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Shamans, Visions and Ghosts: Exploring spiritual and Religious Experiences

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Study of R/S Experience

- Peter Antes: What Do We Experience If We Have Religious Experience? *Numen*, Vol. 49, 3 (2002), pp. 336-342.

Starting point

- Widespread: In all religious traditions there are numerous examples of people who claim to have had specific religious experience like seeing god(s), goddesses, angels, devils or saints.
- Evidence: The number of stories of this kind is such that the belief in these apparitions has been an empirical fact of most of the religious traditions over the centuries.

Possible explanations

- Three steps
 - vision of something hardly recognisable such as light
 - an idea that comes to the mind of the seer
 - the identification of the idea with what is seen so that the hardly recognisable unclear vision of light takes concrete shape and shows more precise forms that correspond to traditional patterns of presentation of these figures in their purest forms

Impact of experience

- “the combination of steps II and III is the decisive moment to make the apparition meaningful because it is both well known and deeply experienced in a unique way of religious experience.”
- “If such an identification process does not take place, the vision remains uninterpreted and thus meaningless to the seer and will soon be without great relevance for the future. When, however, it finds its place in the seer's reference system, it will have an impact on all that follows.”

Interpretation

- Antes highlights the importance of the interpretation of the person who experience it
- -> active participation of behalf of the seer in the apparition itself

- “The seer is thus not only a passive spectator who is overwhelmed by what is going on, but there is a considerable amount of constructive investigation based on what has been learnt from the traditions about what is appearing. The knowledge of those patterns is either due to socialisation in a religious setting or to studies in favour of, or against, those patterns, in any case it is learnt and not produced by the apparition itself. “ (p. 340)

Antes argues that

- “The interpretation key that is proposed here is not reductive as are so many others. It does not express any concrete judgement on whether the first step of experience is purely due to inner developments of the seer or whether the initiative and inspiration come from the outside. The answer to this goes beyond what can be done in the study of religion and enters the domain of belief.” (p. 340)

Diversity of Approaches

- Rudolf Otto
- William James
- Ann Taves
- Edith Turner
- Fiona Bowie
- Jack Hunter

Diversity of Examples

- Near Death Experience
- Spirit possession
- Trance
- After Death Communication

Diversity of Cultures and Traditions

- Siberian shamanism
- Amazonian Santo Daime
- African derived spirit possession
- Evangelical hearing the voice of God
- Reborn in Christ
- Dreaming of deceived relatives

This module

- We looked at shamanism, ghosts and dreams
- But also Spirit Possession, Near Death Experience, Charismatic Christians, and After Death Communication
- We discussed the use of hallucinogen drugs to initiate an experience as well as the clinical perspective

Ongoing debates

- Experience for selected or experience for everyone?
 - Rudolf Otto's methodology
 - But also shamanism and neo-shamanism
 - classic shamanism restrict experience to chosen ones while Neo-shamanism makes it available for everyone
 - Part of life or livelihood (profession)?
 - Ordinary vs non-ordinary experience

Common core?

- Anthropologists focus on cultural diversity
- While theologians, philosophers and some Religious Studies scholars highlight the common core theory

Reality of Experience?

- Edith Turner's article on the reality of spirits
 - Ontology
- But does it matter
 - Researcher have to be open minded to all forms of experience

Final questions

- Understanding of Experience
 - Is it really possible to understand the experiences?
 - And does it matter if not?

