2004

Charting the Inward Journey: Applying Blackmore's Model Meditative Religious Experiences

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APPLYING BLACKMORE'S MODEL TO MEDITATIVE
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

This article applies Susan Blackmore's model of brain self-modeling to explain how people experience altered states of consciousness in meditative religions. Against the experience vs. over-belief model put forth by William James and Wayne Proudfoot, Blackmore's model provides a theoretical base for a social role in the formation of meditative experience itself, not just in its interpretation. Learning to meditate involves learning to attend to certain bodily and feeling states, which involves learning to construct a brain model that produces a different experience of the self. This is not just a matter of socially learned labeling, but of learning to generate authentic psycho-physical experience. Examples are drawn from the author's study of Quakers and practitioners of the Gurdjieff Work.

The social scientific study of religion owes much to William James. It seems trite to say so. Besides setting forth the first modern psychology of religion, he established a key boundary: between the private religious experiences whose varieties he chronicled, and the public "over-beliefs" with which those experiences come to be associated. Experiences, to him, are the essence of religion. They are personal and feeling-oriented; the latter are external interpretations. The former are more real, part of people's lives; over-beliefs are mere symbols of reality. For James, experiences are the source of faith. Gods, demons and doctrines, on the other hand, are the products of people's attempts to interpret these experiences. All people have over-beliefs, he wrote, but none of these touches religion's core (James 1903, 488-9, 508).

James' division has fared well in our disciplines. Peter Berger (1970, 34ff) echoed it in arguing that religion, like the rest of society, provides a socially validated interpretation of private experience. True, his version owed more to neo-Kantianism than to James; he focused on the process by which concepts are used to label experiences, rather than on the experiences themselves. He suggested, in fact, that private experience is at least unsustainable, and possibly unapproachable, without such labels. Still, the dividing line is the same: private experience stands over against public interpretation. The former is personal, the latter social. Religion, in Berger's view, is the process by which society establishes a sacred cosmos, which "provides man's ul-

timate shield against the terror of anomy" (Berger 1969, 26). Like all human externalizations, said Berger, religion makes personal experience socially meaningful.

This division, in effect, tells sociologically oriented social psychologists to keep their hands off religious experiences. Experiences are private, it says, a matter for purely psychological, not social analysis. Sociologists and social psychologists need only concern themselves with religions' public side: the over-beliefs by which such experiences are expressed and thus known. This has done much good. Among other things, it has focused attention on the interpretative process by which private experiences are publicly validated. Along with Durkheim's (1938, 104) similar distinction between the purely psychological and the purely social, it has kept social facts from being absorbed into personal ones.

Yet, James' approach has problems, some of which Wayne Proudfoot noted in his 1985 critique. Proudfoot argued that religious experiences always presuppose religious ideas. James based religion on emotions, and Proudfoot called on attribution theory to show that emotions are not simply given, but are matters of interpretation (Proudfoot 1985, ch. 5; Proudfoot and Shaver 1975). He leaned 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.

This, said Proudfoot, destroys James' neat line between experience and interpretation. If emotions are in part constituted by their interpretations, then our sense of directly experiencing them is an illusion. Ideas help construct such experiences; by extension, they construct religious experiences as well.

Proudfoot's point was well-taken, but is less significant than he implied. Instead of abolishing the distinction between experiences and labels, Proudfoot merely pushed the labeling process back one step. James saw experiences as labels applied to feelings or emotions; Proudfoot noted that emotions themselves were labels applied to

physiological states. However, James, too, saw emotions as physiologically based:

> My theory 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. (1890, 2-449)

In being named, these perceptions are given conceptual content; yet, the perceptions are still analytically separable from the words used to capture them.

Proudfoot and James thus both claimed that some core part of experience is separable from the names such experience carries. Proudfoot may have wanted to draw the line closer to the body than did James, but the structure of their division is the same. To enter human discourse, experiences must be named. That naming is an over-belief, which is open to social psychological investigation in a way that the remainder – the body sensations or emotions, depending on which scholar one follows – are not.

Can we go further? Can we develop a social psychology of religious experience that does not run up against the experience/over-belief divide? In this article, I shall attempt to provide a theoretical basis for the social structuring of at least some religious experiences themselves – as opposed to just the social structuring of their interpretation.

First, I shall present a different model of experience than either James or Proudfoot provides – one that does not negate theirs, but that affords an alternate perspective not suffering their model's limitations. Developed from research into altered states of consciousness, this model allows us to investigate the social formation of altered states and does not limit social influence to the labels by which they are known. It is thus particularly appropriate for the social psychological investigation of that subset of religious experiences in which altered states prevail.

Second, I shall present two examples of religions that encourage altered states of consciousness: religions in which meditation plays a key role. Meditative religions are particularly useful for this exercise, because they place less emphasis on doctrines and church organization than do mainstream groups, while simultaneously not requiring pharmacological experimentation. They thus warn us that religions' charms are not limited to consoling beliefs and warm social contacts –

and that the social influences on religious experiences are not limited to conceptual labels. I shall show how their religions' practices structure their members' experiences, in addition to providing them concepts with which those experiences can be interpreted. Both avenues, in my view, deserve pursuit by social psychologists.

Models of Consciousness

Meditative religions are important test cases for concepts in the social study of religion. Though these religions have doctrines and institutional structures, none is defined by them. Instead, they are defined by an experiential practice. Zen "sitting practice", Vipassana "insight", Gurdjieff "attention", Quaker "sitting in silence" – all are certified more by action than by words. Overtly, these practices are extremely boring, though perhaps no more boring than an overlong sermon. Yet they are undertaken for the sake of a state of awareness that is prized. Meditators label these states such things as "enlightenment", "mindfulness," "waking up", or "worship" (Thich Nhat Hanh 1976; Weissman and Weissman 1996; Tart 1987; Punshon 1987), but such labels are secondary, not primary. Their proof is in the doing, not the believing; their test, as the early Quaker William Penn noted over three centuries ago, is "experimental" (Punshon 1984, 97).

Survey research shows that those who join meditative religions are attracted by the experiences their meditation brings (Gussner and Berkowitz 1988). Doctrines, ethics, and social connections also entice them, but these factors do not exhaust such groups' appeal. The practice itself seems attractive. Some sociologists have acknowledged this, though their disciplinary paradigms have usually steered their analysis in other directions. We know quite a bit about the stages of *liminality* and *communitas* (Hambrick 1979), ethical norms (Tipton 1982), and social organization (Preston 1988), but much less about meditation itself.

What do people get from meditation? To start, we need to know how meditation "works" for its practitioners. Specifically, we need to know something about the meditative experience. What is it, and why does it feel as it does? James (1903, 501-03) attributed its effects to irruptions from the subconscious – a line of reasoning that has adherents even today (Leone 1995; Epstein 1989,1995). Yet, this gives us little help, merely shifting focus from one little-understood phenomenon to another. We need a more specific theory to understand meditation's allure.

One such theory has emerged out of the extensive research on states of consciousness that began in the 1960s (Tart 1975; Ornstein 1973). Developed most recently by the parapsychologist Susan Blackmore (1986; see also: 1984; 1988; 1989; 1992) this theory is clear, comprehensive, posits no esoteric entities, and above all accounts for the experiences of meditators. And unlike the theories of James, Berger, Proudfoot, and others, it does not relegate these experiences to the purely private sphere.

Blackmore points out that in order to understand an "altered state of consciousness" like meditation, we need to know what is altered. That is, we need to know something about ordinary consciousness; then we can examine the changes meditation brings. She therefore starts with the idea – common in Western cognitive psychology – that the brain is a model-builder. Our brains take sense data and build the world out of them. More exactly, they build models of the world. The world does not appear in our consciousness; models of it do. We act toward these models, not toward the world itself. The shape of the models we construct channels our deeds.

This process, of course, is typically occurs without conscious control. The world appears to us as given. Perception is a cognitive but unconscious process by which we construct a representation of the world from sense data. Thinking and remembering build models of the present or the past based on current or remembered sensory input. Even our notion of

> the self is a construct – a complex model consisting of body image, self image, and everything we can remember about what has happened to them. (Blackmore 1986, 74)

Specifically, our self-model combines thoughts, perceptions, and memories into a representation of ourselves-in-the-world. This model is the ordinary "I" through which we experience. (Note: In the following, "I" refers to my self-model and I – without quotes – to my total being.) My experiences are not raw; rather, they result from the way my brain combines sensations, thoughts, feelings, memories, etc. into a representation of "the world". Neither am "I" raw: "I" am a model just as much as is "the world" that "I" experience.

Here is the key part of Blackmore's theory: different models of self produce different experiences. Blackmore does not attribute our experiences to any unchanging soul, spirit, or astral body. Instead, one's experiences depend on the shape of the "I" that one has unconsciously constructed. Given different circumstances, our brains may combine sense data, thoughts, and memories into radically different models. Under the influence of these models, we will experience the world in new ways.

Our waking consciousness, for example, has a relatively stable "I," so it experiences the world as a stable place. We have a firm sense of our bodies, our thoughts, and the world around us. Our brain combines these into an "I" we experience as continuous, in continuous touch with its surroundings. Our dozing "I" is more fleeting, as is the world it builds. This "I" may wax or wane, depending on how much of one's brain constructs a self-model. When "I" disappear, we say, "I must have dozed off." The "I" does not vanish entirely, but it may become absorbed in remembrance rather than the here-and-now.

Sleep is similar. We do not experience anything in deep sleep because we construct no self-model: there is no "I" to experience the sense data we receive. The "I" of normal dreaming, on the other hand, is fragmentary but present; so are our memories of dreams upon waking. Lucid dreaming, in which one is aware of oneself as a dreamer (Green 1968), presents a more stable "I," so its dreams seem more "real"; the self that experiences them is more complete. The difference in our experiences is directly traceable to the models of self that each state builds.

So, says Blackmore, we have a brain and its models. Consciousness, of whatever variety, consists of these models. In our normal state of awareness, we think of ourselves as an "I" inhabiting – and more or less controlling – our bodies. This is of course illusion: I am by no means separate from my body, much less in control of it. But "I" – as a model – am a high-level representation of that body, built by a brain that is attempting to make sense of its perceptions and memories. "I" – as a model – am the result of this on-going process.

Blackmore proposes that what changes in meditation is not modeler – I, the total being -- but the "I"-model.[1] That is, where ordinary consciousness is dominated by a stable, complex model of the self, altered states of consciousness focus our cognitive machinery in such a way as to construct different selves, which we then encounter. In Blackmore's words:

> What is altered in an altered state of consciousness? ... It is the model of reality which is altered. And since "I" am such a model, "I" am altered. This explains why it feels to "me" as though "I" have changed. "I" have. (Blackmore 1986, 80).

Asking about an altered state of consciousness, then, really asks about the changes in our ordinary cognitive model.

What changes? First, there is a changed focus of attention: different states of consciousness attend to different kinds of sense data. We have all, for example, misjudged the height of a chair, sitting down farther than we had expected. Doing so, we were surprised to discover we were not fully attending to our bodies. We ordinarily leave our bodies in the care of an unconscious body-model, which looks out for chair height, curbs, and so on. We could attend to such things, at the cost of some effort. But most of the time our body-model serves us well; we withdraw attention from it to concentrate on "more important" things. Occasionally we must withdraw it: touch typists, for example, cannot think about their fingers; musicians must think their music, not how to produce it. Including the body in the "I"-model fatally hinders performance in each case.

Sometimes the lack of attention runs the other way. Mountain climbers often report reaching a state of physical effortlessness in which they seem to merge with the rock. Thinking disappears; only animal awareness seems to remain. Mihaly Czikszentmihalyi (1975a; 1975b; 1991) calls this state "flow", and links it to activities requiring

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[1] This does not mean that one's total being may not change over time as a result of repeatedly experiencing a changed "I"-model. Most meditative religions predict that consistent meditative practice will have effects on one's character. The specific change to which I refer here is to the "I"-in-the-moment: one's experienced model of self.

much concentration.[2] In Blackmore's terms, its "I"-model severely plays down reflection in favor of a focus on a highly limited range of stimuli – such as the rocks and handholds just before one. Highly focused attention generates focused models of self and world, which the climber experiences as a different state of consciousness.

Even more extreme states are known. Yogic adepts can, it is reported, control their blood flow and stop their breathing, at the cost of an extreme lack of attention to the world around them. Alcohol, marijuana, LSD and so on also alter the body's ability to focus attention, and thus alter our self-models.

But attention to sense data is not everything. Our brains also build thoughts into our models, as well as memories (both conceptual and sensory). Our normal self-representations, for example, include ideas as varied as our sense of self-worth, our values, and our images of our bodies. We think of ourselves as clever or stupid, loyal or self-interested, fat or thin. We act accordingly. If "I" think of myself as a communicator, for example, I will interact with those I encounter far differently than I will if "I" think myself taciturn. As "I" can be tricked by an oddly placed chair, so my thoughts can betray me. If "I" think myself a Don Juan, for example, "I" am embarrassed by failure at love. Had "I" not thought myself a rake, I would not have acted like one – and not failed. Conversely, if "I" think myself unlikable, I will not interact with others, and will not discover that I might be liked. The literature on how social norms affect women's self-image is large and relevant here (see Schur 1984). It is but a particular illustration of the general process by which thoughts become part of our self-models, affecting our experiences.

A Theory of Meditation

All this can be applied to meditative states, inside or outside religions. As I sit at my desk in ordinary consciousness, for example, I construct a model:

> My model of reality consists of self and the world – well divided from each other. "I" consist of a stable body image with arms and legs, a model of myself as someone working,

a lot of modeling of the substance of what I am writing. "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, 83)

Note the combination of elements that makes up this model. "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 model, but I am not free of it; one involves the other in ordinary consciousness. This is part what we mean when we say that someone experiences the world in a "normal" way.

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, 73)

Here there is much less going on. My "self" model is less elaborate, and contains no thoughts. I sense, rather than think my stillness. My "world" model is also sensory; it remains free of concepts and judgments. Both models exist on the same level. I sense myself, I sense the world – but I somehow remain objective to them. Depending on the depth of my meditation, I may not separate them at all.

In meditation, Blackmore says, my normal models of "I" and "world" cease to exist. My attention is focused in such a way that different models emerge. This results in a radically different experience. In her words,

> "I" am as much the sounds as the hearer of the sounds because I have not constructed the model which distinguishes them. ... In a different meditative state, I may not even hear

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[2] For an application of Czikszentmihalyi's work to religion, see Neitz and Spickard (1990).

the sounds of birds, or at least not label them birds, or even sounds, though I do not block them out either. The early processing in the system may be just the same, but never leads to a complex high level model. At that level there may be nothing. I have elaborated no model and so "I" do not exist. (Blackmore 1986, 84)

Three key points deserve our notice. First, awareness is the result of conceptual modeling: the processing of perceptions, thoughts and memories to develop an image of who "I" am in the midst of "my" world. This modeling goes on unconsciously. We do not decide to create a model, then create it. That puts things backwards. Awareness stems from the model; it does not produce it. Learning how to model is thus not like learning addition or social theory. Its achievement is not a conceptual matter.

Second, these models are built out of perceptions, thoughts and memories, which are different at different times and places. Sometimes I feel my breathing; other times I do not. Sometimes I cannot get a particular thought out of my head; other times I cannot seem to recall it. To the extent that the blend of perceptions, thoughts and memories varies, our self-models will vary. We experience these different models as different states of awareness. The contours of these states should thus bear some relation to the elements out of which they are built.

Particularly, models do not just consist of thoughts – the words we learn to apply to the things around us. They integrate thoughts with sense data and memories to build a representation of a "self" that becomes the locus of our experiencing. Analyzing only our concepts, therefore, will fail to grasp the essence of the what we experience. Students of religious experiences thus focus solely on the conceptual contents of those experiences at their peril.

Third – and most important for the study of meditative religions – our perceptions are the result of where we focus our attention in different states of awareness. In the meditative state just illustrated, I hear the birds, children and so on, but do not focus on them. Their sounds go in and out of me, like my breath. Along with my tasks, wishes and so on, they do not grasp my attention, so they do not enter into my model. Altered states of consciousness, in Blackmore's analy-

sis, result from a different attention to things, which we build into different models, experienced by different "I"s.

How does this approach help us understand religious experiences, particularly meditative ones? Two things stand out.

First, concepts (thoughts) are not the sole property of the models built by "ordinary" consciousness; they potentially enter into other states of awareness as well. The conceptual content of dreams, for example, is apt to be different in degree and kind from the conceptual content of our waking consciousness, but both possess some of it. To the extent that religious and other experiences result from self-models that incorporate socially learned concepts, social life affects those experiences directly.

James' sharp distinction between private experiences and public over-beliefs thus fails. Concepts are clearly public, yet they can be among the blocks out of which "private" experiences are built. I say "can be" because their influence in any given case must be empirically determined. The way seems open to measuring the degree to which socially-learned concepts enter into any given level of awareness. In each case, we can gauge concepts' influence in the constitution of the self-model that a given state exhibits. The word "constitution" is key: on Blackmore's theory, thought helps build experience rather than just interpreting it.

The second point focuses on the role of attention in producing altered self-models, and thus altered experiences. It seems clear that the altered states of attention on which meditative religious experiences are based can be socially formed and encouraged. The process is simple to imagine. How does one learn to meditate? Like learning to play the piano, one studies with teachers and reads books, then one practices. As one masters the first exercises, one's teacher checks one's progress, gives new instructions or guidance, and sets one to practicing again. Skill results not so much from naming – labeling one's experiences – as from suggesting technical changes: a different posture, a different mantra, and so on. Gradually one is guided to focus ones attention in the right way, and the proper state of consciousness is achieved.[3]

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[3] For an detailed analysis of this process in music, see Sudnow (1978).

Two examples from different meditative religions illustrate these processes, as well as the different meditative states that result. My first example comes from the "spiritual exercises" practiced by the followers of G.I. Gurdjieff; my second comes from the Religious Society of Friends, better known as Quakers.

The Gurdjieff Work

The "Gurdjieff Work" is a system of "spiritual exercises" developed by G.I. Gurdjieff (1933; 1964; 1975) and some of his followers, most prominently P.D. Ouspensky (1977; see Nicoll 1952; Bennett 1973; Speeth 1976; Vaysse 1978; Tart 1987; De Panafieu, Needleman and Baker 1997; Pentland 1997). While not formally religious – at least if the term "religion" is limited to groups with formal "God"-beliefs – these exercises claim to produce a "hidden knowledge" that adherents believe was long concealed within the Western religious tradition (Needleman 1980). Roszak (1975, 137-45) included Gurdjieff groups in his mid-1970s survey of "the Aquarian Frontier" – a loose-knit collection of growth, healing, and consciousness-raising groups that today would be called "New Age". Organizationally, the Gurdjieff Work is more of a sect than an "audience cult" (Stark and Bainbridge 1985) – the typical organizational form of New Age groups. But its beliefs and practices are kin enough to make Roszak's classification plausible.

At the heart of the Gurdjieff Work is the "group": some 15 to 20 students who meet weekly under the direction of one or two group leaders.[4] Several groups may meet at any given center, and members of different groups will work together at weekly work days, but one's experiences at larger events are always brought back to one's own group for reflection and guidance.

Group members come to their meetings in silence, and sit absolutely still for ten to fifteen minutes. When they have focused their attention, the leaders enter and sit quietly at the front. As the urge rises in them, members ask questions about their practice, the Work, and the "progress" they are making. They often ask for guidance, especially if something unusual has happened at one of the work days.

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[4] The following description is based on a year-and-a-half of fieldwork with Gurdjieff groups in the San Francisco area. See Speeth (1976), Pentland (1997).

The leaders answer these questions, sometimes simply, sometimes complexly. Sometimes they do not answer at all. No direct interchange between members is allowed.

All this is external. While they sit, group members practice what they call an "inner work". They split their attention between the events of the meeting, their breathing and their bodies. They use a specific mental technique to sustain this split; it involves counting and attention to one's skin. (This exercise is also practiced individually each morning.) With their focus thus split, members strive for an altered state of consciousness that Gurdjieff calls "wakefulness".

In the jargon of the Work, "wakefulness" is a full attention to what is "really" going on, without the intrusion of the "dreams" and "fantasies" common to ordinary life. Gurdjieff taught that our everyday consciousness is ruled by associations. I go to work one morning, for example, and pass a car crash. The crash reminds me of an accident I only just avoided last week. Thinking of that accident turns to thinking of the date I had that evening, and how well it turned out. I get so tied up in my memories of that date – and my fantasies about the next one – that I miss my exit and end up 20 minutes late for work. Am I not, in a very real sense, "asleep" to the present?[5]

It is from this "sleep" that the Gurdjieff Work seeks to help people awake. It promises to help people fully focus on the present, so that life becomes more than a walking dream. How does it do so? By teaching them to observe themselves, so they can see their attention come and go. Once they are adept at self-observation, the group leaders provide them with "tastes" of "wakefulness". Group members observe these states; after long practice, they are told, they will eventually learn to produce "wakefulness" on their own.

The process of "waking up" can be striking. One member I spoke with told of thinking all week about an insight she had had at a work day. When she spoke about the insight at her group meeting, in the midst of her meditation, she saw that it came from her mind only, not from her whole self. "It was so hollow," she exclaimed. "I had been so proud of my idea, but as I said it I saw it was only a dream. I couldn't have seen that, if I hadn't been 'awake'. The leader didn't have to say anything: I knew."

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[5] For a more extended example, see Gurdjieff (1975, 46-48).

Sometimes group leaders take a more active role. By intervening, they "tune" members' state of consciousness, making them more self-aware. A second member reported asking a question about his inability to feel his body during his morning meditation. The leader looked at him and said, "How about now?" "If I hadn't known I was sitting still," he said,

> I would have said I sat bolt upright when he spoke. For the first time in my life I was aware of my whole body. It was a tremendous gift. I was able to experience directly the state we are after. I couldn't have done it on my own.

Note that in neither case did the leader interpret or label members' experiences. Though members labeled things after the fact, the strength of the inner experience made the label compelling, not the other way around. The focus stayed on the experience. "It made the ideas real to me," the first quoted member said. "Before that, they'd been so much air." The Gurdjieff Work does provide interpretations which it calls "the Ideas". They are supposed to help people wake up, but they are no substitute for it. "The Ideas are valuable," one leader said, "but without practice they are nothing. Waking up is the only true goal."

What makes people "wake up"? "Awakening" comes from a change in their attention, which, following Blackmore, creates a new consciousness and a new "I". By altering their inner focus, members of the Work experience themselves differently. Different elements combine to form their "I" than in everyday life. Generally, these include more body focus and fewer associative thoughts. Group leaders – in fact the whole organization of the Work: group meetings, lectures, work days, assigned exercises, and so on – encourage this change by teaching the member to focus his or her attention differently. Attention changes, and self-experience follows.

This presents a very different picture of religious experience than do James, Proudfoot, and others using the "over-belief" model. Contra James, experiences are not primary, overlaid with socially-constructed interpretation. Rather, the Gurdjieff Work creates the experiences by creating a different attention, and thus a different "I". This creation is both a personal and a social process, involving both concepts and practices. It is thus directly amenable to social psychological analysis. The personal and the social blend in experiences, which are the heart of the matter.

Quaker Meeting

As a second example, I shall take a more mainstream religion: the Society of Friends (Quakers). Though the group is small, its historic prominence in England and the United States has led many persons to attend its "unprogrammed" meetings. [6] Members sit in silence for an hour or more, waiting, as they put it, for the presence of God. From time to time, a member may stand to deliver a short remark, usually no more than a minute or two at the longest, after which all settle back into silence. A common joke tells of a Presbyterian entering a Quaker Meeting-house one Sunday morning, sitting for twenty minutes or so, then whispering to his neighbor, "When does the service start?" The Quaker's response was, "Right after the worship" – for Quakers are as known for doing good works as they are for their peculiar religious practices (Brinton 1952). Many first-time visitors have been as unprepared for the Quaker experience.

Where the Gurdjieff Work provides exercises to focus attention, however, Quakerism provides none. Even books and pamphlets – of which Quakers write a great many – leave much to Quaker individuality (Steere 1984, 3; Punshon 1987, 58ff). Though diligence, however, a neophyte can get guidance about how to "worship" properly. First, one observes long-time members sit. One learns that this is what one is supposed to do. Sitting is easy. Meeting-houses are plain, and there is nothing much else to do except stay awake. One easily falls into a dreamy state, only occasionally interrupted by members' "ministry". Rather often, that ministry also tells one what to do. "I was thinking about that last message...," a member might begin. And one learns to think about the messages, and how they relate to one's life. Alternately, a member might remind people to "sink deeply down into the Spirit of God." How does one do that, one might wonder? Surely not by fidgeting in one's seat. So one sits even stiller, trying to "sink down" (however one conceives of this). Many meetings can pass in this way.

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[6] The following section is based on the author's more than twenty years of experience with the Society of Friends in the United States and Canada, plus considerably more reading than can be cited here. It focuses on the "unprogrammed" portion of that tradition.

After a while, one begins to focus one's attention. Day-dreaming, after all, is not very serious, and Quakers do seem serious. Trying to think about weighty matters does not get one very far, however. Taking clues from one's neighbors, one closes ones eyes, breathes evenly, sits as comfortably as one can, and waits. For what? One does not yet know. But glimmers gradually come.

Gradually, one learns to appreciate a certain feeling that Quakers call "gatheredness" (Kelly n.d.). Some meetings for worship are more "gathered" than others: one concentrates more easily, hears the messages more fully, feels closer to the heart of life. Ministry blends with the hearers' meditation, becoming one with their thoughts and guiding them to a deeper level. One hears others praise these meetings. What makes them different? With experience, one begins to recognize a different state of mind in a "gathered" meeting: a unity of consciousness, as it were, between member and member. The ministry seems connected, not random. Little by little, one learns to recognize this state physically as well as conceptually. Then one learns to quicken it. Quakers recognize that an experienced group can attain "gatheredness" more often.

But Quakers do not just sit – they also speak. How does one learn to speak in a meeting for worship? Clearly it is a special act. Sometimes the meeting is completely silent; others it is less so. Still others – that Quakers call "popcorn meetings" – are virtual gabfests. If one speaks in this latter mode, one quickly learns of its inappropriateness. One is "eldered", to use the Quaker phrase: one is reminded, privately, of the virtues of holding one's tongue.

After time, one learns that some speeches "break the Silence" and others do not. The meeting for worship is supposed to be silent. Though not all Quakers use this language, some will say that in that silence, God dwells. The "Silence" is at any rate sacred. One may speak "from" it, but only if one is truly "led" to do so and if "the Silence is not broken". As one member of my home Meeting puts it, "I only speak in meeting if I either have to talk or throw up." Practiced Quakers know the feeling to which she refers (Punshon 1987, 83ff).

If we substitute Blackmore's idiom for the Quakerese I have been using, we are left focusing on an experience: an altered state of consciousness that Quakers revere. They call that state "being gathered to the Silence"; it is the center around which all else in their religion re-

volves. It involves the cultivation of an "I" that experiences the world differently than we do in ordinary consciousness. As one grows in meditative skill, one learns to develop this "I". One learns to feel it in oneself and one's meeting neighbors. One learns to label it, but one also learns to taste it, and return to it at will. Finally, one learns to speak in it without destroying it, so one's words form part of the Silence in which all dwell.

Like other learning, this is both a personal and a social process. At the beginning, one is guided by word and by example. Later on, one explores the state for oneself. One learns to attend to some things and not others, to hasten its coming. Still later, one learns to develop it in others. This process takes time, which may be why Quakerism has always had trouble with rapid growth. Despite their historical prominence and the esteem in which they are held, there are not many silent Quakers around these days.[7] Appreciating a "gathered Silence" is a learned skill.

I said earlier that, for Blackmore, altered states of consciousness change the model, not the modeler (page 4 above); I must now qualify that remark, which is accurate in the moment but not necessarily in the long term. Just as Gurdjieff's disciples claim that practicing their exercises allows one to remain "awake" for longer and longer periods, Quakers say that learning to appreciate "gathered Silence" changes one's sensitivity to all sorts of matters. Specifically, they teach that it helps arouse one's conscience and one's compassion, so one becomes more able to do good for others.

This may be true; it is not, however particularly relevant to this article, which explores experiences that lie at the heart of meditative religions. In interviewing Quakers about their religion, one is continually brought back to the experience that they place at its core. Quakerism is not just a set of beliefs and ideas, though these play a

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[7] As Quaker historian John Punshon (1984, 192ff) points out, a portion of American Quakerism began to "program" its meetings in during the Second Great Awakening, largely because the influx of new members stretched experienced members too thin to train people in its peculiar mode of worship. Richard Nixon came from this "church-Quaker" tradition, as did Quaker missionaries to Kenya, Bolivia, and other countries. Their evangelizing success has made the "unprogrammed Friends" a minority in their own religion.

part. It is not just a commitment to do good in the world. Far more, it is driven by the awareness of an experience that its members feel brings one closer to the heart of life. That experience – a particular state of consciousness – is socially learned.

Here, too, James' division of experience from over-belief is not useful. Experiences do not come at random, to be interpreted by beliefs. By tacit observation, one learns to focus one's attention in particular ways, and generate the experiences the religion values. This learning is a both a personal and a social process, both practical and conceptual. Social life enters into religious experience at its very core. Quaker theologizing may indeed be over-belief. One must not, however, reduce Quakerism to its theology. To do so is to miss the point of this meditative religion.

Experience and Interpretation

I have, for the purposes of this article, cast meditative religions as generators of altered states of consciousness. The experience of these states is, I think, central to such religions. Without such states, meditative religions would be thoroughly transformed. While these religions, like others, all interpret what happens to their members, this is not their only social act. Members learn not only to interpret their experiences, but also to have them. They learn to focus their attention in patterned ways, to generate new experiences of self and world.

Blackmore's theory tells us how this focusing of attention leads to new experiences. Her theory tells us how these states are formed, why they feel as they do, and why the "self" that experiences them feels different from the self of our everyday lives. Unlike James's notion of over-beliefs, Blackmore's model allows us to explore the experiences and leaves room for the action of social forces in the generation of the experiences themselves. She lays the groundwork for a more detailed – and a more social psychological – model of the psychology of religious experiences than the over-belief model can provide.

Two currents in contemporary theorizing about religious experiences oppose my view; it is appropriate that I mention each of them, and highlight the differences between their approach and mine. Like James, both separate experience from belief, though they do so in opposite ways.

The first view is best illustrated by Proudfoot and Shaver (1975), who apply attribution theory to reports of religious experiences, as mentioned above. They argue that experiences become religious when people label them as such: for example when religious ideologies encourage people to construe physical manifestations as the workings of the divine. They cite they the case of one Stephen Bradley who, on returning from a particularly impressive revival service, interpreted heart palpitations as the presence of the Holy Spirit. For Proudfoot and Shaver (322ff), Bradley viewed his unknown sensations in the light of a religious ideology; the "religiousness" of his experience was a post hoc matter.

While their account of Bradley's conversion appears plausible, in effect it turns religion into a category mistake. It emphasizes Bradley's later interpretation, and deemphasizes the experience that he was so keen on recounting. Rather than separate experience from interpretation, the theory I have presented in this article would explore the "I" that Bradley occupied in the midst of his experience.

It is clear from his account (James 1903, 186-90) – of which Proudfoot and Shaver present about a third – that Bradley experienced an altered state of consciousness. His state began with an experience of "stupidness", which he could not identify. After going to bed, his heart began to beat rapidly, he was overcome with happiness and humility, he felt a rush of air toward his mouth and heart, and his mind became exceedingly clear. Being immersed in religious things, he began to focus on a Bible passage which he thought relevant to his condition. He was eventually able to sleep, and, on awakening in the morning, willingly re-entered the experience. He experienced himself as changed – not just conceptually, but physically, too. In his words,

> My speech seemed entirely under the control of the Spirit within me; I do not mean that the words which I spoke were not my own, for they were. [Rather] I thought that I was influenced similar to the Apostles on the day of Pentecost. (James 1903, 189)

As this account indicates, the "I" which Bradley occupied in his altered state was a complex amalgam of sensations, thoughts and emotions, which he clearly perceived as different from his ordinary consciousness. Despite Proudfoot and Shaver's attempt to do so, we cannot separate the physical, emotional and conceptual elements of

this "I"; doing so loses the singularity of the experience. Proudfoot and Shaver are correct in noting that Bradley later interpreted his state of consciousness in religious terms – and Christian rather than Hindu or Islamic ones. Yet they fail to see that the way in which the experience itself was permeated by Christianity was not a matter of ordinary consciousness interpreting physical symptoms. Instead, the symptoms, emotions and concepts all created an "I" different from the "I" of Bradley's ordinary life.

Where Proudfoot and Shaver reduce religious experience to physical symptoms plus post hoc interpretation, Blackmore's theory focuses on the integration of concept and percept in the model of self that experiences an altered state of consciousness. Proudfoot and Shaver's approach does not do justice to the experiential side of religions. As such, it certainly fails to comprehend meditative religions, for which experience is paramount; if Bradley's conversion is typical, it fails to account for mainstream religious experiences as well.

If Proudfoot and Shaver reduce religious experience to concepts, Goodman (1986) reduces it to pure physicality. She posits a single "religious altered state of consciousness (RASC)", which she says is cross-culturally universal. This "RASC" is physiological: she says that physical induction techniques "activate certain neurophysiological processes", which bring about "a variety of experiences. What produces the differences is the change in [body] posture" during the induction process (83).

Goodman reports inducing religious-like altered states of consciousness by varying experimental subjects' body postures in a variety of ways. They crouched like a Nupe diviner, for example, or took the position of a shaman figure from a cave painting at Lascaux. Reviewing her technique from the standpoint of the theory presented here (pp 87-88, 90ff), she appears to have selectively altered her subjects' focus of attention to achieve an series of altered "I"s, which differently experienced the world.

Though Goodman claims that each of her postures produced a distinct experience, her data show the experiences to be only approximately alike. Many, though not all, of her Nupe imitators saw blue or white light; some felt themselves spun around, when in fact they had not moved at all; several felt themselves all-knowing (pp 97-98). Blackmore's model would lead us to expect this congruence: the Nupe

posture should focus subject's physical attention in particular ways, as similar physical sensations help to construct similar "I"s. But – and this is important – Blackmore's model also explains the differences. "I"s are not built from just physical sensations. The self-models that are the loci of our experiences – altered or otherwise – consist of concepts as well. To the extent that concepts differ, the resulting experiences will differ. One of Goodman's American Indian subjects, in fact, integrated the white light into a vision quite in keeping with Native religion; that subject saw

> a holy being, very white, and he gave me a present. It was a new ritual that I needed. (98)

Clearly, Goodman's focus on just the physical leaves out much of the singularity of these experiences. My quarrel with her presentation lies with her pure physicalizing of experience, as well as with her notion of the cross-cultural universality of the "RASC", for which she presents no evidence. On the other hand, she does not erase religious experience, as do many observers. She gives it a neurophysiological grounding, which, though one-sided, should not be ignored.

Goodman's error – like Proudfoot and Shaver's – is to separate experience from cognition, assigning the former to the physical and the latter to the social milieu. Like James, she treats experience as separable from belief. Reading her data in the light of the theory of religious experience presented here would, in my opinion, deepen her work.

Conclusion

I have undertaken several tasks in this article. I have argued that experience is central to meditative religions, and that the over-belief model, which separates experiences from their interpretations (and calls only the latter social), is flawed. I have presented a theory of how people's models of self change in altered states of consciousness, and shown how these models integrate sensations, thoughts and memories to generate new experiences. I have applied this theory to two meditative religions, showing how social life guides the experiences of their members, both cognitively and through the selective use of attention. And I have criticized two alternate accounts of religious experiences, each of which seems to me to reduce these experiences to

something less complex than they are. There remains only to point out the benefits of the approach to religious experiences I have proposed.

First, the approach allows scholars to treat experiences as key elements of religion rather than as mere epiphenomena. Experiences take their place alongside beliefs, rites and institutions as key constituents of religious worlds. Scholars of meditative religions will especially benefit, because of the heavy emphasis these religions place on experiences as opposed to other factors. The approach treats the experiences of meditators as significant elements of their religious life, rather than as superficial ones.

Second, the approach outlines a mechanism linking religious experiences with the socio-psychological processes that create them. A socially induced altering of attention combines sensation and thought into different self-models, which create different experiences of the world. Blackmore's theory allows us to describe in detail the experiential results of different meditative – and other – religious practices. No longer must "experience" be a black box into which we can not peer.

Third, this approach expands the concept of the social influences on religion into the experiential domain. No longer must we limit society's role in religion to the ideological and institutional levels. Society shapes religious beliefs, institutions, and experiences. Our theory posits a mechanism by which the latter occurs.

Finally, this approach does not treat experience as purely physical, separate from concepts and thought. On the contrary, it outlines the ways in which thought and sensation produce experience through the medium of altered models of self. The theory allows us to examine the role of thought in experience, without reducing one to the other. This is a positive gain.

Unlike those who follow the over-belief model, we can now begin to investigate the complexity of religious experience – and its centrality to the social-scientific study of religion.

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