

Zoe Tao: So Dr. Kripal, will you tell me a little bit about your work as a religious studies scholar?

Jeff Kripal: Sure. So I work in a lot of different areas. I'm a historian of religions, which essentially means I compare things. I compare religions. And over the years I've worked in India, I've worked in California, I've written a textbook, I've worked a lot on popular culture and religion-I've done a lot of things, but I suppose the goal is to help people think more critically and more sympathetically about religions, with an "s" at the end-and how we negotiate religious difference, essentially the big question.

ZT: So what brings you to teach at the Jung Center?

JK: So I was trained in a program at the University of Chicago that was founded by a man named Mircea Eliade, who was part of what we call the Eranos group, a group of scholars of religion that met at a villa in Switzerland over many decades. And Carl Jung was sort of the de facto mentor of that group for quite some time. And he knew him early on. And so I've always been attracted to Jung and have been reading him since all it's really. His intellectual instincts are very close to the kinds of ideas I was trained in, so it's a natural place to be drawn to.

ZT: And how do you connect the ideas of Jung with your work today?

JK: Well that's an interesting question. So I've been writing and teaching for about twenty-five years now, and I think you could describe the first half of my career as very Freudian-I worked primarily on issues of sexuality and gender, and thought a lot about Freud. In the second half of my career I've thought much more with Jung. I've thought much more about things like magic and synchronicity and what we call the paranormal, which were all really central interests. So I sort of moved to something I abandoned for a bit, and I've moved from Freud to Jung in the second half of it.

ZT: Have you seen great changes in the way we define religion today?

JK: Well, the biggest change in religion since I've been teaching was the post-9/11, and the way religion has been linked in the geopolitical scene to essentially terrorism, and violence. So I think the public as a whole is much, much more aware of how religion and politics and violence are often linked. And that wouldn't have been the case as much in the seventies or eighties, or would have been in far different ways.

ZT: Have you seen major changes in how people look at institutional religion and their own personal religion?

JK: Oh yeah, I think your generation is just dropping it, dropping religion in droves. Not that they're dropping religious questions or spiritual sensibilities, but they're no longer aligning themselves with institutions or churches or synagogues in the way that certainly my generation still did, and generations before mine. So it's I think what we call the "rise of the nones" and the spiritual but not religious, or really in some sense where the next big thing lies. And I think Jung played a big role in that, what he did was move away from his family's Protestantism towards a kind of private or individual religion.

ZT: Why do you think people are interested in abandoning the institutional part of religion?

JK: I think it's complicated. I think there are a lot of reasons. I think one of the big reasons is that fundamentalist forms of religion have really grabbed the public sphere, in the public discourse, and people associate religion now with exclusion and bigotry and hatred because of fundamentalism-all forms, not just Christian. And so I think young people take for granted that human beings are different-they're gendered differently, they're sexualized differently, ethnically and culturally different. Those are all I think no-brainers for young people who grew up in urban environments. And they look out at the religious communities, and they're sort of appalled. And so they don't want to have anything to do with them. I also think though, that in

particular American society-I think you have to take it case by case-but with American society, at least in the urban areas, it's increasingly pluralistic and it's very, very hard to hold a single worldview when you're living in one hundred of them. I think that's much easier in the country, or rural environments. And I think it's very difficult in urban environments. I think there's a lot of reasons. But I don't know-I mean you'd be the one to answer that question, right? You might have more to say to it than I would.

ZT: What do you think would happen to institutional religion further down the line, in an urban setting?

JK: Well I'm not a particular fan of what we call the secularization thesis-the idea that culture, Western culture and human beings will become increasingly secular and less and less religious. I actually don't think that's possible, for one simple reason-I think people have souls, for lack of a better term, and that they are innately religious. You have religious instincts and religious questions, because we're not just our bodies. But that doesn't mean they have to affiliate in the same way with social institutions. I think there are lots of ways for human beings to express themselves in religious or spiritual ways and I don't think church attendance or people sitting in a particular building on a particular day of the week is necessarily the only way to do that. So what will it look like? I don't know, I don't think we do know-I don't think we can know. But my guess is it'll be much more decentralized, and much more creative-looser.

ZT: So it seems like psychology has taken on a lot of the roles that religion used to take on, for people who are spiritual but not religious, or don't identify with religion. What do you think of the increasing emphasis in empiricism and biology for psychology?

JK: I think it's a perfectly legitimate avenue of research, but I think it's a dead end when it comes to religious questions or spiritual questions. I don't think, at the end of the day, that consciousness is produced by the brain. I think the brain's more like a receiver, than a producer. More like smartphones. And there's a wi-fi signal out there, and we're not producing it, we're picking it up, and translating it into Zoe. Or Jeff, with an interface. And I know that's pure heresy in the cognitive science or academic psychology world but I think not all, but many of the religious traditions point to make it certainly closer to what Jung thought. So I don't really have much hope in that kind of materialism or reductionism, either answering our questions about what mind is or certainly about meeting human spiritual needs. It's incredibly depressing, and boring.

ZT: What do you think is the appeal of people turning to the empirical to answer their questions?

JK: Well, you can get answers. It's hard-you can poke things and measure them and pretend you know something because you can tell it's a number.

ZT: So it's an answer.

JK: It's a kind of fundamentalism-again it's a kind of easy answer to a difficult question. Again and it's not that it's illegitimate. I mean, it's a perfectly legitimate enterprise. It's just you can't answer the questions that I have or that you have.

ZT: So you also study the paranormal. Do you see a lot of connections between mental health, psychological health, spiritual health and the paranormal?

JK: Well, I think yes and no. Paranormal experiences are both extremely common and extremely rare. They're extremely common in the sense that if you ask a population of any size whether they've had such an experience, a large percentage of the people are going to report yes, which is very common in that way-but they're very rare in terms of a single life cycle some person might have one or not at all. So I don't think they're always relevant to the mental health. Although sometimes they're extremely relevant. People tend to have robust paranormal experiences around trauma and crisis and suffering. So in those cases, they clearly are serving some kind of potential therapeutic or healing role. And if we can take that seriously I think, encourage

and nurture that healing process. And if we ignore it, or demean it or dismiss it as unreal, it can do damage. So to that extent, I think they're potentially therapeutic but not necessarily-you know, some paranormal experiences are quite negative. They're terrifying, they're abusive or they're scary. They're not always peace and light.

ZT: Do you have an example off the top of your head of a paranormal experience after trauma?

JK: Oh sure. I mean, one of the most common paranormal experiences is an apparition of a dead loved one who just died. So particularly among widows-a widow is grieving, her husband appears to her as an apparition or sometimes in full physical form, and basically comforts the grieving widow. Which of course is how Christianity began too, with a dead man appearing to a grieving widow, a grieving woman. So I mean that's obviously therapeutic. Extremely comforting to people to whom that happens.

ZT: But marked as insane by the psychiatric community?

JK: Well, I don't think apparitions of dead loved ones today are pathologized like they were a couple decades ago. I think we want to look at that but they once were marked as hallucinations or marks of mental illness but I doubt it is now.

ZT: And so in that sense we can't stick to such a rigid definition of what is normal or healthy.

JK: Right, I mean-the reason those things were marked as pathological is that they couldn't be real. Really all of these questions boil down to the question of what's real or not. And I think most of us live in a world where we assume that the only thing that's real is matter, and the material objects in our environment. And so dead men and dead women can't appear because they don't exist anymore. So the reason those things were marked as forms of hallucination or illness was that they can't happen, they're not possible. So what's possible or impossible is really a function of our own assumptions about the world, not a function of what's actually out there. I think that's the deeper question still.

ZT: And so what seems to cause paranormal phenomena?

JK: Well, we don't know. That's the easy answer to that. There's different thoughts about that. The most traditional thought, the most ancient thought is that some encounters are negative because of there are negative spirits out there, there are demons to screw with us and they're bad, so that's scary. Other people aren't so sure. My own kind of gut feeling, and that's all it is, is that when a person encounters another form of mind which may not be their own, and they're ready for that, they're ready to let go of their ego, then the experience will be positive. But if they're not ready to let go, it will be a negative experience, one of fear or terror. Now, terror and ecstasy are very, very close. They're both forms of transcendence. But one is, you're ready for it, and the other you're not.

ZT: And so the same person could look at an apparition and find comfort or find extreme terror.

JK: And that's what the sacred is, if you look at it historically-if you look at God for example in the Bible, it's terrifying or it's redemptive, depending on how that force is approached. And I think it can be either, but I think it's probably a function of us, and not just whatever else is out there.

ZT: And so how do you define the paranormal?

JK: So I define a paranormal event or experience as an event in which something is happening in the physical environment that corresponds almost perfectly to just something going on the mind of the person. So there's a kind of a deep correspondence going on in the internal state and the exterior. So for example, a poltergeist of a teenager might be extremely conflicted emotionally or sexually, and in the environment things are blowing up

or catching fire, breaking. And so events are symbolic or pointing back toward the emotional state of the person.

ZT: So would you consider it synchronicity?

JK: Yes, that's classic. The paranormal was coined about 1900 by French scientists. And the reason they came up with the word is that they really wanted to say is the "not normal"-in French "I'm normal" sounds exactly like abnormal in French. They didn't want to pathologize. So they came up with this new word, paranormal, to describe something like a poltergeist. But they coined the word because they thought it was completely normal, natural, it was just activating systems or processes in the natural world that simply hadn't been mapped.

ZT: So it's a function of how you interpret it?

JK: They were saying it was a function of this focal agent, who was almost always in distress and that somehow the distress was externalizing into the environment. In ways that were natural but which we can't know.

ZT: So affecting something without touching it?

JK: Correct, and Jung's synchronicity is just a much later framing of that. Where something in the environment is essentially functioning as a signal of something happening inside the mind, body.

ZT: So it's supposed to work both ways in terms of cause and effect?

JK: Well for Jung there was no cause/effect in synchronicity. Again I think this is where the sciences mislead us-they go looking for causes but there are no causes. Whatever is performing those events is not working through causal mechanisms. It's working through some wholly linguistic, meaningful process. It's trying to convey meaning, it's not wishing this to push that.

ZT: So they're unpredictable.

JK: They're very unpredictable. And again, that's why it's really hard to study these things in a laboratory because you can't reproduce them. You never know when they're going to happen, and they also tend to have a kind of trickster activity, actively avoid being detected.

ZT: So the studies are based largely on primary accounts and people's direct experiences?

JK: Well, the study of these things splits into two camps. There's the para-psychological camp, which is essentially the laboratory psychologist who is trying to isolate variables, and reproduce and measure things and do a lot of statistics on whatever it is they're trying to study. And then there are the folks who are much more like ethnographers or anthropologists, and talking to people who had some big experience. So one's much more scientific and one's much more humanistic. And I'm much more in this camp, not because I think this camp is more legitimate, I just do.

ZT: So you also study culture, and it seems the paranormal is super pervasive in culture. So what do you think is the appeal to a large audience?

JK: Well in terms of culture, it's really popular culture, film and comic books and television, horror movies. And I think the appeal is that in our present day, we can't talk about the paranormal either in the religious institutions or in the elite scientific or political institutions, and so it goes to the only institutional that will have it, which is entertainment. And so that's where it goes. It's like water, it's going to go somewhere. And if you block it here and here it's going to flow there. And the entertainment industry is particularly apt for it because paranormal events often have a performative or stage character. So there are deep links between

entertainment and the paranormal, being linked certainly back in the nineteenth century.

ZT: So that's even appealing for people who haven't really had those experiences themselves.

JK: Well it's a way of being religious without being religious, right. It's a kind of camouflaged way of talking about the supernatural. That's what it is-magic. The paranormal is really magic when you get right down to it. Of course we can't say that people can say it's magic, but they can say I love Harry Potter. So it's a kind of indirect spirituality. And so it's crept into people's daily lives through culture but they can't talk about it. You can talk about it in other institutions as long as you're talking about fantasy or fiction, but you can never talk about it as real. That's the rule that nobody's written down, but I just told you what the rule is, and you can talk about anything you want. As long as it's fantasy or fiction. But no politician will get up, no scientist, no physicist will get up and say it even if they might be personally completely convinced it is.

ZT: Even in religious institutions where the paranormal exists, like in mysticism?

JK: Well, the problem of that is in a lot of religious contexts the paranormal is demonic, it's literally demonized. Or you know, new age around the debunking community. It's literally demons. So for churches it doesn't help much either to be real. There it's okay for it to be real, as long as it's bad.

ZT: And so what do you see as the most pressing issues in psychology and daily life today?

JK: That's a big question. I don't know. And in terms of what we've been talking about, I think the big question is what we do with religious identity, and how we talk about people being this or that kind of religious person, and whether we see a religious identity as something that's added on later and is rather arbitrary or whether you're born with it. I think that's what the spiritual but not religious community is dealing with, they clearly see it as an add-on that is unnecessary. Whereas religious fundamentalists see it as essential in the person.

ZT: How is it conceptualized in terms of not just how real it can be but how dynamic it can be, how legitimate it is to switch religions or to change beliefs over time?

JK: Well, if you take the position that religious identity is rather arbitrary and is something added on later, then it's easy to switch because you're just trying different roles, trying on different magic worlds to live them. But if you think you're born as X, Y, or Z, then you can't change that-you can't trade that without severe consequences.

ZT: I guess they kind of both can have their own sources of anxiety.

JK: Yeah, I think so. I think people from religious communities often don't have the problems that people who don't have any community have. And there's no perfect solution here. I grew up in a little farming community, and there were people who stayed and people who left. And the people who left gained things that the people who stayed will never have, and the people who stayed gained things the people who left will never have. And it's not that one is right and the other is wrong, those are just really different life paths.