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Chapter 4

Liberation from the Ordinary: The Unseen in Religious Experience

Something happens to me in that state of intoxication. Now I feel ashamed of myself. In that state I feel as if I were possessed by a ghost. I cease to be my own self. While coming down from that state I cannot count correctly. Trying to count, I say, 'One, seven, eight,' or some such thing. *Mahendranath Gupta*¹

1 Introduction: Beyond the Ungraspable

Religion is a relevant object of the social sciences.² Since the inception of the discipline anthropologists have looked at religion as one of the main areas of cultural variability in human societies.³ Uncountable debates on religion have been constructed and deconstructed by opposing schools and approaches, and the anthropology of religion has become one of the most developed and autonomous branches of the discipline. Nevertheless, some selected aspects of religion have been privileged over others. Roughly before 2009, anthropological debates on religion pivoted mostly around two themes: belief and ritual.⁴ The anthropology of religious conversion represented a prolific third avenue.⁵ Other aspects, such as religious experience—e.g., the intimate, unspoken encounter with the divine—were traditionally met with epistemological skepticism. Indeed, religious experience seemed to escape any empirical inquiry based on participatory observation and communicative interaction (in-depth

¹ Gupta [1942] 2022, 1001.

² My deepest gratitude to the ashram community, with a special acknowledgment to S., for allowing me to share his experience. The elaboration of this manuscript was funded by the Fyssen Foundation (Paris), in the congenial environment of Northwestern University. I thank my colleague Rebecca Seligman at Northwestern for her insightful comments. The final version of this chapter was completed in the welcoming environment of Washington University in Saint Louis.

³ Tylor 1889; Frazer 1890.

⁴ Needham 1972; Lindquist and Coleman 2008; Mair 2012; Houseman and Severi 2009; Severi 2014; Berger 2012.

⁵ Stromberg 1993; Hanks 2010; Farhadian and Rambo 2015; Mahadev 2018.

interviews), the two methodological pillars of ethnography. As Jonathan Mair pointed out, this reluctance may be convincingly traced back to Edmund Leach's legacy:

A residual anti-psychologism that still affects many anthropologists, a hangover from the days when structuralism nearly turned to behaviourism as Edmund Leach condemned the foolishness of speculating about the 'internal psychological state' of ethnographic subjects.⁶

Leach's condemnation resonates with current narratives of religious experience as empirically ungraspable. Anthropology's depiction of religious experience as ineffable, elusive and constitutively unobservable, relegated the field to a hesitant posture vis-à-vis a slippery topic that seemed more appropriate for psychological and philosophical speculations.

Nevertheless, a similar attitude of reducing religious experience to a psychological matter can be found among religious studies scholars as well. As Jens Schlieter points out, most religious studies scholars feel that psychological theories of religion erase the specificity of the religious, by approaching it as a non-specific mental phenomenon:

From their point of view, analysis of, say, 'religious experience' in psychological terms will remain a psychological endeavor (explaining '[religious] experience'). For them, usually, that the experience is attributed to be 'religious' does not create the need for a systematic study of religion, or to develop theories that explain exclusively the 'religiousness' of experience.⁷

Religious experience is equated something "internal," conceived as purely psychological and then easily removed from the fields of culture and ontological specificity.

The construction of religious experience as immaterial was countered by the recent expansion of the notion of material religion, now broadened to: "include in its repertoire a vast set of somatic experiences, along with substances, places, environments, and even technologies, imparting an axiomatic status to the notion that 'all religion is material religion' (Engelke, 2011, 209)."⁸ From this perspective, the focus of religious studies shifted from identifying an immaterial kernel of religion to acknowledging that its components equated to, such as embodied sensations and ritual interaction, are grounded in material and empirically observable facts.

Along with the broadening of the concept of material religion, the so-called cognitive turn in anthropology offered another opportunity to experiment with empirical approaches. Human consciousness entered the debate of anthropology

⁶ Leach 1966, 40; in Mair 2013, 452—53.

⁷ Schlieter 2020, 122.

⁸ Reinhardt 2016, 76.

as a bio-cultural construct⁹ where sensations and affects are observable as part of the empirical grounding of culture.¹⁰ This fostered anthropological attempts to explore the cognitive underpinnings of the two traditional objects of belief¹¹ and ritual,¹² but also to explore the *terra* almost *incognita* of religious experience.

A final turn is represented by recent anthropological perspectives adopting an enactivist approach. Anthropological enactivism does not conceive mind as a separated, “internal” domain, but rather as a dynamic system of interactions with the environment.¹³ As Peter Stromberg puts it: “Thinking is increasingly understood not strictly as an interior process hidden away in the brain, but rather as public activity that engages with the environment.”¹⁴

In this sense, Leach’s opposition between an internalist conception of religious experience as purely psychological, and an externalist conception of culture as purely material, could be overcome. Conceived as a system spanning across the brain/environment divide, mind is a dynamic process of exchange with the environment and *within* the environment.

Therefore, from the perspective of enactivism, cognition is not a private process. It unfolds in the public sphere of human everyday transactions with the world. In Edward Lowe’s terms:

Cognitive processes extend out of the brain to include the lived body and the living social, cultural, and natural environment means that this tidy division between the (public) behavioral and the (brain-bound) mental in the study of culture and human conventionality can no longer be maintained.¹⁵

Enactivist approaches of cognition bridge the gap between the individually cognitive and the public material, conceived as two sides of the same integrated dynamic process.

These approaches are particularly relevant to address the intentional and transformative aspects of religious experience, which are the focus of this essay collection. As for intentionality, conceiving religious experience as a dynamic process of exchange *with* and *within* the world highlights the individuals’ intention of acting *in* and *upon* their environment through religion. In this sense, religious self-transformation is not radically different from the intentional transformation

⁹ Seligman 2018.

¹⁰ Halloy and Servais 2014; Ramstead, Veissière, and Kirmayer 2015.

¹¹ Cohen 2007, 2008.

¹² Stroeken 2011.

¹³ See Flavio Geisshüsler’s chapter in this book for another application of enactivist theory in the study of religion.

¹⁴ Stromberg 2021, 427.

¹⁵ Lowe 2021, 442.

of the world. By intentionally changing the way in which the Self inhabits its environment, the Self is transforming the world from the perspective of an active participant.

In this chapter I compare three theories of religious experience bridging the gap between the individually cognitive and the publicly material by presenting them as two co-constitutive polarities of the same dynamic process. Intentionality and self-transformation, in this perspective, are modalities of action *within* and *upon* the world.

Two of these theories are by anthropologists Tanya Luhmann and Rebecca Seligman, and one by a cognitive science of religion (CSR) scholar Ann Taves. These theories present important conceptual and epistemological overlaps. They share a grounding in empirical methods and a cross-disciplinary dialogue with the cognitive sciences. In the first part of this article, I assess the potentials and limits that these theories offer to the anthropological understanding of religious experience.

In the second part, I propose a theoretical innovation on this tradition. I claim that religious experience studies have been dominated by the exploration of the encounter with the extraordinary. By “encounter with the extraordinary” I mean the discovery of divinity as something transgressing ordinary ontological, epistemological, and empirical expectations. The “numinous,” the supernatural, the transcendent or the exceptional have been overemphasized as if they were the only distinctive features of religious experience.

Instead, I claim that the counterpart of the encounter with the extraordinary—the estrangement from the ordinary—deserves more attention. By “estrangement from the ordinary” I mean the process of reappraisal of what was deemed ordinary before religious experience (e.g., everyday life, ordinary existence) as something that becomes estranged, distant, irrelevant, or almost unreal to the eyes of the believer. Rather than being a mere by-product of the encounter with the extraordinary, the estrangement from the ordinary is a distinctive process contributing to the specificity of religious experience. In this article, I argue that the estrangement from the ordinary is a constitutive aspect of religious experience, demanding specific theoretical and empirical tools to be explored in its specificity, and not as a mere consequence of the encounter with the extraordinary, whether this is intentional or non-intentional.

While the theories by Taves and Luhmann present important innovations, they are mostly based on the encounter with the extraordinary as the main distinctive aspect of religious experience. The case of Seligman is slightly different, as it gives more importance to its counterpart, i.e., what I call the estrangement from the ordinary. In this article, I present Seligman’s theory as an intermediate step leading towards my theoretical proposition. Indeed, Seligman does not formulate

the notion of “estrangement from the ordinary” nor theorizes this process, though her ethnography paves the way to its formulation. My proposition consists in building on these precursory theories to outline a theory of religious experience encompassing the two processes—the encounter with the extraordinary (1) and the estrangement from the ordinary (2). These two aspects are conceived as co-constitutive but distinct, each one requiring a specific set of analytical concepts.

2 Three Theories of Religious Experience

Religious experience is a challenging object to approach empirically. Often considered intimate, ungraspable, and even not expressible through words, religious experience seems to resist participant observation. The three theories of religious experience that I am about to consider, instead, strongly engage with empiricism, each one from a different perspective. I will start with the “building-block approach” proposed by Ann Taves.

2.1 Taves’s Building Block Approach

In an influential book published in 2009, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, Ann Taves proposed a “building-block approach” to religious experience. By “building-block” Taves means an analytical approach breaking down religious experience in two constitutive components, or blocks:

- a) **FIRST BLOCK:** “Non-Ordinary Experiences,” NOE, i.e., experiences that stand out for their unusualness, or exceptionality. They are generally disruptive, or shocking, and they frequently entail altered states of consciousness, such as trances, visions, out-of-body experiences, voice-hearing, and any other state of consciousness considered extra-ordinary by a given society.
- b) **SECOND BLOCK:** processes of appraisal and/or reappraisal, which attribute to some NOEs a religious character. By “appraisal” I mean, in cognitive terms, the process of subjective interpretation of a stimulus.¹⁶ Appraisal is always socially shaped, as humans interpret things differently across societies. For example, a sudden racing heart can be interpreted as a sign of demonic attack and/or as an emotional reaction, depending on interiorized beliefs on spirits and bodies.¹⁷

¹⁶ Taves 2009.

¹⁷ Canna and Seligman 2020.

Let us see how this two-blocks approach operates through an example. The sudden apparition of an immaterial figure, according to Taves, is a Non-Ordinary Experience. This experience, per se, is not necessarily religious. It requires a process of appraisal and/or reappraisal to be deemed religious. The individual who saw the immaterial figure must interpret it through a cultural affordance suggesting that this is a religious event. Appraisal depends on cultural expectations and beliefs. Some societies share the belief that most immaterial apparitions are divine, some discriminate between divine and demonic apparitions, others consider apparitions as mendacious hallucinations, and so forth. The possibilities are as infinite as the human capability to produce interpretations and share them socially. Furthermore, it is common that within the same individual many different interpretations co-exist and shift across time. Hence, a NOE can be appraised and re-appraised differently depending on the sociocultural context in which it takes place.¹⁸

Taves's theory is informed by a Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) approach, and based on second-hand empirical data taken from textual sources. An important source for Taves is a personal account of religious experience by William Barnard.¹⁹

William Barnard, in his 1997 book *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* relates the experience that led himself to a religious transformation. His religious self-transformation started after an involuntary episode of ego-dissolution, where his ordinary sense of bounded ego was completely dissolved. This state of ego dissolution was triggered by a paradoxical thought. While he was trying to think about himself after death, he experienced an intense feeling of paradox. At that time, indeed, Barnard conceived of death as pure non-existence. Hence, the attempt to conciliate the thought of non-existence with a sense of continuity ("him after death"), produced in Barnard a cognitive paradox resulting into a sense of ego dissolution. Barnard felt that he was losing his sense of ego and any other perception of boundedness. He appraised this loss as the access to a modality of existence that was radically different from everything he had ever experienced before. This experience was so disruptive, so phenomenologically novel, that he subsequently interpreted it as the discovery of a new dimension. Hence, Barnard, according to Taves, interpreted his experience as religious because of its disruptive and extraordinary nature.

Hence, for Taves, Barnard's account is an illustrative example of the building block theory. Religious experience is made by a non-ordinary experience—in Barnard's case, the paradoxical ego-dissolution (first block)—interpreted through a

¹⁸ Taves 2009; Taves, Fortier, and Canna 2018.

¹⁹ Barnard 1997.

process of reappraisal—Barnard’s conclusion that he accessed a spiritual dimension (second block).

In an interview made in 2018 by philosopher Martin Fortier and I, Taves elaborates further on the role of paradox in triggering non-ordinary experiences deemed religious. While comparing Barnard’s account with my ethnography of demonic possession in Nicaragua,²⁰ Taves advances the hypothesis that paradox may act as trigger for many NOE that are deemed religious.²¹

Paradox as a trigger of spiritual realizations, indeed, is not a new concept in religious studies, especially in Eastern Religious Studies, but also in the study of Christianity, namely concerning the notion of Trinity. Moreover, transversally to the field of religious studies, Micheal Houseman and Carlo Severi proposed a theory of ritual identifying the cumulation of contradictory features—a form of paradox—as the constitutive feature of all ritual action, within and outside the domain of religion.²²

What is important to note, here, is that Taves conceives of religious experience as a composite event incorporating the extraordinary in an individual’s existence through a process of socially shaped appraisal. Religious experience, then, is the act of integrating the disruptively extraordinary and/or the paradoxical in the range of possibilities of one’s life. To be deemed religious, an experience must be extraordinary, but the mere fact of deviating from the expected is not enough. The extraordinariness of the experience must fit into acquired expectations about what a religious event should be. In the case of Barnard, the sensation of ego dissolution was identified retrospectively (or reappraised) by the experiencer as a proper religious experience.²³

Before delving further into this position, let’s consider a similar focus on the encounter with the extraordinary in our second theory of religious experience, by anthropologist Tanya Luhmann.

2.2 Luhmann’s Absorption Hypothesis

Tanya Luhmann is an anthropologist conversant with the fields of cognitive sciences and psychology. Her empirical approach is based on ethnography, i.e., the first-hand participant observation of the social life of a group, in this case US Evangelical Christians. In her 2012 book *When God Talks Back: Understanding the*

²⁰ Canna 2017, 2022.

²¹ Taves, Fortier and Canna 2018.

²² Houseman and Severi 2009; Severi 2015.

²³ See Jens Schlieter’s chapter in this book on the same issue.

American Evangelical Relationship with God, Luhrmann lays the foundation of her theory of religious experience. Religious experience, according to Luhrmann, is the result of two conditions: (1) an individual proclivity to absorption and (2) a process of sociocultural shaping, or social kindling, as Cassaniti and Luhrmann put it later.²⁴ By “proclivity to absorption” Luhrmann and her collaborators mean a tendency to get caught or absorbed in a state of abstraction from ordinary reality, where individuals are less tuned into their immediate environment, and deeply focused—or captured—in another dimension, which is not accessible through the ordinary senses. Absorption, thus, is defined as “the mental capacity common to trance, hypnosis, dissociation, and much other spiritual experience in which the individual becomes caught up in ideas, images or fascinations.”²⁵

The second component of religious experience according to Luhrmann, is a form of sociocultural shaping that identifies this proclivity as religious and canalizes it into a structured religious practice. Like Taves, Luhrmann adopts a componential approach, where two constitutive elements are articulated together to form a religious experience. Like Taves, the first block—an individual proclivity—is not necessarily religious but is canalized or kindled to be deemed religious through a process of social shaping.

Luhrmann builds on an ethnography of US Evangelical Christians, who report extremely vivid perceptions during prayer, including hearing the voice of God talking back and responding to their calls. Absorption facilitates this intimate connection God, as it predisposes the individual to be caught in a mode of consciousness where ordinary sensations are suspended in favor of the perception of a divine presence.

Nevertheless, if absorption predisposes to this intimate connection to God, this proclivity is not limited to religion. A secular form of absorption, for example, is getting “caught” in the reading of a book. Individuals with a high proclivity to absorption, according to Luhrmann, are more easily captured by a fictional world, to the point of losing sight of the surrounding environment. Hence absorption, per se, does not entail any religious content. It is a common potential of the human mind. And, as any other cognitive potential, it can be trained through practice. A person with a low proclivity to absorption can become more skilled through exposure, repeated exertion and all the practices entailed by a learning process.²⁶ Thus, it is not the proclivity to absorption per se that leads to religious

²⁴ Cassaniti and Luhrmann 2014.

²⁵ Luhrmann, Nussbaum, and Thisted 2010.

²⁶ Luhrmann, Nussbaum, and Thisted 2010; Luhrmann 2012.

experience, but the process of sociocultural shaping, or social kindling, which leads some experiences of absorption to be deemed religious.

The theories of Luhrmann and Taves have much in common. They both present a building-block approach based on two fundamental components. The first ones (non-ordinary experiences in Taves and absorption proclivity in Luhrmann) are not necessarily bounded to religion, while the second ones are both a form of socio-cultural shaping: appraisal in the form of being “deemed religious” in Taves and social kindling in Luhrmann.

The main difference between these approaches is that Luhrmann focuses on individual proclivities and skills, while Taves focuses prevalently on marking events (non-ordinary experiences, or NOE). That said, it can be argued that a proclivity to absorption is likely to predispose a person to a non-ordinary experience. Indeed, the “mental capacity common to trance, hypnosis, dissociation, and much other spiritual experience in which the individual becomes caught up in ideas or images or fascinations”²⁷ is the ideal precondition to have a vision, an ecstasy, and any other modulation of consciousness deemed religious. Absorption proclivity, as defined by Luhrmann, is the psychological predisposition to experience Taves’s non-ordinary experience.

These two empirical approaches to religious experience are extremely interesting. They allow for a cross-disciplinary study of some shared human potentials, as absorption and NOE are not religiously bounded and can be found within and outside of what we traditionally construct as religious. This paves the way for approaching our third perspective, Seligman’s theory of religious experience as biosocial self-transformation.

2.3 Seligman’s Biosocial Transformation of Selves

Seligman is a biosocial anthropologist who conducted ethnography on Candomblé in Brazil. Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian religion based on spirit possession. Candomblé adepts, called *mediums*, are initiated to be possessed by the deities of Candomblé pantheon. Possession is based on a structured, ritualized form of dissociative trance. During Candomblé trance, mediums’ bodies are possessed by one or several deities. Possession entails that they speak, move and act as the incarnation of these Other, Divine Selves.²⁸

²⁷ Luhrmann, Nussbaum and Thisted, cited above in this chapter.

²⁸ Seligman 2014, 2018.

Seligman's approach to religious experience is one of the rare—if not the only—biosocial theories of religion mixing ethnography and physiological data. Seligman measures the regulation of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) through portable equipment allowing her to gather physiological data on the field while conducting ethnographical research. Autonomic regulation correlates with cardiac efficiency and is a measure of overall health, namely of resilience to stress.²⁹ Seligman's hypothesis is that the transformation from non-initiated to initiated mediums in Candomblé catalyzes an overall restructuration of the persona in all her components, physical and mental. While the lay person is socially elevated to the status of medium, the physical body transforms through the spiritual practice of embodying deities. This overall self-transformation is physiologically trackable, as the body improves its system of self-regulation. Seligman provides evidence of this physiological transformation through a field-portable device which tracks the improvements in the cardiac regulation of the autonomic system (ANS) of initiated mediums versus non-initiated individuals.³⁰ This approach paves the way for an integrative approach to religious experience, which crosses the traditional disciplinary boundaries between biological and social sciences.

An innovation from the previous theories concerns the direction of religious transformation. In Taves and Luhmann, religious transformation is seen as the access to an extraordinary realm. In both theories we see a paradoxical and/or disruptive dimension, more explicit in Taves and more implicit in Luhmann. Hence, In Taves and Luhmann the sense of extraordinary is encountered in the movement *from* the ordinary world *towards* the realm that will be deemed religious (Figure 4.1).

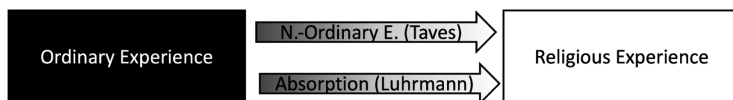


Figure 4.1: Religious Experience in Taves and Luhmann.

Seligman's ethnography, instead, suggests a double movement. In Candomblé, the person who will become a medium is generally in a state of deep emotional, moral and physical suffering before becoming a medium. Future mediums are generally ill with unexplained symptoms, afflicted by multiple misfortunes, and/or in an overall state of distress. This initial state of chronic distress is re-appraised

²⁹ Seligman 2014.

³⁰ Seligman 2014.

after initiation as a sign that initiation to mediumship was necessary to reestablish normalcy and health. Hence, appraisal processes do not act only on the experience deemed religious (here, trance possession) but expand to an overall reappraisal of the previous life of an individual before embracing religion. This distressing life of non-initiated, which was considered ordinary before, after initiation is reappraised as an abnormal distortion which needed to be overcome. Mediums look back at their previous non-initiated self as a state of extraordinary suffering seeming almost absurd or unreal from their new perspective of reestablished wellbeing. Hence, this ethnography highlights another direction of self-transformation: religious experience is described not only as the incorporation of the extraordinary of divinity (which happens during possession), but also as the estrangement—or distancing—from the previously ordinary distress of living without a religion. From the physiological perspective explored by Seligman, the estrangement from the ordinary is manifested by a more effective, more resilient response to stressors. Initiated mediums can be triggered by life stressors as anyone else, but their physiological regulation is more effective in moderating stress responses, such as increased heart rate and cortisol production. This induces a calmer, more relaxed state of mind and body. Even though further progress in field-friendly physiological trackers should be made, Seligman's work is ground-breaking in measuring autonomic regulation to empirically ground claims on religion. In this sense, intentional religious transformation partially overlaps with self-healing. Indeed, the initiated individual is also a more resilient psycho-physical being.

If we represent this double movement in the previous graph, we obtain the graph of Figure 4.2:

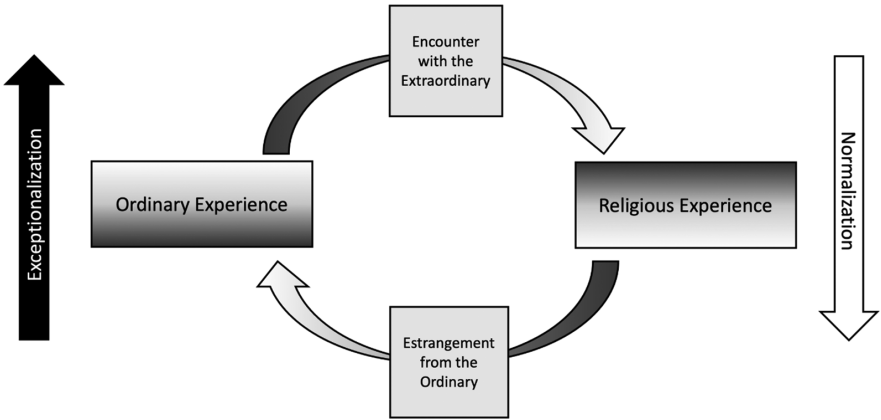


Figure 4.2: Double-sided dynamics of religious experience.

The upward arrow corresponds to the encounter with the extraordinary present in the examples of Taves and Luhrmann. What is new, here, is represented in the downward arrow. Once the adept is fully initiated, what was extraordinary before (divinity) becomes the new normal (see the arrow of normalization on the right). At the same time, the old ordinary (a life of suffering) is estranged to the point of becoming the new extraordinary. Expressions like “*If I look back my previous life seems absurd*” are a manifestation of this process of estrangement and reappraisal of a whole life.

Before moving forward, I must clarify that this double movement is not specific to Candomblé. At different degrees, it can be found in many other religions.³¹ For example, accounts of converted Christians depicting their previous life as a sinful state of absurdity and pain are abundantly documented. The reframing of life before conversion as a state of senseless, destructive, distress is quite typical. As Peter Stromberg highlights:

It is commonplace to observe that the experience of personal transformation that is often a part of the Christian Protestant conversion narrative includes an account of healing from some sort of emotional or physical distress [. . .]. the conversion narrative is often a story about how a believer transformed his or her motives from the destructive to the righteous.³²

This reframing of life before conversion as the new extraordinary comes together with the realization that the new life of the converted is saner, healthier, and more righteous than the past. Hence, anthropological studies of the estrangement from life before conversion are not rare. What is missing, I claim, is an integration of this process in a general theory of religious experience.

This is not to state that in Taves and Luhrmann there is no recognition of these processes. On the contrary, I acknowledge that Taves’s and Luhrmann’s approaches leave room for this recognition. Luhrmann’s monography on Evangelical Christians provides rich empirical insights on the reframing of pre-conversion lives as extraordinarily senseless and exceptionally full of sorrow.³³ Taves, in her book *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths*,³⁴ studies how some extraordinary events, such as ecstasies and apparitions, act as revelations catalyzing the start of new spiritual paths. These new paths are frequently framed as redemptions from a past life reappraised as extraordinarily destructive.

³¹ Perdomo 2022.

³² Stromberg 2014, 14.

³³ Luhrmann 2012.

³⁴ Taves 2016.

This is the case, for example, of Bill Wilson, who cofounded Alcoholics Anonymous after having an ecstatic experience while hospitalized for alcoholism in 1934.³⁵

In all these examples, we see rich empirical evidence and theoretical recognition that a form of estrangement from the pre-conversion life is in act. Nevertheless, this process is not integrated in an encompassing theory of religious experience.

Among the disciplines empirically engaging religious experience, most of the attention has been placed on the incorporation of the extraordinary, and less on the estrangement from the past ordinary. Nevertheless, I claim that these two processes are complementary and inseparable. In the second part of this paper, I will lay out some suggestions for the empirical study of the estrangement from the ordinary that, I argue, deserves to be approached in its specificity, and not as a mere by-product of the encounter with the extraordinary.

To illustrate my hypothesis, I will draw upon an autoethnography of Advaita Vedānta in Europe. The data I am presenting comes from a pilot-study, based on my personal practice in an ashram—or center of spirituality—in Europe from 2014 to 2019. To respect the privacy and spiritual policies of the place, I won't give any identifying information allowing to locate it. Also, my intent is to offer this case as an example of the multiple potential sites of empirical observation for the estrangement from the ordinary. As claimed above, I argue that this process must be deemed constitutive of any religious experience, rather than bounded to specific traditions.

I will focus on three components of the estrangement from the ordinary, according to three areas of empirical observation: perceptual reconditioning (1), interiorization of new habits of estrangement (2), and suspension of previous beliefs (3). I will use the example of Advaita Vedānta in Europe to outline a general theory of religious experience as a practice of subversion—or liberation from—the ordinary. While the term “liberation” overlaps with “subversion” here, I would specify that the degree of intentionality implied is different: it is higher in the notion of “liberation” than in “subversion.” For further inquiries, I would use liberation when the individual is actively affirming their distancing from the ordinary, while the term subversion is more apt to capture the intrinsic erosion of the hegemony of ordinary experience, which is less dependent on individual affirmation. As for the specificity of the Vedānta case, my ethnographic focus is not intended to bound my theoretical claims to the particularities of Advaita Vedānta, nor to the specificity of this particular fieldwork site.

35 Taves 2016.

3 The Reversal of Ecstasy. Religious Experience as Liberation from the Ordinary

Like an insane person I ran out of our house. He asked me, ‘What do you want?’ I replied, ‘I want to remain immersed in *samādhi* [religious ecstasy].’ He said: ‘What a small mind you have! Go beyond *samādhi*! *Samādhi* is a very trifling thing.’ *Mahendranath Gupta*³⁶

Contemporary Advaita Vedānta is a widespread spectrum of religious traditions originated in India and currently globalized. I decided to de-identify the ashram where I conducted my autoethnography to respect the wishes of its religious authorities, concerned with preserving the intimacy and sacredness of the place. As a general reference, this spiritual center belongs to a branch of the Advaita—or non-dualist—Vedānta tradition, stemming from a Hindu spiritual discipline. Nevertheless, in the form practiced in this site, Advaita Vedānta is presented as a universalistic spiritual practice. Not bounded to Hinduism, Advaita Vedānta is lived as a meta-religion embracing any other orientations, including atheism. Different theist and non-theist orientations are practiced in the ashram as variants of a shared spiritual sensitivity. Advaita Vedānta’s sensitivity, as expressed in this site, is based on the belief that the *ātman*, or individual inner self, is ontologically coincident with the Brahman, or the Absolute. The path of the adepts is to get detached from the material world, which is illusory (*māyā*), and realize their fundamental state of undividedness and ontological unity with the Absolute, or Brahman.³⁷ At the site of my study, the main scriptural sources are the Hindu classic *Bhagavad Gītā*, and Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra*. Conscious that globalized Vedānta entails adaptation and syncretism, I won’t engage in any textual discussion on Advaita Vedānta as a literary tradition. My main interest is to see how the current re-invention of this tradition is lived, engaged, and experienced in the life of a European ashram. The specificity of this case will provide an empirical illustration of three main components of the estrangement from the ordinary, which, I claim, is a constitutive process of any religious experience.

Empirically, the construction of a sense of estrangement, or “liberation” from the ordinary, takes place through perceptual, cognitive, and emotional shifts reshaping the experience of the adepts. In what follows, I will explore three main forms of reshaping: perceptual reconditioning (1), interiorization of new habits of estrangement (2), and suspension of previous beliefs (3).

³⁶ Gupta [1942] 2002, 1125.

³⁷ Fowler 2002.

3.1 Perceptual Reconditioning

Anthropologically, rituals have been studied as the loci of production of the exceptionality of religion. Christian masses, shamanic trances, Candomblé spirit possessions provide perceptual and cognitive spaces to encounter the exceptionality of the divine. These encounters take place in well delimited areas, such as churches, shamanic tents or Candomblé *terreiros*. The consecration of a space, organized by distinctive ritual rules, defines the religious context as exclusive and marks the ritual event as distinct from the ordinary life. While the inner space of the ritual has been richly explored, its counterpart, i.e., the exo-space excluded from the ritual, is systematically overlooked by mainstream theories of religion. Even when it is acknowledged, it tends to be presented as a mere by-product, an “empirical leftover” of the ritual delimitation.³⁸ On the contrary, I will offer a counter-example where this exo-space is engaged as a relevant component of the ritual, and a core locus of production of religious experience.

The ashram celebrates New Year’s Eve in alignment with the Western secular calendar. The celebration starts on December the 30th at 9 pm, with the recital of a mantra for 24 hours without interruption. Volunteers take turns to ensure a constant presence in the chapel, where the mantra is recited. The celebration can attract hundreds of participants. Participants enter and exit the chapel to be part of the shared mantra recitation. The chapel is a sensorially saturated space, where the cradling vibrations of the mantra, the pervasive red and orange colors of the decoration and the olfactory intensity of incense embrace the adepts and attune their senses to a contemplative state of mind. Some describe this state of mind as “ego dissolution” or “state of unity,” in accordance with Advaita Vedānta principles. At the end of the recitation the swami, i.e., the leading monk, performs a puja, a devotional homage to a deity, generally the Hindu goddess Kali. The puja ends exactly at 23:30 pm. After the puja, all the participants observe 30 minutes of complete silence to contemplate the transition towards the New Year. This silent passage is the climax of the celebration.

It is during this silent climax that the exo-space of the external world enters the space of the ritual in a meaningful way. During four years of participation, I observed that this climactic silence is never intact. Fireworks and toasts from the external New Year’s celebration inevitably irrupt in the chapel, amplified by the silence of the participants. Far from being a matter of mere disturbance, these echoes from the ordinary world play a meaningful role in the ritual experience. Indeed, they never fail to elicit retrospective comments and reflections by the

³⁸ Severi and Houseman 2009.

participants. Several hours of shared mantra in the chapel, followed by silence, produce a sensorial background of uniformity, cradling rhythmicity, and uninterrupted flow, which creates a sharp contrast with the discontinuous, fragmented, and dissonant irruption of mundane noise. As a participant, I remember perceiving the external celebrations as particularly disruptive, and hearing other participants sharing the same sensations after the end of the celebration. The appraisal of external festivities as intrusive chaos is a direct consequence of the perceptual conditioning cultivated in the chapel. Many participants are aware of this perceptual reconditioning and attribute a moral value to their sensorial transformation. They liken the process of religious self-transformation to the acquisition of a subtler spiritual sensitivity. The previously ordinary (here, New Year's lay celebrations) seems—and literally, sounds—more and more like a disruptive cacophony with respect to a perceived purer state of mind.

Perceptual reconditioning, interpreted as a sign of progress towards a subtler, higher state of mind, is common across religions. The reshaping of the senses, indeed, acts as a form of estrangement from the ordinary, which in this example is perceived as sensorially dissonant. Rather than being a by-product of ritual delimitation, the perceptual reshaping of the previously ordinary world (in this example, New Year's ordinary festivities becoming cacophonous) is lived as a meaningful component of religious experience. Perceiving as a disturbance what was previously deemed ordinary celebration, and sharing this perception with other participants, marks a sensorial turn, a perceptual shift likened to the acquisition of a higher state of consciousness. The more adepts re-attune their senses to the perceptual landscape associated to their religion, and share this experience, the more the previously ordinary is phenomenologically estranged.

At this point, a precision must be made. Even though external noise is not *produced* for the ritual, it is *engaged* by the participants as a meaningful component of their religious experience. As a ready-made object, found by chance but filled with meaning, external noise becomes the demarcation symbol of the previously ordinary life, which now is estranged. No matter if a component is deliberate or casual, the process of perceptual reconditioning leads to a distinctive demarcation from the old ordinary.³⁹ In this sense, the exo-space of the ritual is meaningful as it is recurrently engaged through comments, references, and reflections shared by the participants. The exo-space is the reference allowing

39 See Karl Baier's contribution in this volume on intentionality and non-intentionality in intentional transformative experiences.

adepts to demarcate themselves from a discarded sensorial world identified as a lower form of life without religious experience.⁴⁰

Processes of distinction and demarcation are not exclusive to religious experience. Nevertheless, they are constitutive of the construction of salience allowing an experience to be deemed religious. Hence, besides the encounter with the extraordinary represented by the sensorial world of the chapel, the estrangement from the ordinary, re-appraised as intrusive cacophony, is equally important to build and share a sense of religious experience.

3.2 Interiorization of New Habits of Estrangement

My second empirical focus is the acquisition of new habits of estrangement. I define “habit” as an interiorized disposition to act in a specific set of ways.⁴¹ I will illustrate this point through an example regarding S., an aspiring monk at the time of my autoethnography. A Frenchman in his late twenties in 2018, S. was studying to become a monk and resided permanently in the ashram. The following episode comes from his retrospective account of going to a lay party outside of the ashram. As I did not record nor take notes at the time of this dialogue, I will report in third person. Nevertheless, this account has been read and confirmed by S.

One day, S. participated in an external birthday party organized by some of his old friends. He had not seen them for some years. His lay friends were extremely curious about his new lifestyle, and asked for explanations about his religion. S. wanted to be as transparent as possible about his experience. At the question: “What is your religion?” (*Quelle est ta religion?*), S. responded, with a certain perplexity: . . . “Well, I am. . . calm” (*Bah. . . je suis. . . tranquille*).

Later, when S. commented with me on this episode, he stated that the question took him by surprise. He said that he did not feel identified with any creed or affiliation, but simply grounded in an overall state of calmness. Hence, he tried to provide the most honest and transparent answer he could formulate: “I am calm.”

⁴⁰ In this article I use “religion” for conformity with the tradition of anthropological theories of religious experience. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that many of the adepts mentioned in my ethnographic example would prefer the term “spirituality,” perceived as more apt to demarcate themselves from dogmatic forms of religion.

⁴¹ This definition of “habit” partly draws upon Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus” (Bourdieu 1977, 2000). Nevertheless, I prefer “habit,” as the lay term is polysemic enough to convey meanings associated to practice, disposition and tendency. All these components are co-present in the process of reshaping described here.

Analyzing this episode can be tricky. First of all, we must not misattribute S's response to a lack of theoretical elaboration. In more than 4 years of dialogue, I could assess that S. had a fine-grained knowledge of the doctrinal endorsements of his ashram and could provide a thorough explanation of what Advaita Vedānta is.

Also, this sentence must not be mistaken as a strategic understatement, downplaying religion as mere calmness to make it palatable for a group of partying adults. This was not, either, a variation on the current medicalization of Eastern spirituality, which tends to secularize meditative religions as a lay way to calm the mind.⁴²

Instead, according to S., his friends' question sounded strange because in the ashram he had learned to distance himself from any form of identification with a creed or affiliation. He had not only suspended his identification with any Advaita Vedānta dogma, but also distanced himself from any other social identifier, including ethnicity, gender, and all the determinants considered indispensable to belong to a structured Western society. This sounded particularly surprising to his old friends. Indeed, from the perspective of many Western non-adepts, the endorsement of a creed is seen as an indispensable component of religious life.

This process of estrangement from the social determinants of ordinary life, such as creed, gender, ethnicity, and so on, tends to be stronger in older adepts and in those who are intensely dedicated to religious life. Indeed, through the eyes of S., the "normal," baseline condition is being de-identified and peaceful, hence "calm." Societal expectation about endorsing—and, in other religions, proselytizing—a creed are distanced and suspended. Here, the ordinary formatting of social identity through categories of belonging and creed is re-framed as the new exceptional, while religious life is described as a natural, neutral, unmarked default condition.

It is possible that, in S., the memory of societal expectations was still present at the moment of answering this question. It is plausible that he had an idea of the kind of answer expected by his friends. Nevertheless, even though he may have remembered that his friends expected a creed statement, his new habits of transparency and de-identification prevailed on his previously acquired skills. Rather than conforming to the old norms and providing a creed, he embraced his new habits and refused self-identification.

42 Kirmayer 2015; Cassaniti 2019.

3.3 Suspension of Previous Beliefs

The suspension of previous beliefs is directly connected to the acquisition of new habits of estrangement. Swami X, the leading monk at the time of my autoethnography, produced a vast number of conferences, lectures, and collections of thoughts. Regularly, Swami delivered a lecture on the principles of Advaita Vedānta and/or invited external lecturers, spanning from biomedical doctors to leaders of other religions (e.g., rabbis, nuns, pastors, Buddhist monks). The ashram functioned as a meta-confessional cultural center, where members of other orientations, including atheists, came to share similarities of practices and sensitivities, beyond creeds. At first sight, such extensive cultural activity may suggest a strong engagement with doctrinal theory. This is true and false. It is true in the sense that theological reflections were a regular practice at the ashram. It is false in the sense that theorization was practiced as a normal human proclivity, but never taken seriously as an exclusive way to access spiritual truth. A leitmotiv quotation circulating in the ashram stated:

Ignorance is like a plug in the foot. Knowledge is a second plug that helps you remove the first plug of ignorance. But, once you removed the first plug, you should get rid of all the plugs. You don't need anything more than your feet to walk.

This sentence reflects a specific attitude towards religious theorization, that I will call “suspended engagement.” In the ashram, elaboration on religious meanings was constantly practiced. Nevertheless, practice came with the caveat that no theory or product of the human mind must be taken as the ultimate truth or rigidified into a dogma. The act of theorizing was practiced, but interpreted as an inescapable human need, a coping response to the discomfort of the ultimate unknown. Theorizing, hence, was considered helpful to soothe the mind, with the caveat of not being rigidified into dogma.

This form of soft, playful engagement with theory is in stark contrast with the expectations that adepts find outside of the ashram. The act of expressing, defining, and identifying with a creed is expected in secular societies. Religion is frequently understood by secular societies, and mostly by non-believers, as a set of philosophical endorsements and/or as an identarian orientation. This expectation is evident in the previous example about the aspiring monk S. (5). On the contrary, the endorsement of a creed – religious, professional, intellectual, political or of any other sort – was perceived in the ashram as one of the unnecessary burdens of ordinary non-religious life.

Together with perceptual reconditioning (3.1) and the interiorization of new habits of estrangement (3.2), the suspension of previous beliefs (3.3) is a structural component of the estrangement from the ordinary that, I argue, is constitutive of

religious experience. As I stated before, anthropological literature on religion is abundant with empirical evidence of these processes. From conversion to enlightenment, religious experience cannot happen without some involvement of these kinds of processes.⁴³ Nevertheless, what is missing from current theory of religious experience is the recognition that the estrangement from the ordinary is not a mere by-product of the encounter with the extraordinary, but a distinct, co-constitutive aspect of religious experience deserving to be analyzed on its own. Therefore, it requires a specific set of analytical tools and an appropriate range of empirical focuses to be properly identified and explored. This is particularly relevant when we focus on intentional self-transformation. The intentional liberation from the ordinary entails a series of transformations, such as those highlighted here, which cannot be achieved only as by-products of a willed encounter with the extraordinary. Working on one's Self, and on one's Self-in-the world, entails intentional reflexivity on both sides. Focusing exclusively on one – or subsuming the other as a by-product – would entail a truncated intentionality unable to encompass these co-present facets.

4 Conclusions

In sum, I argue that the theory of religious experience should shift its focus from the encounter with the extraordinary to the estrangement from the ordinary. Religion, thus, can be explored as the space *from which* the ordinary is re-appraised as a new anomaly. Often absurd, arbitrary, sometimes cacophonous, or dissonant, always insufficient to achieve a full human development, the old ordinary is estranged by specific processes of distancing and reappraisal.

This theoretical shift would allow for recognizing the dynamic dialectic between what is deemed extraordinary and what is deemed ordinary. Rather than a fixed dichotomy, the extraordinary/ordinary divide is a porous threshold, continuously renegotiated through social dynamics such as conversion, enlightenment, and initiation. While recognizing the interplay of these two polarities is crucial, I argue that increasing the focus on the estrangement from the ordinary would correct a deeply engrained tendency to overlook this process as a mere by-product of the encounter with the extraordinary. As shown in the examples, the estrangement from the ordinary implies distinct dynamics and appropriated areas of empirical focus.

⁴³ Perdomo 2022; Stromberg 1994.

In addition, refocusing on the estrangement from the ordinary would make the field of religious studies less compartmentalized, and more integrated to the rest of the social, psychological, and biological sciences approaching religion. As Jens Schlieter points out, cross-disciplinarity requires a common ground of epistemological compatibility across scientific communities.⁴⁴ Rather than the locus of exceptionality, religious experience can be explored as the daily process of subverting the ordinary. In this sense, religion would not be preferentially bounded to the confined space of events marked as religious (e.g., rituals, confessional statements), but expanded into a cognitive and emotional attitude reshaping all aspects of life, from going to a party to negotiating identity in everyday interaction. The three theories compared in this article successfully integrate different disciplines across the psychological/social divide, with particular attention to the encounter between cognitive sciences and social sciences (Taves), psychology and anthropology (Luhrmann) and biology and anthropology (Seligman). What they have in common is a conception of human mind as a dynamic space beyond the individual brain, engaged in a constant process of co-creation with and *within* the environment. This line of approaches is currently being developed by enactivist orientations in anthropology.⁴⁵ Building on this line, I argue that an increased focus on the estrangement from the ordinary will allow to develop a more flexible understanding of religion as a cultural dynamic.

To conclude, some limitations should be considered. First, the extent of generalizability of this framework has still to be assessed. As stated, I used the European Advaita Vedānta autoethnography as a first-hand example, but I claim that the processes identified (perceptual reconditioning, interiorization of new estrangement habits and suspension of previous beliefs) apply to any religious experience. Adjustments are required to fit the specificities of each religious tradition. For example, I expect different habits of estrangement in proselytizing religions, and a different selection of beliefs to be suspended in dogmatic creeds. That said, even if the forms taken by the estrangement from the ordinary depend on the specificity of each religion, the process of estrangement is a constitutive feature of religious experience. A comparative assessment of the ways in which different traditions enact their estrangement from the ordinary is out of the scope of this article but would provide a coherent development.

Methodologically, the processes explored here are particularly suited for empirical approaches, especially for ethnography. Perceptual reconditioning (1), interiorization of new estrangement habits (2) and suspension of previous beliefs (3)

⁴⁴ Schlieter 2020.

⁴⁵ Stromberg 2021; Lowe 2021.

are all approachable through qualitative as well as mixed methods research, and abundant evidence has been already gathered, even though not systematized in a comprehensive theory of religious experience. These processes are also particularly suited for biosocial methodologies, including physiological measurements, as pioneered by Seligman.⁴⁶ This paves the way for a further integration of religious studies into the global field of human research. Religion, therefore, should be explored as a constitutive part of social life beyond the enclosed space of what is publicly marked as religious. In this sense, the daily practice of subversion of the ordinary is not a matter of participation or creed, but rather an acquired attitude of dismantling and suspending the set of fluctuating expectations and practices that we call “culture” and “society.” This applies in particular to secular societies, but also to religious societies when a religious shift (e.g., conversion, revelation, enlightenment) catalyzes a renegotiation of the ordinary/extraordinary divide. Hence, religious experience can be explored as the process of acquiring an alternative perspective and engaging it to subvert every aspect of social life.

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⁴⁶ Seligman 2014.

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