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# How Can We Explore the Connection of Sound with the Experience of Religion?

Paolina Marielle Siqueira-Koo  
*Scripps College*

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# **How can we explore the connection of Sound with the Experience of Religion?**

by

**Paolina Marielle Siqueira-Koo**

Submitted to Scripps College in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Bachelor of Arts Degree  
in Religious Studies

Professor Andrew Jacobs  
Professor Erika Dyson

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# Table Of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	4
What is a Mantra?	8
Can Mantras be considered as Music?	13
Chapter I	17
Healthy, Happy, Holy	17
Chapter II	22
Experience and Belief in Understanding the Results of Kundalini Mantras	22
Authority and Knowledge	23
Understanding Mantras from the Yogic Context	26
On the Inherent Corporeality of Mystic Knowledge	34
Chapter III	35
Lens Dialogue	35
Non-Rationality in Numinous and Musical Experiences	37
Music and the Mystical Experience	41
Chapter IV	43
Conclusion	43
Works Cited	47

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## Introduction

The relatedness of music and religion is regarded with enough frequency in both popular and scholarly discourse so as to be readily dismissed without much intensive consideration towards a second-thought. But why is it that music stands out as such a useful and “significant locus in which to examine” spiritually inspired activities and experiences? (Lehrich, 2014) This is a question raised and explored in recent religious studies scholarship by Christopher Lehrich. In his article, "The Unanswered Question: Music and Theory of Religion," Lehrich discusses how the intuitively felt relation between music and spirituality has been *picked up* by classical Western thinkers Rudolf Otto, John Huizinga, and Max Weber to advance their interdisciplinary theories of religion. But given that the issue of the two topics’ connection itself is not extrapolated upon by any author, the question remains suspended from further development. Christopher Lehrich’s approach to the *unanswered question* is effective. It identifies an interesting loose thread within the wider context of scholastic conversations about theories of religion, and offers strategies for how, and reasons why, we might pull on this thread once more (Lehrich, 24). As such, there is much I wish to borrow from Lehrich’s scholarship for my thesis project. However, I wish to deepen the state of the conversation by pointing out from the onset that Lehrich writes about a Eurocentric perspective of music and religion, from a Eurocentric perspective of music and religion. The scope of his investigation limits the possibilities signaled by ‘Music’ to specifically Western classical music. One consequence of this limitation is that it reifies certain conceptual legacies of colonialism; that music is only considered in the ways that it has manifested in Western civilization.

We may have come to accept the categories as self-evident, because most if not all cultures do express Music and Religion in some way, but the concept of Music and Religion as universal classifications of human activity is a product of the modern Western colonizing mentality. Both terms can refer to an incredibly vast range of cultural phenomena that lend an elusive quality to their adequate definitions within neat categories. Nonetheless, those activities and associated concepts which can be considered as 'Music' and 'Religion', include within the umbrella implicit features of human culture that play powerful roles in the lives of almost every individual, and certainly every society. I wish to point out that this commonality of categorical colonialism is just one lens by which the anthropic activities that will be elaborated upon in this investigation can be brought academically into relation with one another. It is by no means the most important shared feature, though, and if we focus obsessively on this one overlap in the metaphoric venn diagram, we miss a host of profoundly interesting, nuanced insights. In an attempt to broaden the implications of this academic endeavor to be inclusive of and sensitive to colonized societies and systems of cultural production, I will open up the narrow, Eurocentric understanding of music to refer to intention-guided, creative human sound. I will also ask readers to be mindful of spiritually-inspired and oriented activities or traditions to be connoted with the category of religion.

There is a trend in recent scholarship towards specificity. This is helpful because it focuses the direction of scholarship towards a grounding of generalities into concrete examples. As such, I have selected a specific case-study to ground the lens-based methodology of this investigation with close-readings, for the purpose of developing the existing academic conversation concerning that intuitively felt connection between Music and Religion. I have selected the sonic tradition of mantric meditation within the contemporary spiritual discipline of

3HO Kundalini Yoga to be the subject of my case-study lens analysis. 3HO Kundalini Yoga is a diasporic, orthopractic, mystic offshoot of Sikh Dharma. I have selected this specific tradition because of how a study of it reveals and challenges some of the implicit assumptions that are made in strict adherences to the qualifications that deem a tradition of spiritual practice eligible for the so-called universalist category of religion, assumptions that obscure the scholarly perspective to the very nuances we could benefit greatly from observing.

The theoretical lenses I employ to deeply investigate the overlapping territory between music and religion, I borrow from Rudolf Otto and William James. Beside the obvious reason for their selection, which pertains to the authors' eminent reputations within the field of religious studies, I have drawn these theorists in for more substantial motivations—each author, in their own ways, propose theories that are directly relevant to defining characteristics of the 3HO Kundalini Yoga tradition. Rudolf Otto's idea that the basis for all phenomena which are encompassed by the term, 'religion', (religious convictions, religious beliefs, religious activities...) is the experience of the *numen*, is an extremely relevant mode of thinking about 3HO Kundalini Yoga because of the legacy of a *nirgun*<sup>1</sup> divinity that is carried forth in the theology of the contemporary tradition. Furthermore, Otto (quite pretentiously) says that no one who has not felt the *numinous* experience ought to grapple with his theories about it, and the emphasis on experiential knowledge in his tone here correlates to the orthopractic emphasis on the crucial role of embodied experience for the attainment of religious knowledge that is central to 3HO Kundalini Yoga's pedagogy. William James surveyed varieties of religious experience and his observations on mysticism, the mystic state, and reverberations of mystic knowledge are

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<sup>1</sup> *nirgun*; abstract, 'without qualities' or attributes, formless, unconditioned (McLeod, xvi, Oberoi, xxi). *Nirgun* is used in Sikh understandings to describe *Waheguru* (God, the One, Divinity) that precedes and forms the basis for all experience/creation

pertinent to unpacking stigma regarding legitimacy which surrounds the contemporary tradition of study. James' articulations on mysticism assist us inquirers in understanding the mode of knowledge production which is promoted by 3HO via the embodied pedagogy of Kundalini Yoga.

I find it important to point out that the application of lenses to a case study ought not be an endeavor undertaken to prove or disprove the truth claims stated by either the authors or the paradigm from which 3HO Kundalini Yoga expresses its pedagogy. The goal of the analyses that I am undertaking in this thesis investigation is simply to bring otherwise disparate articulations on the topic of music and experience of religion into conversation with one another, thereby developing upon the state of the topic that is currently suspended and unresolved.

But that goal brings us to another important consideration for the scope of this project, which concerns the matter of how resolvable this question of music and experience of religion really is? Part of the effort of this project is to emphasize to readers just how personal that resolution must be. Any definitive conclusion on the matter would necessarily rest on the simultaneous evaluation-and-elimination of paradigmatic truth claims, which is fine for personal intellectual exploration, but not acceptable for academic composition. I do hope that this fact does not discourage readers from engaging with the ideas that are presented for analysis and discussion in the following investigation. There is much that we can learn from entering into the conversation and observing the composite elements of the discussion, particularly when we zoom out of the immediacy of what is being said and move into deeper analysis of the parameters each author is using for the given topics.



This issue concerning the connection of the musical and religious experiences, is intuitively sensed. Through the research and analysis undertaken in this investigation, what becomes apparent is that the experiences of sound/music and of the religious are viscerally and ineffably felt in the body. Both experiences can be likened as a paradoxical immersive transcendence. Immersive because of how inescapably corporeally based they are, and yet transcendent because of how they can transport one's consciousness to states of knowing, feeling, and understanding that are camouflaged from ordinary (non-musical, non-religious) mundane corporeal experiences.

Before we move on with the bulk of the investigation, we must put forth a couple clarification questions about Mantras. Firstly,

### **What is a Mantra?**

Mantras permeate many South Asian religious traditions, but what exactly are they? And what are the supposed characteristics that colonizing Eurocentric thought has imposed on this phenomenon that is linked to religious functions? This sub-section will defer to contemporary secondary source scholarly literature by Patton E. Burchett and primary source material from 3HO to introduce readers to the specific sonic expression that is being examined for the duration of this investigation.

Burchett illuminates the mantric phenomenon, by critiquing the stigmatizing portrayal of the spiritual ritual expression as 'magical' (and the related prejudices) that it has come to endure in Western thought, and demonstrating "how and why mantras blur the boundaries of the category" (810). The designation of Mantras as magic formulas or superstitious spells is laden

with biases of Western superiority, as ‘magic’ is traditionally defined in scholarly discourse “in opposition to ‘religion’”, which is too contrasted with the other key category of ‘science’ (Burchett, 808), in a way that is trivializing, vilifying, marginalizing, all to a composite effect of Eurocentric moral imperialism. Academics are joined by historical figures in positions of power in their use of “the term ‘magic’ as a rhetorical weapon to de-authorize that which was not in accord with their own beliefs, models, or economic and political interests.” (Burchett, 809) Mantras, Burchett explains, have been scholastically categorized into binaries of rationality/irrationality, inert/performative.

Burchett deconstructs the cultural barriers that have skewed dominant understanding concerning the linguistic element of Mantras. In this dominant perspective, “magic is closely associated with the notion of a ‘natural language’, a language in which words have a causal relation to reality and are believed to possess a dynamic force through inherent correspondence with their referents” (Burchett, 810). In other words, words are not only signifiers that function to describe or portray, they in fact *are* the signified as well, and “contain within them the object and its real powers” (Burchett, 810). Burchett introduces Stanley Tambiah’s opposing scholarly perspective to challenge the stigmatizing and simplifying view of Mantras as a form of magic, and explains how there may be a separation of intelligibility and logical understanding in the linguistic structures of Mantras. Tambiah furthermore presents a position that frames belief as the operative variable for the efficacy of Mantras—“If a practitioner believes that the structure and content of a mantra make it capable of communicating with the gods or effecting change in the world, then the use of that mantra, regardless of its semantic intelligibility, is entirely sensible” (Burchett, 812).

The etymology of the word Mantra “consists of the Sanskrit root *man*, ‘to think,’ and the ending *-tra*, indicating instrumentality; thus a mantra can be understood as ‘an instrument of thought (or the mind)’ or ‘an instrument for producing (a special kind of) thought.’” (Burchett, 813). This is a technical definition that explores directly the literal linguistic meaning of the label; translation is an appropriate choice for Burchett’s intended audience of scholarly readers looking to hone in as closely as possible to the label’s authentic meaning. The primary source material Level 1 Teacher Training textbook, on the other hand, has both a different audience, and thus a different goal. This source explains that Mantras are

“The creative projection of the mind through sound. *Man*=mind. *Trang*=wave or projection. The science of mantra is based on the knowledge that sound is a form of energy having structure, power and a definite predictable effect on the chakras and the human psyche. ... Mantras are formulas that alter the patterns of the mind and the chemistry of the brain, according to the physical and metaphysical laws. The power of a mantra is in its sound vibration. The mantras used in Kundalini Yoga elevate or modify consciousness through their meaning and rhythmical repetition. It is beneficial to link a mantra to the breath.” (KRI, Textbook, 66)

Already in this short excerpt we can notice a change in dialectical timbre; the focus is not so much on the literal meaning, probably because such an explanation, though seemingly more straightforward and expository, obscures the philosophical background that gives *significance* to the *phenomenon*, rather than just meaning to the label.

The philosophical paradigm in which 3HO Kundalini Yoga Mantras are contextualized derives from the theology, cosmology, and ontology of Sikhism, but reaches even further back than the 500 year-old religious tradition into the antecedent philosophies that can be traced back

to Vedic times. A key truth claim in this paradigm is that the universe, being made of energy, is in a constant state of vibration, and some of these vibrations manifest as sound (*Naad*). Also to be considered are the potential vibrations of the universe, the unmanifest sound (*Shabd*). It is understood that “[t]here is a vibratory frequency that corresponds to everything in the universe,” and that by “vibrating a particular combination of sounds, you tune into various levels of... consciousness. Situations, people, and events respond to the signals you send out[, hence the] vibratory frequency of a mantra draws to you whatever you are vibrating.” (3HO, Textbook, 66). Mantras, explains Yogi Bhajan, are tools and a technique for people to “tune [their] own consciousness into the awareness of that totality [of vibration which underlies and sustains all creation]. By vibrating in rhythm with the breath to a particular sound that is proportional to the creative sound, or sound current, one can expand one’s sensitivity to the entire spectrum of vibration. It is similar to striking a note on a stringed instrument.” (qtd. in 3HO, Textbook, 66).

The innate effectiveness of a Mantra lies in the “intimate connection [of the sound] with God or ultimate reality” (Burchett, 813). Different aspects of the Divine consciousness are manifest in different sounds—the sound vibration *Ong*, for example, manifests the generative force of life, “the creative energy of the total cosmos and consciousness of the Creator as experienced in the creation. It has the connotation of energy and activity” (3HO, Textbook, 78). The power of a Mantra is not accurately understood if compared to spoken prayer, because when a practitioner is chanting *Ong*, for example, they are not speaking *to* the Divine creative, life-generating energy as if hierarchically; rather, the act of chanting allows the practitioner to *merge* with that aspect of the Divine consciousness, to *embody* its power through the technology of sound, and thereby become one with it. That is why practicing the “Meditation for Absolutely

Powerful Energy”, which features a specific *mudra*<sup>2</sup> and posture along with a total sonic emphasis on the manifest vibration, *Ong*, has the effect of manifesting in the practitioner, as Yogi Bhajan puts it, “absolutely powerful energy and will balance the most effective computer that we call the brain. It is the best remedy for ‘brain drain.’” (qtd. in Kaur, 42)

Though the sounds in Mantras are signifiers, are the signified, and have significance, the primary source material contradicts Tambieh’s theory of belief being the operative variable for the effectiveness of Mantra, because it explains that the sounds’ meanings, or the chanter’s understanding and belief in them, are variables only of secondary or tertiary importance for mantric functioning. Many Mantras “consist of ‘nonsense syllables’ with no clear semantic meaning.” (818) The *naad* is the most important element of any Mantra, as *naad* is “the basic sound for all languages through all times [that] comes from one common source or sound current” (3HO, Textbook, 67). The act of using the human body to intentionally create mantric sound allows the consciousness to merge with the sound current, with powerful consequences. “Ultimately,” Burchett concludes, “it is the union of the practitioner’s consciousness with the mantra—more accurately, with the pure consciousness of the divinity manifested in the mantra—that makes a mantra efficacious.” (815). “In this system” of sonic theology, “language and consciousness are inextricably intertwined: words (mantras), meanings, and consciousness are eternally connected and necessarily synonymous.” (Burchett, 823)

As for the function of Mantras, the instruction Manual for the Level 1 Teacher Training in Kundalini Yoga overflows with written explanations for what each Mantra does, the

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<sup>2</sup>*mudra*: a meditative hand position. 3HO says on its website that “Hands are more than just functional; they are an energy map of our consciousness and health. Each area of the hand corresponds to a certain area of the body and to different emotions and behaviors. By curling, crossing, stretching, and touching the fingers and palms, we can effectively talk to the body and mind.” The *mudra* is “a technique for giving clear messages to the mind-body energy system.” (<https://www.3ho.org/kundalini-yoga/mudra>)

consequences that practicing it will bring about for one's consciousness. From these texts, some of which will be excerpted for close-reading analysis in Chapter II, we can see that Mantras have practical, worldly uses, as well as the obvious spiritual application "to realize higher states of consciousness" (Burchett, 818), and, in other words, to raise the vibration of one's energy.

In brief, Mantras are "a uniquely pure utilization of the human capacity for speech uninhibited by the normal constraints of language," that "allow us to transcend ordinary language, to reverse the process of creation and return to the source of the supreme Word, the Divine." (Burchett, 824). This is a lovely representation of the phenomenon, but still, we are pressed to ask,

### **Can Mantras be considered as Music?**

I have already clarified in the first introductory section that the working definition of 'Music' I employ in this investigation is that of "intention-guided, creative human sound". I have done this firstly to open up the narrow, Eurocentric understanding of what music is and can be, so that the case study of Mantras within the tradition of 3HO Kundalini Yoga may fit within the scope of this investigation. But I do wish to emphasize that this rhetorical maneuver is not merely artificial in nature—many mantras are comprised of elements that may be considered musical in the typical Western understanding, but what makes Mantras distinct from others forms of intention-guided, creative human sound (say, song, or instrumental compositions) that the lens authors are thinking of when they present their theories, cannot be fully captured by these elements of Western musical definitions. For us to explore the question of whether Mantras may be considered as Music, it is necessary to incorporate three parts into the inquiry: 1) identifying

the elements that grant Mantras similarity to Music; 2) discerning the differences that serve as points of departure between Mantras and Music; 3) conclude what, exactly, Mantras *are*, and use this conclusion as a launch-pad for the proceeding case-study lens investigation. All the while we must keep in mind that the term ‘Mantra’ is itself inclusive of an extremely broad and varied host of phenomena coming from many religious traditions which have origins in the Indic Valley, including but not limited to Sikhism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. As such, the implications of any conclusions for this section will work most potently when directed towards the intended case-study tradition for this specific study.

In his article series, *The Sound of Religion*, the influential Indologist Frits Staal puts forth a case for the methodological analysis of the science of ritual (Vedic ritual in particular). He demonstrates that it is not enough to study Vedic ritual song solely with the methodologies of religious studies, linguistics, or anthropology, and clearly introduces and applies a semantic and syntactic approach. Staal writes that “A mantra is a ritual sound expression that may or may not be derived from an expression of language” (44). In this statement, it is possible to identify several differences between Mantras and ordinary musical songs: the mantra is the sonic expression of a ritual, and as such it must always be discussed in the context of its ritual system. “Mantras and the ritual acts themselves correspond to each other,” explains Staal, and “To study a ritual system is to study a system of mantras, and vice versa.” (44) Unlike with songs, which may be expressed, analyzed, or interpreted in varying degrees of religiosity or secularity, it would be improper to separate a mantric expression from its spiritual context. The musicality and religiosity of mantras are inextricably tied. Furthermore, while the sounds of Mantra (in the 3HO Kundalini Yogic context) do hold meanings of symbolic value, there is no rule confining the sounds of a Mantra to the realm of ‘natural language’. Staal elaborates on this important

observation by saying that “the assumption that [mantras] express meanings like language is not only unnecessary, but inaccurate and misleading”, because “[i]t is not clear that there is *anything* in the realm of ritual that functions like names, nouns, verbs, or syncategorematic terms.” (43)

Mantras can be comprised of elements such as pitch and tone, rhythm, a *meter* which is akin to tempo in Western musical terms, melody, and verses that lend them similarity to music and song, and which make them eligible for musical renderings. Frits Staal undertakes a close-reading analysis of the *gāyatrī* Mantra from the Rigveda to unpack each of these elements. The Mantra is a verse taken from the literature of the Vedas but then “subjected to *formal* transformations, operations that apply to form but not to meaning,” to make them “fit for ritual consumption.” (Staal, 57) Staal documents how the transformation process uses systems of symbols to communicate how the distribution of long (—) and short (U) syllables affects correct pronunciation of the octosyllabic verses (Staal, 45); the manuscripts also mark tones, so that the ritualist may chant the sounds of the Mantra at proper tonal intervals (Staal, 46). The markings on pitch indicate not only that the Mantra may be “sung”, but also how the “pattern of song” is to be “sung to different melodies” (Staal, 46, 47). Mantras are marked with instructions on proper chanting for ritual function, just like how songs and musical pieces are scribed through notation systems for communication purposes. These transformations change “[e]ntire passages that originally were pregnant with meaning” into “a collection of sounds and syllables” for recitation and for musical renditions (Staal, 57). We shall see in Chapter II, the section of this investigation that focuses on a close-reading analysis of 3HO pedagogy, some examples of how mantric recitation instruction is meticulously documented. The transformations which render religious literary verse into Mantras “conform to precise rules,” and “all the preoccupations” with rules and the the “forms that are generated by rules... illustrate the nature of ritual as a rule-governed



activity” (Staal, 59). This critical insight from Staal helps to contextualize why the pedagogical transmission of 3HO Kundalini Yoga Mantras, and not exclusively the semantic texts of Mantras themselves, arises as such an important site for analysis in this investigation.

# Chapter I

## Healthy, Happy, Holy

The Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO), is a global community dedicated to sharing and practicing the teachings of Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan. The non-profit foundation was founded in July 1969 when Harbhajan Singh Khalsa, more commonly known by his title Yogi Bhajan, emigrated from Punjab, India to Los Angeles, the United States of America with the dual intention of teaching his refined and methodical system of kundalini yoga to students, and of training people to be teachers in this style of yoga (Codrops). The slogan that lends itself to the organization's name is that Happiness is Everyone's Birthright, (3HO, <https://www.3ho.org/about>), and the proclaimed mission of the organization is "to inspire everyone, everywhere, to live a Healthy, Happy, and Holy life through the teachings of Yogi Bhajan." (3HO, <https://www.3ho.org/about>).

The spiritual roots of 3HO lie in the religious tradition of Sikhism, native to Punjab, India. However, since 3HO is a global foundation based in the Western United States, it can be considered as a diasporic offspring of Sikhism. One major way in which 3HO diverts from 'traditional' Sikhism is its thoroughly orthopractic emphasis on mysticism. The practice of Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan is absolutely foundational to the entire Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization, and although yogic practice is not strictly mandatory for all members, "[t]hey generally regard themselves as orthodox Sikhs, and many observers consider them to be generally ritually disciplined and pious" (Stoeber, 352).

The physical yogic practice that is virtually synonymous with 3HO gets its name from the Kundalini-shakti energy, the vital creative life force, “or Supreme Power in the human body by the arousing of which the Yoga is achieved” (Woodroffe, 1). Kundalini Yoga is a form of Tantric yoga and meditation that, as Woodroffe introduced in his seminal but nonetheless orientalist work, *The Serpent Power* (1918, 1974), seeks to stimulate, awaken, and raise the Kundalini-shakti energy that lies latent at the base of the spine in every body. The goal of exercises in Kundalini yogic practices is to “mix the *prana*<sup>3</sup> with the *apana*<sup>4</sup> and, under that pressure, bring the” energy of the vital creative life force up the *sushmuna*<sup>5</sup>. Along its journey up the *sushmuna*, the kundalini energy passes through the 7 major *chakras*<sup>6</sup>, and by its movement through the body “one can know [their] total surroundings and [know that they are] a blessed being.” (3HO, Textbook, 21). Stoeber notes in his evaluation of 3HO Kundalini Yoga and Sikh Dharma that it is “Though appropriate sounding with devotional intention, one identifies with the spiritual reality, which has powerful healing and other transforming effects on the person... the rhythm and sound of a sacred chant are thought to stimulate a link of one’s consciousness with underlying infinite Consciousness and Truth” (355), largely reaffirming the conclusions Patton E. Burchett drew in his 2008 essay on *The ‘Magical’ Language of Mantra*. This union with *Akal Purakh* (the timeless One) is a transformative experience for the practitioner, and its transformative effects are the goal of Kundalini Yoga.

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<sup>3</sup> *prana*: the cosmic life force energy that is carried into the body through respiration.

<sup>4</sup> *apana*: the energy responsible for regulating the outward flow of *prana* from the body, and which governs elimination of physical wastes and toxins from the body.

<sup>5</sup> *sushmuna*: the central nerve channel, which follows the path of the skeletal spine.

<sup>6</sup> *chakras*: sometimes described and depicted as spinning lotuses, the *chakras* are energy centers/vortexes in the body through which the subtle life energy of a person enters, animates, and sustains the body.

Various forms of kundalini yoga have been practiced in India under the secrecy of Guru-pupil training and initiation for centuries, but what distinguishes 3HO's Kundalini Yoga from these other practices is the way that exercises have been: 1) systematized by, and 2) disseminated unto masses by Yogi Bhajan. 3HO Kundalini Yoga "includes a vast array of *kriyas*<sup>7</sup>, which are defined generally as 'an action or series of actions that completes a process and has a predictable outcome'." (Stoeber, 352) No Kundalini Yoga class is ever improvised—the teacher will always teach a *kriya* in the manner of Yogi Bhajan's original instructions that have been collected and precisely recorded in yogic manuals, most often published by 3HO or the Kundalini Research Institute (KRI). Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan "explicitly draws upon a wide variety of traditional Indian Yogas, with special reference to the Naad Yoga (mysticism of sound) that [he] associates with Sikhism" (Stoeber, 353).

"The experience of this flow of energy will affect how and what a person feels and thinks. It is also crucial in stimulating the soul consciousness or divine energy of the person. *Kundalini* is a subtle emanation of the soul, united with *Sat Guru*<sup>8</sup>, which underlies and supports a person's life, but typically remains unconscious, repressed, and constricted. The intention is to support the awakening, stimulation, and circulation of *kundalini* throughout the body and mind via the expansion and integration of *prana* and *apana*, allowing it to pierce or charge the different energy centers or *chakras* of the person, and assimilate these with the physical body and mind. As noted, this requires removing the conscious and subconscious blocks and distortions of the body and mind that inhibit the flow of this spiritual

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<sup>7</sup> *kriyas*: Yogi Bhajan explained that a *kriya* is 'a sequence of postures, breath, and sound that are integrated together to allow the manifestation of a particular state' (3HO, Textbook, 112, 100).

<sup>8</sup> *Sat*: Truth. *Guru*: the Teacher, one who guides the soul from darkness to light.

consciousness and resist its integration. The goal is the transformation and integration of the body in and through this underlying spiritual consciousness, in union with *Sat Guru*. Although the theoretical account of this yoga is not always clear and precise, Yogi Bhajan clearly and carefully explains in a systematic fashion very many practical exercises that he claims stimulate and support this positive movement.” (Stoeber, 357)

This extended quotation from Stoeber’s article stresses the transformative process that is the goal of these spiritual exercises promulgated by 3HO Kundalini Yoga and its teachers.

Yoga generally has been popularized in Western countries, especially in most recent years, but what “marks 3HO Kundalini Yoga off most significantly from most other contemporary Yoga schools is perhaps its stress on *mantra* meditation... in conjunction with other yoga practices” (Stoeber, 355). By Yogi Bhajan’s insistence, the science of Naad—“the Yoga of sound vibrations”—is incorporated into this orthopractic mysticism because “[p]roper rhythmic enunciation and repetition of sounds can unlock subconscious emotions, establish certain psychological states, enhance intuition and tap inner potentials of the brain and mind’ (Kaur Khalsa and Sat Kirpal Kaur Khalsa, 147). Yogi Bhajan does not just see mantric meditation as a technology for the elevation of consciousness, but furthermore as a “significant vehicle of grace” (Stoeber, 356).

Though the teachings and theological, philosophical orientation of 3HO are spiritually linked to the religious tradition of Sikhism, 3HO insists that it is not a religion—the organization describes itself as a spiritual community that welcomes people of all religious backgrounds, and that neither forces belief, nor conversion upon practitioners of its yoga style. Besides, the

emphasis on orthopractic mysticism in 3HO Kundalini Yoga “is explicitly Sikh *mukti*—union between the Soul and God that liberates the Soul from the cycle of rebirth.” (Stoeber, 356).

## Chapter II

### ***Experience and Belief in Understanding the Results of Kundalini Mantras***

To rush into truth claims with blind belief demonstrates scholastic naïveté. But to stubbornly reject truth claims without conducting any investigation demonstrates cultural and intellectual arrogance. Both attitudes in extreme are pitfalls along the journey to negotiate differences in perspective. In the effort to understand truth claims from an unfamiliar paradigm, a willingness to be open-minded must be balanced with a critical eye, so that the process of becoming acquainted with diverse perspectives can cultivate deep appreciation in the investigator. This willingness to “suspend judgement... of what may be radically different from” local, inherited, familiar values in order to engage in unprejudiced study and instead focus on analysis of experience is called the *phenomenological epoché* (Mittal and Thursby, 10).

Some of the claims that Yogi Bhajan, the founder of 3HO Kundalini Yoga (a reconstruction of Sikh Dharma geared towards Western audiences), makes about the effects of mantras on the consciousness of a chanter-meditator are quite grand: You will feel your “soul and destiny [brought] present”, and be able to “consciously remember and experience the link between you and the Creator”, his teachings say about the Laya Yoga Mantra (KRI International Teacher Training Manual, 101); “Total mental balance to the individual psyche” is brought to the practitioner of Kirtan Kriya (Manual, 100). How can scholars of religion making use of the phenomenological epoché to understand the phenomena of mantric chanting in Kundalini Yoga approach such epic claims? The pedagogical style of 3HO Kundalini Yoga offers valuable insight into a possible answer for this troubling query. By turning to the pedagogy, scholars of religion

can analyze how the tradition presents itself, with the expectation of communicating across paradigms, to foreign audiences.

The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate to readers, through close-reading analysis of primary source text material, the strong emphasis placed on embodiment and the embodied experience in the pedagogy of 3HO Kundalini Yoga Mantras. The experience of embodiment is so important for the ultimate goal of Kundalini Yoga exercises and meditations with mantras, because it is exclusively through the body that the practitioner can come to fully realize, understand, and integrate the mystic knowledge and wisdom. As stated in the extended quote from Stoeber that was included in the previous chapter, the subtle *kundalini* “emanation of the soul” can only be united with *Sat Guru* by means of an embodied practice that will integrate, in the body, the teachings with “this underlying spiritual consciousness” (Stoeber, 357).

## **Authority and Knowledge**

Self-representation is an especially important factor to consider when undertaking investigation of a tradition that is of South Asian origin, because Western academic study of these regional traditions has historically been distorted by colonial frameworks. Noble as the neutrality that the phenomenological epoché intends to establish is, it is an impossible ideal. Every new insight develops from a previous understanding. There is no unbiased state of mind. A *postmodernist* study of religion takes into account an understanding that “each point of view, preference, and practice inevitably carries with it *political assumptions and implications*” (Mittal and Thursby, 11). As such, the postmodernist approach acknowledges that many of the texts that established foundational understandings of South Asian religious traditions in the Western academy pejoratively put down, romanticize, patronize, or otherwise interpret traditions,



concepts, and phenomena through imposed preconceptions and theories about what religion *is* (Clothey, 1-11).

One of the most problematic preconceptions is that mantras are a form of magic, and as such they are an expression of (implicitly primitive) superstition. This externally imposed interpretation could not be farther from the truth claims backed by the tradition's own form of knowledge production. Yogic science is different from the Western science of empiricism in many ways. The first crucial difference to recognize is that yogic science acknowledges the influence of unseeable forces such as the mind, the soul and spirit, on the visible and physically observable body (KRI Instructor Textbook, 15). This is because the "work of the early yogis was based upon tangible observations of energy and the effects of different activities and attitudes on the balance of those energies in the individual" (Textbook, 32). The technology of Kundalini Yoga is one that is designed to work on the body's subtle energy, the "total energy" that is either swayed by a person's conscious awareness, or that sways a person's unconscious awareness. The second crucial difference to recognize is that yogic science aims to "compare you to your own... capacity to be extraordinary" so that a practitioner of yoga may "Realize [their] full potential", whereas the scientific statistics of the West "look at you in relation to the average" (Textbook, 101). The technology of Kundalini Yoga is aimed at developing a person's "relationship to [their] mental potential" (Textbook, 19), which is why empirical standards that assess the results of an independent variable by observing how it affects a large sample size, are not entirely appropriate for assessing the values of Kundalini Yoga mantras. Knowledge production is based, in the tradition of yogic science, in experience. It is held that what you can verify through observation, particularly over a course of disciplined practice, of your own, personal experience is what you can know to be true. The tradition of Kundalini Yoga stresses that "the most important thing is

your experience. It goes right to your heart. No words can replace that experience” (Textbook, 20).

The pedagogy of 3HO Kundalini Yoga places emphasis on the demand that knowledge be acquired experientially. This is approach can be appealing to audiences who are familiar with evidence-based paradigms, but whose curiosity nonetheless propels them to probe the unfamiliar territory of mantra rooted in a paradigm of esoteric, Sikh-origin yogic mysticism. However, it must be pointed out that the 3HO Kundalini Yoga pedagogy still asks, covertly, for that experiential willingness to be balanced with some extent of belief. For example, one is asked to believe in the existence of Kundalini energy, a primal power that “[lies] latent at the base” of the human spine (Pandit, 5-6). One is also asked to believe in the existence of other such subtle energetic phenomena, such as the Chakras (“subtle centres of operation in the body of the [vital life force energies]” (Woodroffe, 103) that are located along the *Sushmuna* channel (correlating to the central nervous system), and the 10 Bodies (including the physical body, three mental bodies and six energy bodies, “powerful capacities of the psyche”) (Textbook, 200). In the 3HO Kundalini Yoga pedagogy, experiential knowledge is obtained corporeally, but intellectual understanding is obtained by cross-referencing these experiential truths against established facts and principles of thousands-year old yogic scientific findings.

While it may be applicable for aspiring practitioners of Kundalini Yoga to rely on experiential observations, this personal approach is not entirely fitting for the academic pursuit of understanding the phenomenon of mantras in the Kundalini Yoga tradition. That is why a close-reading method of approaching how mantras are taught to novice audiences is more suited to the purpose of this investigation. The following section will apply, to a close-reading of two Kundalini mantras of cornerstone importance, analysis of the pedagogical presentation with the

understanding of reality taken from the tradition's own perspective and compared to empirical facts that have been established by available secondary-source literature on the researched effects of these mantras.

## **Understanding Mantras from the Yogic Context**

The experiential focus of the 3HO Kundalini Yoga pedagogy places the body at the center of knowledge production. The body is prioritized as the most important vehicle for integrating knowledge. Spiritual insights are first integrated through the fact of embodiment, and then transformed into knowledge apt for communication through the faculty of the intellect. The intellect, then, is positioned as the secondary, not the foremost, vehicle for comprehension; it is seen as having the necessary function of assisting in the teaching and learning of proper meditation practice and mantric recitation. However, a purely intellectual grasp on the teachings cannot be a substitute for the experiential knowledge of the teachings that comes from embodied practice. To truly know and understand, one must do.

## THE LAYA YOGA MANTRA

Kunalini Yoga mantras are more than oral recitations. A close reading of how they are taught and presented by 3HO reveals that these mantras are, in fact, meditations, which utilize sonic expression to focus the meditator's attention and deepen the meditative experience. To chant this mantra, it is not enough to just say the words—one must also adopt the correct bodily postures, adhere to precise rhythmic and tonal structures, and visualize “the sound spiraling up from the base of the spine to the top of the head” (Manual, 12). As we will see, the attention of the practitioner must be totally devoted to the activity at hand in order for the mantra to be accurately practiced. Patton E. Burchett writes, “if the mantra is to be effective, its constituent sounds must be recited properly, with correct pronunciation and in accordance with fixed and strict rules regarding pace, rhythm, and intonation” (Burchett, 815). A close reading of the instructions for the Laya Yoga mantra show Burchett's assessment to be accurate, and analysis of these instructions clues readers into why all the highly detailed components of correct recitation may be necessary to experience “the pure consciousness of the divinity manifested in the mantra” (Burchett, 815).

The body must be sat in Easy Pose (Manual, 101), which is when the legs are folded upon each other such that the feet rest under the opposite thigh. This stable posture consolidates the extremities of the body (limbs) into one center, and when done correctly is easy to sustain for long periods of time. *Jalandhar bandh* (neck lock) must be applied to accentuate the straightness of the spine, which permits the Kundalini energy to rise easily along the *sushmuna nadi* (the central energy channel of the subtle body) (Textbook, 174, and Burchett, 825). The eyes must be closed, and meditators are instructed to “Focus through the Brow Point” (Manual, 101), the point in between the brows, in the center of the forehead, that corresponds to the location of the sixth

chakra, the Third Eye chakra, the energy center of “intuition, wisdom, and identity” (Textbook, 186). The hands must either be in Prayer Pose, “palms together... at the center of the chest” (Manual, 101), or in Gyan Mudra, (the “Seal of Knowledge”), “tip of the thumb together with the tip of the index finger” and the other fingers extended straight out (Textbook, 105), with the wrists resting on the knees (Manual, 101). The instructions for proper posture are very specific. Pictures and illustrations appear in both the textbook and the manual to accompany the written description of the postures, so that practitioners may understand clearly how to do this meditation.

Rhythm and anatomy parallel each other in this meditation—the mantra’s 3-1/2 cycle rhythm accentuates the path that the body’s latent Kundalini energy takes from “the base of the spine to the top of the head in 3-1/2 circles” (Manual, 12). The way to recite this mantra is to chant the sounds, “*Ek Ong Kaar-uh / Saa Taa Naa Maa-uh / Siree Wahaa-(uh) Hay Gu-roo*” in a 3/4 rhythm for the first 3 cycles and changing into a 2/4 rhythm for the final “*Hay Guru*” 1/2 cycle (p. 12). On the “*Ek*”, the navel point pulls in towards the spine, and keeps going in with the pronouncement of every “*uh*”. After the third full cycle (marked by “*Siree Wahaa*”), practitioner must apply the *uddiyana bhand* (diaphragm lock), and relax the lock for the last 1/2 cycle. The “*uh*” sounds, which are “more of a powerful movement of the diaphragm than a pronounced purposeful projected sound” (p. 12), are chanted at a higher tone than the rest of the sounds. The movement of the body in the diaphragm and the voice stimulate the Kundalini energy to move upwards. “The 3-1/2 cycle is the pulse rhythm of the kundalini itself” (Manual, p. 101). It is perhaps the closeness of the mantra and the anatomy that “enables one to get lost in the sound current” (Manual, p. 101).

The mantra must be recited for 11-31 minutes, and practiced for 40-120 days for “the memory and experience of your true identity” to be fully “etch[ed] into the subconscious” (Manual, 101). The effects of this meditation with mantra are numerous. The meditation “brings the soul and destiny present. It suspends you above conflicts attracted by success and the activity of the Positive Mind. It lets your activity serve your purpose. It makes you creative and focused on your real priorities and helps you sacrifice what is needed to accomplish them.” (Manual, 101). The Positive Mind is the third of the ten subtle bodies. It is the mental faculty that recognizes opportunities for expansion and growth. If the Positive Mind is overdeveloped the symptom of risk-neglecting optimism will manifest; if the Positive Mind is underdeveloped the Negative Mind (which recognizes real limitations and risk factors, so as to keep the person safe) will become strongly apparent in the person’s constitution, and they may become depressed and paralyzed with indecision (Textbook, 201). The Positive Mind is anchored to the physical body’s navel point, and so to balance this third subtle body, yogis are instructed to “Strengthen the Navel Point” (Textbook, 201), and we see from the instructions on proper recitation of the Laya Yoga mantra that the Navel Point is emphasized repeatedly throughout the 3-1/2 cycles.

The Laya Yoga Mantra is taught to accompany the *kriya*, “Awakening to your Ten Bodies”. “Awakening to your Ten Bodies” is a popular introductory level *kriya* that consists of 14 exercises, plus a deep relaxation in *shavaasana* (corpse pose; lying on the back, arms at sides palms facing up, and ankles uncrossed). Yogi Bhajan’s instructions indicate that this *kriya* targets all parts of the yogic anatomy, thus awakening practitioners to the full scope of conscious experience beyond the physical body. Several of the exercises in the *kriya* that this meditation with mantra accompanies also use a *pranayam*, Breath of Fire (a quick and short inhale-exhale

pattern to move the diaphragm up and down) (Textbook, 328), to exercise the third of the subtle bodies, the Positive Mind.

The sheer number and thoroughness of instructions for the proper recitation of this meditation with mantra are worth noting. Because many parts of the physical body (the eyes, the hands, the breathing faculties) are intentionally involved in this meditation, the challenge of staying focused on the sound and the consciousness of the mantra are taken care of—it is difficult for one’s mind to wander from the mantra very far for very long, because the prolonged and continuous demands of chanting and maintaining correct posture constantly call the practitioner’s attention back to the meditation. Thus, the detailed and precise instructions for embodying this active meditation discipline the meditator’s awareness.

As Frits Staal has noted, “A mantra is a ritual sound expression that may or may not be derived from an expression of language” (Staal, 44). The mantra is chanted in Gurmukhi, and the manual translates the meaning as One Creator Creation (“*Ek Ong Kaar-(uh)*”), True Identity (“*Saa Taa Naa Maa-(uh)*”), Great Indescribable Wisdom (“*Siree Whaa-(uh) Hay Guroo*”), (Manual, 101). The meanings of the words in a mantra are helpful in focusing the conscious awareness upon an idea, but the meaning is not what empowers the mantra to ‘work’. This is one notable characteristic of mantra that distinguishes the phenomenon from modern western psychology “affirmations”, which are dependent upon the meaningfulness of words for their efficacy. Patton Burchett elaborates on why linguistic meaning must be de-emphasized when evaluating mantric value: because “the proper utterance of the mantra is itself a realization of that divine consciousness which the mantra refers to and embodies” (Burchett, 825). He comments, “a practitioner’s one-pointed concentration on and uttering... of the mantra, even when done internally (silently), constitutes a creative awakening and movement of the vital

“breath” (*prana*), often symbolized as *kundalini*... whose ascension in the practitioner’s subtle body ultimately results in attainment of pure consciousness.” (Burchett, 825). That is why concentration on the subtle sounds of this mantra “enables you to remember and experience the link between you and the Creator” (Manual, 101) that is referenced by the meaning of the words that constitute the mantra.

## **KIRTAN KRIYA**

Kirtan Kriya is one of the three most rudimentary meditations with mantra in Kundalini Yoga, which was touted by Yogi Bhajan for its effectiveness in carrying practitioners “through the Aquarian Age” (Manual, 99). Besides the host of spiritual and energetic effects it is said to have, the mantra has also been observed to have a host of empirically verified effects on depressive symptoms and Alzheimer’s prevention, due to its being studied in controlled, scientific environments (Newberg et al; Eyre et al; Innes et al).

It is said in the manual for proper instruction that “The [Kirtan Kriya] mantra is chanted in the three languages of consciousness: Aloud (the voice of the human) — awareness of the things of the world / Whisper (the voice of the lover) — experiencing the longing to belong / Silent (the voice of the divine) — meditate on Infinity or mentally vibrate.” (Manual, 99). The Manual uses a distinctly poetic tone to explain to readers the three modes of chanting. The repetition in sentence structure subsequent to each of the three language’s titles, in addition to the mystic imagery of the explanations about what each of these languages are and how they resound, lend a rhythmic and somewhat romantic ambiance to the teachings. The decorative and evocative style is worth noting because it does not seem to match traditional perceptions of what



western scientific conventions deem to be the appropriate style for technical instruction. Even though this text is a precise formula on how to recite this mantra in order to achieve the effects purported by traditional yogic knowledge, there is nonetheless a discrepancy between the stylistic charges of the two aforementioned sciences. The language excerpted from this source is notably more geared towards the typically abstract and imagery-rich logic of the right-brain hemispheric interpretation. This could be because certain regions of the right-brain hemisphere are activated during silent meditation (Hernandez), making poetic language the most appropriate medium to communicate the nonlogically-conforming sensations that occur during such a practice.

With the Kirtan Kriya mantra, the concept of mantra as a sonic expression is stretched, because the recitation of this mantra varies between vocalization and silence. While there are parts when the sounds of the mantra are chanted aloud, or in whisper, there is also a mid-section in the meditation when the meditator is instructed to chant the mantra silently, focusing on the sounds only mentally and not vocally. Does sound that is not expressed and only thought of continue to count as sound? To answer this we need to consider the neural effects of thinking the sound compared to vocally chanting the sound. Where does the vibratory power in the mantra lie — in the manifestation of it through sonic expression, or in the electricity of its thought? Possibly, this tri-linguistic method instructed to chant specifically this mantra outlines a way to understand (mentally and through practice) the unification of one's consciousness with the consciousness of divinity (or the *naad*) that is manifest in the sound (Burchett).

The Kirtan Kriya meditation with mantra has been empirically investigated to have observable effects on the brains of regular meditators. The L-form of concentration specifically corresponds to an increase in activity in the frontal lobe of the right-brain hemisphere (Khalsa,

Figure 2). The brain activity triggered by the engaged vocal apparatus, and repetitive movements of nerve-dense body parts —the tongue in pronunciation of the *bija* (seed sound of the mantra), in coordination with the fingertips moving in *mudras*—increases blood flow to the brain’s frontal lobes during meditation, and, over time, also increases important neurotransmitters “such as acetylcholine, norepinephrine, glutamate, and possibly GABA as well” (Khalsa). Why is this significant? Scientists have speculated that the enhanced cerebral blood flow “provide[s] protection against neurodegeneration”, and that the neural transmissive activity stabilizes the brain synapses, a change which can decrease the risk of cognitive impairment (Khalsa). It is difficult to pass judgment on the critical value of this study because it was conducted by a member of 3HO. So, it is likely that the study was designed in a manner that would display the results of the meditation favorably. However, this limitation must be taken with a grain of salt, because of the general sparsity of empirical research available on the topic of Kundalini Yoga meditations with mantras. The traditions practices have yet to be studied widely, and so the current pool of investigations are dominated by those that are in some way associated with the Kundalini Research Institute. The lack of diversity in information sources can pose a problematic limitation for balanced academic investigation. Admittedly this is a difficult limitation to work around; hopefully the lack of diversity in the research pool will be rectified in coming years as Kundalini Yoga gains more popularity and widespread practice.

## **On the Inherent Corporeality of Mystic Knowledge**

An academic approach to the phenomenon of Kundalini Yoga mantras can illuminate the reasons behind why it is so important, coming from the perspective of the tradition, to physically practice the teachings. While the academic approach to Kundalini Yoga mantras can appear somewhat ironic at first—precisely because the tradition is explicit in emphasizing the nonnegotiable quality of learning that comes from the embodied experience of the practice—the intellectual approach can be helpful and reassuring to audiences who may be uncomfortable with approaching the truth claims of an unfamiliar paradigm, in understanding why the 3HO Kundalini Yoga tradition’s method of knowledge production has the priorities that it does. Experiencing the practice is a nonnegotiable requirement for Knowing. It is not necessary for one to believe in the claims of the yogic science behind the technology before being able to Know the effects of the mantra, however, acceptance of the possibility that the claims about subtle energetic forces could be true is what boosts the initial affirmation of Knowledge into the level of Understanding. The pedagogy of 3HO Kundalini Yoga is structured and presented precisely so that Knowing precedes Believing. This is because Belief is a quality accessed by the mental faculties of the person, whereas Knowledge in the 3HO Kundalini Yogic tradition, (at least mystic knowledge, religious knowledge) is inherently a consequence pertaining to observation of the corporeal experience.

## Chapter III

### Lens Dialogue

Christopher Lehrich was right to observe that the question concerning music and its connection to theory of religion has been raised but left *unanswered* in scholarly conversations. However, in his article, he has not ventured so far as to explore the extent to which the question as it had been raised by classical western thinkers Rudolf Otto and William James may be *unanswerable*. I propose that the conversation about how music can be used to understand theories of religion cannot move forward until we introduce, and put into central focus, the Body. I have selected these three authors because their ideas continue to be influential in contemporary contexts of religious studies. Otto introduced to western scholarship the idea that all religious ideas originate from direct experiences of the *numen*, the effects of which can be rationalized, but which itself lies outside of rationality and sensory perception. William James writes on mysticism, and provides ideological frameworks that are helpful for understanding the experiential workings of 3HO Kundalini Yoga in etic rather than emic terms.

The newly founded tradition of 3HO Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan draws upon a paradigm of yogic philosophy to present its embodied pedagogy. The pedagogy teaches that it is possible to attain religious experience by reproducing, in the body, a discipline of mantra recitation. In 3HO Kundalini Yoga, sound—focused and refined for consistency in the forms of mantras—is actively employed in the pursuit of religious experience.

This stands in contrast to the passive role that sound (generalized as music) plays in experiences of the religious that western theorists have more commonly latched on to. The previous chapter demonstrated how mantra is similar to music only on the surface, and how

deeper analysis of the phenomenon can bring readers to understand that mantra is a technique that can be used for spiritual experience. This difference between sound as actively (re)produced (i.e. sound as technique, sound as exercise) and sound as passively received (i.e. sound as performance for spectatorship) is what allows for sound to be situated in the body in the case of 3HO Kundalini Yoga mantras.

When we look at what is said about these two ways that sound plays a role in the religious experience - active, passive - we can come to understand why sound is important in the types of religious experiences described by the sources under scrutiny, without needing to pit either perspective's truth claims in competition with one another. The binary of sound as active and passive is to be understood in loose terms. Even in Kundalini Yoga where sound is actively employed as mantra, there are moments of passivity, such as when the student is receiving instruction, or when the practitioner is observing the effects of a recitation within their bodily environment. The key is to focus on agency through the binary of activity and passivity, so that this binary is understood to be the set up for an intellectual exercise aimed at exploring what can be learned about religion and experience from analyzing 3HO Kundalini Yoga. The creation of sound via mantra, and the reception of sound via musical spectatorship, have both been noted to lead the experiencer into intimate knowledge of religious ideas. The main difference is that sound creation in the 3HO Kundalini Yoga tradition as taught by Yogi Bhañan is an active process that requires consistent discipline in the body to facilitate the religious experience and to access the religious consciousness; sound reception, as theorized upon by Otto and James, is a passive process that *may* bring about, by chance, an experience of the religious. By focusing upon the body in exploring the connection between sound and theory of religion, the conversation shifts

towards the topic of agency. Sound and the religious are connected by more than mere chance insofar as the experiencer utilizes their agency to exercise this connection.

## Non-Rationality in Numinous and Musical Experiences

Rudolf Otto is a thoroughly influential scholar of Religious Studies, whose articulations in 1924 about the religious as an *a priori* category to experience remain the subject of contemporary scholarly discussion. Arguably his core contribution to the field of religious studies is the claim that at the core of all religions is this experience that can be felt through the body, but is itself not about the body; a *numinous* feeling that is unique to religious experiences, and that has its origins in the *numen*. Otto's book, *The Idea of The Holy*, introduces his concept of the *numinous*, a *sui generis* "category of value and... state of mind" that underlies all experience of the religious and that he breaks down into three determinate states, designated by the Latin phrase, *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Otto, 12, 35). The *mysterium* denotes "something absolutely and intensely positive", "which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar" (Otto, 13).<sup>9</sup> Otto goes on to explain that the *mysterium*, "inexpressible and above all creatures" (13), is both overwhelmingly daunting and intriguing (*tremendum et fascinans*). The *tremendum* is rooted in "a specific kind of emotional response" analogous to fear, but "wholly distinct from that of being afraid," as it contains in its spectral quality which makes it more akin to "'awe' rather than 'dread' in the ordinary sense"; the

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<sup>9</sup> Though there is no evidence to indicate that Otto was in conversation with the concepts of Sikh mysticism at the time of writing *The Idea of the Holy*, this articulation of the *mysterium* can be placed in parallel with the understanding of *nirgun*, that which is abstract, 'without qualities' or attributes, formless, unconditioned (McLeod, xvi, Oberoi, xxi), which is used in Sikh understandings to describe *Waheguru* (God, the One, Divinity) that precedes and forms the basis for all experience/creation

particularity of a religious dread described by the *mysterium tremendum* comes from it being marked by a feeling of “terror fraught with an inward shuddering such as not even the most menacing and overpowering created thing can instill.” (Otto, 13-14) Otto only briefly defers to the body in this section to develop this creature-feeling dread, explaining that symptoms may include ‘cold blood’ and ‘creeping flesh’, that the *mysterium tremendum* may “penetrate to the very marrow, making the man’s hair bristle and limbs quake.” (Otto, 16) While the feeling of being in the presence of the numen is daunting, “at the same time it is no less something that allures with a potent charm, and the creature, who trembles before it, utterly cowed and cast down, has always at the same time the impulse to turn to it, nay even make it somehow his own” (Otto, 31). Otto notes that it is the thrust of mysticisms to develop practices in pursuit of “possession of and by the numen”, experiences which are solely “sought for its own sake” (Otto, 33). The intriguing element of the numinous designated by *fascinans* relates to its ability to fill the soul with an inexpressible tranquility, “appears as a strange and mighty propulsion toward an ideal good known only to religion and in its nature fundamentally non-rational, which the mind knows of in yearning and presentiment, recognizing it for what it is behind the obscure and inadequate symbols which are its only expression.” (Otto, 36) Here we see Otto beginning to transition his descriptions of the numinous into a claim about the category of feeling being in essence *a priori* to all sensory experience.

Experiences of the holy are first detected corporeally before they are available to be extrapolated upon for intellectual comprehension, but though the numinous experience is “interfused and interwoven with the present world of sensuous experience” (Otto, 117), it does not originate in the sensuous. Otto writes in the Appendices of *The Idea of the Holy* that since the mind’s “rationalistic speculation tends to conceal the divine in God,” we necessarily must turn to

the unmediated corporeal knowledge in order “to break through the hard crust of rationalism and bring into play the feelings buried deep down in our religious consciousness” (Otto, *Appendix IV*, 198). Certain understandings about the character of the numen can be processed in the mind for the purpose of rationalizing theological understanding, (such as the traits of Mercy, Love, Beneficence, Goodness,) but they are not fundamentally rational in nature, because they are not firstly apprehended by the faculty of cognition. “The rational ideas of Absoluteness, Completion, Necessity, and Substantiality” that humans have developed about the Holy through theology “are not to be ‘evolved’ from any sort of sense perception,” Otto says (116). In other words, our rational understandings about the Holy are results of reflection upon corporeal experience, but the experience which is felt corporeally does not have its origins *in* the body. “Rather, seeking to account for the ideas in question, we are referred away from all sense-experience back to an *original and underivable capacity* of the mind implanted in the ‘pure reason’ independently of all perception.” [emphasis added] (Otto, 116). Thus Rudolf Otto states his claim for the *a priori* categorization of the *numen*, and adds as explanation that “The *numinous*... issues from the deepest foundation of cognitive apprehension that the soul possesses, and, though it of course comes into being in and amid the sensory data and empirical material of the natural world and cannot anticipate or dispense with those, yet it does not arise *out of* them, but only *by their means*.” (Otto, 117) Perhaps one of the most crucial thrusts in *The Idea of the Holy* is the conclusion Otto draws from “the facts of the numinous consciousness [that] point therefore... to a hidden, substantive source, from which the religious ideas and feelings are formed, which lies in the mind independently of sense-experience.” (118)

Much like how the numen is external to yet perceived by the physical senses, so too is music external to yet perceived by the physical senses. In the section, *Analogies and Associated*



*Feelings*, Rudolf Otto defers to the example of music to explain how “rational elements in our feeling-consciousness may be... penetrated by quite non-rational ones” in the phenomenon of numinous experiences. He uses sound, but sound specifically interpreted as musical sound, as an analogy for the numinous experience, because just as feelings incited by the numen can only be categorized in terms of their being *numinous*, according to Otto, feelings incited by music can only be categorized in self-referential terms. “Music,” he says, “arouses in us an experience and vibrations of mood that are quite specific in kind and must simply be called ‘musical’” (Otto, 49). The feelings and state of mind induced through musical experiences are *supra*-rational, because “it releases” an emotional reaction, “a blissful rejoicing”, a “mournful or exultant” feeling, of which “we are conscious of a glimmering, billowing agitation occupying our minds, without being able to express or explain in concepts what it really is that moves us so deeply.” (Otto, 49) The experiences of ‘music-consciousness’ can be rationalized and incorporated into the “fabric... [of] the general human feelings and emotional states” (Otto, 49) of consciousness, but musical feeling “is rather (like numinous feeling) something ‘wholly other’, which, while it affords analogies and here and there will run parallel to the ordinary emotions of life, cannot be made to coincide with them by a detailed point-to-point correspondence” because it is essentially “unconceived and non-rational” (Otto, 50).

Though Otto is fond of music’s non-rationality as a useful analogy to the numinous’ non-rationality, he is clear to remind readers that “Each is something in its own right, independently of the other” (Otto, 51), and warns us against confounding the two. Musical experience can be comprehended in tandem with numinous experience because of their shared similarities but sound manifested as music is only an “*indirect means of representing the numinous*” [emphasis added] (Otto, 70). In regard to this statement we must note that Otto sees Silence, which is still

included “in the language of musical sounds” (71), as a more direct method of representing the numinous. This overlaps interestingly with a truth claim coming from 3HO Kundalini Yoga addressed in the previous chapter about Silence being “the voice of the divine” (Manual, 99). Otto says that the way in which music can evoke non-rational feelings parallels the way the numinous can also do so, but the sound of music itself cannot *express* the holy; it is only when there is “an absolute cessation of sound long enough for us to hear the Silence itself” that the musical experience transubstantiates (by intimation, not by expression) into something holy.

Besides these explicit references to sound, silence, and music as analogies to the numinous experience, Otto further emphasizes the link between sound and the religious experience in *The Idea of the Holy* by using musical language to flourish his statements about the numinous. He talks of the “real sublimity” of emptiness and empty distances as “set[ting] vibrating chords of the numinous along with the note of the sublime” (Otto, 72).

## **Music and the Mystical Experience**

William James is a psychologist and religious thinker whose lectures on Mysticism in his most famous lecture-compilation piece, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, is very influential in the religious studies subfield of mysticism. James was clear to state that he had never personally witnessed a state of consciousness that could be deemed *mystical*, but claimed that it was a category of conscious experience that greatly appealed to his interest. Upon surveying a vast array of sources, he deemed ‘mystical states of consciousness’ to hold far more depth than the superficial, and often dismissive, stereotypes of vagueness, sentimentality, and “without a base in either facts or logic” (James, 301) give them credit for. To introduce readers to the

concept of reference in his terminology, James articulated a system of four identifiable traits in the *mystical*: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. He comes to the conclusion that mystical experiences carry authority for the person who has them, but not for anyone else, and that “The existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension that non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe” (338).

James analogizes the musical experience to explain his point on the ineffability of mystic states, saying that “no one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony” (302). The noetic quality of mystic states comes from their ability to impart “insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect” (302). The observation on transiency could lead into an insightful discussion on the 3HO pedagogical thrust of reproducing mystic states. Mystic states “modify the inner life of the subject between the times of their recurrence” (303), which could be relevant for a discussion on the 3HO pedagogy, too. Possibly linking to Otto, he says that “waking consciousness, rational consciousness...is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the flimsiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different” (308) and accessible to us! (my addition)

He lists music as one of the things that can bring in the subject whose mind is “tuned aright” a “sense of deeper significance” (304), and, similarly to Otto, uses the language of ‘tuning’ to enhance the effect of his analogy.

## Chapter IV

### Conclusion

Part of the theoretical differences that become evident when bringing Western Scholars' articulations about sound and experience of the religious into conversation with the philosophical claims of 3HO comes from may have their origin in how the body is understood in relation to the Divine within each of these paradigms (Abrahamic Judeo-Christian, Indic Sikh Yogic Mystic). Sikh theology and ontology is supported by an esthetic approach "to knowledge and spirituality. The opposite of anesthetic (the deadening of senses), esthetics is the heightening of hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, tasting. In short, esthetics is feeling and experiencing the Divine immediately and intensely. ... A heightened sensuous experience is a requirement for metaphysical knowledge. ...the esthetic experience of an individual is absolutely crucial for ethical development. By honing the senses, knowledge of the infinite One is attained, which frees people from debilitating binary structures." (Singh, 74-75). In the Guru Granth, there is frequent and "multivalent womb imagery" (Singh, 104-105). An effect of invoking "the ontological base of every person" to explain experience of the religious is that of orienting us towards "our primal home", the source of embodied life as we know it, rather than towards "a distant 'heavenly' future" which resides inarguably outside of all possible living experience (NGKS, 104). The life affirming orientation of Granthian scripture also affirms the body as an important, indeed crucial. On the other hand, the afterlife affirming orientation of Christian scripture denies the importance of the body, because physical death is seen as a crucial stage along the progress of the spirit's total experience. This insight helps us to further explore the binary of sound as an active/passive gateway to religious experience: on the one hand, we see in the life-affirming, body-affirming tradition a specific strategy devised for producing and reproducing religious experiences; on the

other hand, we see in the afterlife-oriented tradition a history of scholars who recognize sound as an important but inconsistent gateway to religious experience that occurs by chance, without predictability. The post-death experience is unknowable and the manner of each person's death is unpredictable, and so when the religious orientation emphasizes death as a necessary threshold of religious experience, so too are the religious experiences which come about by experiences of sound unpredictable and out of our control. Living consists of successive series of experiences in which continuity is felt, and agency can be exercised to a certain extent in between moments of experience. The body, through which we experience life, requires regular, laborious upkeep, and so when the religious orientation affirms life and affirms embodiment, so too are the religious experience which come about by experiences of sound moments in which agency can be exercised, regularly, laboriously (disciplined practice upkeeps the ability to enter thresholds of religious experience).

Of course, insofar as this conclusion rests within the structures of this binary between activity and passivity, it cannot be entirely adequate. It is too comfortable. Articulated above is a reflection on the relationship of sound and religious experience that is yet in an intermediate stage of critical development.

To build upon this further, we must ask ourselves the questions that thrive in the moment wherein assumptions about activity and passivity are reincorporated for consideration through the lens of agency, and not just in a superficial manner for the sake of academic formalities. What is the nature of an agency characterized by oscillation between discipline for surrender's sake? Permeable, enigmatic, tense. In observing how indefinable boundaries of a *partially* exercisable agency are encountered, dissolved, absent, and set anew throughout the continuous motions of its oscillation, what do we learn? For one, we learn that there exists a triangular relationship of

agency, embodiment, and consciousness. We learn that agency, embodiment, and consciousness merge together and yet are not accurately depicted if hints of their synonymy are made. Indistinct, yet still not united. And we know that the experience of all facets of this triangular phenomenon occurs with the body as locus. Nuances of experience are expressed in the interdependent triangular suspension, nuances which are detectable by an agential embodied consciousness because of a movement through the tensions, through the permeabilities, of these misty boundaries.

Is sound the vehicle of such an oscillation? In some cases, yes. And I hope to have demonstrated with the case study of 3HO's Kundalini Yoga mantras just how sound can operate as the vehicle for embodied agency to be conscious of this oscillation. But, going back to the binary of activity and passivity for a moment only to comment on its effectual uselessness now that we have extended beyond the intermediate stage of critical development, the agency is passive witness to the effects of the activity itself has exercised. Now we see why we must eradicate this binary now that its usefulness for this intellectual exercise has been extracted.

The esthetic experience of heightened sensual observation is a necessary stage in the eradication of this binary, because the eradication of this (and all) binary structures is hinged at a threshold that is located at the body. Entering the threshold *is* an act of agency, but it need not be through mantra recitation that agency is exercised. 3HO Kundalini Yoga provides a helpful pedagogic model for exercising agency with the intention to reproduce religious experiences through sonic expression.

Agency is an ability to focus awareness within the domain of triangulation of which our limited body is felt as the locus. Binaries ought not to be taken at surface value because the space between each condition always ushers in a new element for consideration. Triangulation is a

helpful development upon the two-fold model, but it too does not solve the philosophical inquiries without leaving enigmatic trails to pursue. That is because these numeral designations are bound by conceptual differentiations so that they may serve as launchpads. And, as we have learned, boundaries—which we use as tools to refine our communication, and to explore abstractions—are permeable to influences which lie beyond the scope of their linguistically signified designations.

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