

Kabbalah: A Neurocognitive Approach to Mystical Experiences. By Shahar Arzy and Moshe Idel. New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2015. Pp. x + 206. \$50.

Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism has remained esoteric through the ages, so two comments, according to legends, that encapsulate the reticence to bring such study into the public sphere. First, at Professor Gershom Scholem's seminar at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Rabbi Abraham Chen remarked that "A scholar of mysticism is like an accountant: He may know where all the treasure is, but he is not free to use it." Second, Professor Saul Lieberman, introduced Scholem at Jewish Theological Seminary in New York with the quip that "Jewish Mysticism is nonsense. But the history of nonsense, that is scholarship." And so why should kabbalah still matter, especially to theologians? Beyond fealty to reason or revelation, theologians today are searching for ways of advancing a postmodern religion in symbiosis with science. By collaborating with Shahar Arzy, senior neurologist at Hadassah Hebrew University Medical Center, Ein Kerem, Jerusalem, Moshe Idel, professor of Jewish Thought at Hebrew University, figures as part of a theological-scientific match made in earthly Jerusalem. I.'s academic career is dedicated to reviving the legacy of a neglected medieval Jewish mystic, Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291 CE). Abulafia identified two predominant schools within the study of Jewish mysticism, namely: (1) theosophic kabbalah, speculation regarding the cosmic mapping of the divine as it emerges into manifestation; and (2) ecstatic kabbalah, concerned with techniques that engender experiences of immersion and absorption in the godhead. While Jewish mystics relied heavily on communicating their mystical speculation and experience through copious scriptural referents, their improvisation—much like accomplished jazz musicians—continues to amaze and mystify readers.

Following a general introduction, the book begins with a justification of the neurocognitive approach to mystical experiences, along with an awareness of its limitations. The richest part of the book lies in the second chapter and beyond, which contribute immensely to expanding the discourse of the four main ecstatic states experienced in kabbalistic texts:

- (1) autoscopic ecstasy—the mystic sees an image of himself in the extracorporeal space, in contrast to the intermediate phenomenon between autoscopia and out-of-body experience known as heautoscopy;
- (2) ascensional ecstasy—the mystic experiences leaving the body, paralyzed or asleep, with a paranormal experience of encountering heavenly entities;
- (3) unitive ecstasy—the mystic experiences unification with the divine;
- (4) dissociative ecstasy—or possessive state in which the external spiritual force inhabits the mystic's mental state.

I. and A. argue that just as scientists no longer refer to "perception" and "action" but also to "perceiver" and "actor" as constituting the human self, so too ecstatic mystical texts allude to this dissociation. Neuroscience adds immeasurably to this investigation

with delusional misidentification syndromes which are not only pathological states of the human brain but are also inducible in healthy subjects by various manipulations or stimuli. What the clinical neurocognitive datum shows is how much these pathological states, much like ecstatic mystical states, are processes that challenge and disrupt the distinction between self and other.

While the mystic may interpret mystical techniques as “sacred or prophetic experiences that reveal mystical secrets about human or divine nature” (117), they can be comprehended through the neurocognitive science, which involves more neuro-imaging than brain mapping. The aim is to “stress the importance of the assemblage of technical, sociocultural, and linguistic factors for the construction of the human self, as based on physiological and neurocognitive characteristics that were altered by the use of ecstatic mystical techniques” (117). The challenge remains: to enable introspection to evolve in tandem with the rapid pace of technology, which is able now to measure so much in the neurocognitive domain.

Each author features his own appendix, introducing the general reader to particulars of neurology and ecstatic kabbalah respectively. The footnotes do little to elucidate the authors’ arguments, especially relating to primary and secondary sources on Jewish mysticism. I. is familiar with vast swaths of kabbalistic literature, but quoting an entire book in the notes rather than pointing to specific passages becomes very frustrating for the specialist and likely intimidating for the non-specialist. Also lacking are any aids for further reading and reflection, especially for the theologian, including an index of scriptural or mystical references.

Avoiding anachronistic modernist methodologies in the humanities, I. and A. offer another approach to mysticism. Advances in theory, clinical studies, and neuro-imaging technology are fruitful when applied as a methodological lens of interpretation to the phenomenology of mystical states described in kabbalistic texts. I. is to be commended for continuing to think critically about kabbalah, expanding the discourse beyond the humanities and into dialogue with science.

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Jesus and Buddha: Friends in Conversation. By Roger Haight and Paul Knitter.
Maryknoll: Orbis, 2015. Pp. xvii + 253. \$26.

This volume is based on a seminar taught by Paul Knitter in 2012 at Union Theological Seminary in New York, for which Roger Haight was a resource person. Each chapter has a similar structure, either a Buddhist perspective (K.) or a Christian perspective (H.), and then a response from the other tradition; each chapter ends with a joint “It seems to us” section. The topics are wide-ranging: spirituality; dialogue; the teachings of Buddha and Jesus; their identities; ultimate reality; the source and destiny of the world; the problem and potential inherent in human nature; words and silence; attaining peace by working for justice; double religious belonging. The topics are dealt with