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Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
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Religious experience : a reader

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Atgoffir staff a myfyrwyr Prifysgol Cymru Y Drindod Dewi Sant bod hawlfraint ar y darn hwn ac ar y gwaith y cafodd ei gymryd ohono. Gwnaed y Copi Digidol hwn o dan delerau trwydded CLA sy'n caniatáu i chi:

- fynd at gopi a'i lwytho i lawr;
- argraffu copi;

Sylwch bod y deunydd hwn yn UNIG at ddefnydd myfyrwyr sydd wedi cofrestru ar y cwrs astudio fel y nodir yn yr adran isod. Caniateir i holl staff a myfyrwyr eraill ddarllen y deunydd yn unig ac ni ddylent ei lwytho i lawr ac/neu argraffu copi

Mae'r Copi Digidol hwn ac unrhyw gopi digidol neu brintiedig a ddarparwyd i chi, neu a wnaed gennych, o dan delerau'r Drwydded hon, i'w ddefnyddio gyda'r Cwrs Astudio hwn. Gellwch gadw copïau o'r fath ar ôl i'r cwrs ddod i ben, ond at eich defnydd personol eich hun yn unig. Bydd pob copi (yn cynnwys copïau electronig) yn cynnwys y Rhybudd Hawlfraint hwn a bydd yn rhaid eu dinistrio ac/neu eu dileu pan fydd Prifysgol Cymru Y Drindod Dewi Sant yn galw am hynny.

Ac eithrio'r hyn a ganiateir gan gyfraith hawlfraint, ni chaniateir copïo, cadw neu ddosbarthu pellach (yn cynnwys drwy e-bost) heb ganiatâd deiliad yr hawlfraint.

Mae gan yr awdur (ac mae'r term hwnnw'n cynnwys arlunwyr a chrewyr gweledol eraill) hawliau moesol dros y gwaith ac ni all staff na myfyrwyr achosi, na chaniatáu, i'r gwaith gael ei aflunio, ei lurgunio neu ei addasu mewn unrhyw ffordd arall, neu ei drin yn ddiraddiol mewn unrhyw ffordd, a fyddai'n niweidiol i anrhydedd neu enw da'r awdur.

Mae hon yn fersiwn ddigidol o ddeunydd hawlfraint a wnaed dan drwydded gan ddeiliad yr hawl, ac ni ellir sicrhau ei chywirdeb. Cyfeiriwch at yr argraffiad cyhoeddedig gwreiddiol os gwelwch yn dda.

Trwyddedwyd i'w ddefnyddio ar gyfer y cwrs HPRS5029 - Visions, dreams and ghosts: exploring spiritual and religious experience

Teitl: Religious experience : a reader

Enw’r Awdur: Martin, Craig, 1972-

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INTRODUCTION

Russell T. McCutcheon

> In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death. (Wesley 1988, 249–50)

So wrote John Wesley (1703–91), in what scholars call his conversion narrative, concerning an experience that reportedly took place during a meeting (somewhat like a modern day Bible study) in London on the evening of Wednesday, May 24, 1738. At that time, Wesley, the son of a clergyman, was himself a Church of England minister who had recently returned from a (not altogether successful) three-year assignment as a missionary in Savannah, Georgia (at that time a British colonial possession). Reporting that he had "continual sorrow and heaviness of heart" on the days preceding that evening meeting in late May, Wesley recounts in this famous journal entry how—as that evening's speaker was addressing Martin Luther's commentary on Paul's letter (or, from the Greek, epistle) to the early Christians who were in Rome—he had experienced a "strange warming" of his heart—a phrase that has become famous, especially among historians of Methodism, the originally British but now worldwide Protestant denomination that John and his younger brother Charles (1707–88) went on to establish. According to his journal, this sentiment or feeling—something which, in this tradition, is clearly differentiated from the cognitive (but still no less interior and thus personal) content of knowledge, often termed "belief"—was followed by an awareness of the role that Jesus Christ had played, through his life, death, and resurrection, in guaranteeing Wesley's own salvation from, as he puts it, "the law of sin and death."

Although many other examples could be supplied, we have here one of the better known accounts of an interior sentiment or affectation (that is, a feeling or emotion) that, to the person who reports having had it, is said to defy explanation; for it is said to carry with it what they might describe as a fullness or an immediacy of awareness that makes

it stand out as unique and thus distinguishable from the other sorts of experiences that people regularly report having—such as the experience of hunger, thirst, joy, boredom, or even fear. Despite what insiders from a variety of cultures may call such exemplary moments in their awareness—if they do in fact possess a framework within which such things not only count *as* things worth paying attention to but also stand out as worth reporting—in the academic study of religion scholars commonly call such sentiments "religious experiences," and those who study them have, for some time, been interested in comparing such reports, looking for the various similarities and differences in the content and form of such reported experiences, all in hopes of drawing conclusions about how religion works.

So, with this initial piece of data in hand—our data being Wesley's journal entry concerning the "strange warming" of his heart—a simple question presents itself: what are we to do with the fact that some people report having had such experiences? Moreover, just what *is* an experience and what sense does it make to talk, as many scholars do, about such things as *unmediated experiences*—that is, internal states or dispositions that are said to result from nothing observable in the empirical world (unlike, say, the experience of heat which is presumably *mediated* by sensory preceptors and neurons as you grab the hot handle on the frying pan)? For that matter, what *is* a strange warming of the heart? What might cause it? What's more, what does it mean to have a heavy heart? Was Wesley speaking metaphorically (better put, *writing* metaphorically, for we cannot forget that all we have is a text and, despite our tendency to hear a human voice behind it, no one is actually speaking here—an important point to which we will return), as in when people commonly associate their heart with emotions, such as claiming to have a broken heart? Or was he speaking literally about sensations taking place in his upper chest, as in when people today talk about experiencing heartburn? Somehow, I suspect that the latter doesn't quite capture what most people think Wesley was trying to put onto paper—though, could psychological or physiological studies help shed light on what *caused* his experience? After all, as the noted US neurologist, Oliver Sacks, has phrased it, "with no disrespect to the spiritual, … even the most exalted states of mind—the most extraordinary transformations—must have some physical basis or at least some psychological correlate in neural activity" (2007, 41). But if Wesley was writing metaphorically—a technique we commonly use to place two otherwise unlike things beside each other, to say something about the one by transferring properties of the other—then to what were his metaphors "warming" and "heart" actually referring?

These are the sorts of questions that have occupied the attention of many scholars, and may very well be the questions that many of the readers of this book wish to pursue; but before attempting to answer any of them—and those looking for a start on such answers would do well to read Ann Taves's important survey of the literature (2005), along with Martin Jay's detailed survey of various uses of the notion of experience in modern scholarship and literature (2005), as well as Jensine Andresen's edited collection of essays for a sample of how some cognitive scientists are today approaching the topic (2001)—we ought to step back and consider a few things. For example, is it even correct to assume, as those who try to answer such questions commonly do, that such a thing as language (e.g.,

whether spoken in words or, as in Wesley's journal, written in a text) *refers* to something outside of itself, as in when we assume that "cup" (whether the sound you hear when it is said or the shapes you see when it is read) *refers* to some property internal to that object on my desk (that is, the very property that makes it a cup and not a bottle or a pen), or when we assume that the quoted words that opened this Introduction *correspond* to an utterance that came from a historical agent named John Wesley, who lived in England more than a couple hundred years ago. In fact, is it even correct to assume that his words—and perhaps this is why we call them *his* words—correspond not simply to an utterance that somehow flowed from his lips or, in the case of our quotation, from his pen, but that they also correspond to a meaning that he presumably had in his head (notice how meanings are in the head while emotions are in the heart)? Reading these words—*his* words—is therefore commonly thought to provide the careful reader with access to a meaning—*his* meaning—that Wesley had in mind when putting pen and ink to paper; a private meaning only he possessed, akin to his private experience, but that he fortunately exhibited publicly through the medium of language. This is the old "What did Shakespeare mean when he wrote...?" approach to studying meaning—the common approach that we easily find in everyday life (and many high school and college courses). According to this model, writers and speakers *express* (a key word—words matter!) their meanings in a code (in our case, it is called the English language, which is symbolized in arrangements of characters that we call letters or in combinations of spoken sounds that we call phonemes) that, when heard or read properly, enables a listener or a reader over two hundred and fifty years later to know what someone named Wesley experienced and then meant when he spoke about his heart's strange warming. Without this assumption that something eternal lurks behind and thereby animates the letters and the sounds, something that links the reader to the writer and the listener to the speaker (what theorists would simply call the *sign* that links the *signifier* to the thing being *signified*), it would make little sense to ask about what either Shakespeare or Wesley meant when he wrote either this or that, for both of them are long gone and all that remains is a text in front of us today—the collection of signs in ink on paper or pictured in shades of light and dark on a computer screen—that has passed through innumerable editorial hands and before countless eyes prior our own.

But is this the way experience, language, and meaning-making actually work? Is experience something inside a person, owned by a person, and is meaning somehow disengaged from the words on a page and the sounds that we hear, such that the sounds and the ink can come and go but the meaning they represented remains forever? If so, then the text of Wesley's quotation might function like an arrow leading away from his experience, on that fateful evening in May, and to the reader, wherever and whenever he or she may be, efficiently communicating across time something unique about this strange feeling that he had. But if meaning and experience *do not* work in this fashion, if they are not some inner, pure, and eternal thing, exclusive to the subject and only later symbolized publicly in fallible language, then too quickly moving from reading words on a page, overhearing words spoken orally, or watching people doing things, to concluding that texts, sounds, and behaviors provide direct access to some inner world of timeless significance is a serious error in scholarship.

To rephrase: perhaps we could say that if you follow the common sense model of meaning-making (which is often called the correspondence or the referential theory of meaning), then claims of religious experience will likely be understood as signaling a pre-verbal, pre-linguistic, and thus pre-cultural moment that is later expressed publicly, but done so only to varying degrees of satisfaction (which is none other than the old, "I can't quite put it into words" approach to how meaning works) by means of those social conventions we call languages. However, if we adopt an alternative theory about how meaning-making takes place, and, by doing so, further complicate meaning's relation to those internal states or dispositions that we commonly know as either experiences or beliefs—a theory to be discussed below in more detail—then we will have to take seriously that, as phrased by the Austrian philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), "the expression of belief, thought, etc.," such as Wesley's journal entry, "is just a sentence;—and the sentence has sense only as a member of a system of language; as one expression within a calculus" (1965, 42). To put it another way, notations on a page or sounds coming from the mouths of people do not necessarily refer to anything outside of themselves; that is, they may simply be notations and sounds that refer to nothing other that the rules of the symbol systems in which they occupy a place (e.g., grammar)—rules that we, as the people who develop and use them, employ to distinguish which markings and which sounds get to count as language and which are seen and heard as mere marks and sounds. If this is the case, then markings and soundings are not neutral collections of signs that re-present (as in the sense of presenting something anew) an otherwise unavailable inner world, thereby making it available, in translated form, to outsiders. And if so, then they do not provide the reader or the listener (no matter how careful they may be in their descriptive and interpretive work) with direct access to any pre-verbal or pre-cultural meanings that were once in someone else's head. Simply put, there is no way to answer "What did Shakespeare mean when he wrote…?"

If this alternative approach to meaning-making is used, then the question "Do you know what I mean?" may not be about the meaning at all, regardless of what the person asking the question may think it is all about. Instead, such a statement may be an invitation to determine whether speaker and listener share the same set of linguistic rules—what Wittgenstein called a calculus or what we might as well just call a grammar, whether linguistic or perhaps social (as in behaving correctly, as other members of the group do in this or that situation). And thus the common reply, "Yeah, I know what you mean," may merely establish that that the listener and the speaker do indeed share the same rules. And by sharing the same rules they have established that they are members of the same group, sharing common likes and dislikes.

Case in point: consider the widely parodied "eh?" (pronounced "ay") which is often used by Canada's English speakers (a trait picked up from the British, but which is also found, though not as prominently, in US English). Waiting at a bus stop, it would not be unusual to hear someone say, "Nice weather, eh?" But the person saying this is not, in fact, posing a question. For, despite the upward inflection as their sentence ends, one would never expect to find "eh?" used at the end of a sentence that put forward a controversial claim—one that risks the sort of disagreement that marks a break or a gap in social life.

That is to say, the linguistic signal "eh?" *functions* (as opposed to *means*) for Canadians much as "or what?" functions in American slang, as in "Is this great weather, or what?": they are both occasions to solicit agreement from the person with whom one is having a conversation—"Yeah, it's great weather" is therefore the expected, and thus the correct, answer. And by correct I simply mean the answer that signals your participation in the group—the group's expectations for weather on an autumn morning, perhaps, or the group's expectations for what sort of behavior can reasonably be expected to take place between strangers waiting at a bus stop. Important to recognize is that this exchange is therefore not about the weather (much like questions such as "How are you doing?" are not about how you are doing but, generally, are simply a way of saying hello; the correct answer, regardless of your disposition, is therefore "Fine"), for the observation on the quality of the weather simply provides an occasion for group affirmation and group building. "Eh?" is therefore a way to invite, perhaps even to force, agreement and thus solidarity by putting forward a claim already known to have the agreement of your conversation partner—it is already known because you each already know the other to be a member of your group, sharing your tastes, your sensibilities, your expectations, and most importantly, your language. Despite being strangers, you are both waiting for the same bus, after all. This agreement therefore is a mark of shared social affinity: "Are we both in the group who thinks that the weather is pleasant today?" to which someone answers, "Yes, we are peers." "Eh?" questions are therefore simply occasions for massaging the group and your place within it.

If queries about the weather may not actually be about the weather, then could experience talk not actually be about supposedly pristine, internal things called experiences either? For if we follow Wittgenstein, then regardless of what people making claims of having had an experience may think, their claims (like all language) may be nothing more or less than evidence that the writer or the speaker are properly schooled in using their group's language rules—and using the rules does nothing more or less than use the rules, thereby reproducing and reinforcing them, and in the process reproducing and reinforcing the identity of the group that results from those who collectively use them.

In this model, the sounds of speech and the markings of texts do not refer to anything outside of the fact that the speaker and listener, the writer and reader, are equally competent to put their shared rules into practice—much as readers of this text are doing right now—and doing this so well that the fiction of meaning is created as a result. In this case—recalling an earlier example—if I write "cup" (as I have just done, and which readers have just read) it may tell us nothing about some essential feature of an object on my desk that makes it naturally distinguishable from other objects also on my desk; instead, writing and reading "cup" may tell us everything about our (that is, the writer's and the reader's) common place within a rule system which distinguishes "cup" from "cap"—not to mention "cop," "cot," "cut," "cat," etc—distinctions that we reproduce and teach to newcomers because we find them useful, not only because this system of distinction helps us to find something to drink with but, more importantly perhaps, because they facilitate our cooperative activities with others in our group and allow us to identify those who are not in the group. Participating in such systems is therefore a way in which

we continually reinvent ourselves as a specific sort of "we" and mark certain things in the world as significant to us.

Of course, this alternative theory of language will probably frustrate those who employ the common sense view of words as neutral signs that directly correspond either to intangible ideas (e.g., justice) or things (e.g., cups) in the real world. But for others, the fact that users of our language system have so successfully schooled each other in "seeing" a cup when hearing the sounds represented by "cup," and a cat when hearing the sounds represented by "cat"—sounds and symbols repetitively driven into us from an extremely young age, by those around us, those who made us what we are today—makes language, meaning, experience, and social identity all the more interesting things to study. For despite my assurance that a *cow* is a cow and that it says *moo*, I also happen to know (because I've seen others do it to their children) that well-meaning (but no less coercive) adults leaned into me, as a very young child, and repeatedly told me, likely with great enthusiasm—"The cow says moo. The cow says moo"—while probably pointing just as repeatedly to a drawing in a child's story book or to an object outside the car window. Would that sketch in the book, that object on the other side of the farmer's fence, have naturally been something worth paying attention to *without* being forced to take notice of it, without being given a name for it, and without repeatedly being told of a whole series of interconnected relationships that it had with other names ("farmer," "farm," "horse," "barn," "pasture," "milk," etc.)? In fact, much like that farmer's fence, not only creating a set of identities by separating farm from not-farm but, in doing so, helping us to conceptually and physically group together and organize all that falls within it as somehow being inherently related (i.e., the well, the tractor, the chicken coop, the shovel, the bags of corn seed, and the pig sty are now all part of "the farm"), being taught any series of interconnected relationships is a way that an identity is made, inasmuch as one acquires the tools (in other words, the structure, the grammar) to determine what is like what and who is like whom. For example, when placed into the correct framework, a flag, a song, a series of holidays, certain events in the past, and certain institutions can all come to create the impression of a uniform national identity. But without initiation into this or that particular linguistic and social calculus, would I have *experienced* the cow and its moo? Would I *feel* French or Greek or Mexican or American? Would I *believe* that I was or was not a farmer? Or, without initiation into the use of that particular calculus, would the moments that together conspired to create that sense of identity instead be irrelevant, and thus unnoticed, in a hectic world in which I had come to pay attention to yet other things by means of relationships perhaps unimaginable to those intent on "seeing" certain objects *as* cows and hearing certain sounds *as* moos?

Apparently, experience is a lot more complicated than was first apparent when reading that quotation from John Wesley, for it now seems that the internalization of a previous calculus, developed long before we arrived on the scene and taught to us by others, ensures that none of my experiences are simply my own; instead, what gets to count as an experience is determined for us by others, by the grids given to us and by means of which we determine what is and is not significant to us. Thus, instead of talking about "his experiences" and "his meanings," as we did earlier when discussing what Wesley wrote, we might better phrase it as *our* experience and *our* meaning, inasmuch as the frameworks

that determine what gets to stand out *as* an experience and what gets to count *as* meaningful are public and therefore collective (such as the usually unnoticed grid that allows us to pay attention to some long gone social actor named John Wesley, while ignoring countless other people who undoubtedly had rich lives in the eighteenth century). And it is not just that "cup" or "cow" do not necessarily point to something internal to those things we call cups and cows, for everything that has just been said (or, again, should I say written?) equally applies to *all* of the other words in the preceding paragraphs. For example, whether I used it in my own text, or whether used by Wesley—as in the phrase, "I felt my heart strangely warmed"—we may have no choice but to ask: To what does "I" and "my" refer? Does it point to something unique inside of me (such as my identity, my subjectivity, my self) or merely to shared assumptions and social rules common among those who constitute my peers—assumptions about what gets to count as an individual?

Taking a serious look at how we talk about experience may therefore be the way in to a whole range of hugely important issues.

* * *

The essays selected for this volume, all of which are intended for a reader new to these issues but motivated enough to tackle some complex issues, explore this very complexity. Therefore, readers expecting to find a selection of articles in the vein of Wesley's journal—that is, a collection of articles narrating religious experiences that people claim to have had—will likely be disappointed, for after the selections included in Parts II and III of the book (in which the essays in each part offer a so-called classic and then also a contemporary example of the widespread view of religious experience being uncaused by other sorts of experiences [i.e., autonomous] and yet universally shared among all human beings), the volume turns to a selection of essays that call into question these very assumptions, making not religious experience the focus of study but, instead, the social effects of making such claims. It's for that reason that the collection opens with Raymond William's brief but crucial study of the two senses in which the word "experience" has been used in the English language—what he terms experience past and experience present. The modern sense of experience as naming a private affectation or sentiment of fullness and immediacy—what Williams calls experience present, which is just as Wesley used the term and much as many people today now use the term—is a fairly recent linguistic invention. So Williams also draws attention to another notion of experience as naming the cumulative result of past situations. In fact, it is this older sense of the term, as naming something public and observable, that occupies the majority of *The Oxford English Dictionary*'s many different definitions for the word (citing examples from as early as the fourteenth century). So, despite the popularity today of assuming that experience denotes an interior disposition available only to the participant—such as those who might nostalgically look back on their school days, longing for "the student experience"—we still have no difficulty understanding a job ad that specifies that applicants need to have "work experience." In this case, experience names something that accumulates over time (hence Williams names it experience-past), something empirical and therefore public (for I can hear whether you know how to play the piano and I can taste whether you know how to cook), something

that can be done with the body (such as the skills required of the job), something that I can observe so as to confirm whether you have it or not. So while I can see whether you know how to do long division, I certainly can't see Wesley's strangely warmed heart.

Two items are crucial to entertain at this point. First of all, whereas experience-present is said to be private and unavailable for empirical (that is, sensory) confirmation (i.e., one cannot confirm that Wesley's heart was indeed "strangely warmed"), experience-past is very public and therefore available for empirical confirmation (i.e., one can easily verify whether a novice professor has teaching experience). These two different usages of the term therefore seem to be the opposite of one another. Second, if we accept Wittgenstein's assessment of claims of belief as being nothing more or less than utterances that can be heard and sentences that can be read, then claims of experience-present are, after all is said and done, just that—*claims* and, as claims that can be understood, they must operate by the shared calculus that we call language, rules that are thoroughly public and social (after all, neither you nor I invented the grammar that we use to make sense of this very text). The point? What some see to be experience-present can instead be understood as but one more instance of experience-past. 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 that can themselves be observed, taught, recorded, and compared to the 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.

Now, of course, this is not the way that the people who make disclosures about their experiences usually think of them—and the question is whether their self-representations (e.g., I think this, I saw that, I meant something else) limit how scholars can examine people's claims and the actions about which they may make claims (e.g., I did this because...). Case in point: I have no doubt that John Wesley was not assuming that his claim to having had an unique experience at a meeting on Aldersgate Street was nothing but an example of how arbitrary signs are connected up in complex systems to form language—a system which is meaningful only so long as more than one person accepts the arbitrary arrangements and combinations that we know as text and grammar. Not at all! Instead, I presume that he, much like the person who assumes "cup" somehow points directly to that thing still sitting on my desk, took for granted that his journal entry was somehow in step with a stable reality in the world, one to which only he happened to have direct access. After all, it was his own heart that was strangely warmed, was it not? But is this description of his assumptions entirely correct? For, come to think of it, if he really did believe that only he had access to this interior disposition then what sense would it make for him to come home, put pen to paper, and write about it, for writing places indicators of this supposedly private disposition into a public domain? So while he likely, and quite sincerely, understood himself to have undergone something unique to himself, that cannot be the whole story.

What if, to begin with, we assumed that the private place from which Wesley's feeling originated was, at least he might say, not limited to him. What if it was private yet somehow

shared by others, such as those also attending that evening meeting, or those who might someday read his published journals? What if we assumed, much like those who today talk about Human Nature as being something unique to each individual (i.e., to each "I") yet shared by *all* individuals (i.e., by the "we")—thereby making everyone equally individual *and* equally members of that family we know as humanity—that the site of Wesley's private disposition of assurance was also present, though just as private, within everyone else? Now, it starts to make sense for him to write about it, while still being unable to put "it" into words adequately, for now the internal thing which his writing *expresses* might be something of relevance to people other than Wesley himself.

So if we're trying to be descriptively accurate when coming across people using the term "experience" in that sense that Williams termed experience-present, we likely have to address two things that these people seem to assume: (1) that although their sense of an interior sentiment is autonomous, or disconnected from being caused by the mundane or empirical things of usual day-to-day life, it is nonetheless also (2) universally shared by (all or at least some) others who are likewise thought to have a similar private, interior space (what scholars sometimes call subjectivity) where such emotions reside. And this is just what we see happening when, in response to the question "Know what I mean?" we commonly see someone reply by simply shaking her head, up and down or side to side. And as if by magic, without the so-called meaning ever being put on the table—placed in public, for scrutiny and possibly for dispute—something seems to have been mysteriously transported, as if by telepathy, between these two otherwise distinct hearts and minds. Yes, I know what you mean.

Throughout the history of that field that we know as Religious Studies, the Academic Study of Religion, Comparative Religion, or even the Science of Religion (the last two names for the field were once more popular than they are now), we come across scholars who, much like the people they study, presume just this: that their object of study is an internal yet universal state (whether emotional, as in an experience or faith, or cognitive, as in a belief) that can only be accessed by means of its various expressions or—using a term favored by those known as phenomenologists of religion (descriptivist scholars interested in doing comparative work, looking for cross-cultural similarities)—its manifestations. These manifestations are generally found in specific sorts of narratives (called myths), certain types of behaviors (called rituals), and a host of other media, from art to hand gestures (all called symbols). In fact, these three items, myth, ritual, symbol, were once (and, in some university curricula, still might be) the basis for common course titles, in which the variety of manifestations studied in a semester were thought to betray a common core, or, using a term often used in philosophy, what is usually termed an essence.

Likened to the core of an onion—inasmuch as it is the only thing remaining when one peals back its many layers—the essence is that without which something would not be what it is. For example, we might say that the color of the onion—or so the argument goes for those who define things (like onions or cups on my desk) by identifying their essence—does not make it an onion, for red onions are no more or less onions than those that are yellow or white or green (which we also call scallions). Color comes and goes (i.e., color is contingent), suggesting that it is not a necessary, or essential, trait of the onion.

Perhaps size, shape, or taste is a better candidate for an onion's necessary trait. Or perhaps the way we use them? Where they are grown? A little thought on the subject makes it clear that none of these features is required for something in the world to count as an onion, for different onions taste differently, have different shapes and sizes, and can be used in any number of ways—but that doesn't mean that any of them are less of an onion. Much as an onion's empirically observable characteristics (size, shape, color, etc.) can all differ, though the item is still an onion, many scholars of religion have assumed that, like the onion-ness that remains when its various observable layers are each removed, there is a nonempirical core that remains once religious beliefs', behaviors', and institutions' unnecessary (that is, changeable) traits are gone.

This strategy for defining something as a this and not a that usually goes by the name of essentialism; in the study of religion, in which we find so many different variations in people's beliefs and actions, the essentialist approach has, for the past few hundred years, settled on private experience as the true essence of all religion. And because the inner world is so often thought to take priority over the outer world, these initial, pre-social experiences come to be understood as the source, the cause, of all that follows them; first comes faith, as the scholar of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) might have phrased it, and only then come the traditions and the institutions. Therefore, despite the many observable differences in the claims people make, the way they do things, and the sorts of groups they form to pass along their traditions, beliefs, and rituals, much as with onions there must be something in common (or so it is thought) in order for us to recognize all of these things *as* religious. And that thing they all share turns out not to be a *thing* at all; instead, it is an internal state, an intangible disposition, a subjective immediacy of awareness, that all people are said to have and thus to share. Though expressed in a multitude of ways, that which motivates these varied expressions, that which is first felt internally and only then manifested externally, is said to be common and thus necessarily shared.

One of the better known examples of an early scholar of religion adopting this approach was the German Protestant scholar Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). Working in an intellectual tradition not unlike that of his predecessor, the German Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), sharing important assumptions about the empirical unavailability of experience in common with his contemporary, the American psychologist William James (1842–1910), and setting the stage for the later work of such scholars as the influential Chicago historian of religions, the Romanian-born Mircea Eliade (1907–86), Otto concluded that those things which we call religious are religious not because of any external or observable trait that they may or may not have—for, after all, place that thing called an altar in a different setting, and do different things with it, and you won't likely continue to think it's an altar but simply a table or a desk. Instead, items in the empirical world simply provide an occasion or a site for the expression of what he held to be a prior and timeless inner awareness that is projected, outward from the individual and into the world. And for Otto this inward awareness is an experience of the numinous, a term he coined from the Latin word *numen* (presence or power), naming one's inner awareness of being in the presence of the compelling yet fearful mystery of it all.

That it is awfully difficult to study a mystery (after all, where does one begin and how does one know where to end?) seems to have been overlooked by the many people influenced by Otto's work. However, the problems do not stop there, for there are other implications of this still common position for scholarship on religion. For example, in the (often quoted) opening lines of chapter 3 of his important book, *The Idea of the Holy* (as the title was translated from the 1917 German original, *Das Heilige*), Otto writes the following:

> The reader is invited to direct his mind to a moment of deeply-felt religious experience, as little as possible qualified by other forms of consciousness. Whoever cannot do this, whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no farther; for it is not easy to discuss questions of religious psychology with one who can recollect the emotions of his adolescence, the discomforts of indigestion, or, say, social feelings, but cannot recall any intrinsically religious feelings. We do not blame such an one, when he tries for himself to advance as far as he can with the help of such principles of explanation as he knows, interpreting "aesthetics" in terms of sensuous pleasure, and "religion" as a function of the gregarious instinct and social standards, or as something more primitive still. But the artist, who for his part has an intimate personal knowledge of the distinctive element in the aesthetic experience, will decline his theories with thanks, and the religious man will reject them even more uncompromisingly. (Otto 1958 [1917])

Drawing on the common analogy of art and religion—inasmuch as people sometimes assume both to be concerned with unique feelings that cannot be fully explained by appealing to any of their observable causes—Otto's position is clear: *to be, or to feel, is to know*. Those who do not possess "an intimate personal knowledge of the distinctive element" of the object under study therefore have no choice but to remain silent when it comes to discussing it. Such scholarship on religion is deeply influenced by an intellectual movement we know as Romanticism—a philosophical, artistic, musical, and literary movement that originates in some eighteenth-century Europeans' negative reactions to the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment. Religion cannot be explained—or so the argument goes—it can only be felt. Practiced in this way, the study of religion amounts to a form of participation, inasmuch as the scholar is assumed to share in the experiences of the people under study—at least enough to feel and understand them enough to represent them accurately.

But in what other area of the university, in which other scholarly discipline, would we play by such rules? For must one be an ancient Greek to study ancient Greece? Must one be a communist to study communism? What about marine biologists and what they study? No doubt there are those in other fields who, along with Otto, think that being a participant gives one a privileged viewpoint. For instance, take the more recent academic fields that are today called area studies, where one can easily find professors who maintain that, for example, women have a privileged insight when it comes to the curriculum of a Women's Studies class. But perhaps, instead of studying the supposed content of

experience, as with a previous generation of scholars, we ought to shift the ground as we did with the Canadian "eh?," just as recommended by Wittgenstein, and take seriously that claims of experience are just that, *claims* and, as claims, they are public, they follow rules, they are negotiable and contestable, and these claims themselves are the things that are *doing* something rather than being a passive sign (that is a description) of something else. And because they are doing something, those making the claims are social actors and their claims are a form of action that can be studied. And it is this doing, the establishing of a zone of social privilege—the thing that results from claims about the unique nature of "women's experience" or the "American experience"—that ought to attract scholars' attention. Of course those making the sorts of claims that we find in Wesley's and Otto's texts more than likely wish their beliefs, behaviors, and institutions to be treated in a special way (aside: to set apart is among the ancient Latin roots of the modern word "sacred"), but I do not think that scholars ought to be bound by the wishes of the people whom they study. In fact, this is *the* issue that operates in the background of the following essays; this volume's position on this point ought to be clear from its opening epigraph from the early French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917).

But readers should not just take Durkheim's word for it; so just why are people not the experts on their own experiences? While I could cite a number of examples to persuade readers that experience is a social product, that without a grid provided for them from the outside (let's say, by a writer such as myself, removed from the world they take for granted), they may not be *experiencing* themselves in either this or that way in the present moment (say, *as* a reader, *as* a student, *as* a teacher, *as* a female, *as* a male, etc.), consider instead a brief but useful example from Wendy Brown's book, *Relating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (2006). Brown, a political scientist, is interested in the history and current effects of what is now an almost taken for granted theme of life in modern social democracies: that we must *tolerate* each other's differences. That there are some things which many—though, significantly, not all, and *that's* the point!—of us agree we must *not* tolerate (such as those behaviors we label as crimes) makes it evident that the limits of toleration (or, to put it another way, the boundaries of the group which tolerates and of what is tolerated) are contestable, that they change over time, and that they must therefore be tweaked, repaired, built, and rebuilt.

With this in mind, consider Brown's example of the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, part of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. A portion of the museum is devoted to exhibits documenting the horrors of Nazi Germany's attempt to eliminate Europe's Jewish population—exhibits that, as with many modern museum exhibits, prompt visitors to move through carefully recreated settings, to interact with multimedia presentations, and thereby to be enveloped by an ever-growing narrative about events in the past and the significance they ought to be seen as having in the present. "The installation culminates," Brown writes,

> with our literal descent into a concentration camp-like space, replete with barbed-wire; entrances that separate the adult and able-bodied from children, the aged, and the infirm; and uneven rough cement floors. We issue into the cold, cavernous

> space of a gas chamber where, for a very long time, we watch images of the camps as actors read the words of inmates and survivors. (Brown 2006)

"At this point," Brown concludes, "we are no longer mere witnesses to the Holocaust but are *inside* the experience" (139). In support of her point, Brown quotes two previous visitors, writing in the guest book at the end of the exhibit: "I had read some things about the Holocaust, but had never seen it first hand," writes one, and another says, "now I know how it must have felt."

But there's just one problem, a particularly nagging problem, when it comes to the manner in which these visitors have experienced the terrors of the Holocaust. As Brown rightly observes, none of the visitors has actually seen anything other than the museum exhibit first hand, for "what we are seeing is staged rather than real"; "this 'experience' is a facsimile," (138, 139). The awareness that so sincerely moved the museum's visitors—what to them more than likely is perceived as vivid, authentic, and therefore rationally persuasive and emotionally compelling—was, the observer and the museum curators both know, manufactured for them, over half a century and a world away from the events that the exhibits claim to represent; it was done so by the same sort of careful planning and attention to detail that one finds in any modern multimedia exhibit, whether it be a museum, an amusement park, or a motion picture. The visitors have quite obviously never left sunny LA; yet to those writing in that guest book, they have somehow been transported back in time, to some core moment a world away—a moment unchanged despite being recreated in a museum exhibit. Could there be any better example of the manner in which experiences are conjured within pre-fabricated grids and settings, making experience an artefact of a prior social world?

But to press the point still further, what are we to make of the presumption that, whether or not we can access it, there is a pristine "core moment" somewhere out there, in the dimly lit past? Could it be the case that this very sense of an original, even if we agree that it is irretrievably separated from us in time, is just as much a product of a calculus in the present, comprised of specific expectations, assumptions, sets of interests and needs that may have little or nothing to do with their so-called origins? For instance, consider that group commonly known in US history as "the founding fathers." What did they found? Certainly not the contemporary country known as the United States of America, for the nation-state that exists today was beyond the wildest dreams of political actors in the mid- to late eighteenth century. Certainly, from the point of view of the present, their long past actions were *necessary* to establish the new nation-state (e.g., their writing a constitution), but they were hardly *sufficient*, for none of those social actors could anticipate issues in the future (which indicates the crucial role of the US Supreme Court in bridging the gap between distant past and unanticipated future, for this is the body responsible for applying a late-eighteenth-century text to ever-changing present-day circumstances). Their unknown future (they lacked foresight) became our known past (because we possess hindsight), thereby allowing us to look backward in time *as if* those past actions led to our present. But because the contemporary moment is comprised of countless present situations, each populated by and indicative of the desires of countless different social actors

in any number of different situations and all looking backward in time for some hint of justification for the particular present *as they wish it to be*, we can see how that thing that we once understood simply as a uniform and tangible past actually turns out to be filled with innumerable actors doing a variety of things for any number of reasons. The past, then, becomes an almost limitless repository from which contemporary actors can pick and choose, to suit their purposes. No doubt, many things were begun in 1776, but should one desire to draw attention to the longevity of certain US political institutions, then a relatively small number of events in that year stand out as significant—significant because of the current desire, not significant in and of themselves. In precisely this way one can argue that the past is an ever-changing construction of the present—ever-changing because the present is so diverse and is itself always changing (that is, the present has a nasty habit of continually becoming the past, which opens the way for yet another unanticipated future to become a new present).

To apply some of this, consider one of my own school's football players, interviewed last season on the local evening news, at a press conference prior to Alabama's annual October game against the University of Tennessee—our arch rivals. When asked what it was like to play a game in Knoxville's famed Neyland Stadium—with over 100,000 cheering fans, all wearing orange and white—he replied by saying that the only thing that he could compare it to was "what the gladiators and lions experienced in the Roman coliseum." Much as with the museum's visitors, we must not overlook the fact that, despite his claims, no actual time travel has taken place; instead, this player's sense of being in ancient Rome was likely a product either of Hollywood special effects magic (had he seen Russell Crowe star in *Gladiator*?) or the imagination of historians hoping that their reading of such things as ancient inscriptions, statues, and architecture might hold up their weighty claims about such things as "the Roman experience." Moreover, today "ancient Rome" comes to stand for so many different things, all because of the many events that have transpired long after it and which were necessarily unknown to the people who actually lived in that place during that time (such as seeing Rome as but one of many so-called "great civilizations" that have risen and fallen over the past several thousand years, including many whose life spans long post-dated Rome's own inevitable decline). So it seems very likely to me that, for this football player in 2006, the English sign "gladiator" (the Latin *gladiatōrēs*, swordsmen, comes from *gladius*, meaning sword) more than likely signifies something that is very different from what it may have meant for the slaves, criminals, war prisoners, and some free men as well who were put in the position of having to fight for their lives. What it meant for such people is, I would suggest, largely if not completely lost to time. The result is that all we have left is someone in the present using such signs as "gladiator" and "ancient Rome" to accomplish social work in the here and now.

But whether grounded in the fictions of Hollywood or of scholarship, we must not overlook that this player's presence on that field in Knoxville apparently becomes understandable to him—becomes something we might call an *experience*—only once it is juxtaposed to a facsimile, somewhat akin to those who, in the immediacy of the shocking attacks of September 11, 2001, were only able to make sense of that day's events by comparing the chaos of the real to facsimiles and fabrications: "It was like a movie," they all said when

interviewed by reporters on the scene, no doubt referring to Hollywood's long tradition of disaster films set in busy US cities (everything from 1974's *Earthquake* and *The Towering Inferno* to *Independence Day* [1996], *Armageddon* [1998] and *Deep Impact* [1998]). This confirms not only that, as scholars of religion are apt to say, we must not confuse our map of the territory (such as a description of an action, which is a mere representation) with the territory itself (what constitutes the original presentation of the act), but also that there is in fact no territory, no original, and thus no direct experience of a real world, without the application of a prior, constructed map that not only exists at a distance from that which it eventually represents but, *more importantly perhaps*, whose use actually transforms the generic, chaotic, and thus unknowable limitless background—somewhat akin to white noise or the brute and unorganized stuff of existence—into a delimited and thus manageable domain that can be conceptualized and only then experienced and known, so that one can now experience oneself as being either "in place" or "out of place," either "early" or "late," either one of "us" or one of "them."

So the question is whether, as scholars, we are content to take the museum visitors' and the football player's claims of experience at face value, simply collecting and cataloguing them, or whether we are interested in how they could come to experience and understand themselves, and their relations to others, in just this way. If the former, then we'll go on assuming either that something in the exhibit captures the essence of what it must have been like to be a victimized Jew in late 1930s and early 1940s Germany or that something on the football field captures the essence of the brutal ancient coliseum. But it seems that we have good reason for *not* doing this—after all, as scholars, we know that even if such originals ever did exist, they are both long lost to history; we therefore have no standard against which to compare these people's claims, preventing us from ever knowing how accurate they really are. It is something akin to the troubles of the earlier example, of "You know what I mean?" followed by an agreeable head nod—such action effectively bypasses ever really testing just what the meaning is.

So, just as Wittgenstein suggested, the head nodding, the museum visitors writing in the book, and the college football player likening himself to an ancient fighter, might not actually be about the supposed one-to-one correspondence between the claim and the thing that it is said to represent. If so, then perhaps Wesley's report of his having experienced a strangely warmed heart had little to do with what he might have thought he felt and what he might have thought it meant. Perhaps the British historian of the English working class, E. P. Thompson (1924–93), in his groundbreaking book from 1963, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1980), was onto something in thinking that the early appeal of Wesley's Methodism was to be found in England's dire social context at that time—for example, the terrible living and working conditions of the Industrial Revolution, which was then beginning to transform a previously dispersed, rural, agriculturally based economy to a condensed metropolitan manufacturing economy. Perhaps this was the social context—much as Wesley's "continual sorrow and heaviness of heart," as he phrased it in his journal, provided psychological context for his own experience—that allowed people at that time to come to experience themselves *as* sinners, *as* needing trust, assurance, and salvation from torment and death. Perhaps this is what prompted them to attend

Wesley's highly popular and emotionally ecstatic tent meetings in which their emotional lives, individual value, and group solidarity were expressed and wildly celebrated by means of what Thompson, provocatively applying Karl Marx's (1818–83) well-known critique of religion as an "opiate of the masses," describes as "a ritualized form of psychic masturbation" (Thompson 1980, 405).

So, having begun with Wesley's disclosure, we close with a scholar's analysis of the social, political, and economic conditions that might allow one to feel a heart's strange warming. If readers have stuck with me so far and are now able to entertain experience as the seemingly private residue of an all too public thing—something that has a history and which can be understood to be a product of a prior calculus (whether it be linguistic or socio-political)—then we have come some distance; and it is now time to turn the argument over to those whose work has been collected in this volume. Ending this Introduction with Wesley and Thompson is therefore a good place to let these other writers begin, for there may be no more compelling example of just how different scholarship on experiential claims may be when compared to the claims themselves, indicating that, despite the apparent sincerity of the people making claims about their feelings, sentiments, dispositions, faith, and even beliefs, something other than what they think may be going on. Determining just what that "something else" is I leave to the following authors.