This-worldly Mysticism: Inner Peace and World Transformation in the Work and Life of Charles "Skip" Alexander

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This paper provides a new interpretation of the work and life of Charles "Skip" Alexander by placing it within the conceptual framework developed by Max Weber, the classical sociologist who created the most far-reaching historical and comparative theory of religion. While Weber developed a famous four-fold typology cross-cutting mysticism/asceticism and this-worldly/other-worldly, his belief that modern society implied ever increasing rationalization made the implied category of 'this-worldly mysticism' an oxymoron. Taking Skip Alexander's developmental model of higher stages of development as formalizing the implications of post-sixties New Age ideas and action, this paper argues that this-worldly mysticism is indeed a highly relevant contemporary category. This-worldly mysticism emphasizes direct experience of sacrality while trying to harness this experience to the service of practical social reform. It is argued that this mode of pursuing salvation will become increasingly important in the postmodern world.

KEY WORDS: Weber; Alexander; this-worldly mysticism; postmodernism; salvation.

Those who knew my brother well knew him as a profoundly spiritual person who sought to experience the sacred and dedicated his life to demonstrating how others could experience it too. In gaining access to the experience of the sacred, Skip wanted to be "saved," to be allowed to escape from what Max Weber, that greatest of all sociological students of religion, called "the senseless treadmill and transitoriness of life," from "the inevitable imperfection of the individual," from "entanglement in the murky confusion of earthly ignorance" (Weber 1968: 528).

TWO PATHS TO SALVATION

Dedicating oneself to the pursuit of the sacred and to the search for salvation is a rare vocation in our secular, materialist, and ratiocinative (logical-analytical) societies. Yet, wanting to experience sa-

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crality, as Skip knew and emphasized throughout his work, is just the first commitment to a broader path; it only sets the stage for a religious life. Because, "the hope of salvation has the most far-reaching consequences for *the conduct of life*," the quest for salvation, Weber insisted, also produces "certain consequences for *practical behavior*" (ibid., italics added).

Weber understood that these consequences for practical behavior can take two opposing directions. Will the search for salvation and the thirst for sacrality lead the believer away from practical, wordly involvement? Will it compel the searcher to withdraw into an elite group of virtuosi who feel compelled to shun the world in their pursuit of an inherently esoteric truth? Historically, such "world withdrawal" has been the principal path for those who have sought to achieve a direct, illuminative experience of God rather than the more indirect satisfaction of ethical service to him. Each of these different paths toward salvation, Weber believes, has "certain consequences for *practical* behavior *in* the world" (ibid.). The quest for salvation is obviously more likely to acquire a

"positive orientation to mundane affairs" (ibid.) if it does not exclusively emphasize world-withdrawal but ties salvation also to the idea of having some distinctive practical effects. Weber puts it this way: a religious group has "the strongest chance of exerting practical influences when there has arisen, out of religious motivations, a *systematization* of *practical* conduct" (ibid., italics added).

How does the search for salvation relate to practical conduct? That is one of the central questions of comparative religion. In terms of Weber's typology, as I have indicated, the answer to this question depends on whether the search for salvation takes one out of the world or places one back within it. This duality, I believe, provides the key to understanding my brother Skip's religious life and work.

SKIP'S TASK: BRINGING THE TWO PATHS TOGETHER

Skip was a deeply spiritual person, finely attuned to the sacred and its ancient, metaphysical knowledge. At the same time, he dedicated himself to living in the mundane and natural world and, in this world, he devoted himself to the most modern, rational, and anti-metaphysical knowledge of all—the kind of truth that can only be achieved by science. In fact, following the teachings of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of Transcendental Meditation, Skip sought to demonstrate that long-standing ritual methods of seeking salvation, for example, twice-daily inner repetition of a "mantra"—were not only generally consistent with scientific knowledge but could actually be seen as necessitated by it. Through what Skip called the new and more rational "technique" of transcendental mediation, increasing numbers of modern people could, he believed, achieve the ancient and traditional experience of the sacred. Equally important, in Skip's view, was that this personal and individual experience of inner salvation could have a "outward," practical, and far-reaching results. He was convinced that, if these masses of moderns achieved salvation through inner peace, they would, at the same, be making a fundamental contribution to resolving social problems—"peaceful body, peaceful mind, peaceful world" (Alexander 1992: 150).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SIXTIES

To understand how this effort to resolve the duality between world-withdrawal and world-com-mitment emerged, and to begin to understand its sociological implications, one must return to the late sixties and early seventies in the United States, the tumultuous, world-historical period that marked both the beginning of the Transcendental Meditation movement and the critical identity-forming years of Skip's life. Two forms of radical protest against modern society defined that period. In the New Left, radicalism was political, self-disciplined, guided by empirical findings and abstract theoretical knowledge, and oriented to the practical, nuts and bolts transformation of institutions. This political radicalism was mirrored and inverted by a counter-culture. Its most exemplary carrier group, the Hippies, created what Jesse Pitts aptly called a "counter-meritocracy" dedicated to what was called, in the jargon of the day, "consciousness" rather than "politics." The counter-cultura celebrated the impractical, non-useful and immaterial: spontaneous pleasure, joy and sensuality, peace, peacefulness, and community.

From the standpoint of Max Weber's sociology of religion, one recognizes this conflict as a localized version of the age long tension between mysticism and asceticism. In the beginning of the great civilizations, Weber believed, there emerged intensely dualistic cultures, cultures that were fuelled by "high" religions whose idealistic and universalizing theologies created great tension with the mundane world of ordinary life. Mysticism and asceticism emerged as contrasting responses to this tension between religious and worldly affairs, offering a choice between a "dreamlike mystical illumination" and more "active and ethical" activism (Weber, 1968, p. 535).

The mystic sought to resolve this tension, not by submitting to it, but by eliminating it, not by going outward but by going inward, searching for ways to become a "vessel" of the holy spirit. By contrast, the ascetic worked to resolve this dualism by becoming, as Weber put it, not a vessel but a "tool" of God, transforming the religious spirit into a system of ethical injunctions guiding practical action in the world. The choice, in Weber's words (Weber, 1968, p. 536), is either "to become [God's] instrument or to become spiritually suffused by him." Sixties political radicals were the ascetics of their time, committed to revolutionary salvation and a socialist bliss but organizing for it in a scientific, practical way. The hippies, for their part, can be seen as taking up the mystical path, from their interest in trance-inducing drugs and highly amplified rock music to their commitment "blissing out." Because their pursuit of mystical salvation, however, was not connected to transcendance

in the ontological sense—that is, to the kind of actually existing other world articulated by the sacred texts of traditional religions—the hippies were post-metaphysical, in the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas' sense. Yet, while postmetaphysical, their commitment to what might be called "this-worldly mysticism" was also decidedly postmodern. Zygmunt Bauman's influential definition of the postmodern seems almost to be an empirical description of the hippies' secular mysticism.

> Postmodernity . . . brings 're-enchantment' of the world after the protracted and earnest, though in the end inconclusive, modern struggle to dis-enchant it (or, more exactly, the resistance to dis-enchantment, hardly ever put to sleep, was all along the 'postmodern' thorn in the body of modernity). The mistrust of human spontaneity, of drives, impulses and inclinations resistant to prediction and rational justification, has been all but replaced by the mistrust of unemotional, calculating reason. Dignity has been returned to emotions; legitimacy to the 'inexplicable,' nay *irrational*, sympathies and loyalties which cannot 'explain themselves' in terms of their usefulness and purpose (Bauman 1993, p. 33, original italics).

COMBINING PIAGET AND MYSTICISM: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF HIGHER STAGES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

For Skip and other members of his generation, TM and other, similarly inclined New Age spiritual movements presented a way out of this impasse between the hippies and the radicals. Transcendental Meditation represented a path for combining the apparently irreconcilable alternatives of mysticism and asceticism. The very definition of the need for "higher stages of consciousness," which Skip translated into the academic-psychological concept of "higher stages of development," is precisely directed at the tension of modern asceticism, the alienating, dualistic split between the rational and the mystical against which the counter-culture struggled.

In what I regard as his most far-reaching and creative theoretical effort, Skip used Piagetian theory to argue for the superiority of the mystical path. He demonstrated the link between an objectivizing epistemology and the ascetic, anti-experiential path to salvation: "Although the formal operator gains in analytic power and objectivity of thought, it is apparently at the price of isolation from the world and himself. The self has become one more "object" to

be reflected upon but cannot be directly known" (Alexander *et al.*, 1990a, p. 26). What Skip does here is to link the objectivism of the modern ego to the secular inability to experience sacrality in the direct, mystical sense. His response, at once scientific, psychological, and religious, is to define TM's goal as the "unfreezing" of development. If development were unfrozen, a possibility that Skip claims for the TM approach to meditation, the dualism that Weber saw as the inevitable essence of modernity—the uncomfortable split between the rational and the mystic, between objective knowing and subjective experience—could be overcome: "Postrepresentational development should resolve the fundamental epistemological and ontological constraint of the abstract reasoning (formal operational) level—that the reflective knower cannot directly know himself" (ibid, 288).

In Skip's academic psychology, then, the vocabulary of developmental psychology is deployed to understand the possibility, and perhaps even the necessity, of achieving salvation in a mystical way. Transcendental meditation will allow the direct experience of fusion between god and man, self and other, worldly and other-worldly experience. Despite the very real possibility that such efforts to overcome dualism may evoke metaphysical beliefs in an ontologically separate and different world, Skip evidently believed that such cognitive "add-ons" were less important than the fundamentals of psychological development. The fusion promised by TM, Skip believes, represented "post-formal," more advanced and higher levels adult development, rather than some kind of primitive regression. In fact, Skip viewed as ineffective efforts to achieve grace via such secular–ascetic paths as political activism. He believed such activities would continue to subordinate the self to the alienating subject-object dichotomy.

Meditation, by contrast, offers the possibility of turning inward and, thereby, to resolve rather than reinforce the duality of modernity. "The distinctive content of salvation," Weber (1968: 544) cautioned his ascetically inclined Western readers, "may not be an active quality of conduct, that is, an awareness of having executed the divine will" (ibid.). Salvation "may instead be a subjective condition of a distinctive kind, the most notable form of which is mystic illumination" (ibid). The goal of mystical activity is "contemplation." With contemplation, "the creaturely element in man is altogether silent," for, in contrast with asceticism, "the quest [is] to achieve rest in god" (ibid.). Contemplation "entails inactivity, and in its

most consistent form it entails the cessation of thought, of everything that in any way reminds one of the world, and of course the absolute minimization of all outer and inner activity" (Weber 1968, p. 545). It is precisely the cessation of all thought, the prototypically mystical experience, that is the promise, according to Skip, of the modernized TM technique. According to his theory, this technique can, therefore, unfreeze adult development. Skip described the TM method as "a process of systematically letting go of thought (effortless 'noncontrol')" (Alexander et al., 1990b: 309).

Skip's own intellectual contribution here, and I think it is a rather brilliant one, is to use developmental theory to explain why, for those who practice mystical techniques, the shift in their consciousness has nothing of the "altered" or "nonordinary" (ibid., 308) about it. In fact, Skip bristled at the label mysticism itself, for it suggests something irrational and antimodern. In a particularly clever riposte to his critics, he argued that such characterizations themselves reflect earlier and simpler developmental modes.

> In communicating with people in higher stages of conscousness, there appears to be a directional assymmetary of comprehension characteristic of communication across all developmental periods: They can understand our logic but we cannot fathom the more unified, yet seemingly paradoxical, nature of their cognitions (ibid.)

What Skip understood, of course, and what Weber was also at pains also to emphasize, is that mysticism is hardly abnormal or anti-intellectual:

> The unique character of mystical knowledge consists in the fact that, although it becomes more incommunicable the more it is specifically mystical, it is nevertheless recognized as knowledge . . . and under certain circumstances even new and communicable items of knowledge" (Weber 1968, p. 545).

Thus, Skip (Alexander et al., 1990b, p. 289) could argue that modern science merely has allowed Maharishi to translate ancient Vedic wisdom about meditation into rational empirical knowledge: "Maharishi presents this ancient knowledge in scientifically testable terms and has sought to relate its fundamental principles systematically to those investigated by the modern sciences." In Skip's words, TM is a "developmental *technology*" (ibid, p. 311, italics added).

Modern psychological theory has allowed Skip to normalize esoteric Vedic knowledge about higher consciousness into ordinary, mundane, scientific propositions about adult development: "We suggest

these higher stages are, in principle, no less inevitable than earlier periods [of psychological development], but both depend on exposure to appropriate environmental support systems" (ibid, p. 297). Armed with this scientific translation, Skip can criticize other kinds of post-formal developmental theories, particulary those of Kohlberg and Gillgan, as in fact not mystical enough. Kohlberg's is too cognitivist and ratiocinative; Gilligan's can't achieve "a state of harmonization" (Alexander et al., 1990a, p. 17).

THIS-WORLDLY DEMOCRATIC MYSTICISM

The historical and comparative thrust of Weber's sociology of religion rests on his argument that the mystical quest for salvation is, almost invariably, a "flight from the world," as compared to the more typically "this-worldly" orientation of Western ascetic religions (Weber 1969, pp. 526–529, 541–556). Yet, the TM movement is definitely this-worldly in its mysticism. Is this an oxymoron? Or does it represent, as I am inclined to believe, a new kind of religious possibility that has become available only in contemporary, postmodern societies?

Skip's life and work represent "exemplary action" in Hannah Arendt's terms. They were dedicated to translating mystical into scientific knowledge and other-worldly escapism into this-worldly activism. Skip's life and work demonstrates how the TM aims not at contemplation but at practical intervention in this world. In fact, with the all important exception of the commitment to contemplative experience as such, every element of what Weber called mystical "world flight" is negated in Skip's work, and in the TM movement more broadly.

Perhaps the most spectacular evidence of this is TM's very existence as a mass social movement. In the more traditional mysticism of esoteric knowledge and world flight, Weber observed, the exemplary figure of Eastern religion was the "virtuoso," the highly-skilled practitioner possessing esoteric knowledge. Because mystical knowledge traditionally required extraordinary self-control, world renunciation, and contemplation, people were held to "differ widely in their religious capacities" (Weber 1968, p. 539). Thus, the "religiously average person" (ibid.) was considered too lazy and complacent to practice mystical techniques. The antidemocratic hierarchy that informs the Hindu caste system can be seen as an expression of this elitist belief. Weber explained the religious rationale as follows.

[Because] not everyone possesses the charisma that makes possible the continuous maintenance in everyday life of the distinctive religious mood which assures the lasting certainty of grace . . . rebirth seemed to be accessible only to an aristocracy of those possessing religious qualificiations . . . So the religious virtuosi who work methodically at their salvation now became a distinctive religious 'status group' within the community" (ibid, p. 539).

By translating esoteric wisdom into a commonly available technique, by presenting TM as "easily learned, [needing] to be practiced [only] 15 to 20 minutes twice daily, and requir[ing] no changes in lifestyle or belief" (Alexander 1994: 545), Skip described and prescribed a practice oriented not to virtuosi but to the masses. Thus, Skip emphasized also TM's inclusivity and popular accessibility, not its exclusivity and esoteria: "Since 1958, four million people have learned TM, and more than 500 scientific studies on TM have been conducted at more than 200 universities" (ibid). In fact, it was the elitist, esoteric implications of Maslow's "peak experience" theory that motivated Skip to criticize this founder of humanistic psychology, whom he otherwise held in very high regard. Whereas "spontaneous peak experience typically occurs only rarely," Skip wrote, transendental meditation is so technically efficient and reliable that it can produce "systematic cultivation of transcendance" on a mass scale (Alexander et al., 1991: 237). Whereas "as little as 1% of the adult population achieve a postconventional self-actualization level" - in Maslow's spontaneous model, Skip claimed, the practice of TM can result "in an unprecedented proportion of the adult populace reaching a self-actualization level" (ibid, p. 238).

Skip's democratic aspirations for his modernized search for mystical salvation are manifest: "The capacity to transcend may not just be available to a privileged few, but the birthright of all" (ibid, p. 239). He was a "sixty-eighter" after all.

THE MYSTICAL PROGRAM FOR PRACTIAL SOCIAL REFORM

Looking back over Skip's other, nonpsychological writings, we see ever more clearly that his work and his life can be understood as the prototype of this new social category of world-mastering/inner-worldly mystic. "The deep motive for development," he wrote, is to gain "mastery over the subjective and objective world" (Alexander et al., 1990b: 295, italics added). Indeed, as Skip understood TM, its specific

virtue vis-a-vis other Eastern and Western religious movements was precisely its promise to transform the world. It would do so, however, not in an ascetic manner, that is, by advocating and organizing ethical struggle, but by providing to every man, woman, and child the opportunity for directly experiencing transcendance.

Promoting physical health, of course, was perhaps the most spectacular and most publically legitimate promise of this modernized and democratic religious search. Weber wrote that the mystical approach to salvation leads to "sanctification" of the self. Skip and his fellow researchers sought to demonstrate this sanctification in something quite different than a metaphysical sense. Thus, they began their survey article in the respected and influential medical journal, *Homeostasis*, by observing the troubled state, not of the self, but of the world.

> Contemporary society faces a challenge of monumental proportions—to abate high morbidity and mortality rates related to stress and lifestyle that appear largely resistant to the approaches of modern medicine (Alexander et al., 1994: 243).

If scientific medecine could not resolve this social strain, then scientific meditation would. The solution was to provide "deep rest"—mystical contemplation—for those who suffer, or may eventually suffer, from physical infirmities. After reviewing numerous reports of scientific research, Skip's article confirms that utopian promise of physical-cum-social health.

> It makes fiscal as well as humane sense to seriously investigate the possibility of wide-scale implementation of this simple technique [TM] as a natural, cost-effective means of health promotion and disease prevention (ibid, p. 259).

Far from being a religious virtuoso in flight from the world, Skip spent his career as what might be called a contemplative warrior, fighting, in the name of a broader humanism, against the practical evils of the world. Not only did he prophecy that meditation would transform physical disease, but he succeeded in persuading powerful figures of modernist ascetic activism that mystical contemplation could transform the most aggressive and violent criminals into good citizens, bad students into scholars, listless elderlies into vigorous older people, alcoholics into teetotalers, and angry and hassled bosses into calm and controlled managers.

Undoubtedly the most ambitious claim to the world-transforming power of mystical experience, however, was the proposal that Skip and his col-

leagues made for what they called the "Maharishi Effect." They claimed that the world's most aggravating and persistant social problems would dramatically diminish if the square root of one percent of a collectivity's members engaged in organized meditation. As a sociologist in the Durkheimian tradition, I thoroughly agree with Skip and his colleagues that collective consciousness is central to social systems and their problems, and, as such, deeply affects such "material" phenomena as war and peace. Nonetheless, I am extremely skeptical about the claims of the Maharishi effect. Methodologically, the sophisticated statistical methods employed by Skip's research team seem to overreach their empirical material (cf. Fales & Markofsky 1997). Theoretically, the argument for a direct translation from individual to collective effects seems to ignore the concept of "emergent properties" that has made the so-called "micro-macro" link such a notoriously difficult problem in the history of social sciences. It is revealing, in this regard, that the argument for such a direct, unmediated movement from individual to collective consciousness is established by TM researchers, not by a specifically social theory, but on rhetorical grounds via analogy with field theory in physics (e.g., Orme-Johnson et al., 1988).

CONCLUSION

But my purpose in this re-examination of Skip's work has not been to assess the validity of his wide-ranging empirical claims, much less to attempt an evaluation of his spiritual beliefs. My aim, rather, has been to argue for the exemplary character of his life and work. Even in their highly controversial project to demonstrate the Maharishi Effect, Skip and his colleagues dedicated their mysticism to the "impera-

tive" of radically changing the world, in this case by "establishing world peace" (ibid, p. 777).

In this homage to my brother's life and work, I have agreed with Skip's own insistance that his quest for spiritual salvation and his scientific investigations were one. Taking them together, I have proposed that they can be understood as exemplifying a new kind of religious orientation to the world. I believe that, in different guises and for better and worse, in metaphysical but also in postmetaphysical forms, what I have here called "this-worldly mysticism" will become ever more prominent in our complex and often confusingly postmodern world.

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