

INTRODUCTION

The Problem of “Religious Experience”

The idea of “religious experience” is deeply embedded in the study of religion and religions as it (religion) and they (religions) have come to be understood in the modern West. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many modernizers in the West and elsewhere advanced the idea that a certain kind of experience, whether characterized as religious, mystical, or spiritual, constituted the essence of “religion” and the common core of the world’s “religions.” This understanding of religion and the religions dominated the academic study of religion during the last century. Key twentieth century thinkers, such as Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Joachim Wach, Mircea Eliade, and Ninian Smart, located the essence of religion in a unique form of experience that they associated with distinctively religious concepts such as the sacred (Eliade 1957/1987), the numinous (Otto 1914/1958), or divine power (van der Leeuw 1933/1986).

This approach has been heavily criticized over the last thirty-five years on two major grounds. First, it sets religious experience up as the epitome of something unique or *sui generis*,¹ which must be studied using the special methods of the humanities. As a unique sort of experience, they argued that scholars should privilege the views of believers (the first person or subjective point of view) and should not try to explain their experiences in biological, psychological, or sociological terms for fear of “reducing” it to something else. Second, it constituted religion and the religions as a special aspect of human life and culture set apart from other aspects. Critics claimed that this approach isolated the study of religion from other disciplines (Cox 2006), masked a tacitly theological agenda of a liberal ecumenical sort, and embodied covert Western presuppositions about religion and religions (McCutcheon 1997; Sharf 1998; Fitzgerald 2000a; Masuzawa 2005).

The critics are basically right about this. Around 1900, that is, at the height of the modern era, Western intellectuals in a range of disciplines were preoccupied with the idea of experience (Jay 2005). This spilled over into theology and the emerging academic study of religion where thinkers with a liberal or modernist bent, mostly Protestant and a few

¹“*Sui generis*” is a Latin phrase meaning “of its own kind.” It refers to a person or thing that is unique, in a class by itself (*The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, 3rd ed. 2002).

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Catholic, turned to the concept of religious experience as a source of theological authority at a time when claims based on other sources of authority—ecclesiastical, doctrinal, and biblical—were increasingly subject to historical critique. For modernist theologians who followed in the steps of the liberal Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, the self-authenticating experience of the individual seemed like a promising source of religious renewal, less vulnerable to the acids of historical critical methods (Proudfoot 1985; Sharf 1999; Jay 2005; Taves 2005).²

Early twentieth-century liberal Christian theologians, such as Rudolf Otto, Nathan Söderblom, and Friedrich Heiler, placed the experience of the numinous, sacred, or holy at the center of Christianity and, by extension, at the center of all other religions as well.³ Hindu and Buddhist modernizers, such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, made similar moves relative to their own traditions, using the idea of experience to undercut traditional sources of authority and interpret traditional concepts in new ways amidst the cross-currents of colonialism, westernization, and nationalist self-assertion. While maintaining the centrality of their own traditions, each used the notion of experience to underscore what they viewed as the essence of all religions (Taves 2005).

It was in this context that the Harvard psychologist William James gave the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1902. These lectures, which were immediately published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, not only defined religion in terms of religious experience—that is, as “*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine*” (James 1902/1985, 34)—but popularized what had been a predominantly Protestant concept as a core feature of religion in general (Taves 1999, 271). While James was responsible in many ways for initiating the turn to religious experience in the psychology of religion and religious studies, he did not—like so many who followed him—claim that religious experience was *sui generis* and refuse to explain it in psychological or sociological terms. Indeed, his aim as a

² We can and should distinguish between “religious experience” as an abstract concept, which has played a prominent role in modern religious thought, and “religious experiences” (in the plural) as specific behavioral events, which I refer to in what follows as “experiences deemed religious.” The conflation of these two usages has created a great deal of confusion in the field.

³ Otto, Heiler, and Söderblom were all Protestant theologians and early historians of religion, who followed the great liberal Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher in defining religion in terms of experience largely independent of doctrine and institution, resisted psychological interpretations of experience, and limited comparisons to religious phenomena.

psychologist was to explain religious experience in psychological terms, while at the same time leaving open the possibility that it pointed to something more (Taves, 2009a).

Although James should not be grouped with those who argued for a sui generis understanding of religion, his definition privileged experience of a particular sort over religious doctrine, practice, or institutions. In privileging sudden, discrete authenticating moments of individual experience (such as revelations, visions, and dramatic conversion experiences) over ordinary, everyday experience or the experience of groups, he introduced a bias toward sudden, individual experience that not only shaped the contemporary Western idea of religious experience but also related concepts such as mysticism and spirituality as well.

The prominent twentieth-century scholars of religion already mentioned—Gerardus van der Leeuw, Joachim Wach, Mircea Eliade, and Ninian Smart—built on this turn-of-the-century emphasis on experience to formulate their understanding of religion and the distinctive phenomenological methods they thought should be used to study it. In the wake of the general linguistic turn within the humanities, however, this entire approach was called into question. Many scholars of religion, eager to deconstruct an essentialist understanding of religion and religious experience, abandoned the focus on religious experience and recast the study of religion in light of critical theories that emphasize the role of language in constituting social reality in the context of relationships of power and inequality (Sharf 1998; Braun and McCutcheon 2000; Jensen 2003; Fitzgerald 2000b; McCutcheon 2002).⁴ Scholars have now traced the history of these concepts in Western thought (deCerteau 1995; Jantzen 1995; Scharf 1999; Schmidt 2003, Jay 2005; Taves 2005), their appropriation by turn-of-the-century

⁴The linguistic or cultural turn refers to the application of insights drawn from linguistics, literary criticism, and cultural anthropology to a range of disciplines in the humanities, where it has been well received, and the social sciences, where it has been highly contested. This approach, which is part of a general postmodern critique, stresses the ways in which language shapes knowledge and treats all truth claims, including scientific ones, as forms of discourse that constitute social reality through relationships of power and inequality. In so doing, it privileges authorial virtuosity, while challenging natural and social scientific claims to generate generally valid, shared knowledge (Bonnell and Hunt 1999, 1–27). This shift in approach is evident in the entries on “Religion” in the first and second editions of the fifteen-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion*. In the first edition (1987), Winston L. King defined religion as “the organization of life around the depth dimensions of experience” and struggled to distinguish distinctively religious depth experiences from nonreligious ones, deciding rather circularly that “the religious experience is religious precisely because it occurs in a religious context” (2005, 7695–96). The supplementary entry written by Gregory D. Alles for the second edition (2005) highlights the intense criticism directed toward definitions of this sort and the scholarly shift from “trying to conceptualize religion to reflecting on the act of conceptualization itself” (2005, 7702) that ensued.

intellectuals with modernist inclinations in other parts of the world such as India and Japan (Halbfass 1988; Sharf 1995; King 1999), and their use by missionaries in colonial contexts (Chidester 1996, Fitzgerald 2007b). These studies, although well integrated with efforts at deconstruction across the humanities, are usually isolated from efforts to understand religion in the natural sciences. Indeed, those who embrace critical theory within the humanities and social sciences have typically been more interested in deconstructing scientific efforts than in bridging between science and critical theory (Wiebe 1999; Slingerland 2008).

Scholars in anthropology, sociology, and psychology—disciplines that we might expect to serve as bridges between the humanities and natural sciences—have faced various difficulties in that regard. Within mainstream anthropology of religion, the primary focus has been on shamanism and spirit-possession with far less attention paid to so-called world religions, particularly Christianity (Cannell 2006). In reciprocal fashion, religious studies has focused for the most part on “high religions” with “gods” and relegated the study of shamanism and spirits—that is, “folk religion”—to anthropology (Mageo and Howard 1996; Mayaram 2001). Although William James and his collaborators in the Society for Psychical Research thought of spirit-possession and mediumship as intimately related to the broader realms of religion and religious experience, they downplayed those connections in their published work and were not able to overcome the emerging division of labor between religious and theological studies, on the one hand, and the anthropology of religion, on the other (Kenny 1981; Taves, 2009a). Given this twentieth-century division of labor, scholars have tended to use terms such as “religious experience,” “mysticism,” and “spirituality” with reference to so-called “high” religions but not as commonly in relation to “folk” or “primitive” religion.

In terms of its orientation to the humanities and natural sciences, anthropology has been divided right down the middle. More than any other discipline, anthropology has been a battleground in the methodological wars between critical theorists oriented toward the humanities and social scientists oriented toward the natural sciences. While race and gender have been the most hotly contested issues, any attempt to bring science into the humanities and critical theory into science can raise suspicions among anthropologists (Slingerland 2008). There are pockets, however, within anthropology—psychological anthropology and medical anthropology in particular—that do bridge the humanistic and the natural sciences, and there is some exciting new work being done on religion in these subfields (e.g., Luhrmann 2004, 2005). Generally speaking, mainstream anthropological research on shamanism and spirit-possession has exemplified the tension between reductionistic, naturalistic, or medical models, on the one hand, and phenomenological, contextualizing cultural-studies

approaches, on the other (Boddy 1994), although here, too, a few anthropologists have made innovative efforts to bridge the gap between the natural sciences and the humanities (Stephen 1989).

Although some sociologists, especially those following in the tradition of Emile Durkheim, have attended to collective and in some cases even individual experience, they have focused on the social causes and effects of experience apart from the psychological and biological. In general, psychologists and sociologists of religion have distinguished between the private religious experience of individuals and the public religiosity of organized groups, with psychologists of religion focusing on the former and sociologists of religion on the latter. Although there is some newer work (e.g., Bender 2008) that runs counter to these trends, psychologists of religion have devoted far more attention to religious experience than sociologists.

Due to their focus on religious experience, including spirituality and mysticism, the relationship between the psychology of religion and the general field of psychology is parallel in some respects to the relationship between religious studies and other disciplines. Although research in the psychology of religion is conducted across the whole array of subfields within psychology running the gamut from the natural to the social sciences (see Paloutzian and Park 2005), psychologists of religion, like scholars of religion, have wrestled with the question of whether religion is unique among human behaviors or can be accounted for using the research methods and/or explanatory principles that are applied to human behavior more generally (Baumeister 2002). Those who claimed that religion is in some sense unique (*sui generis*) have resisted “reductionistic” approaches to the psychology of religion and maintained the need for distinct approaches that set it apart from the rest of psychology (Dittes 1969, Pargament 2002).

While the psychology of religion, like religious studies, has been through a long period of critical self-reflection, some within the field now advocate a “multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm” (Emmons and Paloutzian 2003) that would allow the psychology of religion to “reach out to evolutionary biology, neuroscience, anthropology, cognitive science, and . . . philosophy in a generalized cross-disciplinary approach to critiquing and sharpening the assumptions of science” (Paloutzian and Park 2005a, 7–9). The multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm would thus link “subfields within psychology as the core discipline in a broader effort.” This new paradigm undercuts the old binary distinction between reductionism and uniqueness, reframing it in relation to theories of emergence in which emergent properties, such as consciousness and group leadership, are understood to emerge at different levels of analysis (*ibid*). Experience—whether religious, spiritual, or mystical—is definitely a phenomenon for study within

this new paradigm, but the implications of the paradigm for setting up experientially related objects of study that can be examined across disciplines have not been adequately worked out. Without further refinement at the design stage, it will be difficult to connect different lines of research.

Finally, in the last decade and a half (since 1990), there has been a dramatic increase in studies examining the neurological, cognitive, and evolutionary underpinnings of religion in light of the rapid advances in the study of the brain and consciousness. Scholars who identify with the growing subfield of the cognitive science of religion are drawn from disparate disciplines including psychology, anthropology, religious studies, and philosophy. Though most of them are well versed in the study of religion, they have focused on belief and practice (ritual) and with a few exceptions, such as Azari (2004) and Livingston (2005), have ignored experience (for an overview, see Sloan 2006). In addition, scholars and researchers, including a number of self-identified neurotheologists, most of whom lack training in theology or religious studies (e.g., D’Aquili and Newberg 1999), have enthusiastically embraced the challenges of identifying the neural correlates of religious experience without engaging the critiques of the concept that led many scholars of religion to abandon it.

After decades of critical discussion of the concept, we can neither simply invoke the idea of “religious experience” as if it were a self-evidently unique sort of experience nor leave experience out of any sensible account of religion. How, then, should we understand “religious experience”? Given the critiques of the last several decades, is there any way the concept can be studied by those interested in understanding such experiences naturalistically?

EXPERIENCES DEEMED RELIGIOUS

Rather than abandon the study of experience, we should disaggregate the concept of “religious experience” and study the wide range of experiences to which religious significance has been attributed. If we want to understand how anything at all, including experience, *becomes* religious, we need to turn our attention to the processes whereby people sometimes ascribe the special characteristics to things that we (as scholars) associate with terms such as “religious,” “magical,” “mystical,” “spiritual,” et cetera. Disaggregating “religious experience” in this way will allow us to focus on the interaction between psychobiological, social, and cultural-linguistic processes in relation to carefully specified types of experiences sometimes considered religious and to build methodological bridges across the divide between the humanities and the sciences.

A focus on things deemed religious in turn allows us to make a distinction between *simple ascriptions*, in which an individual thing is set apart as special, and *composite ascriptions*, in which simple ascriptions are incorporated into more complex formations, such as those that scholars and others designate as “spiritualities” or “religions.” This distinction provides a basis for examining the various roles that experience in general and unusual experiences in particular play in both *simple ascriptive formations* (in which, e.g., a single event is set apart as special) and *composite ascriptive formations* (in which, e.g., an event is viewed as ordinary and people seek to recreate it in the present).⁵ The distinction between simple and composite formations, thus, allows us to envision a way of studying “religion” that allows us to understand how humans have used things deemed religious (simple ascriptions) as building blocks to create the more complex formations (composite ascriptions) we typically refer to as “religions” or “spiritualities.”

PREVIOUS WORK

The distinction between simple and composite ascriptions builds on a particular reading of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim and has been anticipated to varying degrees in more recent work. James Dewey (1934) anticipated a similar distinction when he stressed the difference between “religion, a religion, and the religious” (3) and referred to “religious elements of experience” rather than “religious experience” in order to avoid setting up religious experience as “something sui generis” (10, 13). More recently, Hent de Vries (2008, 11–12) makes an analytical distinction between a general or generic concept of religion and the “things” (words, gestures, powers, et cetera) that constitute the “elementary forms” in which religion, abstractly conceived, is instantiated. De Vries’s approach in *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, like Dewey’s in *A Common Faith*, is constructive as well as analytical. Where Dewey sought to articulate a scientifically grounded “common faith,” de Vries and collaborators seek to move beyond the abstract concept of religion to develop what he calls a “negative metaphysics” or “minimal theology” designed to sketch the “emerging features” of an “abstract and virtual ‘global religion’” (de Vries 2008, 13).

⁵ I refer to simple and composite formations rather than simple and composite ascriptions when I want to encompass the beliefs and practices that are associated with a simple or composite ascription. References to simple and composite formations should always be understood to mean simple and composite *ascriptive* formations. These and other italicized terms can be found in the glossary.

The strictly analytical focus of the distinction made here, however, more closely parallels that of sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger and psychologists such as Kenneth Pargament and Annette Mahoney. Hervieu-Léger distinguishes between the sacred character that can be conferred on things and religion as a way of organizing meaning through chains of belief (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 106–8). Pargament and Mahoney (2005, 180–81) distinguish between the sanctification of various objects or aspects of life and religion as “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred.” In making these distinctions, these scholars redefine the *first-order terms* “sacred” and “religion” as *second-order terms* for the purposes of their research.

Although I adopted this course as well in earlier drafts, doing so makes it harder to distinguish between our aims as scholars and those of the people we are studying and thus risks obscuring the contestations over and transformations of experience that we want to study on the ground. Since there is no way to specify an inherently contested phenomenon precisely, I will propose that we situate what people variously refer to *emically* (on the ground) as “religious,” “spiritual,” “mystical,” “magical,” and so forth in the context of larger processes of meaning making and valuation, and specifically in relation to the process of *singularization* (Kopytoff 1986), by means of which people deem some things special and set them apart from others. In my revisions, I have tried to be clear rather than relentlessly consistent in my use of terms, so the reader will find references to both “experiences deemed religious” and “things considered special” as seems appropriate in any given context.

The distinction between simple and composite ascriptions relies heavily on *attribution theory*, which seeks to explain how people explain events. Long a staple of social psychology, attribution theory was applied to religious experience in the 1970s (Proudfoot and Shaver 1975; Proudfoot 1985) and to religion in general in the 1980s (Spilka, Shaver, and Kirkpatrick 1985). Although attribution theory has been widely presupposed by psychologists of religion (Spilka and McIntosh 1995), some religious-studies scholars have rejected it because they think it overrides the subjective sense of those who claim their experiences are inherently religious rather than culturally constructed (Barnard 1992; Barnard 1997, 97–110). In order to respond to this criticism, we will need to distinguish between *attributions* (commonsense causal explanations) that people often supply consciously and *ascriptions* (the assignment of a quality or characteristic to something) that may be supplied implicitly below the threshold of awareness.⁶ The distinction between attribution and ascrip-

⁶ In everyday speech, the terms “ascription” and “attribution” are typically used interchangeably to refer to both causal explanations and the assignment of a quality or charac-

tion will allow us in turn to connect attribution theory more fully with research on implicit, nonconscious mental processing.

Nina Azari, one of the few neuroscientists with dual doctorates in both psychology and religious studies, appropriates attribution theory critically in her recent religious-studies dissertation (Azari 2004). The dissertation, which builds on her pioneering use of brain-imaging techniques to identify neural correlates of religious experience (Azari et al. 2001; Azari, Missimer, and Seitz 2005), provides the most sophisticated attempt so far to come to terms with the issues surrounding the neuroscientific study of religious experience. While our conclusions are compatible, they are intended for different audiences and thus are expressed in somewhat different terms and framed at different levels of generality. Azari’s work is directed primarily toward neuroscientists studying contemporary Western subjects, philosophers of religion, and theologians interested in reflecting on their findings. She critiques both attribution theory and the relatively unsophisticated theoretical underpinnings of neuroscientific studies of religious experience in light of recent research on emotion. This research allows her to undercut the inadequate conceptualization of emotion that informed earlier neuroscientific studies of religious experience as well as overly narrow conceptions of causality in some versions of attribution theory (Azari 2004, 172–82). In contrast, this book aims to rehabilitate a more broadly defined concept of experience and to suggest an approach to studying experiences deemed religious that can be used by researchers who do not focus on contemporary Western subjects.

Azari’s approach has specific limitations that need to be overcome in order to advance this larger agenda. First, although defining religious experience from the perspective of the subject works well when studying modern Western subjects for whom the concept of religious experience is meaningful, this work aims to support research on singular experiences across cultures and historical time periods. Second, although experience can usually be construed as having an emotional valence, it is not always its most salient feature. Defining experience in terms of emotion deflects attention from a range of unusual experiences that are granted special significance, such as lucid dreams, auditory and visual hallucinations, sensed presences, possession trance, and out-of-body experiences, which this book seeks to include. Third, a focus on individual, decontextualized

teristic to something. In the context of attribution theory, however, social psychologists use “attribution” to refer specifically to the commonsense causal explanations that people offer for why things happen as they do (Försterling 2001, 3–4). In what follows, I distinguish between attribution and ascription, using “attribution” to refer to causal explanations, as in social psychology, and using “ascription” to refer to the assignment of a quality or characteristic to something.

experiences tends to reproduce the relatively narrow understanding of “religious experience” that has been of particular interest to modern Western philosophers of religion and theologians. By extending attribution theory to processes at the group level and to composite as well as simple ascriptions, we can place the study of experiences that people consider special within a broader interdisciplinary field of inquiry and open new possibilities for understanding the way that religions are constructed.

THE ARGUMENT

The argument unfolds in chapters devoted to religion, experience, explanation, and comparison. Chapter 1 (*Religion*) addresses the question of how scholars can specify what it is they want to study without obscuring the contestations over meaning taking place on the ground. Since there is no way to specify an inherently contested phenomenon precisely, I argue that scholars can situate what people characterize as religious, spiritual, mystical, magical, superstitious, and so forth in relation to larger processes of meaning making and valuation, in which people deem some things special and set them apart from others. We can then identify marks of specialness (that set things apart in various ways), things that are often considered special (ideal things and anomalous things, including anomalous beings), and the ways in which simple ascriptions of specialness can be taken up into more complex formations. These various distinctions provide numerous options for setting up more precisely designed research projects to probe competing schemes of valuation and singularization in different social contexts.

Chapter 2 (*Experience*) reconsiders views of experience and representation that have colored humanistic discussions of religious experience in light of recent discussions of experience and consciousness among philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists. Distinctions between types of consciousness (transitive and intransitive), levels of consciousness (lower and higher), and levels of mental processing (conscious and unconscious) allow us to consider the relationship between experience and representation in an evolutionary and developmental perspective relative to the experience of animals and prelinguistic humans. Viewing experience in this way allows us to consider how we gain access to experience (our own and that of others) and how it acquires meaning as it arises in the body and through interaction with others. A more dynamic model of how we articulate our own experience and that of others illuminates a range of data that we can gather about experience and allows us to reconsider the relationship between experience and representation in some specific cases

(dreams, possession trance, and meditation) in light of the data available for studying them.

The dynamic model of how we come to know our experience and the experiences of others developed in chapter 2 is based on research on *embodiment* and *theory of mind*. Theory of mind is a key aspect of what researchers refer to as “folk psychology,” the set of very basic, cross-culturally stable assumptions that we use to predict, explain, or understand the everyday actions of others in terms of the mental states we presume lie behind them. Folk psychology, which also informs the latest work in attribution theory (Malle 2004, 2005), lays the foundation for the development of a more interactive understanding of how and why people explain their own and other’s actions in chapter 3 (*Explanation*). Drawing on the multilevel attributional framework proposed by Hewstone (1989), I show how Malle’s interactive approach can be extended to various levels of analysis—intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup—some of which fall under the traditional purview of historians and ethnographers. Though the attributional process takes a somewhat different form at each level, an interactive approach allows us to conceptualize everyday explanations as an interpretive process involving negotiation and contestation at every level.

In arguing against the *sui generis* approach to religious experience, I am arguing that the comparison between religious and nonreligious subjects taken for granted in experimental design can and should be extended to historical and ethnographic research. In chapter 4 (*Comparison*), I sketch some of the ways that researchers can construct similar sorts of comparisons using historical and ethnographic data. Returning to the distinctions between simple and composite formations set out in chapter 1, I set up comparisons that illustrate what we can learn from comparisons between simple formations, between composite formations, and between simple and composite formations.

The distinctions between ascription and attribution and simple and composite formations have implications not only for the study of experiences that people consider special but also for the study of religion more generally. The distinction between ascription and attribution allows us to distinguish between the creation of special things through a process of singularization, in which people consciously or unconsciously ascribe special characteristics to things, and the attribution of causality to the thing or to behaviors associated with it. The distinction between simple ascriptions, in which an individual thing is set apart as special, and composite ascriptions, in which simple ascriptions are incorporated into the more complex formations characteristic of religions or spiritualities, in turn allows us to envision a building-block approach to the study of

religion. The implications of these distinctions for the study of religion are drawn out in the conclusion.

WHY AN ATTRIBUTIONAL APPROACH IS BETTER

Reframing the concept of “religious experience” initially as “experiences deemed religious” and then more broadly as a subset of things people consider special allows us to do three things. First, it forces us to sort out who is deeming things religious or characterizing them as special and on what grounds, both at the level of scholarship and that of general human behavior. Analysis of the different ways that things can be set apart as special and protected by taboos will suggest that the *sui generis* approach to the study of religion, which defines religion in terms of religious experience, sets the study of religion apart and protects it with taboos against comparing it with nonreligious things. If instead we situate the processes whereby people characterize things as religious, mystical, magical, and so forth within larger processes of meaning making and valuation (singularization), we are better able to analyze the contestations over the meaning and value of particular things and the way that those things are incorporated into and perpetuated by larger socio-cultural formations, such as religious traditions and spiritual disciplines.

Second, it allows us to position experience, traditionally understood as a central concept within the study of religion, not as something that sets the study of religion apart from all other forms of knowledge but rather locates it in relation to them. By locating how we come to know our own and others’ experience through processes that are simultaneously embodied and interactive, we can make a concept familiar to scholars of religion usable across disciplines and further a process of conceptual integration that is presupposed in the natural sciences but less well advanced elsewhere.⁷ In drawing from different disciplines to examine processes of ascription and attribution at and between various levels (intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup), we can escape the simple binaries in which the reductionism debate has been framed in religious studies and explore the distinctive features of different levels of analysis in more sophisticated ways.

⁷ While vertical integration across levels of analysis is taken for granted in the natural sciences, this is not the case in the social sciences or the humanities (Slingerland 2008). Calls for integration across levels and more sophisticated analysis of interactions between levels are becoming more common in the social sciences and the humanities (see, for example, Barkow, Cosmides and Tooby 1992 [in evolutionary psychology]; Emmons and Paloutzian 2003; Paloutzian and Park 2005, Kirkpatrick 2005 [in psychology of religion]; and Clayton 2004; Clayton and Davies 2006 [in religious studies]).

Third, an attributional approach allows us to view experiences—and especially unusual experiences—as a subset of the many special things that may be incorporated into the more complex formations we think of as “religions.” The twentieth-century focus on “religious experience” rather than experiences deemed religious deflected attention from the various components that taken together constitute a “religion.” Refocusing our attention on the component parts and the disparate ways in which they can be assembled provides a method for assessing the role of unusual experiences in the emergence and development of religions. Although conceived to solve the problems surrounding “religious experience,” the method provides a more promising way forward for the study of religion generally.