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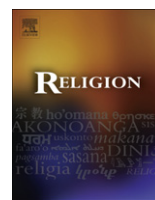
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# Religion

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## Experience as site of contested meaning and value: The attributional dog and its special tail

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### ABSTRACT

*Religious Experience Reconsidered* was premised on the idea that experience is a site of contested meaning and value for subjects (and scholars). Although the concept of specialness has drawn considerable attention, my goal in writing the book was to update efforts to use attribution theory to bridge between religious studies and the psychology of religion. I intended the focus on micro-social processes to complement analysis at the macro-social level. The need for a broader, more generic second order term, such as specialness, emerged in the context of working out an attributional approach and can and should be extended more broadly. While anything can be set apart as special and an analysis of the politics of deeming is essential, we can still ask if there is empirical evidence to suggest that humans are more likely to set some things apart than others within or across cultures. When we take experience as a site for study, we do not have to limit ourselves to describing the range of views held by our subjects, but can also legitimately seek to explain experience in terms that make sense to us as researchers. The breaking of taboos against explaining experience in naturalistic terms will only have apocalyptic consequences if we assume a special/ordinary binary; viewed on a continuum, we can still find special meaning and value in experiences that are not protected by taboos.

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I want to begin by thanking Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler for organizing this review forum and offer a particularly heartfelt thanks to the contributors for the time and effort they expended on this. I am impressed with the thoughtfulness and care that went into all the essays, each of which was written from a recognizable point of view and raised issues that I know are real matters of concern to the authors. My response is organized topically rather than by reviewer and will focus in turn on attribution, specialness, cognition and culture, and taboos.

### Attribution

A number of the reviewers focused their attention on the discussion of specialness in the second half of chapter one, undoubtedly because it cuts to issues at the heart of the academic study of religion. But before considering those issues, I want to stress that my goal was not to write a book on 'specialness' but rather to sketch what an attributional approach to religious experience might look like, that is, what it would mean to focus on experiences people *deem* religious. In asking this question, I was self-consciously picking up where Wayne Proudfoot left off in his attempts to use attribution theory to bridge between religious studies and the psychology of religion through his collaboration with psychologist Philip Shaver (Proudfoot and Shaver, 1975). The approach was developed more fully in the eighties by both Proudfoot (Proudfoot, 1985) and Lee Kirkpatrick in collaboration Shaver, who was his doctoral advisor, and another leading psychologist, Bernard Spilka (Spilka et al., 1985).

I was also trying to draw what I could from the emergence of the psychological study of religion at the turn of the last century. I was particularly inspired by James Leuba, an undeservedly forgotten pioneering psychologist of religion, who devoted 'whatever time [he] could spare from [his] duties as professor of psychology in an American college [Bryn Mawr] to the understanding of *the experiences commonly called "religious"* (Leuba, 1937/1969, 173, emphasis added). Leuba was a forthright attributionist, a thoroughgoing comparativist, and an

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evolutionary psychologist in the best Darwinian (as opposed to Tylorian) sense. As I realized after my book was in press, he captured many of the points I wanted to make in a paragraph published in 1912:

Not only have theologians failed carefully to scrutinize their facts and to bring them into comparative relation with similar facts either in other religions or in secular life, according to the way of science, but they have even declared, as we know, that this cannot be done. ... In justification of their failure to make exact, comprehensive investigations, they have alleged that religious experience is something *sui generis*, incomparable with the rest of life, and also that it is a whole and therefore not subject to analysis (Leuba, 1912, p. 258).

Here you have in a nutshell an attributional approach, an implicit building block method concerned to analyze the parts that make up the whole, and an insistence on comparisons both to other religions and to 'secular life.'

Leuba was forgotten in favor of William James, not only because James was a more significant psychologist and philosopher, but also because, when it came to religion, James waffled on key questions in ways that religionists liked, while Leuba did not. Although the distinction Proudfoot made between descriptive and explanatory reduction in *Religious Experience* (1985) had a major impact in the field of religious studies, his contributions to an attributional approach were critiqued by those who wanted to defend the *sui generis* character of religious experience and largely ignored by those eager to reject psychology and the study of experience at the height of the discursive turn.

So, while I agree with Kirkpatrick (2010) that there are many bridges that could be built between religious studies and academic psychology, it seemed to me that updating an attributional approach was the place to begin. The key challenges as I saw it were to address the objections of the *sui generis* critics and incorporate the gains from the discursive turn. From this perspective, the first part of chapter one (on deeming) and chapter three (on attributions as explanations) comprise the core of the book. Chapter two (on experience) located experience in the context of consciousness studies understood in terms of levels of consciousness in adult humans that can be compared to the levels of consciousness in prelinguistic humans and non-linguistic animals. Chapter two, thus, placed experience within a developmental and evolutionary framework. Chapter four built on the sketch of the attributional processes that take place at different levels (intra-personal to inter-group) in chapter three to demonstrate how psychologists, ethnographers, and historians might set up a variety of comparisons.

As Proudfoot (2010) and Kirkpatrick (2010) offer sympathetic commentary and friendly amendments, I will limit my response to a few points.

#### *Distinguishing marks*

While I largely agree with Proudfoot that 'the distinguishing mark of an experience deemed religious is its being deemed religious,' I wanted to take seriously the existence, in some cases, of a prior stage in which an unusual experience surfaces to consciousness unexpectedly and seemingly laden with inchoate meaning and/or significance. It was this sort of experience that Barnard challenged us to take seriously.

#### *Object of study*

Proudfoot suggests that the object of study is not, as I indicate (Taves, 2009, p. 123), 'things that may or may not be considered religious,' but 'the thing-considered-as-religious.' I understand his difficulty with my formulation, but am not satisfied with his either, especially in light the expansion of focus that comes with looking at things deemed special. So perhaps a better way to state it would be to say that the sites that promise to provide the most insight into the making of experience are sites of indeterminacy, in this case sites where claims about the value, meaning, and significance of experiences (understood as reported perceptual events) are inchoate and/or contested (see also, p. 128).

#### *Learning*

I agree that learning and training are crucial processes and there is some exciting new work in this area (Luhmann et al., 2010; Halloy and Naumescu, submitted for publication). This is an ideal place where ethnographers and historians with a deep knowledge of the tradition, practitioners who are actually trained in the tradition, and scientists who have the tools to study the effects of the training on the brain-mind could collaborate.

#### *Building blocks*

As Kirkpatrick notes, something like a building-block approach is widely presupposed in the sciences. Although the building block metaphor is widely used, it is only a metaphor and should not be taken too literally. I take Proudfoot's comments on a building-block approach as friendly and helpful amendments intended to nuance our understanding of the interplay between ascription and attribution, on the one hand, and experiences and traditions about experience, on the other. I also appreciate Kirkpatrick's point that many areas of psychology are directly or indirectly related to 'deeming' and 'ascription' and his observation that attribution theory is but one of many psychological processes and systems that will ultimately be relevant for explaining religion.

#### *Psychology-of religion and psychology of-religion*

Kirkpatrick highlights the important distinction between disciplines defined by common methods, theories, and levels of analysis (e.g., psychology and sociology) and disciplines defined by an object of study (e.g., religious studies and political science). Although those of us in religious studies may grow weary of the interminable attempts to specify our object of study and feel overwhelmed by the variety of methods that we can bring to bear on it, there are losses and gains in both sorts of disciplines. Psychologists and sociologists have the luxury of shared conceptual approaches and levels of study within their respective disciplines, but they are typically not trained to work across

disciplines and oftentimes are hesitant to venture into unfamiliar territory for which there are few disciplinary rewards. Those of us in disciplines defined by an object of study have the luxury of using methods drawn from different disciplines and integrating data and theories across different levels of analysis. This is a luxury I think we need to exploit.

Benavides (2010) responds as a scholar of religion who shares my interest in working across the humanistic–scientific divide. He outlines a number of directions that further work might take, all of which I agree are important. We need more attention to special things with a negative valence or, more broadly, with life and death consequences, such as oaths, sacrifice, and martyrdom. This gets to the question of what people – scholars included – consider most special, the things for which they are willing to die. The emergence of people who claim to have had unusual experiences as leaders of movements is also an important topic. How exactly do they get from an unusual, anomalous, or otherwise remarkable experience to an interpretation of that experience that others buy into and are willing to act upon? I agree, too, that dreams are rich with possibilities for considering how people might generate a rich variety of ‘religious representations ... encompassing a range of possibilities, including unattainable extremes, which [they then use] as models/ideals for everyday behavior.’ As Benavides recognizes, these are problems that cry out for analysis on multiple levels using various methods of analysis.

von Stuckrad (2010), another scholar interested in bridging the humanities – sciences divide, urges those interested in the cognitive science of religion and psychology of religion to engage more deeply with both history and philosophy. As he recognizes, I am very much in favor of this. I would make a few additional observations. First, there is only partial overlap between those who think of themselves as doing cognitive science of religion and those who identify themselves as psychologists of religion, much of it having to do with the disciplines (and subdisciplines) in which scholars were trained (e.g., anthropology, psychology, philosophy, religious studies). Even within this relatively small academic network there is considerable diversity in perspectives and methods and, as a result, a need for deeper communication. Second, those of us in religious studies need to expand our horizons beyond conversations that relate to religion. There is a rich conversation going on between and among philosophers of science and cognitive scientists that is largely overlooked in the philosophy of religion. There is also a great deal going on in science studies and the history of science that is relevant as well. Although I am more of a historian than a philosopher, I tried to frame my discussion of experience and consciousness with an awareness of the philosophical discussions of consciousness coming out of both the analytic and continental traditions. We need to keep up with such discussions as best we can and, as von Stuckrad suggests, avoid recreating the wheel in our theorizing. Third, in suggesting ‘specialness’ as a second-order tool that might allow us to explore processes of valuation across cultures, I am very aware that this proposal needs to be tested by scholars with expertise in contexts outside the West.

In conjunction with this last point, von Stuckrad is right to observe that there is much work to do in bridging between psychology and contextually sensitive fields, such as history, cultural anthropology, and the history of religions. Psychology as a field has not been known for its concern with culture and contextualization, although those who identify with the new subfield of cultural psychology have been pressing this point with their colleagues in psychology for a few decades (see Kitayama and Cohen, 2007). Quite recently three psychologists at the University of British Columbia, two of whom are doing work on religion, addressed this issue in a target article in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (Henrich et al., 2010). They point out that behavioral scientists routinely publish broad claims based on experimental samples drawn from undergraduate classes and assume that there is little variation across human populations. They tested this assumption in various ways and concluded that behavioral scientists need to question conclusions drawn from ‘this particularly thin, and rather unusual slice of humanity.’ They conclude with a call for behavioral scientists to diversify their subject pool and engage in wide-ranging cross-cultural and comparative research.

We have a vision for the future of scientific efforts to understand the foundations of human psychology and behavior. Research programs need to increasingly emphasize large-scale, highly interdisciplinary, fully international research networks that maintain long-term, ongoing, research projects among diverse populations that collect data over the full life cycle using an integrated set of methodological tools, including wide-ranging experimental techniques, quantitative and qualitative ethnography, surveys, brain imaging, and biomarkers. Questions and methods are best devised and designed at collaborative meetings of these international research networks (p. 62).

I would hope that religious studies departments could produce some students, trained in historical and ethnographic methods, who would be prepared to participate in the sort of large-scale collaborate research projects these psychologists are envisioning.

Spickard's (2010) comments on the book reflect his expertise as a sociologist with particular interests in social theory and the sociology of religion. He makes the point that ‘[a]ttribution is socially located and is often disputed,’ something that he claims I never explore. I have to admit that this observation caught me by surprise, as this was one of the premises on which the book was based. I share Beckford's view, noted by Spickard, that disputes or conflicts are particularly illuminating sites for analysis and this recognition has shaped my work on experience over the past twenty years, although, as noted above, I could have made this point more clearly with respect to experience as an object of study. Nor am I assuming, as Curtis (2010) suggests, that simple ascriptions are anterior to discursive conflicts, although processes of ascription that go on below the subject's threshold of consciousness may seem discursively unambiguous to them (This is not to say that these discursive conflicts are not biased to varying degrees by both cognition and culture at the individual or group or the species level, but more on this below.). My previous book (Taves, 1999) took seemingly ‘involuntary experiences’ as just such a contested site and tracked the disputes over what counted as religion (or not) over some three hundred years of Anglo-American history.

Spickard is right, however, that this new book, which has psychology at its center, did not attend to group-level social processes as fully as it might have. I placed psychology at the center not to downplay the value of a social constructionist approach, but because proponents of a *sui generis* approach claimed that social constructionist accounts were not sufficient to explain some kinds of experiences. Rather than dismiss their objections, I wanted to see if we could account for experiences that surfaced to consciousness already laden with a sense of meaning and value by thinking about dreams and the layered levels of experience that become more evident if we compare adult humans with prelinguistic children and non-linguistic animals. In framing these processes, I was biased toward theories (e.g., the interactionist account of theory of mind) that located them within the micro-social culturally infused interactions between children and parents, precisely because these approaches struck me as compatible with the macro-level processes referred to by Spickard. As he noted, I missed some good

work on this topic by sociologists. That I end up where some of the sociologists start strikes me as a very helpful observation and an indication of where we could build stronger bridges between psychology and sociology.

### Specialness

Once I framed 'religious experience' attributionally, I had to deal not only with 'experience' but also with 'religious,' which is where the trouble, so to speak, began. In the initial draft, I used 'religious' as a second order term to encompass the full range of religion-like emic terms (sacred, magical, superstitious, mystical, occult, spiritual, religious, etc.), whether positively or negatively valenced. In discussing the manuscript in a doctoral seminar, the discussion often returned to these definitional problems. A student working on space argued vehemently that 'sacred' should be used in place of 'religious' as the second order concept; others just as adamantly resisted the substitution. It was in that context that we read Veikko Anttonen's work on the sacred as a second order term and I inserted a lengthy footnote acknowledging the significance of his work, the overlap in our conceptions, and certain moves that he makes that I didn't find as helpful. Unfortunately, I excised the footnote at the last minute in response to my editor's request that I keep footnotes to a bare minimum. It is included here in full.<sup>1</sup> As I mentioned in the book, it was Jesper Sørensen's (2007) use of *magic* as a second order term, roughly co-extensive with my use of 'religious,' that finally led me to search for a term that could encompass the terms on the ground without being confused with them. While for some 'specialness' has turned into the tail that is wagging the dog, the final revisions were focused on the dog as a whole and not on doing complete justice to the tail, something I was not prepared to do at that point in any case. Since the book came out, I have continued to work on the concept of specialness and the possibilities that such a shift might open up (see Taves, 2010, in press). Some of that thinking is reflect in the responses that follow.

So, Knott (2010) is quite right to point out the absence of any discussion of scholarly attempts to use sacred as a second order term. The proposed shift to specialness as a second order term would have been strengthened by discussion of the frustrations scholars have faced in using sacred as a second order term (and also, I would add, reference to the efforts to deconstruct derogatory terms, such as magic, superstition, fetishes, etc). I was fascinated to read her account of the discussions at the 2009 EASR meeting in Sicily and she is right that the problems they acknowledged there are very much the ones that drove me to propose 'specialness' as broader, more generic second order term. I also agree with her that 'sacred' is an important term on the ground, where, as in the Rushdie debates she analyzed, people often use it to characterize the things they consider most special, that is, things they set apart as 'non-negotiable, forbidden, or of deep and abiding significance.'

The advantage of using 'specialness' as a second order term, however, is that we can note when people turn to the language of sacrality and when they don't. Though it may not have been the case in the discussion of the Rushdie affair, there are some things that people consider most special, which they do not refer to as sacred. Thus, for example, 'the right to choose' is clearly extremely special in the eyes of those who support legalized abortion, such that many view it as completely non-negotiable, but they do not necessarily refer to this as a sacred value, perhaps because they equate 'sacred' with 'religious' and view themselves as 'secular.' If we as scholars label the right to choose as a sacred value, we make it more difficult to analyze the complicated ways that people use these terms on the ground to position themselves relative to others.

Fitzgerald (2010) responded to the book in light of his longstanding interest in deconstructing the secular-religious binary. He views the book as making a potentially radical contribution in this regard, but one that fails in so far as my alternating references to 'things deemed special and things deemed religious invites the discursive contours of "religion" to re-enter through the back door, leaving the status quo substantially intact.' My inconsistent use of terms did turned out to be a greater source of misunderstanding than I anticipated. This is most likely due not only to the power of the 'religion vortex' to suck things back in (I love this image), but also to the fact that the idea of using specialness as a second order concept emerged from the vortex as I was writing the book.

Although I recognized from the start that specialness is broad, generic term that captures more than what people have in mind when they refer to sacred, magical, spiritual, mystical, etc., I did not make this point forcefully or often enough in the book and some of the implications and possibilities of looking at things from this vantage point have become more apparent to me since the book went to press. In subsequent discussions I have stated much more forcefully that I am not equating any of the religion-like terms (or the terms taken together) with specialness (see Taves, 2010). The religion-like terms are a web of emic concepts that people on the ground use to variously describe some but not all the things they consider special or things that they think others *mistakenly* consider special (e.g. fetishistic, magical, superstitious). There are, however, many things that people consider special that they do not describe using religion-like terms. The "religion" discursive field,' as Fitzgerald calls it, is thus an unstable subset of the broader discursive field of special things.

<sup>1</sup> Among contemporary scholars, Anttonen (1996, 2000, 2003) has made the most significant effort to operationalize the concept of the sacred as a scholarly construct on the boundary between the cognitive and the cultural. He has offered several definitions of the sacred that differ in modest but significant ways from formulation to formulation. His interest in tracking down "recurrent features in ways in which people in different cultural traditions set apart times, persons, animals, places and locations and attach specific behavioral rules and norms to them in order to protect their value" seems entirely compatible with what is advanced here. Furthermore, his understanding of the sacred as a "culturally dependent cognitive category which at the same time 'separates' and 'binds'" (1996, 43) roots things set apart in the cognitive schema of containment (in/out), which is very helpful in terms of grounding things set apart in the body and space. In other formulations, however, he makes moves that I find less helpful. (1) He suggests that we transform the sacred into an "etic concept for transformational periods in the temporal, spatial and bodily boundaries when some central social value is at stake" (1996, 56). This is precisely what scholars have used the concept of "liminality" to designate and I see no reason to substitute "sacred" for "liminal." (2) He distinguishes at one point (2000, 279) between things with a positive value that are set apart (religion) and things with a negative value that are set apart (taboos), rather than just sticking to things set apart whether due to a positive or negative valance (or both, e.g. things that are awesome and terrifying) and protected by prohibitions. Scholars do not need to characterize things set apart and prohibited as "sacred," but can investigate how subjects understand them. (3) He assumes a tight link between the sacred and ritual, following the lead of Rappaport (1999) and McCauley and Lawson (2002) (Anttonen, 2003, 294). This theoretical move is premature. Tetlock (2003), for example, operationalizes the concept of things set apart and protected without making this assumption and, thus, leaves the question of the relationship between things set apart and ritual open for investigation. (4) Most critically, drawing on the work of Boyer (1994, 2001) and Sperber (1996), he conflates the idea of counterintuitive agents and things set apart. This conflation does not necessarily follow from the work of Sperber, Boyer, or more recently Barrett. Sperber identifies two metarepresentational options that tend to stand out as special for people: things with exceptional (intuition-violating) qualities and things with perfect and ideal qualities (Anttonen, 2003, 297). Things with exceptional (intuition-violating) qualities are not necessarily agents. Attributes of solid objects, spatial entities, and living things that do not appear to be self-propelled can trade properties and become counterintuitive without acquiring agency. Similarly things that do not have agency may have perfect and ideal qualities.

In identifying justice as a special value, courts as special places, and judicial procedures as special paths to 'realizing justice in our lives,' Fitzgerald points to another discursive field or social domain that we could explore using the concept. We could easily add the constitution as a most special text to his list. It was with such things in mind that I included ideals in the diagram of specialness (fig. 1.1) and mentioned truth, beauty, and goodness as examples. I also think he is right that we need to extend this analysis to the domain of science, which like 'religion' arguably has no essence, but can undoubtedly be analyzed in terms of the numerous paths and practices that scientists deem efficacious for reaching particular goals. In short, I agree with Fitzgerald that we can't understand things deemed religious in isolation.

Efforts to expand in these directions need to draw from work in sociology, including the sociology of religion, as James Spickard suggests, and also the sociology of science or science studies. In doing so, we need to be aware of the extent to which these domains are constructed by disputes not only over what should be considered special, but also the relative specialness of things. The two scholars he suggests (Beckford, 2003; Beyer, 2006) both look particularly helpful in relation to this sort of macro-level analysis. I am struck, in particular, by Beckford's attention to 'changes in the conceptualization and regulation of what counts as religion' (2003, 2, emphasis added) and, as Fitzgerald also wants to stress, to the importance of attending to the construction of both 'religion' and 'non-religion' (2003, 4). I agree with Fitzgerald that starting with the concept of specialness 'tends to expose the religion-secular distinction ... as an ideological construct of modernity.' As with other deeply held values that people may not want to describe as religious or sacred, my concern is less to 'expose' them, as if their behavior were hypocritical, but to understand how people as individual or groups or societies use these terms to position themselves in complex fields of discourse and action, oftentimes for quite understandable historical reasons.

### **Cognition and culture; or, are some things more likely to be set apart than others?**

For Day (2010), 'the insuperable problem' with the book is that it disregards Durkheim's insight that any thing can be made sacred and Levi-Strauss's emphasis on the way that people through their social labor make things sacred by putting and keeping them in their place. Citing Bruce Lincoln, he argues that the key questions are: 'Who is setting this thing apart, and what interests are advanced by this act?' Day's concerns are a variation on the concerns raised by Spickard, both of whom view me as motivated by unacknowledged metaphysical concerns (a matter I will return to at the end).

As with Spickard, Day and I are in agreement on a number of points. I agree with Durkheim that anything can be made sacred. I also agree that we need to analyze the way that people through their social labor draw upon their positions of power and authority to put and keep things in special places. I too am a fan of Bruce Lincoln's questions and have been asking 'who says' and 'why' questions for most of my career. I also agree that marketing research has a lot to offer those of us interested in how people make things special. Branding is clearly one way to make a thing special relative to the more ordinary 'generic' version. In fact, I am assigning a number of articles from the *Journal of Consumer Research* in a course on 'special objects' to make just that point (see, for example, Belk, 1992; Curasi et al., 2004; Epp and Price, 2010; McGraw et al., 2003). So I agree with Day that in many cases 'stuff is just stuff until a particular thing is set apart from the rest.' I agree there are not necessarily any objectively observable features that set a lucky penny apart from all other pennies or Dumbo's magical feather apart from all other crow feathers.

The question that I asked, which seems so troubling to Day, is an empirical one, however. To restate it, as carefully as I can: if we look over time and across cultures, would we find that there are things (within culturally recognized classes of things) that people, statistically speaking, are more likely to set apart as special than others in their class? We could test this experimentally. We could lay out an array of pennies with one or more oddly deformed pennies in the array. We could ask people to select a 'lucky penny' or a penny they thought a person who believed in luck might think was lucky from the set of pennies. We could see if they were statistically more likely to choose the oddly deformed penny rather than one of the others. We could see if the likelihood of choosing a deformed penny decreased if we increased the proportion of deformed pennies in the mix.

Alternatively, to pursue a line of thought that both Benavides and I think is potentially very illuminating, we could read up on the research on mother-infant bonds in mammals. If mammalian mothers set apart their offspring from all others, bonding to their particular offspring and not to other infants that look just the same (to us), then specialness is not only separable from 'religion,' but also under some circumstances from discourse. I think that Benavides is right that we need more attention to actual sensory mechanisms (tactility, taste, and smell) that facilitate the connection between mother and infant and in general to the role of senses other than sight in setting some things apart from others in their class. In highlighting the biological aspects, I do not mean to imply that the biological factors are determinative, as adoptions clearly demonstrate, but they do suggest that humans and other animals are able to set some things apart as special without recourse to language.

My hunch, therefore, is that while anything *can be* set apart, there are some things we are statistically more likely to set apart, our biological offspring being the most obvious case. The processes whereby we set some things apart from others most likely range on a continuum from the more biologically determined at one end to the more highly culturally determined at the other. To what extent this is the case is, as Benavides recognized, an empirical question. So too is the question of whether there are anomalies or symmetries that are widely recognized across cultures and which if present would lead people to perceive a thing as standing out from others in its class. Wherever something falls on the continuum, I would assume that culture always plays a role in the process and an analysis of the politics of deeming will always be worth doing. I'm just not convinced that it is the only question worth asking.

### **Explanation**

Spickard (2010) claims that 'explaining [experiences] naturalistically' is to make them 'something other than what they appear to be.' Doing so, he says, involves taking a metaphysical stance and he argues that, if I want 'to focus on "experiences deemed religious" without taking such a metaphysical stance, [I] must give up trying to explain them.' He thinks I think that religious claims are 'category mistakes' and that 'I am caught between wanting to respect the people about whom [I] am writing and being appalled by the things that they actually think and do.' Given that I actually don't have blanket views on religion or non-religion and have gone 'native' on both sides of the divide to the point where it is rather hard for me to clarify my own personal metaphysical commitments, these observations strike me as off the mark. As I said in the preface, 'my own view is that the cultivation of some forms of experience that we might want to deem religious or spiritual

can enhance our well-being and ability to function in the world, individually and collectively.' Although I said that identifying those forms was not the purpose of the book, I cited two authors who do offer such discussions. I view my desire to see to what extent we can explain experiential phenomena using mainstream scientific research as a form of methodological atheism that is ultimately, as Kirkpatrick rightly guesses, agnostic. I don't know how far mainstream science will take us, but I do think it will take us a quite a distance.

I take the relationship between researcher and subjects (living and dead) as somewhat analogous to the relationship between a teacher and her students. When we are dealing with controversial issues, we can let the class debate the issue and they will usually come up with the whole range of possible interpretations. We can step in and offer our own point of view, but we do so with care and deliberation. When we focus on contested experiences, our subjects/informants typically get a range of interpretive options out in the open. This allows us to explore how they come to their (various) conclusions – to focus on the process of making and unmaking special experiences – while being very attentive to their (multiple) points of view. We do not, however, have to limit ourselves to our students' or our informants' points of view. This is the point of Proudfoot's distinction between descriptive and explanatory reduction (Proudfoot, 1985), a distinction I internalized in the eighties at the height of the feminist movement and assimilated to a feminist insistence on the importance of women having a voice. As a researcher, I have been committed both to the voices of my subjects and to my own voice. Though in this book I wanted to speak in a 'naturalistic' voice, I took pains throughout to represent the voices of those with whom I disagreed as accurately as I could, even checking with them in some cases.<sup>2</sup>

The approach I take in comparison, which is indebted to J.Z. Smith, follows from this. Without claiming that experience and interpretation can be separated, I am maintaining that scholars can legitimately set up comparisons based on stipulated points of analogy between comparates in order to investigate both similarities and differences between them. Doing so does not equate the things that are compared. The point of analogy, as I discussed at some length, should be stipulated in such a way that it is compatible with the views of subjects. This can often be accomplished by stating the point of analogy in very generic terms.

Finally I do not assume, as Kirkpatrick rightly suggests, that explaining experiences in naturalistic terms necessarily explains them away. I taught for many years at an institution where there were many self-described religious persons who characterized themselves as non-supernaturalistic and I once belonged to a denomination (the Unitarian–Universalist Association) that explicitly promoted a naturalistic understanding of religion. Moreover, as I take pains to point out at the end of chapter four (pp. 156–160), I do not think there is any way to distinguish between experiences that are legitimately or illegitimately deemed religious from outside a religious system or, more generally, for assessing the specialness or value of something outside a system of valuation.

## Taboos

Both Curtis (2010) and Fitzgerald (2010) comment on taboos and prohibitions albeit from two very different perspectives. Fitzgerald notes: 'taboos and prohibitions protect a contingent system of representations, through a process of mystification, and to transform one possible way of representing the world as inescapably in the order of things.' Curtis might actually agree with Fitzgerald on this point, though Fitzgerald most likely sees the scholar's task as one of dispelling the mystifications and revealing the contingency of the representations, while Curtis is worried that 'heroic taboo breaking' will bring about 'a global apocalypse that will kill us all.'

I agree that breaking taboos is not a neutral strategy. I agree that it is good to think about the consequences of breaking taboos and it is good that critical theorists are invested in raising and scrutinizing these issues. Curtis characterizes me as calling upon scholars to violate taboos, though he rightly suspects that I have 'an ambiguous relationship to [the] secular heroism' he attributes to Dan Dennett. I was actually concerned with a very specific taboo against explaining religion (or religious experience or the sacred) in naturalistic terms, which, as Curtis indicates, I consider homologous to the taboos of religious actors. But to get at Curtis's concerns, I think we need to consider several questions. (1) Is the scholarly task one of violating taboos? (2) If so, is this a form of *secular* heroism, i.e., one that presupposes that taboos are intrinsically religious and, thus, that breaking taboos is a way of promoting secularization? (3) Will violating taboos necessarily lead to the consequences Curtis anticipates, i.e. 'a global apocalypse that will kill us all'? With respect to Fitzgerald's statement, I think we should investigate, as discussed above, whether all systems of representation are equally contingent or whether some recur more frequently than others.

I would respond as follows: (1) The scholarly task is one of violating taboos in so far as those taboos are prohibitions against comparing, mixing, and explaining things in ways that some of those we are studying may find disconcerting. I don't mean to imply that these are the only tasks that scholars might take up, but (as above) I do not think scholars should not have to limit themselves to presenting the point of view of their subjects. They can present their own point of view even if it violates the taboos of their subjects. (2) I do not think this is a form of 'secular heroism,' because I don't think that taboos are strictly religious. Shifting to the concept of specialness (rather than the sacred) allows us to identify lots of non-religious things that people consider so special that they set them apart and protect them with taboos, e.g., the taboos against desecrating the U.S. flag, the taboo against selling one's children, the taboo against compromising a pro-choice stance on abortion. Doing so makes it clear that it is not only religious people who hedge things around with taboos. We all do this sometimes in relation to some things, whether we consider ourselves religious or not. (3) Violating taboos has markedly different implications depending on whether we conceive of specialness as a binary or as falling along a continuum. When specialness is conceived as a binary, violating the taboo makes it ordinary and could carry the apocalyptic consequences Curtis envisions. When specialness is conceived on a continuum, removing the taboo doesn't necessarily make the thing ordinary; it might just make it a tad less absolute. Conceptualizing specialness on a continuum allows us to ask how special something is – how much we value it – relative to other things. If people disagree over how special something is, those who value it have to make a case for its specialness if they wanted others to recognize it. Especially where values are contested, I tend to think this is a good thing (this is a value statement).

<sup>2</sup> As I have indicated elsewhere (Taves, 2010), the term "naturalism" 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. I am assuming that collaboration between scholars of religion and natural scientists will be most fruitful if 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 (on naturalism, see De Caro and Macarthur, 2004; De Caro and Macarthur, 2010).

Unfortunately, I didn't think this through thoroughly enough when I wrote the sentence Curtis quotes regarding the effects of violating taboos. I cast that sentence in binary terms that played into Curtis's fears and undermined my overarching argument. I think that those who take strong either/or positions make it difficult to recognize (historically) or construct (in the present) a more nuanced middle ground. The shift from a binary to a continuous formulation of specialness creates a middle ground that I find compelling intellectually, historically, and personally. Though I didn't critique the views of so-called New Atheists, such as Dennett or Dawkins, in the book, I did discuss Owen Flanagan's work at some length and indicated that I found his approach compatible with what I was advocating. He provides a good example of someone in this middle ground – and his work, of course, hasn't precipitated the firestorm of response generated by those on either extreme. He is a non-theist who takes spirituality seriously. In his commitment to naturalism, he chooses not to push the values he deems most special (the Platonic values of truth, goodness, and beauty) into the realm of Absolutes or to protect them with taboos against naturalistic explanation. He is willing to stake value and meaning *somewhere* without hedging those values with taboos against understanding them in naturalist or scientific terms.

We can also analyze calls to demystify, including my own, in terms of the values that inform them. I suspect that Fitzgerald advocates demystification because he believes (as he states) that doing so will reveal the contingency of representations. I doubt he thinks that demystification will destroy the system of representations; rather it undercuts their absoluteness and allows them to be weighed relative to other things that are valued. If we can establish that things are contingent, we presumably have more choices. Choice (e.g., freedom of choice) is a value, but one that not everyone would rank equally highly. As already discussed, I'm not convinced that attempts to demystify taboos will always reveal the complete contingency of representations, especially those rooted deeply in our evolutionary heritage, nor give us as much choice as some might like, but I would assume that it would certainly give us more choice than if we did not question the taboos.

Although I recognize that we live in a world where some view specialness in terms of binaries, I think such views elide the (potential) middle ground. For those of us who want to occupy the middle ground, eliding it is a problem. For those of us who would prefer to negotiate differences, adopt both/and positions and hold opposing forces in tension, trying to both understand and communicate with those who hold either/or positions can be trying at times. But none of us are all that consistent, so I think we need to be as patient as we can be with one another.

When it comes to the apocalyptic scenarios painted by Curtis, all I can say is that I view capitalism or globalization or enlightenment rationality as forces that are (and should be) in tension with other powerful impulses toward protection of the natural world, local communities, and emotionally grounded systems of meaning and value. I do not think we can destroy emotionally grounded systems of meaning and value without destroying ourselves, but I do think that cultivating the ability to switch back and forth between relatively more engaged and more detached perspectives might foster increased appreciation of our human similarities and differences. I certainly don't know that this will be the consequence of such an approach but it seems to be an approach that suits me temperamentally and one to which I am willing to commit time and energy.

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