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The Objective Study of the Subjective or the Subjective Study of the Objective? Notes on the Social Scientific Study of Religious Experience and the Social Construction of Reality

Eileen Barker*

Abstract

The results of the Religious Experience Survey in Taiwan (REST) can provide a stimulating challenge for Western scholars attempting a scientific study of religion. Too often it has been assumed that religious experiences are little more than the objective phenomena of participants attending a social ritual that involve the worship of a God or some transcendental being(s). With a few notable exceptions, the subjective experiences of individuals have been all but ignored by social scientists until quite recently. This paper begins by considering the limitations of a social science with a discussion of social phenomena as processes of construction that are, intrinsically, both objective and subjective. It is argued that, while we need to take seriously a person's account of his or her experiences, we can also examine the ways in which (relatively) objective phenomena, including social processes, might encourage or discourage subjective experiences. The paper then turns the argument on its head by examining some of the studies of psychologists and neuroscientists which suggest that much of what we consider to be an objective physical reality is more or less selectively constructed by the visual (and auditory) person who is "doing" the seeing (or hearing). There follows a brief glance at some of the reactions to and consequences of what have been perceived to be "religious experiences". Taken as a whole, the paper can be summed up as an exploration of some of the paradoxes and tensions to be found around boundaries that attempt to distinguish an objective "out there" phenomenon from a subjective "in here" experience.

Keywords: religious experience, social science, constructionism, perception, *Verstehen*

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When Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (later known as Osho) was asked what he thought about the scientific study of religion, there was a long pause. “In my whole life,” he said, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anything so ridiculous.”¹

How much more ridiculous might he have thought the idea of the scientific study of religious experience? In what follows, the intention is to take the idea of the scientific study of religious experience seriously and to explore some of the more theoretical challenges to which such a study might give rise.²

Religious experience is certainly not a subject that is obviously accessible to scientific exploration. Religious experiences are rarely shared with others and they are frequently conceptualised as phenomena which are, by their very nature, ineffable. Experiences *of* religion, however, are frequently shared with others and have been the object of study by social scientists since, at least, the time of Auguste Comte (1798- 1857), the French philosopher popularly credited with being the father of sociology.

For the latter part of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, Western sociologists of religion (particularly in Western Europe) assumed that as societies underwent processes such as urbanisation, industrialisation, rationalisation and/or bureaucratisation they would inevitably find themselves on the path to secularisation. There also seemed to be an almost unspoken assumption that the decline in religion would be accompanied by a decline in the numbers of visions or sensations of a supernatural nature that it would be claimed had been experienced by a modern population, with any new revelations being made known through rational or empirical procedures.

The indices for demonstrating the fate of religion were often crude, relying on single measurements such as “Do you believe in God?” or “Do you attend church?” Towards the end of the 1960s, however, a number of sociologists were pointing to different aspects of religious commitment, and discovering both that

¹ Eileen Barker, “The Scientific Study of Religion? You Must be Joking!” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34.3 (1995): 287.

² The paper was originally prepared for the International Conference on the Comparative Study of Religious Experience in Contemporary Taiwan (Hualian, June 2011), when I was invited to discuss “religious experience as an important theme in the study of religion” in the wake of the findings of the recently completed Religious Experience Survey in Taiwan (REST).

many of these did not necessarily vary in the same direction,³ and that in certain parts of the world religion appeared to be remarkably healthy.⁴

Bryan Wilson, one of the best-known advocates of the modern secularisation thesis, explicitly confined his definition of secularization to “a process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose *social* significance,” leaving open the possibility that religion would persist in the private sphere, often acquiring new forms of expression.⁵ Around the time Wilson and others such as Karel Dobbelaere were refining secularization theories, it became increasingly apparent that individuals’ understanding (or lack of understanding) of what was meant by “God” differed dramatically, and more in-depth qualitative research by sociologists and anthropologists led to quantitative surveys introducing a wider spectrum of possibilities and offering such options as “belief in a God with whom one can have a personal relationship”, “belief in an impersonal spirit or life force,” or “a belief that God is something within each person, rather than ‘out there.’”⁶

³ To take just some obvious illustrations, nearly all Scandinavians would call themselves Lutherans and belonged to their State Church, yet less than one in ten attended church. In the 2001 census in England and Wales, 73 per cent of respondents reported that they were Christians, yet only about six per cent were attending church on a weekly basis.

⁴ Among the various trends that were taken as indications that religion was undergoing a revitalisation rather than its demise, was an increase in both Islamic and Christian fundamentalisms, the emergence of numerous new religious movements, and the fact that, in the early 1990s, with the end of several generations of state-imposed secularism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, there was a dramatic resurgence of religion and religiosity (variously defined) in those countries. At the same time, the United States, arguably the most “developed” country in the world, had a population nearly all of whom professed to a belief in God, and over 40 per cent of whom reportedly attended church every Sunday. Furthermore, a roughly similar number of Americans have reported that, contrary to Darwinian evolutionary theory, “God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so.” In other words, they believed that the Book of Genesis was more reliable than “modern science.” (Gallup Polls, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/21814/Evolution-Creationism-Intelligent-Design.aspx>. accessed 26 September 2013.)

⁵ Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (London: Watts, 1966), 14, and “Secularization: The Inherited Model,” in *The Sacred in a Secular Age*, ed. Phillip E. Hammond (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 9-25.

⁶ Karel Dobbelaere, “Secularization Theories and Sociological Paradigms: A Reformulation of the Private-Public Dichotomy and the Problem of Societal Integration,” *Sociological Analysis* 46.4 (1985), and *Secularization: An Analysis at Three Levels* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2002). It is worth noting how REST (the Religious Experience Survey in Taiwan) involved a range of questions about beliefs (see q.16) that both included and extended far beyond those which would be likely to be asked in a Western survey.

But Western sociology of religion has tended to be both ethnocentric and Christo-centric, with a strong focus on institutionalised religion (although there have undoubtedly been some notable exceptions).⁷ Gradually, however, the scope of the subject has expanded to include previously neglected aspects of human behaviour that, while potentially analytically distinct from religion do, nonetheless, overlap with it in ways which, it might be argued, make them an integral part of the discipline. For example, towards the end of the twentieth century there spread an awareness that, while some individuals would deny they were religious, they would nonetheless describe themselves as spiritual, a concept with almost as many ambiguities as religiosity.⁸ More recently, there has been a move in both the United States and Europe to study the “non-religious” from the perspective, and with the concepts, of sociology of religion.⁹ And to include the “non-religious” may be more than justified by an examination of some of the responses in the Taiwanese survey, where the majority (51.9 per cent) of those defining themselves as non-believers affirmed that “Gods, spirits, ghosts, and demons do exist,” 83.7 per cent reported that they had worshipped ancestors and 61 per cent that they had worshipped a neighbourhood god.

Indeed, one source of awareness for Western sociologists of religion about the limitations of their approach has arisen from an increase in their interest in the religions of Asia – or, rather, their interest in what the Westerners would refer to as religions but many of the Asians might not, preferring to think of such beliefs and practices as merely part of their culture, thus challenging the widely accepted distinction between the sacred and profane proposed by Émile Durkheim.¹⁰ An alternative distinction can be found in the work of the Chinese scholar C. K. Yang where he differentiates institutional and diffused religion in

⁷ Among the more obvious exceptions one could point to Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (1922; Boston: Beacon, 1963); Ninian Smart, “Understanding Religious Experience,” in *On World Religions: Volume I: Religious Experience and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. John J. Shepherd (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 39-50.

⁸ Eileen Barker, “The Church Without and the God Within: Religiosity and/or Spirituality?” in *The Centrality of Religion in Social Life*, ed. Eileen Barker (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 187-202.

⁹ Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, *Secularism and Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives* (Hartford, CT: Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, 2007).

¹⁰ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1915; (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968), 37.

Chinese society, the former being:

a system of religious life having (1) an independent theology or cosmic interpretation of the universe and human events, (2) an independent form of worship consisting of symbols (gods, spirits and their images) and rituals, and (3) an independent organization of personnel to facilitate the interpretation of theological views and to pursue cultic worship.¹¹

Diffused religion, on the other hand, is conceived of as a religion having its theology, cultus, and personnel so intimately diffused into one or more secular social institutions that they become part of the concept, rituals, and structure of the latter, thus having no significant independent existence.¹²

Given this distinction, it would seem to be eminently plausible to accept Chan-yang Kao's suggestion that the non-believers identified in the Religious Experience Survey in Taiwan (REST):¹³

are the carriers of the general religious culture that is unstructured and unmediated by organised religions. As potential consumers of the religious market, they may betray features of the un-demarcated territory of the Taiwanese religious field.¹⁴

It would, however, be a mistake to think that it is only in Asian society that such apparent contradictions arise. I have spoken to a number of Westerners who claim not only that they do not believe in ghosts but also that they have felt the presence of a ghost, or even seen one. One avowed atheist of my acquaintance

¹¹ Ching Kun Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*, 1961; (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1991), 294.

¹² *Ibid.*, 295.

¹³ These were respondents who answered "none" when asked, in question 99 of the REST questionnaire, what their religion was.

¹⁴ Chen-yang Kao, "The Religious Experiences of the Non-Religious in Taiwan," in *Religious Experience in Contemporary Taiwan*, ed. Yen-zen Tsai (Taipei: Research Team of a Comparative Study of Religious Experience in Taiwan, 2010), 86.

had her house exorcised in order to free herself from the presence of a ghost in which she did not believe.

In their study of *American Piety*, Rodney Stark and Charles Glock examined religious commitment from a number of perspectives: religious belief; ritual religious practice; devotional religious practice; religious knowledge – and religious experience, which, they wrote, had, since the time of Leuba, Starbuck and William James, been “absolutely neglected.”¹⁵

This was not entirely true. On the other side of the Atlantic, Alister Hardy’s Gifford Lectures and other publications had certainly broached the subject, and in 1969 Sir Alister founded the Religious Experience Research Unit (now known as the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre), which has been responsible for a dramatic increase of awareness of the role of religious experience in people’s lives.¹⁶ Others too, were showing an interest in the subject, but these have been primarily social psychologists, anthropologists or religious studies scholars, with sociologists of religion still tending to steer clear of the subject.¹⁷

It is, however, possible that the results of REST could not only increase our understanding of religious experience but that they could also stimulate a far broader understanding of religious and spiritual phenomena at individual, local

¹⁵ James H. Leuba, *The Psychology of Religious Mysticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925); Edwin Diller Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899); William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, 1902); Rodney Stark and Charles Y. Glock, *American Piety: The Nature of Commitment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 125.

¹⁶ Alister Hardy, *The Living Stream* (London: Collins, 1965), *The Divine Flame: An Essay towards a Natural History and Religion* (London Collins, 1966), *The Biology of God* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); Timothy Beardsworth, *A Sense of Presence* (Oxford: Religious Experience Research Unit, Manchester College, 1977); David Hay, *Exploring Inner Space: Scientists and Religious Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982); Edward Robinson, *The Original Vision* (Oxford: The Religious Experience Research Unit, Manchester College, 1977); Xinzhong Yao and Paul Badham, eds, *Religious Experience in Contemporary China: Religion, Education and Culture* (University of Wales Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi and Michael Argyle, eds., *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour, Belief and Experience* (London: Routledge, 1997); Ioan M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession* (London: Routledge, 1971); Ninian Smart, “Understanding Religious Experience,” 39-50. For a discussion of some exceptions, see Eileen Barker, “The Church Without and the God Within: Religiosity and/or Spirituality?” 187-202.

and universal levels by suggesting a number of new approaches to the subject.¹⁸ While there are undoubtedly limitations to what social science can do and what questions it can legitimately ask, it is, perhaps, possible that its present limitations can be expanded as we try to understand the implications of REST's rich and fascinating data.

Science and its limitations According to the philosopher of science, Karl Popper, the criterion for determining the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, refutability, or testability.¹⁹ A truth claim cannot be considered a scientific statement unless it is possible for others to demonstrate empirically that it is not true – that is, anyone in full command of their faculties would be capable of recognizing through one or more of their five senses (sight, touch, hearing, sight or taste) the existence or non-existence of the phenomenon in question. Of course, even in the natural sciences, nothing is quite this simple in practice – or theory – and Popper's criterion has been severely questioned on a number of different counts.²⁰ Nonetheless, it provides as good a starting point as any for the purposes of this paper.

The falsifiability criterion implies that scientists cannot call upon supernatural entities as independent variables. Abu and his fellow Boodmians

¹⁸ Essentially following Yao and Badham's *Religious Experience* design, the REST team classified religious experiences into four parts: (1) experiencing a supernatural or spiritual power; (2) a sudden insight into the meaning of life or way of life; (3) religious experience in dreams; and (4) mysterious feelings and visions, Yen-zen Tsai, ed. *Religious Experience in Contemporary Taiwan* (Taipei Research Team of a Comparative Study of Religious Experience in Taiwan, 2010), 24, Table 1.1.

The four basic questions in the REST questionnaire were:

Question 8: "Some people have experienced extraordinary powers that are beyond human control. Have you ever had such experiences?"

Question 21: "Some have had the experience of acquiring in a flash new understanding of or feeling for life. Have you ever had such an understanding or feeling?"

Question 47: "Some have experienced mystical or extraordinary feelings. Have you had any of the following experiences?"

Question 60: "Are you interested in 'mystical or supernatural things'?"

¹⁹ Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 33-39.

²⁰ See, for example Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1988); Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Philosophical Papers Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Bryan Magee, *Popper* (London: Fontana, 1973).

may believe that it is evil spirits who are responsible for the crop failure, but an agronomist has to look elsewhere for an explanation. Catherine may believe that Jesus told her that she should join the Divine Devotees, while her mother believes it was the work of the Devil, but sociologists of religion cannot say whether or not either Jesus or Satan is responsible – only that Catherine and her mother have different explanations. In other words, social scientists have to maintain a methodological agnosticism, acknowledging that they have no empirical (or rational) means of deciding the issue. It should be stressed that this approach is not methodological atheism – it is an epistemological position which acknowledges that, as social scientists, they have no way of knowing that it was *not* Jesus or Satan who was responsible for Catherine's conversion.

They may, however, point out that there were certain social situations that could have played a role in the conversion – the fact that, for example, Catherine had been socialised into a Christian environment in which Jesus was a familiar character, and that she had been persuaded by a friend to attend a meeting at which there were friendly Divine Devotees testifying how, having taken Jesus into their hearts, their lives had undergone dramatic and wonderful changes. Her mother, on the other hand, (who was a staunch member of the conservative Christian congregation in which she had raised Catherine) had been persuaded by her pastor and by what she had read in the media that the Divine Devotees were an evil and dangerous cult.

What if Catherine says that Jesus appeared to her in a vision? She actually saw him with her own eyes and heard him speak to her, telling her that the Divine Devotees were his chosen children? What if Kim says he smelled the fragrance of jasmine and tasted divine nectar when he was initiated into his religion by the guru? And what if Raju felt a cool breeze when meditating on his guru? These are all sensations experienced by the various senses. Could that not make them open to scientific study?

To this the scientist is likely to respond that while empirical experience may be necessary for scientific investigation, it is not sufficient for it to be the experience of one person. This in turn might be countered with the argument that there are several instances in which numbers of people have observed what would appear to be a supernatural phenomenon. It was, for example, widely reported that in 1981 in Medjugorje, a small village in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a luminous figure that they identified as the Virgin Mary appeared and spoke to

six teenagers. The site has attracted thousands with reports of apparitions, spectacular lights in the sky and miraculous healings.²¹ Furthermore, it is claimed that “Our Lady of Medjugorje” continues to this day to give messages to six villagers, who are referred to as “visionaries.”²² There are also several reports of occasions when numerous people have shared religious experiences such as the Toronto Blessing, when, first in the Toronto Airport Vineyard Church in 1994 and subsequently around the world (including my local Anglican church), people claimed that they had received the Holy Spirit as they burst into “Holy Laughter,” cried and shook, and, literally, fell about in the aisles.²³ Even more extraordinarily, several members of Christian congregations experienced the miracle of finding gold fillings in their teeth. Over 300 members of the Toronto Airport Vineyard Church had such an experience, a phenomenon for which they claim there is evidence in the Bible by quoting Psalm 81 verse 10: “Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.”²⁴

Other phenomena, such as near death experiences (NDEs) and memories of past lives have been frequently reported and have been widely researched by psychiatrists and psychologists interested in the paranormal.²⁵

The Oxford Professor of biology and active atheist, Richard Dawkins, has confessed that it is not easy to explain how, in 1917, seventy thousand pilgrims at Fatima (Portugal) could share the same mass illusion, reporting that they saw the sun “tear itself from the heavens and come crashing down upon the multitude.” It may seem improbable that seventy thousand people could simultaneously be deluded, or that it was a mass lie, or a historical mistake, or a mirage – but, Dawkins concludes, “any of those apparent improbabilities is far

²¹ David G. Bromley and Rachel S. Bobbitt, “Visions of the Virgin Mary: Organizational Development of Marian Apparitional Movements,” *Nova Religio* 14.3 (2011): 5-41.

²² James Mulligan, *Medjugorje. What's Happening?* (London: Dusty Sandals Press, 2008).

²³ Stephen Hunt, “The ‘Toronto Blessing’: A Rumor of Angels?” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 10.3 (1995): 257-72; Margaret Poloma, *Main Street Mystics: The Toronto Blessing and Reviving Pentecostalism* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2003).

²⁴ BBC News, “God ‘Fills in’ for Dentists,” 21 April 1999. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/324274.stm>. (accessed 26 September 2013).

²⁵ Peter Fenwick and Elizabeth Fenwick, *The Truth in the Light: An Investigation of over 300 Near-Death Experiences* (London: Headline, 1996); Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (London: Routledge, 1969); Charles Tart, *The End of Materialism: How Evidence of the Paranormal is Bringing Science and Spirit Together* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009).

more probable than the alternative: that the Earth was suddenly yanked sideways in its orbit and the solar system destroyed, with nobody outside Fatima noticing.”²⁶

What, if anything, can a social scientist make of such phenomena? Do they emanate from “within” the individual who reports the experience or are they the result of something “out there?” A bemused observer may surmise that there are various possible explanations: those who claim to have had such experiences might just be lying; or they might be delusional and/or suffer from some medical condition (such as temporal lobe epilepsy). If something “out there” was responsible for the experience – that is, the experience was stimulated by something that was not confined to their conscious or subconscious imagination – then that “something” could have been either natural or social (conjured up, perhaps, by the Divine Devotees or a charismatic preacher), or it could have been a supernatural Being or phenomenon (such as Jesus, Guan Gong, the Holy Spirit, or evil spirits).

But although it is useful to make analytical distinctions between the objective and the subjective, such distinctions are, in many ways, far more complicated for social scientists, who are more likely to see objective and subjective aspects of social phenomena inexorably intertwined as part of their data.²⁷

Social Reality

Unlike most natural sciences, social scientists are concerned with phenomena that are, ontologically speaking, relative to both time and place. Social science cannot expect to discover laws that are applicable throughout the planet with the near – certainty with which laws of the natural sciences can be applied – the most they can hope to discover are probabilities or regularities. The sociologist Auguste Comte referred to “degrees of modifiability of fatality” increasing as we move up (as he saw it) from discoverable relationships in mathematics, then physics and chemistry, on to biology and psychology and,

²⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 91-92.

²⁷ In this article, “objective” is taken to refer, *prima facie*, to something that is independent of the perceiving “subject”.

finally, sociology.²⁸

When we come to sociology, however, the object of study – social reality – has many features that, it might be (and has been) argued, are not amenable to the scientific enterprise. And, insofar as religious experience is concerned, a scientific approach might be seen as little short of an oxymoron. But before turning to the challenge of studying religious experience, let us briefly consider some of the more general challenges that the scientific study of society raises.

One of the first and most influential scholars to demonstrate that there existed “social facts” which could not be reduced to the psychology of individuals but needed to be recognised and studied scientifically *sui generis*, was the French sociologist, Émile Durkheim (1858-1917). In his seminal study of *Suicide*, Durkheim sought to demonstrate that, rather than being merely the psychological dispositions of the individuals who killed themselves, it was the properties of groups in which those individuals had lived that were responsible for the (otherwise inexplicable) fact that suicide rates varied significantly *between* different social groups, yet stayed remarkable similar over time *within* the groups.²⁹

The German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) paid more attention to individuals within social contexts. For him, sociology is a science in so far as it searches for causal explanations, but it does so through attempting an interpretative understanding (*Verstehen*) of social action. By “action” he meant behaviour to which the actor attaches a subjective meaning (a wink rather than a blink); and by “social action” he meant actions that take account of others.³⁰

²⁸ Thus, the laws of logic are well-nigh invariable: X cannot be X and not-X at any one time; and, pretty well by definition, two plus two always equals four. Water can be relied on to have boiled at 100 degrees centigrade in fifth century Peru and to do so again in twenty-first-century Taiwan – so long as the surrounding pressure is “normal.” The hearts of human beings are usually on the left side of their bodies, but occasionally they are to be found on the right side, and the regularity with which they beat, although it tends to fall within certain parameters, does vary from person to person – and for individuals at different times – but it is unlikely that these parameters have varied that much over the centuries or from society to society.

²⁹ Durkheim suggested that high suicide rates would be found in groups either with too much or too little regulation (resulting in “fatalistic” or “anomic” suicide) or with too much or too little cohesion (resulting in “altruistic” or “egoistic” suicide). Some of his data have been questioned, but the reasoning that rates need to be explained by group properties rather than individual psychology remains a cogent one, underlying much of the social scientific endeavour.

³⁰ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Free Press, 1947), 88.

In *The Social Construction of Reality*, the sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe social reality as the result of a process that has to be continually created and maintained by individuals.³¹ They distinguish three stages involved in the on-going construction of social reality: (1) *externalisation*, as individuals interact with each other; (2) *objectification*, as the interaction is crystallised as an objective “out there” reality, and (3) *internalisation* as the original and/or other individuals perceive the existence of the “out there” social reality and are, in one way or another, affected by these perceptions.

Conceptualised thus, it is possible to recognise a number of apparent paradoxes, or, at least, tensions, that social reality embodies. First it is, fundamentally, both objective and subjective. It is an objective *reality* insofar as it has an existence that is independent of any particular individual’s volition. That is, as something ‘out there,’ it confronts him or her as something that has to be taken into account, just as a brick wall confronting a driver has to be taken into account. More or less consciously, its existence can be accepted, rejected or negotiated, but it cannot be wished away. At the same time, social reality is idealistic.³² It is subjective in that, unlike a flower blooming in an unexplored wilderness, it exists only in so far as it is recognised in some way or another by individuals. The recognition is by no means always direct – it can be through various media such as written records or the Internet. Furthermore, the perceived reality might not be a “real” reflection of “historical fact”; it can, for example, include myths and various other types of “knowledge” that have been (and are being) constructed as resources within a particular culture.

Secondly and relatedly, social reality is more or less shared by the individuals who perceive it – were this not so, society would not be possible. But, at the same time, no two people’s perception of social reality is ever precisely the same. However empathic anyone (including social scientists) may be, no one can be sure of having the same understanding of (social) reality as the next person. The social scientist may, nonetheless, notice systematic differences between different perceptions of social reality, and, as a fellow human being,

³¹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: Everything that Passes for Knowledge in Society* (London: Allen Lane, 1967).

³² Idealistic is being used here, not in the sense of holding high principles or ideals, but in the philosophical sense in which ideas or spiritual, non-materialistic elements are central to reality or human experience.

understand enough of what others perceive to be able to describe, explain, and even, within calculable limits of probabilities, predict social actions – and, just possibly, the kinds of experiences they may entertain. These systematic differences may be related to such variables as the person's interests, their past experiences, assumptions and presuppositions and/or where they are standing (physically, socially or morally).

Thirdly, social reality, being a process, is not a static “thing.” As a process, it owes its existence to the continuing interactions (constructions, perceptions and conceptions) of individuals. Grammatically speaking, social reality is a verb rather than a noun. Yet while it is subject to constant change (not least because it is mediated through individuals who are “coming from” different places and finding themselves in changing situations), it also exhibits more or less stability over time, enabling the social scientist to recognise regularities, trends and patterns. In some ways social reality might be compared to a film that is constantly changing its frames yet running without “cuts,” sometimes seeming repeatedly to display an ever – more familiar scene with scarcely discernible difference over time, and sometimes changing dramatically (but never completely) within a very short period.

Religious experiences as social phenomena?

Prima facie, most understandings of religious experience could seem to rule out the possibility of such phenomena being the subject of sociological investigation. In so far as it is claimed that the experience originated from some supernatural source, this would seem to place it beyond the potential expertise of a methodologically agnostic social scientist. As intimated above, social scientists can certainly note that people report having had such experiences, and they can note that, on the whole, such people would appear to be perfectly normal citizens. They might also note that in many situations, particularly in the more secularised areas of contemporary Europe, the experiencers are loath to tell anyone about their experiences. To take one possibly surprising example, when I interviewed young men preparing for the ministry at a Methodist college several told me that they had withheld from their teachers and fellow seminarians information about any religious experiences that they had had as such

admissions could be detrimental to their career prospects because, they believed, they might be considered unreliable in the sober and down-to-earth intellectual environment of the Methodist community.

Nonetheless, such experiences can apparently make a significant difference to experiencers' lives, sometimes leading to dramatic changes in their career and lifestyle. Several of these Methodist seminarians told me that their spiritual experiences had played a crucial role in what they considered to be their vocation for the ministry. One of the reasons frequently given by converts for their joining a new religion is that they have had a spiritual experience that convinced them that they had to follow this path. This was an explanation that was given to me by a number of converts when I asked them why they had joined the Unification Church.³³ They told me that they believed their experiences directly accounted for (or had previously prepared them for) their conversion. But this does not preclude the possibility that the *interpretation* of their experience had been strongly influenced by others, and while social scientists may not share experiences, they can try to understand the contexts within which they are more, rather than less, likely to arise – how they may seem to be either “triggered” or suppressed – and, perhaps crucially, how they come to be interpreted.

The “triggering” of religious experiences may be accomplished by individuals themselves. There are numerous techniques that have been developed throughout the ages whereby people have attempted to get in touch with “the beyond.” Practices such as various kinds of meditation, chanting or dance are but some examples. Sometimes religious leaders can induce trances and other altered states of consciousness, or evoke unusual sensations.³⁴ Visitors to a Sahaja Yoga centre have frequently experienced a cool breeze while meditating on the picture of the founder, Sri Mataji Nirmala Devi.³⁵ “Premies” – devotees of Prem Pal Singh Rawat (also known as Maharaji), the leader of the Divine Light Mission (later called Elan Vital) – would be initiated

³³ Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Brainwashing or Choice?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 169.

³⁴ Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*; Charles Tart, *The End of Materialism: How Evidence of the Paranormal is Bringing Science and Spirit Together* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009).

³⁵ Judith Coney, *Sahaja Yoga: Socializing Processes in a South Asian New Religious Movement* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999).

into techniques that were said to enable the initiated to experience the “The Knowledge” which included the vision of Divine Light, the sound of Divine Harmony or vibration, the taste of Divine Nectar, and a Divine Bliss.³⁶

Sometimes, however, it is music or nature that would appear to trigger a religious experience, or the experience is described as just “coming out of the blue.” But whatever the origin of the experience, an analytical distinction can be made between the actual experiences and the interpretations that are given to them by their experiencers (and others), the interpretations being more readily open than the actual experience to investigation by the social scientist. However, it also needs to be recognised that interpretations can affect experiences.³⁷

Culture as an interpretive resource

Durkheim’s insistence that social facts have properties that cannot be reduced to those of biology or psychology can be taken to mean that, at least in part, a social situation can be responsible for something happening or not happening – it can *enable* and/or *restrain* both individuals and groups. From this it follows that what could be impossible to do in one social structure gets done in another social structure; and what could be unthinkable in one culture gets thought in another culture. Does it follow that what is experienced in one religious context is unlikely to be experienced in another religious context?

We might, for example, hypothesise that in the sixteenth century it would have been extremely unlikely for a man in a remote Taiwanese (Formosan) village to have experienced a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or for a woman in a rural part of Poland to have had a religious experience of Guan Gong. But we might, at the same time, consider it possible that the Taiwanese man could

³⁶ James V. Downton, *Sacred Journeys: The Conversion of Young Americans to Divine Light Mission* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

³⁷ In a project entitled *Cross-Cultural Studies of Dissociational States* under the direction of the anthropologist Erika Bourguignon, it was found that, of the sample of 488 societies, at least 90 per cent had institutionalised one or more forms of altered states of consciousness. Whilst Bourguignon, drew a clear distinction between the states of consciousness themselves and the beliefs that people have about such states, she also noted that the beliefs can affect the states, since the interpretations tended to pattern the behaviour. See “Cross-Cultural Perspectives on the Religious Uses of Altered States of Consciousness,” in *Religious Movements in Contemporary America* (Princeton; NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 228.

have “received” an experience remarkably similar to that which the Polish woman would have interpreted as a vision of the Virgin Mary, and that the Polish woman could be subject to an experience that would be reported by the Taiwanese man as an experience of the power of Guan Gong, were he to be answering question 8 of the REST questionnaire.³⁸

In other words, we might say that images of the Blessed Virgin Mary are what might be termed “a resource” in Poland whilst those of Guan Gong are a resource in Taiwan. That is, they are objectively “out there” as part of the social reality of the different cultures. But the only way that social scientists (or anyone else) can know that such resources are “out there” is through learning about them once they have been “objectified” – and then “internalising” their existence. This does not mean that the internaliser has to believe the images reflect objective realities, but that s/he is aware of and recognises their presence as phenomena that members of the culture could believe to be reflections of objective realities. The social scientist may, moreover, be aware that the Virgin is likely to be dressed in a blue (or, occasionally, white) robe and that Guan Gong is likely to have a red face, and that most people would have expected the children in Medjugorje to have had a vision of a white Lady, but would not have been particularly surprised that it is an icon of a Black Madonna that represents a Mexican peasant’s vision of “Our Lady of Guadalupe.” It is not entirely surprising, therefore, that a question which has given rise to some considerable debate over the centuries is why the icon of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa (a popular Polish site of pilgrimage) has a dark skin pigmentation.³⁹

The enabling and constraining properties of the social context are more or less negotiable both for individuals and for groups. This “negotiation” does not necessarily (or possibly even usually) occur at a conscious level. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, social reality is continually changing so that individuals are constantly both receiving and contributing to different circumstances, with different consequences. For this reason, one might expect that interpretations of a particular experience are likely to change when the social context of the

³⁸ “Some people have experienced extraordinary powers that are beyond human control. Have you ever had such experiences . . . ?”

³⁹ Craig R. Prentiss, “Coloring Jesus. Racial Calculus and the Search for Identity in Twentieth-century America,” *Nova Religio* 11.3 (2008): 64-82; James J. Preston, *Mother Worship: Theme and Variations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 57.

interpreter changes.

When, for example, I asked a group of young people who had been members of a religious group at the time of an experience but had since left, a significant number admitted that they had believed at the time that they were having a religious experience but had subsequently come to the conclusion that it had been their imagination or the result of some mundane trigger. Conversely, respondents who had since become part of a religious community were more likely to say that they had dismissed the experience at the time, but now realized that God or some other supernatural entity had been communicating with them.⁴⁰

Such findings do not, of course, imply that people believe only what “fits into” a particular social context. Some people clearly cling to beliefs despite the fact that doing so could be, socially, extremely uncomfortable or even lethal. But the fact that experiencers can alter their own understanding of God’s role in their lives, and that a substantial number of former Unificationists (though by no means all) now deny the Unification interpretation of their experiences, suggests that there remains a case for investigating the strength and efficacy of social pressures in such matters.

In other words, it is at least possible that someone who believes that he or she is being guided by God is, in fact, being guided or even manipulated into that belief by another person or by the social situation in general. In what ways, one might then ask, do the influences of shamans, gurus and charismatic leaders, whose clients, devotees and followers appear to learn how to receive and interpret religious experiences along preordained lines, differ from the techniques of hypnotists or of stage magicians? And it could be equally well asked whether the experiencer was a member of a fundamentalist religious institution, a “non-religious” atheist or agnostic, or an individual claiming to espouse an idiosyncratic “Sheilaism”.⁴¹

But however much experiencers are, consciously or unconsciously, independent or dependent on others in reaching an interpretation for the

⁴⁰ Barker, *The Making of a Moonie*, 170-71.

⁴¹ This is a term that owes its origin to a young nurse named Sheila Larson who described her faith as “Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.” Robert N. Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 221.

meaning of their experiences, the interpretation will have some kind of (possibly confused) meaning for the experiencer, even if this seems to be incomprehensible or fantastic to others. While physicists and chemists can, in theory at least, carry out experiments that will reveal the composition and properties of their data, they are not investigating any subjective knowledge or ideas that their data possess. Nor do their data deliberately lie. It is, however, possible that human beings will report that they have had a vision (or other supernatural experience) when they have not. There are several reasons why people might invent or distort stories about experiences – they may simply want to convince others that they are “spiritual” in a situation where such a quality is highly valued.

Deception

Although no one can ever hope to know precisely what another person is thinking, the social sciences have developed techniques designed to pick out the more obvious falsehoods. Many questionnaires have special questions to try to detect whether respondents are giving answers that they hope will produce a particular kind of impression, rather than one that is strictly truthful. Sometimes it is considered that if respondents appear to contradict themselves then at least one of their answers is untrue, but contradictions do not necessarily imply lies; indeed, many facets of religion are riddled with contradiction, or, to use more celebratory terms, “paradox” or “mystery.”

Mental illness and Neuroscience

Other possibilities are that respondents are deceiving themselves and/or that they are suffering from delusions as the result of some kind of malfunctioning of the brain or an altered state of consciousness. Such conditions could be the result of, on the one hand, disease or deformity, or, on the other hand, of either self-inflicted or externally imposed changes due to, say, unusual diet, exhaustion or the ingestion of some kind of hallucinogenic substance.

The literature is full of reductionist explanations of religious experiences as manifestations of mental or physical illness. Temporal lobe epilepsy has, for

example, been diagnosed as a potential explanation for the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus; of Mohammad's writing the Koran which, it has been claimed, took place after the onset of seizures; and of the voices heard by and/or visions seen by, among others, Moses, Ezekiel, Theresa of Avila, Swedenborg, Kierkegaard, Joseph Smith and Black Elk, who reportedly suffered from seizures before his "grand buffalo" vision.⁴²

But whilst most people might agree that there are cases in which religious experiences could be reasonably attributed to the delusions of the mentally ill, there are many, many cases in which the reporting of an experience would seem to be an individual's only manifestation of "abnormality."⁴³ There have been numerous cases that have nothing to do with religious beliefs and behaviour when psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists, biologists, neurobiologists and others have questioned the attribution of mental illness to otherwise "normal" patients – and, indeed, social scientists are continually pointing out that although the concept of normality may have its uses when referring to a statistical norm, it can be dangerously misleading when it carries the assumption of "healthy" or "natural," thereby implying that deviation from such norms denotes "unhealthy" or "unnatural." Recently I asked two psychoanalysts how they could tell whether someone who reported having had a vivid religious experience was ill or not. After a pause for thought, one of them answered sagely "One just knows," and the other, equally sagely, nodded in agreement. Further discussion revealed that they did not mean that *I* would "just know," but they, they were sure, would.⁴⁴

In the 1970s, when there was a wave of new religions that were causing consternation in the West, dozens of young converts were hospitalised because of their beliefs, and, particularly in the United States, there were doctors who diagnosed these (usually young) converts as delusionary when they recounted their religious experiences. The "medicalizing" physicians then expressed

⁴² Iona Miller. "Fear and Loathing in the Temporal Lobes," September 2003. http://neurotheology.50megs.com/whats_new_9.html (accessed 26 September 2013).

⁴³ Interestingly, members of the Neuroimaging Research Group, based in the Neuroscience Division of the Psychiatry Department in the University Medical Center of Utrecht (UMCU), have written a paper entitled "Auditory hallucinations elicit similar brain activation in psychotic and non-psychotic individuals" (Dieren et al 2012).

⁴⁴ See Stephen Law, *Believing Bullshit: How Not to Get Sucked into an Intellectual Black Hole* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2011), 135-57, for a strident attack on "I Just Know" explanations in general and of claims of religious experience in particular.

extreme frustration when other doctors reported that they could not find anything wrong with them.⁴⁵ In a well-known experiment, David Rosenhan and seven associates (none of whom had any history of mental illness) entered different mental hospitals on the East and West coasts of the United States, reporting that they had had a brief auditory hallucination.⁴⁶ All eight were admitted as in-patients, seven of them being diagnosed as schizophrenic and one as manic-depressive. Once in the hospital they behaved perfectly normally, but none of the hospital staff caught on to the experiment, though some of the ‘real’ patients did.

In a subsequent experiment, Rosenhan contacted the officials of a further mental institution after they had declared that they would never fall for such a deception. He told them that some time in the next three months he would send one or more pseudo-patients to the hospital. Out of the 193 individuals admitted as in-patients during the period, 41 were classified as imposters by at least one staff member, and an additional 42 were classified as suspected fakes. In actual fact, *no* pseudo-patients had been sent to the institution.⁴⁷

Recent work by neuroscientists would seem to indicate that (religious) experiences can be produced by stimulating particular areas of the brain. One of the most publicised researchers in this area is the American cognitive neuroscientist, Michael Persinger, who has used the so-called “God Helmet” to induce mystical experiences in his subjects.⁴⁸ He has claimed that:

In the laboratory we have reproduced every aspect of the God experience. Every essence, every component of it, from the rising sensation, to the feelings of ecstasy, to the feelings of a sensed presence, to the feelings that you’re at one with the universe – we can do that experimentally

⁴⁵ Lee Coleman, *Psychiatry The Faithbreaker: How Psychiatry is Promoting Bigotry in America* (Sacramento, CA: Center for the Study of Psychiatric Testimony, 1982).

⁴⁶ David Rosenhan, “On Being Sane in Insane Places,” *Science* 179.70 (1973): 250-8.

⁴⁷ Michael Shermer, *The Believing Brain: From Ghosts, Gods, and Aliens to Conspiracies, Economics, and Politics – How the Brain Constructs Beliefs and Reinforces Them as Truths* (New York: Macmillan, 2011), 19-21.

⁴⁸ Michael A. Persinger, *Neuropsychological Bases of God Beliefs* (New York: Praeger, 1987); Persinger, Michael A. et al, “The Electromagnetic Induction of Mystical and Altered States Within the Laboratory,” *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research* 1.7 (2010): 808–30.

We can generate the sensed presence which is defined as God.⁴⁹

However, it is not clear exactly where this takes us. As one of his subjects put it, “Was that God speaking? Or was that Professor Persinger just flipping a few switches?”⁵⁰ Others, in particular a Swedish research team led by Pehr Granqvist, have claimed that it has been suggestibility rather than the God helmet which has been responsible for such experiences.⁵¹ Be that as it may, we may still ask to what extent, if at all, such research might help us to investigate whether religious experiences are “real” or merely illusion, or something far more complicated?

Illusion and Perception as Hypotheses

The German physicist and physician Hermann von Helmholtz (1821-94) is often credited with having initiated the study of visual perception in modern times. His research led him to conclude that vision could only be the result of unconscious inferences: a process of making assumptions and constructing conclusions from incomplete data that were based on an individual’s previous experiences. Ever since, there has been an increasing suspicion that the concept of illusion may itself be illusory.

It is, indeed, extraordinarily hard to give a satisfactory definition of an “illusion”. It may be the departure from reality, or from truth; but this merely presents us with the problem of how “reality” and “truth” are to be defined. One of the leading figures in the scientific study of visual perception has commented that:

As science’s accounts of reality get ever more different from appearances, to say that this separation is “illusion” would have the absurd

⁴⁹ Originally appeared on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YPOTaUyvA0> (accessed 8 August 2011, but no longer available). However the comment has been repeated at <http://roar.bellhs.net/article/224/> (accessed 4 August 2013).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Pehr, M. Granqvist et al, “Sensed Presence and Mystical Experiences are Predicted by Suggestibility, Not by the Application of Transcranial Weak Complex Magnetic Fields,” *Neuroscience Letters* 379.1 (2005): 1-6.

consequence of implying that almost all perceptions are illusory.⁵²

In *Seeing Through Illusions*, Professor Gregory illustrates the many ways in which sensory information provides only incomplete or ambiguous evidence for what we see, or believe we see. Perceptions are dynamic and, he demonstrates, they can break free from “stimulus control,” with a life of their own.⁵³ His examples range from the now familiar drawings that show a vase from one perspective and two faces from another, or the picture of what can be seen as either a rabbit or a duck to the impossible (devil’s) triangle and all manner of other ambiguities, paradoxes and illusions.⁵⁴ Gregory’s contention is that perceptions represent hypotheses which are devised to fit with and explain the available evidence, “but are psychologically projected into external space and accepted as our immediate reality.”⁵⁵ Visual illusions, he argues, occur when the brain adopts an incorrect hypothesis and these can be classified into a number of classes: ambiguities, distortions, paradoxes and fictions.

Gregory considers a central and important distinction should be made between “bottom up” signals emanating from the senses and “top down” knowledge represented in the brain, either of which can produce illusions. He sees evolution as being a progression from early organisms simply responding to stimuli, to more complex organisms developing the cognitive experiences associated with intelligent behavior. A final development, possibly unique to human beings, is the capacity for abstract thinking, suggesting an evolutionary sequence from “reception” to “perception” to “conception.” And, furthermore, reception, perception and conception may be increasingly subject to “deception.”

Moving to a somewhat different dimension, Donald Hoffman examines some of the ways in which virtual reality is constructed in on-line computer games, with the argument that we need to remember that the phrase “what we see” has both a phenomenal and a relational sense.⁵⁶ In the phenomenal sense,

⁵² Richard L. Gregory, “Knowledge in Perception and Illusion,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 352 (1997): 1123.

⁵³ Richard L. Gregory, *Seeing Through Illusions: Making Sense of the Senses* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 246.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 123, 125, 222.

⁵⁵ Gregory, “Knowledge in Perception,” 1121.

⁵⁶ The either/or alternatives of, on the one hand, the rationalism of Descartes (1596-1650) and

what you see means “the way things look to you,” “the way they visually appear to you,” “the way you visually experience them.” But in the relational sense it means “what you interact with when you look.”⁵⁷ He concludes his aptly named book, *Visual Intelligence: How We Create What We See*, with the words:

Because the phenomenal and relational realms need not resemble each other, because their relationship is arbitrary and systematic, the tools of science can help us guess at the nature of the relational realms, but it might never dictate a final verdict.⁵⁸

While it is not being suggested that we inhabit the kind of world depicted in the cult science-fiction film, *The Matrix*,⁵⁹ the work of contemporary psychologists, neuroscientists and cognitive scientists would seem to suggest that the fact that people report religious experiences should not be as unexpected an event as those who adhere to a crude “camera theory of vision” might assume. It is, moreover, possible that, although a greater awareness of what the human sciences are discovering about our perceptions may not now (or perhaps ever) help us fully to understand such apparently incomprehensible experiences as some of those reported in the REST survey, such an awareness could help us to make slightly less *uninformed* guesses about what is going on.

other European philosophers and, on the other hand, the sceptical empiricism of David Hume (1711-76) and other British philosophers was to some extent transcended by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) with his distinction between the noumenon (the unknowable “thing in itself”) and the phenomenon (that which appears to us). In his influential work *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant maintains that our understanding of the external world lies not merely in empirical experience, but in both experience and *a priori* concepts.

⁵⁷ Donald D. Hoffman, *Visual Intelligence: How We Create What We See*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1998), 187.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁵⁹ Interestingly, as one of the more successful contemporary “hyper-real religions,” Matrixism has a significant number of followers. John W. Morehead, “‘A World Without Rules and Controls, Without Borders or Boundaries’: Matrixism, New Mythologies, and Symbolic Pilgrimages,” in *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions: Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religions*, ed. Adam Possamai (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 111-28.

Consequences of Religious Experiences

It has already been mentioned that religious experiences can have a profound effect on those who experience them. Although it goes beyond the remit of REST, it might be worth mentioning that the effects of religious experiences on other members of society can also be considerable, and that most of these effects can fall well within the scope of the social sciences.

Although there are certainly social situations in which people keep quiet about any religious experience they may have had, many have told not only their family but also a wide range of acquaintances about the event, with reports sometimes being spread among the general public and brought to the attention of civil and religious authorities. Reactions have varied from awe, adulation, worship and eventual canonization, to fear, scorn and derision, being called a liar, imprisonment, interrogation, hospitalization, excommunication, exorcism, torture and/or burning at the stake for heresy.

Sometimes new cults emerge as the result of a religious experience, and there are numerous instances of pilgrimage sites being constructed as places of veneration, worship and miraculous healings at what have come to be regarded as sacred places.⁶⁰

To give an example of the kind of research that can explore some of the consequences of a particular kind of religious experience, the sociologists David Bromley and Rachel Bobbitt have compared the origins and development of thirteen Marian apparitional movements.⁶¹ They concluded that these movements all occurred within the context of various types of crises which were interpreted as having religious significance, and that the initial apparitions were constructed so as to be credible within Catholic circles.

One of their case studies was that of the 14-year-old Bernarde-Marie

⁶⁰ Simon Coleman and John Eade, *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London: Routledge, 2004); Katarína Nádaská, "Religious Pilgrimage and Pilgrim Tourism," in *New Religiosity*, ed. Michaela Moravčíková and Katarína Nádaská (Bratislava: Institute for State-Church Relations, 2010), 213-34; Ian Reader and Tony Walter, *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993). One can also go on a cyberpilgrimage on the Internet. See Connie Hill-Smith, "Cyberpilgrimage: The (Virtual) Reality of Online Pilgrimage Experience," *Religion Compass* 5.6 (2011): 236-46

⁶¹ David G. Bromley and Rachel S. Bobbitt, "Visions of the Virgin Mary: Organizational Development of Marian Apparitional Movements," *Nova Religio* 14.3 (2011): 5-41.

(Bernadette) Soubirous of Lourdes, who experienced the first of her eighteen apparitions of the Virgin Mary in 1858. Initially, she was punished by her parents and the villagers, the local priest was sceptical, and she was interrogated by the local police, prosecutor and magistrate. But as the word spread, several thousands of pilgrims descended on Lourdes, many of them hearing voices and independently seeing the virgin, and children were frequently entering into ecstatic states. The local bishop launched a four-year investigation that eventually authorized belief in the apparitions and proposed the building of a shrine at the site. Following her death in 1879, Bernadette was canonized as Saint Bernadette in 1933, and the year 2009 was declared “The Year of Bernadette.”

Another case involved three young girls from Marpingen, Germany, who had a vision of “a woman in white.” Their parents told them they had just seen a local resident, then the children were confined by the state authorities to an orphanage for observation and interrogation which resulted in their retracting their claims and then retracting their retractions on a number of occasions. However, the number of pilgrims to the site soon exceeded the number of pilgrims to Lourdes that year (1876), and by 1932 the local parish council made land available, and a chapel was built the following year.

The situation with regard to Medjugorje remains ambiguous. On several occasions the Vatican has stated that dioceses should not organize pilgrimages to Medjugorje, but it has also stated that Catholics are free to travel to the site.

There have been other cases when local authorities have imprisoned or hospitalized visionaries. There are relatively few instances when the Catholic Church has wholeheartedly embraced revelatory experiences from outside or even from the parameters of the institution. It has more frequently responded by rejecting the authenticity of apparitions or spiritual experiences, sometimes by imposing sanctions (most severely, excommunication) on the visionary and/or any clergy or other Catholics who make a pilgrimage to the “holy site” or acknowledge the vision in any other way.

Not surprisingly, visions that proclaim allegations of clerical corruption, question the legitimacy of the Pope or threaten the authority of the Church are unlikely to be authenticated. However, institutional legitimacy would appear to be neither a necessary nor a sufficient reason for public acceptance or rejection. It is also, perhaps, not surprising that there are a number of instances in which

(as in Kibeho, Rwanda) the priests have assumed control over the apparitions, determining when and where and under what conditions they were received.⁶²

The need for collaboration between quantitative and qualitative approaches to religious experiences

There have been two sets of questions underlying the discussion in this paper. Both have been approached from a social constructionist perspective. The first set has been concerned with what religious experiences *are*, and an analytical distinction has been drawn between the experiences themselves and the interpretations that have been conferred upon them. The second set of questions has been concerned with how social scientists can *know* about such experiences: what tools have been created or could be further developed for discovering who has what kind of experience, under what sorts of conditions, and with what consequences.

Natural scientists can, to a limited extent, check an objective “out there reality” with their tools or instruments. A ruler can show that a line which appears to be curved to all “normally” sighted people is in fact a straight line; a photometer can show that the square seen against a dark background has exactly the same luminance as the square seen against the white background, although the former appears to be much lighter than the latter.⁶³ But there are no tools or instruments that can check social reality in a similar way, and experiences involving a supernatural event are, almost by definition, incapable of being recorded by cameras, dictaphones or any other instrument that could reproduce the phenomenon so that other individuals could share the experience. Indeed, cameras and other recording machines would be more likely to indicate to the observer (and possibly even to the experiencers themselves) that neither the Virgin Mary nor Guan Gong was “objectively” present.⁶⁴

It can, however, be argued that *no* social event can be directly perceived. It

⁶² Bromley, “Visions of the Virgin Mary,” 36.

⁶³ Hoffman, *Visual Intelligence*, 118.

⁶⁴ There are those who claim that “auras” and even “phantom limbs” can be captured by kirlian photography, but such claims have been treated with considerable scepticism by “debunkers” such as James Randi, *Flim-Flam!* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1982), 8-9.

is true that we can observe physical bodies moving around, hear sounds, and see marks on paper, but unless we have also learned to attach some meaning to such phenomena, they are, literally, meaningless. In order to understand *any* human experiences, the social scientist has to catch a glimpse of the conceptualisation of their subjects' perceptions of the social – and supernatural – worlds. And, as argued above, no one can ever know exactly what is in the mind of another person; everyone's perception, and conception, of the natural, the social, and the supernatural world is different. At the same time, if there were not some overlap between people's perceptions and conceptions, social life and, indeed, functioning human beings themselves would not be possible. Social scientists have to place themselves in a situation in which they can, to a greater or lesser extent, have access to the perceptions and conceptions of those whom they are studying. This involves the methodology referred to by Weber as *Verstehen* or empathic understanding. It is not something that can be accessed through questionnaire survey research alone.

None of this is to suggest that quantitative research is not a basic tool in the social scientific endeavour. Both useful and important patterns and regularities can be detected by large-scale surveys. But by themselves, quantitative studies can be meaningless or misleading if they are not undertaken with reference to qualitative research. Too often, the specific meanings that concepts have for respondents are misunderstood, or it is assumed that they have the same meaning for all respondents.

Of course, the truly ineffable cannot be rigorously or systematically operationalized.⁶⁵ It is, however, possible, through observing and attentively listening to those who have experiences which are not commonly shared by others, to learn, understand, construct and explain concepts that can enable and improve communication between researchers and experiencers on the one hand, and between researchers themselves (for genuinely comparative research) on the other hand.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Although language is the main means of communication between researchers and their subjects, it is not the only one. Interesting and productive work has been done using other media such as drawings, mime and dance. Marily Guillemín, "Understanding Illness: Using Drawings as a Research Method," *Qualitative Health Research* 14.2 (2004): 272-89.

⁶⁶ A distinction needs to be drawn between those concepts that are heuristics, analytical tools or ideal types employed by researchers and those that are used by, or at least hold a meaning for, the experiencers.

The REST report was undoubtedly enhanced not only by the fact that it relied on the quantitative survey but also because it was informed by drawing on the previous research experience of the REST team and other scholars, by conducting focus and pre-survey interviews, and by giving respondents the opportunity to provide open-ended answers to question 59, in which they were invited to try to describe the mysterious or extraordinary experience that they had felt most deeply.

If, however, one were to construct a “wish list” of procedures that would enrich still further our understanding of religious experiences not only in Taiwan but also in other parts of the world, the list would include the provision of in-depth interviews and, perhaps, prolonged participant observation in the different contexts within which people experience “supernatural or spiritual powers, sudden insights into the meaning of life ... [and/or] mysterious feelings and visions.”⁶⁷ It is only through such qualitative methods that social scientists can hope to sharpen and deepen their understanding of otherwise unsuspected constructions (and deconstructions) of the social resources that can trigger and interpret otherwise inexplicable reports of experiences. Informed by such understandings, quantitative surveys can enable the researcher to explore in greater detail, with the assistance of modern statistical techniques, what goes with what and, just as importantly, what does not go with what – and how these connections and non-connections vary according to place and time.

Concluding comments

Were Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho) still alive, it is unlikely that he would have changed his mind about the ridiculousness of the concept of a scientific study of religion – let alone a scientific study of religious experience – although it is quite likely that he would have relished learning of the tensions, contradictions and confusions charted by REST. *Pace* Bhagwan’s comments quoted at the beginning, this article has tried to take the idea of the scientific study of religious experience seriously. Both by respecting the limitations of science and by exploring some of the questions that the study of religious experiences might legitimately embrace, it has been noted how all social life

⁶⁷ Tsai, *Religious Experience*, 24.

would seem to be concerned with the process of on-going constructions of reality, whether this be the social reality that confronts us as members of cultural communities or the perceptual, auditory and other sensual realities that appear to us to have an independent existence “out there,” yet are, in part, dependent on what is already “in here.”

The fact that boundaries between the objective and the subjective are constantly traversed does not mean that they are dissolved – both exist, each as part of a complicated interwoven fugue that is unpredictable but which is also, to some extent at least, recognisably belonging to its surroundings and to its past, its present and its (imagined) future.

Religious experiences might seem to be, as Shakespeare’s Prospero suggests we ourselves are, “such stuff as dreams are made on”.⁶⁸ But as they emerge, develop and change we can develop hypotheses about their origins, their contents, the interpretations they are given, and the consequences to which they give rise. Some of these hypotheses can be tested with the tools of the scientific method and, like other scientific hypotheses, they can be open to refutation, even if they are not definitively confirmable. Other hypotheses may be no more than observations or conjectures that are not amenable to rigorous testing but which may, nonetheless, provide speculative insights and stimulate our curiosity to ask further questions about such phenomena.

The data unearthed by the Religious Experience Survey in Taiwan (REST) offers us a wealth of rich and stimulating data as an exemplary example of the scientific enterprise. It provides a detailed and suggestive picture of the religious and spiritual inner lives of the Taiwanese people. But indirectly it informs us also about Taiwanese society and, indeed, about other peoples and other societies. It challenges us to explore in even greater detail some of the ‘natural’ associations with experiences of the supernatural. And if at times it raises more questions than it answers this certainly does not make it ridiculous.

⁶⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* Act 4, scene 1, 148-58.

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主觀的客觀研究或是客觀的主觀研究？

Eileen Barker

摘要

「台灣宗教經驗調查」(REST)的結果，可為試圖進行科學宗教研究的西方學者提供有激勵性的挑戰。一般學者的通常認知是，宗教經驗不過是信仰者參與帶有崇拜神或超越者的社會儀式。除了少數特例之外，社會科學家直到最近為止總是忽視人的主觀經驗。本論文即是要反思社會科學的侷限，申論社會現象在本質上即是客觀與主觀的建構過程。本論文強調，縱然我們需要嚴肅看待個人的經驗陳述，我們也必須檢視激發或貶抑主觀經驗諸如社會變遷等因素的客觀脈絡。另一方面，本論文也根據某些心理學家與神經科學學者的研究指出，我們所認定的客觀實體，多少是由觀者或聽者本人的選擇性建構而來。本論文緊接著討論對所謂「宗教經驗」的反應和其結果。簡言之，本論文旨在探討存在於「外在」的客觀現象與「內在」的主觀經驗，兩造之間可能產生的矛盾與張力。

關鍵字：宗教經驗、社會科學、建構主義、知覺、理解