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Citation for published version (APA):

Vliegenthart, D. (2022). Reasoned Flights beyond Reason The Life and Teachings of Franklin Merrell-Wolff. *Nova Religio*, 26(1), 5-34. <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2022.26.1.5>

Document status and date:

Published: 01/08/2022

DOI:

[10.1525/nr.2022.26.1.5](https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2022.26.1.5)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Document license:

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Reasoned Flights beyond Reason

The Life and Teachings of Franklin Merrell-Wolff

Dave Vliegenthart

ABSTRACT: New religious movements in modern western culture often emphasize experience at the expense of reason; for that reason, some scholars have described their teachings as “flights from reason.” This description has been rightly criticized. Nevertheless, it is not entirely wrong. Many founders of new religious movements do claim immediate insight into a (divine) reality that transcends the intellect. And yet, they and their followers often spend much of their lives building an intellectual frame around this anti-intellectual claim. Why did such paradoxical “reasoned flights beyond reason” emerge? Based on the life and teachings of Franklin Merrell-Wolff (1887–1985) and his Assembly of Man, the intellectualization of anti-intellectual claims by founders and followers of new religious movements in twentieth-century North America can be partly explained by three sociohistorical developments: (1) increasing access to an academic education, (2) increasing demand for a reflexive spirituality, and (3) increasing competition between eastern and western esoteric movements that answered this call for a reflexive spirituality

KEYWORDS: Advaita Vedanta, Alice Bailey, anti-intellectualism, Assembly of Man, Benares League of America, Franklin “Yogagnani” Merrell-Wolff, Gertrude “Lakshmi Devi” Adams, gurus, Helena P. Blavatsky, Inayat Khan, Introceptualism, New Age, Order of Avalokiteshvara, Sarah “Sherifa” Merrell-Wolff, Sufi Order of the West, Temple of the People, Theosophical Society, Theosophy, United Lodge of Theosophists, Yogi Hari Rama

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In his *Flight from Reason* (1971), later republished as *The Occult Underground* (1974), historian James Webb argued that the eighteenth-century “Age of Reason” had been succeeded by an “Age of Unreason” in the nineteenth century. In Weberian terms, the Enlightenment drive for rationalization had created a “disenchanted” world, which fostered a Romantic longing for its “re-enchantment.”¹ According to Webb, industrial and scientific revolutions together with colonial encounters had forced people in Europe and North America to revise their views of reality. Further exacerbated by the First and Second World Wars, this caused a “crisis of consciousness” during the nineteenth century, which extended into the twentieth century.² As more and more westerners were disenchanted by conventional sciences and lost faith in conventional religions, they turned to alternative sources of enchantment. Many of them found meaning in the magic and mystery of occult movements, imported eastern religions, and other wellsprings of superstition, Webb said, which created countless “cults of unreason,” as psychologist Christopher Evans described them.³ By using tainted terms such as *magic*, *occult*, and *superstition* as the “other” of scientific rationality, scholars such as Webb and Evans revealed their own Enlightenment bias.⁴ This makes their claims about “flights from reason” in “cults of unreason” within modern western culture outworn, but not necessarily wrong. This article argues that many founders and followers of new religious movements especially in North America do criticize reason, claiming that immediate experience is required for insight into (divine) reality, but that most of them still rely heavily on reason in doing so. Thus, it would be more accurate to speak of paradoxical “reasoned flights beyond reason.”

When we look at new religious movements in North America, including the one that is at the core of this article, we often find this paradoxical tension between intellectual and anti-intellectual tendencies. Here, I will define intellectualism as a positive perception of the intellect and anti-intellectualism as a negative perception or even suspicion of the intellect. In other words, intellectualism regards reason as a stepping-stone, whereas anti-intellectualism regards reason as a stumbling block, for acquiring insight into reality.

This definition of anti-intellectualism goes back to its original use in a debate among early-twentieth century American philosophers. As historian Martin Burke explains, this debate arose in the wake of the Hibbert Lectures on “The Present Situation of Philosophy” by William James (1842–1910) at Manchester College, Oxford, in 1908.⁵ In these lectures, James criticized the “vicious intellectualism” of Rationalism.⁶ Inspired by Henri Bergson (1859–1941), his Radical Empiricism holds that the concepts of the intellect provide only superficial “knowledge about” reality, while immediate experience provides “knowledge of acquaintance,” that is, insight into reality itself.⁷ According to James,

reality, especially the higher reality that mystical experiences suggest to exist, transcends the intellect and should therefore be called irrational or at least non-rational.⁸ James' student Ralph Barton Perry (1876–1957) summarized this “immediatism” as follows:

Direct, presentative, immediate experience, in which reality is itself in mind, in which the knower and the known coincide, is more comprehensive, fundamental, and penetrating than the indirect, representative, mediate experience which implies it, refers to it, and is formed out of it.⁹

This philosophical definition of anti-intellectualism differs from the sociopolitical interpretation of historian Richard Hofstadter (1916–1970). In *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), Hofstadter defined anti-intellectualism as a variety of attitudes and ideas bound together by “a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it.”¹⁰ This anti-intellectualism has been fostered by an evangelical Christian sentimentalism, an egalitarian focus on mediocrity in politics and education, and a celebration of practicality in business and self-help spirituality.¹¹ Hofstadter distinctly differentiated this form of anti-intellectualism from its more theoretical articulation by the likes of Bergson and James. Nevertheless, Hofstadter did point out in passing a relation between philosophical and sociopolitical anti-intellectualism by saying that the latter often invokes ideas of the former.¹² As a typical example, he referred to psychologist-turned-spiritual-author Henry Link (1889–1952).¹³ In *The Return to Religion* (1936), Link claimed that western culture had forsaken God by deifying the mind and reifying reason. Perhaps with thinkers such as James in mind, Link reminded his readers that “among the philosophers and scientists there have always been some who maintained that life was not a logical or rational experience and that nature could never be explained in terms of scientific knowledge.”¹⁴ For him, this confirmed that “reason is not an end in itself but a tool for the individual to use in adjusting himself to the values and purposes of living which are beyond reason.”¹⁵

Variations on this theme are common at the intersection of philosophical and sociopolitical anti-intellectualism in modern American spirituality. This goes for both the anti-intellectual claim about a source of meaning beyond reason and the intellectual support for it based on philosophy, psychology, and science. New religious movements often invoke the authority of philosophical, psychological, and scientific traditions to legitimate their spiritual teachings.¹⁶ This article studies new religious movements at the junction of philosophical and sociopolitical anti-intellectualism, but it does not focus on their bids for scientific legitimation. It does not deny their “scientification of religion,”¹⁷ but suggests an additional explanation for their paradoxical intellectualization of anti-intellectual claims.

According to this additional explanation, founders and followers of new religious movements in North America have increasingly intellectualized their anti-intellectual claims due to three sociohistorical developments in the twentieth century. First, more and more people enjoyed the privilege of an academic education, which cultivated their critical acumen. Second, this fueled a demand for a reflexive spirituality among the growing group of educated spiritual seekers, who were convinced that reason could be used to discover a source of meaning beyond reason. Third, several waves of eastern and western esoteric movements answered the demand for such reasoned flights beyond reason. Many of these movements derided the dualism of modern western science and religion and promoted an eastern or eastern-inspired non-dualism, based on claims to an immediate insight into a (divine) reality beyond reason, which they presented as an ancient wisdom that underlies all true sciences and religions. Growing competition in the spiritual marketplace led founders and followers of these new religious movements to intellectually differentiate their similar anti-intellectual teachings as a (more) authentic and unique expression of this ancient wisdom.

This explanation is constructed around a microhistory of the life and teachings of Franklin Merrell-Wolff (1887–1985). It follows four stages of his life: early years, early adulthood, late adulthood, final years and beyond. At each stage, it places microhistorical anecdotes and texts in their macro-historical contexts to find sociohistorical clues for explaining the intellectualization of his anti-intellectual teachings. This method was created by historian Carlo Ginzburg.¹⁸ He has suggested to study biographies for “seemingly insignificant and marginal, unconsciously or routinely made actions as clues” of significant sociohistorical developments.¹⁹ As historian István Szi­jártó argues, microhistories are useful due to their popular appeal, realistic nature, and focus on real-world experiences with “little facts” from individual lives as valuable pointers to collective patterns.²⁰ This article focuses on little facts from the life and teachings of Franklin Merrell-Wolff to find clues of broader patterns behind the intellectualization of anti-intellectual claims about a direct insight into a (divine) reality that transcends the intellect—reasoned flights beyond reason—by founders and followers of new religious movements in twentieth-century North America.

Merrell-Wolff is a typical example of both a follower and a founder of new religious movements in twentieth-century North America. He followed several “enlightened” gurus and spiritual teachers, actively participating in their new religious movements and spreading their teachings, before claiming to be enlightened himself and founding a new religious movement based on his own teachings. During his adult life, he delivered hundreds of lectures and published dozens of texts on a wide range of religious, philosophical, and psychological topics. As such, he has been described as a modern American “philosopher and mystic,”

“Emersonian sage,” “gnostic,” “guru or proto-guru,” as well as “founder of an esoteric group,” “yogi,” and “satsang teacher.”²¹ The first in-depth studies of Merrell-Wolff’s life and teachings were conducted by insiders such as his step-granddaughter Doroethy Leonard and her partner Ron Leonard. As his self-assigned successors, they have a personal stake in presenting and preserving his legacy in a specific way in their books *Franklin Merrell-Wolff: An American Philosopher and Mystic* (Doroethy B. Leonard, 2017) and *The Transcendental Philosophy of Franklin Merrell-Wolff* (Ron Leonard, 1999). As will be discussed, social circumstances probably motivated them to picture Merrell-Wolff as a mystical philosopher rather than (also) as a guru of a new religious movement. As I will show, some outsiders have adopted this image of Merrell-Wolff, while others are steering it in a different direction.

Like the modest but mounting library of literature about Merrell-Wolff, this article reflects on his life and teachings. Unlike other studies, it paints a less biased and more complete picture of Merrell-Wolff’s legacy by critically scrutinizing and combining his colorful life and his eclectic teachings. It highlights underplayed facts about his life, revealing patterns in the intellectualization of his anti-intellectual teachings that also seem to recur within and between other new religious movements. As such, it builds on my book *The Secular Religion of Franklin Merrell-Wolff: An Intellectual History of Anti-Intellectualism in Modern America* (2018).²² It offers a similar structure and descriptions of Merrell-Wolff’s life and teachings. However, it includes new primary and new secondary sources that support a more theoretically refined argument about the paradoxical reasoned flights beyond reason present among founders and followers of new religious movements in twentieth-century North America.

EARLY YEARS

Franklin Merrell-Wolff was born as Franklin Fowler Wolff in Pasadena, California, in 1887. As the son of a Methodist minister, he said, “I was a child of my father and I was no critic of what [he] believed.” Merrell-Wolff recalled how “I did not choose to go to the Methodist Church. I was born in it.”²³ Not until his teens would he start to think for himself. For instance, he would question the dissolution and redistribution of atoms in the *literal* resurrection of Christ. After his pastor told him to “leave it to the Lord, my son,” the church lost him forever. This type of anti-intellectualism pushed critical thinkers such as Merrell-Wolff away from Christianity and often from organized religion in general.

Benefiting from the academic boom that started around the turn of the twentieth century, Merrell-Wolff exchanged religion for science at

Stanford University and Harvard University. He was among the first to reap the intellectual fruits of a reformed educational climate, as more and more American universities were turning their schools into research institutes on par with European standards.²⁴ During his college years, from 1907 to 1913, Merrell-Wolff combined the abstractions of mathematics with the reflections of idealist and pragmatic philosophy and the introspections of experimental psychology.²⁵ His academic education cultivated a type of analytical thinking that would stay with him the rest of his life.

In 1914, Merrell-Wolff completed his studies and accepted a temporary position as a math teacher at Stanford. He briefly considered pursuing a PhD, before turning his back on academia to search for a “third form of cognition.”²⁶ He had grown convinced that a higher knowledge existed that was ignored within the walls of both the church and the academy.

EARLY ADULTHOOD

After discarding the perceived dogmatism of organized religion and excessive materialism and rationalism of mainstream science, Merrell-Wolff embarked on a quest for meaning outside the confines of conventional society and established religion and science. He retreated into the Santa Lucia Mountains, south of Carmel, to create a commune with a couple of friends.²⁷ He soon abandoned his plans, however, to join the Temple of the People in Halcyon, in San Louis Obispo County.

The Temple was an offshoot of the Theosophical Society, which was founded in New York City in 1875 by Russian cosmopolitan Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), former American military officer Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), and Irish-American barrister William Quan Judge (1851–1896). The key to authority and cohesion within the Theosophical Society were claims to exclusive contact with Mahatmas (“great souls”) such as Morya and Koot Hoomi. These Masters were regarded as spiritually superior beings living in (male) human bodies primarily in the Himalaya region, who were allegedly guiding humanity toward higher stages of evolution based on an ancient wisdom that underlies all true sciences and religions.²⁸ As historian of religions Egil Asprem writes, Blavatsky presented this ancient wisdom as “the *true* expression of science and religion,” which stemmed from a “higher knowledge, beyond reason and revelation alike.”²⁹ Disputes over who had authentic access to the Masters within the first, second, and third generations of leaders within the Theosophical Society produced numerous offshoots.³⁰ One of these offshoots was the Temple of the People, which was founded in 1898 by physician William “Red Star”

Dower (1866–1937) and medium Francia “Blue Star” LaDue (1849–1922), who claimed to receive messages from a Master Hilarion.³¹

Merrell-Wolff’s interest in this esoteric movement is not surprising. As art historian Paul Ivey elaborates, at this time, spiritual seekers “flocked to a host of new metaphysical American religions,” which “devoted their metaphysics to practical ends in a realization of an absolute and fundamental reality.”³² These new metaphysical religions were entangling secular and religious beliefs and practices from eastern and western traditions.³³ This attracted educated seekers such as Merrell-Wolff, who were searching for higher sources of meaning that still seemed compatible with science.³⁴ According to Merrell-Wolff, “It was at Halcyon that I met the woman who later became my wife. She was Sarah A[llice] Merrell-Briggs [1876–1959]—a married woman at the time.”³⁵ Sarah had participated in other new religious movements before she and her son James joined the Temple. From 1915 to 1917, the future couple closely collaborated as the Temple’s “propaganda officers,” until Merrell-Wolff was drafted for the First World War in Europe. For Merrell-Wolff and many others in Europe and North America, the Great War revealed “the spiritual bankruptcy of the West.”³⁶ If God had died by the nineteenth century, as Nietzsche said, then the war had been his funeral. However, his death deprived people of their “former belief in the divine purpose.”³⁷ This fueled widespread quests for alternative sources of meaning. As journalist and future professor Rom Landau, among many others, recalled of this time, “After the war of 1914–1918, wherever I went . . . conversation was likely to turn to supernatural subjects.”³⁸ Spiritual seekers collectively abandoned conventional sources of meaning and pursued alternative sources for individual purpose and direction.³⁹

Many of them found these alternative sources in new religious movements, which were growing, or at least growing more visible, throughout the country. Especially in California, there was a rise of new religious movements between 1910 and 1935.⁴⁰ Reminiscent of earlier surges of religious enthusiasm such as the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Great Awakenings, historian Philip Jenkins refers to it as a “period of emergence.”⁴¹ However, this time, the emergent movements did not have evangelical Christian roots, but rather eastern religious or western esoteric roots, or both. Their beliefs and practices sprang from older new religious movements such as Transcendentalism, Theosophy, and New Thought.⁴² Together, they were contributing to what sociologist Colin Campbell has termed a “cultic milieu,”⁴³ a precursor of the countercultural New Age movement.⁴⁴

Merrell-Wolff was discharged from the army in 1919. He and Sarah had been nurturing their romantic feelings for each other through letters. After years of separation, Sarah had divorced her husband. This now allowed her to marry Franklin on 25 June 1920. They merged

their surnames into “Merrell-Wolff” as a sign of equality. The marriage may not have been consummated physically for they felt it did not have “the usual biological objective . . . the raising of biological children,” but rather the raising of spiritual offspring.⁴⁵

In 1922, Temple of the People leader Francia LaDue died. A book-length transcript of “channeled messages” that Sarah supposedly received from Hilarion shows that Sarah believed that she was LaDue’s successor.⁴⁶ A power play between the couple and the commune’s second-in-command, William Dower, resulted in their departure. Looking back, Merrell-Wolff recalled, “After the funeral and the various activities connected with [LaDue’s] death, we severed our connection with the Temple of the People and went down to San Fernando and managed to purchase the largest portion of my father’s orchard. Sherifa [Sarah Merrell-Wolff] became interested in the work of one of the members of Krotona . . . and went to New York . . . while I continued with the orchard.”⁴⁷

The member of the Krotona Institute of Theosophy to whom Merrell-Wolff referred would become one of *the* prophets of the “New Age,” Alice Bailey (Alice LaTrobe Bateman, 1880–1949). In 1923, Bailey had just founded the Arcane School, after she and her husband had been expelled from the Theosophical Society and its Esoteric Section because she claimed that her first book *Initiation Human and Solar* (1922) had been directly received from one of the Masters.⁴⁸ Through a fellow student of Bailey’s Arcane School, Sarah met the Sufi sage Inayat Khan (1882–1927), who named her “Sherifa.” Like Blavatsky and Bailey, Khan said that his mystical teachings captured “the essence of all pure religions and philosophies” about “self-realization” as “a science beyond reason.”⁴⁹ The couple joined Khan’s Sufi Order of the West. Merrell-Wolff would later explain that he produced lectures and his wife performed rituals in service of Khan’s order, until it became clear that the head of its American branch “was impossible to work with.”⁵⁰ The real issue was that they were spreading Theosophical beliefs and practices, which their peers perceived as a distortion of Khan’s unique teachings.⁵¹

They left the Sufi Order to join the United Lodge of Theosophists (ULT) in Los Angeles, from 1923 to 1928. Like the Temple of the People, the ULT sprang from the American branch of the Theosophical Society. However, the ULT leaders denigrated their peers at the Temple for distorting the ancient wisdom laid down in Blavatsky’s teachings. Merrell-Wolff later explained that this “opened the door to a problem in the Theosophical movement with which we were very little familiar,”⁵² its internal polemics—that is to say, its rhetorical strategy of defending one’s own position and questioning or even criticizing the beliefs and practices of similar others.⁵³ Historian of religions Olav Hammer explains that such polemics were common within Theosophical circles. For instance, Rudolph Steiner (1861–1925)

criticized the eastern orientation of the Theosophical Society and left it to create his more western-oriented Anthroposophical Society; Bailey criticized Steiner's Anthroposophy; and some Theosophists criticized Bailey's Christianized Theosophy.⁵⁴ Despite their polemics toward the Temple of the People, Merrell-Wolff remained "impressed with the character and intellectual quality of the work that was produced by the ULT association."⁵⁵ However, Sherifa did not feel the same affinity, and they moved on again.

After the ULT, the couple joined the Benares League of America of Yogi Hari Rama (Mohan Singh, c. 1885–?).⁵⁶ Merrell-Wolff recalled that "In 1928, I along with eleven others was appointed by an East Indian known as Yogi Hari Rama Disciples of the Absolute,"⁵⁷ tasked to teach his "super yoga science."⁵⁸ Inspired by Hari Rama's teachings, Merrell-Wolff started to produce texts and talks on yoga, karma, and reincarnation under the name "Yogagnani."⁵⁹ Not only did he adopt this Indian-sounding pseudonym, he also assumed an exotic image to match—complete with beard, robe, and turban. This makes sense within the cultural context of the time. At least in Theosophical and New Thought circles, Indian gurus and yogis were seen as the authentic custodians of an ancient esoteric wisdom, yet ever-stricter immigration laws had reduced their North American influx to a slow trickle.⁶⁰ This motivated some western students-turned-teachers to assume their role as guides on the road to realization.⁶¹

As Yogagnani, tacitly claiming the status of an Indian yogi, Merrell-Wolff wrote that "Yoga Philosophy is the intellectual formulation of ontological principles which are known unequivocally as the result of direct perception or rather apperception," which "lies above intellection."⁶² The "Spiritual Knowledge" that is acquired through such direct perception is that the universe is a projection of consciousness in form. "Liberation follows upon the realization of this fact, not merely as an intellectual concept, but as something immediately apperceived." This immediate apperception is the goal of the highest yoga or *jñana yoga* ("path of knowledge").⁶³

In a letter to a student, Merrell-Wolff argued that *jñana yoga* is "the Vedanta, which attains its most complete rationalistic completeness in the writings of Shankarachara [sic] and which in exoteric statement comes the nearest to the Gupta Vidya (Secret Doctrine)."⁶⁴ Vedanta or "end of the Vedas" refers to the philosophy of the Upanishads.⁶⁵ Shankara (eighth century CE) was the founder of Advaita Vedanta, which is a non-dualist interpretation of the Upanishads.⁶⁶ The non-dualist message of Advaita Vedanta is that "ever free and different from names, forms and actions, I am the supreme *Brahman*, the Self [*Atman*], consisting of pure Consciousness and always without a second."⁶⁷ The "Secret Doctrine" was Blavatsky's term for the ancient wisdom that allegedly underlies all true sciences and religions.⁶⁸ Merrell-Wolff regarded

Shankara as “the philosopher Sage par excellence.”⁶⁹ Nevertheless, even Shankara’s “most rationalistic articulation” of the “Secret Doctrine” in Advaita Vedanta cannot answer all questions, he reminded his student, because “the Absolute . . . we are dealing with [is] a domain which transcends intellection as well as any other form of relative representation.”⁷⁰

As he traveled the country to spread this message, an inner section gathered around Merrell-Wolff called the Order of Avalokiteshvara.⁷¹ This raised eyebrows among other members of the Benares League, with good reason. Internal memos were presenting “the O[rder] of A[valokiteshvara] [as] a special work given to Yogagnani by the Great Master.” It was so special, that “no disciple of H[ari] R[ama] may know anything about it, except by initiation.” Its existence was to be kept from anyone who could not produce the secret symbol of the order.⁷² Power struggles ensued with senior members of the Benares League, who feared a hijacking and distortion of Yogi Hari Rama’s unique teachings. This resulted in Merrell-Wolff’s exit from yet another movement.

In December 1928, Merrell-Wolff and Sherifa turned his order into a movement. They first called it the Rama Sangha or Jnana Sangha, translated in Bailey terms as “Arcane School.”⁷³ Eventually, they settled on “the Assembly of Man.” Its policy documents include a two-legged *sampradaya* or “guru lineage” of initials, which I interpret as a legitimation claim to the authority of B[uddha] and C[hrist], M[orya] to K[oot] H[oomi] and [H]ilarion, I[nayat] K[han], and H[ari] R[ama] down to Y[ogagnani] and S[herifa].⁷⁴ At last, the Merrell-Wolffs had accomplished their objective of becoming parents to a spiritual offspring of their own.⁷⁵

However, as Jenkins has shown, eastern-inspired western esoteric movements like theirs were emerging everywhere at this time.⁷⁶ Given this increasing competition, the Merrell-Wolff couple apparently felt compelled to resort to polemics similar to what they had encountered, and disliked, in the ULT. They claimed that “the country is filled to overflowing of *pseudo*-occult organizations,” but that their Assembly presented spiritual seekers with a unique opportunity “to unite yourself with a truly occult movement.”⁷⁷ Their claim to (more) authentic and unique occult teachings acquired increased credibility in 1936.

LATE ADULTHOOD

As the country suffered a period of great depression, Merrell-Wolff experienced one of great personal elation. On 7 August 1936, after weeks of studying Advaita Vedanta in a book by Indologist Paul Deussen, *The System of the Vedanta*,⁷⁸ Merrell-Wolff had a sudden realization:

I am already That which I seek, and therefore, there is nothing to be sought. By the very seeking I hide Myself from myself. Therefore, abandon the search and expect nothing. This was the end of the long search. I died, and in the same instant was born again. Spontaneity took over in place of the old self-determined effort. After that, I knew directly the Consciousness possessing the characteristics reported by the mystics again and again. Instead of this process being irrational, it is the very apogee of logic. It is reasoned thought carried to the end with mathematical completeness.⁷⁹

Though reason played a significant role in the process toward realization, the immediate experience of it went beyond reason.⁸⁰ “Transcendental Knowledge is beyond thought” and “beyond feeling and sensation,” Merrell-Wolff stressed, for these are mere “instruments,” which are “left behind at the final transition.”⁸¹ Building on William James, he claimed that his realization could not be described as “knowledge about” (conception) nor as “knowledge of acquaintance” (perception), but only as “knowledge through identity” (introception):

*God is either Known directly through identity or He is not known at all. In contrast to formal and empirical knowledge, Real Knowledge is essentially wordless, for It does not deal with objects. This is Knowledge through Identity.*⁸²

Despite being essentially wordless, Merrell-Wolff would spend the rest of his life trying to find the right words for this “Real Knowledge,” building an intellectual frame around his anti-intellectual claim of immediate insight into a (divine) reality beyond reason. He later called this frame “Introceptualism,” short for “introceptual idealism.” He maintained that Introceptualism is a modern expression of the ancient wisdom that underlies all true sciences and religions: it is “as a whole rather unique, though the parts of it . . . are found scattered through the thoughts of other individuals, both occidental and oriental.”⁸³ Over the course of the following five decades, he constantly refined his teachings through one academic article, two books, and hundreds of lectures. His academic article, “Concept, Percept, and Reality,” appeared in the *Philosophical Review* in 1939.⁸⁴ It offers a philosophical reformulation of his first book, *Pathways through to Space*, which contains mostly psychological introspections of his mystical experience of introception with sporadic philosophical reflections. He wrote it in 1936, but it was not published until 1944.⁸⁵ His second book, *Philosophy of Consciousness without an Object*, was written during the late 1930s and revised in the 1940s, but not published until the 1970s.⁸⁶ It compares Introceptualism to eastern and western traditions, particularly Indian Advaita Vedanta and German Idealism, which Merrell-Wolff deemed near-identical.⁸⁷ Yet, he said that his own non-dualist teachings of Introceptualism are “not

to be identified with either Vedantism or current Idealism, though it is arrived at by a process of passing through these schools of interpretation.”⁸⁸ In his notes for a lecture titled “Are You Teaching the Hindu Philosophy?” Merrell-Wolff reaffirmed his affinity with Advaita Vedanta, but also reiterated that he gleaned elements from many other sciences and religions as well.⁸⁹

While Merrell-Wolff worked on his second book, the group of students around him, who together comprised his Assembly of Man, slowly grew to about a hundred members. But the growth stopped by the 1950s. In their weekly homework questions, Merrell-Wolff and Sherifa asked their students what they considered to be “the cause of [their] slow growth” and what would “help the Assembly gain in numbers.” One of their students answered, “We have tried advertising, but it seems it takes a spectacular type of advertising in this age to catch the eye, and even then it is difficult to hold the interest because there is so much competition.” Voicing the concerns of his teachers, he added that “there is nothing particularly spectacular about the Assembly,” but that they would need to attract people somehow, “as any organization needs new recruits if it would keep alive.”⁹⁰ Attempting to differentiate themselves from the growing number of “pseudo-occult organizations,” the couple redirected their focus from the group’s activity to its identity. The Assembly of Man was temporarily renamed “the Holistic Assembly,” with a revised mission statement and organizational structure.⁹¹ But before they could implement their revisions, Sherifa suffered several strokes and died in 1959. It left Merrell-Wolff depressed and in need of another female companion.

Gertrude “Lakshmi Devi” Adams (1911–1978), one of Merrell-Wolff’s followers from Chicago, agreed to “replace” Sherifa at his side. Through her efforts many of the Assembly’s original plans were realized. The Lone Pine “ranch” in Inyo County, which had been acquired a decade earlier, was permanently inhabited and opened for weekly lectures and talks with students and visitors, a monthly newsletter was introduced, and the yearly convention was reinstated, which was partly used to build an *ashram* in the hills nearby.

Meanwhile, Merrell-Wolff witnessed the rapid continuation of “old religious forms losing their vitality; new religious forms coming in.”⁹² The Second World War had sparked another “period of emergence” of new religious movements.⁹³ Particularly, Neo-Hindu and New Age movements posed a growing problem for the assembly. In 1960, for instance, Merrell-Wolff worried that “other racial groups are beginning to dominate,”⁹⁴ who were spreading non-dualist teachings that seemed (too) much like his. This probably referred to a series of waves of Hindu gurus and their Hindu-inspired meditation movements.⁹⁵ The first wave had reached American shores at the turn of the century. It introduced famous Indian gurus such as Swami Vivekananda (Narendranath

Datta, 1863–1902) and Paramahansa Yogananda (Mukunda Lal Ghosh, 1893–1952) as well as less famous ones such as Yogi Hari Rama. The second wave that arose during the 1960s and 1970s brought in spiritual superstars such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Mahesh Prasad Varma, 1918–2008) and Swami Muktananda (Krishna Rai, 1908–1982) along with their respective Transcendental Meditation and Siddha Yoga movements.⁹⁶ Their teachings also provided reasonable pointers to an immediate experience of a (divine) reality beyond reason. For instance, in his commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, Maharishi claimed that “Yoga, the path of Union, is a direct way to experience the essential nature of Reality,” which is intellectually systematized in the Gita, even though “[t]he state of realization [of Reality] is beyond the limitations of thought.”⁹⁷ Muktananda similarly argued that “what one comes to understand only intellectually through the study of the scriptures is directly realised through Siddha Yoga,” that “you are pure consciousness.”⁹⁸

Due to this increasing competition, Merrell-Wolff lamented that “even with good advertising, you do not get the audiences that once could be secured. You do not arouse, apparently, a lasting interest.”⁹⁹ Some of his closest students were turning to Indian gurus.¹⁰⁰ Most worrying was that young people stayed away. “The average age of Assembly members is too high. We need more youth. We need it badly.” This showed that they could not “afford to become stale.”¹⁰¹ The group had to find a way to stand out and secure its future.

Luckily, fate helped through John C. Lilly (1915–2001). Lilly was one of the academic self-help teachers at the Esalen Institute,¹⁰² the growth center at Big Sur that became the birthplace of the Human Potential Movement.¹⁰³ In 1971, Lilly first learned of Merrell-Wolff when a mutual friend lent him a copy of *Pathways through to Space* after noticing striking similarities between their teachings. This book sent Lilly on a search for its author. Though initially unsuccessful, he finally acquired the right address and drove down to Lone Pine.¹⁰⁴ The two men talked for hours about many topics, including Merrell-Wolff’s books. Lilly felt that “the time for the republication of *Pathways* had arrived . . . hundreds of thousands of young adults were now ready for the ideas, experiences and philosophy expressed therein.” At his own lectures and workshops, he had met “increasing numbers of people with mental properties similar to Dr. Wolff’s and mine,” who could reach higher states of consciousness “by the right reading material.” There were now “thousands of people, where there were only a few hundred in 1944, who are in need of confirmation of their own experience and in need of a showing of a pathway basically ‘jñana,’ or the head trip route to higher states.”¹⁰⁵ This cry for “head trip routes to higher states,” what I deem reasoned flights beyond reason, signaled the rise of a more intellectual spirituality.¹⁰⁶

After the Second World War, North American universities were transitioning from elite to mass higher education, which gave a new impetus to the academic boom that had started around the turn to the twentieth century.¹⁰⁷ Baby boomers were contributing to this “golden era” of higher education,¹⁰⁸ with college and university enrollments going up by 227 percent between 1950 and 1970.¹⁰⁹ At the same time, socioeconomic changes left them with more time and money on their hands to pursue their spiritual interests. Sociologist Marion Goldman also refers to this as “the rise of spiritual privilege.”¹¹⁰ Together, the growing access to higher education and the rise of spiritual privilege sparked a desire among many educated spiritual seekers for what sociologist Wade Clark Roof calls “reflexive spirituality.”

Roof defines reflexive spirituality as “a more deliberate, engaging effort on people’s part for their own spiritual formation, both inside and outside religious communities.”¹¹¹ Sociologist Kelly Besecke reformulates this as “a thoughtful, deliberate, open approach to cultivating religious meaning.”¹¹² Reflexive spirituality pursues an immediate experience of a reality beyond reason, but uses reason to realize this experience.¹¹³ “Reflexive spiritualists use reason to point to meanings that transcend the limits of reason.”¹¹⁴ Here, “*transcend* means to go *beyond*,” beyond our ordinary lives and our ordinary ways of experiencing reality.¹¹⁵ Such reasoned flights beyond reason have most appealed to “educated spiritual seekers who find little meaning in either ordinary secularism or traditional religion” and who want to “use intellectual reason to make religion more meaningful to modern ears.”¹¹⁶

Through Lilly’s efforts, publisher Julian Press answered the younger generation’s cry for “the right reading material” that would provide them with a more “reflexive spirituality.” In 1973, it published the second edition of Merrell-Wolff’s *Pathways through to Space* and the first edition of his *Philosophy of Consciousness without an Object*.¹¹⁷ Merrell-Wolff’s books were well received, even though most reviewers did warn potential readers about their unusually intellectual content and style.¹¹⁸

In 1974, one reader took especial notice of these publications. “I have long intended to write you of my enthusiasm for your work,” he started his letter to Merrell-Wolff. “I have just finished a work on the same subject and I feel our experience-thoughts so overlap that correspondence with you would prove most fruitful.”¹¹⁹ Despite the purported overlap, the budding writer struggled to get his book published. Most publishers, including Julian Press, had declined it because they found it too difficult for the average reader. *Pathways through to Space* and *Philosophy of Consciousness without an Object* would have given him renewed hope that American seekers were now ready for a more intellectual or reflexive spirituality. The letter writer was Ken Wilber (b. 1949). His *Spectrum of Consciousness* was published by Quest

Books/Theosophical Publishing House in 1977, which launched Wilber as a leading figure in the New Age movement.¹²⁰

The New Age movement was actually a loosely connected network of different eastern or eastern-inspired and western esoteric movements whose participants became aware of their similarities during the mid-1970s.¹²¹ Historian of Hermetic Philosophy Wouter Hanegraaff describes these similarities as a shared criticism on the dualism in modern western culture, exemplified by the rationalism of science (reason) and the dogmatism of Christianity (faith), and a shared pursuit of a “third option” (gnosis) that synthesizes science and religion.¹²² According to religious studies scholar Kocku von Stuckrad, this “third option” would often be supported by claims to a higher knowledge that is realized through an extraordinary experience.¹²³ Historian of religions Richard Kyle concludes that many spiritual seekers were drawn to New Age movements because New Age teachings answered their call for a more intellectual spirituality that would allow them to “experience a reality beyond the intellect” in a way that “does not reject science or rational thought; [but] transcends it.”¹²⁴

The rise of other movements that were combining eastern and western science and religion to support similar claims about an immediate insight into a (divine) reality beyond reason did not pass unnoticed within the Assembly of Man. One of Merrell-Wolff’s confidants, a colorful character named Erma Pounds (1925–2011), had this complaint:

The thing that irritates me among different groups that I find nowadays is that they start out, so many of them, with something just very, very real and then they forget what it is that they have and they become a little isolated group of “We are special people,” and they think of themselves as the esotericists . . . [as] really something.¹²⁵

These concerns and polemical complaints within the Assembly about “other racial groups” and groups of “special esotericists” show that the growing number of new religious movements challenged not only older religions, but also each other. The very similar reasoned flights beyond reason among different eastern and western esoteric figures and groups were being subjected to the laws of supply and demand. This made them compete for the time, money, and commitment of spiritual seekers in what Roof has called “the spiritual marketplace.”¹²⁶

This competition in the spiritual marketplace led Merrell-Wolff to differentiate his assembly from Neo-Hindu and New Age movements—just as many Theosophical movements had differentiated themselves from each other, the Sufi Order of the West had differentiated itself from Theosophy, and the Benares League had, ironically, differentiated itself from Merrell-Wolff’s Order of Avalokiteshvara. “Religious contacts challenge religious traditions to differentiate themselves, position

themselves and establish an identity,” says religious studies scholar Volkhard Krech, but they can also lead to an “amalgamation of elements of various traditions.”¹²⁷ In this case, the increasing contacts among new religious movements that amalgamated elements of various traditions to support similar anti-intellectual claims about an immediate insight into a (divine) reality beyond reason challenged their founders and followers to differentiate their teachings intellectually as a (more) authentic and unique expression of the ancient wisdom that supposedly underlies these traditions.

This drive for intellectual differentiation is explained by historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith. “The deepest intellectual issues are not based upon perceptions of alterity, but, rather, of similarity, at times, even, of identity.”¹²⁸ According to Smith, not the remote but the proximate others are most problematic, not those who are “like us” or “not like us,” but those who seem “too much like us.” This may well explain why Merrell-Wolff underwent his most prolific period in the 1960s and 1970s. For him and the members of his Assembly of Man, the Neo-Hindu and New Age gurus and movements must have seemed “too much like us.” These proximate others forced Merrell-Wolff to refine his teachings about a (divine) reality beyond reason to differentiate it from theirs, in one lecture after another.

In these lectures, Merrell-Wolff always partially compared his teachings to other secular and religious traditions, but never completely identified with any of them. He even circumvented certain references to avoid such identifications; for instance, “references to the works of Shankara,” as “I did not wish to become merely a continuer of this philosophy, but rather to break out my own personal, indigenous thought,” he explained.¹²⁹ To this day, Merrell-Wolff and his followers have presented his teachings as unique. But as we will see, they failed to distance his legacy from Advaita Vedanta.

FINAL YEARS AND BEYOND

The religious freedom and tolerance of the 1960s and 1970s were reined in after 1978. This was a fateful year for Merrell-Wolff on a personal and a societal level. Not only did his second wife Gertrude meet her demise due to a stroke, more than nine hundred people met theirs in a mass murder-suicide at Jonestown. Without diminishing the personal tragedy of the former, the latter would have greater consequences for figures like Merrell-Wolff and for groups such as his Assembly. As sociologist Eileen Barker observed at the time, “No new religion would be regarded in quite the same light or treated in quite the same way, after Jonestown.”¹³⁰ To make matters worse, a myriad of guru scandals in numerous spiritual communities came to light during the 1980s and

1990s.¹³¹ From then on, “cults” and “gurus” spelled danger in the public eye.

In this context, one understands why Merrell-Wolff’s spiritual descendants cringed at the thought of him being pictured as a “guru” and their group as a “cult” or even a “new religious movement” in my contact with them over the years. Does this align with the image Merrell-Wolff himself wanted to leave behind, though? He did say he wanted to be remembered as a philosopher and his teachings as a philosophy, despite its “deeply religious” purpose.¹³² But he also said, “It is entirely possible that the material I have put down in written form or oral form that has been recorded may lead after I depart from this plane to the formation of a philosophical school or a religious movement or even possibly a combination of the two.”¹³³

Be it as a founder of a new philosophical school or as a guru of a new religious movement, Merrell-Wolff’s legacy was to be built on his Introceptualism. In his “Capstone Statement” in 1980, one of his last recorded lectures, he situated Introceptualism between the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara and the Buddhist philosophy of Ashvaghosha (c. 80–150 CE).¹³⁴ As such, he considered it surprisingly similar to Blavatsky’s Theosophy. He still insisted that it significantly differed from each of these traditions because of its psychological and philosophical rather than religious or metaphysical bent.

Merrell-Wolff presented his Introceptualism as unique until his death on 4 October 1985. His family and friends have followed suit by characterizing his life as that of an “American philosopher and mystic” and his teachings as a “unique contribution to modern philosophy,” which “is not nor must it ever become a religion.”¹³⁵ This image of Merrell-Wolff’s legacy is clearly visible in Ron Leonard’s *The Transcendental Philosophy of Franklin Merrell-Wolff*:

His philosophy is a unique, authentic expression springing directly from mystical realization and refined in reflection by his critical intellect. He distinguished his accounts of the experiences themselves . . . from his expression and discussion of their philosophical significance. Although his formulation exhibits certain similarities with several established traditions, it cannot be subsumed by any of them.¹³⁶

Notwithstanding its unique expression, Leonard cannot deny the similarities between the non-dualist teachings of Merrell-Wolff’s Introceptualism and Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta:

The common thesis advanced by both Wolff and Shankara is that mystical insight provides knowledge in the sense of Gnosis, which in this context means esoteric knowledge based on intuition rather than reason. Similarly, conceptual thought has a high place for each . . . in which the concept serves as a viceroy to the Introcept.¹³⁷

Whether Shankara stressed intuition over reason is a matter of debate; suffice it to say that this focus on mystical experience sounds more like a modern reading of classic Advaita Vedanta.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, Leonard's comparison of Merrell-Wolff and Shankara accords with religious studies scholar Thomas Forsthoefel's view of Advaita Vedanta. Forsthoefel writes that "the knowing beyond knowledge . . . is at the heart of Advaitin religious experience, which, according to Advaita, is the very heart of reality itself." He adds that "although the mind is often represented as the primary stumbling block to liberation, the use of the mind to get beyond the mind is clear in Advaita."¹³⁹ For Forsthoefel, then, Advaita Vedanta advocates a reasoned flight beyond reason. Despite this "uncanny affinity" between their teachings, Leonard still corroborates Merrell-Wolff's claim to originality by concluding that his realization ultimately required a revision of Shankara's philosophy.¹⁴⁰

Coherent with this carefully crafted image by insiders, some outsiders have also pictured Merrell-Wolff as a "philosopher-mystic." For instance, philosopher Colin Wilson describes him as "an American doctor . . . [with] his own experience of Nirvana."¹⁴¹ German literature scholar Dennis McCort thinks of him as "the thinking man's mystic."¹⁴² Tibetan Buddhism scholar B. Alan Wallace considers him a modern "contemplative."¹⁴³ And psychologist Imants Barušs calls him an "American philosopher" and "American mystic," whose teachings suggest that science itself can be used as a spiritual practice for seeking transcendent consciousness.¹⁴⁴

Contrary to the carefully crafted image by insiders, more and more outsiders are picturing Merrell-Wolff as what scholars of religion Ann Gleig and Lola Williamson call a "homegrown guru."¹⁴⁵ Homegrown gurus emerged in North America during the 1960s and 1970s as a third wave of Hindu-inspired gurus. Unlike the gurus of the second wave with whom they were contemporaneous, homegrown gurus did not arrive from distant lands but arose from domestic soil. Literary historian Arthur Versluis argues, for instance, that "Merrell-Wolff, if not a guru, can be described at the very least as a proto-guru."¹⁴⁶ He furthermore thinks that Merrell-Wolff's teachings belong to an Anglo-American tradition of what he calls "immediatism," which he traces back to the evangelicalism of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), and the Radical Empiricism of William James, but he also includes the recent non-dualism of foreign gurus in North America such as Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) and German spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle (Ulrich Leonard Tölle, b. 1948). "Immediatism refers to a religious assertion of spontaneous, direct, unmediated spiritual insight into reality (typically with little or no prior training), which some term 'enlightenment,'" Versluis explains.¹⁴⁷ He states that it is

also present in “Neo-Advaita” or “the *satsang* network.”¹⁴⁸ Author Philip Goldberg makes the same connection between Merrell-Wolff and Advaita, writing that “Merrell-Wolff . . . attracted a small but devoted following to his Advaita-based teachings.”¹⁴⁹ Popular Advaita teacher and author Dennis Waite similarly concludes that Merrell-Wolff’s accounts of his “experience of enlightenment” accord with Advaita Vedanta.¹⁵⁰ This image of Merrell-Wolff as a Hindu-inspired home-grown guru is steadily spreading through popular websites such as Advaita Vision, which categorize him as a modern Advaita “western *satsang* teacher.”¹⁵¹

CONCLUSION

In his study of the modern Advaita movement in the West, religious studies scholar Phillip Lucas distinguishes “traditional” from “non-traditional” gurus.¹⁵² The latter are less concerned with the beliefs and practices of “original” Advaita Vedanta and are more eclectic in their teachings and methods. As such, they resemble what the late religious studies scholar Liselotte Frisk referred to as “*satsang* teachers.”¹⁵³ Since the 1990s, given the exponential growth of the *satsang* network, traditional modern Advaita gurus have increasingly criticized their non-traditional peers.¹⁵⁴ From the perspective of an economic model of religion, the traditional gurus try to delegitimize the non-traditional gurus to maintain their dominance in the spiritual marketplace.¹⁵⁵ This delegitimization often entails accusations of mere intellectualization. Traditional and non-traditional modern Advaita gurus agree “that absolute reality is infinite, formless, non-dual awareness, and that the supreme goal of human life is to realize this awareness as the ground of one’s being.”¹⁵⁶ Both describe this realization of absolute (divine) reality as an immediate non-dual awareness beyond the duality of the mind.¹⁵⁷ However, traditional modern Advaita teachers accuse their non-traditional rivals of “only communicating intellectual insights that do nothing to burn out the ego’s identification with the body and its desires.”¹⁵⁸ Non-traditional modern Advaita teachers, in turn, similarly accuse their traditional rivals of extending nothing more than “an exchange of ideas.”¹⁵⁹

Lucas considers this competition “a manifestation of the entrepreneurial spirit that long has characterized the North American religious landscape.”¹⁶⁰ I do, too. Yet, this does not explain why modern Advaita teachers in the West have intellectualized their anti-intellectual claims. Through the case study of Franklin Merrell-Wolff, this article has shown how and why such intellectualized anti-intellectualism has occurred. Like the modern Advaita movement, many new religious movements in modern western culture emphasize experience at the expense of

reason; some scholars have even described their teachings as flights from reason. This deprecating description has been rightly criticized for its Enlightenment bias because it implicitly pits the teachings of new religious movements against the touchstone of scientific rationality. Nevertheless, it is not entirely wrong. Many founders of new religious movements do claim immediate insight into a (divine) reality that transcends the intellect, yet they and their followers often spend much of their lives building an intellectual frame around this anti-intellectual claim.

Franklin Merrell-Wolff and his Assembly of Man are a typical example of this impulse. As such, his life and teachings provide a microhistorical lens to look for clues of macrohistorical circumstances that have fostered such reasoned flights beyond reason. Looking through this lens has revealed three contributing and cumulative sociohistorical developments in North America. The first development was an increasing access to an academic education. The second was an increasing demand among educated seekers for a reflexive spirituality, which uses reason to point to sources of meaning beyond reason. The third development was increasing competition in the spiritual marketplace between eastern and western esoteric movements—notably, Neo-Hindu and New Age figures and groups—that answered this demand for a reflexive spirituality. Many of these movements derided the dualism of modern western science and religion and promoted an eastern or eastern-inspired nondualism, based on claims to an immediate insight into a (divine) reality beyond reason, which they presented as an ancient wisdom that underlies all true sciences and religions. Increasing competition in the spiritual marketplace motivated these movements to differentiate their teachings intellectually as a (more) authentic and unique expression of this ancient wisdom.

Faced with a growing number of “other racial groups” and “pseudooccult organizations” of “special esotericists,” whom they viewed as too similar, Merrell-Wolff and his followers presented his Introceptualism as a unique philosophy to stand out from the crowd, attract more members, and secure the future of their Assembly. This perpetuated a polemical pattern that Merrell-Wolff had earlier encountered in Theosophical circles, the Sufi Order of the West, and the Benares League of America, and which later recurred in the modern Advaita movement. Thus, even if these new religious movements in modern western culture started as flights from reason, this polemical pattern in the spiritual marketplace turned them into *reasoned flights beyond reason*.

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The author would like to thank Doroethy and Ron Leonard of the Great Space Center and Robert Holland and Charles Post of the Franklin Merrell-Wolff Fellowship for their support of my research on Franklin Merrell-Wolff, despite their reservations about some of my claims about the life and legacy of their step-grandfather, friend, and teacher. The author also extends his gratitude to the dedicated editors and anonymous reviewers of Nova Religio for their constructive feedback and critical questions and comments on earlier drafts of this article, which have significantly improved the final result.

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⁴⁸ Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 65.

⁴⁹ Inayat Khan, *A Sufi Message of Spiritual Liberty* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1914), 3, 27, 28; Inayat Khan, “Inayat Khan’s Message over the Radio,” in *Complete Works of Pir-O-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan: Lectures on Sufism 1926*, vol. 2, ed. Munira van Voorst van Beest (Suresnes, France: Nebkakt Foundation, 1989), 124.

⁵⁰ Merrell-Wolff, “Autobiographical Material: A Recollection of My Early Work with Sherifa.”

⁵¹ Doroethy B. Leonard, *Franklin Merrell-Wolff*, 87.

⁵² Merrell-Wolff, “Autobiographical Material: A Recollection of My Early Work with Sherifa”

⁵³ Olav Hammer and Kocku von Stuckrad, “Introduction: Western Esotericism and Polemics,” in *Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and Its Others*, eds. Olav Hammer and Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2007), vii–viii.

⁵⁴ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 375.

⁵⁵ Merrell-Wolff, “Autobiographical Material: A Recollection of My Early Work with Sherifa.”

⁵⁶ Philip Deslippe, “The Many Lives of Mohan Singh: A Pioneering Aviator who Conned America as a Yoga Guru,” Scroll.in, 1 April 2019, <https://scroll.in/magazine/914011/the-many-lives-of-mohan-singh-a-pioneering-aviator-who-conned-america-as-a-yoga-guru>.

⁵⁷ Merrell-Wolff, “Autobiographical Material: A Recollection of My Early Work with Sherifa.”

⁵⁸ Yogi Hari Rama, *Super Yoga Science: Occult Chemistry Combined with the Chemical Composition of Life Elements* (n.p.: H. Mohan, 1927), <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/1339.PDF>.

⁵⁹ Yogagnani, *Yoga: Its Problems, Its Philosophy, Its Technique* (Los Angeles: Skelton Publishing Company, 1930); Yogagnani, *Re-Embodiment or Human Incarnations* (Los Angeles: Skelton Publishing Company, 1930). “Yogājñāni” roughly translates as “one who has knowledge of union [with the divine].”

⁶⁰ Bill Kte’pi, “Introduction,” in *The Roaring Twenties: 1920 to 1929*, ed. Rodney P. Carlisle (New York: Facts on File, 2009), 8–11.

⁶¹ New Thought thinker William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932), for instance, wrote books under pseudonyms such as Yogi Ramacharaka. See: Carl T. Jackson, “The New Thought Movement and the Nineteenth-Century Discovery of Oriental Philosophy,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 9, no. 3 (1975): 538.

⁶² Yogagnani, *Yoga: Its Problems, Its Philosophy, Its Technique*, 27–8.

⁶³ Yogagnani, *Yoga: Its Problems, Its Philosophy, Its Technique*, 145–57.

⁶⁴ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, “Letter to Laura Felper,” 24 September 1929, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/L86.PDF>.

⁶⁵ Patrick Olivelle, *The Early Upanisads: Annotated Text and Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 10.

⁶⁶ Jacqueline Suthren Hirst, *Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta: A Way of Teaching* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005).

⁶⁷ Shankara, *A Thousand Teachings (Upadesahasri): In Two Parts Prose and Poetry of Sankaracharya*, trans. Swami Jagadananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1949), 118.

⁶⁸ Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy*, 2 vols. (London: Theosophical Publishing Company, 1888).

⁶⁹ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, *Transformations in Consciousness: The Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973/1995), 242.

- ⁷⁰ Merrell-Wolff, "Letter to Laura Felver," 1.
- ⁷¹ Avalokiteshvara embodies compassion in Buddhism. See: the order document titled "The Meaning of Avalokiteshvara," n.d., <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/612.PDF>, accessed 1 June 2022.
- ⁷² Sarah Merrell-Wolff and Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "Rules of the O of A," n.d., <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/705.PDF>, accessed 1 June 2022.
- ⁷³ Yogagnani, "The Arcane School (Sangha Jnana)," n.d., <http://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/607.PDF>; Doroethy B. Leonard, *Franklin Merrell-Wolff*, 118.
- ⁷⁴ Merrell-Wolff and Merrell-Wolff, "Rules of the O of A," 3.
- ⁷⁵ "[T]he Neophyte [must] have a spiritual father and mother, e'er he can build and incarnate in an Immortal Body of Light. Are you ready, O Child, to attempt this great step?" Merrell-Wolff and Merrell-Wolff, "Rules of the O of A."
- ⁷⁶ Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs*, 70–99; Steven Sutcliffe, "The Origins of 'New Age' Religion between the Two World Wars," in *Handbook of New Age*, eds. Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 51–75.
- ⁷⁷ Merrell-Wolff and Merrell-Wolff, "Rules of the O of A."
- ⁷⁸ Paul Deussen, *The System of the Vedanta*, trans. Charles Johnston (New York: Dover Publications, 1912/1973).
- ⁷⁹ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, *Experience and Philosophy: A Personal Record of Transformation and a Discussion of Transcendental Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973/1994), 294.
- ⁸⁰ Strictly speaking, he called it an "imperience" because an experience still implies a duality between a subject who experiences and an object that is experienced. See: Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "On My Philosophy: Extemporaneous Statement," 3 Dec. 1972, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/M127.pdf>.
- ⁸¹ Merrell-Wolff, *Experience and Philosophy*, 45.
- ⁸² Merrell-Wolff, *Experience and Philosophy*, 65. Incidentally, like Bergson and James, Merrell-Wolff emphasized immediatism; unlike them, he did not go against reason in favor of experience but claimed an immediate knowledge that transcends both reason and experience. See: Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "Philosophy and the New Left (Part 2 of 5)," 13 Dec. 1970, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/M080.pdf>.
- ⁸³ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "General Discourse on the Subject of My Philosophy (Part 1 of 12)," 17 Sept. 1971, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/M104.pdf>.
- ⁸⁴ Franklin F. Wolff, "Concept, Percept, and Reality," *The Philosophical Review* 48, no. 4 (1939): 398–414.
- ⁸⁵ This first book was republished under the same title in 1973 and as part of *Experience and Philosophy* in 1994.
- ⁸⁶ This second book has four parts. Only parts I and II were published in 1973 and republished as part of *Experience and Philosophy* in 1994. Parts III and IV were later separately published in 1980 and republished as *Transformations in Consciousness* in 1995.

⁸⁷ Merrell-Wolff, *Transformations in Consciousness*, 125.

⁸⁸ Merrell-Wolff, *Experience and Philosophy*, 350.

⁸⁹ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "Educational Material: Are You Teaching Hindu Philosophy?" n.d., <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/29.PDF>, accessed 1 June 2022.

⁹⁰ "Educational Material: Weekly Reports from a Student," 1951, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/142.pdf>, accessed 1 June 2022.

⁹¹ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "The Holistic Assembly," 1952, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/591.pdf>, accessed 1 June 2022.

⁹² Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "On the Meaning of Realization (Part 13 of 16)," 28 Oct. 1951: 3, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/M007.pdf>.

⁹³ Jacob Needleman, *The New Religions* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 1970/2009).

⁹⁴ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "Memorial Service for Sherifa," 20 Feb. 1960, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/M018.pdf>. He elaborates elsewhere what he means by "racial religions/groups": "[I]t would appear that all of the religions prior to the time of Gautama Buddha were racial—Hinduism is racial; Hebraism is racial; both Confucianism and Taoism are racial. . . . [I]n contrast, Buddhism as well as Christianity were interracial." See: Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "On the Meaning of a New Dispensation," 11 Jan. 1970, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/M039.pdf>.

⁹⁵ Thomas A. Forsthoefel and Cynthia Ann Humes, "Introduction: Making Waves," in *Gurus in America*, eds. Thomas A. Forsthoefel and Cynthia Ann Humes (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 1–13; Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

⁹⁶ Especially after the Asian Immigration Act was lifted in 1965. See: Ann Gleig and Lola Williamson, "Introduction: From Wave to Soil," in *Homegrown Gurus: From Hinduism in America to American Hinduism*, eds. Ann Gleig and Lola Williamson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 1.

⁹⁷ Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *On the Bhagavad-Gita: A New Translation and Commentary with Sanskrit Text, Chapters 1–6* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969/1971), 116, 146.

⁹⁸ Swami Muktananda, *The Play of Consciousness* (Ganeshpuri: Shree Gurudev Ashram, 1972), 133, 184.

⁹⁹ Merrell-Wolff, "Memorial Service for Sherifa."

¹⁰⁰ For instance, his close student Melvin Mael was also "studying Swami Muktananda and Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh," according to Doroethy B. Leonard, *Franklin Merrell-Wolff*, 251.

¹⁰¹ Merrell-Wolff, "Memorial Service for Sherifa."

¹⁰² Donald Stone, "The Human Potential Movement," in *The New Religious Consciousness*, eds. Charles Glock and Robert N. Bellah (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 97; Jeffrey Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 287.

¹⁰³ Don Lattin, *Following Our Bliss: How the Spiritual Ideals of the Sixties Shape Our Lives Today* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 3, 9.

- ¹⁰⁴ John Lilly, "Introduction to the Second Edition," in *Pathways Through to Space: A Personal Record of Transformation in Consciousness* by Franklin Merrell-Wolff (New York: Julian Press, 1973/1983), vii–ix.
- ¹⁰⁵ Lilly, "Introduction," viii.
- ¹⁰⁶ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 74–75.
- ¹⁰⁷ Derek Curtis Bok, *Higher Education in America*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 201.
- ¹⁰⁸ Christopher J. Lucas, *American Higher Education: A History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 47–52, 232.
- ¹⁰⁹ Charles Dorn, *For the Common Good: A New History of Higher Education in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 171.
- ¹¹⁰ She writes: "*Spiritual privilege is an individual's ability to devote time and resources to select, combine, and revise his or her personal religious beliefs and practices over the course of a lifetime.*" Marion Goldman, *The American Soul Rush: Esalen and the Rise of Spiritual Privilege* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 2. Italics in the original.
- ¹¹¹ Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 75.
- ¹¹² Kelly Besecke, *You Can't Put God in a Box: Thoughtful Spirituality in a Rational Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.
- ¹¹³ Besecke, *You Can't Put God in a Box*, 112.
- ¹¹⁴ Besecke, *You Can't Put God in a Box*, 82.
- ¹¹⁵ Besecke, *You Can't Put God in a Box*, 16.
- ¹¹⁶ Besecke, *You Can't Put God in a Box*, 3, 9, 13.
- ¹¹⁷ Julian Press only published parts one and two. In 1980, parts three and four were privately published by his students, as Franklin Merrell-Wolff, *Introceptualism: The Philosophy of Consciousness without an Object Volume II* (Phoenix: Phoenix Philosophical Press, 1980).
- ¹¹⁸ See: Paul Severson, review of *Pathways Through to Space*, in *Fate* (March 1974): 114–17; Paul Severson, review of *The Philosophy of Consciousness without an Object*, in *Fate* (month unknown, 1974): 136–7; Rufus Mosely, review of *Pathways Through to Space*, in *The A.R.E. Journal* (November 1974): 269–70; Doug Knott, review of *Pathways Through to Space*, in *The Whole Earth Epilog* (September 1974): 145.
- ¹¹⁹ Ken Wilber, "Letter to Franklin Merrell-Wolff," 26 September 1974, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/C38.PDF>.
- ¹²⁰ Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 506.
- ¹²¹ Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996/1998), 517.
- ¹²² Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 522.
- ¹²³ Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2005), 9–10.

¹²⁴ Richard G. Kyle, *The New Age Movement in American Culture* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), 58, 84.

¹²⁵ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "Discussion with Franklin Merrell-Wolff, Erma Pounds, and Others (Part 1 of 2)," 9 Feb. 1969, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/M025.pdf>.

¹²⁶ Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*.

¹²⁷ Volkhard Krech, "Religious Contacts in Past and Present Times: Aspects of a Research Programme," *Religion* 42, no. 2 (2012): 199.

¹²⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 245.

¹²⁹ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "Purpose, Method, and Policy of this Work (Part 11 of 15)," Sept. 1976, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/M215.pdf>.

¹³⁰ Eileen Barker, "Religious Movements: Cult and Anticult since Jonestown," *Annual Review of Sociology* 12 (1986): 330.

¹³¹ Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad, *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* (Berkeley, CA: Frog, 1993), 50.

¹³² Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "Convention 1974: Preliminary Words on the Purpose of My Work," 11 Aug. 1974, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/M386.pdf>.

¹³³ Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "Precaution against Misinterpretation of the Philosophy," 22 March 1970, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/M046.pdf>.

¹³⁴ According to Merrell-Wolff, "One of the most important Buddhist philosophers . . . Ashvaghosha . . . affirms that neither the individual nor the world is real. That which is real, he calls the *Suchness*. He's quite Mayavadin in viewing the whole development of worlds and men as unreal. And that, as you know, is characteristic of the philosophy of Shankara—*Brahman* alone is real. With Ashvaghosha, the *Suchness* alone is real." See: Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "Capstone Statement," 22 Jan. 1980, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/M314.pdf>. His understanding of Ashvaghosha is largely based on Walter Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937/2000), 224–32.

¹³⁵ Doroethy B. Leonard, *Franklin Merrell-Wolff*; Ron Leonard, *Transcendental Philosophy of Franklin Merrell-Wolff*, 19, 283.

¹³⁶ Ron Leonard, *Transcendental Philosophy of Franklin Merrell-Wolff*, 15.

¹³⁷ Ron Leonard, *Transcendental Philosophy of Franklin Merrell-Wolff*, 34.

¹³⁸ Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981/1990), 378–402.

¹³⁹ Thomas A. Forsthoefel, *Knowing Beyond Knowledge: Epistemologies of Religious Experience in Classical and Modern Advaita* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2002/2007), 34, 53.

¹⁴⁰ Ron Leonard, *Transcendental Philosophy of Franklin Merrell-Wolff*, 34–5. Merrell-Wolff had claimed two "Fundamental Realizations." For him, the first verified the teachings of Advaita Vedanta, but the second stood closer to those of

Buddhism. See: Franklin Merrell-Wolff, "On the Meaning of Redemption," 10 Aug. 1969, <https://www.merrell-wolff.org/sites/default/files/M033.pdf>.

¹⁴¹ Colin Wilson, *Beyond the Occult: Twenty Years' Research into the Paranormal* (London: Watkins, 1988/2008), 18, 460–64.

¹⁴² Dennis McCort, *Going beyond the Pairs: The Coincidence of Opposites in German Romanticism, Zen, and Deconstruction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 16–17, 134–35, 163.

¹⁴³ B. Alan Wallace, *The Taboo of Subjectivity: Toward a New Science of Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 118, 194n52.

¹⁴⁴ Imants Barušs, *Science as a Spiritual Practice* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2007), 91–124; Imants Barušs and Julia Mossbridge, *Transcendent Mind: Rethinking the Science of Consciousness* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2017).

¹⁴⁵ Gleig and Williamson, "Introduction: From Wave to Soil," 6.

¹⁴⁶ Versluis, *American Gurus*, 84.

¹⁴⁷ Versluis, *American Gurus*, 2.

¹⁴⁸ Versluis, *American Gurus*, 227.

¹⁴⁹ Philip Goldberg, *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation: How Indian Spirituality Changed the West* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010), 222.

¹⁵⁰ Dennis Waite, *The Book of One: The Spiritual Path of Advaita* (Winchester: O Books, 2003), 16.

¹⁵¹ "Profoundly influenced by Shankara, Franklin Merrell-Wolff is a Master of transcendental awakening as viewed through a western mindset." See: "Satsang Teachers M-O," Advaita Vision, http://www.advaita.org.uk/teachers/teachersm_o.htm, accessed 29 April 2022. Satsang teachers are regarded as "enlightened" individuals who are spreading a modernized version of Advaita through public lectures and dialogues. See also: Liselotte Frisk, "The Satsang Network: A Growing Post-Osho Phenomenon," *Nova Religio* 6, no. 1 (2002): 64–85.

¹⁵² Phillip Charles Lucas. "Non-Traditional Modern Advaita Gurus in the West and Their Traditional Modern Advaita Critics," *Nova Religio* 17, no. 3 (2014): 6–37.

¹⁵³ Frisk, "The Satsang Network." For Lucas, "non-traditional modern Advaita" is clearly connected to Advaita Vedanta and less eclectic than "the satsang network." See: Lucas. "Non-Traditional Modern Advaita Gurus," 8.

¹⁵⁴ For an explanation of its growing appeal, see: Dave Vliegenthart "Meaningless Spirituality? The Satsang Network as a Grassroots Response to the Modern Western Crisis of Meaning" in *Geometries of Crisis and Collective Action*, ed. Kai A. Heidemann (forthcoming).

¹⁵⁵ Lucas, "Non-Traditional Modern Advaita Gurus," 29.

¹⁵⁶ Lucas, "Non-Traditional Modern Advaita Gurus," 7.

¹⁵⁷ For instance, "traditional" Advaita teacher James Swartz writes that "[Enlightenment] is the hard and fast conviction based on direct observation that I am ever free awareness and not the body-mind." See: James Swartz, *How to Attain Enlightenment: The Vision of Non-Duality* (Boulder: Sentient Publications, 2009), 19. Similarly, "non-traditional" Advaita teacher John Wheeler writes that

“our true nature is awareness itself. . . . This is direct and immediate knowing. It requires no proof and is known by immediate, non-conceptual recognition.” See: John Wheeler, *Awakening to the Natural State*, rev. ed. (Salisbury: Non-Duality Press, 2005), 170–71.

¹⁵⁸ Sadhu Tanmaya Chaitanya cited in Lucas, “Non-Traditional Modern Advaita Gurus,” 23.

¹⁵⁹ Tony Parsons cited in Lucas, “Non-Traditional Modern Advaita Gurus,” 21.

¹⁶⁰ Lucas, “Non-Traditional Modern Advaita Gurus,” 28.