Introduction

The Jogi cries:
    "Gorakh, Gorakh!"
The Hindu utters
    the name of Ram,
The Mussalman repeats:
    "God is One!"
But the Lord of Kabir
    pervades all.[1]

Kabir, the fifteenth-century author of these lines, exemplifies the diversity of the religions of India and at the same time points to an all-pervading unity beyond religious formulations. Although influenced by each of the traditions he refers to — yoga, Hindu devotionalism and Islam — his teachings were not an amalgam of other people's ideas, but the result of his own practice and experience. Pervading all, "the Lord of Kabir" could be sought by means of one religion or another, but the best place to look, as he said elsewhere, was "in the heart of your heart".[2]

Kabir is just one of hundreds of men and women of South Asia who have given expression to personal experiences of an inner or higher or divine or absolute reality. Most of the religions of the region trace themselves back to such founder-figures. Selections from their written and spoken words are presented in the following pages.

Scope and Organisation

This reader is an attempt to present as much of the diversity of the Indian religious traditions as is possible in a single volume. Selections from around two hundred texts are included, written and oral, ancient and modern. The earliest ones were composed towards the end of the second millennium BCE, the latest at the end of the second millennium CE. The authors are from almost every corner of the subcontinent of South Asia. For convenience, the familiar term "India" is used for this region, but it should be understood that it is meant in its historical and not its political sense. In modern political terms, the authors lived in what are now the states of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Some of their texts drew nourishment from roots in central or western Asia; some spread their branches to Sri Lanka, Tibet, or even further afield; but all of them were fruits of the Indian soil.

The arrangement of the reader is historical, but strict chronology and rigid periodization are avoided. The material is arranged in five overlapping parts, called Foundations, Developments, Elaborations, Reformulations, and Continuity and Innovation. The markers of each part are date, language and tradition. The first part, Foundations, begins with the earliest surviving Indian religious text, the *Ṛg Veda*, and extends for some two millennia into the early centuries of the Common Era. Written in Sanskrit and two Prakrits, the texts included in this part document the beginnings of three religious traditions: Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, to use the modern names. The second part, Developments, covers some twelve hundred years, from just before the beginning of the Common Era until the end of the first millennium. During this period the foundational teachings of the vedic and upanishadic sages and of the earliest followers of the Buddha were developed in novel ways. Almost all the selections in this part were written in Sanskrit, ranging in style from the chaste classicism of the *Bhagavad Gītā* to the hybrid language of the Mahayana *sūtra*s and the rough vigour of the *tantra*s and *purāṇa*s. The third part, Elaborations, overlaps chronologically and developmentally with the second. For about a thousand years, from the second to the twelfth century, Sanskrit-knowing philosophers elaborated systems that defended and extended the insights of earlier Buddhist, Jaina and Hindu teachers. From the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries, Persian-knowing teachers did the same with a religious tradition whose foundations and early developments took place in Arabia and other lands to the west.

All the texts in the first three parts were composed in languages known by relatively small élite classes. In contrast, the texts included in the last two parts were sung or spoken or written in still-living languages of the subcontinent or (in a few recent cases) in English. The fourth part, Reformulations, begins with the poems and songs of Tamil *siddha*s and devotees, and includes works by mystics from Karnataka, Andhra, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Mithila, Bengal, Kashmir, Punjab, Sind, and the Hindi- and Urdu-speaking North. Most of these texts give expression to the poet's *bhakti* or devotion to a particular form of the Divine, but some of them celebrate the Formless. Chronologically, they range from the sixth or seventh century up to the mid-nineteenth. The traditions chosen for inclusion comprise a dozen schools of Hinduism, several varieties of popular Sufism, and Sikhism. The fifth and last part, Continuity and Innovation, covers the mid nineteenth to late twentieth centuries. It includes works by sixteen mystics and poets from different parts of the subcontinent, who spoke Tamil, Bengali, Marathi, Punjabi, Urdu and other languages, and sometimes used English for their teachings.

In selecting material, preference has been given to what are often called (for want of better terms) the "mediaeval" and "modern" periods. Only about a third of the book (Parts 1 and 2) is devoted to the "classical" texts that for most people define what Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism are. Frequently translated and widely published, these foundational texts do not need to be emphasised here.

The Sanskrit and Prakrit texts of the classical period share one characteristic: their actual authors were not historical individuals but generally nameless spokesmen of tradition. The second third of the book (Parts 3 and 4) is devoted to authors who lived between the end of the classical period and the beginning of modern times. With one or two exceptions, they are well attested historically, even if their dates are in dispute. Many of the authors in these parts are famous throughout India; others are little known outside their home provinces. The final third of the book (Part 5) comprises talks and writings of men and women who lived during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (No one living at the time this reader was compiled has been included.) Their works are given as much space as those of the more celebrated mystics of the past because their nearness to us in time gives their works an accessibility and relevance that older writings sometimes seem to lack.

The presentation of the texts is historical in the sense that it follows the roughly chronological lines indicated above. In addition, each text and each author is situated within the cultural, social or political history of a period and region. An attempt is made to bring out linkages between texts and authors of related traditions, as well as the often unacknowledged links between apparently unrelated traditions. Lines of historical development are sketched, but no attempt is made to plot the material into one historical narrative, with a single origin and direction. The emphasis rather is on the plurality of traditions. Texts from all the five "major" religions of the subcontinent are included. Of these, four are represented by a variety of subtraditions: orthodox and heterodox, classical and popular, public and transgressive. These subtraditions, rather than the religions themselves, are the units of the book's organisation. As a result, texts belonging to one religion are not necessarily grouped together. Buddhist texts, for example, are found in three separate places: Chapter 4 (Theravada Buddhism), Chapter 7 (Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism), and Chapter 10 (Spiritual Philosophies). The alternation of texts from different traditions should help the reader take note of parallel developments across religious boundaries.

The religions of India form such a vast area of study that it would be impossible to include selections dealing with every aspect of every tradition or even of selected traditions in a single volume. Every religion has a psychological, a practical, a mythic, an intellectual, an ethical, a legal and social, and an organisational side. Significant texts are associated with each of these aspects. Hinduism, for instance, has a large number of treatises dealing with ritual practice, huge compendia of myth and legend, whole libraries of philosophy, numerous ethical scriptures and many texts setting forth the intricacies of its laws and social organisation. Some of these texts are respected by many branches of Hinduism, others only by particular regional and sectarian groupings. Full coverage of all aspects of every important Hindu tradition would require more than one large volume, while Indian Buddhism and Islam, Jainism and Sikhism, would together require at least as much space.

In order to keep this reader to a manageable size, the editor has focused on one particular aspect of the religions of India: their psychological or experiential side. While by no means the whole of religion, the experiential side is regarded by many as being of central importance for at least four reasons. First, founders and adherents of many traditions, including all those covered by this book, see the ultimate goal of spiritual practice as a subjective or experiential state, to be obtained through individual effort or devotion. Secondly, many founders or innovators speak of subjective religious experiences as important means in their own spiritual practice and in the practices they recommend to their followers. Thirdly, many of these founders or innovators base their teachings on knowledge they say was obtained by means of subjective experience. Finally, the works in which these experience-based teaching are contained are among the high points of Indian religious literature, indeed of Indian literature in general. Each of these points will be discussed below. First, however, it is necessary to say something more about the preference given to the individual as opposed to the collective aspect of religion.

Collective and Individual Aspects of Religion: Social Science and Religion

Like all other expressions of human life, religion has a collective as well as an individual side. Even traditions that state their goals in individual terms, such as Buddhism, Jainism and some forms of Hinduism, grant an important role to the religious community and to collective forms of practice. So important indeed are the collective aspects of religion that most social scientists view religion primarily or entirely as a construction of social forces or entities. Cultural anthropologists see it as a chief determinant and expression of the structure and dynamics of a culture. Many sociologists, following Émile Durkheim, view it as a means by which society preserves its equilibrium. Some economists regard particular religions as consequences of particular socio-economic conditions; Marxists see it as a part of the ideology or false consciousness that keeps the exploited classes from realising their true condition. Historians, sifting through the documents of early civilisations, note that most of them were organised around their religions, and believe that the individual, as we now understand the term, is a relatively recent emergence. Recent cultural theorists go a step farther by asserting that the individual or "subject" is a modern cultural construct that in the postmodern age has effectively ceased to exist.

Despite their interest in the individual psyche, many psychologists also regard religion as a social construct — one that is at root illusory. Sigmund Freud gave definitive expression to this viewpoint when he wrote: "Religious conceptions originated in the same need as all other achievements of culture, from the necessity of defending oneself against the crushing superiority of nature" and "from the urge to correct the painfully felt imperfections of culture" (Freud 1961: 26–27; trans. Gay 1988: 530). To Freud and many other psychiatrists, religious experiences are manifestations or symptoms of underlying neuroses. More recently, some neurologists have tried to show that religious experience "can be explained in terms of neural networks, neurotransmitters and brain chemistry" (Vedantam 2001).

Practitioners of these disciplines view religion and its expressions in terms of theories that are believed to provide a complete explanation of human life and its products. They reduce religious phenomena to anthropological, sociological, economic, historical, psychological or neurological data, and in so doing deprive them of their religious character. While there is no universally accepted definition of "the religious", "the spiritual" or "the sacred", any acceptable definition would have to take seriously the claims of religious innovators, such as those whose works appear in this volume, that they are in contact with a reality that both includes and in some way exceeds the world around us. Theorists who explain religious phenomena in terms of social or psychological or neurological structures can sometimes tell us a great deal about how such phenomena emerge, but they often misrepresent the plain sense of the texts they criticise by imposing on them an alien interpretive framework.[3]

The selections in this reader are presented as religious documents and not as social-scientific data. Accordingly, in the notes that accompany the texts, little space is given to social-scientific theory. This does not mean that the presentation is free from theoretical assumptions. Every coherent presentation is based on assumptions, whether acknowledged or taken for granted. Here the working hypothesis is the one proposed, implicitly or explicitly, by the authors of the selected texts: that there is a religious or spiritual or sacred dimension of existence that both includes and in some sense exceeds the observable universe, and that it is possible for individuals to come into contact with it.

This hypothesis is consistent with the "radical empiricism" of William James, who attempted to study religious phenomena with the same rigour as he studied other aspects of human mind and life. According to James, "To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced" (1971: 25). In his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James treated the writings of mystics as useful records of direct experiences. He summed up his attitude towards such material in a later essay: "One cannot criticise the vision of a mystic — one can but pass it by, or else accept it as having some evidential weight" (1912: 374). Not surprisingly, James's view of the relationship between individual religious experience and organised religion is different from that of most modern social theorists. He stated this view concisely in a letter of 1901: "The mother sea and fountainhead of all religions lie in the mystical experiences of the individual, taking the word mystical in a very wide sense. All theologies and ecclesiasticisms are secondary growths superimposed" (1920: 149). The selections in this book have sufficient "evidential weight" to establish a prima facie case for the existence of religious experience. They cannot prove, nor could any documentary evidence prove, the claim made by James in his letter,[4] but they do show that the experiences of religious founders and innovators have been a primary factor in the formulation of the goals, means and knowledge-claims of many spiritual traditions, and have been given expression in some of the most memorable literature of South Asia.

Goals: Liberation and Union

Many Indian traditions stress the importance of *mokṣa* or *mukti*: liberation of the individual from the cycles of rebirth. This goal is perhaps most explicit in Jainism and Buddhism. Jaina scriptures speak not only of *mokṣa* but also of *kevala* ("isolation" or "aloneness") (selections 24, 83). Buddhist texts speak especially of *nirvāṇa* or "extinction" (selections 28, 32, 63, 65, 80). The goal of liberation is found in some of the *upaniṣad*s (selection 19), in Samkhya and Yoga (selections 40, 42), in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (selections 47, 49), in the *Śiva Sūtra* (selection 87), and in many modern texts (see for example selections 161, 168, 186). In other texts the goal put forward is not liberation from a painful or limited state, but calm or joyous union with the Absolute or Self or God (selections 11, 12, 15, 20, 21, 85, 103, 157, 163, 176). Some tantric texts promote the goal of liberation (selection 71); others combine or replace it with that of blissful union (selection 89, 97, 99, 104, 105) or masterful perfection (selections 68, 70, 100). In the devotional traditions, including those of the *sant*s and Sikhs, the goal is the ecstasy of closeness or union with the Divine (selections 55, 79, 88, 106–136, 137–141, 142–46, 154, 157, 173). Some sufis also speak of union with God or the Beloved (selections 90, 92, 94, 95, 150, 151, 152, 172).

These various conceptions of the goal of religious practice show some remarkable similarities across traditions, but it would be a mistake to think that the goals proposed were always precisely the same. It would not be wrong to conclude, however, that the goals are conceived as subjective or experiential states that are to be achieved by means of effort or grace.

Experiential Means

In most of the traditions included in this book, one who achieves the goal of liberation, unification or perfection does so by experiential means. The founders and renewers of the these traditions — those who are believed by the rank-and-file to have actually achieved the goal — state, or are made to state in traditional texts, that before reaching the ultimate goal they passed, spontaneously or by means of inner practice, through special subjective states, what nowadays we would call religious experiences.[5] When the time came for teaching, they exhorted others to seek these states, usually by following the same or a similar discipline.

Anubhava, the Sanskrit and modern north Indian word that corresponds most closely to our "experience", was not widely used for individual religious experience before the second half of the first millennium. Before then, terms denoting vision, direct witness, direct consciousness, direct knowledge or identity were used when speaking of the states that were prized and promoted by religious teachers.[6] The author of the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* says that when the embodied soul sees (*prapaśyet*) the real nature of the Self, the result is unity and freedom (selection 17). Similarly, the author of the *Maitrī Upaniṣad* says that when one sees (*paśyati*) the Brahman-source, one achieves unity in the Imperishable (selection 18). Early Theravada texts (for instance selection 28) stress that the Buddha mastered various teachings by "realising . . . with direct knowledge [*abhiññā*]", and then went on to attain the supreme deliverance of *nirvāṇa*. A later Mahayana *sūtra* has the Buddha declare that "the highest reality is to be attained by the inner realisation of noble wisdom" (selection 67). The *Sāṁkhya Kārikā* explains that the embodied being attains freedom in life through "the attainment of direct knowledge" (*samyagjñānādhigamād*) and then goes on to achieve full *kaivalya* (selection 40). The *Yoga Sūtra* describes *kaivalya* as "the power of consciousness in a state of true identity" (*svarūpapratiṣṭhā vā citiśaktiḥ*) (selection 45).

Individual experience plays an important role in all forms of tantric practice. The *Hevajra Tantra* says that the goal of Great Bliss is to be attained by "direct personal experience" (*svasaṁvedyād*) (selection 69); the *Dohākoṣa* says similarly that Great Bliss consists in "self-experience" (selection 70). The Hindu *Kulārṇava Tantra* explains that the awareness of the Absolute arises out of the pure experience of transcendental Being (selection 73). Texts of Non-dual Kashmir Shaivism, which is rooted in the tantric tradition, stress the importance of experiential means for the attainment of freedom or union. The *Śiva Sūtra* says that by dwelling in the fourth or absolute state of consciousness, the practitioner is "released" and attains union with Shiva (selection 87). The Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta explains that the yogin attains Self-knowledge by relaxing into the "direct experience of Bhairava [Shiva] in the form of consciousness" (*cidrūpa-sākṣad-bhairava*) (selection 89).

All but the last of these statements come from traditional or anonymous texts and might be regarded as prescriptive rather than descriptive — although it would not be unreasonable to think that many of the authors had experienced the states of which they spoke. The authors of most selected texts composed after the middle of the first millennium are known historical individuals, and when they speak of religious experiences, there is good reason to believe that they are describing states that they knew at first hand. The siddhas and yogis of the popular tantric traditions put many of their statements in experiential terms. "He is right there within you," Sivavakkiyar declares. "Stand still and feel him, feel!" (selection 98). The singers of the *bhakti* movement use intimate personal language to express the varied emotions of divine love and devotion. The cry of Manikkavachakar is representative: "You are my Lord who melting my bones entered my Self as a shrine" (selection 109). Ramanuja, the philosopher of *bhakti*, gives abstract expression to this "infinite and unsurpassed bliss of the experience of Bhagavan" (*bhagavad-anubhava*) (selection 86), but as a rule the poets of *bhakti* use the most concrete of language, speaking of seeing (selection 116), hearing (selections 120, 172), feeling (selection 114) and even tasting the forms of God. "He only can appreciate this who experiences it" (*sākṣa jyācī tyāsī manāmārjī*), says Bahina Bai of her "taste" of the divine consciousness (selection 126). Many *sant*s and Sikhs use equally intense imagery to describe their devotion to the formless God (selections 137, 138, 140, 142), while others declare that no imagery is adequate: "This experience [*anabhai*] is such that it defies all description", sings Raidas of the unitive experience (selection 139). Some of the strongest human feelings are associated with erotic love, and a large number of bhaktas, sants, sufis and Sikhs use the language of human love to express their passion for the Divine (selections 107, 110, 112, 128, 129, 130, 132, 134, 135, 147, 148). The *sahajiyā*s and *bāul*s combine this erotic devotionalism with the erotic methodology of the *tantra*s (selections 104, 105).

The methodical disciplining of mind, emotions and body in order to attain experiential states has been a common theme in Indian religious traditions since the time of the *upaniṣad*s. Meditative methods are alluded to in the *Chāndogya*, *Kaṭha* and other early *upaniṣad*s (selections 11, 14), while later texts like the *Śvetāśvatara* and *Maitrī* present specific meditation techniques (selections 17, 18). Mahavira is said to have attained intuitive knowledge and *kevala* through the practice of psycho-physical austerities (selections 24, 25). Various meditative practices have formed part of Buddhist discipline from very early times (selections 35, 36, 38, 61). Methods for the attainment of *mokṣa* or *kaivalya* are given in the *Sāṁkhya Kārikā* and *Yoga Sūtra* (selections 40–43). The synthetic *Bhagavad Gītā* presents methods drawn from the upanishadic, Samkhya–Yoga and devotional traditions (selections 50, 53, 55). All forms of Tantrism, *haṭhayoga* included, are characterised by a reliance on psychological and psycho-physical techniques to achieve liberation and mastery (see for example selections 72–77, 101–103). Such techniques lie at the heart of philosophical systems like Kashmir Shaivism (selection 89), and are even found in the teachings of the Shattari and other sufi orders (selection 93). Masters of the *siddha*, *nāth* and *sant* traditions speak frequently of meditative and psycho-physical methods, as do virtually all the mystics of the modern period.

The works of these modern mystics were not transmitted orally, as were most earlier texts, but written down or recorded (in writing or on tape) and published during their lifetimes or afterwards. As a result, vast amounts of their direct teachings survive. These works, generally personal and often informal, contain many explicit references to their spiritual experiences. Scholars interested in modern theories of social constructivism might regard these as expressions of the nineteenth-century European "discourse of experience".[7] Others still under the sway of Freudianism or Marxism might consider them expressions of infant sexuality or post-feudal bourgeois mentality.[8] A more empirical approach would see them as recent examples of India's long tradition of basing spiritual teachings on individual spiritual experience.

Experience and Knowledge

The authority of the Veda is said to reside in the text itself, which is believed to be timeless and eternal. Most subsequent Indian teachings, even some that are ostensibly vedic, base themselves instead on experiential insights of the founders or renewers of the tradition. The *upaniṣad*s never question the supernatural authority of the Veda, but many of them say also that spiritual knowledge is to be achieved experientially. The *Īśā Upaniṣad*, after acknowledging its debt to the givers of revealed knowledge, declares that Truth is to be attained by illuminated sight and through identity with the all-pervading Spirit (*yo'sāvasau puruṣaḥ so'hamasmi*) (selection 15). Theravada texts make it clear that that the Buddha's teachings were based on experiential insights. "The Dhamma I have attained", he is made to say in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, "is unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise" (selection 30). According to the *Yoga Sūtra*, the highest knowledge is not attainable by thought, but comes when "thought assumes the form of the spirit through consciousness that leaves no trace" (selection 45). In the post-classical yoga and devotional traditions, much stress is placed on the experiential sources of knowledge. After denying the efficacy of vedic study and practice, Sivavakkiyar declares, "Melt with the heart inside and proclaim the truth" (selection 98). A *nāth yogī* sings even more explicitly: "Know [that] positively with experience [*anubhava*]" (selection 102). The *sant* Dadu proclaims that he "found true knowledge" (*saṁcī mati āī*) when he "was one with Him" (*tab ham ek bhaye*) (selection 140). The Punjabi sufi Sultan Bahu (in a passage reminiscent of Sivavakkiyar's) says that "perfect knowledge is obtained . . . by those who close the revealed scriptures", for truth is to be found not by means of "rationality" but in "the glorious mystery of divine unity" (selection 147).

Most mystics of the modern period speak in unambiguous terms of the experiential basis of their teachings. Nisargadatta Maharaj states plainly that he is only able to teach “what I know from my own experience” (selection 186). Krishnamurti underlines the importance of the unaided individual: “Truth cannot be given to you by somebody. You have to discover it; and to discover, there must be a state of mind in which there is direct perception” (selection 178). Ramalinga declares that he attained the highest reach of knowledge “in the state of union with You [Shiva]” (selection 153).

Goals, Methods and Knowledge: Some Problems

The passages cited in the three preceding sections are enough to show that subjective religious experience has played a significant role in the formulation of the goals, methods and knowledge-systems of many religions traditions of South Asia. There are problems associated with each of these topics that the reader should be aware of while studying the texts. The brief selections in this book are not sufficient to settle all the questions that might be raised, but they can serve as useful and authentic materials when the questions are discussed.

Spiritual Goals: Immediate Awareness or Mediated Knowledge

Many founders and renewers of religious traditions state openly or imply that those who attain the goal of the tradition are in direct contact or union with a reality that comprehends all that is. It is generally, though not invariably, assumed that there is only one comprehensive reality.[9] It is apparent however that the nature of this reality is expressed differently by different traditions. There are, broadly speaking, three attitudes that may be taken in regard to this diversity of expression: (1) that there is only one reality and only one true formulation of its nature, all other formulations being false or at best incomplete; (2) that there is only one reality, and all formulations of its nature are various attempts to give form to a single truth, which is in essence beyond description; (3) that formulations of religious “truth” as well as the “reality” they speak of are plural and culturally specific. The first attitude is that of most traditional religions, in particular those based on a single infallible scripture. Tending towards bigotry or lukewarm toleration, it is of little interest in a book that seeks to highlight the diversity of Indian religions. The second attitude is the implicit stance of some liberal believers, and the explicit position of certain scholars of religion. It is sometimes referred to as "perennialism", since its proponents are said to endorse the views of Aldous Huxley in his *Perennial Philosophy* (1946).[10] This position is attractive to those who look on religious experience as a cross-cultural constant, and the reality experienced as a substrate underlying all religious traditions and showing their fundamental unity despite differences of expression. The third attitude, known as "contextualism" or "constructivism", is the position of some contemporary scholars of religion, and may be regarded as an extension to the field of religious studies of the social constructivism that is now the dominant framework in the humanities and social sciences.[11] It appeals to those who wish to emphasise the diversity of religious experience and expression, and fear that perennialist claims of universality amount in practice to the reduction of diversity to a single dominant model.

So much has been written on the question of universality vs. social construction in religion that it is not possible to do more here than sketch the principal lines of the debate and indicate what bearing the selections in this reader might have on it. The chief assumption of the perennialists is that there is a core religious experience (or range of experiences) that is essentially the same among mystics of all ages and cultures. This experience is direct, unmediated by language, and thus ineffable. Mystics who attempt to give expression to this experience, and to the knowledge that it grounds, are obliged to use their own language and (usually) to employ the terminology and figures of a particular religious system. As a result, their formulations differ, but the differences are matters of interpretation and not of essence. The core experience is always the same, as is the reality experienced. On the level of experience, all religions are fundamentally one.

Constructivists deny that there is a core religious experience that is identical across cultures. Their primary assumption, as stated emphatically by Stephen T. Katz, is: "*There are* NO *pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences*" (1978: 26; cf. Proudfoot 1985: 217). Linguistic and cultural mediation is a factor not only in the verbal expression of mystical experiences but also in the experiences themselves. The claims of mystics that their experiences are ineffable are incoherent and, given the amount they have written and spoken about them, absurd. The presumed distinction between the essence of the experience and its interpretation does not hold up. It follows that the experiences of different religious traditions are different from those of other traditions. There is no normative religious experience and no universal religion.

The difference between the perennialist and constructivist positions may be brought out by comparing statements explaining the relationship between the ultimate states as conceived in different religious traditions. William T. Stace, often cited as an typical perennialist, puts it this way: "Nirvana is the Buddhist interpretation of what Plotinus spoke of as union with the One, the Vedantist as realisation of identity with the Universal Self, the Christian as union with God" (1961: 199). Stephen Katz, the best-known constructivist, says rather: "'God' can be 'God', 'Brahman' can be 'Brahman' and *nirvāṇa* can be *nirvāṇa* without any reductionist attempt to equate the concept 'God' with that of 'Brahman', or 'Brahman' with *nirvāṇa*" (1978: 66). In their search for what Huxley calls "a Highest Common Factor in all . . . theologies" (1946: 1), perennialists treat the very different textual descriptions of Buddhist *nirvāṇa*, neo-platonic unity, upanishadic identity and Christian union as disparate interpretations of the same experience. But in seeking to get beyond "inessential" differences, they may be ignoring real and perhaps unresolvable divergences not only in forms of expression but also in the thing expressed. If we read early accounts of the Buddha's experience of *nirvāṇa* (see for example selection 28) and early statements of his spiritual teachings (see selections 29, 33, 37) we find that a great deal of stress is laid on what became known as the doctrine of *anattā* or "no-self". Can comparatists like Stace really be right in asserting that *nirvāṇa*, which assumes no-self, and the upanishadic experience of the self (see selections 11, 16, 19) are one experience differently interpreted? Even worse are attempts by proponents of a given position to reduce other positions to their own, as when a contemporary vedantist says that what the Buddha realised was "exactly the *ātman* of the Vedanta" (Dixit 1996: 103). Perennialists have been justly criticised for superficial reading of texts, reliance on inadequate translations and failure to master the systems of discourse of the traditions they profess to study. All this has allowed them to formulate generalisations that often do not stand up to informed criticism.

Much more than most perennialists, constructivist scholars try to honour the particularity of the traditions they study, and to avoid making simplistic identifications on the basis of verbal resemblances. But they run into trouble when they say or imply that there is no relationship at all between such experiences as *nirvāṇa*, identity with *ātman–brahman*, union with God, etc. These experiences are described by most of those who have had them as all-inclusive. The systems of knowledge that are based on them are said to account for all that is. Brahman of the *upaniṣad*s, Buddha of the Mahayana, Krishna of the *Gītā*, Parama-Shiva of the shaiva *tantra*s, the Formless One of the *sant*s and Sikhs, Allah of the Muslims, the Christian God, etc., occupy the same ontological space. To say flatly that God is God and Brahman is Brahman is to assume a plurality of comprehensive realities. God and Brahman could be completely distinct entities only if both were human constructions — the usual reductionist position of Marxists, Freudians, and others.

The evident plurality of the forms of God, as conceived by different religions, does not rule out the possibility that there is a single comprehensive reality behind them all. There are a number of Indian precedents for this way of looking at things. Vaishnavas conceive of Vishnu as taking form in various incarnations — different faces of one divine principle. The twentieth-century mystic Sri Aurobindo writes that the Self, although without specific character, "bears and upholds the play of all character, supports a kind of infinite, one, yet multiple personality" (1999: 751). The similarities of the experiences of mystics of different cultures, despite differences of conception and expression, suggest that there may be a reality independent of culture that can be approached in different ways. Most constructivists do not deny that there are such things as mystical experiences, but by saying that such experiences are as much mediated by language and culture as other forms of experience, they make them something other than what mystics claim them to be.

An anthology consisting of translated extracts cannot hope to resolve all the issues raised by the perennialist–constructivist debate. All it can do is offer selections from texts in which founders, renovators and exponents of Indian religious traditions speak of their experiences and give expression to their understanding of life and the world. A number of statements in the selections seem to support the perennialists' views in regard to immediacy of experience, direct knowledge, and ineffability. This is not surprising:

the perennialist position was formulated by scholars who had immersed themselves in mystical literature and took the mystics at their word. Many passages in classic mystical literature do seem to allude to unmediated knowledge. To give one example, Meister Eckhart devotes the better part of a famous sermon to the question of mediation; in the course of this he says: "God the Father may speak His word there [in the ground of the soul], for *this* part is by nature receptive to nothing save only the divine essence, without mediation."[12] Since Eckhart is widely recognised as an authoritative Christian mystic, his statement lends support to the idea that mystical experience is linguistically and culturally unmediated. What do the mystics of India have to say about this question?

A number of citations reproduced above under the heading "Experience and Knowledge" indicate that the authors of important texts of the upanishadic, Theravada, Mahayana, Samkhya, Vajrayana and Kashmir Shaiva traditions accepted the existence of direct or unmediated knowledge and experience. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* explains that words cannot express the highest reality, which can only be attained by inner, non-linguistically mediated means (selection 67). The monistic philosopher Shankara argues: "If the light of *Ātman* which is Pure Consciousness were not eternal in one's own *Ātman*, it would be mediated by remembrance and the like and so it would be composite". Since *ātman* "exists for its own sake", it follows that the consciousness of *ātman* is uncomposite and unmediated (selection 85). The philosopher of *bhakti* Ramanuja speaks of knowledge by "direct vision" (selection 86), while the nineteenth-century *bhakta* and mystic Sri Ramakrishna makes reference to "immediate knowledge", "direct perception" and "direct self-existent truth consciousness" (selections 157, 158). The poet Tagore speaks similarly of receiving a "direct message of spiritual light" (selection 190). Mystics who emphasise intuitive knowledge rather than intuitive emotion, for example Sri Aurobindo, Ramana Maharshi, Krishnamurti, and Gopi Krishna, put even more stress on the attainment of direct truth-consciousness, direct perception, direct touch or contact, and so forth (selections 161, 166, 178, 188).

These examples indicate that a number of important Indian mystics acknowledged the existence of some form of direct or unmediated knowledge. No doubt their testimony cannot be taken uncritically. To begin with, most of them did not use the English words "direct" or "unmediated", but terms in Sanskrit and other languages that have been so translated.[13] Further, the fact that these authorities affirm the existence of unmediated experience does not in itself prove that such a thing exists. At best their statements can be taken as having "some evidential value", and used as a basis for further investigation.

Spiritual Methods: Liberation or Acculturation

Despite the striking similarities in the experience and expression of mystics of different traditions, it must be conceded that most members of a given tradition have experiences quite like those of their predecessors and less like or quite unlike those of mystics of other traditions. Constructivists explain this by saying that the mystics' background and training have a causal influence not only on their modes of expression but also on the experiences themselves. Gurus instruct their disciples as their gurus instructed them, transmitting what they themselves received. This instruction produces experiences of a similar kind. The practices recommended by various traditions, far from liberating practitioners into objectless awareness, simply acculturates them in a certain way, with the result that practitioners have experiences of the desired sort. As Katz confidently puts it: "It is in appearance only that such activities as yoga produce the desired state of 'pure' consciousness. Properly understood, yoga, for example, is *not* an *un*conditioning or *de*conditioning of consciousness, but rather it is a *re*conditioning of consciousness" (1978: 57).

The spiritual teacher (*ācārya, guru, murshid*) is held in extraordinary respect in most Indian spiritual traditions. Many disciples who have attained experiential knowledge attribute their success not their own efforts but to the guru's grace. The guru generally demands that disciples follow a certain discipline, judges their progress in accordance with traditional criteria, and certifies success or failure. This would seem to indicate that the disciples' experiences are not unmediated but determined by the guru's teaching. Accounts by modern yogis like Yogananda and Nisargadatta certainly emphasise the part of the guru in their attainment of experiential knowledge, but they also suggest that the role of the guru may be that of catalyst and not effective cause. Other mystics, for example Krishnamurti and Sri Aurobindo, took a direction radically different from the one proposed by early teachers and soon cut off all connection with them. Yet others — Ramana Maharashi, Anandamayi Ma, Swami Ramdas, Gopi Krishna — were able to attain realisation without a guru's assistance, while Ramakrishna had experiences first on his own, and later while following the instructions of gurus of various traditions.

The role of the guru in Indian religious traditions is clearly more complex than the constructivist position would permit. The guru does not seem to be an indispensable giver of tradition who enforces a specific pattern of experience and prevents all innovation. What about of the techniques that are transmitted by a guru's instruction or preserved in sacred texts? As noted above under the heading "Experiential Means", almost all the traditions dealt with in this reader have preserved and transmitted meditative, mantric, devotional, ritualistic or psycho-physical techniques that are meant to help practitioners get in direct touch with the Divine (variously conceived). A large number are these techniques are said to work by replacing the ordinary activities of mind, emotions and body with a state of quiet or dynamic openness to non-conceptual and non-verbal experience. They claim then to be means of restraining the ordinary forms of mediated conception and activity in order to provide access to unmediated experience. According to the *Kena Upaniṣad*, *brahman* is "hearing of our hearing, mind of our mind, speech of our speech" and so forth (selection 13). A later verse (2.3) states that *brahman* "is discerned by those who seek not to discern it". The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* recommends that the practitioner restrain the breath or life-force and "hold his mind in check"; to those who persist in such meditation, *brahman* will revealed (selection 17). The *Maitrī Upaniṣad* offers several methods of mind- and sense-restraint. A person who succeeds in a certain preliminary practice is urged to "continue void of conceptions" (*niḥsaṁkalpas tatas tiṣṭhet*) until the unconditioned Absolute (*turya*) is reached (selection 18). The suppression of mental activity and formations is also recommended by different schools of Buddhism and by Patanjali's Yoga. Theravada calming meditation is meant to take the practitioner beyond what is "conditioned and voluntarily produced" to what is permanent (selection 35); Theravada insight meditation requires the practitioner to observe the body, feelings, mind and mind-objects as they are, without active participation in their movements (selection 36). Similar practices are recommended in

Mahayana texts (see selections 60, 61). The *Yoga Sūtra*, which defines Yoga as "the cessation of the turnings of thought" (*citta-vṛtti-nirodha*), says that "a subliminal impression [*saṁskāra*] generated by wisdom stops the formation of other impressions", preparing the way for thought-free contemplation or *samādhi* (selection 41). The *Kulārṇava Tantra* declares that the yogin in *samādhi* is free from sensory impressions and mental conceptions (selection 73). The shaiva-tantric philosopher Abhinavagupta says that in the repose of meditation, the yogin enters "a state where there is no distinction", but only universal bliss (selection 89). Similarly the unlettered Kashmiri mystic Lalla sings: "Absorbed in bliss, I forgot the scriptures" and realised "consciousness-bliss" (*tsetan ānand*) (selection 103). Among modern teachers, Sri Aurobindo, Ramana Maharashi, Krishnamurti and Nisargadatta Maharaj declare that concept-free meditation opens the way to direct experience of that which is (selections 161, 166, 178, 186). If one assumes, like the neo-Kantian Katz, that unmediated experiences are impossible, one is obliged to say that practices like these constitute "reconditioning" rather than "deconditioning". The texts themselves suggest otherwise.

Robert K. C. Forman views the escape from ordinary sensory, verbal and conceptual activity into non-conceptual awareness as a sort of "forgetting", what Meister Eckhart calls *vergezzen* (1990: 30; 1998: 7). Forman's "forgetting model" is of some help in understanding certain forms of spiritual experience and practice. Along with the examples alluded to in the preceding paragraph, one might cite this passage from Sharafuddin Maneri: "On account of this forgetfulness, all awareness of self is lost. There is no calling upon the name or observance of customs; awareness of whether one exists or not; explanation, allusion, or divine throne!" (selection 92). There are however other forms of practice and experience that involve remembrance rather than forgetting. Examples are the repetition or contemplation of prayers or mantras or the Name (in Sufism this practice is called *dhikr*, literally "remembrance"), and the contemplation of visual or conceptual images. In several *upaniṣad*s, the mystic syllable *om* (or *aum*) is put forward as the supreme object of contemplation; the *Muṇḍaka* says that contemplation of *aum* can propel the individual self into the *brahman* (selection 16). This use of *mantra*s as a means for achieving spiritual ends is an important part of all forms of Tantrism (see for example selection 74). Another tantric technique is the mental visualisation of forms of divine power, such as Virochana Buddha or the Goddess as Shakti, or else the contemplation of the Absolute (selection 73). In the various paths of devotion, contemplation of forms of the godhead is the pre-eminent means of practice. Krishna declares in the *Bhagavad Gītā* that loving meditation on himself is better than the practice of yoga or dedicated work (selection 53). Vaishnava *bhakta*s from Andal to Dayaram give an intensely personal turn to this loving absorption in Krishna or other forms of Vishnu; shaiva bhaktas from Appar to Mahadeviyakka do the same with regard to Shiva. *Dhikr* is recommended by sufis from Hujwiri to Inayat Khan. The latter explains: “The whole idea of the Sufi is to cover his imperfect self even from his own eyes by the thought of God” (selection 172). Somewhat paradoxically, the *sant*s and Sikhs counsel contemplation of the God without form, particularly as the Divine Name. These various traditions have their own patterns of practice and devotion, but there is considerable overlap among them. Narsi Mehta worships the visible Krishna but also cries “Let us see, but not with eyes, Him who is formless” (selection 127). Sai Baba of Shirdi counsels devotees to meditate on him as the Blissful Formless Being (*ānanda nirākāra*); if this proves impossible, they should picture his outward form “exactly as it is” (selection 159).

Reality, Truth and Verification

When mystics speak of their experiences, they imply or declare that the object of their experience is real, and that the knowledge that comes from the experience is true. Such claims raise difficult epistemological questions. Are mystics right in thinking that what they feel themselves to be in contact with is a (or *the*) reality? If it is real for them, is it necessarily real for others? Do their private experiences put them in a position to make claims about the nature of life and the world? If these truth-claims disagree with one another, are some or all of them refuted? Is there one Truth, or many truths, or is “truth” a human construction determined by social and political forces rather than anything inherent in the supposed source of truth?

The best way to begin an intellectual enquiry into these matters is to examine the textual evidence. In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, Uddalaka Aruni tells his son and disciple Svetaketu that the “finest essence of things" is "the Real" (*satyam*, usually translated "the true"), and "the Self" (selection 11). The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* says that a person gains freedom when he or she "sees Brahman as It really is" (*brahmatattvam*) "by means of the self as it really is" (*ātmatattvena*) (selection 17). In a similar vein, the author of the *Bhagavad Gītā* says: "The unreal never is: the Real [*sataḥ*] never is not" (selection 46). The author of the *Kulārṇava Tantra* says that "the [ultimate] Reality shines forth of itself" (*svayaṁ tattvaṁ prakāśate*), not through "mental effort" but by its own self-nature (selection 73). Mystics of later traditions use a variety of words in a variety of languages to signify the "reality" they claim to be in contact with. Shah Abdul Latif cries in Sindhi: "Reality is one: do not be mistaken!" (selection 149). Ramana Maharshi writes in Tamil of the "Sole Reality" which "exists for ever", and which to him is the same as "the Self" (selection 171). Krishnamurti speaks in English of "that which is", "*what is*", or simply "that" (selection 178).

Most of the authors cited above belong to traditions classed as Hindu. As a rule, Hindu mystics speak of the Real as having some sort of positive existence. Buddhist mystics, on the other hand, generally speak of existence in negative terms, stressing the *un*reality or emptiness of things without proposing a "higher reality" beyond (selections 58, 61, 81) . The Prajnaparamita school introduces the term *tathatā* or "suchness" to signify that which is beyond verbal description (selection 59). To the Vijnanavada philosopher Vasubandhu, "suchness" is a quasi-positive term which he identifies with "perception-only" (selection 82). The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* speaks of the "truth of the highest reality", which lies beyond positive as well as negative terms (selection 66).

Whether viewed negatively or positively, the real is not considered by many mystics to be something with specific qualities or properties. It is simply that which actually is. Their claim is that it is possible to have direct awareness of or to come into direct relationship with this reality. Since most believe that the reality can be known only by experiential means, they rarely argue the point. The real, they assert, has to be *realised*. This word crops up again and again in English translations of Indian spiritual texts, and also in texts written originally in English (23, 28, 66, 86, 103, 139, 148, 160, 170, 173, 176). To those who say that the mystic's reality is unsubstantial in comparison with the world as perceived by the senses, some mystics reply that the actual situation is the opposite.

Gopi Krishna speaks of being in contact with "a reality more solid than the material world" (selection 188). Nisargadatta Maharaj says similarly that the reality known by the *jñānī* is "more real" than the objects of the "ordinary consciousness" (selection 186). Nisargadatta also is emphatic that "the real is not imaginary, it is not a product of the mind" (selection 186). Vasubandhu distinguishes between "the constructed own-being", which is unreal, and the self-evidence of "suchness" (selection 82).

These various conceptions of "reality" are not necessarily incompatible with one another, though it must be admitted that it is not easy to reconcile the positive and negative approaches. When we come to claims about truth, however, we find that traditions and individuals offer a large number of apparently incompatible systems. Many *upaniṣad*s speak of *satyam* or truth. In a notable passage, the *Muṇḍaka* declares: "Truth alone conquers, not untruth. By truth is laid out the path leading to the gods by which the sages who have their desires fulfilled travel to where is that supreme abode of truth" (selection 16). Mahavira is said to have realised the truth of things (selection 23); a Jaina text says of his teachings: "that is the truth, that is so, that is proclaimed this [creed]" (selection 26). The Buddha of the Theravada speaks of dependent origination as "the truth", and calls the primary doctrines of his *dhamma* "the four noble truths" (selections 30, 32). Mahayana texts like the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* ("Sutra of the Lotus of the True Law") give quite different accounts of the Buddha's highest teaching. Even the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* says that its socially transgressive doctrines are an expression of "the great sacramental truth" (selection 68). Similarly, the Hindu *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* says that its teachings are "the very truth" (selection 74).

When we come to texts written by historical individuals, we find a similar profusion of truth-claims. Shankara asserts that his view (*advaita vedānta*) is declared "from the standpoint of the highest truth" (selection 85). The Shattari sufi 'Isa Jund Allah distinguishes three levels of truth (selection 93); a later sufi, Shah Wali Allah, speaks of seven stages of perfection, at the top of which the Prophet stood at his side, while a voice cried: "Truth, truth, truth" (selection 96). Bulleh Shah speaks also of realising truth (selection 148), while Guru Nanak's greatest hymn is filled with references to the truth of the Name (selection 142). Ramana Maharshi, Nisargadatta Maharaj and other modern mystics all use words signifying "truth" to describe the world-views founded on their realisations. When Ramalinga Swami formulated a new religion he called it the Universal True Creed (selection 156).

All these mystics evidently felt that they were in experiential contact with a reality, and that as a result of this contact they had become aware of a truth which did not need intellectual justification. To many, such claims are unacceptable. Mystical experience, it is said, does not share with ordinary sensory experience the intersubjective verifiability that is necessary for general acceptance. But to argue this way is unduly to privilege one form of perception over another. Philosopher of religion William Alston shows that "unfavourable comparisons between mystical perception and sense perception" by naturalistic critics "either condemn the former for features it shares with the latter (the double standard) or unwarrantedly require the former to exhibit features of the latter (imperialism)" (1991: 253). If perceptual evidence provides grounds for belief, there is, prima facie, as much reason to accept mystical as sensory perceptual evidence. Most social scientists would argue however that it is possible to explain mystical experience in terms of psychological or sociological theory. When the supposed self-evidence of the experiences disappear, the truth-claims that are based on them are undermined. As for the religious "force" of the experience, this may, according to Wayne Proudfoot, be "accounted for by the fact that the criteria for identifying an experience as religious include reference to an explanatory claim. The experience is perceived by the subject as eluding explanation solely in terms of his own mental states but as having been produced in such a way that it supports his beliefs about the world, beliefs that are distinctive of the tradition within which it is being characterised as religious. The experience provides support for and conformation of those beliefs" (1985: 216). Proudfoot's argument depends on his assumption that there are no unmediated experiences. His conclusion that mystics' beliefs precede their experiences does not agree with statements made by mystics that their beliefs are the consequences of their experiences. It is true that many mystics have experiences within the framework of pre-existing belief systems, but this does not of itself prove that the experiences are the results of the beliefs. On the other hand, many mystics have experiences, and subsequently make truth-claims, that are the contrary of what they had hitherto accepted, for example, the Buddha, Appar, Vasubandhu, Guru Nanak, Ramalinga Swami, Sri Aurobindo and Krishnamurti. Others who have no positive religious training or beliefs nevertheless have powerful mystical experiences, for example Ramana Maharshi and Gopi Krishna.

If it is true that mystical experience is the source of mystical knowledge, the most decisive way to verify mystical truth-claims is by means of mystical experience. No doubt the experiences of a Buddha or Nanak or Aurobindo are not in the reach of everyone, but these and other spiritual teachers insist that such states are the ultimate destiny of all aspiring humans. A preliminary decision to take seriously a mystic's account of his or her experience, the truth-claims based on the experience and the methods proposed for its attainment will depend on one's estimate of the authority of the mystic, the intellectual and emotional satisfactoriness of the truth-claims, and the utility of the methods in attaining the accepted goals.

There remains the problem of the variance of truth-claims of different mystics. It certainly is a fact that mystics describe "truth" in different ways. But it also is a fact that many mystics, particularly those living in multi-religious environments, are untroubled by the apparent differences, and provide ways to reconcile them. Many insist the differences between religions are nominal and not substantial. "Some call it Rama, some call it Khuda; some worship it as Vishnu, some as Allah", says Guru Arjan (*Ādi Granth*, p. 885, trans. Kaur Singh 37). Kabir similarly sings: "The Master of Hindus and Turks [Muslims] is one and the same" (selection 138). A number of Ramakrishna's parables touch on the same theme; in one he points out that what Hindus call *jal*, Muslims *pāṇi* and Christians *water* is always the same substance: so it is, he suggests, with the names and substance of God.

Another means of reconciliation is to distinguish between the paths, of which there are many, and the goal, which is one. Ramakrishna tells Keshab Sen: "God can be realised through all paths. It is like your coming to Dakshineswar by carriage, by boat, by steamer, or on foot. You have chosen the way according to your convenience and taste; but the destination is the same" (selection 158). In a similar vein, Ghauth Ali Shah says: "Let them all strive in their own ways towards that mystery — the traditionalists with their obedience to the law and ritual, and mystics with their meditations and aspirations, and the madmen with their eyes filled with wonder" (selection 152).

Other mystics stress the inadequacy of all formulations of truth and of all fixed paths to reach it. Truth is “limitless, unconditioned, unapproachable by any path whatsoever”, says Krishnamurti; it is “pushed aside” rather than described “by symbols, words, images” (selections 177, 180). Many other mystics would agree: “Because the highest reality is an exalted state of bliss”, says the author of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, “it cannot be entered into by mere statements regarding it” (selection 67). Sri Aurobindo brushes aside the notion that “truth is a single idea that all must accept”. Although “the fundamental truth of spiritual experience is one”, he says, there are “numberless possibilities of variation of experience and expression” (selection 163).

These extracts from mystical literature do not solve all the problems raised by the diversity of religious truth-claims, but they suggest that solutions may yet be found. What is needed to proceed is “a pluralistic theory” of religion, such as the one proposed by philosopher of religion John Hick, which will help us “recognise and be fascinated by the manifold differences between the religious traditions, with their different conceptions, their different modes of religious experience, and their different forms of individual and social response to the divine”, while at the same time remaining open to commonalities (2001: 566). The religions of India, in all their fascinating diversity, present the problems in their fullness, but they also hint that the similarities between traditions may be as important and as interesting as their differences.

The Literature of Indian Religion: Experience and Expression

Religious literature takes many forms: ritualism, mythology, sacred history, doctrine, ethical injunctions, social ordinances, and the expression of individual feelings and experiences. Because it emphasises individual expression, this reader gives little space to several sorts of religious literature. Few texts dealing exclusively with ritual, ethics or social organisation have been included. The vedic *saṁhitā*s are represented by a handful of hymns from the *Ṛg Veda* and an extract from the *Atharva Veda*. Epic literature finds place only in the extracts from the *Bhagavad Gītā*, mythology, only in some vedic and upanishadic passages and the two extracts from the *purāṇa*s. Other omissions might be noted; what is remarkable however is how much of the most important literature of Indian religions gives expression to spiritual experience or experience-based knowledge and emotion. It is open to question whether every example of such expression reproduced in this book is based on the author's first-hand experience. Much religious literature consists of traditional or even conventional wisdom passed down from teacher to student or disseminated in the form of books, songs or talks. It is all but impossible to say whether any particular expression of mystical knowledge or emotion is a transmission of this sort or is based on the author's experiential insight. Most of the selections seem to the editor to have the stamp of authentic experience. At the least they are authentic examples of experience-based spiritual literature.

Whatever their origin, most of the selections rank high as literature even when judged by "literary" criteria. If the aphorisms of the *Sāṁkhya Kārikā* and *Yoga Sūtra* and the writings of Vasubandhu and Shankara cannot be called masterpieces of *belles lettres*, they nevertheless are important examples of literary genres that have been much practised during the history of Indian literature. The same sort of apology does not need to be made for the works of the *bhakti* and yoga traditions that have been included. The sayings of Lalla and the virashaiva saints are among the masterpieces of Kashmiri and Kannada literature, while the songs of the nayanars and alvars, and the vaishnava devotees of Andhra, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Mithila, Bengal and the North are recognised as masterpieces of poetic expression in Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati, Maithili, Bengali and Hindi. The works of Kabir are as much admired for their literary as their spiritual qualities, while the hymns of the Sikh gurus are foundation-stones of modern Punjabi literature. Bulleh Shah would also figure in any list of leading Punjabi poets, while Shah Abdul Latif remains the greatest name in Sindhi poetry, and Dard a major figure in Urdu literature. Rabindranath Tagore, Bhai Vir Singh, Muhammad Iqbal, and Subramania Bharati are generally acknowledged as the greatest twentieth-century writers of Bengali, Punjabi, Urdu and Tamil, while Sri Aurobindo and Krishnamurti are among India's most notable writers of English. By focussing on experience, this reader has been able to include many of the greatest literary expressions of the major Indian religions.

NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

1. Kabir, *Kabīr Granthāvali* 2, 128 and *Ādi Granth, rāg bhairo* 11; translation Vaudeville 1997: 240.

2. Kabir, *Kabīr Granthāvali* 2, 177 and *Ādi Granth, rāg bhibās* 2; translation Vaudeville 1997: 218.

3. An egregious example of such theory-laden interpretation is found in Kosambi 1975. The noted Marxist historian writes that the Buddha "expounded what seemed to him an underlying fundamental order in all nature (i.e. society). . . . This was a scientific advance, as it analysed, in a rather elementary way, the causes of social suffering and showed the way to its negation" (165). There is not the least evidence in the Pali Canon or contemporary texts that the Buddha meant anything like "social suffering" when he spoke of *dukkha*. A number of other examples of Marxist (or Marxist-Foucauldian) and Freudian "hermeneutics of suspicion" are found in recent studies of Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Partha Chatterjee (1994) and Sudhir Sarkar (1997) both regard the public figure of Ramakrishna as a creation of the Bengali middle class (more precisely, the Kolkata *bhadralok* or "respectable people"). "If Ramakrishna attracted bhadralok through his 'Otherness', this was to a considerable extent an Other constructed by the bhadralok themselves", writes Sarkar (285). Both critics focus on the key role played by the authors of the *Śrī Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Kathāmṛta* and *Śrī Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Līlāprasaṅga* in the construction of the popular image of Ramakrishna. Both also seek to situate Ramakrishna's practice and teachings within the economic and social world of colonial Bengal. Ramakrishna and others enter "the inner world of devotion, a personal relation of *bhakti* (devotion) with the Supreme Being" because the outer world of domestic responsibility is frustrating and unfulfilling. "The strategy of survival in a world that is dominated by the rich and the powerful is withdrawal", Chatterjee concludes (59). Writing as social historians of nineteenth-century Bengal, Sarkar and Chatterjee are not obliged to study the experiential sources of Ramakrishna's teachings, but by granting no autonomy to his inner life, they miss out on what may have been the most important factor in his appeal to his countrymen. The best Sarkar can do is to acknowledge in passing that "Ramakrishna's personal qualities" constitute a "by no means unimportant" issue (315). Scholar of religion Jeffrey Kripal gives much attention to Ramakrishna's experiences, but he looks at them from the standpoint of a rather dogmatic Freudianism. Reading closely the Bengali text of the *Kathāmṛta*, he isolates and interprets a number of passages that, "taken together", add up to what

he believes to be "a convincing argument for the 'secret' erotic nature of Ramakrishna's mystical experiences" (1995: 317). Kripal exposes this "secret" in a somewhat roundabout way; his disciples are less circumspect: the secret is that Ramakrishna was a homosexual. There is no direct evidence of this in the *Kathāmṛta* or anywhere else, and Kripal himself admits that his interpretations are often "speculative". The sensationalism of his approach vitiates the overall value of his book, which does make a number of interesting points, for instance that the official text of the *Kathāmṛta* tends to replace the "complexity and ambivalence" of the phenomenon of Ramakrishna with "monotone colors, simplicity and dogmatism" (171). Psychoanalytic theory is put to more productive use by the "post-Freudian" psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar. Recognising that "theoretical uncertainties in contemporary psychoanalysis . . . threaten its basic paradigm", Kakar does not accept "the earlier equation of the mystical state with a devalued, if not pathological, regression comparable to a psychotic episode" (1991: 3–4). He does however draw on the insights of Freud and neo-Freudians like Bion and Lacan in his study of Ramakrishna's life, which includes an examination of his sexuality. But in the end Kakar avoids Freudian reductionism: "Mystic experience", he concludes, "is one and — in some cultures and at certain historical periods — the pre-eminent way of uncovering a vein of creativity that runs deep in all of us" (34).

4. The selections show that the practices and beliefs of many religious traditions, for example Jainism, Buddhism, Virashaivism and Bengal Vaishnavism, may be traced back to the experiences of their founders. They say nothing about the historical relationship between these foundational experiences and the "theologies and ecclesiasticisms" of the religions in question. There is no evidence that James's dictum applies to prehistoric religions in India and elsewhere, which seem to have been based on tribal cults rather than individual "mystical experiences". James's dictum does not adequately account for the importance of revealed scripture in such religions as vedic Hinduism, Islam, etc. There is no straightforward evidence that the *Ṛg Veda* (one or two hymns of the tenth book excepted) gave special importance to the attainment of subjective religious experiences; it stresses rather the correct performance of sacrificial rituals. (Spiritual or symbolic interpretations of the Veda expand on, but do not replace, this basic sense.) Ritualism remains an enormously important part of contemporary Hinduism, and also is found in such experience-based traditions as Jainism, Buddhism and Tantrism. The selections in this reader testify to the importance of experiential religion, but do not nullify the importance of other aspects: social, ethical, ecclesiastical, etc.

5. The English word "experience" began to be used for subjective spiritual states in the late seventeenth century (*OED*, s.v. "experience", significance 4b). The term "experience" (often accompanied by the adjectives "religious", "spiritual", or "mystical") was taken up by writers like William James in the nineteenth century, and since then has become the standard term, in scholarly as well as spiritual literature, for the special inner states attained by mystics and others by means of discipline or grace. Some recent Western writers have suggested that the term "religious experience", and perhaps also that to which it refers, is a modern Western invention, dating back no farther (in the opinion of Wayne Proudfoot [1985]) than the early nineteenth century. Robert H. Sharf, in several recent papers (for example Sharf 1995) extends this line of criticism to Far Eastern Buddhist religious experience, and in a more general article to Indian religious experience as well (Sharf 1998). In this article he asserts: "In the end there is simply no evidence of an indigenous Indian counterpart to the rhetoric of experience prior to the colonial period" (1998: 100). Sharf does not cite any Indian literature in support of this assertion, making do with a reference to a chapter of a book by Wilhelm Halbfass (1988: 378–402). Halbfass's chapter can only be said to support Sharf's argument if two-thirds of it is left unread. Halbfass begins his treatment of the Indian idea of experience by pointing out certain anachronisms and other flaws in the treatment of the concept by some late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers. He then goes on: "There can be no doubt that India has produced an extremely rich and complex legacy of ideas, doctrines, methods and practices related to religious, meditational and in general inner experience" (386), listing sources of such ideas, doctrines, methods and practices from all periods of Indian religious history, beginning with the Veda, continuing through the mediaeval philosophers and *bhakta*s, and finishing with modern times. Using the tools of textual and historical criticism, Halbfass corrects what he considers to be modern misreadings of this material, but he nowhere denies the existence of a "rhetoric of experience" in the pre-modern period. After noting that "there has been much vague rhetoric and more or less deliberate blurring of conceptual distinctions in the use of 'experience' ", he concludes that in such matters historical criticism may be "more shallow and parochial than its target" (402). Sharf, like Halbfass, has pointed out some significant instances of inexactness and vagueness in modern writing on religious experience, but his failure to cite any primary documents, and his misrepresentation of Halbfass's work, make it impossible to assign any value to his remarks on Indian religion.

6. While examining the citations that follow in the introduction, it is important to remember that almost all the texts from which they are extracted were written in languages that are quite different from English. In rendering these passages into English, the translators not only made use of nineteenth- and twentieth-century English vocabulary and syntax, but also drew on the categories of Western spiritual discourse. In a reader like this, there is no way (short of giving all the texts in the original languages) of avoiding problems of translation. As an acknowledgement of such difficulties, I have given the key words of many of the phrases cited in this introduction in the original languages. This should remind the reader that each of these phrases is part of a linguistic, textual and doctrinal or philosophical structure that differs in important respects from the structures of other languages and texts — even when the terms are, from the point of view of historical linguistics, the "same". The word *anubhava* occurs in late classical Sanskrit and (with slight phonetic variations) in modern north Indian languages. A translator of Ramanuja and a translator of Nisargadatta Maharaj might each use the word "experience" as the English equivalent of *anubhava*, but it should not be imagined that Ramanuja and Nisargadatta meant precisely the same thing when they said or wrote *"anubhava"*. On the other hand, there is no compelling reason (unless one accepts as fact the claims of Foucauldian and other self-justifying theories of discourse) to believe that there were no commonalities between human consciousness and subjective experience in twelfth-century Srirangam and twentieth-century Mumbai.

7. See the works cited in note 5.

8. See the works cited in note 3.

9. In Jainism and Samkhya – Yoga, each soul or conscious being (called *jīva* in Jainism and *puruṣa* in Samkhya – Yoga) is eternally separate from every other soul. Liberation is a soul's realisation of its isolation (*kevala* or *kaivalya*) from nature (see Chapters 3 and 5). Thus it cannot be said that the comprehensive reality as visualised by these traditions is *one*. On the other hand, the plural souls of Jainism and Samkhya – Yoga cannot be said to be *different* from one another. Difference is found only in the realm of nature, the result, in Jainism, of the impurity of *karma*, in Samkhya – Yoga, of the imbalance of the three *guṇa*s.

10. The term "perennialist" is used mostly by opponents of the view, often with derogatory intent. Along with Huxley (1946), scholars frequently cited as holding the perennialist position are William T. Stace (1961), R. C. Zaehner (1994 [first published 1960]), Huston Smith, Mircea Eliade and others. Earlier scholars such as William James (1961

[first published 1902]) and Evelyn Underhill had many of the same assumptions as Stace and others later grouped together as perennialists. These scholars differ in many respects — Stace, for example, is basically monistic, while Zaehner is dualistic and theistic — but all of them agree in holding that (certain types) of religious experience occur without fundamental difference in mystics of various religious traditions. This position was predominant in discussions of religious experience during the 1960s and 1970s, but during the 1980s was replaced by the contextualist or constructivist view. During the 1990s, Robert K. C. Forman and others (Forman, ed., 1990 and 1998) tried to work out a viewpoint that conceded many of Katz's points but held on to the perennialist belief in the cross-cultural validity of certain forms of spiritual experience. Constructivist scholars see little difference between Forman's views and those of Stace-era perennialists.

11. The most important statements of the constructivist position in the field of religious studies are found in Katz, ed., 1978, and in subsequent volumes edited by Katz (e.g. Katz, ed., 1982). Katz prefers to call his position "contextualism"; "constructivism" is of broader application and relates Katz's view to that of the so-called postmodern discourse theorists, who stress the social construction of all forms of knowledge, and share many of Katz's assumptions. As is the case with "perennialist", "contextualist" and "constructivist" are umbrella terms covering a number of different stances. Most of those in this camp would agree, however, that no form of mystical experience is identical across cultures.

12. Meister Eckhart, Sermon 1 (Pf 1, QT 57), trans. Walshe 1957: 3. Eckhart of course did not say "without mediation". What he said, in Middle High German, was "ân allez mitel", which translates into modern German as "ohne alle Vermittlung" (J. Quint). An alternative English translations is "without means" (C. Evans). It seems fairly certain that Eckhart's meaning was that there is a form of communion between God and soul that is unmediated by thought, sense and language.

13. As an illustration of the problems involved in using translated terms when writing about mystical experience, one may examine the occurrences in this reader of the phrase "pure consciousness", often cited (notably in Forman, ed., 1990) as a key term in mystical studies. "Pure consciousness" is used by the translator of the *Kaivalya Upaniṣad* to render the Sanskrit terms *cinmātra* and *cit*; by the translator of the *Kuṇḍikā Upaniṣad* to render *(kevala) akhaṇḍabodha*; by the translator of the *Yoga Sūtra* to render *citi*; by the translator of the *Laghutattvasphoṭa*, again for *citi*; and by translators of the *Śiva Sūtra* and of Shankara's *Upadeśasāhasrī* to render

caitanya. (An equivalent phrase, “absolute consciousness”, is used by the translator of Utpaladeva’s *Śivastotrāvali* to render *viśvaikapūrṇā*.) Other Sanskrit terms sometimes translated by “pure consciousness” are *puruṣa* (in classical Samkhya), and *vijñaptimātratā* (in Vijnanavada Buddhism). In addition, translators of Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi and Nisargadatta Maharaj use “pure consciousness” as the equivalent of unspecified words or phrases in Bengali, Tamil and Marathi. All the Indian terms belong to different systems of spiritual knowledge, and it is unlikely that the mystics who employed them meant the very same thing by them: a Vijnanavada Buddhist would hardly say that *vijñaptimātratā* was the same as Patanjali’s *citi*. It might nevertheless be argued that the terms are more or less synonymous, attempts in different discourse-systems to name a general power of unmediated and contentless consciousness. On the other hand, it might be charged that “pure consciousness” was used to translate the various Indian terms simply because the English phrase is often found in books about mysticism. It is probable that the translators were aware of the use of “pure consciousness” in English mystical discourse, but the very existence of that term, along with the various Indian terms, suggests that the idea of contentless consciousness is not confined to a single conceptual system, and that the faculty it presupposes may indeed be attainable by humans in different cultures.

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ON THE SELECTIONS, TRANSLATIONS AND EDITORIAL NOTES

The texts and authors chosen for inclusion in this reader are generally those regarded by the traditions in question to be the most important and most representative. For reasons explained in the Introduction, preference has been given to texts in which authors speak in the first person about their own experiences. Such texts usually require less knowledge of the technical vocabulary of the tradition than doctrinal statements or guides to practice, and thus are more accessible, and more interesting, to modern readers. Whether separate pieces or extracts from longer works, the selections had to be able to stand on their own with only a minimum of editorial explanation. The selections, finally, had to be from texts that have been adequately translated into modern English.

Even the best translation of a complex text written in a language very different from English can give only a rough approximation of its meaning. Faced with competing demands of readability and accuracy, translators adopt a variety of strategies to help them in their all-but-impossible task. Some, impressed by the linguistic and discursive particularity of their material, stay close to the letter of the text, often leaving technical terms untranslated, and supplying detailed notes and other explanatory aids. Others, banking on the similarities of human experience across temporal, spatial and linguistic boundaries, put their texts into straightforward modern English and hope for the best. The translations chosen for inclusion here are distinguished by accuracy as well as readability. Some, for example the renderings of three *upaniṣad*s by Purohit Swami and W. B. Yeats, often sacrifice verbal precision for ease of comprehension. Others, like the upanishadic translations of R. E. Hume and R. C. Zaehner, follow the texts closely but sometimes read awkwardly in English. The best translations combine a high degree of textual accuracy with straightforward idiomatic English.

Linguistic and other technical notes by the translators have been omitted. These generally require the rest of the explanatory material provided by the translators to make good sense. Readers are urged to turn to the complete translations for detailed information on texts, authors and terminology.

Most technical terms left untranslated by the translators, as well as those used by the editor in his notes, are defined in the Index and Glossary of Terms. Significant occurances of personal and geographical names and titles of works are listed in the Index of Proper Names.

In writing the notes that precede chapters, sections of chapters, and selections, the editor has made considerable use of the translators' introductions and notes, as well as the best recent monographs by specialists in the various fields. The editorial notes supply only basic factual information: dates, historical and theological/philosophical background, essential information on texts, terminology, etc. The works listed under Further Reading at the end of each chapter will provide interested readers with much more information on these and other topics.

ON TRANSLITERATION

The languages of India and Iran are written in a variety of scripts that differ considerably from the Roman script used for English and other European languages. All these languages contain sounds that are not found in English. To represent Indian and Persian writing in Roman script, scholars have devised systems of transliteration in which one Roman letter, with or without a diacritical mark, stands for one Indian or Persian letter. These systems enable those who know the languages concerned to spell Indian and Persian words precisely in Roman script, but they are less useful to those who do not know the phonetic systems involved. For the ordinary reader, an approximate transliteration, without diacritical marks, is generally preferable.

In reproducing extracts from translated texts, the editor has generally preserved the transliterations used by the translators. In a few cases, where translators used obsolete or incomplete transliteration-systems, the editor has modernised or completed them. In his notes, the editor has followed these rules: biographical, mythological and geographical names are transliterated using the "approximate" system, without diacritics or italics (Krishna, not *Kṛṣṇa*; Andal, not *Āṇṭāḷ*). Titles of books and technical terms are transliterated using the appropriate scholarly system, in italics. Terms used repeatedly (*bhakti*, *sant*) are sometimes printed in Roman rather than italic type.