

Beyond *Mysterium Tremendum*: Thoughts toward an Aesthetic Study of Religious Experience

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- Background** Much ethnography of religion reduces religion to a catalog of doctrines and rituals, failing to take seriously the subjective experiences of believers and of ethnographers themselves.
- The association of religious experience with feelings of awe or ecstasy, coupled with the methodological impossibility of perfect empathy, further drives the ethnography of religion away from the consideration of religious experience.
 - The author offers thoughts toward an aesthetics-oriented method of studying religious experiences, whereby the ethnographer becomes sensitive to aspects of religious experience that are precognitive, but necessarily spiritual.
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- Empathy** The desirability of empathy with people's experiences comes into question when religion is the subject. This is because we assume that empathy means relating only to another person's most powerful religious experiences.
- A gesture toward empathy would therefore involve understanding from a subjective standpoint the metaphysical system of the religion and how that system is experienced by believers.
 - For this reason, the experiential, empathy-seeking sociology achieved in secular settings has been nearly absent in the sociology of religion.
 - When ethnographers of religion do claim empathy it is often with apology for having experienced subjective spiritual states rather than "the facts" – the implication being that one cannot be a participant and an observer in a religious setting.
 - In the meantime the less exalted, more accessible aspects of religious experience go nearly ignored. As a result, our theorizing about how religious commitments structure and motivate individual and social action remains somewhat anemic.
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- The Remedy** The ethnographer must abandon the idea that to understand religious experience, s/he must experience the Holy. The ethnographer who does reduce all of religious experience to "the Holy" will tend to limit his work to the study of dogma, ritual, and the organizational structure of religion – this amounts to a flight from the consideration of religious experience.

Phenomenology Definition Phenomenology is a philosophy or method of inquiry based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness and not of anything independent of human consciousness.

Limits of Phenomenology Even phenomenology does not adequately solve the problem of understanding the subjectivity of religious experience.

- Phenomenology takes the social world as a world of mysterious individual internal states that are squeezed into the available categories of shared language so that they might give rise to an endlessly complex set of symbolic interactions.
- Phenomenology is particularly useful as a humbling device for the ethnographer who is tempted to think she really “gets” her subjects simply because she understands their social universe more than other scholars.
- Phenomenologists of religion still theorize religious experience in ways that render it beyond the purview and understanding of the ethnographer – it is impossible for one to write about and understand religious experience when the experience is defined at the outset as belonging to the realm of qualities that can’t be expressed in words.

Religious Experiences All experiences associated with religion, including communication about religious experiences, are religious experiences, whether or not they involve contact with heavenly realities.

- While it remains impossible to empathize completely with another being and describe that experience with absolute fidelity, the relatively mundane religious experiences (e.g., the feelings of sitting in the pew) are not out of reach of the ethnographer.
- These relatively accessible and mundane experiences are not any less important to our sociological understanding of religious life than the more esoteric ones beyond our social scientific reach.

An Aesthetic Approach The aesthetic approach to the study of religious experiences assumes that religious experiences include intuitive, precognitive elements that are not necessarily spiritual.

- It presumes that people who choose to practice religion find the more mundane aspects beautiful, and then sets out to understand experientially the stylistic aspects of religious experiences.
- It is the view that religion is based not only on the capacity to experience the Holy and to discern the ethical, but also on our faculty of aesthetic appreciation.

- For the ethnographer of religion, aesthetic experience lies somewhere between the entirely subjective realm of religious experiences and the ostensibly objective social scientific outlook.
 - The ethnographer can try to appreciate or “get” it and then speculate about the social significance of “its” appeal.
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Ethnographer’s Role

The point, at least initially, is not for the ethnographer to mine the aesthetic for meaning the way we might mine the verbal content of a sermon.

- First the ethnographer seeks conversion: she takes a voluntary step into a universe of aesthetic appreciation.
 - The ethnographer struggles to understand the aesthetic experience of the believer, as well as analyze and interpret the more formal aspects of religious practice –giving a richer account of, or a deeper speculation about, what makes religion compelling.
 - Such an account would humbly make use of the ethnographer’s own experiences, but would nonetheless avoid evaluating adherents’ metaphysical claims.
 - The ethnographer can use his experience of beauty to discover deeper questions about the believer’s universe of experience – his subsequent ethnographic account, if it is to convey any of the beauty of the stimulus, will then build at least partly on his own experience of it.
 - As participant observers the ethnographer of religion must necessarily study his own experiences as well as the words people use to describe theirs.
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Conversion Narratives

An example of the use of the aesthetic approach is the examination of conversion narratives to better understand the convert’s attraction to the religion.

- We should examine conversion narratives as much for their aesthetic impact as for the way they signal the neophyte’s ideological alignment with the religious group.
 - The narrative can then be seen not just as a meaningful story, but as a style with aspects that are probably experienced as beautiful to the convert.
 - Ideally, our ability to relate to this beauty and emote it through ethnographic writing would transcend the important “alignment” analysis, allowing the reader a better understanding of the process of attraction to the religion.
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Conclusion

We should re-envision the gesture toward empathy as a highly provisional one in which the ethnographer uses his own experiences to speculate more deeply about the experiences of others.

- An inquiry should make use of the ethnographer's sense of being in a social world, but should avoid degeneration into narcissism and memoir, both of which tend to result when the ethnographer presumes the possibility of perfect empathy.
- Neither empathy nor objectivity appears as an achievable goal in itself. They clear space for a fresh sociological insight – this understanding of empathy and objectivity opens up new possibilities for the appreciation of non-spiritual religious experience.
- The focus can then be on the styles of being that get embodied in, perpetuated through, and enjoyed during religious practice.
- There is the need to expand dominant notions of what religious experience encompasses beyond its awesomeness and mystery.
- The aesthetic approach is significant because it highlights intuitive, precognitive aspects of religion that the ethnographer may appreciate experientially and use to deepen inquiry and enhance reportage – the point being to expand our understanding of religious experience and realizing more of the rich potential of our own ethnographic experiences in religious settings.