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Robert Grabowitz March 25, 2014

Integrating the Anomalous: Towards a Typology of Religious Transformation

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Abstract

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This paper addresses the process by which anomalous or unusual experiences come to be incorporated into religious meaning-systems or worldviews. This type of experience and process is first situated within the ongoing feud between perennialist and constructivist perspectives on religious experience in which I conclude that elements from both camps must be incorporated. Second, it is analyzed through the lens of psychological attribution theory, which is concerned with the process of meaning-making rather than the ontological status of religious experience. Ann Taves' approach and other cognitive approaches will turn out to be flawed because they do not differentiate enough between different types of religious transformations and that they do not take into account the various dynamic steps of meaning-making and integration. We conclude by pointing to future directions for research that may emerge from addressing these deficiencies.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Laying the Groundwork (1)

Introduction (1)

Perennialism (3)

Constuctivism (9)

Neo-Perennialism (14)

Synthesis and Conclusion (17)

Chapter 2: Attribution and Integration (26)

Taves' Attributional Approach: Ascription (28)

Taves' Attributional Approach: Explanation (36)

Cognitive Model of Integration: Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis (42)

Chapter 3: Questions and Future Directions (47)

The Problem with Generic Ascription: Meaning-Making as Play (47)

The Need for Models of Integration Process (53)

Conclusion (57)

Conclusion: Toward a Typology of Religious Transformation (59)

Works Cited: (62)

Chapter 1: Laying the Groundwork

Introduction

My overall task in this thesis is to analyze the ways in which individuals come to use religious meaning-making structures to integrate experiences that defy explanation under the meaning-making resources available to them prior to the experience. If we are to understand this process, our first task must be to establish a working framework for understanding so-called "religious experiences" in general. Historically, in scholarly writings, the primary debate over religious experience has been between two camps: perennialists and constructivists, with perennialists positing a universal core of religious experience, and constructivists emphasizing cultural and cognitive construction of these so-called "religious" experiences. As such, our framework must take this debate into account: we will trace its evolution starting with the rise of perennialism, followed by the constructivist critique, leading finally into the resurgence of perennialism at the end of the 20th century. After tracing the history of the debate we will survey the most important aspects of each camp and work towards a synthesis of their most useful features.

In the second chapter we will introduce approaches to religious experience that more directly address the process of integrating these anomalous experiences. The first approach will be an attributional approach as presented by Ann Taves in her book *Religious Experience Reconsidered,* and the second will be a model for spiritual transformation based on cognitive restructuring. I will offer brief critiques of both approaches that I will expand upon and unified in the third and final chapter to form an overall critique and a new direction for the study of

anomalous religious experiences based upon a typology of paths towards integration. We will conclude by assessing the value of such an approach and briefly applying it to the field of mental health.

Given that religious experiences of multifarious kinds have been reported throughout almost all of recorded history, we will need to narrow our inquiry to one basic category. Rather than focusing on the content of the religious experience, I will emphasize the individual's orientation towards the content. For example, there are charismatic spiritual leader leaders whose experiences allegedly gave birth to an entire religion or spiritual lineage. Founders of new traditions blazed trails and created or discovered new territory, depending on one's perspective. Theirs is a passive orientation towards religious experience in which revelation is said to emanate through them often without any effort or active seeking.

There are also those whose experiences are the result of deliberate training to reach such states, as is the case with students of mysticism or monasticism. In this case, practicants are usually prepared for their experiences by their training such that they know what to expect. Theirs is an active or intentional orientation towards religious experience. Their experience is usually confirmed and explained through the language of the tradition the mystic is trained in.

But there are also those who, like some founders of religions, have spontaneous, untrained experiences, but like mystics, they eventually interpret or explain their experiences within a pre-existing religious tradition. These are people who may have had no religious or spiritual training or background or whose experiences cause them to completely reevaluate their worldview. For some individuals, these experiences can be disruptive because they present the individual with something they cannot explain using their worldview prior to the experience.[1]

[1] Specific examples given below.

This type of experience will be our focus and we will call them untrained, spontaneous experiences.

The debate between perennialists and constructivists will help us understand the importance of these untrained, spontaneous experiences, as they are a major point of contention between the two camps. In my view, though it has been examined, this type of experience has not been adequately theorized. While neoperennialists, as we will see, have pointed to the very existence of this type of experience as evidence for the inadequacy of constructivism, it is unclear that their case is definitively demonstrated. In light of the framework we establish, we will consider the various ways these untrained, spontaneous experiences can be interpreted. Ultimately, however, we will see that neither the perennialist nor the constructivist lens is adequate to resolve the dilemma, and in the next chapter, we will present the attributional approach that I will argue to be more useful.

Perennialism

Towards the end of the 19th century, many theologians and scholars of religion shifted their attention away from the study of religious belief systems, ethics and philosophies and directed their energies towards defining and explaining "religious experience." Wayne Proudfoot, Robert Sharf and others note that these interpreters draw on the work of Fredrick Schleiermacher with his emphasis on feeling or experience. Building on that theme, these theologians and scholars of religion saw in religious experience the potential for a common core or essence to link all major world religions (Proudfoot xiv). This line of argumentation I will call "Perennialism" and its proponents "Perennialists" because their enterprise was to find a common thread linking all religions through all time (Huxley). While the particulars of their

theories varied, there are generally three components to their argument. First, religious experience is *sui generis*, and is therefore irreducible to any explanations outside of the religious sphere: it is a category of its own. Secondly, religious experience is the foundation from which all other religious phenomena emerge, including beliefs, ethics and worldviews. A certain kind of experience, on this account, is the essence of diverse religious traditions. Finally, this essence is common to all world religions and is thereby the one true source common to all world religions (Proudfoot xv).

Rudolf Otto, a prominent German theologian in the early 20th century, makes a pivotal case for the perennialist position in his book, *The Idea of the Holy*. He frames his argument by establishing that religious experience falls under the jurisdiction of 'the holy,' which is "...a category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to the sphere of religion," just as aesthetics is a category peculiar to the sphere of art and beauty (Otto and Harvey 5). Religious experience, according to Otto, occurs in a particular moment when an individual comes into contact with the holy or 'the numinous.' The nature of the numinous cannot be fully captured in words, he claims, because it is not a rational experience. It is inherently non-rational by nature. Non-rational, he clarifies, is not the same as irrational. While the irrational contradicts reason, the non-rational is a category for things that are simply outside of the sphere of reason, governed by a different set of rules. He likens the non-rational experience to the moment in which a feeling is present before its cause is known, something like a sensation. It is knowledge by feeling rather than words. Although it is possible and desirable to try to put words to the experience (hence Otto chose to write a book), the words will never accurately penetrate to the experience's essence. In light of this characterization, Otto claims that the reader can only understand religious experience if his words evoke the experience in the reader. To fully grasp the

numinous, one must actually experience it for oneself through non-rational faculties of perception (Otto and Harvey).

The holy, one among many non-rational experiences, has a set of characteristics that make it a uniquely *religious* experience. One of the fundamental features of the numinous he calls “creature-consciousness,” which is a modified version of Schleiermacher’s notion of “absolute dependence.” He says, "It is the emotion of a creature, abased and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures" (10). Otto invokes this concept in describing another component of the numinous, which he calls *Mysterium Tremendum.* This “creature-consciousness” helps explain the overwhelming nature of the experience of the numinous. In its feeling of nothingness, the creature is completely overpowered by the divine presence before him or her.

The numinous is also of a *mysterious* nature, but not because it is elusive, as in the case of a suspicious individual whose actions are difficult to interpret**.** Nor is it mysterious because its source is unclear, as in the case of a seemingly unexplainable event, such as a snowstorm in the summer**.** Rather, it is by nature totally outside the realm of that which can be comprehended by human beings. *Mysterium* is a unique and fundamental structure of the numinous:

> The truly mysterious object is beyond our apprehension and comprehension... because in it we come upon something inherently 'wholly other,' whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb. (28)

Taken together, creature-consciousness and the wholly other constitute mutually reinforcing qualities that ultimately categorize the phenomenon of the numinous. The experience

of the numinous is completely overpowering, while its nature cannot be known. Such a character explains Otto's stipulation that the religious experience cannot, by its very nature, be described.

Otto, in contending that religious experience is non-rational and sui generis, drew upon arguments William James made in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. While James wrote about a “variety” of experiences, we will direct our attention primarily toward his chapter on mysticism. From the outset, James established that one of the fundamental qualities of the mystical experience is that it is ineffable:

> The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of the intellect. (James 380)

James’ ineffability criterion for mystical experience echoes Otto’s characterization of religious experience as non-rational. He maintains that the experience cannot be put into words and thereby defies rational expression and must therefore be experienced to be fully understood. In this sense he agrees with Otto.

As would be expected, James’ methodology differs from Otto’s. Since James was a psychologist, his approach was largely empirical, while Otto’s was more philosophical. James' approach was to list examples of individual reports of mystical experience to draw upon to make conclusions as to the nature of mystical experience. His phenomenology of mystical experience is based on a literature of examples in both modern and pre-modern texts. This is not the full

picture of James' argument, however. In choosing to categorize particular cases as mystical, he is making active choices as to what ought to be defined as mystical. His choices become especially clear when he interprets reports of some of the most distinguished mystics throughout history. In particular, he mentions that there is a particular type of experience that is uniquely mystical and common across many different traditions:

> In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think, and what brings it about that the mystical classics have, as has been said, neither birthday nor native land. Perpetually telling of the unity of man with God, their speech antedates languages, and they do not grow old. (419)

James thought that this sense of Divine Union was the source of all mystical experience universal to all of the major world religions based on his observation of contemporary and classical experiences with the common features he perceived. It must be clarified, though, that James, unlike other perennialists, did not think there was one universal mystical experience; rather, he believed that their source was universal and took slightly varying manifestations in different individuals.

W.T. Stace, a philosopher most widely known for his work on mysticism, saw mystical experience as the common core amongst all the world's major religions. By sifting through the reported experiences of mystics, Stace concluded that there is a fundamental mystical experience that set it apart from all others. He described two different types of mysticism, which he called introvertive and extrovertive experiences. The fundamental nature of the mystical experience, he

claims, is a unitive consciousness, in which all distinctions between objects become eliminated in the mind of the mystic. The extrovertive mystic finds unity within the external world, somehow seeing the multifarious objects of perception without making any distinction between them. The introvertive mystic, on the other hand, finds unity as the formless One within his or her self. While Stace initially presents these two forms of mysticism as separate phenomena, he eventually concludes that the introvertive One is of the same nature as the extrovertive One. Though he lists a number of other characteristics of mystical experience, Stace, like James, takes this unity between God and man, between Atman and Brahman, the loss of individual consciousness in the overwhelming power of the divine to be the feature that makes it *sui generis* (Stace).

Like James and Otto, Stace concludes that the mystical experience is non-rational and in a category of its own. He is unconvinced, however, that mystical experience is ineffable. "Mystical experience, during the experience, is wholly unconceptualizable and therefore wholly unspeakable. This must be so. You cannot have a concept of anything within the undifferentiated unity because there are no separate items to be conceptualized" (297). After the mystical experience, when the mystics try to describe their experience, they can only do so through apparent contradictions. This is so, Stace claims, because the mystical experience is not beholden to logical structures. The experience, however, is not completely ineffable but is rather effable only in ways that defies our expectations of rational thought. Words can be put to the experience, but because the experience is non-rational, those words defy the rules of logic.

In our survey of perennialist scholars, we have covered two types of experiences: experience of the numinous, in Otto's analysis, and the mystical experience of James and Stace. Yet both of these experiences fit the model of the perennialist logic presented at the outset. The

experience of the numinous is one of being overpowered by the presence of the divine, a force that is completely inaccessible to human understanding, "wholly other." James and Stace, on the other hand, describe an experience of unity with a divine force. Both experiences are *sui generis*, unique to the category of religious experience. Relatedly, these thinkers believe that the religious experience of the holy or the mystical is a universal characteristic of all the major world religions. You will notice that we have not explored the second tenet of the perennialist philosophy listed at the outset. We said that perennialists believed that religious experience is the foundation of all of the other characteristics of religion. For now, we will put this issue aside. Soon this claim will become essential for the direction we will take in the study of religious experience.

Constructivism

The perennialists came under sharp fire in the 1970's by constructivist scholars who disputed all components of the perennialist position. As with the perennialists, constructivists varied in their styles and the extremity with which they present their arguments, but the essential characteristic of the constructivist argument is found directly in the title ascribed to their arguments. Instead of being *sui generis,* constructivists characterized religious experiences as products of the precepts and training instilled upon the practicant prior to the experience. The religious experience, from this perspective, is essentially constructed by the context in which we learn to interact with our environment. The religious experience, they claimed, was a product of the beliefs, practices and training of the religious tradition within which it appeared (Katz, Proudfoot). Religious experiences are no different from other experiences in that they are also subject to explanations that may contradict the subject's interpretation of his or her experience.

Steven Katz advocated the strong constructivist stance against the perennialists in his article "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism." The crux of Katz's contention is that the content of mystical experience is shaped by the context in which the mystic is primed for the experience:

> To flesh this out, straightforwardly, what is being argued is that, for example, the Hindu mystic does not have an experience of *x* which he then describes in the, to him, familiar language and symbols of Hinduism, but rather he has a Hindu experience, i.e. his experience is not an unmediated experience of *x* but is itself the, at least partially, pre-formed anticipated Hindu experience of Brahman. (26)

Katz's strong form of constructivism not only precludes there being a *sui generis* religious experience, but it also precludes the possibility that there is any quality of purported mystical experiences that is not preformed by expectations. Katz claims that he is not so much concerned with the veracity of the experience; he is not trying to claim that practicants are actually seeing a *y* when they think they are seeing *x*. Rather, he is claiming that regardless of whether it is a *y* or an *x,* it is prefigured by the training of a religious tradition. While Katz attempts to qualify his claim by adding that it is "at least partially" preformed, his perspective ultimately precludes the possibility that what the mystic experiences maps onto actual territory, because the content of the experience can only come from the map. Thus, while Katz says that the question of the ontological validity of mystical experiences cannot be answered, he is actually precluding there being any substance to religious experience.

As a corollary to this point, Katz argues that the perennialist attempt to draw connections

among different traditions is a severe oversimplification of the depth of the religious traditions. To demonstrate his claim, he compares the various desired states in different religious traditions and highlights the distinctions among them emphasizing that the mystic is trained to reach a specific goal with nuanced characteristics. He claims that the goals of one tradition cannot be equated with the specific goals of other traditions even though they may somewhat resemble one another on the surface. Mystics are not merely taught to reach a state of oneness or unity: They are taught how to reach Nirvana or *devukuth* or union with Brahman. If we accept Katz's argument, the perennialist argument is seriously weakened. If all mystical experience is the result of the teaching prior to the actual event, then there cannot be a universal essence underlying all religion because the language used in various mystical traditions varies.

Katz is joined by Wayne Proudfoot in the constructivist camp, who takes a compelling new perspective on the study of religious experience in his groundbreaking book, *Religious Experience*. The foundation of Proudfoot's argument lies in his reconciliation between what he calls the hermeneutic and pragmatic traditions. The hermeneutic tradition as applied to the study of culture within the humanities, he explains, is correct to emphasize that the subject of study must be understood in its own right, as an insider would explain it. However, the tradition has gone too far in emphasizing that the experience or phenomena must *only* be understood in the terms of interpretation found within a particular culture. Researchers must be able to analyze the interpretations made and draw their own conclusions from what they observe, Proudfoof says. Pragmatists, on the other hand, often entirely overlook the importance of describing the interpretation of a particular culture on its own terms. Instead, they may become a mere object of study to be explained in likeness to the reasons an apple falls to the Earth (47).

To clarify what he believes to be the correct approach, he differentiates between what he

calls descriptive and explanatory reductionism. Descriptive reductionism occurs when a scholar identifies a religious event in terms that stray from the description provided by the subjects being studied, while explanatory reduction is when a scholar offers an explanation for the event that differs from the one provided by the subject. Proudfoot concedes that proponents of the hermeneutic tradition are right to protest descriptive reductionism on the part of pragmatists. In order to offer a methodologically sound interpretation, the original interpretation must be honored. This initial description is a prerequisite for explanation. However, Proudfoot claims, the hermeneutic tradition goes too far in precluding *explanatory* reductionism. Instead, he argues, explanatory reductionism is a critical part of meaningful scholarly research. By no means, in interpreting a particular cultural phenomenon such as a religious experience, are scholars obliged to accept the interpretation offered by the subject. They may offer an alternative explanation for it. The necessity for explanation is the virtue of the pragmatist tradition. Both camps must be willing to give a little for a fully integrated methodology (72)

In establishing that alternative explanations may be offered for phenomena as explained by an insider, Proudfoot opens the door for his own critical study of the way religious experiences ought to be interpreted. The perennialist contention that is most anathema to Proudfoot's framework is that religious experience is not amenable to any explanation outside of that which the religious would accept on their own terms. Essentially, he opposes the idea that religious experience is *sui generis*, not to be explained in terms of any phenomena that is not religious. Recall that the perennialists, particularly James and Otto, conceived of religious experience as of feeling rather than as cognition. It could not be understood in its totality using rational thought and could only be understood experientially, through having the same feelings as others who had the same experience. Otto and others claimed they only set out to evoke the

experience in the reader in their writing because understanding the writing alone was not enough.

The perennialists characterized religious experiences as ones of emotion rather than thought. They are, “non-rational,” for Otto; “ineffable,” for James; and “paradoxical” to Stace. Proudfoot, while willing to concede that religious experiences are emotional, disputes that emotions are non-conceptual. He explains that, in general, there have been two competing views on the nature of emotion. In one camp lay Hume and James who maintain that emotions are each unique sensations that could only be felt and not understood or described. They lack any cognitive component. James believes that every emotion correlated to a particular body sensation that was unique for each particular emotion. Emotions can not be understood by analysis; rather, they can only be known by feeling. They are entirely free of concepts (79). In the other camp are adherents to Aristotle's view that emotions actually have a specific logical structure. Though Aristotle acknowledged the presence of a sense of pleasure or pain, he maintained that emotions also have agents they are directed towards and justifications. From this vantage point, emotions are a composite of sensation and thought and are therefore subject to analysis and rational interpretation. Another's anger, for example, can be understood simply by the conditions that surround the situation. For example, I understand anger in the statement, “I am angry because my girlfriend cheated on me,” through the context of his girlfriend cheating rather than the word anger itself. Just seeing the word anger does not provide any meaningful understanding. Emotions, thus, are ascribed their meaning on the basis of a logical structure. For this reason, Proudfoot claims that religious experiences are no different from any other emotion in that they can be analyzed cognitively. Because cognition can be analyzed naturalistically, Proudfoot claims that religious experiences so too may be, and ought not therefore be treated as sacrosanct (83).

In a related topic, Proudfoot takes great lengths to undermine the common perennialist stipulation that religious experiences, particularly mystical experiences, are ineffable. His fundamental objection is that labeling a religious experience ineffable is more of a prescription for the parameters to identify an experience as mystical rather than a description of a religious experience. Here, Proudfoot's argument echoes Katz's radical constructivist position in that he is claiming that prior training influences the way that a religious experience is interpreted. However, instead of explaining the relationship between priming for the experience and the actual experience as a causal one, Proudfoot maintains, "The logic that governs the concepts by which people interpret their experiences in different traditions shapes those experiences" (123). For an experience to be ineffable, he claims, it must fit a particular logical structure. Thus, ineffability is prescribed as a construct in order to govern the ways in which the mystic decides which experiences are truly mystical.

Neo-Perennialism

After constructivism became the dominant school of thought from the 70's into the 80's, a new contingent of perennialists, now known as neo-perennialists, emerged on the scene with critiques of constructivists. One of the most prominent of the group is Robert Forman. Like the earlier perennialists, Forman thinks that religious experience was *sui generis,* only he has a different model for understanding the nature of religious experience, specifically mystical experience. He identifies a type of experience that he calls a pure consciousness event (PCE). The PCE is an encounter with what Forman calls "awareness per se;" awareness of no particular object, just awareness itself. Throughout his book *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness,* Forman contrasts this view with Steven Katz's conception of mystical experience. While Katz

characterizes mystical experience as one of "constructing," Forman, citing various sacred texts, spiritual teachers and the experiences of modern seekers, argues that the PCE is rather one of "forgetting."

> Mystical experiences don't result from a process of building or constructing mystical experience…but rather from the un-constructing of language and belief. Is seems to result from something like a *releasing* of experience from language. Some forms of mysticism, in other words, should be seen as *decontextualized.* (*Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 99)

To characterize the PCE epistemologically, Forman examines two categories of knowledge established by William James: *knowledge by acquaintance* and *knowledge about* (*Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 116). Knowledge by acquaintance comes mostly through direct sensory perception, while knowledge about is more conceptual. Neither of these categories, he claims are sufficient to explain the PCE, because they both have an object to which they are referring. He proposes that the PCE is in a third category, which he calls, "*knowledge-by-identity.*" He explains:

> In knowledge-by-identity the subject knows something by virtue of being it. I know what it is to be conscious, what it is to 'have' 'my' consciousness because and only because I am or 'have' that consciousness…Other than the 'encounter I have with my own awareness, I know of no other cases of knowledge-by-identity. The knowledge that I am aware is, in other words, not a knowledge like any other. It is *sui generis.* (*Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 188–120)

It is evident from this passage that Forman's rationale for claiming religious experience is *sui generis* is somewhat different from those of the earlier perennialists. Otto for example, likens the religious experience to a non-rational sensation not unlike the experience of music. It is an experience that must be "felt" to completely understand. Forman claims that the PCE is actually not one of sensation; but rather of actually knowing the experience by being it. It is not the consciousness of something but rather pure consciousness itself.

William Barnard, another neo-perennialist and associate of Forman's, does not call for another epistemological category altogether; rather, he examines the dynamic between the two categories put forth by James in the context of religious experience. To Barnard, religious experiences, like all other experiences, always have a component of knowledge about and knowledge by acquaintance that are in a dialectic relationship (*The Innate Capacity Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy* 164). For example, at the moment that I perceive the color blue, I begin to give it the name "blue" and I categorize it. This does not mean that there was no stimulus that caused me to label such a thing, only that it was later given a name. Likewise, at the moment a Hindu man sees a blue being through his own inner vision, he may label that being "Krishna." Unlike constructivists, particularly radical constructivists like Katz, Barnard does not believe that this Hindu man's experience of Krishna is entirely determined by his prior training or cultural orientation as a Hindu. In order for him to identify Krishna, something "real" must have stimulated his perception of a blue being. That felt presence of Krishna could never be ascertained from years of knowledge *about* Hinduism or Krishna. In this sense the religious experience is something new. He does not deny, however, that the fact that the man was coming from a Hindu background played a role in his identification of the experience as an experience of Krishna.

Synthesis and Conclusion

Now that we have examined the general structure of the perennialists-constructivist debate, we will try to establish our own working framework from the positions presented. Is one camp correct? Can we definitively grant either the perennialist or constructivist framework more weight than the other?

I will argue first that Katz's strong constructivist position is untenable. There is clear evidence that religious experience can reveal something novel. To Barnard, for example, the world that can be known by acquaintance has preformed qualities that are waiting to be perceived by human beings, rather than being an amorphous abyss onto which anything can be projected. Within this framework Barnard argues that religious experiences can happen to people with no particular background in religion or mysticism whatsoever. He offers a personal testimony of an experience of just this nature. Because this testimony will be referenced throughout the entirety of this paper, I will transcribe it in some detail:

> When I was thirteen years old, I was walking to school…and, without any apparent reason, I became obsessed with the idea of what would happen to me after my death…I simply could not comprehend that my self-awareness would not exist…after death. I kept trying…to envision a blank nothingness. Later, I was returning home from school...still brooding about what it would be like to die. Suddenly…something shifted inside. I felt lifted outside of myself, as if I had been expanded beyond my previous sense of self…In a single, "timeless" gestalt, I had a direct and powerful experience that I was not just that young teenage boy but, rather, that I was a surging, ecstatic, boundless state of consciousness. (*The*

Innate Capacity Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy 250)

This experience he described as one of knowledge by acquaintance that did not have a corresponding "knowledge about" to contextualize it. It was not until after he had that experience that he sought out a framework with which to understand it, and he ended up finding a mystical framework. Barnard is claiming that there was an inherently "mystical" nature to the experience that he only discovered years after the fact.

Forman, in his book presents a very similar example of such an experience in which somebody has a "mystical" experience before having any awareness or training in mysticism. He describes the experience of a man who had a PCE without having any training in a mystical path:

> Daido Sensei Loori's first experience of *Samadhi* happened on a *photography* workshop…He "had no training in meditation or anything," and was just sitting in front of a tree when [the PCE} happened. He had not begun Zen practice, but just the reverse. The after effects of his experience were so powerful that he spent the next years of his life trying to recreate it, and, as a result of the whole experience, *began* the practice of Zazen. (*Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 52–53)

Barnard and Forman conclude from these testimonies that religious experiences can happen to people without any training or interest explicitly in religion or mysticism. Such a conclusion invalidates the radical constructivism presented particularly by Katz. If mystical experiences were entirely the product of the priming the mystic receives prior to the experience, it would be impossible for anybody to have a mystical experience without any prior training. These testimonies demonstrate that mystical experiences are not always the result of a long

period of training. Instead, they are, at times, a catalyst for personal exploration that may only later lead to religious or mystical understandings. They present a novel quality to reports of mystical experiences that particularly Katz's critique simply does not take into account. But in making this distinction, we must not be too hasty and throw away all of Katz's argument. He is correct to uphold that there are cultural distinctions, as all religious experiences are embedded within particular cultures and thereby express themselves differently. He is incorrect to say that the mystical experience is formed entirely from the cultural and religious priming *creates* the experience.

Let us consider how Proudfoot's cognitive critique holds up in light of the testimonies presented. Recall that, according to Proudfoot, religious experience, as an emotion, is subject to cognitive explanations. His claim is intended to undermine religious experience's alleged immunity from naturalistic explanations. Forman's epistemological category of knowledge by identity, however, actually circumvents Proudfoot's critique of the cognitive structure of emotion because the PCE is not known through sensation. Unlike the early perennialists, Forman is not even claiming that mystical experiences are emotions, the claim for which Proudfoot's critique is relevant.

In grounding his theory in knowledge by acquaintance, Barnard's claims are susceptible to Proudfoot's cognitive critique. Barnard, fully aware of this challenge, takes up this very argument in his article "Explaining the Unexplainable." His critique of Proudfoot is that he misunderstands what is meant by "sense" or "feeling" as James uses these terms:

> …when James speaks of "the *sense* of Presence of a higher friendly Power" (1985:221), or mentions that people who have religious experiences seem to

> "possess the objects of their belief, not in the form of mere conceptions which their intellect accepts as true, but rather in the form of *quasi-sensible* realities directly apprehended" (1985:59, my italics), he is by no means rigorously equating this "sense" with "sense perception." He is simply using the word in the loosest "sense"…often interchanging it with the terms "intuition," "feeling," or "conviction in his attempt to convey a cluster of interrelated… phenomenological characteristics of religious experience. (*The Innate Capacity Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy* 250)

Regardless of whether or not Proudfoot's critique of emotion applies to the neo-perennialist position, however, his call for explanatory reductionism is valid. Simply presenting some experience in religious terms does not mean scholars must accept the account as true in studying that experience. There is no reasonable way to exclude this from the methodology in the study of any religious phenomenon. Think of all that we would need to accept at face value! In studying demonic possession we would need to be accept the existence of demons as fact merely because it is the understanding of the local community. The good thing for perennialists, however, is that this does not necessarily undermine their position entirely. The interpretation offered by the religious insider is not, on the outset, rejected. Rather, it remains as one of many competing explanations that may be valid for a particular experience.

Despite the validity of this critique, by claiming that labeling an experience ineffable is a protective strategy, Proudfoot overlooks the fact that there is a particular phenomenology and even logic to the ineffability of a mystical experience. When mystics try to explain, for example, the experience of pure consciousness, they are at a loss of words. Michael Sells calls this

struggle an "aporia;" the tension between the experience of that which is beyond names and the need to put the unnamable into words. The general approach mystics have taken is to use negative theology, or apophatic discourse. It is only possible to deny qualities to God or the absolute. The mystical experience is thus achieved when all preconceptions of God's nature are denied. This approach may seem problematic in that the denial of qualities is infinitely regressive: that is, God is not all-knowing and yet he is also not not all-knowing and so on. Nevertheless, Sells points out that many great mystics have used this style of discourse as a useful tool for eliciting and communicating their experiences to others. A key feature of apophatic discourse is that it allows for a mystical experience to be ineffable whilst also naming and describing it. Like Stace, Sells characterizes the mystical experience as paradoxical:

> In the very act of asserting the nothingness (no-thingness) of the subject of discourse, apophasis cannot help but posit it as a 'thing' or 'being,' a being it must then unsay, while positing yet more entities that must be unsaid in turn. The result is an open-ended dynamic that strains against its own reifications and ontologies—a language of *dis*ontology. (7)

The very fact that there is a consistent structure to the way many mystics report their experience seriously calls into question the notion that there is no substance to the aporia that mystics struggle with. At the very least, practicants are under the impression that their experiences are non-rational, and it is unlikely that they are labeling religious experiences as ineffable simply because they want to protect its inviolable status.

Overall, there seems to be one major obstacle to resolving the debate in that both sides rely on certain assumptions to establish their positions. Katz, in his paper, begins with the

assumption that all experiences are mediated without giving much justification for it. Forman's challenge to this assumption is that all experiences are mediated except for this one PCE, which is in itself unverifiable. It is impossible to definitively prove the ontological existence of the PCE with any rational arguments. The only way it could be confirmed is for scholars to themselves have a PCE themselves. The scholarly discussion of religious experience, as Katz suggests, need not ask questions as to the validity of the experiences themselves, but should instead look to describe the features of mystical experience as they appear from the outside. Therefore, for purposes of the paper, we will not be concerned with the ontological validity of the content of a religious experience. We will not try to answer the question of whether or not the mystic actually gets in touch with the One or finds unity in God, regardless of whether or not we uphold the perennialist or constructivist positions.

This stipulation is particularly apt in that for different reasons, it runs as a common thread through both the perennialist and constructivist camps. James concludes that while the experience is completely authoritative to the mystic, "[he or she has] no right to claim that we ought to accept the deliverance of their peculiar experiences, if we are ourselves outsiders and feel no private call thereto" (424). The implication is that mystical experience is an inherently private event, and that it therefore cannot be verified objectively. For this reason, Otto's attempt to evoke religious experience is not tenable for establishing any objective reality to religious experience. Stace claims that mystical experience is neither objective nor subjective due to the structure of the experience itself. In Stace's unitive consciousness there can be no distinguishing one object from any other, as there are no distinctions to be made in the One. In Stace's mind, only objective phenomena can be ordered in a logical fashion, and since there is no variegation in a mystical experience, there are no objects that could be rationally categorized. To be

subjective, the phenomenon must be disorderly, but mystical experience also cannot be *dis*-orderly because it does not present itself in opposition to ordered objects:

> But the very essence of the experience is that it is undifferentiated, distinctionless, and destitute of all multiplicity. There are no distinguishable items or events among which repeatable patterns or regular sequences could be traced. With this the claim of introvertive experience to objectivity collapses. It cannot be objective… It [also] cannot be disorderly within its own boundaries as would be a dream of a kettle of water freezing when put on the fire. For there are no distinguishable items within it to constitute sequences which are contrary to the constant conjunctions in the world order. (144–145)

These stipulations do not deviate too far from those in Katz's article, in which he clarifies that he will not try to answer the question of the validity of mystical experience. They are also echoed in Proudfoot's insistence that religious experiences be open to explanatory reductionism.

We will maintain though, in light of Forman's response to the constructivists and the two case studies we have examined, that there is at least some substance in the religious experience that the mystic or religious person must grapple with. This does not contradict our previous stipulation that we will remain neutral to the ontological validity of such experiences. The very fact of there being substance to a religious experience does not mean that the explanation offered for it is valid. The experiences are still subject to explanatory reductionism. We are, in a sense, relying on the perennialist position in this contention, in that for the individual, there is an event that triggers a new exploration on the part of the experiencer. Regardless of whether or not religious experience is truly *sui generis*, there is evidence to suggest that those who report

mystical experiences often experience something novel or unexpected that, while mediated, cannot be fully accounted for in reference to the expectations that a religious tradition generates within the mystic.

It is important to keep in mind that while perennialists claim that religious experience constitutes a universal core of religion, this does not mean that religious experience is more valuable than other parts of religion. In fact, the opposite is often the case. Now we are referring back to the second stipulation of perennialism that religious experience is the foundation for all other components of religion. Being the mere foundation for those components, it need not be considered the most important component. Stace, from the very beginning of his book states, “What bearing, if any, does what is called "mystical experience" have upon the more important problems of philosophy?” (5). The implication is that knowing the nature of mystical experience is not valuable in its own right, but in its application. On this view, experience on its own is absolutely morally neutral. Otto maintains that “[The holy] is, indeed, applied by transference to another sphere-that of Ethics” (5). We can conclude from this statement that despite remaining non-rational and therefore ineffable, the experience of the numinous has an important connection with the rational sphere of ethics. Otto calls this dynamic relationship between the rational and the non-rational “schematization.” Although the schematization between the holy and ethics is a reciprocal relationship, the very fact that the holy interacts in significant ways with other spheres indicates that its being the core component of religion from which all else emanates does not necessarily make it the most important one. While not an exhaustive account, Otto's introduction of schematization into his model of religious experience represents a shift from the nature of the religious experience to the purpose of religious experience. To have any significance, Otto claims, religious experiences must undergo *a process* by which it is translated into a form that

informs one's action in the world. In other words, religious experiences must be integrated into the life of the one who lives it.

The issue of integration is precisely the question that we seek to examine, and in the next two chapters we will especially address integration in relation to the untrained, spontaneous experiences reported by Barnard, Sensei Loori and others. While both Barnard and Forman correctly identify this type of experience, they do not thoroughly address the process by which such an *integration* occurs. Their assumption is that both Barnard and Loori had actual mystical experiences that, preformed, would fit into a religious *meaning-making structure.* There are two problems with this, which will be addressed more thoroughly in the next chapter. First, it is unclear whether or not there is any *inherently* mystical experience and second, even if there were, the process by which an individual finds a religious framework is still not explained. This second problem begs to be answered in light of the above analysis of the importance of integration.

Chapter 2: Attribution and Integration

Now that I have discussed the historical debate between perennialists and constructivists, we will turn to some other approaches towards religious experience that are more apt for addressing the integration of untrained, spontaneous religious experiences. The fundamental quality that distinguishes these experiences is that they are anomalous in the sense that they defy a person's explanatory capacity using the meaning-systems available to them at the time of the experience. I am using the term meaning-system here as the set organized structures of cultural norms and customs, psychological processes, and personal beliefs that serves as a filter through which experiences are processed, interpreted and explained. Because these experiences are "anomalous" precisely in the sense that they exhaust the meaning systems available to the experiencer, this type of experience often prompts experiencers to search for meaning in areas that are not familiar to them, notably including religion. These experiences ignite a search for meaning rather than imparting meaning fully packaged. In the examples we explored at the end of last chapter, Sensei Loori and Barnard each knew they had experienced something special and knew its qualities intuitively. Sensei Loori could clearly describe what he felt during the experience Forman described as a PCE. Yet he still felt the need to explore and study to fully explain and repeat his experience. In short, powerful, inexplicable experiences especially call upon people to seek out new meaning-systems.

Neither the constructivist nor the perennialist stance alone can adequately be used to analyze this type of experience. Generally, the type of anomalous experience we are studying is one in which somebody has an experience that has prompted them to adopt a religious meaning-system without any prior training in religious practices or any religious beliefs. This is both

semantically and substantively different than saying that somebody had a *religious experience* that they were not prepared for, as we will see. In terms of the historical debate about the nature of mystical and religious experiences, this particular type of experience is especially important because it directly challenges the strong constructivist stance that all experiences called religious experiences are actually a product of prior cultural or cognitive priming that "constructs" the entire experience. The fact that there are people with no religious background who understand powerful experiences in religious terms demonstrates that some "religious experiences" cannot be the result of prior training. While perennialists make room for these types of experiences, they take their argument to an extreme by protecting religious experience from explanations outside the sphere of religion, as Proudfoot pointed out (74). It is possible, however, to maintain that there may be ontological validity to religious experiences while rejecting the perennialist claim that these experiences are universal, and this is an essential component in understanding integration.

Our focus in this paper, however, transcends the limitations of the perennialists and constructivists. We are concerned with the way that people make meaning of religious experiences, rather than the question of the ontological status of the experience. In this chapter, we will explore ways that scholars have tried to understand anomalous experiences as a process, and critique their approaches, much as we did with the perennialist-constructivist debate. Only this time, the entire debate will be directly applicable to understanding the process by which individuals integrate untrained, spontaneous "religious" experiences as they were described in the last chapter.

The first approach we will examine is the attributional approach as presented by Ann Taves in her book, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*. I am choosing this particular approach

for three reasons: (a) its methodology (once adjusted with a small critique) circumvents the problems we had with the perennialists and constructivists; (b) it is relevant to the study of the process of meaning-making; and (c) Taves has already applied this model to one of the cases we are studying. The second approach will come out of the field of psychology of religion. In their book, *Religion and the Individual*, Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis present a model of integration for religious experiences. This study is particularly relevant, because, unlike Taves' approach, which is mostly analytical, their work provides a potential *model* for integration.

As in our previous chapter, we will see pitfalls in both positions. The two major problems we will focus on are the tendency to overgeneralize the psychology of ascription and to give scant reference to the actual steps of integration. Taves, in her attempt to analyze Barnard's experience misses integration by only addressing the beginning and ending of Barnard's search for meaning, rather than the process in between. In addition, Taves' overemphasis on the naturalistic aspects of religion leads her to over-generalize the religious attribution. Batson et al. overgeneralize the process of integration so that their model does not make room for the flexibility that attribution theory allows for. Their model of the process of integration amounts to no more than a thematic analysis of integration, thereby both overgeneralizing and glossing over the specificity of each religious experience.

We will conclude by presenting these two pitfalls as fundamental problems with prior approaches to the study of integrating anomalous experience. These problems will be further developed in the next and final chapter into an integrated critique with implications and suggested future directions.

Taves' Attributional Approach: Ascription

Attribution theory/analysis is an approach used in the field of psychology to analyze and

explain the ways in which individuals or groups give meaning to things, events and experiences. Its foundational premise is that people make meaning out of events by "attributing" meaning rather than perceiving pre-given meaning. Because religion is such an integral part of the ways the majority of human beings derive meaning, the attributional approach is particularly pertinent and applicable in the study of religious meaning systems. Therefore, attribution theory was specifically applied to religion in the early days of attribution theory's development.[2]

Attribution theory is extremely relevant for the purposes of this paper because its methodology can easily be applied to the study of integration. Unlike perennialism and constructivism, in which integration is ancillary to the debate, attribution theory directly addresses religious experiences through a meaning-making perspective. Its application may be useful for us to illuminate both the *process* by which Barnard and Sensei Loori attributed *religious* meaning to their experiences and possible reasons *why* they attributed religious meaning. Both of these questions are extremely important in understanding the way in which individuals who have such experiences come to integrate them.

Ann Taves, in her book, *Religious Experience Reconsidered,* draws many of the attributional approaches together in order to create a comprehensive model for researchers to study religion from an attributional perspective. Part of her goal in writing was to open the doorways for interdisciplinary research on religious experience that allows for naturalistic explanations, such as biological or psychological ones. Her approach is reminiscent of Proudfoot's conception of explanatory reductionism, which in the previous chapter we took to be a sound component of a methodology for the study of religion. While this approach offers many advantages when studying the process of integration, it must be tempered slightly. Before offering this critique, let us take a look at Taves' particular approach to the attribution model.

[2] See Spilka et al.

First, she divides the attribution model into two components: ascription and explanation. The "ascriptive model" is fundamental to Taves' argument. To illuminate this step of attribution, she juxtaposes her ascriptive model with the *sui generis* model of many of the perennialists. Perennialists claim there are certain types of experiences that are *inherently* religious and occupy their own ontological category such that no explanations outside of the religious sphere are adequate to explain them. Religious experiences can only be fully known by direct experience, according to perennialists. Taves, however, rejects the claim that there are inherently religious experiences; instead, she argues that experiences become religious by the process of ascribing meaning. Ascription, as Taves applies it, is a psychological process by which an individual or group *deems* something "special." Religious valuations, such as sacredness, are just one of many different ways of deeming something special, and their ascription is not much unlike any other ascribed value such as beauty. To Taves, experiences *become* religious when they are ascribed religious specialness:

> If we want to understand how anything at all, including experience, becomes religious, we need to turn our attention to the processes whereby people sometimes ascribe the special characteristics to things that we…associate with terms such as 'religious,' 'magical,' 'mystical,' 'spiritual' et cetera. Disaggregating 'religious experience' in this way will allow us to focus on the interaction between psychobiological, social, and cultural-linguistic processes in relation to carefully specified types of experiences sometimes considered religious and to build methodological bridges across the divide between the humanities and the sciences. (8)

Therefore, Taves does not use the terminology of "religious experience" as a general

category or "religious experiences" as instances. Instead she refers to "experiences deemed religious." This essentially serves as a "dethronement" of so-called religious experiences by exposing them to scrutiny from all other academic disciplines, as Proudfoot did. To Taves, there ought to be no experiences that are immune from academic scrutiny from any field in any particular mode of analysis. This is because she views these experiences as the result of a multitude of different factors that can be considered—social, psychological, biological and so on. Taves is uninterested in what the actual content of an experience is but rather how the valuation of the experience is formed. She is particularly interested in studying so-called "special" experiences because they are particularly pertinent when studying the ways in which individuals make meaning. Certainly ordinary experiences could be analyzed from an attributional perspective, but experiences ascribed religious or special valuation are particularly significant components of an individual's meaning-making system.

When an experience or any other thing is ascribed religious value, it takes on particular qualities that distinguish it as special. Taves' conception of specialness is that of "singularity." To explain this concept she draws on Durkheim who described sacred things as "things set apart and protected by taboos" (26). The notion of singularity builds on this general line of thinking, but it refines the definition further. Singularity is the negative quality of not being comparable to any other objects. Singular objects cannot be bought or sold because there is no way to exchange for something that has absolute value. In keeping with her ascriptive model, Taves claims that things are not inherently singular; rather they are ascribed this quality. As evidence, she references instances in which objects can become sacralized and subsequently desacralized (30). Experiences, she claims, can also be considered singular, as in the case of revelatory experiences of the founders of religions (33). The experience of the revelation of the Qu'ran to the prophet

Muhammad in the Muslim tradition is one example. That experience was so special, in the eyes of Muslims, that no other experience could ever rival it in its qualities or value.

According to Taves, there are also particular modes of specialness. She differentiates between two different types of special things: ideal things and anomalous things. She starts by explaining ideal things:

> Let us begin by considering things that stand out as special because they seem ideal, perfect, or complete. They may stand out in this way in a relative sense or, if they are thought to approach an ultimate horizon or limit, they may signal an ideal in the absolute sense. As absolutes, they are no longer on a continuum with limited things, however special such things might be, but are fully set apart. (36)

Ideal things become singular when they are considered absolutes. In becoming so special that they are considered absolutes, they cannot be compared with other objects and are therefore considered singular. Taves believes that things become ideal or absolute by a process of ascription and thereby become singular. She explains:

> If we describe a flower as beautiful, we perceive a quality in the flower and mark the flower as special, in this case beautiful. If the perceived beauty of the flower evokes a response in us and we attribute the flower's ability to evoke this response to Beauty manifesting itself in the flower, then we have transformed a perceived quality into an absolute. (36)

Thus, according to Taves, the absolute reveals itself only when the person viewing the flower transforms an ordinary quality into the absolute of that quality. When beauty, in the case of the flower, is perceived as an ultimate quality that actually goes beyond the existence of that

individual flower, it becomes the ultimate. The capitalization signifies that this particular thing is not just a thing, but also the Ultimate Reality of that particular thing. These capitalized words represent that which is beyond all ordinary things, and occupies a space in the "other" world.

The other quality that tends to mark specialness is anomalousness. We have already discussed anomalousness at the beginning of the chapter, but here we are concerned especially with how anomalousness translates into the specialness or singularity that Taves is describing. Anomalous things defy our expectations. They are unusual or strange. Taves argues that labeling experiences or events "spiritual" or "mystical" or "transcendent" are ways to set those experiences apart from all others:

> People often use the terms "mystical" and "spiritual" to mark events, places, objects, or experiences as very special and, depending on what they mean by the terms, sometimes to signal that they consider the thing in question so special that it cannot or should not be compared to other, less special things. People may use these terms to mark things as belonging to another realm or manifesting a different sort of energy or exemplifying a higher aspect of reality that is not just special, but so special that it cannot be compared with more ordinary things.
>
> We can take as an example the anomalous experience in which the boundary between self and world seems to dissolve. Most people would probably consider such an experience unusual and thus special to some degree. Some philosophers of religion [such as Robert Forman and William Barnard] characterize such experiences as mystical and in so doing mark them as very special. (40)

An untrained, spontaneous experience clearly fits this category more so than ideal things.

Those who eventually incorporate an anomalous experience into a religious framework usually reach this point because they considered that experience special in the way that Taves describes. This conception of anomaly goes a step further than the way we conceived it at the beginning of the chapter, as Taves frames it within her singularity model. For our purposes it is important to understand that when people find religious contexts for their anomalous experiences, they are not only different but also special. The experience seems so anomalous or so special that it requires a framework like a religion that facilitates such a conception.

Finally, Taves delineates between simple and composite ascriptions. Simple ascriptions are when one thing is deemed special such as an event, an experience, or a person. Composite ascriptions have to do with paths. In composite ascriptions there is both a path that is deemed special and a goal the path is reaching towards that is also deemed special. Though it may seem that composite ascriptions shed light on the process of integration, this is not so the case in spontaneous, untrained experiences. More will be said about this in the next chapter.

One of the key weaknesses of Taves' model is her treatment of "specialness" as one generic category that can account for all anomalous experiences.[3] Taves makes little distinction between different types of religious ascriptions, let alone the distinction of one category of specialness from one another. Taves uses the same generic form of specialness for spiritual, religious and mystical experiences alike. In reality, however, there are distinct qualities that accompany all anomalous experiences that make them qualitatively distinct from one another. The notion of generic specialness is an oversimplification that leaves little room for the various

[3] Taves does distinguish between anomalies and anomalies caused by agents (Taves 45), but this still does not fully distinguish these experiences. For example, we would categorize experiences of terrifying anomalous agents that may be attributed as demons or pleasant ones that bring a feeling of love. Ultimately all of the different modes of ascription are generic because they are only indicative of one form of valuation with what I am describing as different modes. These distinctions do not adequately account for the variety of religious experiences both quantitatively and qualitatively.

textures of different experiences. This critique will, too, become clearer when we address it more comprehensively in our final chapter.

In addition, in order to keep true to the stipulation in the previous chapter that we will remain agnostic as to the ontological validity of religious experiences, it is important that we do not preclude nor posit the possibility of an ontological truth that the attributor has experienced. It is for this reason that we rejected the strong constructivist position according to which religious experiences are *only* constructed and do not have any reality in themselves. By rejecting the *sui generis* model completely, Taves borders on also precluding the possibility of there being some phenomenal reality to experiences that are deemed mystical. To entertain that there is phenomenal substance to experiences deemed religious we do not have to accept the *validity* of the description that follows from the experience; rather, we must accept that there actually was an event that cannot be explained *entirely* on the basis of previous cultural and cognitive construction, as Katz and Proudfoot would have us believe. Taves borders on making the same mistake. Consider, for example, Taves' treatment of Forman's Pure Consciousness Event (PCE) from above. Taves argues that, by calling this experience mystical, Forman is setting it apart and protecting it with taboos. But she seems to imply that the mere process of singularizing an experience means it does not have actual phenomenal qualities that contributed to it being deemed special.

On the other hand, we ought not overlook the relevance of the constructivist position in constituting the actual formation of the religious experience. Proponents of both Taves' attribution approach and the *sui generis* approach tend not to give enough attention to the constructed components of experiences deemed religious. The *sui generis* position characterizes religious experiences as if all inherently "religious" meaning-systems may account for the

uniquely religious experience. I contend that, even in light of the spontaneous, untrained, anomalous experiences that pose a challenge to the constructivist camp, religious experiences come with some degree of construction. In other words, reports of religious experiences are not neutral or generic; specific formations are inherently attached to these experiences.

Taves' ascriptive model is still relevant, however, because there is still a process by which the individual deems this experience "mystical" "religious," "spiritual" and so on, regardless of whether there is ontological reality to the content to the experience. In other words, even if there is some unifying quality to experiences deemed mystical, our focus here is just on the process by which it comes to be understood as such and integrated into one's life. Taves' attributional approach is significant because it allows one to analyze the dynamics of integration. In short, the integration of an experience can be studied without concern about the validity of the experience.

But Taves' ascriptive model actually falls into the same trap as the perennialist model albeit in a different way. By creating her category of "specialness" as a generic attribute to religious things and experiences, Taves also ignores the variance in the constructed qualities of religious experiences, even those that are untrained and spontaneous. Not all ascriptions are the same, and classifying all such experiences as simply "special" or "singular" limits the study of "experiences deemed religious" by ignoring their texture. Therefore, Taves' ascriptive approach is not as different from the perennialist approach as she has us believe. More will be said about this in the next chapter, but for now I will just note that this is a fundamental flaw of the attribution approach as Taves presents it.

Taves' Attributional Approach: Explanation

We've established that, in Taves view, experiences become "religious," or, more broadly,

"special" when they are deemed special, rather than there being some inherent religious feature of that experience that makes it special. The defining feature of specialness is singularity, the valuation of something that is incomparable to any other thing within that category. We saw that there are basically two types of special things: ideal things and anomalous things. We have determined that, because of the particular type of experience we will be examining, anomalous things will be our focus. Finally, we have noted that there is a distinction between simple and composite ascriptions, which will only become important in our next chapter.

After describing ascription, Taves presents explanation as the nest step of the attribution model. Explanation is the process through which individuals, scholars, medical professionals, communities and so on attribute meaning or causality to experiences. Taves sees a distinction between these two steps. Ascription is the process of giving value to the event, which thereby distinguishes it as something worthy of explanation. Explanation is the process of assigning the specific significance and offering meaning or interpretations of the experience, including the source of or reasons for its specialness. There have been many models of attribution theory in religion in previous literature. Taves thoroughly summarizes a broad range of studies and draws on a number of these different approaches for her own more comprehensive analysis. She relies most heavily on the attribution model put forth by Spilka et al. Within their model, there are at least four relevant factors when analyzing the process of attribution: the attributor, the attributor's context, the event, and the event context.

The goal of this form of analysis is to determine which meaning system an attributor will adopt for his or her experience. It is possible that, in terms of one experience, the person who had the experience may interpret it one way, while an outsider may interpret it an entirely different way. It is also possible for two individuals to have very similar experiences but interpret

them in two entirely different ways. This is at least in part due to differences in their meaning-systems. The meaning-system is inextricably linked to the report of an experience because all descriptions are not accessible without first being filtered through our meaning-system. A meaning making system is broadly the set of conceptual filters through which we interpret our experiences formed by factors such as culture, prior knowledge and experience. As we just saw, there are many individuals who may interpret one singular event. While many agents may play a role in the interpretation of an event, we will be focusing primarily on how the meaning-system of an individual who has an experience that they have deemed religious influences the attribution of causality.

According to Spilka et al, the person who has an anomalous event will rely upon the most readily available meaning system. In light of this assumption, an untrained, spontaneous experience poses a challenge to this attribution model. In the context of such an experience, an individual uses a meaning-system that they did not previously have to attribute meaning to the event, and this challenges the model proposed by Spilka et al. because their model is highly dependent on the individual relying upon meaning-systems already available to them. Taves takes up this issue very directly in her discussion of explanation. She claims that such cases can still be explained using an attribution model. In doing so, she is careful to distinguish her approach from constructivism, which she claims is not adequate to explain the type of experience we are focusing on. To explain the difference between the constructivist and attributional approach, she draws upon neuroscientific approaches that delineate between top-down and bottom-up processing. Top-down processing originates from schemata, our prior expectations and beliefs, while bottom-up originates from “environmental influences and cues” (Taves 94). Constructivism, she explains, only allows for a top-down structure to explain religious

experience such that the understanding of the experience can only be explained in terms of the priming and training that occurred prior to the experience in question. Taves argues that the attributional approach leaves room for "bottom-up" experiences in which the experience introduces something novel into the religious person's meaning-making system. This conception is more apt because it acknowledges that something new is being presented in anomalous experiences.

As one of her examples for the attribution model, Taves looks at Barnard's experience of a boundless surging energy that we have already described in our last chapter. Taves begins her analysis by employing the model from Spilka and colleagues. She reiterates the characteristics of Barnard's experience, which was "a direct and powerful experience…that [he] was a surging ecstatic, boundless state of consciousness" (95). The event context, she explains, was that he was, at the time, ruminating over the possibility of his own death. Barnard's disposition for the experience came from his previously held secular point of view that our consciousness does not continue after we die. The problem in the analysis emerges, however, with the requirement from Spilka et al. that Barnard employ the most readily available meaning-making model to interpret the event. But the whole point of Barnard's untrained, spontaneous experience is that it resists any explanations available to Barnard. After a lengthy search for explanations, he eventually adopts an entirely new meaning-making approach (from Buddhist sources) that was not at all available to him at the time of the event. Thus, Spilka et al.'s model seems to fail here, and while Taves claims there are other programs that account for transformation, she does not explain how.[4]

In the next stage of attributional analysis, Taves incorporates the work of Bertram Malle. Malle distinguishes between the ways individuals explain intended behavior and unintended

[4] One such approach by Paloutzian and Park will be examined in the next chapter.

behavior. Malle argues that intentional behavior is usually explained in the language of reason, while unintentional behavior the individual is explained causally because one cannot adequately attribute any reasons for the event. Taves applies the analysis of unintentional versus intentional behavior to understand Barnard's meaning-making process in terms of Malle's folk psychology. In Barnard's experience the most pertinent behavior was his encounter with the boundless, surging state of consciousness. Taves argues that this behavior is unintentional and that Barnard thereby sought a causal explanation for his experience and he eventually adopted a Buddhist philosophical framework to understand it.

After applying Malle's analysis using the language that Barnard presented in his own narrative, Taves analyzes it from a naturalistic perspective. In other words, she attempts to explain his experience without evaluating whether or not he actually experienced himself as a boundless state of consciousness. Her chief explanation is that Barnard's experience was the result of a paradoxical dissolution of self-other boundaries and his search for meaning arose out of the intensity of the event. She claims:

> [Barnard's experience] is precipitated by the unsuccessful attempt to visualize a widespread secular cultural script (the idea that the soul/self is extinguished with the death of the body). The idea of trying to visualize the self not existing after death apparently emerged spontaneously. I am hypothesizing that the mental paradox involved in the visualization triggered the dissolution of self-other boundaries, that the dissolution of self-other boundaries triggered feelings of ecstasy and exhilaration, and that the novelty, intensity, and suddenness of this experience triggered the need for explanation. (110)

Beyond the problem that Taves' use of the model from Spilka et al. does not account for

Barnard's need to find a new meaning-making system, Taves' analysis has two other major issues. First, the way Taves limits herself to naturalistic explanations does not present any methodology or model to understand the process of making meaning. Even if the self-other boundary was dissolved and this caused Barnard to search for explanations, Taves' naturalistic explanation does not explain the entire dynamic of attribution. From Barnard's perspective, he actually did experience himself as a boundless state of consciousness. To fully understand Barnard's meaning-making process, it is important to understand Barnard's subjective experience and how he attempted to reconcile it. This is another instance of the importance of the construction of "experiences deemed religious." The experience is not simply amorphous, but rather has features that are relevant to the search for meaning. Second, Taves' account is incomplete. She stops at the fact that Barnard had a drive to find a new meaning system, but she does not have anything within her model that accounts for the actual process of *integrating* the experience. She effectively leaves out the entire search for meaning that ensued after the event.

Therefore, we need two additions to the attribution model that Taves presents. First, as we saw in her notion of explanation, the attribution model must be modified to account for the individual's actual subjective experience of meaning-making that Taves' particular application of naturalistic explanations does not account for. Naturalistic models are valuable only if they acknowledge the personal struggles inherent in meaning making which includes the phenomenal qualities of the experience. Taves' basically physicalist explanation may describe what happens within the brain at an unconscious level, but it does not provide a model to understand how Barnard processed the content of the experience at a conscious level. Second, as a corollary, we need to extend our study of attribution to include the *process* of integration. It is impossible to fully understand how individuals attribute meaning to an experience if we stop analysis at the

inspiration to search for meaning. This would be like saying that a fire could warm somebody just by the spark that started it. The fire only comes into fruition as it spreads from tinder to blazing. Integration is of special significance with the type of experience that we are focusing on in this paper because untrained spontaneous experiences often require a prolonged meaning-making process.

Cognitive Model of Integration: Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis

Psychologists have taken other approaches to explain the process of integrating religious experience in which the actual dynamics of religious transformations are taken into account. Notably, Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis proposed a four-stage cognitive model for integration. It is quite relevant to Barnard's experience because it is specifically geared towards studying people who first engage with religious life due to their anomalous experience. One of the fundamental premises of their model is that human cognition is hierarchically layered from the simpler processing to more complex layers with each layer transcending but including the previous one. At higher levels there is a greater degree of differentiation and integration, meaning that the mind becomes open to more new data while simultaneously generating a more coherent worldview (90–91). Transformation occurs when somebody has an experience that is beyond the comprehension of his or her present cognitive level. In such instances, the individual is forced to expand their present cognitive level to solve the problem posed by this higher-level phenomenon. Previously, scholars studying creativity had already presented a model for the creative process based around this premise (Graham, McDonald, and Klaassen). In *Religion and the Individual,* Batson et al. attempted to reshape that model to study religious experiences, which they characterize as existential problems rather than intellectual problems.

Their model and the original model are divided into four basic stages. We will only be

concerned with the model that applies to religious experience. The first stage of the model is a personal existential crisis in which the individual struggles with seemingly unanswerable questions, or questions that are personally troubling. In this stage, individuals search all layers of their cognition for a framework to make sense of their query. In Barnard's case, the existential question was about what would happen to him when he died. In his searching, he exhausted the secular worldview, which was that consciousness completely ends after death. After questioning for some time, his worldview simply collapsed. This is the second stage they call "self-surrender." In this stage, after "[t]rying and failing to regain existential meaning within one's existing reality, one is driven to a point of despair and hopelessness (104)." It is unclear if this stage applies specifically to Barnard's experience, but it is clear that he wrestled with the idea to a point of frustration, though perhaps not to one of complete self-surrender.

In the final stages the individual integrates a new model. First, these authors describe a stage of "new vision." In this stage the individual finds the resolution to the existential crisis in the form, perhaps, of a religious experience. Barnard's experience of himself as a boundless state of consciousness is perhaps the closest analogous experience. In his crisis to determine if consciousness continued after death, he realized himself as this disembodied consciousness that may have answered the question. But ultimately, Barnard did not find this new vision until after years of studying Buddhist philosophical texts. This new vision ultimately leads to the final stage of the process, "new life," in which the experience is fully integrated into a higher cognitive level. This final stage or something like it is the final stage of integration. In my view, an experience is integrated when it is no longer anomalous and can be used as a guiding force for action.

Like Taves, Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis offer a naturalistic explanation for their

model, offering the possibility that the religious experience and the creative experience involve a shift from activation in the left hemisphere of the brain, which is considered heavily involved with logical, rational thinking, to the right hemisphere which deals more with emotions. This, they say, may explain the seeming ineffable quality of the experience, because it originates from a region that cannot be processed by the left-brain. As we saw with Taves' account, it is important not to overestimate the value that a biological correlate to a type of experience can provide. At the very least, it must be cautioned that it cannot tell us the entirety of the experience because it cannot reveal anything about the meaning-making process unless we know the content of the experience.

There are several additional, and more fundamental, problems with the model proposed by Batson and colleagues. One problem is that it is too general. These four steps are certainly relevant themes in many "personal transformation" stories, but not all play these out in the same order or even contain all of those factors listed. Barnard studied for years in order to finally find his way within a Buddhist meaning-system. Within this model, was his "new vision" the boundless state of consciousness he encountered or the Buddhist principles he encountered as he tried to explain the experience? And in the case of Sensei Loori cited by Forman (and discussed in greater detail below), he did not even have any existential crisis to precipitate the experience; rather he had an experience without any provocation, and then sought to make meaning out of it. Therefore, Batson et al.'s framework is really more like a set of recurring themes that occur during personal transformation. Also, their model does not explain the dynamic process of how meaning is actually derived from the experience and what qualities of religion lends itself to solving existential questions. *How* does Barnard's experience translate into a new structure? Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis only outline stages without demonstrating the entire dynamic of

the process.

The weakness of their model is quite evident in light of the cases we are studying. When Barnard had his "existential crisis" he was not at all influenced by Buddhism or anything religious for that matter. So they do not answer the question of how this process is uniquely religious. Why would somebody having an existential crisis find his or her way into a religious meaning-making structure? The examples they cite in their chapter are all of people having a deeper understanding of their prior meaning-system. They do discuss some cases involving atheists, but these subjects eventually reverted to their atheistic disposition without integrating their questioning through a religious form of meaning-making. In contrast, in the cases I have cited, there was a transition to a new, religious approach to meaning-making. The case of the Sensei Loori, who eventually became a Zen Abbot, particularly illuminates the pitfalls of Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis' model. Sensei Loori did not have any sort of existential crisis. He was not seeking anything when his experienced occurred. Instead, his experience was entirely spontaneous, but it still led him towards religious systems. In a sense, his new vision came *before* his existential crisis. This type of experience and subsequent search for meaning clearly does not conform to the model proposed by Batson and colleagues.

Our task now is to suggest, in a preliminary way, a new direction for understanding and modeling the integration of anomalous experiences that takes into account the critiques of previous cognitive and attribution approaches we have raised in this chapter. This will allow us to take the benefits of the attribution methodology and extend it to incorporate the themes of a process of integration not unlike the one the Batson et al. present. We will suggest a new direction that takes into account the need for a more nuanced understanding of "specialness" and the need for an account of the actual dynamic process by which integration occurs. Eventually,

this will amount to a unified call for continued research with specific applications. Our first task, however, will be to expand the critiques we raised in this chapter, such that the importance of a new model becomes clearer.

Chapter 3: Questions and Future Directions

We have examined a number of different approaches towards understanding "religious experiences" or "experiences deemed religious" as phenomena generally and as components of a process of integration. Untrained, spontaneous experiences have been our focus; specifically, we have examined some factors that are involved in the integration of into religious meaning-systems. Now, I will conclude by addressing some of the issues I present in the second chapter in greater detail in order to clarify the process of integration or religious transformation. Our first issue will mostly concern the first critique of the attribution model, in which I will argue that anomalous experiences are to a certain degree preformed and are therefore not amenable to just any meaning system, including those immediately at one's disposal and those that may be sought out. Secondly, I will remark on the way previous models of integration have done little more than outline components of transformation rather than provide a model of the dynamic steps from anomaly to integration.

The Problem with Generic Ascription: Meaning-Making as Play

We turned to the attributional approach because it offered a methodology that could potentially be used to understand the dynamic process of integrating anomalous experiences into religious meaning-making systems. This approach was advantageous because it compensated for some of the pitfalls of the perennialist-constructivist dichotomy by providing an avenue for analyzing meaning-making while circumventing the question of whether or not there is an essence underlying all religious experiences. The notion of an essence arose when the early perennialists claimed that there were inherent features of religious experiences that distinguished

them as falling within a *sui generis* category. In other words, the early perennialists claimed there were distinctly mystical and numinous experiences that were universal in the sphere of religion and inaccessible to the rational mind alone. These experiences either constituted or, in the case of James, manifested from a fundamental essence of religion.

The constructivist response, though partially valid, was still insufficient when applied to understanding the integration of anomalous experiences. The central component of constructivism is that there actually is no essence underlying mystical experiences, but rather that the experiences are constructed through cognitive and cultural predispositions held prior to the experience. The merit of this account is that it acknowledges that all anomalous experiences are, indeed, filtered through the cultural or perceptual lenses we carry with us and thereby vary from context to context. The pitfall of this perspective is that it could not account for the quality of newness that sometimes accompanies religious experiences, as in the case of spontaneous, untrained religious experiences. We cited two examples from scholarly literature as examples of cases that the constructivist approach could not account for. Specifically, Barnard and Sensei Loori had "mystical" experiences without being exposed to mystical teachings beforehand.

The attributional approach circumvented both of these limitations by sidestepping the question of whether or not there is an essence of religious experiences. We have focused mainly on Taves' version of the attributional approach in which "religious experiences" are considered "experiences deemed religious." In other words, regardless of the ontological status of the material of such experiences, an individual has come to consider it a special, singular experience that begs for explanation. Taves spoke of two particular types of experiences that lent themselves to such a process: ideal things and anomalous things. Anomalous things, as we discussed, are things that exhaust the meaning systems we have at our disposal at the time of any

experience. Both Barnard and Sensei Loori could not account for the experiences at the time of their occurrence. They considered these experiences in some way special and thereby sought out an explanation for them.

Through this conception of "experiences deemed religious" we can study the process of meaning-meaning independent of the ontological status of the content. Taves described some of the various approaches psychologists have taken toward the process of meaning-making. Spilka et al. provided a four-component model to predict whether or not a person will adopt a religious meaning-system. These four components were the disposition and context of the attributor and the quality and context of the experience. Based upon the combination of these four factors, they claim, it is possible to predict if somebody will rely upon a religious or secular meaning system. Taves also presented an approach by Malle in which it is possible to analyze the explanatory method experiencers will use to account for experiences.

There is at least one fundamental problem, however, to the attributional approach that Taves proposed; namely that she creates her ascriptive model without giving enough consideration to the specific phenomenal features of experiences as they arise within the subject's awareness at the time of the experience. Aside from distinguishing between anomalous and ideal things, Taves gives scant reference to the content of religious experiences. On the contrary, she characterizes ascription as almost entirely a voluntary process, as if anybody can choose to call any type of experience anomalous or ideal and ascribe it with "specialness." This appears to be an oversimplification that lends itself to misconstruing how people come to explain their experiences.

Not all ascriptions are equal. There are, instead, preformed qualities to "experiences-deemed-special," such that not all special things are special in the same way. Admittedly, this is

not an issue that Taves completely overlooks. The attribution model of Spilka et al. takes into consideration both the qualities of the attributor and the experience in determining whether or not the person will adopt a religious framework. Taves' distinction between anomalous and ideal things is also a step in the right direction, but within these two broad categories there are numerous different types. Moreover, she still ultimately describes all religious experiences as special with no substantive distinctions. There are a number of problems with the approach that stem from the conflation of all ascriptions into one category of generic "specialness." In short, in the attributionists' effort to form a general structure of attribution, they overlook the phenomenal content of the experience and the person's meaning-system.

To understand this distinction, consider the difference between children playing with Playdough and children playing with shaped blocks. Children playing with Playdough may mold it into any particular shape they want depending on which cookie cutters they have. Playdough is moldable, and can take the form of whatever filter it is put through. Children playing with Playdough can make any shape they wish. If they have a star they can cut the Playdough and make a star. If they have a circle cutter they can make a circle.

When children play with blocks, on the other hand, they are limited by the holes they may fit any particular block into. If they pick up the star-shaped block, they may only fit it within the star spot. They are completely constrained because of the specific shape of the block. If they are handed a round block, on the other hand, they will not be able to fit it in the star hole that they had become accustomed to. They will have to find another hole that can contain the round block. The round block, of course, will fit in the round hole; however, while a square block won't fit in a round hole, a round block may fit in a square hole if the diameter of the circle matches the lengths of the sides of the square. Therefore, although children are constrained by

the shape of the block, there may be multiple holes that one block fits into.

Now, think of the shapes as meaning systems and a child as the attributor of an anomalous experience. In the Taves/Spilka et al. conception, ascriptions are like Playdough; the child will fit into any meaning system as long as that system is available to the attributor at the time. The ascription does not come preformed in any particular shape; it is simply "special," or "singular," or "religious." Therefore, any meaning-system that explains "special" things at the subject's disposal is adequate. So, for example, this would mean that anybody that lives in a conservative Christian family might use a Christian meaning-system to account for their experience, no matter what the initial ascription consists of. This is not to say that they necessarily would use the Christian meaning system to explain the experience, but it is at the very least within the realm of possible outcomes. Spilka et al. make clear that people generally make use of experiences they have at their disposal (9). From their perspective, it is always at least possible and perhaps likely that they will fall upon these attributions for experiences.

Anomalous experiences, I will argue, are more like blocks. They have certain preformed features that make them limited in the range of possible meaning-systems to adopt. As in the case of the round peg that fit in both the round and square hole, not all experiences are destined to fit within one particular meaning-system; there is often a range of possibilities. But the round peg will never fit within the star hole. Its shape constrains that possibility. Similarly, not all special experiences are the same, particularly anomalous ones. I contend that if a person from a conservative Christian family has an uplifting vision of a blue figure with many arms, he will not find a place for this experience within the Christian meaning-system available to him. He may, however, find meaning within Indian systems that depict Vishnu in this fashion. Therefore, while the person is most likely limited to meaning systems that acknowledge the existence of

Vishnu, multiple perspectives on such an experience are possible.

By critiquing Taves' attributional approach, I am not meaning to suggest that it is entirely invalid. In fact, it is a good general framework for addressing the process of meaning-making. Our understanding of the ascription process, however, must be more specific to be ofuse it to understand the integration of spontaneous, untrained anomalous experiences like those of Barnard and Sensei Loori. Generic specialness is not sufficient because to explain this process because the integration process is more constrained than the general example of child's toys; that is, integration would have no significance within the Playdough model because a child may choose any meaning system available. The child is free to play with any cookie-cutter shape. But when that child is playing with blocks, the integration process is clearer. When the child is able to place the block in the correct hole consistently it means that the integration process is complete. In real terms, the integration process is complete when the experience is no longer anomalous.

Therefore, it would improve the ascriptive model to generate a typology of specialness rather than to use the generic version Taves uses. Spilka et al. and Paloutzian begin to answer this question, but their work is insufficient. They fall into the same pitfalls as the perennialists, of grouping religion into a monolithic entity. The perennialists did so by positing a universal essence to all religious experience, while Taves and other attributional psychologists act as if religious meaning systems and special ascriptions all take on similar psychological qualities. This is evident in the stated goals Spilka et al. set out accomplish, namely, to determine the situations in which a religious meaning system will be adopted in general: This implies that all religious meaning systems fall into one basic category. Therefore, the ascriptive model, in its own way, generalizes religious experience.

The Need for Models of Integration Process

In our attempt to understand integration, we examined a few approaches that more explicitly addressed the actual process of integration. Primarily, we examined the model conceived of by Batson et al. that centered upon cognitive restructuring in existential problems. Under this model, a religious transformation is prompted by an experience that exceeds the cognitive level of development at the time of the experience. In our terminology, we said that this is an anomalous experience, defined by the fact that it exceeds the capacities of our meaning system. According to Batson et al. and others (Paloutzian and Park), in the process of transformation, the individual encounters some sort of "New Vision" that is a solution to the existential question they confronted at a lower cognitive level. We said that as the cognitive layers increase in both integration and differentiation. In other words, we become capable of processing more experiential "data" and have a more coherent vision of how they all link together.

The major problem with this approach is that it does not do enough to explain the actual steps and dynamics of a process of integration. We saw, in light of our application to Barnard's experience of being a boundless state of consciousness, that the model they presented is more like a set of themes that often occur in the case of transformational religious experiences. The structure of this model is particularly inadequate in light of spontaneous, untrained religious experiences because a new vision often prompts a search for meaning, instead of the reverse that their model suggests. Certainly in the case of Barnard he was wrestling with existential questions, but Sensei Loori did not start searching until he had his "new vision." He was not even consciously wrestling with any questions; the PCE came to him seemingly entirely unprovoked when he sat down in front of the tree. Yet this experience prompted a spiritual

transformation. Therefore, the model of Batson et al. is not as universal as they would make it seem. In fact, even spontaneous, untrained religious experiences come in multiple forms.

While the approach of Spilka and colleagues is certainly not as comprehensive as they would have us believe, it is still a reasonable starting point for understanding religious experiences. Their cognitive restructuring model is an useful tool for understanding the general process of integration because it maps out the dynamic of meaning-making change, as in an experience that cannot be accounted for in one's meaning system becoming integrated with some sort of new life and new vision. But more research is needed on the ways cognition is restructured during a religious transformation. In other words, there are different steps along the path to integration that are necessary to restructure cognitive systems. These steps are not only poorly understood; they also seem to have been ignored in psychological research of meaning-making.

Recall the distinction we made in the last chapter between simple and composite ascriptions. In differentiating between simple and composite ascriptions Taves attempts to take into account the "path" feature of religious experiences. As previously mentioned, composite ascriptions consist of special paths and special experiences. In the mystical traditions, in particular, there are special meditative and contemplative paths that are geared towards attaining special states such as *Mokṣa, Nirvāṇa* or *Samādhi.* The practicants are trained in the rigors of a tradition that have been replicated over years to attain a "special" designation of singularity. The problem with this type of composite ascription is that it does not take into account the type of path of those who have untrained, spontaneous experiences. In these cases the experience comes before the years of training. There is no way for the person to ascribe singularity to a path because they did not seek out any such special experiences and did not follow any path to attain

them. These individuals often *become* seekers as they try to derive meaning from the event. Thus, while Taves is right to emphasize the distinction between simple and composite ascriptions, she does not include all types of paths within composite ascriptions. Taves seems to acknowledge this limitation as we saw in the previous chapter, but she does not fully resolve the issue. This is a serious weak point in Taves' attributional approach.

I argued that the attribution approach of Spilka et al. was inadequate to account for the fact that Barnard used a meaning-system that was not previously at his disposal to integrate his experience. Taves briefly suggested other attributional approaches that could account for this seeming discrepancy in the theory. Let us turn to one of these approaches written by Paloutzian in *The Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality.* His approach is reminiscent of Batson et al. in that he claims the prompt for religious transformation is an anomalous experience that cannot be accounted for using current cognitive structures. He explicitly sets out to answer the question of *how* religious transformation occurs. His model is based upon the notion of meaning-system change. Paloutzian, who references Batson et al., adds nuance to the cognitive meaning-system change model in that he outlines many of the factors that may come to change in what he terms "religious transformation." For example, he lists attitudes and beliefs, values and value change, and goals and goal redefinition as factors of meaning-systems that are subject to change.

Paloutzian, however, does not do exactly what Taves leads us to believe he does. She claims that his model can account for what she calls the diachronic or dynamic elements of meaning-making when, in fact, he does little but tell us the *content* that will change. He barely touches upon the actual stages of religious transformation, and when he does, it is not enough. He summarizes the process, "as a series of three steps in which (1) input pressures prompt (2)

internal change in one or more components of the meaning system that (3) shows expression as altered outcomes that are connected to those internal components of the meaning system that have been affected" (337). Note that this particular process only provides a skeleton of a process rather than dynamic steps. It is because of this lack that all Paloutzian really accomplishes is outlining what qualities change. While this model is helpful, it does little to help understand the specific integration paths of experiencers of spontaneous untrained religious experiences.

But what do I mean by stages and where do they fit into the meaning-making model of religious transformation? Specifically, I mean the steps that one takes from acknowledging an anomalous experience to eventually integrating that experience into a meaning-system that is capable of holding the experience as it was perceived by the experiencer. I am positing that there is a dynamic process during integration whose stages may be ascertained. In other words, there is likely a particular structure to the process by which different qualities change in the individual who has had an anomalous experience.

To give a rudimentary model to understand what I am thinking of, think of the process as trying on a suit. In buying a suit you start by looking for a suit that looks nice, then you try on the suit to see how it looks and fits, then if you like it you will tailor it, and finally you will buy it. To put this in terms of a meaning-making model: looking at suits is akin to exploring new meaning-systems. For example, one might decide to "try on" Christianity because one's anomalous experience seems to be explicable in terms of Christian notions about God's love that one has gleaned from some source. Trying on the suit would be akin to becoming involved in a Christian community so as to get a general sense of how well Christianity "fits" one's experience. And tailoring the suit is like trying out a number of different churches or theologies while constructing one's personal, Christian worldview that incorporates and integrates the

anomalous experience. Finally, buying the suit is finally to make a commitment to Christianity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we set out to raise some unanswered questions that are essential in understanding the process of integrating untrained, spontaneous experiences. In light of the very existence of such experiences we saw that it is possible for people to integrate experiences into a meaning-system they did not have at their disposal at the time of their initial experience. This conclusion challenge the strong constructivist position, which posits that the entirety of religious experiences could be explained by construction through cultural and cognitive filters that were present prior to the experience. In this chapter we adopted a modified constructivist stance in conjunction with the attributional approach by Taves. From this perspective, new "data" is introduced in anomalous experiences in a constructed form, with specific features. This perspective modifies Taves' ascriptive model by recognizing the qualitative differences among ascriptions.

We also critiqued many of the previous approaches towards integration on the basis that they do not adequately address the process of integration. First we looked to Taves' composite ascriptions as a possible avenue to understand this change, but it offered little help because it presupposes a path already deemed special when, in the case of spontaneous, untrained experiences, the path only emerges after the experience. Taves composite ascriptions are only relevant in pre-organized paths. The model proposed by Batson et al. was valuable based upon their presentation of cognitive restructuring as a general process of integration. It proved insufficient, however, because its supposed structure was really no more than a set of themes that are present in many but not all processes of "religious transformation" to use their terminology. Paloutzian, who built off of Batson et al. added to the process the different qualities that often

change after a spiritual transformation, but gave little in the way of the dynamics. To overcome these limitations, there must be a model that takes into account a more nuanced picture of the different textures of anomalous experiences and situates them within a dynamic process of integration.

Conclusion: Toward a Typology of Religious Transformation

In this thesis, I set out to account for spontaneous, untrained experiences that are integrated into religious meaning-systems. These are experiences in which people with relatively little or no exposure to any religious practices or disciplines have anomalous experiences that eventually lead them to adopt religious meaning-systems that they did not hold prior to the event. We started in the first chapter by situating this discussion within the historical framework of debate on religious experience between perennialists and constructivists. The underpinnings of this debate centered on the question of whether or not there is some category of experiences that is inherently "religious" or "mystical." The perennialists argued that there is an essence underlying all religious experiences and that religious experience was in its own category, that it is *sui generis.* Constructivists argued, instead, that religious experience is constructed by cultural and cognitive filters.

Neo-perennialists in the late 20th century brought the untrained, spontaneous religious experience to the forefront in a way that undermined the constructivist claim that all religious experiences can be accounted for by constructions held prior to the religious experience. Our task, in the following chapter, was to account for such an experience in a way that is neutral to the ontological status of religious experiences. We turned to the attributional approach as presented primarily by Ann Taves which, instead of questioning if there is an essence underlying religious experience, asked how people came to attribute meaning to them. Taves broke this process down into two components, ascription and explanation--with ascription being the process of ascribing specialness to the experience and explanation being attributing meaning to the event.

Taves approach is helpful because it provides a framework that both perennialists and constructivists can reasonably access: meaning systems change regardless of the ontological

status of the experience. Her approach, however, did not adequately address the variations in the way people who have anomalous experiences ascribe "specialness" to their experience. While she does differentiate between anomalous and ideal ascriptions, this does not account for the variety of types of anomalous experiences. For example, there is a difference between somebody who experiences a loss of identity and somebody who experiences themself as a part of the natural world. The process of integration will look different for these two people.

We also turned to various approaches towards a framework for the actual *process* of integration where we found that none of those we examined adequately accounted for the dynamics and stages of integration. Batson et al. convincingly laid out the general principles and themes of religious transformation, but they did not explain how the transformation actually occurs. Paloutzian, building on Batson et al., outlined the various qualities of the individual that may change as he or she shifts into a new meaning-system, but he still does not address how these changes occurred. To demonstrate what I mean when I call for this type of model, I proposed the process of "trying on suits" as a potential starting framework to understand the process.

Taken together, these two critiques amount to a unified call for research and experimentation on a potential typology of religious transformation. The overall goal of such research would be to outline different types paths individuals take in meaning-making to serve as a typology for scholars and other professionals. By understanding the meaning-making process in integrating anomalous experiences, more help can be offered to those who fall into difficulty in their meaning-making process. The most obvious example of people who could benefit from this knowledge is mental healthcare providers.[5] There is some evidence in more overtly

[5] For readings on the connection between religious experience and mental illness see: Smith; Heriot-Maitland; Luhrmann; Leudar and Thomas; Clarke; Symington and Symington;

spiritual, non-academic literature that "spiritual" experiences can be quite disruptive and perhaps require an intervention of some kind (Grof and Grof). The advantage of the attributional approach is that it is agnostic concerning the ontological status of the experience. Therefore, using an attributional approach, psychologists of any religious or secular persuasion can help guide the integration process because it does not force them to accept that there is an essence underlying spiritual experience. Generating a typology of religious transformations add an even greater capacity for helping those among us who are integrating troubling anomalous experiences. It would allow the therapist/doctor to identify possible treatments tailored to their unique, individual process. [6]

To understand different types of ascriptions, ethnographic and psychological research are valuable approaches because they address the subjective aspects of phenomenal experience through interviews. First-hand accounts are useful sources of qualitative data that are perhaps the only way to really understand the typology of religious transformation. It would be useful to ask about one's initial impressions of religious experiences. The stages of religious transformation may potentially be mapped using naturalistic methods like those proposed by Taves at the end of her book and those advocated by Proudfoot in his call for explanatory reductionism. They may be mapped out into general stages that correlate to the actual processing of the internal experience. I predict that there are at least broadly structured steps that an individual must take to traverse the path from anomaly to integration.

[6] For general critiques of the psychiatric model see: Foucault and Khalfa; Szasz; Laing; Fee; and Keohane.

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