Religious Experiences and Religious Beliefs: Deconstructing Some Postmodernist Axioms

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I. Experience as Non-Referential

'…it is a mistake to approach literary, artistic, or ritual representations as if they referred back to something other than themselves, to some numinous inner realm.'

Sharf, R. (1998) 'Experience.' In M. C. Taylor (ed.) *Critical Terms in Religious Studies*, 94-115. University of Chicago Press. Reprinted as 'The rhetoric of experience and the study of religion'. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 7/11–12, 2000, 267–87

I. Experience as Non-Referential



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'…is there any reason to assume that the reports of experiences by mystics, shamans, or meditation masters are any more credible as "phenomenological descriptions" than those of the abductees?'

Sharf, R. (1998) 'Experience.' In M. C. Taylor (ed.) *Critical Terms in Religious Studies*, 94-115. University of Chicago Press. Reprinted as 'The rhetoric of experience and the study of religion'. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 7/11–12, 2000, 267–87

I. Experience as Non-Referential

'…there is an irony in his use of the term "mystical" to isolate a certain category of experiences in order to point up differences among that category's members while neglecting exactly those characteristics of the experiences that gave him and others reason to call them "mystical."'

Brainard, F.S. (1996) 'Defining "mystical experience."' *JAAR* LXIV/2, 359-93.

I. Experience as Non-Referential

'There are no experiences of any sort which are independent of pre-formed expectations or unaffected by the prevailing beliefs of the time…. Mystical experiences will be, perforce, saturated with the dominant ideas of the group to which the mystic belongs, and they will reflect the expectations of that group and that period.'

Jones, R.M. (1909) *Studies in Mystical Religion.* London: MacMillan.

I. Experience as Non-Referential

'…the mystical experience itself as it bursts upon the soul is a unifying, fusing, intensifying inward event…. [It] is not dependent upon any peculiar stock of ideas and is not confined to what is usually called the purview of religion; it is the sudden transcendence of our usual fragmentary island of reality…'

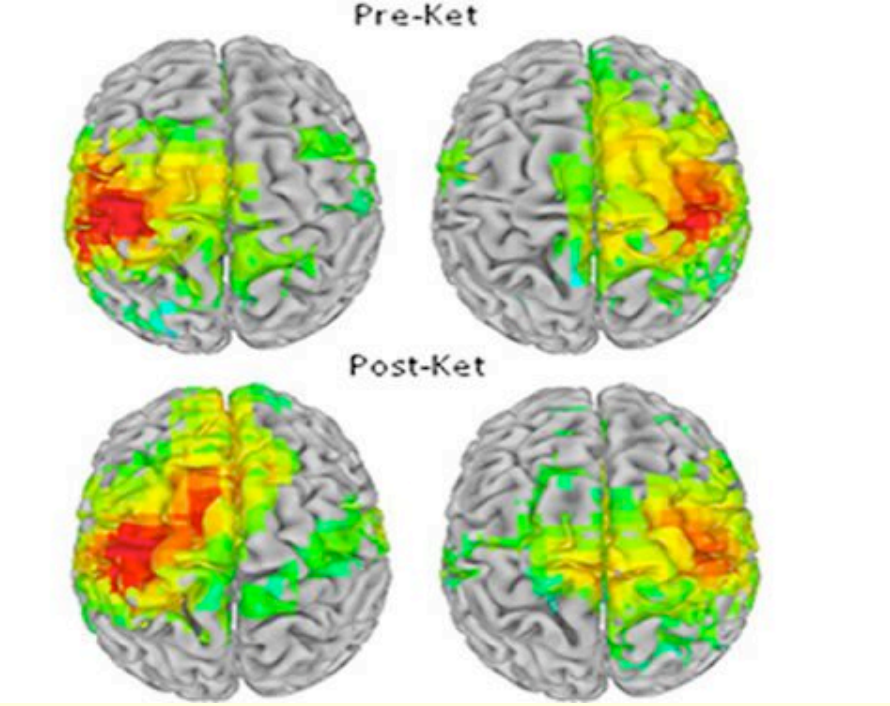
Jones, R.M. (1915) Mysticism in present day religion.
Harvard Theological Review 8/2, 155-65.

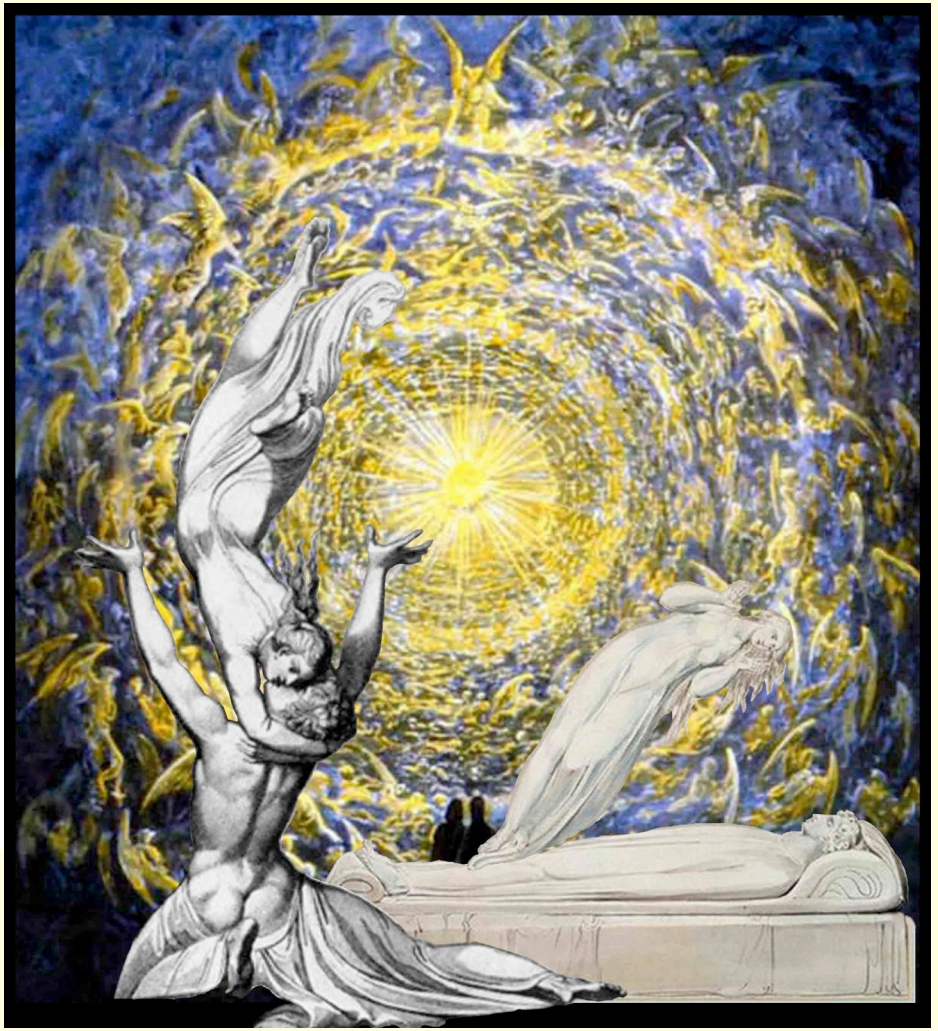
II. Unmediated and Precultural Experience

'…mediation is not an obstacle to experience, but its* sine qua non*, and not a barrier to understanding, but the process of understanding'

Short, L. (1995) 'Mysticism, mediation, and the non-lingusitic.' *JAAR* LXIII/4, 659-675.

II. Unmediated and Precultural Experience





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Experiences have interconnected universal, individual, and cultural layers: a universal 'event' is experienced by, filtered through, and processed 'live' by a biological, enculturated individual, who subsequently attempts to make sense of it according to his/her socio-cultural-religious situation (or by innovating away from it).

II. Unmediated and Precultural Experience

- **Anomalous Experiences often conflict with the expectations and cultural-religious milieux of experiencers**

- ***Spontaneous* AEs involve no 'practice' and no expectation (and often total ignorance of the phenomenon)**

II. Unmediated and Precultural Experience

Commonly Reported Features of NDEs

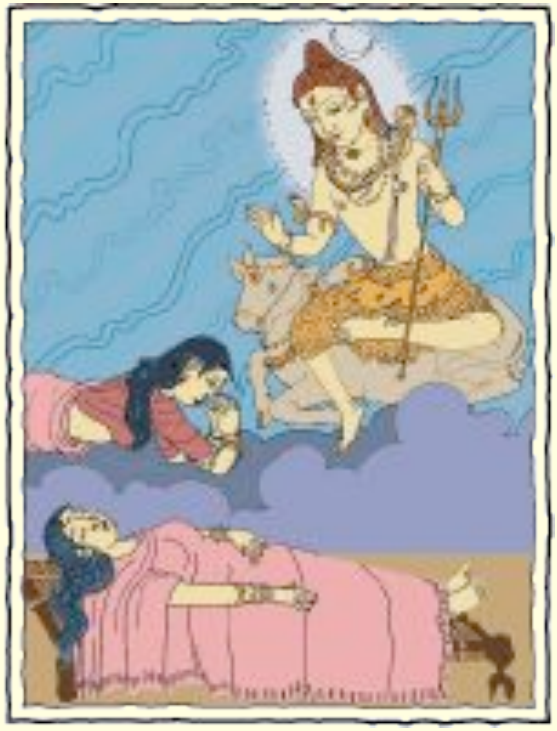
- Out-of-body experience (OBE)
- Seeing the body
- Period of darkness
- Meeting deceased relatives
- Encountering ‘being of light’
- Judgment/evaluation
- Obstacles / barriers



- Journeys to other realms seen as 'home‘ or origin
- ‘Oneness’ and association of the self with the divine or 'ultimate reality'

- Ancient Greece
- Ancient Near East
- Medieval-Modern Europe
- Ancient-Modern China
- Ancient-Modern India
- Early and late 20th century Japan
- Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica
- 20th century Mexico





- 19th-20th century America
- 12th–20th century Tibet
- Thailand
- Philippines
- Pacific
- Asia
- North America
- South America
- Africa

III. Linguistic Constructivism and Ineffability

'…there no such thing as experience outside and prior to language…. Language doesn't copy or convey experience; language determines or forms experience as such.'

'You can't first experience religious happiness and then transcribe it into words, because writing precedes experience, writing forms and produces experience, writing makes experience possible.'

Cupitt, D. (1998) *Mysticism After Modernity.* Oxford, Blackwell.

III. Linguistic Constructivism and Ineffability

'…language mainly affects the memory and expression of experiences.'

It is not crucial to their formation, nor even significantly influential upon it.

Language is not a prerequisite for experience

Davis, C.F. (1989) *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience.* Oxford University Press.

III. Linguistic Constructivism and Ineffability

The inadequacy of language to express the experience suggests that the experience originated prior to the attempt to put it into language.

Fox, M. (2003) *Religion, Spirituality and the Near-Death Experience*. London, Routledge.

IV. Negative Exceptionalization

Religious experiences: *'inaccessible to strictly objective modes of inquiry'?*

- **Neurological and other observational approaches to experiences in progress (e.g., meditative states, OBEs)**
- **Experiential studies of shamanic imagery**
- **Survey- and fieldwork-based studies**
- **Historical and ethnohistorical studies**
- **Cross-cultural comparison**
- **NDE studies test OBE observations during cardiac arrest**

IV. Negative Exceptionalization

- **Special, elevated status is given to certain kinds of non-quotidian experiences cross-culturally**
- **People around the world have been reporting them throughout recorded history, and regarding them as being in a separate category to everyday occurrences.**
- **This pattern of cultural ascription is an important indicator of their cross-cultural stability**

V. Postcolonialist Historiography and Cross-Cultural Comparison

A historiographical analysis of a term within a particular context says nothing about the nature or existence of the term's referent outside that context.

It has no bearing on the objectivity or otherwise of religious experiences; and the suggestion that the invention of terms is somehow equivalent to that to which they refer is insupportable.

V. Postcolonialist Historiography and Cross-Cultural Comparison

- **Conflates experiences themselves with certain uses of rhetoric *about* them ('real' v. 'nominal' definitions of terms)**
- **Biased sampling techniques (selecting for *difference*) to advance particular theory**
- **Group diverse experience types under a single rubric then construct general theories about 'experience'**
- **Overgeneralize with inadequate sample sizes**

VI. The Experiential Roots of Beliefs

'Sharf's argument is, or should be, unsettling for anyone who naively thinks that religious beliefs are grounded in religious experiences.'

Bocking, B. (2006) Mysticism: no experience necessary? *DISKUS* 7, http://www.basr.ac.uk/diskus/diskus7/bocking.htm

VI. The Experiential Roots of Beliefs







Sleep Paralysis

VI. The Experiential Roots of Beliefs

Joseph Smith, Mormonism





19th c. Spiritualism



Raëlism

VI. The Experiential Roots of Beliefs









VII. NDEs, OBES, and Afterlife Beliefs

1. *NDEs are widely accepted from both reductionist and theological orientations as pan-human experiences. Occurrence not in general dispute - only meanings*

2. *NDEs are phenomenologically identifiable as a particular type of anomalous experience*

3. *NDEs typically occur under similar physical circum-stances (i.e., 'near death'), and thus have a cross-culturally stable originary context.*

4. *Apparently universal interpretation of NDEs, specifically: 'This is what happens when you die'*

VII. NDEs, OBES, and Afterlife Beliefs



John Wren-Lewis



A.J. Ayer

VII. NDEs, OBES, and Afterlife Beliefs



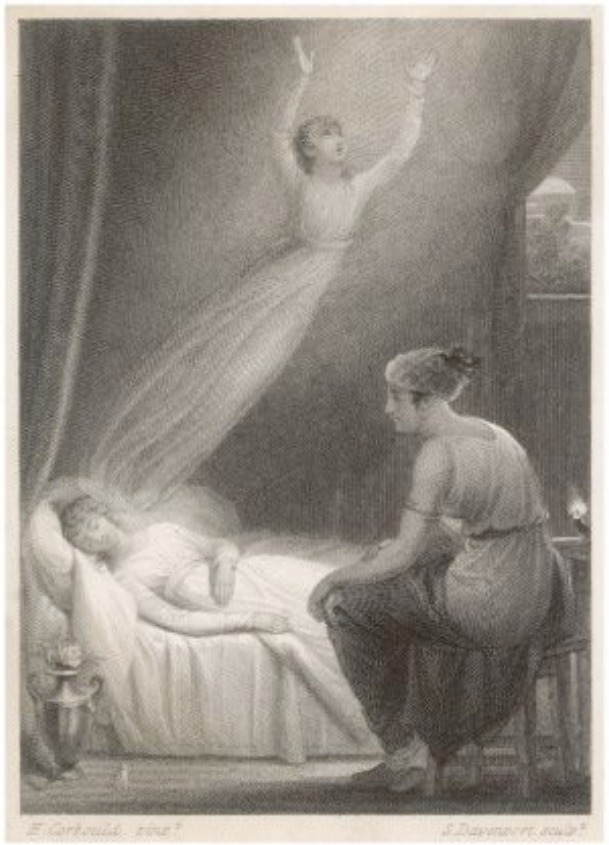
Arapaho Ghost Dance, c. 1893

Indian Shaker Church, c. 1907



VII. NDEs, OBES, and Afterlife Beliefs

'For anyone who actually had that type of experience it is almost impossible not to become an ontological dualist afterwards…. [OBEs] almost inevitably lead the experiencing subject to conclude that conscious experience can, as a matter of fact, take place independently of the brain and the body…'



Metzinger, T. (2005) 'Out-of-body experiences as the origin of the concept of a "soul"'. *Mind & Matter* 3/1, 57–84

VII. Summary and Conclusions

1. *Treating philosophical arguments as axiomatic*
2. *Combination of unfounded axioms into mutually-reliant components of* a priori *cyclical argument*
3. *Failure to distinguish between experience contexts and types*
4. *Lack of relevant scholarly specialization*
5. *Confusing recognition/inquiry with interpretation*
6. *Disregarding / disbelieving emic testimonies*
7. *Not exempt from reflexivity of their own culturally-situated claims*

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