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Linking Text and Experience

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
ATANT	Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments
BBB	Bonner biblische Beiträge
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CBR	*Currents in Biblical Research*
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
EPRO	Etudes préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain
HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
HR	*History of Religions*
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*
ICC	International Critical Commentary
Int	*Interpretation*
JAAR	*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JECS	*Journal of Early Christian Studies*
JJS	*Journal of Jewish Studies*
JR	*Journal of Religion*
JSHRZ	Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit
JSJSup	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series

JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
RBL	*Review of Biblical Literature*
RevQ	*Revue de Qumran*
SBLAcBib	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLEJL	Society of Biblical Literature Early Judaism and Its Literature
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
SVTP	Studia in Veteris Testamenti pseudepigraphica
TAPS	Transactions of the American Philosophical Society
TDNT	*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.
TZTh	*Tübinger Zeitschrift für Theologie*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

Opening the Black Box: New Prospects for Analyzing Religious Experience

Colleen Shantz

The essays in this volume and the first *Experientia* collection reflect efforts to revise and reinvigorate the understanding of religious experience. Over the last century the category waxed and waned in popularity. Indeed, sometimes religious experience has been invoked in critically naïve or even apologetic ways, and these errors have led some to abandon the category altogether. In an effort to rescue the baby from the bathwater, the Religious Experience in Early Judaism and Early Christianity section of SBL has continued to invite papers that try to refine the category—both what it is and how we might access it in ancient texts. The papers collected here were all presented in some form at the meetings hosted by that section. The motivation for this effort, as stated in *Experientia,* vol. 1, is "the recognition that the texts that are the sources of scholarship on early Judaism and early Christianity often have as their *raison d'ĕtre* some religious experience of author and/or of community.… What we *can* do is to take seriously the textual *articulation* of religious experience in antiquity."[1]

This attempt to take the articulation of ancient authors seriously as topics for study requires attention to *experience*, which is precisely the crux. For many years, the possibility of accessing subjective experience has been considered a theoretical misstep at best and apologetics disguised as analysis at worst. No one argues that the particular circumstances—emotional, dispositional, even biological—of the individuals who wrote and received the texts are *insignificant* for early Judaism and formative Christianity. At the same time, many have maintained that

1. Frances Flannery et al., "Introduction: Religious Experience, Past and Present," in *Inquiry into Religious Experience in Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (vol. 1 of *Experientia*; ed. Frances Flannery et al.; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 2.

the religious sentiments of these ancient people are inaccessible to us. In other words, experience has been treated as a black box: we can describe the context of the writers and we can analyze the texts they produce, but the processes that transform the one to the other are necessarily inscrutable. This volume continues the quest of the first to pry open the black box by articulating the growing sense of new possibilities for study, and this chapter sets up those studies. In doing so, I begin by outlining some reasons for these persistent objections to the category of religious experience, suggesting a number of possibilities for rehabilitating it, and touching on some of what this might require of our scholarship.

To varying degrees, the contributors to these volumes want to reclaim the category of religious experience from its relative neglect. As you will see, some of the contributors remain wary of the category of experience (especially Vaage and to some extent Ramsaran), though their reasons share little in common. Other contributors have embraced new approaches with a critical enthusiasm that sets experience as a primary exegetical filter. Still, all the papers share attention to the relationship between the surviving literature and the people who wrote it or received it. More specifically, they have each attended to the means by which we might move from text to experience or vice versa. To do so, they necessarily must consider the elements that we have previously been unwilling or unable to examine. But before proceeding to the results, it seems necessary to linger a little longer over the reasons for resistance, some of which have been well justified. So we begin with the problems.

The Problem of Tendentiousness

Perhaps the most impeachable misappropriation of the category of religious experience is the role it has sometimes been given in debates about the validity of religion. The extraordinary nature of some experience has been claimed as evidence of a direct and unmediated encounter with the divine, however that is named. To a degree this perspective took warrant in William James's discussions of "pure experience." By "pure" James intended not to signify the absence of extraneous elements, but the monism of all experience, the undivided nature of consciousness and content.[2] In other words, "pure experience is just exactly what it is, whatever it is that is experienced,

2. William James, "Does Consciousness Exist?" *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* 1 (1904): 480.

in the here and now, in all its multiplicity, exactly as it is experienced."[3] James's conception had significant implications for the development of philosophical phenomenology,[4] but others used the concept of pure experience to assert a perceptual purity for one kind of experience—religious experience. Thus the term was conscripted to denote a way of knowing that is free of sensory input and, further, that blocks out everything except awareness of the divine. By this definition of religious experience, all interceding structures and senses were eliminated from consciousness and religious experience was an *unmediated* encounter.[5] Those who hold this position argue that the extraordinary emotional tone of such moments combined with the profound sense of clarity and conviction that attends them is evidence of the *object* of the experience, rather than the *subject* who undertakes it. In other words, the character of such moments of insight is so unlike ordinary experience that the difference cannot be attributed to the human subject. Further, proponents of "perennial philosophy" point to the cross-cultural similarities of such experience as proof that divine being must be the common object of all the diverse cultural practices.[6]

There are at least two kinds of problems related to this claim for religious experience. The first is its theoretical naïveté. The most important and sustained critique of this shortcoming has come primarily from cultural constructivists. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, cultural constructivists argued that all experience, especially religious experience, is culturally conditioned. Hence, in the words of Steven Katz, "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

3. Eugene I. Taylor and Robert H. Wozniak, "Pure Experience, the Response to William James: An Introduction," in *Pure Experience: The Response to William James* (ed. E. I. Taylor and R. H. Wozniak; Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), ix–xxxii, here xv. The authors also describe the intellectual climate within which James was arguing. For James's own words on the matter see his essays "Does Consciousness Exist?" *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* 1 (1904): 477–91; and "A World of Pure Experience" *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* 1 (1904): 533–43.

4. The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (and before him Husserl) found great affinity with James's view of unfragmented consciousness. Merleau-Ponty calls the same fluid integration of self and object the "pre-objective" state.

5. William P. Alston, "Religious Experience," in *Routledge Encylopedia of Philosophy* (ed. Edward Craig; 10 vols.; London: Routledge, 1998), 8:250–55.

6. See Huston Smith, "Is There a Perennial Philosophy?" *JAAR* 60 (1987): 553–66.

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."[7] So, Katz and others, such as Proudfoot and Scholem,[8] argue that it is not only the interpretation of a phenomenon after that fact but its very character and existence that are culturally constituted. In short, there is no experience that is pure (in the non-Jamesian sense).[9] The insights of constructivists were significantly invested in the intellectual climate of the time, which included a new awareness of the power of language and culture to shape human experience, formed in part by the trauma of World War II and the Shoah. Thus the constructivist position corrected a lack of discipline in the study of religious experience. Yet, as significant as the cultural observation was, the scope of its application sometimes exceeded the target. As the next section argues, it sometimes was taken as sufficient explanation for all the phenomena of religious events.

The second major problem with some earlier claims about religious experience concerns the tendentious and ideological use of the category. Some students of religion argue that the category should be abandoned altogether because invocations of experience are used to falsely protect religious claims from critical scrutiny. As Robert Sharf puts it, "By emphasizing the experiential dimension of religion—a dimension inaccessible to strictly objective modes of inquiry—the theologian could forestall scientific critique."[10] To put the matter somewhat crassly, this critique frequently runs along the fault line between theology and religious studies in our own academic version of the culture wars. However, Scharf's critique extends to all scholars of religion, since those in religious studies faculties "have a vested interest in the existence of irreducibly *religious* phenomena over which they can claim special authority" despite the fact that other disciplines in the humanities often claimed to explain the same phenomena.[11]

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7. Steven T. Katz, "The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (ed. Steven T. Katz; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 4.

8. See Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Proudfoot, "Explaining the Unexplainable," *JAAR* 61 (1993): 793–803; and, even earlier, Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961).

9. Katz, "Conservative Character," 26.

10. Robert H. Scharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (ed. Mark C. Taylor; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 95.

11. Ibid.

So, according to Scharf, it has sometimes been in the interests of those of us who study ancient religion to treat experience as a black box in order to protect the specialness of our fields.

Given these two criticisms, for all of us interested in understanding early Judaism and early Christianity, the first difficulty might be described in these terms: Can religious experience be explored without special pleading? How is it possible to formulate research in religious experience in a way that does justice to the dimension of experience while lodging that exploration firmly in human subjects?

Although the essential subjectivity of experience—its "black-boxness"—can never be fully overcome, a number of recent developments have rendered it a little less opaque. The first is more critically informed means of assessing the influence of culture on individual human actors. While recognition of cultural influence is a point well taken, descriptions of exactly how culture shapes experience have tended to be mechanistic, as if ancient people sat down with a menu of values and linguistic constructs that could be pieced together—through an exercise of intellect—like modules in a role-play video game. Often these arguments are fueled by cultural parallelomania,[12] and become reduced to genealogical claims about the connection between ideas without consideration of how such borrowing actually takes place or other possible explanations of similarity.

In far more sophisticated ways, a number of approaches are providing more transparent means to assess experience. For example, theorists such as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu have developed nuanced descriptions of the interplay between culture and individual actors.[13] Bourdieu's work conceives not of the monolithic force of culture on individual experience, but the interplay between and mutual shaping of both with the body as the carrier and transformer of culture. As cultures shape individuals' experiences, regulating when they should speak and where they should stand, and prescribing meanings for objects, such cultural energy molds dispositions in a continuous negotiation between the subject and her/his environment. Using Bourdieu's terms, such collections of dispositions

12. Some practices have improved since Samuel Sandmel identified the tendency in biblical studies to overattribute similarities in language to direct literary influence ("Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 [1962]: 1–13). We would do well to cultivate a corresponding sensitivity with regard to other cultural patterns.

13. See especially Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (trans. Richard Nice; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

comprise a *habitus*. In this volume, Rodney Werline's discussion of *paideia* explores the way cultural practices of education and childrearing are written into the relationship between God and the people in *Psalms of Solomon*. Through that strategy, the embodied *habitus* of ancient pedagogy is activated in order to transform the experience of suffering faced by its readers. The black box in a theory like Bourdieu's contains the automaticity of bodily behaviors that have been shaped by repeated and reinforced cultural practices. In a similar way, Frances Flannery's exploration of the power of social memory construction is a further example in this volume of the interplay between individuals and their culture. Flannery explores the active, constructive exercise of memory for the community of 4 Ezra. Through the selection of the historical figure of Ezra the author creates a "new, symbolic organization of reality that reflects the present experiences"[14] and, in this case, provides the point of view for the community in resolving the tension between their expectations of God's protection and the circumstances of defeat after 70 C.E.

A second means through which we can critically examine experience is the recently emerging field of the cognitive science of religion, or CSR.[15] The fledgling discipline draws on insights from cognitive studies, neuroscience, evolutionary psychology and anthropology to understand human patterns of religious behavior. Practitioners propose that certain species-wide habits or structures of thought predispose human beings to religious ideation. These cognitive and biological patterns are thought to have arisen for very different purposes—as strategies of survival—but also generate and constrain religious phenomena. One of the most significant implications of CSR is that it shows how certain similarities in behavior and ideation need not be explained by direct influence. Rather, some patterns are broadly *human* rather than particularly *cultural*. In this volume, CSR approaches are represented in the contribution of Istvan Czachesz,

14. Flannery, this volume, pp. 47–48.

15. CSR offers hypotheses about both religious ideation and religious behavior in social groups. For the former see the landmark study of Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London: Vintage, 2002). For the latter see David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). For the implications of evolution for religious groups, a convenient hub for information about CSR may be found at the website for the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion: http://www.iacsr.com/iacsr/Home.html.

who argues that the debates about the Lord's supper in Corinth are fueled not by theological or economic factors, but by distinct neurological and social patterns of religiosity that are incompatible.

Concerns about anachronism have led to repeated lip service to the idea that ancient people were far more oriented to group identity than are we and were concomitantly far less likely to claim personal conviction as credible support for their views. Nonetheless, those corporate values and social sensibilities have to be received by individuals somehow in order for them to function. We cannot simply replace individual consciousness with corporate identity and assume that we have done justice either to the events themselves or to the complex process of enculturation. However, there are ways to ground culture in the individual without reducing it to individualism, ways that recognize that culture is also the product of humanness. Each of these approaches used by Werline, Flannery, and Czachesz provides a critically informed template through which we can scrutinize the text. Despite the fact that we cannot directly interview, observe, or subject our authors to fMRI scans, some methods allow us to proceed heuristically. When the text is held up to these templates certain previously opaque elements come into focus, and features that made no sense take on meaning. The measure of the aptness of the approach is the degree of explanatory power it wields.

The Problem of Reductionism

I have mentioned the overcorrection that has sometimes marked the attention to culture. Certainly it is clear that the arguments for a special category of experience that was free of the cultural conditioning or previous life experiences of the religious practitioner should be set aside. Constructivist critique is well taken as a response to arguments for "veridical experience"[16] or proof of divinity. However, the success of this corrective has come to participate in what I would name as the second problem in this area: reductionism. Too frequently, arguments about cultural influence have been extended beyond their weight-bearing capacity, and important observations of cultural influence have become a *de facto* contention that there is nothing but culture in such experience.

16. William P. Alston "Religious Experience" in *Routledge Encylopedia of Philosophy*, 8: 250–55. London: Routledge, 1998), 250.

For Katz, for example, the doctrinal difference among mystical traditions is taken as sufficient evidence that the experience of each mystic is already thoroughly culturally determined before it happens. Such reasoning is a fallacy of division: since religious experience as a whole displays doctrinal properties, therefore every component of religious experience is doctrinal. Underwriting this reasoning is the further reduction of experience to language, the idea that language both creates and exhausts experience. Although few hold so strongly to this view, nonetheless it does continue to constrain our discussions and formulations of experience, if only because we remain silent about other features of experience. The "shift to belief as the defining characteristic of religion" after the Protestant Reformation has fueled attention to ideas and propositional knowledge.[17] The methodological companion to the emphasis on belief is the focus on words.

Although his work concerns Hermetic writings dated later than the biblical material, Wouter Hanegraaff has considered the plight of those of us who are text-bound. He points to problems shared by all scholars who study historical religious movements:

> Like any other academic discipline, the history of religions relies on discursive language to make itself understood. … However, scholars of religion are often faced with the strangely paradoxical task of having to make sense of textual sources which explicitly deny the relevance, indeed the very possibility, of what the scholar is trying to do.[18]

In short, religious texts sometimes negate the very language they use to convey their import. Hanegraaff observes further that the responses to this dilemma tend to be of three sorts: the first is to focus solely on discourse because it is the only datum to which we have access; the second is to supply the discursive meaning about which the texts are so skeptical (typically, in biblical studies, theological meaning that is extrapolated from other, ostensibly parallel, sources or influences); and the third is to address more narrowly the topics of philology, grammar, textual criticism and historiography. Hanegraaff calls this third approach "the quasi-positivist doctrine

17. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, 271.

18. Wouter Hanegraaff, "Altered States of Knowledge: The Attainment of Gnōsis in the Hermetica," *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 2 (2008): 128.

of descriptivism."[19] Certainly all of these approaches generate important insights for exegesis, and should not be set aside. The point is rather that none of them is able to uncover the precise matter at the heart of a certain set of texts—the significance that arises from experience.

Two decades ago Sallie King summarized the problem as follows:

> Of course, the scholar's primary access to mystical phenomena is through the literature of mysticism. The point is, however, that it is not useful, and in fact seriously obscures the matter, to forget that there are experiences and lives on which that literature is based and into which it is projected.[20]

Beyond King's concern about obscuration, we might consider whether we actually misunderstand or misrepresent these very texts if we take them primarily as ends in themselves, as nothing but text. An extreme example of this seems to me to be Martha Himmelfarb's well-known claim that ascent texts are always pseudonymous inventions and *never* reflective of personal experience except in the most banal way.[21] Here a textual convention (pseudepigraphical authorship) is made to say everything that can be said, again mistaking a part for the whole. The writings of early Judaism and Christianity are filled with references to and residue of phenomena that fueled shifts in social affiliation, that are grounded in human bodies rather than merely in cultural constructs, and that are intimately tied to the social history of communities. These are the sorts of elements that are shut up in the black box. Can religious texts be understood at all without reference to that rich non-discursive reality? All of this raises the second question. If, on the one hand, we reject absolutizing explanations, we must ask, on the other hand: Which approaches and theoretical investments will best help us avoid linguistic reductionism?

The essays collected here offer plenty of options for non-reductive readings. However, at this point I want to highlight four of them because, in varying ways, they are each relevant to the problem of texts-as-words. Two

19. Ibid., 130–32.

20. Sallie King, "Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism," *JAAR* 56 (1988): 258.

21. Martha Himmelfarb, "The Practice of Ascent in the Ancient Mediterranean World," in *Death, Ecstasy and Other Worldly Journeys* (ed. John Collins and Michael Fishbane; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 132–33.

of these papers are—following Hanegraaff's typology—deeply invested in the text as discourse, and two employ descriptive, theological modes of analysis. Both Jack Levison and Leif Vaage take the former approach. Levison discusses the *Testament of Eve* for its use of agency and voice as Eve speaks a newly constructed, alternative version of originary events. He argues that the empathy that is stimulated by her testament transforms the reader's own gendered experience. We could describe this discursively as a shift in identity construction, but the point is that the shift is conducted emotionally. In his chapter Vaage explores the Gospel of Mark as a discourse of violence written in reaction to the revolt against Roman rule (66–73 C.E.). He argues, in effect, that there would be no Gospel of Mark without the traumatized body of the author and the depiction of the abused body of Jesus: "The discourse of the text is the kind of speech in which a writer deliberately (with some intentionality) seeks to articulate a sensation that otherwise already has marked and impressed itself into the writer's own flesh."[22] In contrast, Robin Griffith-Jones and Rollin Ramsaran are interested in more explicitly theological descriptions—in this case using Paul's letters. Griffith-Jones marches through the letter to the Romans, describing its attention to the inner person as a progression toward transformation of the mind. He argues that the performance of the letter before its audience would have generated the corresponding transformation in them. Ramsaran scans the entire Pauline corpus for references to in-Christ language in order to describe the theological patterns of Paul's thinking. In the end he concludes that ideas in themselves do not sufficiently explain Paul's participatory theology, but that much of it relies on "inner religious experience," which is affective in nature. In quite different ways, each of these four essays explores the way that literary media are either produced out of experience or intended to shape experience. They show that, even at this most discursive and descriptive level, the human body, emotions, and what might generally be described as interiority are essential to the text.

Terra Incognita

The possibility to begin again with religious experience arises against this background of both the problems in the history of scholarship and the

22. Leif Vaage, "Violence as Religious Experience in the Gospel of Mark," in this volume, p. 132.

access that is opened by new approaches. The parallel with renaissance maps of half-explored territory provides an apt analogy at this juncture. *Experience* remains largely unexplored territory. We have explored enough to know something of territorial mass and where it lies located relative to our interests in texts. The edges of this turf are also defined and, along with the crafters of the Lenox globe, we can point to some spots and say that *hic sunt dracones*. In our case, the dangers lurk in the claims, on one side, of a *sui generis* phenomenon and, on the other, of a linguistic reductionism that leaves no room for embodied perceptions. Between these coasts lies a territory that we now have better means to explore. But in what way is it meaningful to call it religious experience?

The calls for papers for the Religious Experience in Early Judaism and Early Christianity sessions have invited participants to retain the term but to use it in a way that is broader and more critically informed. For the most part *religious experience* has not been understood as an adjective and a noun, but rather as a compound term for a superlative sort of experience. Indeed, the more traditional terrain of out-of-body experiences, visions/hallucinations, and other extraordinary experiences remain heuristically useful in testing the limits of the category. For example, while a vision is culturally prepared and interpreted, the fact that it takes place in the body of the visionary is essential to its power. The visionary's neurons, emotions, brain chemicals, and personal associations all root the event *in her* and shape it *as hers*, making it meaningful in ways that doctrine or propositional reasoning is not. In short, the experience of it forms part of what makes it meaningful and part of what must be understood. What is true in those unusual circumstances is also true in the more ordinary. The body moving through the stances of a prescribed ritual, the recitation of a prayer in the midst of a gathered community, the reclaiming of a past figure in connection with one's own history, all generate significance that drives and shapes religious communities. In these volumes we propose to examine the ways in which analysis of experience, in all its rich variety, is relevant to and enlightening of the textual remains of early Christianity and Judaism. Rather than treating "religious experience" as a compound term, we treat it as a noun modified by an adjective. These essays offer a broad sampling of experience in religious contexts.

The difficulty on this point lies not only in the rejection of outmoded definitions, but in the fact that both of the terms of which "religious experience" is composed are likewise disputed. The difficulty with "religion" inheres in its artificiality, or at least in the failure to recognize that it is a

construct of academic convenience rather than a natural category. In the words of Jonathan Z. Smith, "'Religion' is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define."[23] In the study of biblical literature, this is a question that does not naturally arise; rather, it is taken as a given that these texts and their content is religious. The challenge posed by Smith and others is that the definition of religion has been tailored far too closely on the pattern of Judaism and Christianity. Thus, the category becomes almost circular with regard to the Bible, and is misconstrued with regard to all other movements. The appending of modifiers like "primitive" and "folk" demonstrates the normative role of Judeo-Christian structures—all other forms of religion require qualification. If, in defining religion, we want to do more than create a synonym for Judaism or Christianity, we need a category that can apply comfortably to a wider range of cultures. Smith identifies Melford Spiro's characterization as the one that has gained greatest ascendancy. For Spiro the core of religion is "culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings."[24] That definition allows us to highlight the interplay between various practices and beliefs, which are facets of culture, and experience, which is a facet of the individual.

A working definition of experience is even more difficult than that of religion. The seeming interiority and subjectivity of experience is precisely the reason that it has functioned as a black box, but the benefits of considering experience are sufficient to justify the effort. First, it allows us to consider other epistemological categories: ways of knowing that are not logocentric, even while we work with texts that attempt to put them into words, or ratiocentric, even while we search for the causal links among elements. Much of the time, however, human beings function on the basis of information that never takes the form of words or reason. King describes such knowing through the example of staring at a candle:

> If one concentrates, for example, on a candle flame to the exclusion of all else, sooner or later there will be only "consciousness-of " candle flame, with no sense of a separate self perceiving a separate candle flame attendant upon this awareness. When one looks back retrospectively upon

23. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," 281.

24. Melford E. Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (ed. Michael Banton; London: Tavistock, 1966), 96.

> such meditative experiences, if one attends carefully to what was in the experience itself, one will even later not want to speak of such experience in the language of subject and object. Such subject-object language does not fit the case.[25]

Phenomenology describes this epistemology in which we are not conscious of ourselves in most acts of perception and knowing. For the most part there is no subject-object dichotomy, but only in secondary reflection on the experience as object do we generate ourselves as subject. King argues from an epistemological grounding that there is pure (mixed) consciousness and it is what we experience much of the time. We experience the thing without consciousness of ourselves experiencing it. This mode of experience is often described in religious texts and participates in religious ideation.

A second means through which experience can be explored is in attention to the human body. At the same time that culture in general and words in particular have been promoted as the only safe ground for analysis, the body is increasingly asserted as a field of study. Sometimes such assertions merely identify the body as another cultural product, as constructed as is a ritual or other social convention. However, biological and cognitive sciences are describing human universals in ways that give us access to a bodily *givenness* as well. Some elements of experience are constrained by the fact of being human. Even language is body-bound, as conceptual blending theory argues.[26]

In this volume three essays are especially attentive to the power of embodiment in religious contexts. Relying in part on anthropologist Roy Rappaport, Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte explores the ritual of baptism in the Pauline communities. Peerbolte considers again the old question of the influence of the mystery cults on the establishment of baptism as an initiation rite. In Rappaport's model, the actions conducted in any ritual have a self-referential effect: they confirm the participant's status and iden-

25. King, "Two Epistemological Models," 272.

26. For the state of the art in this approach, see Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). The work began with the study by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson of the way all language, including abstract concepts, is grounded in physical, bodily experience (George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* [London: University of Chicago Press, 1980]).

tity within the community. In the end, such similarities among religious movements have more basis in the universally human patterns of embodied knowing than in any borrowing between cultures. Carol Newsom's fascinating analysis of the images and structure of the *Hodayot* and the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* focus on the physical performance of these liturgical texts. In the case of the *Hodayot*, the use of first person pronouns enacts the performer as the "I" of the text. As he repeats the dramatic oscillations of self-worth described in the text, his identity is destabilized and reconstituted. In the second case the repetition, paradox, and sensory overload stimulated in the language of the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* bring the congregation into the imagined presence of the angelic worshippers. The bodily performance of both of these liturgical texts induces the experiences encoded in them. Angela Harkins's analysis of Neh 9 and the fourth-century *Hymns on Paradise* shares many resonances with that of Newsom. Harkins also points to the rich imagery and sensory data in these texts as keys to their efficacy. She uses performance theory to explain how active reading stimulates in the reader the same emotions and even sense of space that the text records. These heightened states can in turn generate new experiences that move beyond the scripted experience of the reading. In each of these three essays we see how meaning is conveyed through the body, from the bottom up.

Conclusion

This second *Experientia* volume attends to the challenge inherent in working with texts in order to understand experience. In some cases the essays show how the text helped to stimulate a particular kind of experience, and in other cases the texts communicate the residue of experience or a record of its effects. As in the first volume, these essays explore experience as a critically informed category, understood to be shaped by culture but also by universal human capacities. As such, many of the older concerns about the category of religious experience can be set aside. The analyses presented here are not naïve or apologetic. In place of special pleading, they ground their observations in cross-disciplinary theorizing about human behavior. Neither do they reduce experience to the mere replication of cultural values. Instead, in complex and contextually sensitive ways, the authors discuss the contributions of emotional, sensory, habitual, story-based, performative experiences to religiosity. Through social memory, *habitus*, and the creation of narrative, some ancient people came to terms

with unexpected suffering, and their relationship to God was stabilized through the text. Other texts examined in this volume helped to effect the transformation of their audiences, bringing them into perceived contact with divine realms, or evoking a sense of change in their constitution or sense of self. Through these various means these essays explore what has long been thought to be inaccessible or opaque. They thus help to reclaim the category of religious experience and offer ways to examine its significant contribution to early Judaism and early Christianity.