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Methodological Pluralism in the Study of Religion

*How the Study of Consciousness and Mapping Spiritual
Experiences Can Reshape Religious Methodology*

This special issue of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* throws down a methodological challenge to the field of Religious Studies. Over the last half century, the academic study of religion has developed a variety of angles and approaches: structuralist, Eliadian, Marxist, feminist, and so on. Recently, approaches popular in many institutions and departments have centred on linguistic and cultural analysis, notably the postmodern and deconstructivist approaches championed by Derrida and others. With the dawn of the interdisciplinary field of the study of human consciousness, and with this issue of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, we challenge this prevailing approach by presenting readers with articles analysing religion, spirituality, and spiritual experience, not solely as cultural phenomena, but as phenomena that can be related to human physiology, and a kind of pan-human technology of human spiritual development.

This issue offers new and exciting approaches whereby our understanding of religion and religious experiences may be enhanced by reference to methods stemming from cognitive science, neuropsychology, developmental psychology, philosophy of mind, anthropology, and the myriad other fields that have joined together to investigate the phenomenon of consciousness. Because consciousness plays such a central role in the creation of human experience, and because the field of consciousness studies is growing more mature by the year, it only makes sense that we should learn what we can about the functioning of consciousness from the myriad disciplines that have deigned to place it under their scopes. It is time for religious studies to draw upon neuropsychology, cognitive neuroscience, artificial intelligence, artificial life, psychology, and other disciplines. It is time for religious studies to explore how consciousness functions and how it may play

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a role in the constitution of reality, in spiritual experience, in the generation of doctrine, and in ritual and meditative life.

Also constructively, this volume attempts to forge a truce in the twenty-years' methodological war that has been waging between constructivists and perennialists in the study of religion. To summarize each side's historical position briefly, constructivists (i.e., Katz, Proudfoot) presented religious experience as wholly constructed from the fabric of pre-existing materials. Perennial psychologists (i.e., Forman, Barnard, Rothberg, etc.) claimed that mystical experiences, regardless of the tradition involved, share certain common underlying experiential cores, notably the so-called Pure Consciousness Event and several more advanced mystical states.

As in any just war, both constructivists and perennial psychologists made some good points, and we hope this volume sheds light on both sides of the debate. By drawing upon evidence from a range of disciplines other than the study of religion *per se*, this volume may help systematize how the constructivist and perennial psychologist positions about religious experience can be seen as complementary in a way that may help illuminate the broader relationship between subjectivity and objectivity. This is what Wilber calls, in this volume, the right and left quadrants. As Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1993) already have proposed in the context of ontology, and as generations of Buddhist philosophers have articulated before them, 'consciousness' stands as the mediating term between the qualia, or felt experience, of the subjective, and the 'hard' reality we refer to as 'the external world'. Since our perceptual systems translate between the two continuously, defining what we colloquially understand to be 'life', it is time to recognize their complementarity.

The Exploding Field of Consciousness Studies

The *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, and the regular meetings in Tucson and elsewhere on the study of consciousness, have become the principle venues for the incredibly dynamic study of consciousness and its relationship to human phenomena. One of the reasons that these debates are so vital is that they have made it a point to include *both* the full range of externally measurable phenomena that impact consciousness, *and* the role of the subjective aspect of consciousness on those phenomena.

Insofar as there is a majority report in the field of religious studies, it is that formation goes from the past to the present, from the background of social training to the interpretative models, from the cognitive set to the experience, from the linguistic training to the construction of experience. This has been an enormously valuable model. But it portrays the vector of influence as solely unidirectional: the concrete influencing the abstract. In portraying the causal vector as aiming only one way, the American Academy of Religion is in danger of painting itself into a methodological corner.

This journal and recent conferences have examined how physics, biology and neurobiology, sociology, religion, philosophy, psychology, cognitive psychology, animal behaviour, and even art and poetry all may impact and be impacted by

consciousness, intuition, psychological leanings, and direct, non-dual experiences. For example:

Several articles, including two by one of the present authors, have explored what mysticism might teach us about consciousness;
 Many thoughtful people are exploring the role of consciousness in shaping cultures;
 Scientific studies have been conducted on distance healing and the effects of prayer on medical treatment;
 Scholars have begun to explore the role and impact of consciousness, not only apophatic and non-dualistic experiences, but also in visions of God, Christ and other divine forms; and
 The present issue of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* offers the analyses of several noted authors on a variety of spiritual experiences.

That the field is so open-minded seems right and proper. After all, if there is one thing that is certain about consciousness studies, it is that we do not know the answers. We do not know how to think about consciousness, how it relates to the body, or how it might connect to anything beyond the body. We do not know if the final theory of consciousness will look like a formula, a brain diagram, a sentence, some combination of the three, or something entirely different. We do not even know the correct questions to ask. Clearly, this field is in a formative stage.

But one thing is clear. The interplay between subjectivity and objectivity must be part of any complete answer, and this examination can benefit greatly from studies of culture and general research on the nature of consciousness. On the one hand, subjectivity and intentionality clearly are influenced by a range of cultural and linguistic contexts and backgrounds. As Dr. Katz and others have pointed out, our background and training set up situations and influence our ability to have most experiences, including many mystical ones. The vector in this analysis goes from the objective realm of cultural and social influence, to our subjective ability to have such experiences.

On the other hand, consciousness itself can influence culture and society — its language, theology and belief, conceptual systems, etc. Similarly, religious experiences can influence one's belief system, and, if one writes or speaks persuasively, the belief systems of an entire tradition. The direct experiences of Buddha, Patanjali, Muhammad, Paul and Uddalaka clearly played a role in the formation of their respective traditions. So this vector of influence goes from subjective consciousness to objective culture.

Culture and consciousness interact with, and reflexively influence, one another, and so do biology and consciousness. Biology and neurobiology clearly influence consciousness — change the brain chemistry, or change neural pathways, and you will change some aspect of consciousness. Electrically stimulate some aspect of the brain, and the subject will have some shift in conscious experience, be it a memory, a visual distortion, or a desire. Physiology clearly influences our ability to have a vision of the divine, or to experience a moment of non-dual emptiness.

Conversely, consciousness influences biology. If you have a thought or a fear, clearly the local chemistry of the brain will shift, however subtly. This is the whole point of the theory of a fight or flight mechanism: when I think I'm in danger, my heartbeat, blood pressure, epinephrine output and other physiological parameters will change. A long-term subjective shift in feelings or awareness, generated by a happy or unhappy marriage, stressful job or long-term meditation inevitably will cause long-term changes in body and brain physiology. Similarly, spiritual satisfaction will have its long-term physiological effects.

The study of religion will benefit greatly from a more interdisciplinary consideration of how consciousness and subjective experiences, including religious ones, may actively influence, and be influenced by, human physiology. To undergo a vision of any divine form, or even to believe that we are having such a vision, will no doubt effect our heart rate, our blood chemistry and pressure, our serotonin levels, etc. It is high time that we studied how, and how much.

It is time for scholars of religion to leap with both feet into the discussion of consciousness, spirituality, and the role of direct experience as important and creative elements of human religions. What will this mean? Many things. We must explore the nature of spiritual experiences in more detail by drawing more guidance from consciousness studies. We must learn how physiology connects with spiritual experiences by increasing research on the biology of religious experience. We must examine the implications of research on the biology of religious experience for views on the 'validity' of those experiences. We also must understand how significant conscious experiences may have shaped and redirected the world's religious traditions, as, for example, Spanish Catholicism shifted significantly as a result of Theresa's visions.

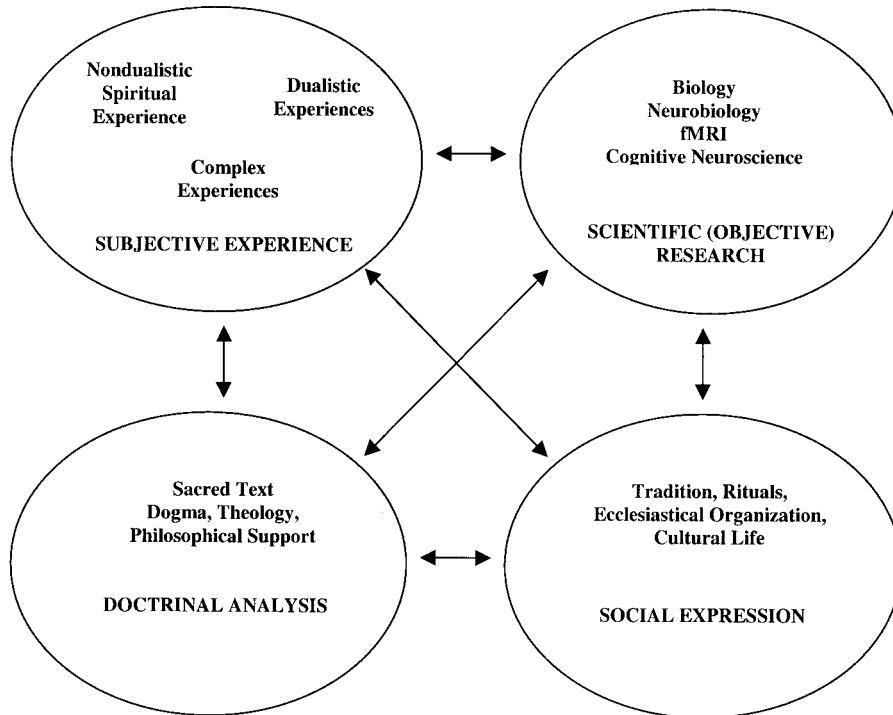
It is time for scholars of religion to open their conceptual doors to a fuller range of analyses and to embrace the total phenomenon of religions and religious experiences. It is time to develop alternative and more inclusive paradigms that include more than social and conceptual influences. There is a place for the analysis of the given, but also for the analysis of the experientially novel. There is a place for the analysis of dogma, but also of the ineffable. It is time to include more of human life in the study of religion.

Four Aspects of the Study of Religion

How might we typologize the different elements of a more complete study of religion? We suggest that there are four discrete but interrelated aspects to a thoroughgoing methodology for religion. Let's look at each one in turn.

A. Doctrinal Analysis — Understanding God's message as revealed through human language and concepts.

In much of the Graeco-Semitic religion of the West, the basic assumption has been that God reveals primarily through prophets, oracles and divine messengers. This view brought the study of texts and historical dogma to the fore, causing many theological seminaries and universities to emphasize this methodology. As



a result of this history, doctrinal analysis remains overemphasized in the field of religion as a whole.

Yet as Wiebe, Sharf, and Lancaster show in the pages below, a thoroughgoing methodology must *include* this doctrinal aspect. Insofar as it's focused on hermeneutics and the lived meaning of a text, it is the province of Wilber's lower left quadrant.

B. Social Expression — Understanding society's interpersonal, cultural and religious interactions.

This approach also emphasizes background analysis, except that the deconstructive method here primarily is focused on society, ritual, sociological, and interpersonal behavioural patterns. Too often, historians and sociologists of religion focus primarily on this approach to the exclusion of all others, as if to reduce the understanding of religion to anthropology and socio-political dynamics. This approach generally leaves out the 'felt experience' of the religious practitioner, which is similar to a deaf person's studying music through the analysis of written musical notes, or a reviewer of written recipes never tasting the cuisine. It tends to devalue the religious lives of others and the idiosyncracies of religious experience itself.

Krippner's fascinating study of shamans and primal culture delves into society's interpersonal, cultural and religious interactions.

C. Subjective Experience — A study of the felt character or peculiarities of religious experiences.

In our diagram we have separated two distinct kinds of religious experience, non-dualistic and dualistic, roughly apophatic and kataphatic forms of spirituality. We also recognize that some experiences, which we call ‘complex experiences’, may include elements of one or both, and thus that there is a continuum of religious experiences. Subjective experiences of any kind, we suggest, may influence dogma insofar as major religious leaders such as Paul, Theresa or Buddha try to express what it is that they have experienced. Experiences may effect tradition, ritual, and even politics, as in the case of Joan of Arc’s remarkable experiences. And these experiences clearly will have their biological correlates, too.

The upper left quadrant of Wilber’s model expressly encourages explorations of spiritual experiences, while the papers by Newberg and d’Aquili, Deikman, and Austin, also expressly include the subjective side of spiritual life.

Although some experiences, notably the non-dualistic and ‘pure consciousness’ varieties, seem largely, or perhaps even entirely, unconstructed by cultural language and background, other experiences seem more shaped by the background. What, then, is the relationship between formed and unformed experiences?

Here we can turn to the religious and spiritual traditions themselves. Because priests and practitioners have pondered such questions for centuries, the testimonies and sacred scriptures of individual traditions may have something to teach us. In our study of particular traditions, and in our own experiential lives, we have noticed a kind of continuum. One begins a spiritual practice, of course, utterly enmeshed in the historical world, or what Buddhists and Hindus would call *samsara*. This is the lowest level of Bonaventure’s spiritual ascent, the first of the ten stages of Ox herding. As meditation slowly moves one away from sensation and thought, the formative role of background and context slowly slip away. One becomes less and less aware of one’s surroundings, thinks with borders that are less and less clearly defined, and moves away from the cares of the world. The fourteenth century English text entitled *Cloud of Unknowing* calls this moving into the Cloud of Forgetting. And in some branches of Buddhism and Hinduism, practitioners are believed to have become less and less enmeshed in *samsara*, the cyclical mundane world.

D. Scientific (Objective) Research — A variety of objective studies performed on religious adepts and believers.

Just as intellectual and sociological processes are involved with some religious experiences, so, too, may a variety of physiological processes be correlated with them. As we see in the pages that follow, neuropsychology, biology, developmental psychology, cognitive neuroscience, fMRI, and other areas of research all may be used to understand religious experiences. It would be premature to identify ‘causes’ *per se*, but correlations may help us understand some parameters of religious consciousness at work.

Papers by Andresen, Newberg and d'Aquili, and Austin all provide examples of the use of science to examine religion, while Wilber's upper right quadrant also invites this methodological approach.

Consciousness and the Study of Religion

The study of religion brings into sharp focus a particular kind of consciousness — generally called 'religious experience'. Anthropologists and religionists alike have noted the surprising consistency with which people across many time periods and cultures have demarcated religious experience differently from other types of experience. That 'religious experience' is so commonly, and cross-culturally, set apart from other types of conscious experience should give us pause. Indeed, perhaps the domain of the religious reflects pan-human correlations at a deeper level than conceptuality — electrical activity in the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain, the stimulation of hormone flows, and the ceasing of random thought generation all may be seen as cross-cultural technologies of spiritual experience.

With studies from the field of cognitive science now readily available, it is time for religious studies to reach beyond its traditional disciplinary methods (e.g., historicism, textual exegesis, philology, and the like) if we really hope to fully understand ourselves and our religions. Textual religious sources reveal worlds about human psychology and sociology, and the historical study of religion helps us contextualize ourselves appropriately in the scheme of things. But if we want to understand how and why we tick *spiritually*, we are going to have to venture out of this box, probing first consciousness, and then its subcategory, religious consciousness (i.e., 'religious experience').

Of course, there are many ways to study religious consciousness, and this issue demonstrates that many different approaches can be valuable. We are arguing, therefore, for a species of methodological pluralism in the study of religious experiences that looks not only at a variety of conscious states, but also one that applies relevant findings from cognitive science, group dynamics theory, and a host of other domains to the task of understanding religion.

The Challenge

Our hope for this special issue is that the field of Religious Studies may take guidance from the field of Consciousness Studies. This will entail a renewed emphasis on religious experience in the study of religion, which seems only appropriate considering the significant degree to which traditions themselves stress the importance of these experiences. The meditative schools of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, not to mention Kabbalah and mystical Christianity, all stress direct experience of the profound. Figures such as Sankara, Meister Eckhart, Nagarjuna and countless others all have stressed the necessity of integrating experience along side conceptuality, and using it to sharpen one's views. To do justice to

these traditions and inspirational figures, we must give full attention to the description and analysis of experiential realities.

It is time as a field of scholarship to remove the barriers that have constrained our vision. A range of approaches illuminate reality, which itself reflects interactive and reflexive causes, requiring a range of methodological glasses. It is time to look through all of them, and to see religion and human life in the richly complex hues that they are.

References

Varela, F.J., Thompson, E. and Rosch, E. (1993), *The Embodied Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).