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No Field Is an Island: Fostering Collaboration between the Academic Study of Religion and the Sciences

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Abstract

We can foster collaboration between the academic study of religion and the sciences, particularly the biological and psychological sciences, if we (1) construct a common object of study that can be positioned within an evolutionary paradigm, (2) adopt a building block approach to the study of religion that distinguishes between religions and the more elementary phenomena that comprise them, and (3) operationalize abstract concepts as behavioral interactions in order to gain a better understanding of the process whereby people construct religions and other complex things out of more elementary phenomena that they view as special.¹

Keywords

religion and science, evolution, building block approach, operationalizing concepts, specialness, revelation

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Note: In view of the invitation to make a programmatic statement, I have opted to organize my thoughts on fostering collaboration between scholars of religion and scientists in an outline format. I find that this format not only forces me to be clearer but also allows readers to absorb an argument more quickly.

1. Constructing a Common Object of Study

Collaboration between scholars of religion and scientists only makes sense if we can identify a shared object of study that we think we will understand more fully if we approach it from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including those of the natural sciences. Although many in the humanities have reservations about collaborating with scientists, I argue that viewing ourselves as human animals that are simultaneously biological, social, and cultural offers a broad basis for collaborative research and that studying the cultural aspects of human behavior within an overarching evolutionary paradigm will significantly enhance our understanding of cultural processes.

1.1. *A shared object of study*

If our object of study is “God” or “religion” or even “religions,” we will have fewer potential collaborators than if we conceive our object of study as “religious texts” or “religious institutions” or “religious people” or “religious behavior.” In the latter formulations, we can collaborate with others who are studying texts, institutions, behaviors, or people as long as we don’t assume that there is something so distinctive about (say) *religious* texts or behaviors that we cannot learn from methods used to study *other* texts or behaviors. In my work on “religious experience,” I shifted to an ascriptive formulation—“experiences deemed religious”—in order to signal my interest in positioning the study of “religious experience” within the context of experience more generally (Taves 2009: 56-87). Here I will take as my starting point the goal of fostering collaboration among scholars from humanistic and scientific disciplines who are interested in studying human behaviors that can be construed as religious. Leaving aside for the moment the question of how we as scholars might identify such behaviors, let us first consider the reasons that some might seek to avoid formulating an object of study that can be approached from a scientific perspective.

1.2. *The challenges posed by a scientific perspective*

Given that scholars of religion frequently draw upon perspectives from disciplines such as philosophy, literature, history, anthropology, and sociology, it is primarily the natural and experimental sciences, such as biology and psychology, that scholars of religion find problematic. The problems most often mentioned are naturalism and/or materialism and the related issue of reductionism, especially as it relates to claims regarding experience.

1.2.1. *Naturalism*

Generally speaking, natural and social scientists are seeking to explain as much as they can in naturalistic terms. “Naturalism,” however, is used in a variety of senses, ranging from the belief that the physical sciences can provide a complete account of human behavior, on the one hand, to non-supernaturalism, on the other.² I am assuming that collaboration will be most fruitful when scholars of religion set aside supernatural explanations, as most already do, and scientists are open to the possibility that we need more than the physical sciences to give an adequate albeit still naturalistic account of human behavior.

1.2.2. *Reductionism*

Scholars of religion have long-standing, yet ill-defined, anxieties about reductionism that we often use to fend off collaborative possibilities (for a recent example, see Slingerland 2008b, Cho & Squier 2008). There are real issues concerning how different levels of analysis are related, but these are complex issues that confront all disciplines, not just those of us studying religion. Thus, there are theories that assume that it will be possible in time to describe phenomena at higher (more macro) levels in terms operative at lower (more micro) levels (reductionism), theories that argue for the emergence of distinct properties at higher levels that are not present at lower levels (emergentism), and theories that argue for reciprocal constraints between levels (for an overview, see Clayton 2004, Clayton and Davies 2006). These discussions go to the heart of the relationships between mind and body, consciousness and behavior, and the individual and the group. These are very important discussions, but need not be resolved for us to work collaboratively with scientists.

1.2.3. *Experience*

The question of how we as scholars can gain access to the experience of others, whether through first person or third person perspectives, has constituted a long-standing divide between the humanities and the experimental sciences. The resurgence of interest in the study of the mind and consciousness over the past several decades is providing much more complicated and interesting ways of understanding the distinction between experience and representation embraced by many humanists. If we view experience in an evolutionary and developmental perspective, we can think of the ability to represent experience linguistically as layered on top of underlying non- and pre-linguistic forms of

² I am grateful to Matt Bagger for alerting me to these distinctions and to two volumes of essays that emphasize a more expansive understanding of naturalism (De Caro & Macarthur 2004, De Caro & Macarthur 2010).

experience that adult humans share with pre-verbal children and non-human animals. Viewed in this way, we can identify continuities between the way something is experienced (non- or pre-linguistically) and the way it is represented (linguistically) without having to equate them (see Taves 2009: 56-87). Moreover, as researchers learn more about how the mind works, it is becoming evident that “the mind” (as philosophers such as Dewey, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and others argued) is not just “in the head” or “the brain” but also in the body (embodied mind) and in the complex transactions between embodied mind and the world in which it is embedded (embedded mind) (Robbins & Aydele 2009, Gallagher 2009, Taves 2009: 63-68).

1.3. *The advantages of collaboration with the sciences*

The biological sciences and most psychological subspecialties assume an evolutionary paradigm. I think that scholars of religion would not only be in a better position to collaborate but also significantly advance the study of human behaviors construed as religious if we overcome “our allergy” (as Nancy Levene commented) to framing the study of religious behavior in evolutionary terms. Doing so would mean thinking of ourselves as human *animals* that are simultaneously biological, social, and cultural (Baumeister 2005, Gazzaniga 2008) and studying the cultural aspects of human behavior within an overarching evolutionary paradigm (Wilson 2007). Viewing ourselves as human animals provides us with two very different ways of viewing the cultural aspects of human behavior: diachronic and synchronic.

1.3.1. *A diachronic view of culture*

Viewed from the diachronic perspective of evolutionary time, we can understand the cultural dimension of human behavior as a relatively late development. At the genetic level, we share much in common with other animals; at the biological level, we have much in common with other mammals; and, at the social level, much in common with other primates. If we define culture as “information capable of affecting individuals’ behavior that they acquire from other members of their species through teaching, imitation, and other forms of social transmission” (Richerson & Boyd 2005: 5), it is evident that, while culture is not limited to humans, it plays a much larger role in human behavior than in any other species (Tomasello 1999, Baumeister 2005).

In placing humans in an evolutionary perspective, I do not seek to return to the models of nineteenth and twentieth century Orientalists. Rather, I am convinced, as Nancy Levene commented, that “seeing ourselves as part of evolution can bring many insights to the project [of] understand[ing] human behavior, not, as the Orientalists did, to divide us (high from low religions,

primitive from civilized peoples) but to make us collaborators and co-conspirators in the history we share with not just other human beings but with all life forms.” Viewed diachronically, we can see the biological, social, and cultural as layers that emerged at different points in evolutionary time. A diachronic perspective helps us to distinguish aspects of human behavior that emerged earlier in evolutionary time and upon which later aspects are layered. Such a perspective can inform what I am calling a “building block” approach to the study of religion.³

1.3.2. *A synchronic view of culture*

Viewed synchronically, however, the picture looks very different. At any given point in time, human behaviors are simultaneously biological, social, and cultural. Moreover, there is no question that, within limits, the cultural and social aspects of human behavior can and do shape us at a biological level. Thus, to take a very obvious example, we are born with the potential to speak any language. After we learn one, unused neural pathways are “pruned” and we lose the ability to distinguish and form sounds distant from those in our native language. Although English speakers never regain the ability to learn Chinese that they had as young children, research on neuroplasticity is demonstrating that socio-cultural processes can modify the brain rather dramatically throughout the life course (Doidge 2007). Although this may not come as a surprise to those who study practices intended to transform people, scientific study of highly skilled meditators is now showing the extent to which this is the case in scientific terms (Lutz et al. 2007).

From a synchronic point of view, we can speak of different levels of analysis from the micro to the macro, that is, from molecules to cells to organisms to groups. At each level, a system interacts both with its environment and with the subsystems that comprise it and the macro systems of which it is a part. From a synchronic perspective, “culture” is not simply a macro level process

³ Some may be tempted to place a “building block” approach within the old evolutionary paradigm such that the “building blocks” might be construed as lower or more primitive than what is constructed from them. To avoid reverting to such a view of evolution, it is helpful to think about the evolution of religion in relation to what we might call the “evolution of business.” Thinking about business in the present, we have small businesses, huge corporations, and start-up companies. Walmart may be better for some things than your neighborhood grocery store or the start-up fresh food delivery business, but it is not better in any absolute sense. It is clearly different, however, and the differences need to be recognized. Thinking about the history of business over the long *durée*, we can think about precursors to these types of businesses, how far back they go in time, and what new developments were necessary to make them possible, e.g., the invention of the international trading company, of credit, and of money. There is a difference between a barter economy, a money economy, and a credit economy and again, these differences need to be recognized.

but rather a process that is shaped by and also shapes each of these levels. Thus, in so far as cultural information is learned and neurons interconnect at molecular and cellular levels in ways that reflect what we have learned, cultural patterns are expressed at the micro level of neural processes as well as at macro levels of analysis, such as organisms and groups.

2. Adopting a Building Block Approach

Collaboration will be enhanced if we adopt a building block approach to the study of religion that distinguishes between religions and the more elementary phenomena that comprise them. I suggest that the elementary phenomena might best be understood broadly and generically as things that people consider special (special things, for short) and that religions (and spiritualities and philosophies) are often organized around path schemas that involve special practices and/or special goals. In their more elaborated forms, we can view religions, philosophies, paths, etc., as systems or frameworks for assessing, ranking, manipulating, and sometimes transcending things that matter (and, thus, are viewed as special).

The building block approach I am advocating can be derived fairly directly from a certain reading of Durkheim.⁴ Durkheim defines “a religion” (not “religion” in the abstract) as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is, things set apart and forbidden” (Durkheim 1995: 44). While Durkheim is not entirely consistent, he makes a remarkably clear distinction between religions (plural) and the elementary phenomena that comprise them. Sacred things (things set apart), religious beliefs (beliefs about sacred things), and rites (rules for behavior in the presence of sacred things) all can exist apart from religions. Sacred things and beliefs and rites related to

⁴ Although Durkheim explicitly derided the futility of trying to “express the nature of religion as a whole”, Max Weber also recognized that religions (plural) were complex systems made up of parts. In considering the relationship of the parts to the wholes, Durkheim devoted more attention to the “elementary phenomena” than to the systems that were produced, while Weber was more interested in the processes whereby people transformed parts (“sacred values” or, in ascriptive terms, “things that are valued”) into wholes (world religions). More recently, sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger and psychologists such as Kenneth Pargament and Annette Mahoney adopted a similar distinction. Hervieu-Léger distinguishes between the sacred character that can be conferred on things and religion as a way of organizing meaning through chains of belief (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 106-08). Pargament and Mahoney (2005: 180-81) distinguish between the sanctification of various objects or aspects of life and religion as “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred.” In making these distinctions, these scholars redefine the *first order terms* sacred and religion as *second order terms* for the purposes of their research rather than adopting a more encompassing term, such as specialness, as I do here.

them are separable from religions and at the same time provide the fundamental raw material that people use to construct “religions” (Durkheim 1995: 38).

2.1. *Special things as basic building blocks of culture*

Durkheim’s “sacred things” are things—where things can mean literally any thing—to which people ascribe sacredness. They, thus, involve what I refer to as simple ascriptions; they are things to which a quality of some sort is ascribed consciously or unconsciously (Taves 2009). Rather than trying to identifying the quality that people ascribe to these units as specifically “religious” or “sacred,” I think it makes more sense from an evolutionary perspective to start with the broader, more inclusive class of things that people consider special and see how people who distinguish between things they consider religious, sacred, magical, superstitious, etc. position them within that larger class of things. In substituting special for sacred, I am not equating the two; rather I am situating ‘sacrality’ as an emically defined subset of the larger class of things people consider special. We can view this move both diachronically and synchronically.

Viewed diachronically, taking specialness as our starting point allows us to think about a variety of cultural activities that are differentiated in the modern West (e.g., religion, drama, dance, music, literature, etc.) from an evolutionary perspective. From this perspective, we can ask when and to what extent culture (the transmission of learned behaviors) emerged over the course of evolutionary time in different species and what role it played in the development of humans and other animals. Since adopting the concept of specialness (Taves 2009: 26-48), I have found others whose work is helping me to frame the diachronic significance of this move more broadly. Ellen Dissanayake, for example, understands art (under which heading she subsumes cultural processes more generally) at its most basic level as an instance of “making [things] special” by placing them “in a ‘realm’ different from the everyday.” She roots this behavior in play and ritual and specifically in the ability of animals to signal that they are playing, i.e., that this is pretend (Dissanayake 1990: 92-101). In seeming contradiction, anthropologist Maurice Bloch (2008: 2055) recently proclaimed, “religion is nothing special.” His point, however, is that religion is nothing special because, viewed from an evolutionary perspective, it is “an indissoluble . . . aspect of human social organization.” Nonetheless, he argues, what we think of as “religion” is a central aspect of the imaginative processes that differentiates human sociality from that of other primates. Without arguing the specifics here, my claim is that,

while religion *may be* nothing special relative to other cultural activities from which it has belatedly been distinguished, *specialness* is special in so far as making things special (adding surplus value, as Benavides would say) is at the heart of human cultural activity.

Viewed synchronically, the idea of specialness includes as a subset most, if not all, of what people have in mind when they refer to things as sacred, magical, mystical, superstitious, spiritual, and/or religious. Whatever else they are, things that get caught up in the web of relations marked out by these terms are things that someone or some group has granted some sort of special status. Whether or not particular things should be considered special is typically a matter of dispute and leads different individuals and groups to position things differently in relation to the web of related concepts. Although neither the specific western terms nor the web of relationships that they constitute correspond precisely to distinctions made in other cultural contexts, the concept of specialness, in so far as we can operationalize it in terms of behaviors, provides a more promising starting point for honing in on religion-like aspects of cultures, particularly in contexts in which people don't make a distinction between religion and a general way of life.

2.1.1. *Advantages of specialness*

In light of my interest in (a) studying 'religion' on the ground and (b) incorporating evolutionary and cognitive perspectives into the study of religion more generally, focusing on specialness has certain advantages.

- A focus on specialness shifts our attention from supernatural beings (or counterintuitive agents) to salience and, thus, to a value-based approach. As such, it includes more of what people think of as sacred, spiritual, mystical, and religious along with many things they may view as special but not sacred. Thus, it encompasses agents with counter-intuitive properties, that is, agents such as deities or ghosts with anomalous characteristics (such as omnipresence or the ability to go through walls) that set them apart as special. It also encompasses things that are considered special for other reasons, e.g., things that seem special because they seem ideal or perfect (a sacred mountain, an awe-inspiring sunset, or Truth with a capital T), because they are scarce (gold or diamonds), because they are unusual (an experience of oneness-with-all), or simply because they are *ours* (our children).
- It gives us a way to identify a distinctive feature of the small units that people sometimes incorporate into the larger systems we tend to identify as religions or spiritualities and sometimes into other complex formations that people tend not to view in that way. In so doing, it eliminates the need

to distinguish between the building blocks that people incorporate into systems that they or we have come to think of as ethics, art, religion, philosophy, or even economics in so far as they all incorporate fundamental building blocks, indeed in some cases *shared* building blocks, that people consider special, e.g., feelings of awe or compassion; concepts of ultimacy (Good, Truth, Beauty, Reality); or special objects, whether natural (gold, diamonds) or created (masks, costumes, statues).

- It focuses our attention on processes that are (a) most likely biologically primed to some extent and at the same time culturally differentiated and (b) present in both small-scale and complex societies, such as our own that are awash in competing schemes of valuation and singularization.

2.1.2. *A behavioral definition of specialness*

- We can define (or operationalize) specialness behaviorally in terms of processes that involve setting things apart from other things in their class, where “thing” can literally mean any thing, whether event, person, behavior, object, experience, or emotion. Setting something apart in this way *singularizes* it (Kopytoff 1986). When people set things apart or singularize them, they become non-ordinary, special, or extra-ordinary relative to the other (ordinary) things in their class.⁵
- Things set apart can have a positive or negative valence; they may be singularly good or singularly bad, or a combination of both, as in Otto’s ominous numinous.
- We can locate “things set apart and forbidden” (Durkheim 1995: 34) at one end of a continuum that runs from the ordinary to the extraordinary, with things that are so special that people set them apart and protect them with prohibitions or taboos at one extreme. Locating specialness on a continuum makes specialness a matter of degree, such that there are many things people might consider special that they would not consider so special they would set them apart with taboos.

⁵ This definition of specialness recasts Durkheim’s definition of “sacred things as things set apart and forbidden” (Durkheim 1995: 34) in more generic terms utilizing Kopytoff’s concept of singularization. Thinking in terms of processes that singularize allows us to treat the sacred as an emic term that people may or may not apply to everything they singularize and to think in terms of gradations rather than assuming a binary relationship between the special and the ordinary. This reformulation is also congruent with Weber’s notion of charisma, which he understands as an “extraordinary” quality assigned to people, mental states, or objects (Weber 1978: 241, 399-401).

2.1.3. *Marks and types of specialness*

In light of this definition, we can ask (1) if there are identifiable behavioral marks of specialness, that is, distinct ways that people signal that they are setting something apart, and (2) if there are particular properties that predispose people to consider some things in a class as special. In previous work (Taves 2009: 29-46), I identified several marks of specialness, i.e., prohibitions against trading, mixing, and comparing, and two types of things that people are likely to consider special, ideal things and anomalous things, though this needs to be tested empirically. Walter Burkert's analysis would suggest that we should add "scarce things" to the list of types of things people may be predisposed to consider special (see Benavides 2009: 58 for an analysis of Burkert [1996] on this point). We can also distinguish between things that people view as inherently special and things that people deliberately make special. Benavides suggests that theories of aesthetics may illuminate these processes through which people endow things with "surplus value," citing in particular the work of Arthur Danto and Viktor Shklovsky. In addition to things that people view as special by virtue of properties associated with the thing itself (whether acquired or seemingly inherent), there are also things that people view as special by virtue of their relationship to the thing. So, for example, an individual's own life, self, children, kin, home, and country typically stand out as special for them relative to the lives, kin, countries, and so on of others. Schematically, we can represent these distinctions as follows:

Marks of singularity

- Priceless things: Things that people refuse to trade, price, or sell
- Pure things: Things that people refuse to mix with other things
- Incomparable things: Things that people refuse to evaluate relative to other things

Types of singularity

- Feature based: Things that have features that cause them to stand out from others in their class, e.g., features that are anomalous, rare, or ideal, whether acquired by or believed to be inherent in the thing itself.
- Relationally based: Things that are singular by virtue of a person's relationship to them, e.g., my self, my child, my parent, my house, my country.

This brief consideration of what specialness might look like if we tried to map it out is meant to be suggestive. There is a great deal here that I hope to explore in greater depth in future work. I hope that scholars will continue

to refine these marks and types of singularity and add others as needed to reflect what they find in various contexts. In the process, I hope we can distinguish aspects of specialness that are culturally specific as well as underlying aspects that may reflect basic affective and cognitive processes common to humans and perhaps to other animals as well.

Scientists, borrowing a culinary metaphor, speak of carving various domains (e.g. linguistics, biology) at their joints, by which they mean making conceptual distinctions that reflect underlying evolutionary and developmental processes and which are, in that sense, non-arbitrary. By comparing the way humans across time and cultures identify and mark things as special and by extending our comparisons, where relevant, to other species, we may find ways to carve specialness at its joints. In doing so, we would dramatically refine our understanding of one of the building blocks commonly used to create what we think of as religions or spiritualities (and other differentiated cultural domains as well).

2.2. *Religions as composite formations*

Religions and spiritualities can be understood as composite formations premised on a set of two or more interlocking ascriptions, at least one of which is a basic ascription with special qualities. I have used the idea of special paths, which I borrowed from Buswell and Gimello (1992), to illustrate the idea of a composite (Taves 2009: 46-48). Buswell and Gimello (1992: 2-3) define *mārga* (path) theory, a Buddhist concept they argue could be used to illuminate religions more generally, as “the theory according which certain methods of practice, certain prescribed patterns of religious behavior, have transformative power and will lead, somewhat necessarily, to specific religious goals.”

The concept of *mārga* has particular value for setting up comparisons across cultures and time periods because it is grounded in what cognitive linguists refer to as image schemata, in this case a PATH schema. Image schemata are prelinguistic patterns that couple brain, body, and world; they operate across sensory modalities, linking sensory motor activity in the world with mental representations in embodied schemas that we use to structure our experience (Gibbs 2006, 114-15). Meaning in this view is neither fixed nor infinitely variable, but *emerges through* and *is then is constrained by* schematic structures, such as CONTAINER, BALANCE, PATH, CYCLE, ATTRACTION, CENTER-PERIPHERY, LINK, and VERTICALITY, that are often metaphorically extended to more abstract forms of experience (Johnson 1987, 28-30).⁶

⁶ In *What Science Offers the Humanities*, Slingerland (2008a, 151-218) makes use of Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory, which is build on the idea of image schemata, and

PATH schemas are routes for moving from one point to another, built on our own experience of movement, whether of a body part (e.g., an arm in space) or our entire body, and our experience of tracking things moving around us. The PATH schema has a definite internal structure comprised of a source or starting point, a goal or ending point, and a sequence of actions linking the source with the goal (Johnson 1987, 113-17). When extended metaphorically to religion, the goal is metaphorically transformed from a physical place (a destination) to a more abstract goal (a purpose). In other words, RELIGIONS AS PATHS TO A GOAL maps a PURPOSES ARE PHYSICAL GOALS metaphor on to the PATH schema. In doing so, however, the PATH schema gives form to our desire to achieve a religious goal (a desired state) and constrains the ways we can think about achieving it (Johnson 1987, 116-17). If we conceive of religions as paths to a goal, we then naturally find ourselves thinking in terms of sequences of actions (practices deemed efficacious) for moving from an original state to a desired state.

Max Weber's understanding of religions relies on an implicit path schema directed toward the goal of salvation, i.e., redemption from something and for something, where "from what" and "for what" depends upon one's image of the world (Gerth & Mills 1958: 280-81). Because he starts with the meaning that subjects ascribe to their actions, those on the path always explicitly seek the goal and by implication deem the path efficacious with respect to the goal. He provides a long list of possible instantiations of goals that redeem from something for something, all of which can be construed as special things (for a discussion, see Taves 2009: 176-77).

More broadly, I would argue what we think of as religions, philosophies, paths, etc., could be construed as systems of valuation. In their more highly elaborated instances, we can conceive them as systems or frameworks for assessing, ranking, manipulating, and sometimes transcending things that matter. Whether people consider a special thing as (say) religious, mystical, magical, superstitious, spiritual, ideological, or secular will depend in part on the preexisting systems of belief and practice, the web of concepts related to specialness, and the way that people position themselves in a given context. Things that seem special may be caught up in preexisting systems of belief and practice and assessed in light of them. Relative to such systems people may decide that something is more or less special than they originally thought. Assessed in light of such a system, people may conclude that something that seemed special at first actually was not, such that the thing loses

the related, but more elaborate, mental space and conceptual blending theories of Fauconnier and Turner (2002) as his primary bridges between the sciences and humanities. Readers interested in how these theories can help us to understand ancient texts are encouraged to consider Slingerland's extended analysis of Book Six of the *Mencius* (188-206).

its specialness and becomes ordinary. In other instances, a person may value the thing more highly than does the system of valuation, leading them to question or challenge the system's assessment. In such cases, the individual may position themselves in opposition to the extant system of valuation, challenging established beliefs and practices and perhaps generating new or modified ones.

Within a system the value ascribed to things can be assessed and ranked and also manipulated. In light of systemic rankings, people may attempt to subordinate their initial valuation of something (e.g., wealth, leisure, pleasure) to something deemed higher by the system (e.g., service to others, charity, compassion). Finally, some systems culminate in a paradox that undercuts or calls on people to let go of (and in that sense transcend) that which the system itself taught them to value, as in the case of paths that wind up saying there is no path or paths that ask followers to sacrifice or abandon all that the path initially taught them to value.⁷

3. Operationalizing Abstract Concepts

Collaboration will be enhanced if we operationalize abstract concepts as behavioral interactions and then focus on the processes involved rather than simply analyzing the content. This will allow us to examine different interpretations of the behavioral events on the ground and provide us with a better understanding of the process whereby people construct religions and other complex things out of more elementary phenomena that they view as special.

3.1. *Converting abstract concepts into behavioral interactions*

In religious studies, we work with many abstract concepts that we will need to express as behavioral interactions if we want to study them using methods from the sciences as well as the humanities. In working with the terms 'tradi-

⁷ The approach that I am advocating is highly responsive to historical change and, indeed emerged out of my efforts to track people's changing assessments of certain types of unusual experiences (trance, out of body experiences, etc.) over time in *Fits, Trances, and Visions* (Taves 1999). In response to Robert Yelle's query regarding disenchantment in the modern era, I would agree that people may disenchant things by deciding that they are no longer special. Although I think that the specialness of some things (e.g., our children) may be biologically primed and, thus, less sensitive to socio-cultural pressures than other forms of specialness, many forms of specialness are highly sensitive to a range of historically contingent factors, such as parental expectations, political requirements, and advertising. My hesitations regarding theories of disenchantment are rooted in my historical awareness of people's ability to re-enchant things that others seek to disenchant.

tion' (Taves forthcoming) and 'revelation' (Taves, in preparation), I found a three-step approach helpful in my efforts to convert these terms into something that could be studied by scientists as well as humanists. The three steps are (1) disambiguation of the various meanings of the term as it is used in contemporary usage, (2) identification of meanings that can be operationalized as behavioral events in relatively generic terms, and (3) elimination of the use of passive voice so as to surface issues of power and authority. I can illustrate using the concept of revelation.

3.1.1. *Disambiguation*

There are at least three distinct ways that the term revelation is used: (1) to refer to particular events or occurrences (whether mythic or historical) that some construe (explicitly or implicitly) as revelatory; (2) to refer to the specific content that people claim has been conveyed through the revelatory event; or (3) to a general type of knowledge or means of acquiring knowledge.

3.1.2. *Operationalization*

Of these, the first type of definition, due to its focus on particular events, is the most amenable to collaborative investigation across humanistic and scientific disciplines. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers an event-related definition of revelation as "the disclosure or communication of knowledge to man by a divine or supernatural agency." We can cast this more generically as a type of inspiration, that is, as knowledge that seems to come from a source other than the conscious self. Then, picking up on a suggestion made by Bryan Rennie, we can characterize inspiration and revelation as subtypes of intuition, that is, "knowledge that is acquired without procedures and which is not sensory or perceptual" (Bambrough 1978: 203).

Nested in this way, it is easy to see that we rely on intuitive knowledge much of the time and that in most instances it is so much a part of our ordinary functioning that it goes unnoticed and unmarked. When people characterize intuitive knowledge as inspiration, they mark it as special, typically flagging the source of the knowledge as unusual. Use of the term "revelation" marks intuitive knowledge as even more special, typically signaling the belief that the knowledge originated from a divine, supernatural, or otherworldly source.

3.1.3. *Surfacing agency*

Through its use of the passive voice, the OED's definition of revelation obscures the contestations that such revelatory claims typically elicit and, thus, tacitly echoes an insider perspective. We can rewrite it in the active voice by inserting "someone claims." This makes it clear that the revelation in

question is not simply given, though it may seem like it is to some, but rather is the result of a meaning making process in which some interpretations were ruled out and others embraced. If we define revelation as a type of intuitive knowledge that an individual or group *claims* was disclosed or communicated to them or others by a divine, supernatural, or otherworldly source, we shift our attention away from figuring out if the claim is true or not and focus instead on the processes whereby people explain the origins of intuitive knowledge.⁸

3.2. *Focusing on processes*

Research that focuses on process questions may be particularly amenable to collaboration between humanists and scientists. A focus on process has two main advantages: it allows us to focus on behavioral interactions and, thus, to see things that are obscured if we look only at content, and it generates an object of study that can be considered from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Thus, to continue with the example of intuitive knowledge, a focus on process allows scholars of religion to consider, first, how and why some people (and not others) come to understand intuitive knowledge as revelatory and, second, how in some cases those who view intuitive knowledge as revelatory are able to convince enough other people of this to launch a new religious movement.

Although scholars of religion would presumably be most interested in behavioral events in which intuitive knowing leads to claims of revelation and the emergence of new religious movements, other humanities scholars might be more interested in feelings of inspiration that lead to the production of works of art or literature. Anthropologists might be particularly inter-

⁸ Robert Yelle posed the question of how we might, or indeed whether we could, subject a concept such as transcendence to scientific measurement, if, as he argues, such transcendence “assumes a virtual reality only in relation to some system” such that the subjectivity cannot be removed. To consider it scientifically, we would need to express the abstract concept as a behavioral interaction. As with revelation, we would need to consider various extant definitions and see if we could find an event related definition that we could express as a behavioral interaction. Yelle’s definition could be translated into an event related definition if we viewed “becoming (virtually) real within a system” as an event. Then we would have to ask how people inside the system claimed to know that the transcendent was becoming real, e.g., through procedures, the senses, or intuition. The process of knowing could then be studied using all the methods—scientific and humanistic—used to study procedural, sense-based, or intuitive knowing more generally. If, for example, transcendence were construed in a particular system as something that is known intuitively, e.g., in moments of great insight or expanded horizons, those moments could be studied in the same way that scientists would study other intuitions that people consider highly significant.

ested in the different ways in which intuitive knowledge is conceptualized and utilized in different cultures. Cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists might be particularly interested in the underlying mental processes that give rise to intuitive knowledge. Psychiatrists may be most interested in feelings of inspiration or intuitive knowledge that lead to psychological dysfunction; psychotherapists may be particularly interested in the ways that intuitive knowledge (aka insight) can lead to healing. Evolutionary and developmental psychologists might focus on how non-human animals and pre-linguistic children know things as a way of trying to understand processes that inform intuitive knowing in adult humans. By constituting an object of study in more generic terms, such as “intuitive knowing” rather than “revelation,” scholars from different disciplines with different kinds of expertise can focus on different aspects of the problem. Scholars who are comfortable working across disciplines can then work to create more integrated multi-level models of the processes in question.⁹

Evolutionary and developmental perspectives play a crucial role in constructing a comparative framework for understanding processes such as intuitive knowing. In thinking about how other animals and prelinguistic children come to know things, we can gain a deeper understanding of different kinds of knowing (procedural, sensory, intuitive) and how they emerge over the course of evolutionary and developmental time. Such a framework casts certain human abilities (e.g., language and metaconsciousness [awareness of awareness]) in high relief and allows us to consider how these abilities, when added to underlying processes of intuitive knowing common to us and other animals, might result in the highly elaborated intuitions we have come to call “inspirations” or “revelations.” By joining forces in this way, collaboration across the humanities and sciences promises to supply insights into different aspects of behavioral events and to provide a far richer understanding of the complex processes whereby people construct religions and other complex things out of more elementary phenomena that they view as special.

⁹ From the psychological side, some psychologists of religion have been making complementary efforts, calling for a “multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm” (Emmons and Paloutzian 2003) that would allow the psychology of religion to “reach out to evolutionary biology, neuroscience, anthropology, cognitive science, and ... philosophy in a generalized cross-disciplinary approach to critiquing and sharpening the assumptions of science” (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 7-9).

4. Implications for Scholars of Religion and Departments of Religion

Neither the call for collaboration nor the building block approach advocated here would obviate the need for departments of religion, but it would allow scholars of religion in departments of religion or religious studies to approach what they do somewhat differently.

- First, the approach I am advocating would allow us to quit worrying so much about defining “religion.” I think we can simply consider it as an abstraction that we use, as we use the abstractions art, philosophy, and literature, to allude to webs of overlapping concepts that vary from language to language and culture to culture. In their most basic form, I have argued that the concepts that we (as scholars) associate with these webs are part of a larger class of things that people view as special and sometimes incorporate into the more complex formations that we tend to identify as religions or spiritualities. In other cases, however, special things are incorporated into complex formations, such as governments or sporting events, which we are less likely to consider as religions or spiritualities. In yet other cases, people notice something special and leave it more or less as they found it.
- Second, if as I am advocating, we view sacred things (and their kin) as a *subset* of special things, then scholars of religion cannot claim to have a monopoly on special things. It is possible, however, that the more special people consider something to be the more likely they and others are to place it under some religion-like heading (e.g., religious, sacred, magical, superstitious, etc.). If this is the case, departments of religious studies might want to conceive of themselves as loci for studying things people consider special and the ways people incorporate them into and perpetuate them within larger socio-cultural formations, whether or not people view those formations as religious. An underlying focus on specialness and processes of singularization, thus, would not provide religious studies with an exclusive franchise, but rather with a focus on processes that are integral to and exemplified in the formation of religions and spiritualities and other complex social institutions. A focus on such processes, thus, would provide a bridge to other disciplines across the humanities and the sciences.

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