

## BOOK REVIEW

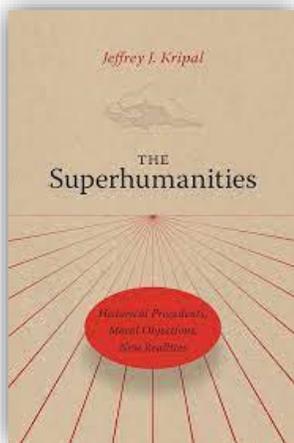
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# The Superhumanities: Historical Precedents, Moral Objections, New Realities

By Jeffrey J. Kripal

Reviewed by Jill L. Hurley

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My upbringing in third-wave charismatic churches shaped my epistemology and ontology in a way that allowed me to experience things beyond what the material world could explain. Reading *The Superhumanities* by Jeffrey Kripal, I finally understood why my hunger to do research in this arena is important, not only for myself but for the rest of society. The reason is simple: we have been duped. The Enlightenment era saw brilliant scholars bring forth conclusions which were unequivocally and undeniably false, and yet their attempts at undermining the metaphysical, supernatural realm could not be stopped. Jeffrey Kripal takes readers on a journey of discovery that peels back the layers and exposes the true nature of reality, a glorious supernatural reality at that.

Modernity, the epoch following post-medieval history, was the defining worldview for centuries.<sup>1</sup> Then, in roughly 1970, a paradigm shift happened and the post-modern era was born. The world is going through another paradigm shift, into what I've deemed the anti-modern era. No longer are we simply dropping outdated modalities and belief systems, but there is a growing animosity towards the ways that the belief systems of the past have corrupted our lives and set us up to live in a false dichotomy. It is in this context that Jeffrey Kripal offers his book of hope for a path toward "Superhumanities." To be clear, Kripal is not suggesting that we do away with empiricism, but rather wed it to an "imaginal" or phenomena-centric epistemology. In the case of human beings, he suggests, this means describing them not as a "soul and body," but rather as beings that experience,

rare but real revelations of consciousness, which appear in these moments not to be restricted to the socialized body-brain but distributed throughout, if not identical with or the source of, the larger bio cosmic environment, which is alive. (119)

The point of this work is to succinctly proclaim that there is mystery in this world that cannot be explained as happenstance. There are too many circumstances that defy the boundaries of materialistic presumptions. In these moments when "the stars align" or however you want to phrase the fantastical, mystical, ecstatic, supernatural experiences that can be had by all humans, of all cultures, of all times—we understand in those moments that we were made for more than this material world that we've been led to believe is the be-

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Irving Mitchell. Definitions and Characteristics of Modernity. Accessed November 2, 2023. <https://www.dbu.edu/mitchell/early-modern-resources/modernit.html>.

all and end-all of existence. Perhaps the goal is not trading immanence for transcendence and vice versa, but learning to live in tension embracing both simultaneously.

In light of this tension between empiricism and mysticism, it is imperative to critique Kripal's choice of descriptors within this book. Quoting Riesebrodt, Kripal defines religion as a "legitimate form of science fiction" (34). Kripal goes on to say,

In short, people legitimate and make real these beliefs by acting on these superhuman powers, and practicing them within social institutions that we can now called religions, whose basic convictions and claimed phenomena look remarkably like what we now call in our more secular mode science fiction. (34)

On the surface, I understand Riesebrodt's and Kripal's perspective on the value that this definition brings to the entire discourse. While I don't believe for an instant that Kripal is suggesting that the entities in religious arenas are fictional, as a practitioner of faith, it nevertheless feels deeply offensive. Ironically, using terms like "imaginal" and "science fiction" when speaking of religion causes Kripal to come off as one of the materialists he is working so hard to discredit. Instead, Kripal could have used the literary term, speculative experience, to describe encounters with the fantastical.<sup>2</sup> Both Christianity as a whole, and my personal relationship therein, have an epistemic capacity to understand that there are non-human entities which occupy the "thin places" beyond the veil in the supernatural realm. What we cannot abide, any longer, is the over-simplification and dismissal of supernatural encounters as fiction. While that is not ultimately the way Kripal uses the words "imaginal" and "science fiction," these words are triggering to people who want the academy to treat these subjects with the respect that they deserve.

In conclusion, religion has taught us that we can know God. And with that knowledge, many have foolishly believed that they have conquered the

mystery. The goal of religion is not to know, as in to conquer, but to know as in to have a continuously, never-ending curiosity that is at the heart of true intimacy. Knowing someone makes you want to know more. Knowledge begets knowledge. And without knowledge of the mystical people are increasingly becoming more depressed. Elsewhere, I have written,

Porosity pinpoints precisely the thing that humans desire the most: a transcendental encounter with God. It is the spark of inspiration, a moment of comfort, an out of body experience where people come face to face with the mystery, and so much more. This porosity invades conversations, mundane moments, everyday circumstances and transforms people into evangelists and the theological landscape of peoples lives change in an instant. Porosity is why America is experiencing a psychedelic renaissance and why the American church is dying. People are craving an encounter with the divine. People are starving for transcendental, mystical experiences that reveal their place in the mystery. Porosity is why Tibetan Buddhists spin a prayer wheel, why Hindu's place mangos on the altar of the local shrine, why Muslims travel to Mecca, and why Christians sing "How Great Thou Art" at the top of their lungs as they watch the sunrise in the mountains. Worship is the only tenable response to encountering the mystery.<sup>3</sup> The noetic response is universal.<sup>4</sup>

To quote Roberta Flack's lyrics to the song, *Killing Me Softly*, Kripal is "Strumming my pain with his fingers, singing my life with his words. Killing me softly, with his song. Killing me softly—with his song." From the first to the last page, the overarching message is one that moves me and is why I also am studying religion. While I don't agree with all of Kripal's points, the pursuit of mystery invokes a deep Hallelujah in my soul.

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<sup>2</sup> Much thanks to Meg Mercury, for providing literary language to frame this rebuttal.

<sup>3</sup> A quote from a conversation with Benjamin McCauley, director of Denovo Psychedelic Therapy Clinic in Lubbock, TX on December 28, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Jill Hurley. "Singing Samo Songs: From Shaman to Pastor: A Book Review." *On Knowing Humanity Journal: Anthropological Ethnography and Analysis Through the Eyes of Christian Faith* Vol. 7, no. 1 (January 2023).



**Jill Hurley** is a doctoral student at Graduate Theological Union, and has an MA in Theological and Cultural Anthropology from Eastern University and dual bachelor degrees in Religion and Anthropology from Eastern New Mexico University. Her research has covered the ontological turn in Christian converts in Nepal and the inter-generational trauma of the nation of China from a psychohistorical perspective. She is currently working on a project that explores the theological and ethical implications of Christians using psychedelic plant medicine in a medical context, such as using psilocybin to treat PTSD due to religious or other forms of trauma.

*Author email:* [jhurley@ses.gtu.edu](mailto:jhurley@ses.gtu.edu)

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