

2010

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## Recommended Citation

Spickard, James V., "Does Taves Reconsider Experience Enough? A Critical Commentary on 'Religious Experience Reconsidered'" (2010). *Our House Articles, Poems, and Short Stories*. Paper 74.  
[http://inspire.redlands.edu/oh\\_articles/74](http://inspire.redlands.edu/oh_articles/74)

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Does Taves Reconsider Experience Enough?  
A Critical Commentary on Religious Experience Reconsidered

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Published in Religion 40:311–313, 2010

Three problems beset Ann Taves' thought-provoking book. The first is her failure to recognize that her focus on "experiences deemed religious" makes just as many metaphysical claims as does the focus on "religious experiences" that she seeks to replace. Second, her building-block definition of religion drops her into the middle of controversies over the nature of religion, rather than rescuing her from them. Third, her approach embodies a peculiarly North American cultural ambiguity about religion: on the one hand, it contains an abstract democratic affirmation of the importance of studying people's beliefs and practices on their own terms; on the other hand, it pairs to this a concrete sense of horror at what those beliefs and practices actually are.

All books are located, and this one is more located than most. It could have been written only by someone enmeshed in a late-20th/early- 21st century North American academic department of Religious Studies. This does not mean that the work is provincial. However, the book does define its subject matter in a way that makes sense in this time and place, and not in others. The question is whether the limitations outweigh the benefits of seeing from this particular hill. Do we get a new vista? Or is our vision merely obscured by a different set of trees?

Three elements shape the ground on which Taves rests her argument. The first is her commitment to a human-centered social science, which focuses on "what people deem religious" rather than on "religion *sui generis*". The second is the well-documented conflict within academic Religious Studies over the definition of religion, specifically whether "religion" is a defensible concept with applicability across history and cultures. The third is a root North American cultural ambivalence about the proper relationship between scholars and the people they study. Should one believe one's informants, democratically affirming their "emic" point of view? Or should one privilege expert intellectual analysis, taking an "etic" view of what one sees? Let us explore each of these in turn.

I

Taves organizes her book around a distinction between "religious experience" and "experiences deemed religious". She explains that the first treats religion as an independent domain, which can generate experiences that are religious in their very nature. The second claims that religion is no pre-established thing, but is a matter of attribution. Things (including experiences) are religious because people call them so.

Taves opts for the latter. In her view, the former approach protects religion from being compared with other domains, while the latter encourages it. She values that comparison. Indeed, she spends her fascinating fourth chapter exploring how best to compare things, an exercise that demonstrates considerable wisdom.

Her distinction between "experience" and "experience deemed" has merit, as does her intellectual-historical demonstration that much of the early literature on religious experience grew from an effort to protect religion from naturalistic science. If, to use just one instance, religion stems from a perception of "the numinous" that is "irreducible to any other" (Otto; quoted on p. 17), then it is safe from scientific critique. Theologies, doctrines, histories, scriptures, and organizations can fall away, yet religion retains its experiential core. Though she breaks no new ground here, Taves recognizes that treating religious experience as *sui generis* involves a metaphysical commitment one opposed to her own commitment to naturalistic inquiry. Focusing on

However, Taves carries this in an unfortunate and unnecessary direction. There are at least three positions here, not two. Experiences can be religious in themselves, they can be deemed religious, or they can be mistakenly identified as religious. Taves too often equates these last two. Though she claims to focus on "deeming" experiences, in fact she focuses on explaining them naturalistically and as something other than what they appear to be.

For example, her lengthy account of William Barnard's rather ecstatic state of consciousness hypothesizes that "the mental paradox involved in [his] visualization triggered the dissolution of self-other boundaries, ... [which] triggered feelings of ecstasy and exhilaration" (p110). She posits that the first triggering was "unconscious", without recognizing that this claim puts her naturalism beyond examination every bit as much as Otto's claim for "the numinous" puts religion beyond scientific scrutiny. Each depends on unexaminable entities. Her universe is populated by "the unconscious" and by "self-other boundaries"; Otto's is populated by God (and perhaps by other beings). Each posits a metaphysic that sets the rules for explanation, then reads the results back from the rules it has set.

If Taves wants to focus on "experiences deemed religious" without taking such a metaphysical stance, she must give up trying to explain them. For example, my own fieldwork with the American members of the Japanese new religion Sekai Kyusei-kyo (Spickard, 1991a, 1995b) required me to experience their core healing practice, johrei. It involved channeling invisible "divine light" to "clean the clouds from people's spiritual bodies". They certainly deemed this "religious", and I could certainly experience it, though I have (frankly) no idea what they were 'really' doing. Nor do I care. What interested me as an ethnographer was the meaning that my informants made from it, how it shaped their social lives, their decisions, their factional fights, and so on. These were not epiphenomenal, and they were informed by their collective metaphysical interpretations of their johrei practice. My inquiry was naturalistic, and it was grounded in experiences deemed religious. It worked precisely because I made no metaphysical claims about those experiences, on any side.

Taves clearly wants more. Throughout the book, she speaks of religion as a faces-in-the-clouds phenomenon (Guthrie, 1993), in which the (postulated) human tendency to find patterns in random events imagines supernatural agents to be active in the world. Naturalistically, she can explain those agents as category mistakes. But this interpretation depends on metaphysical claims every bit as much as do religious views.

## II

Academic Religious Studies has been riled of late about the question of whether "religion" is a cross-culturally valid concept, a Western imposition, or something in-between. Works by Beyer (2006); Masuzawa (2005); McCutcheon (1997) and others have explored this from various angles. Of these, Beyer strikes me as being the most reasonable: in his argument, the West did not impose the concept "religion" on other cultures, but current ideas about "religion" did develop through a concrete transcultural dialogue, in which the West played a key role. Taking India as an example, what started out as "Christianity" versus "heathens" became, over time, a mutual acceptance of "Christianity", "Islam", "Hinduism", "Buddhism", etc. as members of a set of "World Religions", of which each is an example. Whether a particular group gains admission to that set depends on whether it can argue successfully that it looks like the other members. This is never a done deal. Sikhism's application is accepted by almost everyone, though not by radical Hindus, while Scientology's application has convinced Americans but not Germans. Chinese intellectuals decided not to apply, saying 'Confucianism is not a *zongjiao*' (literally, "belief-cult"), because it does not match the emerging definition of "religion" that typifies the set (see Beyer, 2006, ch 5). In this view, "religion" is not *sui generis*, though it is (now) the topic of a world-wide discourse.

The point is, "religion" is not some definable thing, with concrete and enduring characteristics. It is, as Taves puts it, a matter of attribution. Something is "a religion" if some unspecified number of people accepts that it is. An experience is "religious" if a similar (perhaps smaller) set of people accepts that it is connected to a generally accepted "religion" and is somehow significant to it. My declaring that "eating french fries is a religious experience" does not make it so. Attribution is socially located and is often disputed, something that Taves never explores.<sup>1</sup>

How does this matter to Taves' book? It raises three interrelated issues.

First, Taves is exercised by the problem of comparison, and by the question of how one compares experiences across the various domains of human life. She wants to compare experiences deemed religious with other kinds of experiences, and I think she is on good ground for doing so. She fails to see, however, that her approach drops her in the midst of disputations about religion rather than rescuing her from them. Comparing experiences deemed religious with experiences-not-deemed is problematic if one thinks that deeming is central to the experiences themselves. What differentiated johrei from the healing work taught at the nearby Berkeley Psychic Institute was precisely the centrality of the religious

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<sup>1</sup> I'm reminded of the story told me by an elderly parishioner, of the sermon her (male) pastor began with the words "I had a significant religious experience this week." Her disparaging comment: "I'm sure she was."

message. Taves implicitly imports William James' (1903) "over-belief" model, which separates experience from interpretation. Only this makes her comparisons possible.

Second, Taves ends her book with a call for a building-block definition of religion. In this view, there are a number of relatively simple things that various religions can include: rites, experiences, images, beliefs, etc. Specific religions are, in fact, complex combination of these simple things. This makes point-for-point comparisons between religions as wholes rather problematic, because they aren't all made of the same stuff. On the other hand, it does make low- and mid-level comparisons easier.

It strikes me that Beyer's (2006) discourse approach better describes what is actually going on in the religious sphere. Scholars don't get to define religions; people do *en masse*. They don't do so based on either top-down or bottom-up criteria, but by arguing about the degree to which a particular religion fits or doesn't match the contours of the evolving (fuzzy) set of "world religions", a set over which they have no individual control. In this context, Taves' book is a piece of argumentation, one which claims that "experience" is not central to the religious enterprise. Put otherwise, her scholarship is part of the attribution process rather than separate from it.

That said and this is the third point Taves does not, I think, sufficiently explore the social side of the attribution process, something that ought to be central to her project. Indeed, she uses an overly psychological definition of the term. James Beckford (2003) provides a sociological starting point, by arguing that it is much more interesting to see how religion is used in fights than it is to treat religion as a thing-in-itself. Taves ends up where Beckford starts, calling for a moratorium on defining "religion" social-scientifically. But she misses much of the good work that has been done on this topic by the sociologically informed.

### III

The third background element with which I began this essay is cultural, rather than disciplinary, though it helps shape academic work far more than most scholars recognize. This is an ambiguity about how we should treat our informants' statements. Do we assume that our informants are describing their worlds as they experience them, and that we should privilege their descriptions? Or do we assume that they systematically misunderstand their own worlds, in ways that only we (outsiders) can see?<sup>2</sup> North American scholars, especially "progressives", find the first attractive, because it matches our democratic ethos. Simultaneously, they are prone to being appalled at these people's actual choices: political, religious, dietary, or what have you. "Why do people vote against their own interests?" is a staple topic among political scientists. "How can people believe such weird things?" is the parallel for scholars of religion. I don't have figures on this, but I suspect that Unitarians, Quakers, and Wiccans are wildly overrepresented at the American Academy of Religion, relative to their population numbers; Southern Baptists and Pentecostals are probably much less well represented than they ought to be, were demographics alone at work.

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<sup>2</sup> There are other positions: we can assume both, and investigate the interface between insiders' and outsiders' views. But I shall leave this aside.

Taves, I imagine, is caught between wanting to respect the people about whom she is writing and being appalled by the things that they actually think and do. Most Americans believe in the presence and efficacy of religious experiences, many of them believe that they have had such experiences, and many of these believe that their experiences prove religion to be "true". Taves' book questions this, pointing out that these experiences are attributed, not *sui generis*. She does distinguish her position from Wayne Proudfoot's (1985) claim that religious experiences are "constructed". (Constructivism says that religious beliefs and attitudes help form religious experiences *a priori*, where Taves' attribution theory sees them as being primarily means of interpreting experiences that exist on their own; see Taves, p. 93ff). Still, it strikes me that the cultural context helps explain why Taves slips so easily from naturalism to metaphysical atheism, claiming that religious experiences are other than they appear.

There is, I think, an institutional issue as well. I have spent much of my professional life doing informal fieldwork among people who study religions. Put bluntly, North American Religious Studies scholars find themselves in an institutional odd spot. Religion matters in North American culture, where it is a strong bone of contention socially, politically, and academically. Religion used to play a large role in American higher education, but that role has lately been challenged. Religion is relatively unpopular among the intellectual elite (Carter, 1993). Indeed, an increasing number of Americans claim to have no religion precisely because they associate religion with backwoods yahoos and want nothing to do with it (Hout and Fischer, 2002). Religious Studies scholars know better, but it makes sense for them to distinguish themselves from 'true believers', if only so their own views will have greater influence. Thus renaming "Departments of Religion" as "Departments of Religious Studies" signals to one's colleagues that one is just as scientific as they are, except that one is studying religions rather than bees. Though naturalism (which amounts to a methodological agnosticism) does not require metaphysical atheism, it takes much gumption to keep the distinction straight. This is especially true when one is constantly being asked on which side of the religion/non-religion line one stands.

Of course, we ethnographers have our parallel disciplinary peculiarities, chief among them our fear of being accused of "going native", i.e., of shifting our loyalties from our science to the people we study. This seems to be less of a worry today than when I was being trained. Ethnographers have had forty years to get used to the idea that there are no uninvolved positions from which we can carry out our observations. Can Religious Studies scholars learn to recognize their own metaphysical commitments accurately? I hope so, though Taves does not seem to be entirely on top of hers.

Culturally speaking, North America is not yet ready to leave the question of whether religion is "real" or not. Taves' book takes a position on this matter, something I find sad but understandable. Still, the book is eminently worth reading: for its scholarly depth, for its nuanced typologies, and for its insistence that religious comparisons must be multi- rather than unidimensional. Bravo!

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