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Shamans, Visions and Ghosts: Exploring spiritual and Religious Experiences

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Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Last time: Rudolf Otto

Challenges of Otto's work

- One reviewer of his book highlighted one of the problems with Otto's arguments – the lack of evidence.
- "Otto writes as if a feeling of immediate presence were sufficient evidence of true presence, but this is by no means the case. ... a feeling, however vivid, cannot guarantee the validity of an inference" (Moore 1938: 92-93, quoted by Ballard 2000: 43).

- For Otto: to be, or to feel, is to know.
- And those who do not possess "an intimate personal knowledge" of the numinous should therefore remain silent when it comes to discussing it.

Mediated/unmediated

- unmediated experience = internal states or dispositions that are said to result from nothing observable in the empirical world
- Mediated experience = experiences that can be mediated by sensory preceptors and neurons (e.g., experience of heat when one grabs the hot handle on the frying pan)

- Otto takes religion out of the realm of social scientific analysis
- Religious experience becomes something separate from other human experiences
- It is based on its own faculty, and thus can only be understood in its own terms.

But

- Religion cannot be studied as a singular, autonomous element of human like because it is interweaving with all other aspects of human beings

Religious experience within a cultural context

- By placing religious experience in a cultural context, we also acknowledge the contextual meanings of “religious experience” when it is applied to various cultures and religions.
- -> religious experience can have different meanings depending on language and culture
- E.g., how to understand the experience of a Hindu guru without understanding Hinduism

What about evidence?

- Do we regard experience more important than evidence and scientific facts?
 - -> Problem about subjectivity of the experience
- Subjective over objective?
- Ninian Smart and others argue that it depends on the understanding of people having the experience and not on the verification of the experience.

Ninian Smart

- “religious experience involves some kind of ‘perception’ of the invisible world, or involves a perception that some visible person or thing is a manifestation of the invisible world” (Smart 1984: 15).

Russell McCutcheon



- Canadian scholar of religion
- Professor at the University of Alabama
- Works on critical theory of religion and methods and approaches
- Blog:
<https://edge.ua.edu/category/russell-mccutcheon/>

McCutcheon argues that

- To speak about religious experience was part of study of religions for a long time
 - Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) wrote in 1799 that the core of religion is the awe-inspiring experience of God
 - -> strand of scholars see experience as the essence of religion and other items such as rituals are secondary (Otto, Eliade, James and others)
- **However**, we lack empirical evidence of both gods and of the universal experiences (p. vii)

McCutcheon writes that

- “To put it another way, the ability to have an experience, much less to report that one has had one, may itself be evidence of one’s prior participation in a certain sort of social world, one comprised of specific rules of other social worlds. What some might understand as the supposed immediacy of experience-present may actually be but an internalized residue of an earlier social world (its calculus), invented by others and that, through the actions of others, has been imprinted on us – or better put, *within* us.
”(McCutcheon 2012: 8)

Methodological problems

- Non-ordinary experiences are outside our own (academic & secular) world
- 'There is no way to study "religious experience" as such scientifically simply because what constitutes "religion" is highly contested.' (A.Taves 2005, p. 45)

Ann Taves

- Non-ordinary experiences are outside our own (academic & secular) world
- But instead of abandoning the study of religious experience, Taves argues that expand the study and study the wide range of experiences to which religious significance has been attributed (2009: 8).

Range of experiences

- Spiritual and religious experience
- Non-ordinary experience
- -> can someone who is agnostic or atheist have a religious experience?
- Research project: The Inventory Project that explores the Inventory of Non-Ordinary Experiences (INOE) in the US and India.

Caroline Franks Davis (1989)

- Six categories of religious experience:
Interpretive; Quasi-Sensory, Revelatory;
Regenerative; Numinous; and Mystical
- These experiences have in common that the experiencer describes it in religious terms or in terms that are intrinsically religious

Religious experience within a cultural context

- 'the analytical framework has to be culturally sensitive and aware of contextual meanings of "religious experience" when it is applied to various cultures and religions. ... Whether an experience is deemed religious depends upon the interpretation of the experience. It is finally judged by its cultural-linguistic community' (Tsai/Kuan 2010: 20).

Other problems?

- Historical context
- But also terminology (e.g., what is a 'soul' or how to define 'the divine'?)
- -> problem of translation!

How can we study what we don't see?

- How trustworthy are internal experiences?
- -> we rely on the narrative after the experience but cannot confirm the experience itself
- Short [YouTube about the reality of experience](#)

- But is this important? Do we always need to find empirical evidence to support these accounts?
- What about the impact on one's life?
 - e.g., change attitude
 - Impact on health and wellbeing

Discussion of Text

- Introduction by Russell McCutcheon
- In the book *Religious Experience: A Reader*, edited by Craig Martin and Russell T. McCutcheon (Equinox, 2012)

- Unmediated / mediated experience
 - in which category fall religious and spiritual experience?
- Metaphorical language
 - Does it diminish the experience?
- Belief / experience
 - What is McCutcheon's position?