



## Destructive Ecstasies: Wargasm and the Joy of Violence

The documentary film *Fahrenheit 9/11* has a scene of a soldier in a heavily armored tank, talking about the “rush” he gets from killing Iraqis while listening to hard, violent rock music. It is a particularly clear example of what is one of the most widely known forms of ecstasy, the intense joy which arises from destruction. Such violence can come from war, from crime, and from many forms of domination. We see this ecstatic joy in Robert Duvall’s character Lt. Colonel Kilgore in *Apocalypse Now*, riding into battle with Wagner’s music blaring, loving the smell of napalm in the morning. Such destructive ecstasy is sometimes called “the thrill of the kill,” the intense state that arises from violence. As General George S. Patton said observing the scarred French battlefield, “Could anything be more magnificent? Compared to war, all other forms of human endeavor shrink to insignificance. God, how I love it!”<sup>1</sup>

The destructive ecstasy that we see in violence and war can be useful and sometimes justified—it motivates people to fight and defend themselves, to protect others and kill enemies that threaten them. But for peaceful societies, the violent thrills that come from killing, crime, terrorism, gang violence, and raiding can become problems that drain large amounts of public money for police, courts, jails, and armies. The emotional intensity found in proximity to death and destruction may be secular, or it may be understood as a dark sort of religious ecstasy. Violent acts may be a way of giving transformative intensity and meaning to a dull life that lacks them otherwise, or there may be a vengeful God who inspires the struggle that fills both supporters and enemies with horror,

fear, disgust, and hatred. But it can also be a form of transgression, not only the secular fascination with the demonic, but a transformation of the supernatural and transcendent into the superstitious and dark. As Victoria Nelson has described the situation, it is a displaced religious impulse:

Our culture's post-Reformation, post-Enlightenment prohibition on the supernatural and exclusion of a transcendent... has created the ontological equivalent of a perversion caused by repression. Lacking an allowable connection with the transcendent, we have substituted an obsessive, unconscious focus on the negative dimension of the denied experience.<sup>2</sup>

She notes that our society “carries the burden of the unacknowledged and unacceptable divine,” as the transcendental has shrunk from awesome to awful, as Christianity turned pagan gods into Devils, and Hellenistic *daimones* into demons.<sup>3</sup> This is the modern *Zeitgeist*, where mystery becomes danger, and the miraculous becomes dark and dangerous. She links this with the broader Western rejection of Platonism in favor of Aristotelianism, where “the entire discredited worldview of Platonism eventually came to be linked with the underworld and the demonic grotesque.”<sup>4</sup> Experiences banished from mainstream intellectual discourse turn up in other ways. This is Freud’s “return of the repressed,” except that here it is religious ecstasy which has been suppressed by the culture.

Observing the positive aspects of ecstasy is indeed difficult, for as we have seen in Chapter 4, there is a wide swath of academics and theologians suppressing the value of ecstatic experience. This chapter includes some of the things that they fear. Here, we shall explore two varieties of the dark return of the transcendent, as destructive ecstasy shown through violence and through transgression.

### ECSTATIC VIOLENCE

As Lars Bang Larsen notes in his article “When the Light Falls: Notes on Ecstasy and Corruption, “There is ambivalence in ecstasy, a dark undertow... ecstasy can be absolute freedom or a dance of death.”<sup>5</sup> Following Immanuel Kant, he defines ecstasy as the sublime, a meeting of human consciousness with formless and immeasurable nature. It is not only like a starry night or a vast desert, but it includes the violence of destruction, found in hurricanes and volcanoes. Encounter with the sublime is the

human response to the infinite, which is chaos beyond human comprehension. When one is carried away, reason is lost. As Larsen notes, “This is why systems of belief and knowledge based on reason and truth have official policies against ecstasy.”<sup>6</sup>

This approach is based on the belief that if one seeks to transcend reason, what will be found is chaos and darkness. The irrational is decadent, fallen, making self-control impossible. Reason protects the person from the deeper nature of the self, which is a dark and dangerous thing. This deeper nature of the self may indeed be passionate and fallen in Christianity, to be avoided by reason. However, in Hindu Vedanta, the deeper self is ideal and virtuous, the *atman*, one’s divine nature. One’s view of ecstasy may well be based on one’s cultural assumptions about human nature.

However, ecstatic states may be open to both interpretations. When the positive aspects of ecstasy are excluded, people turn to more negative ones. As the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, people need the state of flow, in which there is exhilaration and enjoyment, when body and mind are stretched to the limit and overcoming challenges. The optimal state is self-transcendence, sometimes with religious meaning. But when such states are limited, and people cannot find a state of flow in a positive way, they turn to the intense enjoyment of danger and random violence. Csikszentmihalyi includes Roman gladiators, Spanish killing of bulls, American boxing, fighting on the front lines of battle in war, and criminal behavior as places where the dark side of flow can be found.<sup>7</sup> It is not an opposition but a continuum, which may have different responses to the same events. He gives as an example sexuality, which can be “painful, revolting, frightening, neutral, pleasant, pleasurable, enjoyable or ecstatic” depending on its interpretation. It can be positive, a sport with physical skills, a meaningless ritual, or addiction, depending on individual understanding. The lack of flow, leaving activities that lack meaning, can make life impoverished or in some cases evoke violence as its antidote.

As William F. May writes in his article, “Terrorism as Strategy and Ecstasy,” violence is a way of surpassing the limits of normal life, of transcending an ordinary identity. It is like an alternative kind of religious behavior, with sacramental ritual and leadership:

[Ecstasy] literally means “to stand outside oneself,” that is, to stand outside the limits of ordinary consciousness or to stand free of the restraints and limits of everyday behavior. Terrorism- whether of the established

regime or the revolutionary left- is characterized by this ecstatic element... special uniforms, masks, sunglasses in Haiti, white robes and hoods for the Ku Klux Klan- all these devices emphasize the distinction between... the everyday world and the consecrated activities of those who... justify and apotheosize a dreadful violence.<sup>8</sup>

The term “wargasm” was used by Robin Morgan in her book *The Demon Lover: The Roots of Terrorism*, but its original use was by the radical group Weathermen, declaring their opposition to the United States government in 1969. For Morgan, a feminist writer, ecstatic violence is associated with both sexuality and death, and is a function of the patriarchal focus on power. Violence is hypnotic and attractive, as personified in the form of the Demon Lover:

[He] is the ultimate sexual idol of a male-centered cultural tradition that stretches from pre-Biblical times to the present: he is the logical extension of the patriarchal hero/martyr. He is the Demon Lover, and society is (secretly or openly) fascinated by him... his intensity reeks of glamour... He is sexy because he is deadly, he excites with the thrill of fear.<sup>9</sup>

Both religious and secular ideologies glorify death and male leadership. Morgan quotes Kiramat Ullah, a fighter in Pakistan, on the glories of war:

When we start fighting and bullets are flying and we are firing at the enemy and they are crying out and in trouble, and when some of my men are being injured and becoming martyrs- that is the peak!<sup>10</sup>

She also cites the combat-training songs for the Rangers, Green Berets, and Delta Force members at Fort Bragg, North Carolina: “Glo-ry, Glo-ry, what a hell of a way to die!” As Randall Terry, founder of Operation Rescue, states in publicly inspiring his followers: “I want you to let a wave of intolerance, of hatred, wash over you...”<sup>11</sup> For these groups, it is fighting and death that makes life worth living; it is death that makes one alive. She calls it the “Sadean high.” Morgan’s fascination is the attraction of violence, power, and death. As she describes her Demon Lover figure, he is a pirate, an outlaw, a daredevil, a swashbuckler, and highwayman, seeking the ecstasy of death:

He glares out from the reviewing stands, where the passing troops salute him... He straps a hundred pounds of weaponry to his body, larger than life on the film screen... He drives the fastest cars and wears the most opaque sunglasses... whatever he dons becomes a uniform. He is a living weapon.<sup>12</sup>... Recognizing only the redeeming ecstasy of a tragic death, the hero already lives as a dead man. As a dead man he is fearless, because as a dead man he is unconquerable by any life force.<sup>13</sup>

She places herself in his position:

*But this-* the hands shaking, the throat dry, the heart pounding, the brain in a blur of excitation, the body poised, exhilarated, the risk of being swept into obliteration, the aphrodisiac in demanding power- *surely this surpasses whatever they mean by sexual joy.*<sup>14</sup>

Such a patriarchal “politics of ecstatic death” suffuses both nationalism and religion, appearing in sermons, political speeches, and the rush to war. For Morgan, it is a sensualization of cruelty and death, a lust for annihilation that opposes a more feminist ecstasy, in which the person stands inside of the self, rather than outside of it, and has compassion for the victims of violence and war. But the “high” of soldiers comes through ideology, from faith in leaders and traditions.

She notes that violence can come from secular and nationalist sources, as in terrorist groups like the Algerian FLN, the Italian Red Brigade, and the Tupamaros. It can also come from groups that have religious associations, such as the Muslim Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad groups, the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo, the Christian Army of God and The Lord’s Resistance Army. In such cases, whether there is religious or secular ideology, it is rare that the individual members report their own current ecstatic religious experiences; more frequently, we see great faith and love toward idealized leaders, and a distant anticipated ecstatic goal that requires violence and sacrifice. That goal will hold the joy and beauty that this life lacks, and violence is justified, for it leads toward the ultimate goal.

One of the most well-known articles on the ecstasy of war was written by William Broyles, Jr in the November 1984 issue of *Esquire Magazine*. It was called “Why Men Love War,” and it described the states of intense joy and excitement that he saw and felt during his years as a soldier in the Vietnam War. He was struck by the ways that people did not discuss this

when they came back from the war, and wanted people to know about it. There were many unspoken attractions of war.

The love of war stems from the union, deep in the core of our being between sex and destruction, beauty and horror, love and death. War may be the only way in which most men touch the mythic domains in our soul. It is, for men, at some terrible level, the closest thing to what childbirth is for women: the initiation into the power of life and death. It is like lifting off the corner of the universe and looking at what's underneath. To see war is to see into the dark heart of things, that no-man's-land between life and death, or even beyond.<sup>15</sup>

War brings about ecstatic states, because of its life or death intensity. He notes, "War stops time, intensifies experience to the point of a terrible ecstasy." It is a corrupting influence—as with animals, the taste of blood changes people:

A lieutenant colonel I knew, a true intellectual, was put in charge of civil affairs, the work we did helping the Vietnamese grow rice and otherwise improve their lives. He was a sensitive man who kept a journal and seemed far better equipped for winning hearts and minds than for combat command. But he got one, and I remember flying out to visit his fire base the night after it had been attacked by an NVA sapper unit. Most of the combat troops had been out on an operation, so this colonel mustered a motley crew of clerks and cooks and drove the sappers off, chasing them across tile rice paddies and killing dozens of these elite enemy troops by the light of flares. That morning, as they were surveying what they had done and loading the dead NVA—all naked and covered with grease and mud so they could penetrate the barbed wire—on mechanical mules like so much garbage, there was a look of beatific contentment on the colonel's face that I had not seen except in charismatic churches. It was the look of a person transported into ecstasy.

And I—what did I do, confronted with this beastly scene? I smiled back, as filled with bliss as he was. That was another of the times I stood on the edge of my humanity, looked into the pit, and loved what I saw there. I had surrendered to an aesthetic that was divorced from that crucial quality of empathy that lets us feel the sufferings of others. And I saw a terrible beauty there. War is not simply the spirit of ugliness, although it is certainly that, the Devil's work. But to give the Devil his due, it is also an affair of great and seductive beauty.<sup>16</sup>

Like Robin Morgan, Broyles discusses the sexual charge of war and the ways that death and sexuality seem to merge:

Many men loved napalm, loved its silent power, the way it could make tree lines or houses explode as if by spontaneous combustion. But I always thought napalm was greatly overrated, unless you enjoy watching tires burn. I preferred white phosphorus, which exploded with a fulsome elegance, wreathing its target in intense and billowing white smoke, throwing out glowing red comets trailing brilliant white plumes. I loved it more—not less—because of its function: to destroy, to kill. The seduction of War is in its offering such intense beauty—divorced from all civilized values, but beauty still... Most men who have been to war, and most women who have been around it, remember that never in their lives did they have so heightened a sexuality. War is, in short, a turn-on. War cloaks men in a coat that conceals the limits and inadequacies of their separate natures. It gives them an aura, a collective power, an almost animal force.<sup>17</sup>

This description in some ways parallels that of Robin Morgan, with the intensity of violence as both sexual and destructive. It is an ecstasy she finds more suited to men.

When war is supported by the culture, there are often rituals and myths which give ultimate meaning to the violence, transforming cruel and sadistic acts into moral actions, expressions of virtue which turn warriors into heroes and saviors. The destructive ecstasy of violence and bloodshed is justified and redefined as positive and socially beneficial by brotherhood and the value of one's own group. The fascination and revulsion in the killing of enemies is balanced by the intense closeness between fellow soldiers. Sebastian Junger talks about this aspect of war:

War is hell, as the saying goes—but it isn't only that. It's a lot of other things, too—most of them delivered in forms that are way more pure and intense than what is available back home. The undeniable hellishness of war forces men to bond in ways that aren't necessary—or even possible—in civilian society. The closest thing to it might be the parent-child bond, but that is not reciprocal. Children are generally not prepared to die for their parents, whereas the men in a platoon of combat infantry for the most part are prepared to do that for each other.<sup>18</sup>

War justifies both love of allies and ecstatic violence toward enemies, lending both heroism and morality. This sort of moral justification is

a major problem with modern terrorist groups, who claim that killing enemy civilians without warning is morally justified by a future goal. Violence can be justified by love or by hatred.

Violent and destructive ecstasy can appear in other contexts than war. The psychoanalyst Michael Eigen writes of the prominence of destructive ecstasy in his patients:

There are destructive as well as creative ecstasies, ecstasies of war and injury, brutal ecstasies.... Ecstasies of pain and trauma confuse souls and mind. In light of miseries wrought by ecstatic destruction, no critique of ecstasy can be too strong. History is filled with stunning abuse between groups and persons fueled by ecstatic processes that sour, take cruel ideological turns, pit being against being. Ecstasy and its twin, ecstasy envy, readily meld into a righteous rage that can be all too calculating.<sup>19</sup>

Eigen can also see the more positive, primal side of ecstasy which is focused in the body and is neither positive nor negative:

Ecstasy is the heart's center. The heart of life. It is not reserved for the soul's union with God, although that is where it starts and ends. It pervades the body, the inside and outside of the skin, the pulsing of organs. It is in the senses... and blood.<sup>20</sup>

However, he recognizes that the ecstasy associated with the blood can be very dark:

Blood ecstasies can be terrible. Not just ecstasies of sex, but ecstasies of murder, ecstasies of fear and rage. There are patients who must cut themselves, see and smear and taste their blood, not only to feel real but to feel ecstatic. There are individuals who must cut others to tap a stream of ecstasy... Death-life feed each other, soul of the hunt. Twist the sense of power and you have the frenzy of Nazi calculation, chills of exaltation and stupor, extermination ecstasies.<sup>21</sup>

As Eigen notes, a part of this search for ecstasy can be sexual, from a sort of sexual desire that is inadequate, blocked, or armored. He notes, "the schizophrenic and Nazi share orgasmic inadequacy, they seek alternative orgasm: madness and murder."<sup>22</sup> But the ecstasy which is wholeness, integrating all parts of the self, requires more than that. Rather than "sinking" or "merging" or "being filled" with God, people seek to tear



away what is imperfect and impure, literally cutting their flesh and tearing away their ideas and emotions. Eigen quotes Plotinus on how to get to God through ecstasy—“cut away everything”—and some people take this sort of approach literally:

Their blades want something that can't be touched by metal. Do they feel something ineffable for a moment when they see blood? The soul is in the blood? Or perhaps they angrily insist body is a gateway to ecstasy, the bloody body. No body, no ecstasy.<sup>23</sup>

This is how ecstasy is sought in a materialist culture—in and through the body. While some people can find destructive ecstasy on their own, attacking their own bodies by self-mutilation, most people require enemies, real or imagined. People need an Other to fight, to create a true intensity of hatred, and to focus the hatred and anxiety in life. The enemy becomes the scapegoat, and the ecstasy of destruction is losing anger upon it.

Violent ecstasy may be motivated by both secular and religious ends. It appears in secular contexts which do not support any transcendent form of ecstasy, which the culture promotes with a variety of extremes—extreme sports, extreme combat, and extreme terror at horror films.<sup>24</sup> Intense experience becomes either illegal, especially through the drug wars, or dangerous, in survival shows and violent competitions, in random sexuality, addiction, and terrorism. Simulations of dangerous situations become popular entertainment, found on television crime shows, reality survival shows, and in war films. As Murray Pomerance notes in his edited volume *Bad: Infamy, Darkness, Evil and Slime on Screen*, violence and corruption “sell big.” People are attracted by screen representations of negativity: evil, monstrosity, corruption, ugliness, villainy, and darkness, including killers, vamps, cold-blooded megalomaniacs, and demons.<sup>25</sup> His book has chapters on Nazis, violent pornography, and “bad goodness.” Violence and corruption on screen can evoke emotions like terror, disgust, and rage in the audience. Homicidal ecstasy, which emphasizes the lure of the forbidden, and criminal behavior are made attractive.

We may also see a form of destructive ecstasy in the popular fascination with films depicting monsters, especially vampires. Without positive spiritual figures to represent immortality, we move to the demonic. The vampire is an immortal being who lives intensely and passionately,

a cultural rebel, and a tragic figure whose lovers are victims who die while he lives on. They have cosmic longings, unlike dull humans, and are “born to the blood,” feeling the intense draw of the night. They are different from the herd of humanity, both more sensitive and more callous. The older image of Dracula has become more popular through Anne Rice’s novels, in which vampires roam history as predators, taking what they choose. They are powerful and instinctual, living in both natural and supernatural worlds. The endless life of vampires does not have immortality as an ideal heaven, but rather an infinity of darkness and violence. When there is no positive heaven, a dark underworld can substitute as immortal life.

Their ecstatic states are supernatural and destructive, taking both blood and life from their victims. They are instinctual, sensual, and brilliant but corrupted by what they must do to live. An example of vampire ecstasy comes from Rice’s *Interview with a Vampire*, in which the vampire Louis de Pointe du Lac is an aristocrat who becomes a vampire, attracted to the “pulsing veins” of his male and female victims:

I sank my teeth into his skin, my body rigid, that hard sex driving against me, and I lifted him in passion off the floor. Wave after wave of his beating heart passed into me as, weightless, I rocked with him, devouring him, his ecstasy, his conscious pleasure.<sup>26</sup>

In vampire literature, ecstasy is associated with both drawing blood and having it taken. For Anne Rice, vampires are passionate and tragic figures, caught in destructive passions. The vampire ecstasy of attacking victims and drawing their blood can be associated with aggression, rage, hunger, and sexuality. As David and Ellen Ramsdale note, rage and sexual orgasm are similar physiologically. There is rushing blood, facial contortions, expressive sounds, and release of stored energy. They note, “Getting angry and expressing it very dramatically may be a socially acceptable way of having an orgasm-type experience in public, a sort of “angergasm.”<sup>27</sup> Part of the appeal of vampires is their public expression of private, forbidden passions, and the linking of violence and sexuality.

Destructive ecstasy can also be simulated by watching violent films, as in the recent genre of films that include detailed scenes of torture. Rage becomes mixed with sexuality, as people become enthusiastic over prolonged torture scenes in films. As Jenny McCartney notes in her article, “The rise of ‘torture porn,’” recent horror films,

...openly beckon the audience to relish voyeuristically the victim's prolonged agony, and often to enter into a form of dubious complicity with the 'sicko' who wields control. They recognize few boundaries to the degradation they will heap upon their protagonists for the delectation of their audience.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, we can see different styles of destructive ecstasy. One is the ecstasy of sheer destruction, found in battle frenzy, the joy in killing, the glory of revenge, the adrenaline rush of war. Another is an ecstasy of deliberate sin, of transgression, in which the goal is not necessarily death, but rather pain and harm, the violation of boundaries, and artistic originality found through the recognition of human misery.

### THE ECSTASY OF TRANSGRESSION

One well-known writer and literary critic who justifies this sort of violation, which he calls "transgressive ecstasy," is Georges Bataille. Bataille describes human life as ordinary, conformist, robotic, confined by the past. How can one be original, think new thoughts, be a true artist or writer or thinker? Certainly, we cannot transcend the ordinary in a religious sense, as there is no God and there are no religious goals to achieve; people cannot reach any real sphere of transcendence. People cannot find God; they only go through levels of meaning upon meaning, a "hermeneutical schizophrenia" which searches for some God substitute. The only real potential for originality comes through what he calls "transgression:"

To define transgression we must think of a threshold, or rather, a movement towards the threshold, towards the limit, where there is no longer interpretation. We must think of the self being pushed to its own limits... Each limit is revealed through transgression...And with each new understanding, an abyss is opened and a new fall takes place. But transgression offers the hope that the sacred can be recovered in the shadow of a dead god.<sup>29</sup>

Bataille's "paradoxical philosophy" arose from difficult and violent periods in his own life. He described the world as painful and horrifying, full of violent sexuality, sickness, and intoxication, causing the "collapse of being into night."<sup>30</sup> In his writing, literature is transgression, "the dark and unholy rendering of a sacrificial wound" which allows true and

meaningful communication, rather than ordinary pseudo-communication. It reveals the “violent absence of the good,”<sup>31</sup> the death of God and the absence of any sacred dimension of human life. This is the cause of terrible suffering, but it is meaningful because it is the true human situation. Divine ecstasy is horror for Bataille; it is intensity which must exist without any sacred dimension. Transgressive joy is the surpassing of annihilation, the realization of nothingness, and thus the knowledge that everything is permitted and nothing can be ultimately limited.

God is limitation, “wing-clipping” that which forbids. One’s freedom without God is intensity, and only hell remains, as heaven is gone. This is the hell of human suffering, the meaning which remains for people without a transcendent realm. When Bataille writes “I have wanted and found ecstasy,”<sup>32</sup> this is an ecstasy of excess, surviving the loss of heaven. He describes it as the time “when the plenitude of horror and that of joy coincide.”<sup>33</sup>

Because there is no ultimate good, the ecstatic must strive for an intensity of evil—found in violence, murder, blasphemy, excessive sexuality. He states, “I search only for the terror of evil”<sup>34</sup> the denial of the false and rotting ordinary world, and the seeking of intensity and originality. Only fear and eroticism are powerful enough to negate nature and the profane world, thus the “erotic attraction of limits and taboos.” Transcendence becomes transgression, ecstasy becomes excess, and because there is no sacred aspect to life, artistic originality requires the intensity of the profane. Thus, disorder and madness are superior to ordinary order and rationality, and we escape from the ordinary and repetitive world by transgressive ecstasy. Transgression is what remains when the sacred is gone, intensity without divinity, a fascination with horror, madness, violence, eroticism, and death. Some people find that fascination in suicide, an “intensity of the profane.” Talal Asad notes,

For most witnesses, horror- a compound of pain and delight or (as Bataille put it) of ecstasy and unbearable pain- is generated by the unexpected image of a broken body, a shattered human identity. There are few things as shocking as a sudden suicide in one’s presence. A suicide operation, in which many die and are wounded, extends that shock. A possible refuge from horrified helplessness in that case is righteous anger directed at the perpetrator of the deadly violence. ... In the suicide bomber’s act, perhaps what horrifies is not just dying and killing (or killing by dying) but the violent appearance of something that is normally disregarded in secular

modernity: the limitless pursuit of freedom, the illusion of an uncoerced interiority that can withstand the force of institutional disciplines.<sup>35</sup>

We also see such violent imagery in the writing of Foucault, who speaks of interpretations devouring themselves in a world without a sacred. People seek some ultimate end to interpretation, but without success, and become intimately tied to madness. For Foucault, intensity without the sacred brings madness, horror, and the grotesque. For instance, the images of the crucified Christ are horrific and severe, full of potentiality for horror and madness. There is an abundance of dark meaning, with no higher goal to which it points. This is the “decay of Gothic symbolism” which is dizzying and frightening when it is not able to point to a spiritual object.<sup>36</sup> We have shattering and dismemberment—transgression, but no transcendence.

Thus, the lack of religious ecstasy leads to transgression as the only true originality, the only possible extreme in a Nietzschean world where God is dead and heaven is inaccessible. Transgression is immensely accessible—one need only violate a moral rule or a social norm. Thus, we have direct transgression—violence in relationships, drunken or drug-fueled rages, and passionate addictions. We also have vicarious transgression, in dogfights and bullfights where people get to watch violence leading to death, in film dramas of revenge and rape and degradation and violation of taboos.

In his article “Genocide as Transgression,” Dan Stone describes genocide in ecstatic terms. Following on Roger Caillios’ anthropological analysis of “war as festival,” and Dominick LaCapra’s descriptions of joy in scapegoating and the “carnavalesque” aspects of the Holocaust, Stone writes that any act of genocide involves a heightening of community feeling, and “ecstatic sense of belonging” when people share a normally forbidden act of transgression in order to safeguard the community by killing its designated threatening group.<sup>37</sup>

In his book *Memory, History and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, Saul Friedlander writes of the “mystical Fuehrer-bond” which seduced Germany into supporting the Holocaust. He spoke of *rausch*, the intoxication or ecstasy of destruction which occurs at the breaking of a universal taboo, in this case mass murder. Such irrepressible exaltation substitutes for a more traditional religious ecstatic goal, for this is human transcendence through existential experience, in which ordinary men are required to transgress moral laws in the name of a new historical epoch.

National Socialism combined the thrill of perfect obedience with a violation of the ordinary order. As Himmler stated in his 1943 speech to the SS, the mass murder of the Holocaust was glorious, “modernity’s final and highest expression.” But he exhorted his listeners to be silent about these deeds, as the world would not understand them.<sup>38</sup> This *rausch* drew ordinary people into becoming extraordinary, so that they might be transformed into secular reflections of the religious hero.

### DESTRUCTIVE ECSTASY AND RELIGION

Most religious war is not ecstatic—the soldier fights in obedience to a god’s commands, in order to please the god. People generally do not have visions or mystical union with the God on the battlefield; they are servants of the God and his generals. Warriors are rarely prophets. The end of time may be full of ecstatic joy, but the present is a time of work and struggle.

Yet there are destructive images in many religions. The gods themselves may express and support violence in myths of past and future, as seen in Shiva’s dance of destruction at the end of the *yuga* in Hinduism, the destruction of the world in *The Revelation of John*, and Yahweh’s Biblical command to kill all of the Amalekites, even their children and their animals (1 Samuel 15:3). It is shown in the jihads and crusades of religious followers, listening to songs intended to evoke an emotional response, a “battle ecstasy” which can motivate more violent fighting. Such songs may range from religious chants of the Shahada in Islam, songs of the Soldiers of the Cross, to the Battle Hymn of the Republic. Destructive ecstasy may take on extreme forms—the heroes of the Greek epic *The Iliad* were possessed by gods during battles, and the “battle-fury” (*riastradh*) of the Irish hero Cuchulainn required multiple baths for him to cool down (the steam from his body burst three vats of cold water). According to the *Tain Bo Chuailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*), Cuchulainn’s actions in battle involved supernatural power:

During this slaughter, a graphic description is given of the battle fury, or ‘riastradh’, that Cuchulainn experienced from his early childhood. The change that comes over him is not just one of spirit but also a major physical one. His whole body changes until he takes on the appearance of an invincible, primeval dragon, with distended head and snapping jaws. During the course of the battle he himself, just like the Sí, was completely

invisible to the enemy. After this great slaughter, Ailill estimated that almost half the number of men they had set out with, approximately 54,000 warriors, had been slain along the way by Cuchulainn.<sup>39</sup>

Destructive ecstasy in religious war can arise from killing enemies, or merely humiliating and degrading them. There are times when religious fervor can merge with destructive ecstasy, and religious warriors can be capable of a cruelty which often violates their own ethics.

Earlier forms of destructive religious ecstasy were often associated with raiding cultures. Among the Vikings of Scandinavia, some of the most fierce and powerful warriors were called the berserkers. Before battle, they would get into the trance state of *berserkergang*, a state which allowed them to ignore pain and danger. They dressed themselves in bear or wolf skins, to show that their violence was like that of wild animals. They would enter into the battle frenzy by biting their shields and howling, and they were ferocious fighters while this battle ecstasy lasted. Some tales say the berserkers were magically immune to weapons, unable to be harmed by fire or iron. The berserker is closely associated in many respects with the God Odin, who was said to shape-shift into the form of a bird, fish, or wild animal. The berserker, too, was often said to change into animal form, or at least to assume the ferocious qualities of the wolf or bear. We have descriptions of berserkers in battle frenzy going back to ninth-century Norway, and theorists have speculated about whether battle ecstasy was motivated by shamanic trance, possession by animal spirits, or the use of *amanita muscaria* mushrooms. A good poetic description of battle ecstasy with its distortion in the perception of time and space comes from a recent fiction novel, *Merlin*, by Stephen R. Lawhead. Myrddin Emrys, or Merlin, is on the battlefield:

The cry of outrage reached my ears as a mild and distant sound, for I had once again entered that uncanny state where the actions of others were as languorous and slow as those of men half-asleep. The flying, careening warhost became a massive, lumbering thing, heavy-footed and dull, without speed or quickness, overcome by a languid torpor. Once again, as in the battle at Maridunum, I became invincible, dealing death with every well-calculated blow, hewing down mighty warriors with effortless strokes, my movements perfect in their deadly grace. The clash of battle reached my ears like the sound of water washing a far-off shore. I moved with elegant precision, striking boldly and with vengeance, my sword a living thing... I carved a swath through the enemy ranks as if I was a scythe and

they the corn standing for harvest... I wept with laughter until I tasted the tears in my mouth.<sup>40</sup>

In Celtic tradition, battle ecstasy was a major way to become a hero. All of the major Western monotheisms have heroic strands which emphasize the importance of war, from the ancient struggles of the Israelites with the Canaanites, to the Crusades, to the armies of the Mujahaddin. Destructive ecstasy tends to be found in dualistic religions, in which the world becomes an arena of divine forces fighting for power. It becomes changed in the religious context is when hatred of the enemy becomes more intense and valuable than love of the god.

Destructive action may not actually bring the person ecstatic visions of the god, but it may certainly demonstrate an extreme form of obedience to the god. There have long been bloodthirsty gods, whose rage is only appeased through attacks on sinners, infidels, and heathen. Sometimes this involves death, though torture may be sufficient. In ancient Greece and Rome, for instance, there was voluntary whipping at Lacedaemon before the altar of Diana on the Day of Flagellations, and Plutarch notes that boys were sometimes whipped to death before Diana the Orthian—and the one who lasted longest was called the Hero.<sup>41</sup> Gods were believed to be calmed by torture—Petronius writes that Encolpus was whipped by sailors to prevent a storm and to appease the deity of the ship.<sup>42</sup> There were also Flagratores, who allowed themselves to be whipped for money, to calm the anger of the gods, or to rid a place of impurity. Historically, there are gods who have required individual human sacrifices, but the modern holy wars tend to require group sacrifices—we see genocides, martyrdom operations, and spreading religious Truth by means of the gun, the bomb, and the sword. Such behavior has been encouraged by warlike interpretations of religious texts in the past, and to a lesser extent messianic literature (especially apocalyptic fiction) in the present. We can see this emphasis on violence in certain of the modern fundamentalisms.

Mainstream religion in the modern West tends to emphasize ethics and reason, and avoids ecstatic extremes. Yet we have the creation of radical fundamentalist wings which emphasize ecstasy in the future, but only if the members obey the authoritarian leaders and support their wars and hatred of outsiders. One fact stands out in modern religious ecstatic violence: it tends to follow a vision of God which appeared in the distant past, or will appear at the end of the world. Ecstasy in the present world



is absent, or in its rare occurrence highly suspect. Heaven is not on earth, and it is modern fighting and violence which will bring the faithful to that noble end. The closest that we can find to religious ecstasy is a sort of possession trance, when the person becomes God's avenging arm, or perhaps speaks a message from a prophet or historical figure. But such possession states are rare in the modern world.

Most religious forms of destructive ecstasy today emphasize the glorious past or the even more glorious future. Mankind must return to the golden age when people knew their place and worshipped the right god—and this must happen by force if it is not happening naturally. Or they must bring about the Day of the Lord, the righteous end of time, when God will judge the good and evil, and punish the wicked. Many of the so-called religious fundamentalisms emphasize that death will bring the religious warrior to heaven, or that indeed people may never have to die, as the end of the world and the Rapture will come during their lifetimes.

Modern attitudes toward destructive ecstasy may be seen in the science-fiction stories written within the worldview of modern fundamentalisms. This “finding truth in fiction” is perhaps ironic, with the fundamentalist emphasis upon literal truth.

Millennial writing often makes use of violent imagery. As an example, we can look at a few Islamist apocalyptic writers. Muhammad Isa Saud wrote of the return of the messianic figure of the Mahdi and the proclamation of the universal Caliphate in the near future, which would involve a nuclear battle between the Muslim countries and the West. The writer Bashir Muhammad identified the USA with the city of Ad, destroyed by Allah in the Qur'an (Ad has nuclear weapons, skyscrapers, arrogance, and tolerance of homosexuality). He describes a climactic battle at the end of time, in which the Jewish Zionists and Christian Crusaders (and also the Masons) will fight the armies of Islam and the Mahdi. New York City and its Jewish population will be annihilated by an earthquake, the rest of the USA will be destroyed, and the whole world will convert to Islam.<sup>43</sup> Muslims who live an obedient and ascetic life in normal times will get the joy of fighting alongside the Mahdi, the savior, and participating in the ecstatic genocide of the infidels. The signs of the Mahdi's earthly coming are predicted to be fear, confusion, violent deaths, *fitnas* (sins creating chaos), wars, earthly tyrants, and according to some interpretations, the appearance of Dajjal, the one-eyed Dark Messiah. As one hadith goes (a commentary on Surah 3:19 in the Qur'an), there are signs

of the end-times. Hazart Abu Musa Al Ashari narrates that the Holy Prophet said that the Mahdi will come at Doomsday (Qiyamah)...<sup>44</sup>

The apocalyptic war to be led by the Mahdi is a well-known Shia end-time scenario, similar to the millennial ideas of many Christians. There are many Islamic sites on the Internet which talk about joining with the Mahdi's future army. The ideal is the future martyr—generally male, who gains respect, celebrity, and money for his family. He can wear white in the streets, symbolizing that he is pledged to death. In the 1979 Iranian revolution, soldiers wore white burial clothing to show their eagerness to die, with crimson martyr scarves and small “keys to heaven” around their necks. They followed Khomeini's motto—“To kill and be killed is the highest duty of every Muslim.” As a young Shia man said, “I want to die before my friends. They want to die before me. We want to see our God.”<sup>45</sup>

While the ideal of martyrdom is most well-known in Shia of Islam, it has also been adopted by some Sunni groups. According to an al-Qaeda spokesman, “There are thousands of young men who look forward to death... The *goal* is martyrdom.”<sup>46</sup> Attitudes toward martyrdom and jihad war vary in the Muslim world. As Yaakov Lappin notes in his article on international terrorism, suicide becomes ecstatic:

While many Muslim scholars have ruled that acts of jihad such as suicide bombing are forbidden acts of self-destruction, jihadi websites quickly establish that suicide terrorism is a holy sacrificial act and surround it in a mist of glamor and mysticism. It, like similar acts, is a pinnacle moment of spiritual ecstasy... While most soldiers are taught to avoid injury to themselves, jihadi recruits are told that coming back unscathed from their mission would be an unmitigated failure. Their harm and demise is necessary to reach heaven. “Either way there is victory, whether he kills or is killed,” the website assured.<sup>47</sup>

While suicide is forbidden in mainstream Islam, it can be understood as valuable in certain circumstances. Suicide may indeed lead to the “pinnacle moment of spiritual ecstasy,” as Lappin phrases it, or it may be an act that will bring the person to hell, depending upon the interpretation of the situation. Thus, it becomes modern Muslim theologians who determine if an act is heroic or sinful. Even the sacrifice of children can have a terrible beauty, as Iran's current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, notes in the 2011 film “Iranium.” When the Ayatollah Khomeini sent

children on foot to clear minefields during the Iran–Iraq war in 1980, they were blown up by the mines. In the film’s footage, he tells his followers of their deaths, “No art is more beautiful, more divine and more everlasting, than the art of martyrdom.”<sup>48</sup> Many children accepted such deliberate death, as a way to reunite with their parents who had already died in the war.

Joyful participation in terrorist acts may be understood as either secular ecstasy or religious ecstasy for participants. For instance, the 9/11 attackers have been understood as acting based on religious ideals by Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon. In their book, *The Age of Sacred Terror*, they emphasize how religion may be adapted to incorporate violence.<sup>49</sup> On the September 11, 2010 television show *Frontline*, there was a special on “Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero.” The commentary noted the “thirst for the absolute” on the part of the bombers, interpreting the suicides as a religious search for absolutes, and an avoidance of nothingness. The suicides were interpreted as an act of worship, in which the religious idea of sacrifice for the sake of the community is turned into a private jihad, which then loses the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, and forgets the rules of war. It is a danger of the charismatic side of religion, in which one can ignore the law in favor of a direct line to God. This justification of ecstatic death and vengeance allow violence as a religious act, and dedicating the violence to the God makes it acceptable. Destruction becomes a form of piety.

However, we should also note that some accusations of destructive ecstasy over the course of time have been fantasies or exaggerations on the part of observers, often for political reasons. Much of the film imagery of orgies, sacrificing virgins, black masses, and various ritual reversals in non-Christian religions are more cinematic imagination than they are history. Such exaggeration of the dangers of foreign beliefs are not new. The witch craze, the persecutions of heretics during the Middle Ages, the European and Russian pogroms, and various holy wars through the centuries have been based on exaggerations of the dangers of outsiders and their religions, the Enemy Other who wishes harm for the sake of evil. But there may be other, more commercial, agendas. Some years back, *Mad Magazine* had a satirical article which asked the question, “What is really living?” They gave as examples fighting blood-thirsty sharks, skiing off high cliffs, and doing all manner of dangerous activities. They noted at the end of the article that it had been sponsored by the Funeral Directors Association of America. In typical *Mad*

Magazine style, it showed how special interests can redirect one's understanding of meaning in life, so that proximity to death becomes the sign of a meaningful life.

There are also many Christian millennial writings, in which the imminent end of the world will mean eternal life for the saved and eternal damnation for the unsaved. Many Millennialists look eagerly toward the wars at the end of time, led by Christ against the Antichrist. Perhaps the most famous apocalyptic text, the *Book of Revelation* by John, begins with John's contact with an angel to learn about the future (Rev 1:1–2). The book was thus described by its author as the result of a direct religious vision. In recent years, writers interested in the Book of Revelations and other apocalyptic writings have begun a genre of apocalyptic Christian novels. The most popular apocalyptic fiction series has been the *Left Behind* novels, though other modern messianic Christian series have followed in its wake. These books describe the imagined situation of the Tribulation after the Rapture, and a major focus is the sufferings of people who would not convert to Christianity. These sufferings were described in graphic detail. As an example, in the novel *Apollyon: The Destroyer is Unleashed*, those who were "saved" generally showed little compassion toward the people who were not saved, people in such intense pain that they put their heads in ovens and jumped from tall buildings, trying unsuccessfully to kill themselves. Instead, they were satisfied that they were right, and the others were wrong, and deserved their suffering. Their response was to attempt to convert the sufferers to Christianity. In reading some of these books, the major religious emotion seemed to be a form of *schadenfreude*, the joy in another's suffering. Only Christians would have access to true religious ecstasy, both in the Rapture and in the coming millennial kingdom.

Destructive ecstasy in the Western religions tends to be motivated by one salient fact—there is little opportunity for more positive and transcendent forms of ecstasy. This is because, in the Western post-Enlightenment secular world, prior to death, there is no possible access to a transcendent realm. How then does one have a truly intense experience, especially of the overwhelming religious sort? If there is no option for positive ecstasy, destructive ecstasy would have to substitute. We have available the milder secular ecstasies for those who fit well into the culture, victory in sports, or falling in love, or appreciating music, or winning the lottery. But for those who do not fit in, and have other values,

we see that violence often substitutes for transcendence, bringing a dark form of ecstasy in the joys of war and struggle.

While polite Western society frowns upon the joys of blood-lust, there are institutions which support it. Soldiers should enter gladly into battle, and boxers look forward to the ring. For the untrained and the less athletic, there are games which simulate violence, and are intended to cause intense reactions in their players. There are video games based on murder, theft, and rape, and these have become popular in school-age children. While fairy tales have often been deemed too violent for children in the elementary school curriculum, we have more vivid and direct violence in the games that the children play. Entrance into virtual worlds in the computer entertainment subculture allows intense interactive gaming in animated environments; and such games are sometimes called the “ecstatic technologies.”<sup>50</sup>

In many video games, the player changes identities, becoming a warrior or a thief or a criminal. As a person changes identities when he becomes a member of the Lord’s Army or a *mujahid*, so a child playing a video game looks out through another’s eyes. He perceives in a different way, as he adopts various roles that require violent actions. Simulated violence allows children to act as simulated criminals. Video games themselves have many levels of violence within them. Some games turn children into warriors, others allow children to experience criminal life, but a large number allow them to experience vicarious violence. Games like *Strike Force*, *Splinter Cell*, *Evil Dead*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Doom* bring killing as an art form to children. There is hedonistic gratification in mass killing, and the child is rewarded by winning the game if he demonstrates sufficient levels of ruthlessness.

The joy of violence can also be found more indirectly in conquest and theft in popular culture. The recent film “*The Wolf of Wall Street*,” directed by Martin Scorsese, shows a stockbroker who experiences intense joy by cheating other people and stealing from them, as well as from drugs and prostitutes. Making money from the naivete and ignorance of others by his hard sell approach caused a form of destructive ecstasy, clearly portrayed in the film, which worked against him as time went on.

In his book *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm outlines two categories of malevolent aggression. The first category concerns “spontaneous” forms of aggression, and the second one describes the malignant aggression which is “bound in the

character structure.” The “spontaneous” forms of aggression are most likely to occur when individuals or groups are subjected to a particularly extreme and traumatic set of experiences, and it can take the form of either “vengefulness” or “ecstasy.” Vengefulness occurs when the individual or group has been subjected to intense and unjustified suffering, and becomes driven by the need to avenge their own pain. It is exemplified in the notion of blood revenge, “when revenge is a sacred duty that falls upon the member of a family, clan or tribe who has to kill a member of the corresponding unit if one of his people of his people has been killed.”<sup>51</sup> Ecstatic destruction, though it is also a response to a particular set of circumstances, occurs in the ritualized orgies of violence or states of trance that certain societies use in order to give vent to extreme rage. Fromm writes that both of these forms of spontaneous destructiveness are responses to particular sets of circumstances. However, when the person’s aggression is “bound in the character structure,” it is particularly destructive, for it will then characterize the whole of the individual’s way of life.

For Fromm, a central assumption is that each individual has his or her own particular “character.” This term refers to “the relatively permanent system of all non-instinctual strivings through which man relates himself to the human and natural world.”<sup>52</sup> Differences in character are rooted in differences in social experiences, both personal and cultural, although genetically given dispositions may also play a part. Some individuals, according to Fromm, experience so destructive an early environment, both personal and social, that the predispositions to behave in particularly destructive and cruel ways become bound in the character structure. Fromm gives as an example the sadistic character. The experience of absolute control over another human being creates the illusion of transcending the normal limitations of human existence, particularly for one whose real life is deprived of productivity and joy. He notes:

For the sadistic character everything living is to be controllable; living beings become things. Or still more accurately, living things are transformed into living, quivering, pulsating objects of control. Their responses are forced by the one who controls them. The sadist wants to become the master of life, and hence the quality of life should be maintained in his victim. This is, in fact, what distinguishes him from the destroying person. The destroyer wants to do away with a person, to eliminate him, to destroy life itself; the sadist wants the sensation of controlling and choking life.<sup>53</sup>

Victoria Nelson discusses this form of projection as the “psychotopographic imagination,” which externalizes traumas and psychoses onto the outer landscape. The externalizing of psychoses destroys any barriers that the ego might have for protection, and inner and outer worlds both mirror the projected threat.<sup>54</sup> It creates a sort of madness that is understood as ultimate truth, for there is no distinction between inner and outer worlds, and no way to disprove the threat. Sacred terror fuses with pathology, and the world is full of supernatural danger. There is no form of positive religious experience available that can balance the intensity of universal destruction. The person sometimes resorts to hatred and ecstatic violence to counter this projected threat.

Destructive ecstasy may exist in either a secular or religious framework, generally one where more positive forms of ecstasy are not available to the person. There are intense emotions like rage and fear and passion. The ecstatic desire to kill or harm may be found in the Roman arenas, with the crowds on their feet crying for blood, in fights where crowds scream at the winner to kill the loser, in riots and wars throughout the world. Wars do not always justify such destructive ecstasy—many people are horrified by the acts that occur, and are haunted by them for the rest of their lives. But others find their calling in wars, enjoying it as the ancient Babylonian goddess Anath was said to dance in rivers of blood.

Such intense negative emotion may also be found violating social norms, in choosing the forbidden—compulsive lust, theft, gambling, speeding, violence. It may sometimes be found in deliberately risking death in extreme sports, where the chance of death leads to exhilaration. When there is a greater the possibility of destruction the event becomes more attractive, thus the charm of demolition derbies and snuff movies, in which actors actually die in the violence during filming. There are currently “death races” for which one may register on the Internet, whose attraction is insanity and the possibility of death.<sup>55</sup>

The presence of intense, destructive emotion is perhaps the most obvious aspect of this “wargasmic” sort of ecstasy. Such intense emotion may also be found in conscious transgression, in violating social norms, and in choosing forbidden actions. In deliberately risking death, where rebellion and cheating death become goals in themselves, destruction becomes fascinating and a form of self-expression. It is a powerful mixture, the combining of *eros* and *thanatos*, the intense exhilaration of seeking, accepting, and combating the death urge.

Altered perception is less common in destructive ecstasy. It may come as a result of drink or drugs, when other people appear as enemies, when peaceful events are perceived as threats, and obvious lies are accepted and repeated as undeniable truths. It may occur during war, when violent actions no longer occur in a particular time and place, but are perceived as “out of time” or past wars which are echoed in the present. Modern wars can become sanctified by being understood as symbolic reenactments of ancient religious wars, and violence becomes acceptable because modern limits of “just war” are reinterpreted or suspended. There may also be individual cases of changed perception, such as battle frenzy, when the sense of time and space becomes altered.

In the religious world, we often have altered identity in a group context: We have Muslims fighting Westerners in Iraq who identify with Muhammad fighting the idol-worshipping Jahiliyah in Saudi Arabia, Christian fundamentalists claiming to be oppressed in the USA who perceive themselves as a part of the oppressed early church in Roman times, and Hindu fundamentalists still defending the armies of Rama in India against threatening Ravana. Alteration of identity is frequently found in destructive forms of ecstasy in vicarious enjoyment and identification with the aggressor. We can see this in boxing and other sports matches, where members of the audience identify strongly with the fighter and scream and yell and act out the actions that they want the fighter to perform. Such identification is encouraged in movies which are filmed through the eyes of the serial murderer, rapist, or torturer, allowing audience members to experience murdering or harming another person indirectly. It is seen in the propaganda of modern terrorist groups which encourages violent acts, which allows people to identify with the Jihadi online executioners who behead and disembowel others. Such merging of identity can reach toward a sort of possession, where the violence swamps the individual, making him or her part of a larger collective identity. Thus, we have suicide bombers identifying with the rage of their cultural group, soldiers being the wrathful hand of God, the kamikazi becoming the force of the destructive wind God or Kami, and the person who kills innocent victims because the Devil coerced or acted through him. The person is no longer an individual, but rather “a killing machine,” possessed by the power of destruction.

However, we should note that transgressive violence often features an ambiguity about the roles of hero and villain, for the person who breaks the rules, fights against greater odds, and is exhilarated in the presence of



grenades and firebombs can be either one, depending on the social circumstances. The force of salvation for one group can be the criminal and terrorist of another, when violence is justified by claims of oppression or group superiority.

Destructive ecstasy can be a problem for both individual relationships and for society as a whole. Yet people are drawn to ecstatic states, and if a society is threatened by and rejects the more positive forms of ecstasy, it may then suppress or outlaw both types. Then, the more loving and creative forms of ecstasy become confused with the destructive ones, and because they are all illegal they then become interchangeable. Visions of light and visions of darkness are both forbidden and thus are equated. It is no longer an opposition between good and evil, but between ordinary and non-ordinary. Ecstasy itself becomes a threat, and then society lashes out at anything understood as abnormal. Religious varieties of ecstasy, even those that emphasize love and unity, are made illegal, immoral, and profane, and all forms of ecstasy become equated with transgression.

The darker side of mystical ecstasy is usually portrayed by scholars as an uninvolvedness in earthly ethical problems, in favor of a monistic unity which has no room for a dualism of good and evil. In the book *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism*, it is debated whether mystical and ecstatic states can separate people from the world and its values, making people variously moral, amoral, immoral, or transmoral. The “antinomian challenge” is the tendency for unusual states to lead to moral problems, such as life-negation, “effeminate weakness” on the part of the mystics, extremism, and abuse. A concern with spiritual knowledge rather than social ethics encourages future bad behavior; as writer Jeffrey Kripal notes, for in his view mystical experience “inevitably tends toward the transgressive, the ascetic and the extreme.”<sup>56</sup> It might thus be in the interest of cultures and religions to forbid ecstatic experience, to be protective, to help people who “suffer” from visions and ecstasies.

However, by doing so, the culture may not be helping either itself or the ecstatic “victims.” By forbidding subjective experiences understood as deeply meaningful, societies and religions may well create the problems that these writers seek to prevent. When ecstatic states are discouraged, and societies emphasize rigid authority and obedience to particular belief systems, they virtually guarantee that at least some people will not fit into their social structures. It is useful to examine the consequences of such a critique, which results in limiting access to ecstatic states. As the ethical narrows the mystical, some ecstatic experiences will react against

that pressure. Kripal notes that transgression is the key or linchpin to the debate about the ethical status of mysticism.<sup>57</sup> As we expand the realm of the forbidden, the potential for transgression grows ever larger.

From this perspective, without strong moral control and punishment, what we would have is immorality. This is certainly a traditional, conservative fear. To bring this to its extreme, when moral rules cease to dominate thought and behavior, people will choose evil rather than good. Ecstatic religious experiences “inevitably” lead to weakness or suicide or malice. It is a particularly dark view, which fits in well with a notion of fallen humanity. However, it is not only ecstasy which leads to problems—as we have seen, lack of ecstasy can evoke the same problems. As the writer Novalis stated in his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, “Where there are no gods, ghosts will hold sway.” If there is no positive goal, destructive ones can take its place.

Perhaps we need a better model for what is acceptable. As G. William Barnard notes, it is not the obligation of society to force all people into a single mold, and condemn all behavior outside of that narrow range:

Perhaps the universe does not just need social reformers, but a whole spectrum of people responding in different ways to their own unique gifts and inclinations. Perhaps it is the job of enlightened beings to energize, enliven and inspire those who come to be with them, and this task is worthy of tremendous respect on its own merits.<sup>58</sup>

Allowing a wider spectrum of states and roles as acceptable might also allow for greater, positive exploration of ecstatic gifts. If societies had less fear of transgression, and emphasis upon it, we might find fewer transgressive acts as responses to the limitations of religion and culture.

One response to the pathologizing and condemnation of more positive ecstatic states is the rise of destructive forms of ecstasy. Another is the creation of alternative forms of ecstasy, when ordinarily secular acts come to take on religious language, interpretations, and goals. We can see this in the next chapter.

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47. Yaakov Lappin, International Terrorism: Terrorism 2.0, online at <http://www.jpost.com/VideoArticles/Article.aspx?id=192353>.
48. The film "Iranium" is described in the article "Iran can't intimidate Canadians" by Clifford D. May, *The Post and Courier*, January 28, 2011, p. 13A.
49. Cited in Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), pp. 327–328.

50. Ibid., p. 200.
51. Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 363.
52. Ibid., original italics.
53. Ibid., p. 388.
54. Ibid., p. 110.
55. As an example, see [www.youmaydie.com](http://www.youmaydie.com).
56. *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism*, ed. G. William Barnard and Jeffrey J. Kripal (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2002), p. 33.
57. Ibid., p. 69, note 118.
58. Ibid., p. 84.