

The Sociology of Religious Experience

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Abstract

This essay examines the sociology of religious experience within the broader context of how other disciplines also study the same phenomenon. It explains the principle of methodological atheism sociologists have typically employed in the study of religion, which goes back to Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy*. The principle expressly excludes the possibility that subjects of religious experience may actually be experiencing something real that contributes to their experience. As a consequence, other disciplines and even some sociologists have recently departed from methodological atheism in favor of an approach that might be called methodological agnosticism. This essay examines that shift and the research agenda thereby opened up.

INTRODUCTION

The most basic question we can ask about religion is the one sociologists do not normally ask. Why are people religious? Or why are some people religious and not others?

When we ask this question, religious experience assumes central place. Perhaps, one important reason why some people are religious and others are not is because in contrast with the nonreligious, many religious people experience or at least believe they experience religious realities. Experiencing those realities or believing they do, such religious people believe in those realities and, hence, are religious.

An answer along the above lines was first given by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1996) in 1799 when he released his tome, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. Religion's cultured despisers included Schleiermacher's own sophisticated friends, strong advocates of Enlightenment reason. According to them, religious beliefs were just silly superstitions. Schleiermacher's religious despisers were thus the eighteenth century's version of Christopher Hitchens (2009) and Richard Dawkins (2008). In response to religion's cultured despisers, Schleiermacher argued that religious belief

originates in religious experience and thus from contact with a perceived reality that the nonreligious either do not similarly perceive or which, perceiving, they interpret differently.

Since Schleiermacher, religious experience has been the object of intense study by those who address themselves to the central question about religion. Religious experience has been well studied by philosophy, religious studies, and psychology. In contrast, religious experience is not frequently studied by contemporary sociologists. Why not? It might be conceptual difficulties with the very notion of religious experience (see Yamane, 1998), although that difficulty has not stopped other disciplines from studying it, and sociologists study all sorts of things that are conceptually problematic. Just ask most sociologists what is meant by human agency or social structure. Alternately, it may be that *qua* experience, religious experience is considered more the province of psychology (Yamane, 1998). Again, however, it would seem that we are well past the pure sociology of Emile Durkheim's (1982) admonishment to eschew any attention to individuals.

Perhaps, a major reason why the study of religious experience is avoided is because its study threatens naturalism and the demarcation line supposedly distinguishing science from nonscience. Naturalism is the view in the philosophy of science that natural, this-worldly forces and agencies are the only causes operative in the world—or at least the only ones that can be studied scientifically. Thus, to go beyond natural forces and agencies is to go beyond science.

To keep the sociology of religion on the science side of the demarcation line, Peter Berger (1967, p. 100) famously introduced a rule he called *methodological atheism*. It is a rule that the sociology of religion still largely follows today. In conformity with naturalism, methodological atheism enjoins sociologists to avoid supernatural explanations of religious phenomena. It is not that supernatural agencies are denied. But it is denied that they can be studied in a scientific manner. Thus, in order to remain scientific, sociologists of religion are to avoid supernatural explanations and confine themselves to the social causes of religious behavior.

For most of what is studied by the sociology of religion, methodological atheism works quite well. There is no need, for example, to invoke supernatural agencies to explain why religiosity persists more in the United States than in Western Europe. For such questions, social forces and agencies quite suffice.

It is otherwise, however, when it comes to religious experience. In the case of religious experience, we centrally confront a putative, nonnatural explanation of the phenomenon under study. Simply to set that explanation aside in favor of an exclusively social explanation is hardly value-neutral. Rather, in this case, methodological atheism is value-laden in favor of naturalism.

A more truly neutral posture would be *methodological agnosticism*, which would have us remain open-minded about supernatural realities (see Porpora, 2006). Of course, that very open-mindedness breaks from unquestioned naturalism and thus challenges what it means to be scientific. Navigating that challenge is itself a challenge. Nevertheless, methodological agnosticism is a direction in which scientific discussion of religious experience seems to be moving. This essay will end with the issues raised by this new direction and with the potential lines of research it suggests.

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE?

What is religious experience? It is the experience of religious realities. This preliminary formulation is meant to be less circular than it sounds. It is meant to highlight the need to raise a prior question: What do we mean by experience?

According to the most relevant dictionary definition, to experience is to observe, encounter, or undergo something. Experience is thus different from just a passing thought or belief. When we think something or believe something, we are not encountering or undergoing anything. While thoughts are also certainly involved in experience, what the word experience distinctly implies is an impact on us—on our thoughts and feelings in particular—of something outside of or apart from us.

When we are analyzing experience then, there are three categories we must consider: the subject of experience, the object of experience, and the content of experience. The subject of experience is the person undergoing the experience. The object of experience is what that person is experiencing; what, in other words, is having a perceptual impact on that person. The content of experience is the nature of that impact: what is perceived and how it is interpreted and felt. Therefore, the study of experience must encompass both cognitions and emotions. Further, in any genuine experience, some object of experience contributes something to the content of experience.

If normally an object of experience contributes something to the content of experience, then experience is a way of knowing, a way of making contact with an ontologically independent reality. It is this *noetic* quality that troubles sociology when it comes to religious experience. Yet, it is with this issue that this essay is starting to wrestle.

Having clarified what is entailed by the very category of experience, religious experience can be defined fairly straightforwardly. Religious experience refers to an impact on us of a reality that the experiencing subject considers religious or spiritual. Thus, in short, religious experiences are putative experiences of religious or spiritual realities. Consistently, in public opinion polls, between a third and a half of the U.S. public reports some religious

experience. In a 2006 survey, for example, 54% of respondents who said they believed in God also reported having personally experienced the presence of God (Faith Matters Survey, 2006). Sometimes, other transcendental experiences are polled, as in a study by sociologist Andrew Greeley (1975), which asked subjects whether they have ever felt they were close to a powerful, spiritual force that lifted them out of themselves, an experience that Greeley considered *ecstasy*. Over a third of respondents answered affirmatively.

THE RANGE AND FURTHER STUDY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Certainly, all three of sociology's major founders—Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber—addressed religion. Without perhaps calling explicit attention to it as such, religious experience played particularly central roles for Durkheim and Weber. For Durkheim (2008), the experience of God was actually the experience of *communitas* (the local and perhaps even cosmic community), especially in what anthropologists Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (2008) later called the *liminal* states associated with ritual or festival.

Likewise, although now largely overlooked, religious experience figures prominently in two of Weber's key concepts. What after all is a calling (Weber, 1958)? A calling is not primordially a belief, but a belief about an experience—the sense or feeling of being summoned by something or someone outside oneself. Charisma too did not originally mean as today—simply the charm or magnetic presence we might associate with a celebrity. For Weber (1947), charisma was a quality within a person that others regard as cosmic or spiritual, a quality that Rudolph Otto (1958) would go on to call *numinous*. To the extent that this quality is something others feel, or at least think they do, charisma is a matter of religious experience.

For the most part, however, for sociology, the study of religious experience has been “the road not taken” (Yamane, 1998). Thus, religious experience has been studied mostly by those outside of sociology. As noted, Schleiermacher was the first to call academic attention to religious experience, focusing particularly on what he called the feeling of absolute dependence. In part, this feeling might be interpreted as a sense of our own contingency and even the contingency of the entire universe, the sense of some need for ultimate grounding. In part, too, the feeling suggests a connection to a source of ontological sustenance. Thus, much later but in an equally seminal work, Mircea Eliade (1987) examined how in attitudes of prayer or in sacred times and sacred places, the religious person, what Eliade called *homo religiosus*, taps into a felt source of greater being and greater meaning, the two virtually coinciding.

Otto's (1958) *The Idea of the Holy* was equally seminal. There, among other things, Otto introduced the notion of the *numinous*, that which is experienced as wholly other, that is, beyond our ordinary, natural ken. It is what we would experience were we to encounter a ghost or an extraterrestrial intelligence, that is, a combination perhaps of a distinctive kind of dread, awe, and fascination. What is numinous is related to the uncanny. It is this numinous quality that is built both into charisma as originally understood and into the idea of God as found in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Perhaps, the most well known among social scientists is William James. With a father who was a Swedenborgian, William James was not only an early president of the *American Psychological Association* but also a founder of the still extant *American Society for Psychic Research*. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James (1961) canvassed many of the different forms taken by religious experience. Although many of these forms were quite dramatic and unusual, some were quite ordinary. Among the latter was what James (1961, p. 62) called a primordial experience of something there: "It is as if there were in the human consciousness a *sense of reality*, a *feeling of objective presence*, a *perception* of what we may call 'something there,' more deep and more general than any of the special and particular 'senses' by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed." Later, in his controversial book, *Honest to God*, Anglican Bishop John A.T. Robinson (1963) would call this feeling of something there an apprehension of a depth dimension to reality.

One other very important figure in the study of religious experience was biologist Alister Hardy. A professor of marine biology at Oxford University, after his retirement, Hardy founded the Religious Experience Research Centre. Housed now at the Lampeter branch of the University of Wales, the center has accumulated thousands of accounts of people's religious experience and sponsors further research on the subject. Interested scholars are invited to peruse these archives, but one must physically visit Lampeter to do so.

STANDARD SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO RELIGION

Currently, there are two major sociological approaches to the study of religion: rational choice theory and social constructionism. Neither affords much place to religious experience.

Rational choice theory, the less dominant of the two approaches, seeks to represent religious behavior as a rational choice. The problem with rational choice theory is that the only form of rationality recognized is instrumental reason, what Weber (1947) termed *Zweck Rationalität*. Rational choice theory essentially argues that it is rational for people to pray to or otherwise propitiate their gods insofar as people expect to receive something in return from

their gods. If the putative gods exist, it may well be instrumentally rational to pray to or otherwise propitiate them, but is it rational in the first place to believe in their existence? This question concerns not instrumental but epistemic rationality, a matter that appears beyond the ken of rational choice theory, as if it too, like religious realities, were wholly other.

The question of epistemic rationality is actually also evaded by social constructionism, the second and more dominant sociological approach to religion. As a theoretical paradigm, social constructionism was initiated in 1967 by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1967) classic *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger subsequently applied social constructionism specifically to religion in *The Sacred Canopy*.

It was in *The Sacred Canopy* that Berger (1967, p. 100) introduced the principle of methodological atheism. Religious himself, Berger's intent was not to promote actual atheism. It was quite the opposite. In part, Berger was trying only to separate science from nonscience. In part, by doing so, Berger was seeking to secure religion from scientific reductionism.

Since the work of Berger and Luckmann, social constructionism has become a common default stance among sociologists and not just in application to religion. By the end of the last century, particularly with the rise of feminism and other social identity movements, social theorists were declaring everything a social construction. Gender was socially constructed and race, then even science and, finally, all reality.

There was of course an element of truth to all these claims, and in some cases such as gender and race, much more than an element. Race, in particular, appears to be nothing but a social construction. In many cases, however, including religion, it is the "nothing but" suggestion that is the sticking point with social constructionism.

What does it even mean for something to be socially constructed? Social constructionism holds—quite reasonably—that we have no uninterpreted access to reality. Instead, we always grasp reality via one or another interpretation. Such interpretations, furthermore, are always socially and culturally shaped. Thus, it is the job of the sociologist to describe just how our interpretations of things are socially and culturally shaped.

What about objective reality, reality as it is in itself, apart from any human interpretation? Along with social and cultural shaping, does not objective reality contribute something to our interpretations of reality? This question has tended to strike sociologists—including Berger and Luckmann—as philosophical, a matter of epistemology beyond the scope of sociology. The question thus has tended to be bracketed out of sociological discussion. Instead, sociologists have understood their mandate to be the examination solely of the social and cultural influences on reality construction. For sociologists, the question of ultimate or objective reality has thereby been evaded.

Of course, in all social constructionist works, the evasion of the ontological question is more apparent than real. There is a difference between what people consider reality and what reality actually is, that is, the distinction originally made by philosopher Emmanuel Kant between phenomenal and noumenal reality. As for Kant, the default stance of social constructionism is that the twain never meet.

So it has been from the beginning with the social constructionist approach to religion. From the scientific, sociological point of view, Berger (1967, p. 100) argued that religion is just a phenomenal projection of purely human ideas onto the otherwise blank screen of the noumenal world. Any putative contribution to human religion from the other side—from, that is, noumenal or objective reality—was beyond scientific inquiry. Thus, in the end, *The Sacred Canopy* mirrored proto-Marxist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach's (1989) *The Essence of Christianity*, rendering religion nothing but a human projection onto the world. Such was the logical result of methodological atheism.

FROM METHODOLOGICAL ATHEISM TO METHODOLOGICAL AGNOSTICISM

Much later, Berger would become very critical of the direction taken by much of what came to be argued by social constructionists. Yet, even before, Berger seemingly became disenchanted even with his own methodological atheism. After all, whereas Berger had started out protesting the conceptual liquidation of religious reality by sociology, his own methodological rule seemed to produce that very effect. Thus, in books such as *A Rumor of Angels* (Berger, 1970) and *The Heretical Imperative* (Berger, 1979), addressed more to theologians than to sociologists, Berger seemed to suggest that religious experience offers a nonscientific way of knowing that does in fact put people in touch with objective religious reality. In religious experience, Berger (1979, p. 59) argued, "there are indicators of a reality that is truly 'other' and that the religious imagination of man ultimately reflects."

Here, Berger's admission seems entirely to vitiate the principle of methodological atheism. If theologians and subjects of religious experience can access objective, noumenal religious reality, why cannot sociologists? Perhaps, it may be argued, because unlike theology and the subjects of religious experience, a truly scientific sociology must maintain a stance of value-neutrality. Leave aside for the moment that the positivist (and Weberian) ideal of value-neutrality in science has by now been completely discredited. Suffice it to say that, as noted, the principle of methodological atheism is not itself value-neutral; it is instead an *a priori* endorsement of naturalism.

Not only value-laden, social constructionism's programmatic exclusion of objective reality is philosophically untenable. In the first place, such exclusion

obliterates the very category of experience. Recall that in any genuine experience, the object of experience (noumenal reality) contributes something to the content of experience. Thus, insofar as social constructionism would have us ignore any contribution to the content of experience from the noumenal object of experience, it excludes from consideration all genuine experience.

The implications are injurious even to sociology's scientific pretensions. If the world's contribution to knowledge is always to be bracketed out from the start, then the constructedness of reality is effectively removed from empirical contestation and surreptitiously fixed instead as an unfalsifiable, disciplinary premise.

It gets worse. It is assumed that the social and extra-social parts of religion are easily partitioned, permitting an *a priori* focus on the one and a bracketing of the other. Yet, if there are no uninterpreted experiences, if all reality comes to us already saturated with interpretation, then the extra-socially real and the socially interpreted cannot so easily be prized apart. They confront us rather as a mangle.

If the extra-socially real and the socially interpreted comprise a mangle, then we cannot know in advance which is which. Instead, the two can only be separated empirically case by case. Thus, unless the extra-social is admitted to empirical examination as well, the result will be to treat all as socially constructed—including what is not. Then, despite what sociology may think, it will not have shown anything to be socially constructed because its investigation will have failed to rule out what is extra-social.

The upshot is that in the case of religious experience specifically, sociology cannot avoid investigating any putatively extra-social contribution. The extra-social cannot legitimately be banished by a transcendental *a priori*. It must, rather, be approached empirically. Methodological atheism then must be abandoned in favor of what may be called methodological agnosticism. Whereas methodological atheism excludes the possibility that the objects of religious experience are real, methodological agnosticism makes no such *a priori* judgment. Instead, any such judgment is always the result of empirical investigation.

CAN IT BE DONE?

When it comes to religious experience, can methodological agnosticism really be practiced? Methodological agnosticism not only can be practiced, it has been and is increasingly being practiced. Actually, the open-mindedness of methodological agnosticism was the stance all along of William James, who appreciated how the specifically passive and noetic qualities of religious experience pointed to an independent object of experience. In other

words, James's presumption was that people with religious experience were genuinely experiencing something real; the question was what.

Subsequent work in psychology has continued in the Jamesian tradition. Most notable is a large compendium of work on anomalous experience published by the American Psychological Association. Called *Varieties of Anomalous Experience*, the Jamesian connection is clear (Cardena, Lynn, & Krippner, 2004). The handbook encompasses research on such phenomena as near-death, psi-related, hallucinatory, past-life, and out-of-body experiences.

The work canvassed by the handbook is remarkable in a number of respects. Remarkable in the first place is just the consideration given to the category of experience. Equally remarkable for a publication of the American Psychological Association is how interdisciplinary the work is. Represented along with psychology is psychiatry, medicine, physiology, parapsychology, history, anthropology, and even a sociologist or two. The refreshing intent seems to be not to affirm a discipline but to answer questions. Most remarkable of all, however, is the consideration given by various pieces to allegedly paranormal phenomena. The paranormal is not ruled out from the start as would be required by a naturalist presupposition. Instead, the evidence is followed wherever it seems to lead.

Some of the most interesting of the current psychological works on religious experience come from neuroscience. Using neuroimaging, for example, Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili (2001) have shown that intense prayer and meditation affect the experiential centers of the brain. Empirically demonstrated thereby is that we are dealing not simply with belief but also with experience. Again, of course, the actual object of experience remains a matter of debate.

Equally open at the moment to fascinating debate is the object or cause of so-called near-death experiences (NDEs), experiences many people report after cardiac resuscitation and even after apparent cessation of brain activity of various encounters with tunnels, a welcoming, embracing light, and deceased relatives. Physiological processes seemingly cannot be the full explanation as sociologists such as Allan Kellehear (1996) demonstrated that what is experienced varies culturally. The very same evidence, however, suggests that the experience is not completely a social construction, for it seems to be found across cultures. Overall, the study of NDEs is a burgeoning field, to which sociologists can and should contribute more.

TOWARD A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA FOR SOCIOLOGY ON RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The foregoing considerations all point to the possibility of a new research agenda for sociology around an alternative theory of religious

experience—and of religion generally. For want of a better name, call the theory the transcendental signal theory (TST). TST hypothesizes a transcendental or depth dimension to reality that can variously make itself felt in human experience. The theory further hypothesizes that it is experiential connection with such reality that explains why many people are religious. That is not to say that all people are religious exclusively or even at all for this reason. Doubtlessly, many practice religion out of fear, out of hope for an afterlife, in search of community, or from simple inertia. It is possible, however, even for many of these people that part of what makes them religious is an experiential connection with some transcendental reality. Of course, because there are no observations without interpretation, the hypothesized transcendental signal always comes through embedded in one or another cultural tradition, which, from a cosmic point of view, might be considered noise.

TST seems to be the direction that Berger himself was moving in his extra-sociological writings. It is a theory that makes sense of the historical trajectory of liberal, mainline Protestantism, the scholarly attempt of which has always been to better separate noise from signal and to be better open to the possible diversity of signals out there to be received.

TST can likewise help us avoid what is called the “derogation of the lay actor” (Giddens, 1993), the tendency to advance theories that insufficiently credit the intelligence of lay actors. According to TST, there is something or some things transcendently real to which even the holders of otherwise untenable religious beliefs are responding. The trouble is, according to the theory, that insofar as the message received embodies both universal, transcendental signal and local, culturally interpreted human noise, the tendency is for people to absolutize the entire message. Although, for example, some divine reality may shine through the *Bible*, the *Koran*, or the *Talmud*, fundamentalist believers in these sacred books, correctly detecting in them, according to the theory, some real transcendental signal, nevertheless incorrectly canonize the whole as if it were signal in its entirety. Because, however, TST assumes something real and valuable to which even fundamentalist believers are responding, it does not go so far as to denigrate their cognitions as complete illusion.

Yet one more novel feature of TST is its refusal to privilege the religious inexperience of atheists. If it makes sense to research the extent to which experiences deemed religious are socially constructed, it makes equal sense to research how atheists socially construct nonreligious interpretations of the same or kindred experiences. Herein lies a course of sociological research that seems to have been rarely, if ever, touched.

All well and good, it might be said, but TST nonetheless is audacious in its departure from naturalism and methodological atheism. Can such a theory

even be empirically tested? In answer, as we have already observed, if TST cannot be empirically tested then neither can social constructionism nor, indeed, any other encompassing sociological theory of religion. The reason is that TST must at least be refuted as an alternate hypothesis in order to vindicate any of the other sociological theories. And if TST is to be refuted, it must first be fairly entertained. Thus, whether it proves right or wrong, TST needs to be considered by sociology. Doing so, returns sociology to the biggest of questions: Why are people religious?

To be sure, there are important empirical and conceptual questions to be asked of TST. Those questions are currently being asked, although with the exception of a few such as Margaret Poloma and Matthew Lee, the questioners are mostly outside of sociology. Consider Ann Taves, for example, in religious studies. Her (2009) *Religious Experience Reconsidered* collects most of the questions researchers across disciplines are currently asking about something like TST (see also Poloma and Hood 2008).

As multiple disciplines are pursuing this research agenda, different questions come from different disciplines. An important question from the humanities, for example, reflects the turn there to language and discourse. As David Yamane (2000) in sociology has also asked, can we researchers access religious experience directly or is it rather only subjects' discourse about religious experience that we actually study? It is an important question, although the stark either/or contrast seems overdrawn. It is like asking whether we can ever study quarks directly or just discourse about quarks. Although radical constructionists might favor the latter view, it is then not just religious reality that fades away.

A similarly large and much contested question is whether there are at least some experiences that are irreducibly or *sui generis* religious or whether all experiences must rather await subjects' ascription to them of religious or nonreligious character. Schleiermacher, Otto, and Eliade all tended toward the former view whereas James and, more recently, Wayne Proudfoot (1987) tend toward the latter. With push back from philosophers such as Robert Forman (2008), this debate is currently at a standoff. Sociologists might contribute their own insights.

The work being done is not just conceptual. A number of multidisciplinary ethnographies, some including sociologists Margaret Poloma and Matthew Lee, have been studying new paradigm or emerging church, an evangelical but nonfundamentalist Christianity that emphasizes divine love and a direct experience of God (Poloma and Hood 2008; Lee and Poloma 2012). In *When God Talks Back*, anthropologist Tanya Luhmann (2012) sets out to learn how it is that God comes to be experienced as real for people in this movement.

Luhmann's findings are fascinating. Admittedly, she begins from the perspective of methodological atheism, claiming only to study the human side

of things and denying any ability to comment on objective reality itself. Her analysis, however, moves beyond this position, framing what practitioners do less as construction than as learning new perceptual skills and forms of attention, a frame leaving open the possibility that some objective reality is actually being detected and not simply projected. In the end, Luhrmann confesses to having learned herself to experience an element of what might be considered transcendent reality.

Three other books looking with a different emphasis at this movement are *The Science and Theology of Godly Love*, edited by Mathew T. Lee and Amos Young (2012), *Blood and Fire: Godly Love in a Pentecostal Emerging Church*, written by Margaret Poloma and psychologist of religion Ralph W. Hood (2008), and *The Heart of Religion: Spiritual Empowerment, Benevolence, and the Experience of God's Love* (Lee and Poloma 2012). All three works are part of a 3-year project funded by the Templeton Foundation to research the experience and expression of Godly Love in the Pentecostal tradition. They examine specifically how God's love is experienced and in response practiced. The first volume expressly advertises itself as rooted in methodological agnosticism, and the Poloma and Hood team likewise describe their research as so guided. What distinguishes this work, particularly that of Poloma and Hood, is its extensive examination of the causal effects of a particular kind of religious experience on social movement formation. This direction could mark a new research agenda for sociology, one that connects with Christian Smith's (1996) *Resisting Reagan*, which similarly examined the religious roots of the Central America Solidarity movement in the 1980s.

As can be seen, scholars in anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and religion are all currently pursuing research that, if it does not quite go by the name of TST, at least seems to move away from the stance of methodological atheism and more in the direction of methodological agnosticism. Doing so raises questions that sociologists have heretofore tended to ignore but to which their own expertise could ably contribute. Perhaps in doing so the whole sociology of religion might be invigorated.

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