

## Religious experience: perspectives and research paradigms

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**Abstract.** *The subject of religious experience has been marginalised in the social sciences. Although authors such as James (1903) have suggested that religious experience is pre-cultural and pre-cognitive, this paper argues against the perennialist position, suggesting instead that religious experience and its narration are both socially constructed. The ideological role of religious experience is discussed. The implications for future research on religious experience are outlined.*

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### THE MARGINALISATION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

Although many religious believers would claim that the experience of the divine is integral to their religious praxis, this experiential dimension has been largely neglected in the social sciences. The focus in the sociology of religion and social sciences generally, according to Neitz and Spickard (1990), has been on the cognitive and institutional factors, with the experiential dimension receiving little attention (**Note 1**). Stark and Bainbridge (1985) have argued: “We do not deny the worth of examining the prevalence of these other mental and emotional phenomena; we simply think it important not to mistake magic and odd mental states for religion”. For most sociological observers religious experiences are merely ‘odd mental states’ that can only be socially validated through interpretation i.e. when they are explained by collective beliefs. According to this view, beliefs are social whereas experiences are not, and therefore unlike beliefs or institutions or rituals, individual religious experiences are seen as immune to sociological analysis.

The term religious experience is deployed in a number of diverse ways in the social science literature and a number of states are included in this rubric: mystical, numinous, ecstatic, paranormal, out of body, often with a distinct lack of clarification as to what defines each state. Some might argue that any experience which occurs in a religious context and is attributed to transcendental forces can be labelled as ‘religious’ (**Note 2**). Perhaps it is Glock and Stark (1965), coming from a sociological background, who capture what most authors typically define by religious experience and this definition will inform the methodological discussion below:

*“All those feelings, perceptions and sensations which are experienced by an actor or defined by a religious group or society as involving some communication, however slight, with the divine essence i.e. with God, with ultimate reality, with transcendental authority”.*

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Although much of the literature has focused upon extraordinary experiences such as mysticism, these authors point out that some individuals may have more ordinary, but deeply felt experiences. These less dramatic experiences may be more prevalent among believers. Glock and Stark have developed a taxonomy of religious experiences dependent on the intensity of interaction with the divine and includes four major types: confirming experience, responsive experience, ecstatic experience and revelational experience. The revelational experience involves the most intimate contact with the divine.

The category of religious experience is a relatively late development in western history. Proudfoot (1985) traces its development to the theologian Friedrich Schliermacher who emphasised feelings in an attempt to free religious doctrines and practice from dependence on metaphysical beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions. His book *'On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers'* (1958, [1799]) defended religious belief by reclaiming religious experience as primary and in a form not influenced by language or abstract concepts. He asserted that experience was ultimately one of dependency on the divine and that religious language was purely an expression of these feelings. Prior to Schliermacher, religion was not understood in experiential terms.

The concept of religious experience developed as part of a key component of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century argument about individual authority and autonomy. These notions about individual religious experience provided protective and apologetic arguments about pure religion that could remain immune from enlightenment era reductionisms. Religious experience became naturalized into a taken for granted idea and played a pivotal role in developing arguments for the possibility for comparative study of world religions. Taves (1999) points out how the concept of religious experience in late eighteenth and nineteenth century evangelicalism meant religious experience in a particular tradition.

One of the first in depth discussions centering on religious experience was undertaken by psychologist William James who referred to the private nature of such experiences. For him, religious experience referred to "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves and stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (James, 1903). James emphasises that experiences are apprehended, rather than cognitively known, hence positing religious experience as individual, non-cultural, pre-cognitive and bounded in event. His 'measure' of the authenticity of religious experience is whether it leads to a positive change in behaviour. They are real only for those who directly experience them, thereby effectively removing them from sociological enquiry. Unsurprisingly therefore, sociologists have ceded the study of religious experience to other disciplines such as philosophy and psychology.

This position is typical in ethnographic discussions of religious experience. For example McRoberts (2004) argues that the association of religious experience with transcendent feelings of awe or ecstasy, coupled with the methodological impossibility of 'perfect empathy', further drives the ethnography of religion away from consideration of religious experience. Sharf (1998) makes an important point in relation to religious experience "the term is often used rhetorically to thwart the authority of the objective or the empirical and to valorise instead the subjective, the personal, the private, thereby becoming ever more unknowable". Despite this, he argues that the appeal in trying to understand religious experience then emerges as a challenge to be explored empirically and cross-culturally.

**EMPIRICAL STUDIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE** To date two main approaches have been deployed to examine religious experience: quantitative and qualitative. The former approach is concerned with two aspects of religious experience, measurement and explanation. The most common form of measurement is to administer standardised structured interview questions with closed-ended response categories. Examples of groups who have deployed quantitative methodologies include the Gallup Organisation and The National Opinion Research Centre. Gallup has repeatedly asked American samples "would you ever say you have had a 'religious or mystical experience' - that is, a moment of sudden awakening or insight"? (Back & Bourque, 1970; Bourque 1969; Gallup, 1978; Gallup & Newport, 1990). NORC includes in its general survey question, "How

often have you had one of the following experiences? Felt as though you were very close to a powerful, spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself?" (Yamane & Polzer, 1994; Greely, 1974; 1975). Overall across all the surveys 35% of respondents reported having at least one religious experience as operationalised in the different surveys. This methodology often attempts to causally link religious experience to other variables, which include gender, region of residence, size of community, political party, political opinions and age. Although the studies tell us something about religious experience, as Yamane (2000) argues it is unclear what exactly subjects are affirming. Such quantitative studies tell us nothing of the meaning of the experience for the actors or of the ways in which such experiences are labelled as religious.

Qualitative studies of religious experience are interested in description and classification. The dominant approach is the structured question for a filter, followed by more or less open-ended interview of those responding. A good example is Hay (1979) who interviewed 100 students, 65% of them affirming they had at some time a religious experience, "Have you ever been aware or influenced by presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from everyday self?". Those who affirmed they had had a religious experience were further interviewed about their experiences. The descriptions given were divided up into eight classes of experiences. Hardy (1979) collected more than 3,000 descriptions of religious experiences between 1969–1979 by soliciting in newspapers and pamphlets and through interviews. Analysis of the data generated 92 different categories.

Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are problematic in that they share an objective understanding of reality and language and treat representations of religious experience as if they were fixed and transparent objects to be measured or classified. People's descriptions are taken as *realistic representations* not as interpretations or retrospective accounts which seek to render the experiences meaningful and, therefore, change over time according to life circumstances or with the social context of telling. They also run the risk of filtering out those who do not understand experiences and the terms given by the researcher.

Yamane (2000) has rightly pointed out that we cannot directly access experience using existing social science paradigms and that what we actually record is the interpretation of this experience, mediated through language. Subjects typically portray their experiences through narratives which illustrate how meaning is given to these experiences. Thus, Yamane speaks of narrative approaches to religious experience where he argues for the distinction between experience and its account, as a fundamental fact. Sociologists who want to study religious experience "must bracket any claims to apprehending religious experience itself and instead give full attention to the primary way people recount their experiences through narratives" (Yamane, 2000).

**RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AS CULTURALLY CONSTRUCTED** It is only in the last two decades that interest in religious experience has been rekindled among Sociologists (e.g. Yamane & Polzer, 1994; Yamane, 2000; McRoberts, 2004; Bender, 2007) with many scholars moving away from a view of religious experience as a 'natural category', to one of historical and cultural constructionism (Proudfoot, 1985; **Note 3**). To date much of the sociology of religion literature in this field has taken religious experience as a given without taking into account the fact that it is socially constructed. Religious experiences are typically seen as an intensely personal matter providing the basis which, through secondary processes become institutionalised in collective forms. Timothy Fitzgerald (2007) underscores the fact that even the most personal and private experience, if it is to be interpreted, needs to be placed within the context of collective, institutional realities. As Bender (2007) points out, Americans who describe individual religious experiences have often been taken at their word, but what they are doing is individualised and spiritual, rather than religious. However, religious traditions shape religious individualism. What we include in the category of religious experience is not only negotiated with powerful traditional institutions, but also with scholars

who study them. Immediate circles of communication and compatriots matter, but so do scholarly authorities who will describe the experience to the world.

The idea of perennialism - that there is an essential commonality between philosophical and religious traditions from widely disparate cultures - has been criticised. According to Sharf (1998) “to separate an unmediated experience from a culturally determined description of that experience, is philosophically suspect”. In a similar way, Proudfoot (1985) argues that Schliermacher’s (1776-1834) notion of a pre-cultural, pre-cognitive religious experience is beset with logical and philosophical paradoxes; thus we need to reject the perennialist position that presupposes a core experience unmediated by culture, since it is obsolete, and imposes recent and ideological notions of religious experience predicated on largely textual interpretations. Likewise Katz (1978) also argues that: “neither mystical experience nor any more ordinary forms of experience give any grounds for believing that they are unmediated”. It is therefore difficult to comprehend how religious experience cannot be socially and culturally various in its construction.

Recent authors have argued that cultural factors construct not only the narration of religious experiences, but also the experiences themselves. There is no experience separate from culture. Taves (1999) has presented an historical overview of religious experiences in Anglo-American culture between the mid-eighteenth century and early twentieth centuries, by examining the myriad ways in which these experiences were interpreted; as natural, supernatural or as natural and religious. Such explanations were often contested both by religious elites and educated lay followers. She argues that theories of experience bear close relation to the narration of that experience; the way in which an experience is explained itself plays a part in constituting that experience. Anthropological, psychological or religious explanations are not simply different interpretations of the same experience; each explanatory model is based upon different cultural and historical practices and constitutes the experience in different ways. Our experiences, our ideas about the experience, and our engagement with the experiences of others, all take their place in the flow of experience as it is constituted and reconstituted over time.

As Bender (2007) cogently argues, stories of religious experience and the experiences themselves become sites where scholars can analyse how culturally shared formations of self, theology and bodily comportment shape religious experiences and their accountings (see also Cain, 1998; Lawless, 1991; Csordas, 1990). It has to be remembered that theological and scientific concepts are embedded in their own traditions of discourse and practice.

**RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AS IDEOLOGICAL** I would accord with this position and argue that to understand religious experience necessitates an understanding of the historical and cultural factors which construct not only the narratives of religious experiences, but the experiences themselves. Experience and its account are tied together in complex relations with each other and to the social and cultural world that embodies them (Bender, 2007). The task for the sociologist is to account for how historical and cultural factors construct and constitute these experiences; but additionally how these factors render such experiences as *valid and authentic*.

Virtually all contemporary studies of mysticism fail to appreciate the sense in which notions of the mystical (including those that are adopted in the studies themselves) are cultural and linguistic constructions dependent upon a web of interlocking definitions, attitudes and discursive processes, which themselves are tied to particular forms of life and historically specific practices. Not only are contemporary notions of the ‘mystical’ subject to the cultural presuppositions of the day, they are also informed by, and overlap with a long history of discursive processes, continuities and discontinuities and shifts in both meaning and denotation.

As Jantzen in her study of gender and mysticism (1995) aptly demonstrates, the way one defines ‘the mystical’ relates to ways of establishing and defining authority. This is obvious in the pre-modern context since anyone claiming direct experiential knowledge of God or the ultimate reality is in effect claiming unmediated authority to speak the truth. In a traditional Christian context, for instance, such

a claim might be seen as undermining the claim of the Church to mediate between humanity and the divine. Defining mysticism then is a way of defining power. One's answers to the questions 'What is mysticism?' and 'Who counts as a mystic?' reflect issues of authority.

Sharf (1998), argues that religious experience has an ideological element that is used to "legitimize vested social, institutional, and professional interests", especially in the study of mysticism. He applies this argument to Hinduism and Buddhism, suggesting that the commonly held assumptions that mystical experience is more prevalent in the East, is questionable. Buddhist texts are frequently cited as descriptions of personally felt 'imaginative states', but are in fact based more on sacred texts than direct experience. The situation according to Sharf, is not so very different in Hinduism, where ancient meditation practices were aimed towards the elimination of pollution and risk, as well as accumulating merit and supernatural powers through appeasement of the deities.

He proposes that the idea that eastern religion is more experiential than its western counterparts is deeply ingrained in the minds of western scholars and originates through dialogues between Hindu scholars and their academic counterparts in the West, each influencing the other. Sarvepalli Radhakishnan (1937) and D.T. Suzuki (1962) both influenced and were influenced by, the work of authors such as William James and Henry Bergson. For example, western conceptualisations of Buddhism, particularly Zen Buddhism, are based on the writings of Suzuki. This posited religious experience as the entirety of Zen and defined it as pure experience. Radhakishnan and Suzuki both asserted the experiential groundings of eastern religion, whilst also emphasising this aspect of 'purity', contrasting it with more materialist western traditions. These views, which served to dissipate any critique of the Enlightenment project according to Sharf, whilst also counteracting western cultural hegemony, elucidates the argument that religious experience has an ideological purpose by legitimisation of "social, institutional and professional interests".

He argues that narratives of religious experience do not describe phenomenological events, nor do they signify some underlying 'natural occurrence'. Scholars of religion are not presented with experiences that require interpretation; rather there are texts, narratives and performances. While these representations might assume the rhetorical stance of phenomenological description, we are not obliged to accept them in this way. Such a stance has significant ideological implications. Likewise Bender (2007) argues against the idea that narratives of religious experience are descriptive; rather they are inscriptive or prescriptive.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH ON RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION**

I have outlined above how conceptualisations of religious experience have moved from seeing them as precultural individualistic experiences to a perspective in which they are seen as sociocultural constructs which may function in an ideological way. Future research on religious experience needs to move beyond quantitative / qualitative studies of individual experiences to examine the cultural contexts which construct them in the first place, how they inform discourse about them and to examine the ways in which that discourse is ideological. I would concur with authors such as Bender (2007). We need to move beyond perspectives which view religious experience as a 'natural occurrence'. Instead we need to listen to the ways that religious experiencers render their experiences as valid and authentic and to explore how such accounts are linked to the wider cultural and social worlds in which they occur.

## **NOTES**

1. These authors provide the best sociological analysis of religious experience and deploy Schultz's theories as they relate to religious experience and Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow experiences as a theoretical foundation. They

posit an inherent sociality to these religious experience which they argue are both socially learnt and pre-conceptual.

2. Caroline Franks Davis (1989, p 30) argues that some experiences are more genuinely religious than others “not all experiences in a religious context are religious experiences... an itch during communion is unlikely to be, for instance! Similarly, the perception of religious texts and works of art and the participation in religious rituals, though experiences with religious content, do not in themselves constitute ‘religious experiences’ ”. She includes in this rubric dramatic encounters with God or ultimate reality which others refer to as mystical experiences.
3. The idea of raw uninterpreted experience has been criticised by Wayne Proudfoot (1985) in his book *Religious Experience* who argues that all our experience is shaped by our concepts and beliefs. For him Schliermacher’s thesis cannot be substantiated. Proudfoot argues that religious experience always presupposes religious ideas. Schliermacher’s experience of ultimate dependence cannot be identified as such without reference to the ideas of dependence and ultimacy. One cannot, according to Proudfoot, separate ideas from experience. Borrowing from Schachter’s work on labelling theory in emotion, he argues that pure emotions are impossible, and in William James case, the attempt to ground religion in pure feeling is absurd.

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