowedly “religionless religion” or antireligion, Neo-Tantrism rejects the traditional metanarratives and established ideologies of the West, openly embracing the radical pluralism, heteroglossia, and freewheeling pastiche of late-capitalist consumer culture. As Rajneesh explains, Tantrism is not an ideology or a grand metanarrative about the universe: on the contrary it is a nonreligion, an antiphilosophy, whose aim is precisely to deconstruct the ideologies and institutions that bind us to this world: “The Tantric attitude . . . is not an attitude . . . it has no concepts, it is not a philosophy. It is not a religion, it has no theology. It doesn’t believe in words, theories, doctrines. It wants to look at life without any philosophy . . . it is a no-attitude.”¹⁰² Or, to quote another popular holy madman and self-proclaimed Tantric guru, Bubba Free John (alias Da Love Ananda or Adi Da), even the teachings of the guru are ultimately empty and worthless. They, too, are so much “garbage,” whose sole aim is to reveal to us the futility of all truths, the emptiness of all spiritual and moral doctrines: “Everything the guru gives you is garbage, and he expects you to throw it away, but you meditate on it. All these precious experiences, all this philosophy . . . None of them is the Divine. They are garbage.”¹⁰³ “The enlightened person . . . is a seducer, a madman, a hoax, a libertine, a fool, a moralist, a sayer of truths . . . a god. He demonstrates the futility of all things.”¹⁰⁴ Instead of an ideology, religious worldview, or master narrative, Tantra is thus presented as a noninstitutional, universal tradition drawn from the sacred heritage of all cultures and historical periods—from ancient Greece to Egypt and Mesopotamia, Native American spirituality, Hebrew Kabbala, and Western sex-magic. As a “simple non-denominational sacred sex for everyday folks,” designed for “open-minded sensual beings irrespective of race, gender or faith,” Tantra is presented as “a way of life drawing inspiration from the realizations of the Enlightened of all ages and traditions.”¹⁰⁵ So it is that most Neo-Tantric authors feel free to draw eclectically from all variety of sacred and secular teachings, creating their own spiritual-sexual pastiche to fit the tastes of their consumers. “The essence of Tantra . . . is not specifically Indian or Tibetan . . . it is as native to the Bronx as to Bengal . . . [T]he bondage of the senses can be overcome *through* the

hedonism are no longer seen as incompatible, indeed the subjugation of the body through body maintenance routines is presented within consumer culture as a precondition for the achievement of an acceptable appearance” (“The Body in Consumer Culture” [n. 12 above], pp. 170–71).

¹⁰² Rajneesh, *Tantra* (n. 61 above), p. 96.

¹⁰³ Free John, *Garbage and the Goddess: The Last Miracles and Final Spiritual Instructions of Bubba Free John* (San Rafael, Calif.: Dawn Horse Press, 1974).

¹⁰⁴ Free John, *The Knee of Listening: The Early Life and Radical Spiritual Teachings of Bubba Free John* (San Rafael, Calif.: Dawn Horse Press, 1978), p. 270.

¹⁰⁵ Nik Douglas, *Tantra Yoga* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1971), p. 93.

senses . . . There is a Path of Excess which . . . can lead to the heights rather than the depths.”¹⁰⁶

Second, as a child of the late-capitalist era, Neo-Tantra also centers around an aesthetic of intensity, hedonism, and shock. According to Trungpa, Rajneesh, and most other modern Tantric gurus, the ordinary human being is trapped within the dysfunctional patterns of socialization created by mainstream education, politics, and religion. The only way to free us of these self-destructive patterns is through the most intense shock tactics of Tantra—through the explicit violation of normal social and moral laws; illicit sexuality; indulgence in food, drink, and drugs; violent orgies; and wild parties. Their aim is to shatter our usual ways of conceptualizing the world, to break down even our most cherished religious and moral ideals, and to project us into the ultimate state of ecstasy beyond all worldly constraints: As Da Love Ananda put it in his characteristically shocking and irreverent style, “The guru’s function is to undermine all this, to make the world show itself. He makes the Goddess pull down her pants and then you see her asshole . . . What do I know? . . . No one agrees with me . . . They all tell me I’m mad . . . The Goddess used to say, ‘Yield to me,’ and I fucked her brains loose. I never listened to anyone.”¹⁰⁷ The aim of Tantric sex is not to fill our minds with religious rules, moral codes, elaborate rituals, or institutional structures—on the contrary, it is to break down all such confining structures through the sheer intensity of physical pleasure, to realize our own true selves beyond all ethical and institutional restraints: “Since sex magic is a product of consciousness; it is as individual as the persons involved. There are no rules for sex magic. However, there has to be good sex . . . The idea of ‘To thine own self be true’ is essential.”¹⁰⁸

Tantra, in these accounts, is thus the only spiritual path that actually accepts and affirms human beings as the creatures they truly are—namely, as hedonistic, pleasure-seeking, desiring, and sensual creatures, who need to pursue and satisfy their hedonistic urges in order to be self-realized and self-fulfilled individuals: “Tantra is a great yea-sayer,” as Rajneesh puts it, “it says yes to everything.”¹⁰⁹ Or as the popular Tantric guru, Nik Douglas, adds, “We are hedonistic creatures, needing to know how best to pursue pleasure intelligently and creatively. Tantra teaches how the pursuit of sensual pleasures can become an authentic spiritual activity.”¹¹⁰ Thus, one of the most common themes throughout much recent literature on Tantra

¹⁰⁶ Francis King, *Tantra the Way of Action* (Rochester, Vt.: Destiny Books, 1990), pp. 128–29.

¹⁰⁷ Free John, *Garbage and the Goddess*, pp. 106–7.

¹⁰⁸ Don Webb, “A Sex Magic Primer,” posted on the *Church of Tantra* website.

¹⁰⁹ Rajneesh, *Tantra*, p. 95.

¹¹⁰ Douglas, *Spiritual Sex* (n. 8 above), p. 79.

is the “Be all that you can be” ethic—the idea that Tantra provides the means of enjoying life to the fullest, of achieving worldly goals, pleasure, and success, as well as spiritual growth: “Tantra wants me to awaken all my potential, to unfold my personality as a whole. . . . *the aim of Tantra is total ecstasy.*”¹¹¹ In short, when we embrace the Tantric path we discover our own innermost true self—and we then realize that our very self is itself divine, that we are all already gods in the flesh. As we are enthusiastically urged by the “Developmental Techniques for Tantra/Sex magic,” website, “Thou Art God(dess)! There are no limits! Play hard and play safe!”¹¹²

Perhaps most strikingly, Tantrism would also appear to have become the ideal religion for late-capitalist society because it is presented as a specifically consumer religion—a form of spirituality that does not deny but actually embraces our most materialist impulses for wealth, financial success, and power. As a variety of observers have noted, the New Age as a whole tends to foster a kind of “consumer approach to religion,” offering a wide array of religious products, as readily available as the products on the shelves at Wal-Mart, and championing the freedom of the individual spiritual shopper. As Feuerstein comments, “the contemporary scene [is] a spiritual supermarket” that caters to the dominant “quick fix consumer mentality” and the desire for instant spiritual and material gratification.¹¹³ As the perfect wedding of “*mukti* and *bhukti*” (spiritual realization and material pleasure), Tantrism would seem to fit in perfectly with this consumer mentality. When we explore the “Sex Magic” and “What Is Spiritual Sex?” links on the *Tantra.com* website, we find that Tantric sex holds the power not just to help us achieve spiritual freedom; if properly harnessed and directed toward our desires, it can be used to achieve the most worldly of aims such as love, success, and any amount of money. By focusing the tremendous power of our orgasms through ritual sex, we can use that awesome sexo-spiritual force to realize our greatest worldly desires:

Do you know the tantric secret about orgasms? While releasing in orgasm, you can perform white magic by visualizing ways you would like Life to be. You can picture anything, such as being deeply in love, or money flowing abundantly in your life.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Van Lysebeth (n. 27 above), p. 347. As Douglas adds, “By embracing Tantra we become more real, more complete. How? By recognizing and stimulating our inherent sensual spirituality we discover parts of ourselves that have been repressed . . . Tantra can help a person to enjoy life to the fullest” (*Spiritual Sex*, reprinted on the *Tantra.com* website).

¹¹² Fra. Geh Mad, “Developmental Techniques for Tantra/Sex magic” (www.greendome.org/archives/tantra/tantra.html).

¹¹³ Feuerstein (n. 47 above), pp. 108–9.

¹¹⁴ Peter Rengel, “What Is Spiritual Sex?” from the *Tantra.com* website.

The SMRCP [Sex Magic Reality Creation Process] is about maintaining one's focus during orgasm and channeling the energy into creating reality, any reality, whether it's creating a new job, car, experience, relationships, etc.

See, hear, taste, smell and feel the creation as if it's real . . . What is your life like when you earn \$85,000? What does it FEEL like? Make it big, in Technicolor . . . Do whatever brings you to orgasm . . . masturbation or sex with a supportive partner.¹¹⁵

Perhaps the most explicitly capitalist and consumer-oriented of all the modern Tantric masters was the "Guru of the Rich" and undisputed leader in the "God Man Business," Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. Indeed, Rajneesh made it quite clear that his ideal of the self-realized human being or "Superman" was by no means some pure, otherworldly ascetic, but rather what he called "Zorba the Buddha"—one who could combine the worldliness and financial success of Zorba the Greek with the spiritual realization of the Buddha: "I teach a sensuous religion. I want Gautama the Buddha and Zorba the Greek to come closer and closer; my disciple has to be Zorba the Buddha. Man is body-soul together. Both have to be satisfied."¹¹⁶ Not only was he unopposed to economic success, but he was actually an open advocate of American capitalism and consumerism. "I sell contentment, I sell enlightenment," Rajneesh quite bluntly put it in a famous television interview with Mike Wallace of *60 Minutes*. Capitalism, particularly the American variety, was for Rajneesh the natural condition of the human being, for it is the triumph of the powerful few, who are willing to struggle and succeed, over the weak masses, who remain jealous and lazy: "The creation of wealth is the task of genius . . . Socialism is the jealousy of the masses, of the have-nots against the few who succeed in doing something for mankind."¹¹⁷ As Rajneesh put it, in his typically unapologetic style, "I don't condemn wealth. Wealth is a perfect means which can enhance people in every way and make life rich in all ways. The materially poor can never become spiritual."¹¹⁸ "People are unequal and a fair world has to give people full freedom to be unequal. Capitalism has grown out of freedom. It is a natural phenomenon."¹¹⁹ And at least until his investigation by the federal government, Rajneesh appears to have been quite successful in realizing his Tantric wedding of capitalism and spirituality, financial prosperity and otherworldly transcendence.

¹¹⁵ Jeffrey Tye, "Tantra: Sex Magic," reproduced on the *Church of Tantra* website.

¹¹⁶ Rajneesh, quoted in Vasant Joshi, *The Awakened One: The Life and Work of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 1.

¹¹⁷ Mullan (n. 65 above), p. 48.

¹¹⁸ Rajneesh, cited in Laurence Grafstein, "Messianic Capitalism," *New Republic* 20 (February 1984): 14.

¹¹⁹ Rajneesh, *Beware of Socialism!* (Delhi, 1978), pp. 15, 19.

Perhaps the simplest way to summarize the popular interpretation of Tantrism might be to borrow an advertising slogan: Just do it! As the ultimate affirmation and celebration of the body, sexuality, wealth, and power, Tantrism would seem to offer a remarkable fit with the social and economic ideals of late twentieth-century America: "Understanding that our bodies are temples for expressing divinity we can . . . expand, celebrate and share VIBRATIONAL ENGORGEMENT in every cell of our body . . . blending sex and spirit . . . The benefits we have experienced include: more vitality, physical and spiritual health, positivity and pleasure! (Juice it up, way up!)"¹²⁰ "The art of Tantra . . . could be called spiritual hedonism, which says 'eat drink and be merry' but with full awareness . . . tantra says YES to sex! . . . DO IT NOW! Life!"¹²¹

Not surprisingly, the "just do it" religion of tantra also comes with a certain price tag. Participation in the art of Tantric loving appears to demand a fairly affluent consumer, who can afford the wide range of books, videos, workshops, and therapies, not to mention the wide line of spiritual-sexual accessories. If we shop the "Tantra Gift Shop" or "E-Sensuals Catalogue" websites, for example, we can now purchase a wide range of Tantric products and sexual-spiritual commodities, including not only books, videos, and artworks, but also herbs, vitamins, incense, aphrodisiacs, and other sexual aids such as "ProSexual Plus Drink Mix and Capsules" (retail \$39.95), the "Goddess Spot G-Spot Stimulator" (\$49), "Lust Dust" (\$22), "Hawaiian Goddess Tantric Massage Oil" (\$13), and "Bawdy Butter" (\$8.50).¹²²

V. CONCLUSION: "AFTER THE ORGY"

The Future of Tantra is like Woman's best Orgasm . . . It is without limits. It embraces the beginning and end of the universe . . . tantra is a fast spiritual experience, oceanic . . . wondrous and unpredictable. (NIK DOUGLAS)¹²³

If it were necessary to characterize the state of things I would say that it is after the orgy. The orgy is . . . the explosive moment of modernity, that of liberation in all domains. Political liberation, sexual liberation, liberation of productive forces, liberation of destructive forces . . . Today everything is liberated . . . we find ourselves before the question: WHAT ARE WE TO DO AFTER THE ORGY? (JEAN BAUDRILLARD, *La Transparence du mal*)

¹²⁰ Paul Ramana Das and Mary Ann Silbey, "American Tantra's Top Five Techniques!" from the *American Tantra* website.

¹²¹ Virato (n. 5 above).

¹²² See <http://www.tantra.com/tantra2/product1.html>. For a good list of sources on popular Tantrism, see the bibliography and appendix of Douglas, *Spiritual Sex*.

¹²³ Douglas, *Spiritual Sex* (n. 8 above), pp. 345–46.

In sum, it is not entirely difficult to see why the figure of “Tantrism” should have become so very popular among many contemporary New Age and New Religious movements. Nor is it hard to imagine why Tantrism has come to be increasingly praised and celebrated as “the Science of the Future,” and even as “The Engine of Political Change” that will reunite humankind of the next millennium in a “new spiritual democracy.”¹²⁴ For it is in many respects a brand of spirituality ideally suited to the social and economic situation of late twentieth-century consumer capital culture—a brand of spirituality that can magically unite hedonism and transcendence, self-realization and this-worldly prosperity.

Still more important, however, this new image of Tantrism also fits in with contemporary Western attitudes toward sexuality and its liberation—what Jean Baudrillard has aptly dubbed the “culture of premature ejaculation.” Ours is a culture rooted in an imagined dialectic of “repression” and “liberation,” or the beliefs that our sexuality has been systematically suppressed and denied by a prudish, puritanical, Victorian culture and that we must now free our sexuality through hedonistic enjoyment:

Ours is a culture of premature ejaculation. More and more, all seduction . . . disappears behind the *naturalized* sexual imperative calling for an immediate relation of a desire. Our center of gravity has shifted toward an unconscious and libidinal economy which only leaves room for the total naturalization of a desire bound . . . to the imaginary order of repression and liberation. Nowadays one no longer says: “You’ve got a soul and you must save it” but “You’ve got a sexual nature and you must learn how to use it well” . . . “You’ve got a body and you must know how to enjoy it.” “You’ve got a libido and you must learn how to spend it.”¹²⁵

Finally, I would also suggest that this investigation of the contemporary imagining of Tantrism has much broader comparative and cross-cultural implications. These popular appropriations of Tantrism give us some profound insights into the many ways in which traditional religions are being adapted, transformed, and exploited within the strange new world of late capitalism as a whole. We might also compare, for example, the appropriations of Native American spirituality, Afro-Brazilian movements such as Santeria or Candomble, and even traditional Jewish traditions such as Kabbalah (which now claims popular entertainers such as Roseanne Barr among its disciples). In each of these cases, we seem to find ancient religious traditions entering more and more into the ever expanding web of global capitalism and consumerism. This process could, of course, be seen as a healthy phenomenon, contributing to our awareness of other cultures and leading the way to a more diverse, pluralist, and tolerant global

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

¹²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1987), pp. 23–24.

community. But it could also be seen as quite negative, and even a form of neocolonialism and cultural imperialism, as yet another example of the West's exploitation of the sacred artifacts of other peoples. As Marianna Torgovnick acutely points out in her discussion of the ideal of the primitive in modern culture, the popular celebration of globalism and pluralism as a carnivalesque liberation is rather naive, to say the least. For it masks the deeper socioeconomic disparity that continues to structure relations between East and West, between First and Third Worlds; it ignores the real ongoing forces of neocolonialism and cultural exploitation that still rule much of the late-capitalist global marketplace:

The problem is one of carnivalesque rejoicing . . . of believing that contact and polyphony are inherently liberating . . . The essence of the carnivalesque is that one cannot tell male from female, rich from poor, black from white: those differences . . . do not matter for the duration of the carnival . . . But carnivals do not last . . . Behind the festivities are social and economic facts we should not forget.

The problem with the carnival idea . . . is that it ignores the real social and economic cost of the global village . . . It may sound a discordant note at the carnival, but that note is still heard—daily—in the ghettos and shantytowns of the urban jungle.¹²⁶

Yet however we wish to interpret this phenomenon, it would seem that in this age of increasing pluralism and globalism in the late-capitalist world order, we need to practice relentless self-consciousness and self-criticism. We need always to ask ourselves whether we are working toward a genuinely postcolonial, postimperial, and pluralistic global community, or whether we are merely absorbing all other, even previously uncolonized peoples' cultures into the ever expanding network of neocolonialism and global capitalism. In other words, to quote Chogyam Trungpa in his work on the widespread Western disease of "Spiritual Materialism," we need to ask whether or not "we have simply created a shop, an antique shop."¹²⁷

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¹²⁶ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 40, 41. On the spread of capitalism or neocolonialism to all parts of the formerly colonized and as yet uncolonized world, see Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory* (London: Verso, 1992); Turner (n. 10 above).

¹²⁷ Trungpa, *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism* (n. 52 above), p. 15.