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Maps Beyond the Mind:
NLP and Spirituality

INTRODUCTION

Of late, people in NLP have been taking an increasing interest in the spiritual. This is natural. After all, we describe our field as "the study of the structure of subjective experience", and the spiritual forms an important part of human experience. Yet in the case of the spiritual, we approach domains where, as Bateson put it (quoting Alexander Pope), "angels fear to tread".

Firstly, the spiritual is perhaps the one area of human experience where there has already been extensive modelling. All the major religions of the world—Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism—have developed maps of the spiritual and pathways to its attainment, sometimes as part of the mainstream, as in the case of Buddhism, sometimes esoteric and hidden, as in the case of Sufism. (Even the traditional Eastern method of following a guru involves extended second-position intuitive modelling.)

Besides the major religions, a host of teachers and teachings have offered their own maps and methods. The shamanic and animist traditions from around the world, for instance, now so much in vogue, offer a vast repository of knowledge and wisdom about body, mind, and spirit. In NLP, we are if anything brash newcomers to a field with a long history.

Secondly, the spiritual generates great passions. Directly, and indirectly through the ossified structures of organized religion, the spiritual has engendered fierce conflict, often leading to brutal intolerance. Confusions of map and territory abound in this area, with potentially horrendous consequences in terms of inter-community strife and personal repression.

Thirdly, many would argue that NLP is a mental discipline, arising from the conscious mind and, as such, ill-equipped to deal with the spiritual which, they suggest, touches realms of revelation that surpass and reframe our ordinary experience. One thinks of the thirteenth-century theologian Aquinas, one of the great minds of the Christian tradition who, after an intense spiritual revelation towards the end of his life, wrote that "all I have written is so much chaff." For many, our approach to experiences of the sacred and the ineffable could be reductive. Questions abound: can analytic modelling do justice to "transcendental" experience? Can the latter be defined in terms of submodalities? If we want to know God, is it enough just to change our state? Or is that "chunking on the wrong logical level"?

My own view is that there is a place for our discipline in coding and modelling spiritual experience so that it is better understood and more easily accessible to those who are ready for a spiritual journey. But we need to proceed gingerly, treading more lightly even than angels, if we are to help resolve map–territory confusions, rather than add to them.

In this article, I attempt to provide a comprehensive if loose map of different kinds of spiritual experience, both in relation to each other and in relation to our existing maps of experience in NLP. I hope that subsequently it will be possible to make finer distinctions than I do here.