

1992

## "For a Sociology of Religious Experience."

James V. Spickard  
*University of Redlands*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://inspire.redlands.edu/oh\\_chapters](http://inspire.redlands.edu/oh_chapters)

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), [Religion Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Spickard, James V., "For a Sociology of Religious Experience." (1992). *Our House Chapters and Poems*. Book 37.  
[http://inspire.redlands.edu/oh\\_chapters/37](http://inspire.redlands.edu/oh_chapters/37)

This Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Our House at InSPIRE @ Redlands. It has been accepted for inclusion in Our House Chapters and Poems by an authorized administrator of InSPIRE @ Redlands. For more information, please contact [gabriela\\_sonntag@redlands.edu](mailto:gabriela_sonntag@redlands.edu).

SEEKING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE:  
A SURVEY OF RECENT APPROACHES TO A CONCEPTUALLY  
ELUSIVE PHENOMENON

by

James V. Spickard  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
University of Redlands  
Redlands, California 92373

Appeared as "For a Sociology of Religious Experience."  
Pp. 109-128 in A Future for Religion?: Trends in Social Analysis,  
edited by W.H. Swatos. Newbury Park: Sage, 1992.

Sociologists have not well comprehended religious experiences. We know that more than 30% of Americans claim such experiences (Gallup, 1978; McCready and Greeley, 1976). Yet few in our discipline have investigated them in depth. Some 90 years after William James's (1902) pioneering treatise on the topic, little progress has been made. Why?

It seems to me that the problem is conceptual. James grounded religious experiences in feelings, which he treated as private. He drew a rigid distinction between these experiences and the "overbeliefs" by which they are labeled. Overbeliefs are clearly social. Treating experiences as private, however, removes them from the social sphere. Since James, the sociology of religion has focused on religious institutions and religious ideas. We have neglected religion's experiential side. A variety of observers--many of whom I mention below--have noted this failing. The time has come to cast a wider net.

Recent literature contains five different approaches to a sociology of religious experiences, none of which is fully developed. If we work on all five of these fronts at once, we may yet be able to see religious experiences as fully social phenomenon.

The Idea of Religious Experience

As Wayne Proudfoot (1985) wisely notes, the idea of "religious experience" is no Platonic form, universal in space and time. The notion gained scholarly prominence in the late 17th century, with Friedrich Schleiermacher's (1799/1958) attempt to justify Christianity against Enlightenment rationalism. Thinkers from Descartes to Kant and Hume had dismantled the scientific and metaphysical justifications for religious belief. Historical studies of scripture and of the early church had eroded faith in church authorities. Schleiermacher sought a ground from which to defend religion against its "cultured despisers".

Roughly put, Schleiermacher argued that religion is best grounded in sentiments, not in ideas; he says these sentiments are experienced directly, and remain unstructured by thoughts and actions. Such affective experiences point beyond the natural realm. People experience, for example, a sense of utter dependence--something that cannot be comprehended within the bounds of the everyday world. As they reflect on this experience, they develop the idea of an allpowerful, benevolent God, the only possible source such an experience might have. This is an "overbelief", to use William James's later term. Its details are an intellectual deduction from and elaboration of the experience itself. Religious warnings to the faithful that God is greater than any idea we have of Her confirm this model: that ideas are secondary to experiences in the religious realm. In James's words, religious ideas "presuppose immediate experiences as their subject matter. They are ... consequent upon religious feeling, not coordinate with it, not independent of what it ascertains" (James, 1902, p.424).

In this view, religion cannot be destroyed by metaphysical or ecclesiastical criticism, for it is effectively grounded in the experiences of believers. Religious ideas in fact make sense only to the extent that they express people's experiences in symbolic form. Though science and philosophy may attack such ideas, they cannot undercut the experiences themselves: experiences of dependence (Schleiermacher), of "the More" (James), or of "the Holy" (Otto, 1917/1958). The idea of religious experience, says Proudfoot, is thus a product of the subjective turn by which 19th century Protestant theology tried to evade the Enlightenment critique of religious doctrines.

This claim that religion is based in experience has had tremendous influence in the last two centuries. It has provided intellectual support for a recurrent interest in mysticism and "the gifts of the Spirit", as well as for such notions as the possibility of a "personal relationship" with Jesus. Curiously, it also exempts such experiences from direct scrutiny.

Why do I make this claim? Should not the idea that religion is centered in experience aid analysis rather than hinder it? The problem is simple: if experience is the core of religion and thoughts are only secondary to it, we cannot grasp such experiences by thought. Experience becomes like sensation: something that can only be known by acquaintance. As Otto puts it, the experience of "the Holy"

is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other; and therefore, like every other absolutely primary and elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined. ... it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes "of the spirit" must be awakened. (Otto, 1917/1958, p.7)

This blocks inquiry. Though this framework allows scholars to investigate the intellectual trappings of religious experiences, the circumstances of their appearance and so on, they cannot investigate the experiences themselves. The approach sees experiences as irreducible--uncapturable by thought. Moreover, they are private. They are not amenable, *prima facie*, to sociological analysis because they are not social. Only their trappings, circumstances, etc. enter the social sphere.

The result is just what Schleiermacher intended: on this view, religious experience cannot be judged by science. It is independent, and cannot be reduced to any other thing. William James treats experiences in this way: though he examines their varieties and criticizes the theologies that people have built on them, he accepts the experiences themselves as real. Any analysis of them--including his own--is mere "overbelief": less real than what it tries to explain (James, 1902, p.489).

### A Jamesian Approach

A major social-scientific approach to religious experience follows James's path. Though there are many worthy examples to choose from, I shall focus on Margaret Poloma's recent analysis of the role of "charisma" in the Assemblies of God (Poloma, 1989; Poloma and Pendleton, 1989; see also Jelen, 1991; and Kellstedt, 1989). Poloma's research revolved around a "CHAREX index", an index of paranormal phenomena that Poloma treats as "indicators of a personal relationship with God" (Poloma 1989, p.27). The index includes such elements as praying in tongues, receiving definite answers to prayer requests, giving prophecies at church services, and being "slain in the Spirit"--common but not universal experiences for members of the Assemblies. She assessed the frequency of these experiences by questionnaire and phone survey ("Have you ever..."), then statistically analyzed the connections between CHAREX and various sociodemographic variables, an index of religious participation and an index of evangelism.

Poloma's analysis is thorough, and her work has the merit of taking members of the Assemblies seriously when they say that such experiences are central to their religious life. Though faked religious experiences are probably at least as common as faked orgasms, certainly some of these experiences are valid. The problem, however, is what people's reports of their own experiences really measure. Take Poloma's question about "receiving definite answers to prayer requests", for example. This is no pure experience, separable from its overbelief. As Mary Jo Neitz (1987) has ably shown in her ethnography of a charismatic Catholic prayer group, "having" such an experience involves knowing what a prayer request is, knowing when such a request is appropriate (and when it is not), having ideas about the kinds of ways in which God might answer such a request, and being able to recognize otherwise ordinary events as the answer one seeks. These are all matters of belief, on which the experience itself depends. One can "have" such experiences only after one has accepted the ideas that make these experiences possible.

Speaking in tongues is similarly inseparable from believing. A person does not first have the experience, then come to interpret it in religious ways. If this were so, people would first speak in tongues, then join the Assemblies to have their experiences explained and valued. Instead, prospective members learn that the experience exists, what it means, and how to pray to have it. Then they learn how to produce it. Neitz shows in some detail how her informants learn to speak in tongues by learning to label, attend to and even amplify certain occurrences that they might otherwise ignore. A person's report of such an experience cannot be accepted as pure experience, separable from religious beliefs.

Many social scientists besides Poloma use the overbelief model. I came close to this approach in an article on the role the *johrei* experience plays in the lives of members of *Sekai Kyusei-kyo*, one of the new Japanese religions (Spickard, 1991a). Though the model takes religious experience seriously, it fails to acknowledge the role that religious ideas and institutions play in the construction of the experiences themselves. A full sociology of religious experience needs at least this much.

### Labeling Experiences

A common and related approach also separates religious experiences from beliefs. It treats the former as anomalous brain-states and the latter as labels--both of which are open to empirical analysis. This approach is particularly common among psychologists investigating the altered states of consciousness that often appear in religious settings.

A fine example of this approach is Susan Blackmore's (1983, 1984) analysis of the psychophysiological origin of out-of-body experiences.

During such experiences--which are quite well attested--people perceive themselves as having a double or astral body, which travels free of the physical body and sees close things as if they were far away. Blackmore argues that despite such perceptions, we cannot conclude that people's "spirits" actually leave their bodies and travel to distant places. Really, she argues, such experiences are matters of perception, and provide only illusory support to the religious belief in life after death.

Blackmore points out that in normal consciousness, we do not directly experience the world. Rather, our brains mold our perceptions into a model of reality; we then "experience" this model. Normally, our brains combine our awareness of our bodies, our awareness of our thoughts, and our visual, auditory and other perceptions into a fairly stable self-model. We "experience" ourselves as located

in our head, behind our eyes, or in some other convenient spot within the body. Wherever it is, that does not tell us that there is a soul or something at that spot, rather it tells us that we have chosen to organize our perception and self image that way, as a convenience in our construction of experience. (Blackmore, 1983, p.150)

If the normal place we locate the self is merely the result of a convenient model, what is to prevent our brains from occasionally putting the self elsewhere? Could we not experience ourselves above and behind the head, for example, where many out-of-body experiences appear to be set? Similarly, what is to prevent the brain from including only some of our sensations in its model-building--leaving out, for example, the thoughts that normally fill most of our waking lives? This, says Blackmore (1986), is how we experience meditation: as a silencing of the internal chatter that is so much a part of our ordinary reality.

In both cases, says Blackmore, our vivid experiences are "real". Yet they are evidence for the truth of neither the immortality of the soul nor the possibility of nirvana. The theologies that these experiences "support" are overbeliefs: labels that we attach to our experiences to explain them. Clearly, overbeliefs need not be religious: an out-of-body experience can attract a secular interpretation as easily as it can a religious one. (Otherwise parapsychology would appeal only to religious audiences.) Religiousness, for Blackmore, is a matter of labeling; the same experience may be religious or secular depending on how it is named.

Other scholars have pursued such explanations with a fine appreciation of people's experiences, yet without taking native interpretations at face value. David Hufford (1982), for example, has exhaustively examined reports of nocturnal assault, in which people feel themselves attacked and sat upon at night, burdened as if by a crushing weight. In Newfoundland, where

Hufford first encountered such reports, the experience is called "The Old Hag". There it is believed to be a supernatural visitation. Inquiry in the United States found similar experiences to be widespread, possibly affecting "15 percent or more of the general population." The event is "probably best described as sleep paralysis with a particular kind of hypnagogic hallucination." Though it is not culturally produced, "cultural factors heavily determine the ways in which the experience is described (or withheld) and interpreted" (Hufford, 1982, pp.245-6). That is, people's interpretations of this event are overbeliefs: labels by which they name what has happened. Interestingly, not all societies have a name for this night terror; in such societies, people keep quiet, lest they be thought insane. In Hufford's view, such an experience is empirically separable from any given interpretation of it. Both the experience and the beliefs are open to investigation.

In a similar vein, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has documented an experience he calls "flow":

the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement. ... We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present and future. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b, p. 43)

Csikszentmihalyi and his associates interviewed rock climbers, dancers, chess masters, surgeons and others who engage in activities requiring a much concentration. When their skill and the requirements of the task match exactly, he says, they can attain an identifiable state of consciousness. They can become one with their activity, the self dissolves and the "flow" experience emerges.

Though he does not pursue the matter, Csikszentmihalyi suggests that many religious experiences are akin to "flow". Peak experiences, the meditation practices of Zen, Yoga and so on are valued in themselves, and cannot be reduced to "the external goals ... [that are] mere tokens that justify the activity" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a, p. 37). Mary Jo Neitz and I have extended Csikszentmihalyi's hints because many of our informants' religious experiences exhibit a "flow"-like quality. "All sense of individual self vanishes. The person feels in a time out of time, connected to 'the way things really are'" (Neitz and Spickard, 1990, p. 24). Here, again, the experience is seen as real, and its interpretation as an overbelief. Depending on the religious setting, this experience might be labelled the Kiss of Universal Peace or the Presence of Jesus Christ--or the Temptation of the Evil One. Outside religious settings, the experience will not be seen as religious at all.

There are two problems with this approach. First, it is open to the criticism leveled at Poloma above: that experiences are not completely separable from their labels, but are at least to some degree constituted by them. A "flow" experience, for example, is likely to be different for someone who believes it is a gift of God than for someone who believes it is a gift of the Devil. Hufford suggests as much in his discussion of the cross-cultural differences in the ways people talk about their night terrors; Blackmore allows that one's intellectual acceptance or rejection of out-of-body experiences will influence those experiences.

Second, the approach undercuts a full sociology of religious experiences simply because it limits social influence to ideas. According to the model, people have experiences; then they learn how to label those experiences. Though the first act is psychological and investigable, only the latter act is social. As I shall relate below, I see at least two other ways in which experiences of the type Blackmore, Hufford, and Csikszentmihalyi describe can be seen as social. A sociology of religious experience must be more than a sociology of ideas about religious experience--at least if it is to be worth furthering.

### Constructivism

Both of the above approaches to religious experience separate such experiences from beliefs. Another social-scientific approach to religious experience begins by questioning this split. In fact, it explores the ways that experiences and ideas condition one another. Mary Jo Neitz's (1987) description of the interpenetration of religious ideas and experiences among charismatic Catholics--related above--is a noteworthy example of this approach, which I have labeled "constructivism". It treats experiences as central to religion, but does not see them as independent of the religious ideas by which they are explained.

The best theoretical presentation of constructivism is Wayne Proudfoot's (1985) critique of Schleiermacher and James, to which I have already referred. Proudfoot argues that religious experiences always presuppose religious ideas. Schleiermacher's experience of ultimate dependence, for example, cannot be identified as such without reference to the ideas of dependence and ultimacy. Which comes first, after all: a feeling of ultimate dependence? Or the notion that dependence might be ultimate--that is, beyond the natural sphere? A baby feels dependence on its caregivers, but this is not the feeling that Schleiermacher sees leading to religion. By the time a person has developed enough for such a feeling to emerge, s/he is thoroughly imbued with the concepts by which it will be articulated. One cannot separate these ideas from the experiences, says Proudfoot, and then build religion on the latter alone.

Proudfoot's approach to James is similar. James based religion on feeling, and Proudfoot calls on attribution theory to argue that emotions are not simply given, but are matters of interpretation (Proudfoot, 1985, chap. 5; Proudfoot and Shaver, 1975). He leans heavily on Stanley Schachter's experiments, in which research subjects were given adrenaline, then placed in a social context that led them to interpret their arousal in one or another way (Schachter and Singer, 1962; see also Maslach, 1979). Subjects who were confronted with abrasive individuals came to see their arousal as anger; those exposed to euphoria thought themselves happy. In each case, a subject's felt experience was a product of both arousal and self-interpretation. Pure emotions, says Proudfoot, are impossible; thus James's attempt to base religion on pure feeling is absurd.

Clever readers will at once see the flaw in this argument. Instead of abolishing the distinction between experiences and labels, Proudfoot has merely pushed the labeling process back one step. With Schachter, he sees emotions themselves as labels applied to physiological states. In one circumstance, one label applies; in another circumstance, another. Emotions for him are like experiences for James: sensations plus overbeliefs. Note, however, that for James emotions were themselves physiologically based. "My theory," James wrote, "is that the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion" (James 1890, Vol. 2, p. 449). In being named, these perceptions are given conceptual content; the perceptions, though, are still analytically separable from their names. Proudfoot and James are thus in agreement: at some level, one's sensations are separable from the names they carry. Proudfoot may want to draw the line closer to the body than does James, but the structure of their division is the same. To enter human discourse, experiences must be named--and that naming is an overbelief.

What, then, are we to make of constructivism? Clearly, constructivists like Neitz and Proudfoot show that we cannot just accept religious experiences as given; we must ask about their origins, to which religious beliefs may contribute. Not only does "speaking in tongues" involve learning religious ideas, out of which the experience is at least partly generated; the apprehension of a "flow" experience also has a conceptual component that cannot simply be declared "overbelief", much less ignored. Just as clearly, these experiences cannot be subsumed by beliefs, as Proudfoot sometimes tries to claim. Something beyond belief is involved; that something is worth investigating. The question for sociologists, then, is whether this something is social. Are ideas the only avenue by which religious experiences can be shared?

In the rest of this paper, I want to lay forth two other ways in which religious experiences are social. Neither approach has received much attention in the sociology of religion; I suggest that it is time that each does.

### Learning to Have Religious Experiences

The first of these approaches starts from the realization that no matter how much ideas may help constitute religious experiences, something non-conceptual always remains. Whereas the religious approach treats that something as *sui generis*, and the labeling approach treats it as an odd brain-state, this approach sees it as something learned. People can, this approach argues, learn to have religious experiences--at least some of them. They can learn to produce certain brain-states, which then interact with labels to make experiences they call religious.

Let us take the example of Zen meditation. Meditation, of course, is at base an altered state of consciousness--one in which the usual chatter of thought is missing. To understand this state as an experience, we can contrast it with our experience of ordinary consciousness. As I sit at my desk in ordinary consciousness, for example:

"I" consist of a stable body image with arms and legs, a model of myself as someone working.... "I" have plans for future actions (I must tidy up) and wishes that things were different (I wish I could concentrate harder) ... The world around consists of the room, the sounds outside; the birds (Oh there are some birds singing. Don't they sound nice? I wonder what sort of birds they are. ...); children [playing] (I wish they'd be quiet), the radio (I hate the noise). (Blackmore, 1986, p. 83)

Note the combination of elements that makes up this experience. "Self" and "world" are relatively distinct, though both are built of thought, memory and sensation. "I" combines sensations, thoughts, plans, and self-images; "world" combines sensations, concepts (e.g., birds and their kinds), and judgments (hating the radio). "Self" and "world" intertwine, in that "I" am always reacting to the "world"--both positively and negatively. "I" am distinct from the "world" in my experience, but I am not free of it; one involves the other in ordinary consciousness.

Now see me meditating:

I am still. The birds are singing outside, there are sounds of children playing a long way away, and a distant radio. The muddle on my desk and the room full of things are filled with stillness. There is me sitting. The sounds are full of silence. I hear a woodlouse crawl across the floor. (Blackmore, 1986, p. 73)

Here there is much less going on. My experience is less elaborate, and contains no thoughts. I sense, rather than think, my stillness. I sense myself, I sense the world--but I somehow remain objective to both. Depending on the depth of my meditation, I may not separate them at all.

Given such an identifiable meditative experience--and there are many varieties--how is such a state attained? Clearly, ideas have little to do with it. Learning ideas about meditation is not the same as learning to meditate. Like learning to play the piano, one studies with teachers and reads books, then one practices (see Sudnow, 1978). As one masters the first exercises, one's teacher checks one's progress, gives new instructions or guidance, and sets one to practicing again. Guidance consists not so much in labeling what is occurring as in suggesting technical changes: a different posture, a different mantra, and so on. Gradually one learns to focus one's attention in the right way, and attains the proper state of consciousness.

David Preston (1988) analyzes in some depth the process by which "Zen reality" is transmitted from teacher to pupil. He argues that learning Zen results from meditative practice--for which conceptual rules (sit just so, don't look up, count breaths, etc.) are next to useless. These rules are socially learned, yet Zen teachers provide little guidance about how to follow them. Indeed, the beginner soon discovers that following them does not induce meditation. But Zen offers no other ideas, other than to say that ideas are meaningless.

Preston argues that with extended practice--and an acceptance of the notion that ideas will not cause the Zen meditative state--the "bodymind" becomes more attentive. Preston borrows Bourdieu's (1972/1977) notion of "habitus" to describe this training: the body itself becomes practiced, and its activities take on an "objective meaning" (Bourdieu's term) quite distinct from subjectively religious notions. All the while one meets with one's teacher, who guides one's activity. Ultimately, one may attain the "Zen state": a new sense of self that just sits without thinking or emotion.

The same non-conceptual training techniques that Preston describes for Zen exist in other religious settings. I have elsewhere sketched the ways in which Quakers and participants in the Gurdjieff Work learn to reproduce the meditative states that typify their religious practices (Spickard, 1989). Similar analyses could no doubt be carried out for other religions and for non-meditative religious experiences--though often the training is not as explicit as it is with Zen. The experiences need only be identifiable states of consciousness, and be learned.

Clearly, this approach complements rather than contradicts the labeling and constructivist approaches to the social study of religious experiences. It locates a second way in which these experiences are socially formed, focusing on their non-conceptual aspects. In combination with the labeling

and constructivist approaches, it promises to further our understanding of religious experiences as social products.

### Living in Shared Time

A final approach to religious experience as a social phenomenon begins from the fact that religions--even in their mundane moments--are rarely private. People practice their religions together, side-by-side as it were, in shared time. To understand religions' sociality, we must understand how individuals can share time. To do so requires an excursion into theory: specifically the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz. Best known to sociologists for his analysis of typification (the process by which people call on their socially generated stock of knowledge to make their way in the world), Schutz's writings contain the germ of another approach to social life. I find this approach useful for the analysis of religious experiences.

Schutz fully recognized the importance of shared ideas as part of what ties people together. He argued, however, that such conceptual or semantic communication presupposes sociality rather than the other way around. Sociality is built on "the possibility of living together simultaneously in specific dimensions of time" (Schutz, 1951, p. 162). Semantic understanding is one form of living together, but it is not the only one. Experiencing things together is another. In an essay on the phenomenology of music, Schutz illustrates how experiential sociality occurs.

Musical performances involve many people, among them composers, performers and audiences. For Schutz, the heart of music is the experience shared by these people; music is, after all, the point of their interactions. In Schutz's (1951, p. 170) words,

For our purposes a piece of music may be defined ... as a meaningful arrangement of tones in inner time. ... The flux of tones unrolling in inner time is an arrangement meaningful to both the composer and the beholder, because and in so far as it evokes in the stream of consciousness participating in it an interplay of recollections, retentions, protentions and anticipations which interrelate the successive elements.

These recollections, retentions, and so on are not the private memories people bring to their experiences. They are not associations of musical phrases with parts of the external world. The "Moonlight Sonata" does not have to remind us of moonlight to draw forth the recollections of which Schutz speaks. Instead, such recollections are internal to the music.

The composer, by the specific means of his art, has arranged it in such a way that the consciousness of the beholder is led to refer what

he actually hears to what he anticipates will follow and also to what he has just been hearing and what he has heard ever since this piece of music began. The hearer, therefore, listens to the ongoing flux of music, so to speak, not only in the direction from the first to the last bar but simultaneously in a reverse direction back to the first one. (Schutz, 1951, p. 170)

By structuring inner time, then, music allows composer and beholder to share experience.

Although separated by hundreds of years, the [beholder] participates with quasi simultaneity in the [composer's] stream of consciousness by performing with him step by step the ongoing articulation of his musical thought. The beholder, thus, is united with the composer by a time dimension common to both, which is nothing other than a derived form of the vivid present shared by the partners in a genuine face-to-face relation. (Schutz, 1951, pp. 171-2)

Music's peculiar sociality is not dependent on conceptual thought. Composers, performers and audience all bring to music a socially generated stock of knowledge, which forms the ground of their experiences. But musical experience is not reducible to that ground. Music generates a shared experience of inner time: what Schutz calls a "mutual tuning-in relationship".

Mary Jo Neitz and I have argued that this relationship can be the basis for a sociology of religious experience (Neitz and Spickard, 1990; Spickard 1991b). Experiences are patterns of inner time; like all patterns in inner time, they can be shared. People experience time together in many religious settings, but especially in rituals. Instead of focusing on rituals' ideational contents--their theologies and symbols--a Schutzian approach could focus on the ebb and flow of their activity. Rituals, in this view, help people "tune-in" to one another, to share an inner state of consciousness. Seen in this light, the experiences that people have in religious settings are profoundly social--and in a quite basic way.

To illustrate what such an approach can do, I have elsewhere applied Schutz's insights to traditional Navajo religion (Spickard, 1991b). I argue that Navajo rituals structure their participants' experiences of time; this structuring both generates and confirms the religion's conceptual principles. In essence, this is a more subtle version of James's thesis that religious belief grows out of experience. Unlike James, however, I see such experience as social, not private; unlike Proudfoot, I do not see ideas as the only way to connect the two. A brief overview of my presentation will show what I mean.

Navajo religion is highly ritualized. Firmly rooted in the Southwestern landscape, it concerns itself with maintaining individual and communal life and health. Its main event is the "chant"--a ceremony lasting several days and nights that is designed to reorder one's relationship with the powers of creation. Families choose to sponsor chants at times of crisis or potential disorder. A family member may be ill; someone may be leaving for or returning from a journey among foreigners. That person--the "patient"--is the focus of the ceremony. The family will engage a "singer", a priestly specialist in the particular chant deemed proper for the occasion. The singer will direct the entire ceremony, including sandpaintings, ritual emetics and sweats, and the more than 100 prayers and songs that must be repeated exactly if the ritual is to have effect. These are highly repetitive and display a detailed imagery. On the surface, they contain a simple message. Each invokes a Holy Person, then seeks identification between the patient and that Holy Person's powers. In some chants this leads to a request that the Holy Person remove and disperse the malevolence that besets the patient. Often the language models this removal.

As Sam Gill has pointed out, such prayers must be seen as performances, not as texts. From the point of view of the ritual's participants, such prayers

evoked and structure the images ... in such a way that they create the power that can expel malevolent influences and that can reorder, and hence restore to health and happiness, a person who suffers." (Gill, 1987, p. 110)

Their impact is experiential, not conceptual. Like music, prayer presents a stream of images that structure inner time. It guides the hearer from image to image: backward as the images repeat what has been, forward as they foretell what is to come. Where theology is meant to convince, ritual prayer is meant to be experienced.

Navajo religion is particularly oriented toward prayer, because in prayer is believed to be the origin of the world. On a conceptual level, we can see this in the Blessingway myth, which is retold at all major creative events. Literally translated, it means "the way to secure an environment of perfect beauty". The myth recounts the occasion of the first ceremony, by which the world was made.

At the beginning of this world, the story goes, all was chaos (Gill, 1983, pp. 503-4; 1987, pp. 19ff; Witherspoon, 1983; see Wyman, 1970). The lower worlds had fallen into disorder and been destroyed. All that was left was the medicine bundle, a collection of objects and powers from which the world was made. Thought and speech emerged from the bundle; they took the form of a young man and woman, too beautiful to behold. As Long-life Boy and Happiness Girl they thought and talked about how the world was to

be. Then they built a ceremonial hogan held up by the cardinal directions: East, South, North and West. They entered the hogan and spread the contents of the medicine bundle on the sand. They painted the life forms of all the living things that would be in the world, along with the months of the year, the stars and the landscape. Then they sang through the night. At dawn the painting was transformed into the world the Navajo know.

I have summarized this story; the Navajo do not do so. The Blessingway myth is told only in the context of ritual, where it is self-referencing. The story says that thought and speech created the world at the beginning of time; in the ritual retelling they create it once again. But this time the creation is in inner time--in the experience of teller and hearer. Every retelling is an origin. As people experience the story again, the world is renewed.

Their experience is not vicarious. Though the ritual goes to great lengths to identify the patient with the supernaturals, and to model his or her cure, its ultimate reference is not "there-then". It is "here-now". More particularly, the ritual experience is not a copy of the original world-creation. It is the world-creation. In Navajo eyes, the ritual literally recreates the world. In Austin's terms, Navajo ritual is performative. Navajo "ritual language does not describe how things are; it determines how they will be" (Witherspoon, 1983, p. 575; see also Gill, 1977). By telling the myths of the world's origin in ritual, it allows ritual participants to experience the world restored to its original perfection.

Like music, this world-creation cannot be done conceptually. I can summarize rituals, but doing so subverts their purpose. Rituals to restore perfection take time. They use the same tools that did the original deed: knowledge and language. And they are patterned on that deed. Long-life Boy and Happiness Girl sang songs and painted sand in the first hogan. Ritual singers do the same today. Order and harmony arise as they create their world in its minute detail. Ritual, like music, is a reordering of shared time.

Navajo chants are social experiences in three ways. They are social in so far as they require many people for their execution. This is the sociality of church life that our discipline studies well. They are social in so far as they make use of shared elements of the Navajo world view. This is the sociality of beliefs our discipline also acknowledges.

But Navajo chants are also social as they guide experience along well-worn channels, toward an inner reorientation to the world. Through ritual acts, the patient is united in inner time with all patients who have gone before. The singer is united in inner time with all singers. The helpers are united with all helpers and the families with all families. And all are united with the Holy Persons, the world-creators.



To the extent that we limit our understanding of the social nature of religion to churches and to beliefs, we miss much of Navajo religion's purpose. It is not, primarily, designed to heal social splits, though it may do that. It is not, primarily, designed to reinforce or change people's ideas, though it may do that as well. It is designed to 'cure' people: to create an experience of the harmony between self, society and world that in the Navajo scheme of things always is, and is always coming to be. This harmony lives in a shared present--in the midst of ritual.

Navajo rituals are thus directly analogous to musical performances, conceptualized in Schutzian terms. By structuring inner time, both rituals and music unite people, living and dead, in a common experience. First this happens, then this, then this--not just to me but to you and to our ancestors and our descendents to come. Ritual forms community and keeps it alive; the shared experience of ritual is at the center of the religious life.

### The Paths Ahead

We have, then, five approaches to the social study of religious experience. Three focus on the relationship between experiences and religious ideas. A fourth focuses on how various experiences--seen as altered states of consciousness--are learned. And the fifth focuses on rituals as experiences of shared time. Ideas, practical learning, and the "mutually tuned-in" moment are three different social aspects of religious experiencing. Hitherto only the first has been explored, and that only slightly; all deserve study.

Each of the five approaches can generate concrete research. Of these, the Schleiermacher/James overbelief model is probably the least useful. Though it finds religious experiences important, its portrayal of them as *sui generis* discourages detailed inquiry. A full sociology must at least explore the ways in which ideas and institutions interact with the experiences themselves. Rather than suggest ways to pursue the overbelief model, then, I shall focus my suggestions for future inquiry on the other four.

Despite its theoretical limitations, the labeling approach could well generate more research along the lines Blackmore, Hufford and Csikszentmihalyi have pioneered. Such research would isolate and identify a particular kind of experience, then explore the ways it is manifested and interpreted in different religious and non-religious settings.

New religions and New Age groups are prime sites for such investigations. For example, the *johrei* experience that is central to *Sekai Kyusei-kyo* has many analogues. A form of spiritual healing, *johrei* involves the projection of "divine light" from the hand of a minister or church member. This light "raises the spiritual level" of the person or group on the receiving end. Though it is not seen, people often feel it as a heat passing over their bodies. The church teaches that *johrei* clears away the spiritual

clouds that cause illness and misfortune. Members equate it with the Light of God that they believe is bringing about a new age (Spickard, 1991).

When I was studying *Sekai Kyusei-kyo* in the mid-1970s, the Berkeley Psychic Institute was teaching an almost identical kind of spiritual healing. Here, the experience was at most quasi-religious. It was presented as a skill that required no metaphysical allegiances, only a desire to become a psychic healer. Yet in its most developed form it involved the use of visualized spirit guardians. As near as I could tell--as a non-practitioner--it was the same as *johrei*. I later felt similar sensations from the hands of an American Indian healer. Though other scholars have noted the common occurrence of such healing practices, even among the white middle-class (McGuire, 1988), they have generally looked at beliefs about healing, rather than at the experience itself. It strikes me that there is a need for a good comparative study of such healing, undertaken from a phenomenal point of view. First, such a study would locate a set of similar healing practices. Then it would probe the ways in which different religions interpret them.

Of course, the topic need not be healing. It could be any of a number of sensations or states of consciousness found in religious settings. Csikszentmihaly's "flow" experiences and Blackmore's out-of-body experiences are only two of many possibilities. Students of American Indian and Siberian shamanism, of Tibetan Buddhism (particularly in its wilder forms), and even of Scientology should have no difficulty locating phenomena to investigate. In some cases--such as the diverse forms of meditation found among Buddhists--some comparative physiological work has been done (see Tart, 1975). With a common mental state already identified, the sociologist has only to study the different ways in which the state is labeled.

A more complete project would move from studying the social labeling of such religious states of consciousness to examining the ways in which those states are learned. This moves from the second to the fourth approach outlined above. Preston's (1988) work on Zen is a perfect model; it shows how experiences and ideas interact in the process of transmitting non-conceptual reality. Besides this, and my rudimentary research on other forms of meditation (1989), little work has been done in this area. Like the labeling approach, the learning approach depends on identifying discrete states of consciousness as central to religions. Transpersonal psychologists are more accustomed to this than are sociologists. The latter must master the psychological literature in this field and then extend it in the direction of their own interests.

One current researcher in this area is worth mentioning, if only because her work cries out for sociological completion. Felicitas Goodman (1986, 1990) posits a single "religious altered state of consciousness (RASC)",

which she says is cross-culturally universal. This "RASC" is physiological, she says: trance induction techniques "activate certain neurophysiological processes", which bring about certain key experiences. "What produces the differences is the change in [body] posture" during trance induction (1986, p83). In a series of experiments, Goodman had her subjects crouch like a Nupe diviner, or lay like a shaman figure from a cave painting at Lascaux. Each of these (and other) postures produces a distinct experience, she says. Nupe imitators, for example, see blue or white lights, feel themselves spun around, and think they are all-knowing. She claims that other body postures generate other experiences.

The problem with Goodman's work is two-fold. First, though she claims that trance in a given body posture always produces the same experience, I find her subjects' trance descriptions not all that similar. They are certainly not identical enough to undercut the notion that people's ideas about what they are doing influence how they describe what happens to them. Second, she neglects almost completely the social context in which her trance states occur--the very thing that most interests sociologists. Reading her 1990 work, it seems that as her subjects learn to enter trance in given body postures, they also learn to have the "right" experiences. The final experience is no mere idea; neither is it a pure result of bodily position; it is something in between. This, of course, matches the constructivist paradigm--though with more emphasis on the body that a constructivist like Proudfoot is willing to allow. A nice research project could be designed to explore the social conditioning of posture-induced trance states, building on Goodman's work.

As Neitz's (1987) work with charismatic Catholics shows, however, there is no need to limit the study of religious experiences to the marginal and the bizarre. Middle-class American religion is not without experiences.

It would be fascinating, for example, to approach the experiences Poloma (1989) finds in the Assemblies of God with the sophistication of a constructivist. How, for example, do the young, educated, upwardly-mobile members of the Assemblies come to welcome tongue-speaking rather than rejecting it? On the surface, this seems odd: who would welcome words coming unbidden out of one's mouth, even if they are unintelligible and thus not potentially embarrassing? Even odder is "being slain in the spirit": being knocked down by an unseen force in the middle of prayer. Surely the constructivist could trace the complex interaction between sensation, belief, and social approbation that together constitutes this experience. Though the Assemblies of God are not a mainline denomination, similar charisms are found in most of the more "establishment" churches.

The constructivists, of course, do not have the only fruitful approach. How interesting it would be to reanalyze Neitz's data on charismatic

Catholics, to see if identifiable states of consciousness were being taught while these Catholics learned to see their experiences as religious. Is learning to speak in tongues just a matter of identifying and labeling certain sensations? Or does one also learn to produce a certain state of consciousness, which one also learns to interpret in a particular way? This is an empirical, not a theoretical question. A delicious combination of the labeling, constructivist and learning approaches could harvest a bumper crop for the canny researcher.

The last approach, based on Schutz's sociology of music, requires separate treatment. Essentially, it allows us to see rituals as experiences--as opposed to just collections of symbols, the focus of most recent ritual studies. In a sense this is not new: Emile Durkheim (1912/1965) saw rituals as experiences. He, however, saw ritual only as "collective effervescence", not as the multi-textured sharing of time of which Schutz speaks. Schutz substitutes a scalpel for Durkheim's handcar--and allows a far better analysis of ritual experience as a result.

It is easy to imagine an empirical study of ritual following Schutz's lead. One would most likely choose a religion rich in liturgy--one whose members identify ritual as a key reason for belonging. Rather than focusing on what ritual "means" to them, and postulating a mental "traditionalism" as the source of its appeal, this approach would look at the ways sharing ritual forms people into a community. As with the Navajo, we should expect the experience of ritual to resonate with their theology: the former elaborates in time what the latter summarizes in ideas. Yet ritual is not reducible to these ideas. Theology may be a blueprint, but one cannot live in a blueprint. Ritual is the house wherein such religions dwell.

Traditionalist Catholics, Orthodox Jews, and Eastern Rite Christians all emphasize ritual enough to make such a study promising. One could look at different liturgical styles within these groups. How do different styles affect individuals? Do they solidify, or fragment the community? Of particular interest might be converts--especially those for whom ritual was a chief attraction. How do they experience these rituals, as opposed to the rituals of their former churches? Are such converts different from "natives" in their approach? Another study might focus on differences between ritually oriented and dogmatically oriented denominations. Does the relative importance laid to the experience of ritual make a difference to church loyalty? To clergy/laity relations?

Such questions are endless, and there is no point in specifying them further here. Given the conceptual tools with which to work, it is but a small step to explore the experience of ritual time as a separate social modality, alongside the sociality of ideas and of institutions. In a sense, the entire sociological study of religious experience has been waiting for such tools.

For too long have we thought such experiences to be purely private. Now that we can see experiences as social in several ways--and as central to the religious life--progress is certain to occur.

#### REFERENCES

- Blackmore, S.J. (1983). Are out-of-body experiences evidence for survival? Anabiosis--The Journal for Near-Death Studies, 3(2), 137-155.
- Blackmore, S.J. (1984). A psychological theory of the out-of-body experience. Journal of Parapsychology, 48, 201-218.
- Blackmore, S.J. (1986). Who am I? Changing models of reality in meditation. In G. Claxton (Ed.), Beyond Therapy: The Impact of Eastern Religions on Psychological Theory and Practice (pp. 71-85). London: Wisdom Publications.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). Outline of a theory of practice. (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1972)
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975a). Beyond boredom and anxiety: The experience of play in work and games. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975b). Play and intrinsic rewards. Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 15, 41-63.
- Durkheim, Emil. (1965). The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (J.W. Swain, Trans.). New York: The Free Press. (Original work published 1912).
- Gallup, G. (1978). Religion in America: 1977-1978 (Gallup Opinion Index Report No. 145). Princeton, NJ: Princeton Religious Research Center.
- Gill, S.D. (1977). Prayer as person: The performative force in Navajo prayer acts. History of Religions, 17, 143-157.
- Gill, S.D. (1983). Navajo views of the origin. In A. Ortiz (Ed.), Handbook of North American Indians: Southwest (pp. 502-505). Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- Gill, S.D. (1987). Native American religious action: A performance approach to religion. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Goodman, F.D. (1986). Body posture and the religious altered state of consciousness: An experimental investigation." Journal of Humanistic Psychology 26(3), 81-118.
- Goodman, F.D. (1990). Where the spirits ride the wind: Trance journeys and other ecstatic experiences. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Hufford, D.J. (1982). The terror that comes in the night: An experience-centered study of supernatural assault traditions. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press.
- James, W. (1890). The principles of psychology (Vols 1-2). New York: Henry Holt.
- James, W. (1902). The varieties of religious experience. New York: The Modern Library.
- Jelen, T.G. (1991). Political mobilization of religious beliefs. New York: Praeger.
- Kellstedt, L.A. (1989). The meaning and measurement of evangelicalism: Problems and prospects. In T.G. Jelen (Ed.), Religion and Political Behavior in the United States (pp. 3-21). New York: Praeger.
- Maslach, C. (1979). The emotional consequences of arousal without reason. In C.E. Izard (Ed.), Emotions in Personality and Psychopathology (pp. 565-590). New York: Plenum.
- McCready, W.C., & Greeley, A.M. (1976). The ultimate values of the American population. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- McGuire, M.B. (1988). Ritual healing in suburban America. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Neitz, M.J. (1987). Charisma and community: A study of religious commitment within the charismatic renewal. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books.
- Neitz, M.J., & Spickard, J.V. (1990). Steps toward a sociology of religious experience: The theories of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Alfred Schutz. Sociological Analysis, 51(1), 15-33.
- Otto, R. (1958). The idea of the holy. (J.W. Harvey, Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1917).
- Poloma, M.M. (1989). The Assemblies of God at the crossroads: Charisma and institutional dilemmas. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.
- Poloma, M.M., & Pendleton, B.F. (1989). Religious experiences, evangelism and institutional growth within the Assemblies of God. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 28, 415-431.
- Preston, D. (1988). The social organization of Zen practice: Constructing transcultural reality. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Proudfoot, W. (1985). Religious experience. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Proudfoot, W. & Shaver, P. (1975). Attribution theory and the psychology of religion. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 14(4), 317-330.
- Schachter, S., Singer, J.E. (1962). Cognitive, social and physiological determinants of emotional state. Psychological Review, 69, 379-399.
- Schleiermacher, F.D.E. (1958). On religion: Speeches to its cultured despisers. (J. Oman, Trans.). New York: Harper and Row. (Original work published 1799).

- Schutz, A. (1964). Making music together: A study in social relationship. In A. Brodersen (Ed.), Collected Papers II: Studies in Social Theory (pp. 159-178). The Hague: Nijhoff. (Original work published 1951)
- Spickard, J.V. (1989). Over-beliefs and religious experiences: Toward a socio-psychology of meditative religions. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Spickard, J.V. (1991a). Spiritual healing among the American followers of a Japanese new religion." Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion, 3, 135-156.
- Spickard, J.V. (1991b). Experiencing religious rituals: A Schutzian analysis of Navajo ceremonies. Sociological Analysis, 52(2), 191-204.
- Sudnow, D. (1978). Ways of the hand: The organization of improvised conduct. New York: Harper and Row.
- Tart, C.T. (Ed.). (1975). States of consciousness. New York: Dutton & Co.
- Witherspoon, G. (1983). Language and reality in Navajo world view. In A. Ortiz (Ed.), Handbook of North American Indians: Southwest (pp. 570-578). Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- Wyman, L.C. (1970). Blessingway: With three versions of the myth recorded and translated from the Navajo by Father Berard Haile. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.