

Beyond
*Mysterium
Tremendum:*
Thoughts
toward an
Aesthetic Study
of Religious
Experience

By
OMAR M. MCROBERTS

Much sociological ethnography of religion values an objective distance between observer and subject to the point of reducing religion to a catalogue of doctrines and rituals, failing all the while to take seriously the subjective experiences of believers and the experiences of ethnographers themselves. The association of religious experience with transcendent feelings of awe or ecstasy, coupled with the methodological impossibility of perfect empathy, further drives the ethnography of religion away from the consideration of religious experience. I offer thoughts toward an aesthetics-oriented method of studying lived religiosity, whereby the ethnographer becomes sensitive to aspects of religious experience that are precognitive but not necessarily spiritual.

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Of all the commonly perceived strengths of ethnographic methodology, empathy stands out as the most mysterious and powerful. Whether or not we make explicit empathic claims, ethnographers often implicitly claim to understand the actual experiences and perspectives of the people they study, as well as the micro-interactive mechanics, cultural codes, and exogenous forces that define and reproduce social settings. Building perhaps on Max Weber's injunction that *verstehen*, or social understanding, be a central preoccupation of sociology, ethnographies commonly suggest what it might feel like to be a part of the social worlds we study, even when these empathic gestures are not built into a formal account of how those social worlds operate. Those who consume ethnographic accounts reserve special praise for those works offering gripping, gritty,

Omar M. McRoberts is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Chicago. He is most recently the author of Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Urban Neighborhood (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

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The point, at least initially, is not for the ethnographer to mine the aesthetic for meaning the way we might mine the verbal content of a sermon or testimonial. First, the ethnographer seeks conversion: she takes a voluntary step into a universe of aesthetic appreciation. The religion as meaning system can then be described from this aesthetic standpoint, even as the aesthetic viewpoint is made significant in the context of the meaning system. The ethnographer who views the religious setting as an aesthetic universe thus struggles to understand the aesthetic experience of the believer, as well as to analyze and interpret the more formal aspects of religious practice. The result, it seems, would be a richer sociological account of, or a deeper speculation about, what makes religion compelling. Such an account would humbly make use of the ethnographer's own experiences (humbly, because the ethnographer's experiences are not presented as perfectly empathic) but nonetheless avoid evaluating adherents' metaphysical claims.

I present this approach in full agreement with David Yamane (2000, 173) that "more explicit attention must be paid to what we study when we study religious experience." Yamane's concern grows out of his conviction, which I also share, that we cannot directly study religious experience, or any experience for that matter, since a person cannot verbalize an experience without imposing upon it a layer of interpretation and since we can never know whether our empathic eavesdropping on another's experience is real (pp. 173-74). I therefore cannot directly perceive a worshipper's experience of beauty, nor can he describe the actual feeling of beauty to me, but we can talk about the things that make something beautiful for him. In addition, as a participant observant, I myself can experience something as beautiful and compare notes, as it were, with him about what made it beautiful; I can then use ethnographic writing to try to transmit not only the interpretive worldview but also my own grasp of that beauty to the reader. The process would be understood more as the translation of a poem than as the exegesis or interpretation of prose.

It is my belief in this last possibility that leads me to disagree with another of Yamane's assertions: that our inability to empathize perfectly means we may only study the language that people use to make sense of religious experience. This may be true for experiences of the Holy but not necessarily for other, comparatively mundane aspects of religious experience that the ethnographer himself might pick up on by being there. In other words, Yamane's language-based, narrative-focused solution to the problem of empathy is ideal for the in-depth interviewer but does not take sufficient advantage of the ethnographer's willful participation. As participant observers in religious settings, we experience many of the same stimuli as believers. The believer's linguistic sense making may explain the ideological significance of the stimulus, but the words, by themselves, cannot make the ethnographer perceive the stimulus as beautiful. When the ethnographer does perceive the stimulus as beautiful, it is not simply because she has understood the believer's articulated worldview. In fact, believers may have spoken little or nothing about the thing the ethnographer found so appealing. But the ethnographer's recognition of beauty might signal that something is compelling to others in the setting, thus inspiring a new angle of investigation into the believer's religious experiences. Recall that Burawoy honed in on the machinists' ironically self-sacrificing work

ethic mainly because he experienced it as his own existential dilemma. Rather than calling this experience an instance of pure empathy with other machinists, on one hand, or a purely objective observation, on the other, he used his experience of the dilemma to question the social context more deeply than he had before. He used his experience as a machinist to discover the unique problematics of life on the shop floor. Likewise, the ethnographer of religion can use his experience of beauty to discover deeper questions about the believer's universe of experience. His subsequent ethnographic account, if it is to convey any of the beauty of the stimulus, will then build at least partly on his own experience of it. The point is, as a participant observer, the ethnographer of religion must necessarily study his own experiences as well as the words people use to describe theirs.

Aside from its practical disfavor of the experiences of the ethnographer, the language-only approach to religious experience eclipses the fact that religious talk itself can be a part of religious experiences of the beautiful. The narratives people use to "emplot" (Yamane 2000) dramatic experiences of religious conversion, for example, are a part of experienced religious life; they do not merely describe religious experience. For this reason, we should examine conversion narratives as much for their aesthetic impact as for the way they signal the neophyte's ideological "alignment" (Snow and Machalek 1984) with the religious group. The conversion narrative may then be seen not just as a meaningful story but as a style with aspects that are probably experienced as beautiful to the convert. Ideally, our ability to relate to this beauty and to emote it through ethnographic writing would transcend the important alignment analysis, allowing the reader to understand better the convert's attraction to the religion. We would say something about the appeal of this or that style of conversion story and show, perhaps, how people attempt to beautify their lives by viewing its details through the aesthetic of that narrative.

Conclusion

In the present format, there is barely room to raise, let alone to resolve, this truly vast issue. I can propose, nonetheless, a twofold agenda for the ethnographic study of religious experience. The first part of the agenda is to reconsider the seemingly antipodal ideals of empathy and objectivity. It is especially important that this take place in the study of religion, for while these ideals are potent in all of sociological ethnography (indeed, in all of ethnography), it is perhaps in the study of religion that their consideration is tetchiest. I assume that our response to the challenge of studying religious experience more carefully and cautiously should not be to purge from our methodological cache any mode of study that seeks experience or that involves an empathy-seeking act of conversion. These modes are not the problem in the study of religion any more than they are in the study of nonreligious settings. Rather, we should re-envision the gesture toward empathy as a highly provisional one in which the ethnographer uses her own experiences to speculate more deeply about the experiences of others. The ethnographer, in other words, takes seriously his own experiential point of view as data but makes this point of view a dynamic

part of the inquiry rather than an end in itself. The empathic assertion then appears not in the form of “I experienced thus and so, and will now describe it as what others experience,” but instead “I experienced thus and so, which prompted me to pursue a more incisive line of inquiry about the experiences of others.”

Likewise, objective distance loses its status as a discrete methodological accomplishment that grants special validity to ethnographic inquiry. Only when held in tension with empathy—the impulse toward experiential understanding—does objective distancing become useful. Such tension “does not seek to remove the actor from the perceptual act, so that he can ‘objectively’ know its object. Nor does it require a ‘subjective’ commitment to the predefinitions and categories of the everyday world. . . . The participant side of participant-observation thus affords nearness, while the observer side lends fairness” (Brown 1989, 49-55). Objectivity, then, is not merely about achieving and holding the proper analytical distance from the phenomenon one studies; rather, the objective stance accommodates intimate experience, even relishes ethnographic conversion, but perpetually disciplines the ethnographer’s reactions to that experience with doses of critical dispassion. In this way, the inquiry makes use of the ethnographer’s sense of being in a social world but avoids degeneration into narcissism and memoir, both of which tend to result when the ethnographer presumes the possibility of perfect empathy.

Thus, neither empathy nor objectivity appears on this agenda as an achievable goal in itself. Instead, the two appear in dialectical tension as a methodological heuristic: a “mental move” (Abbott 2004) that primes the pump, or perhaps clears a space, for fresh sociological insight. In particular, this understanding of empathy and objectivity opens up new possibilities for the appreciation of nonnuminous religious experience. The ethnographer, freed from the idea of religious experience as being almost exclusively spiritual and viewing objectivity and empathy not as static goals but as alternating mental dispositions possessing deep heuristic value, can turn her attention to the styles of being that get embodied in, perpetuated through, and enjoyed during religious practice.

The second part of the agenda, on that note, is to rethink and expand dominant notions of what religious experience encompasses. The most formidable barrier to our appreciation of religious experience is our a priori banishment of religious experience to the most inaccessible reaches of *mysterium tremendum*. While cautiously, and appropriately, interpreting such experience by using only the sense-making languages of informants, we become nearly blind to the more mundane religious experiences that we might appreciate more directly as participants. The aesthetic approach I briefly outline here is only one approach to the study of such experience. It is significant mainly because it highlights intuitive, precognitive aspects of religion that the ethnographer may nonetheless appreciate experientially and use to deepen inquiry and enhance reportage. But the point is not to reduce religion to or explain it by aesthetics, as religion previously has been reduced to emotionality, morally integrative functions, the numinous, and so on. Neither is the point to generate arguments for why particular religious practices or beliefs must be seen as beautiful from all standpoints. The point is to expand our understanding of religious experience, thereby deepening the sociological consid-

eration of such experience while realizing more of the rich potential of our own ethnographic presence in religious settings. We should offer this richness with epistemological humility, for certain, but not apology.

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