

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-00008-7 - Religious and Spiritual Experiences  
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Excerpt  
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## CHAPTER I

*Exploring a strange yet familiar landscape:  
a strategy for interpreting religious and  
spiritual experiences*

## INTRODUCTION

What is the point of studying religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs)? What can we hope to achieve intellectually and practically? These questions are deceptively simple, but compelling answers prove difficult to construct, suggesting that fascinating and important issues are at stake.

Some years ago in Montreal I had a private conversation with Dr. Andrew Newberg after he had delivered one of his fabulous stump speeches on the neurophysiology of RSEs. Well known for studying expert meditators using functional imaging of the brain, Newberg had colorful resources to draw on for his presentation, and it was entertaining as a result. The lecture was also pregnant with hints about the wider philosophical significance of the research. So when we met I asked him about the *point* of his study of meditation experiences. I noted that many in his audience that day were enthusiastic about his research and spoke as if he had produced evidence for the authenticity, cognitive reliability, and spiritual value of such experiences. I asked Newberg if he thought his data justified such a conclusion. He replied that he thought that the data justified neither that conclusion nor its opposite. Then he told me that when he makes the very same presentation to groups who tend to view RSEs in a negative light, they are equally enthusiastic and take his research to confirm the delusory and unhealthy character of such experiences.

When all was said and done, my question about the *point* of Newberg's neurological research into meditation experiences remained unanswered. Perhaps at that time this research was for him just a matter of satisfying curiosity in the way of much pure research, and he imagined no philosophical or moral or social or political significance beyond the considerable value of assembling facts (he has since developed a more positive theological viewpoint; see Newberg *et al.* 2001b). But this conversation left me with a puzzle that continues to bother me today. Why do

intelligent people get excited in opposite ways about the neural embedding of RSEs? What do they think such research reveals about the truth or falsity of religious and spiritual beliefs, and about the value or disvalue of religious and spiritual behaviors? There seems to be much more popular excitement around such research than there is clear understanding of its significance.

Much the same applies to the social embedding of RSEs. Experts readily agree that social groups condition the way such experiences are felt and expressed, and that this embedding can magnify their political and economic effects in quite spectacular ways. For example, sociologist Max Weber argued convincingly that particular patterns of religious behaviors, beliefs, and experiences among Protestant Christians produced a distinctive form of economic practice that helped produce modern capitalism and thereby exercised a pervasive influence on Western civilization (Weber [1920] 1930). But what do we think such insights into the social embedding of RSEs reveal about the reliability or moral value of religious beliefs? Should the religious experiences and beliefs that proved vital to the emergence of capitalism be embraced because of their fruits or condemned? Why do people get excited in opposite ways about our growing knowledge of the sociality of RSEs?

The repeated drawing of opposite conclusions about the reliability and value of RSEs from the same data is a phenomenon deserving a name. I call it the *dongle phenomenon*. A dongle is a sealed hardware device that allows copy-protected software to run on your computer by means of a process that dongle distributors do not want you to understand. Basically, you know that a dongle is important but you have no idea why. This basic concept has penetrated our lives in a host of ways. For example, when an automobile mechanic has to repair a modern engine, he or she might point to something in the engine and say, “The car is not working right because that computer screen over there says this here dongle is broken.” But the mechanic does not know any more about how the dongle works than we do. We all just know that it is important. That is the dongle phenomenon.

The neural and social embedding of RSEs is a premier instance of the dongle phenomenon. We know that these forms of embodiment are important but we do not really know why. Newberg’s story about opposite reactions to the same talk makes the point perfectly. I want to know whether we can penetrate beneath the shallow enthusiasm and superficial skepticism that so many people bring to the discovery that the brain mediates RSEs, and to the equally important realization that social

groups condition such experiences and mediate their effects. We probably can. But it is not easy. And here is why.

The neurology and sociality of RSEs inevitably refer to an extremely complicated network of possible linkages among the biological sciences, the medical sciences, the human sciences, and the humanities. Some authors even argue that quantum physics is vital for explaining RSEs, so we probably should add physics to that list. This network of linkages is so complicated that most people register only a fraction of the possible connections and implications. The possibilities they see first are typically those matching their background and experience, and thus confirming their preconceived notions about the value or disvalue of religious and spiritual behaviors, beliefs, and experiences. But one's first thought in this domain is often quite mistaken, and further study can thoroughly complicate those instinctive, preliminary convictions. We all know that the neurology and sociality of RSEs is important *somehow*, but a moment's thought shows that we may *actually* know less about this than we assume.

In this chapter, I present a framework for interpreting RSEs that can help untangle the maze of possible implications surrounding this topic. I shall explore different aspects of the framework in subsequent chapters. Throughout, I shall attempt to be clear about the values that guide my own research and thinking in this area so as to expose my interpretation to sustained scrutiny and constructive criticism, which is the best way to take responsibility for it and to improve it.

I just used the word "framework." The grid-like connotations of that word are potentially misleading. The territory of RSEs is wild and rambling, containing enormously more varied and colorful flora and fauna than most people realize. It reaches from near-death experiences to out-of-body experiences, from feelings of oceanic calm to dramatic conversions, from sudden bursts of unaccountable compassion to routine participation in religious rituals, and from centering meditation to the busy joy of shared meals within a religious community. It is a landscape that invites exploring and resists definitive classifications. So I propose a compass to guide that exploration. In fact, in honor of the complexity of the subject, I offer two compasses, each orienting explorers to a different dimension of the territory.

The first compass orients us to practical purposes in studying RSEs. Motivations matter in every domain of life. A compass of motivating concerns can help us be responsibly self-aware, appropriately suspicious, and steady in judgment. The second compass orients us to classic theoretical

issues in the study of RSEs, each of which has a complicated history and lively contemporary manifestations. If we want a sound understanding of such experiences, we will have to work for it by penetrating these difficult issues.

As a final introductory remark, we need to clarify a key piece of terminology. My favorite phrase to encompass the territory we will be exploring is “RSEs.” That is unwieldy but shortening it presents problems. If I abbreviate it to “spiritual experiences,” I risk emphasizing individual states of consciousness at the expense of the corporate dimensions of experience. If I abbreviate it to “religious experiences” – perhaps recalling German philosopher-theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher’s early usage – I risk failing to register the fact that many people who do not consider themselves religious have such experiences, a point with which Schleiermacher himself grappled as a young man (see Schleiermacher [1799] 1893). If I invent a new phrase I will just multiply confusion. So I shall use “RSEs” as often as possible, despite the awkwardness. I shall speak in the plural most of the time in recognition of the fabulous diversity of experiences under discussion. Though my focus is on experiences, I shall often use the phrase “behaviors, beliefs, and experiences” to indicate that experiences are inextricably entangled with behaviors and beliefs. Finally, I shall assume that RSEs have neurological and social embeddings that are subject to more or less rigorous scientific study. I do not believe that this assumption prejudices the discussion. In fact, I think it is possible to affirm all kinds of metaphysical worldviews and still accept that brains and groups play crucial roles in the expression and functions of RSEs.

#### MOTIVATING CONCERNS

RSEs have been the topic of extensive academic study from a host of disciplinary perspectives for well over 100 years (in addition to the works mentioned elsewhere in this book, see Ames 1910; Block 1992; Brinton 1996; Brown and Caetano 1992; Burhenn 1995; Callahan 2003; Campbell 1959, 1962, 1964, 1968; Currie *et al.* 1982; Donovan 1979; Eliade 1954, 1960, 1961; Fowler 1981; Frazer 1900; Griffith-Dickson 2000; Happel and Walter 1980; Hardwick 1996; Hood 1995; Hook 1961; Kapstein 2004; Kason 1997; Katz 1984, 1992, 2000; Kierkegaard [1843] 1983; Kokoszka 1992; Lévi-Strauss [1962] 1963; Main 1998; Masson 1980; Maxwell and Tschudin 1990; Meissner 1984; Moacanin 1986; Moehle 1983; Oxman *et al.* 1998; Pargament 1997; Pearson 2005; Rappaport 1979; Rizzuto 1979; Sharpe 1986; Spilka *et al.* 2003; Stark 1965; Taylor 2008; Tillich 1952; Tyler 1874;

*Motivating concerns*

5

Ullman 1989; Van der Leeuw [1933] 1964; Wildman 2002). The observer of these and other vast piles of books and articles from multiple cultural traditions cannot help but ask why people invest their valuable energy in this venture. What motivates them? And what do their motivations imply for their research?

The first compass tells us something about why we might be motivated to explore the landscape of RSEs. This compass will not capture the intricacy of each person's interests, of course, but most people can relate to at least one of the four motivating concerns I shall discuss. We do well to be aware of these possible dimensions of motivation. As we shall see, there is evidence that here, as in all human endeavors, guiding interests sometimes unduly influence interpretations.

*Intellectual and spiritual curiosity*

A non-religious scientist friend told me a few years ago about a spectacular personal experience that seemed loaded with religious and spiritual meanings. This intelligent and sensitive person was deeply moved and also confused by the experience and wanted to know what it meant and whether it could be studied in a way that would yield understanding that a scientist could appropriate with integrity. The aim of inquiry in this case was neither to explain the experience away nor to justify its apparent meaningfulness. And the emotional framing was neither desperate nor indifferent. My friend wanted to satisfy profound intellectual and spiritual curiosity.

Natural curiosity about a fascinating range of phenomena joined with a drive for authentic self-understanding is a motivating factor for many students of RSEs. Most scientists who engage in pure research for its own sake, even in the politically and emotionally charged area of religion, are deeply curious about why so many people report such experiences, some of which are quite strange. I should say that I am curious in this way. I engage topics such as RSEs because of their significance for a wider understanding of the human condition. Insofar as I am a philosopher, theologian, and ethicist, however, I am also interested in the relevance of such topics for satisfying my intellectual and spiritual curiosity about goodness, beauty, and truth, and about their ultimate source and meaning. Such philosophical and theological issues take those who pursue them far beyond the official borders of the natural and human sciences into the hinterlands of philosophy where descriptions fail and human cognitive limitations routinely trip up even the best-designed inquiries.

6 *Exploring a strange yet familiar landscape*

The types of curiosity driving students of RSEs do not always harmonize. Some of my science-for-the-sake-of-science friends feel irritated when someone like me introduces a philosophical agenda into this field of research, which they would prefer to pursue in a strictly empirical and descriptive way. They will be particularly worried when I talk out loud about the theological significance of RSEs. But my philosophical questions count just as much as their (and my) empirical questions, and if they feel uncomfortable then they really should broaden their intellectual horizons. To ask such philosophical questions is not immediately to fall prey to bias and superstition, as they fear. By the same token, people curious about the philosophical and theological significance of RSEs have to pay close attention to descriptive and empirical work lest they mistake the dark abyss of embarrassing ignorance into which they may be falling for profound insight. Curiosity gets us started, perhaps, but we get nowhere without discipline and expertise in a process of rigorous multidisciplinary cooperation.

*Socio-political management*

A second motivating concern is the need to manage the social and political effects of RSEs. The most famous American philosopher prior to the twentieth century was arguably Jonathan Edwards. A polymath, Edwards was also a Christian pastor at the time of the Great Awakening in New England. Much like the charismatic movement within American Christianity during the 1970s and 1980s, the Great Awakening produced spectacular experiences in the lives of Christians who were open to them. The experiences changed lives in a mostly healthy and pro-social way. But they also disrupted churches, including Edwards' church. His solution was to investigate and write a book about the issue. So in 1746 there appeared *The Religious Affections*, in which Edwards completely failed to express his subtle thoughts in ways that could have any effect on most of his target audience. Nevertheless, the book is remembered because of its determined attempt to distinguish truly gracious and authentic religious experiences from counterfeit or inauthentic ones. Edwards was particularly careful to emphasize the importance of loving behavior and to criticize as misleading the strength and fervor surrounding RSEs. Through his formidable sermons rather than through this book, Edwards exercised a salutary influence on the unfolding of the Great Awakenings.

This is an excellent example of studying RSEs in order to exercise social control. But it is by no means the only one. Political strategist Karl Rove

*Motivating concerns*

7

studied the religious experiences of born-again Christians in the United States in order to appreciate how to leverage their voting tendencies for the benefit of the candidate he promoted. He did not study their born-again religious experiences like a psychologist or an anthropologist might, and he probably relied a great deal on intuition and his own experience. But he certainly learned how a politician could connect to those experiences and the moral and religious sentiments they engender. Researchers such as anthropologist Scott Atran, journalists Nasra Hassan and Hala Jaber, and psychologist Anne Speckhard have interviewed terrorists and their trainers in the Middle East and elsewhere in an attempt to understand how their RSEs, among other factors, lead them to make the choices they do, from forming political opinions to becoming suicide bombers (Atran 2003; Hassan 2001, 2004; Jaber 1997; Speckhard 2006; and the review in Schaeffer 2007). Presumably understanding this process could have a beneficial effect on interactions between Western and Islamic cultures.

Then there are the people who fervently believe, with a passion rivaling that of the most fervent religious fundamentalist, that religion is bad for you, bad for society, and bad for the global human future. For example, physicist Steven Weinberg said in a 1999 Washington D.C. speech, “Religion is an insult to human dignity. With or without it, you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. For good people to do evil things, that takes religion” (quoted in Dawkins 2006: 249). This seems to neglect the unprecedented violence of totalitarian regimes during the twentieth century, and also the positive behavioral transformations triggered by religious conversion and commitment, but Weinberg does have a point about the way people use religion to rationalize bad behavior.

According to biologist Richard Dawkins (2006), philosopher Daniel Dennett (2006), astronomer Victor Stenger (2007), writers Sam Harris (2006) and David Mills (2006), pundit Christopher Hitchens (2007), the UK’s National Secular Society, the USA’s Freedom from Religion Foundation, and numerous other individuals and organizations, we would be far better off without religion. These prophets of secular enlightenment long to make the sadly deluded religious people of the world wake up and see the truth. In a March 28, 2007 debate on the proposition “We’d be better off without religion” in London, Dawkins is reported to have said that “There are very good grounds to believe there is no actual truth in the claims of religion. I rather liken it to a child with a dummy in its mouth. I do not think it a very dignified or respect-worthy posture for an adult to go around sucking a dummy for comfort” (see the report in

Gledhill 2007). If Dawkins is right about that, then religion is an infantile attachment that produces comfort through misunderstanding. It really would be more grown-up to be rid of it.

Since it is not obvious how to rid the world of religion, this task requires quite a bit of thought. Unfortunately for the anti-religionist who longs for this cultural transformation, there are few successful models from which to learn. After all, the attempts of some Stalinists to kill religion off failed, and the USSR later collapsed under the overbearing weight of an inspiring but impractical socioeconomic and political vision. Some Marxists wanted to witness the withering away of religion as economic conditions gradually eliminated the deprivation that Karl Marx thought causes it (see Marx 2002; Marx and Engels [1846] 1970), but so far their longings have been in vain. Anyway, contemporary anti-religion evangelists are committed to democracy and non-violence. Being thus limited to consciousness raising and education, it is not surprising that they turn to the study of RSEs as a weapon in the war against religion.

For example, Dawkins describes religious and spiritual experience as the delusional result of the human brain's simulation software. "This is really all that needs to be said about personal 'experiences' of gods or other religious phenomena. If you've had such an experience, you may well find yourself believing firmly that it was real. But do not expect the rest of us to take your word for it, especially if we have the slightest familiarity with the brain and its powerful workings" (Dawkins 2006: 92). With a proper education, argue Harris and Hitchens, children can be liberated from religion. They can be taught that the brain occasionally throws off misleading experiences with huge emotional and existential significance, and thereby freed from the intrinsically persuasive effect of those experiences. These anti-religionists are equal opportunity haters of violence and superstition, whether it is authoritarian religion or absolutist politics. With John Lennon, they imagine a better world, "with no religion too." And the path toward that better world involves freeing ourselves from, among other things, the impression that our RSEs are as important as they seem to be.

#### *Legitimation of group identity*

Let us consider a third motivation that people bring to the study of RSEs. I shall relate three personal experiences and then ask what they have in common. First, several of my friends, disciples of the Dalai Lama, want me to practice meditation. They are confident that my experiences while



meditating will demonstrate to me the transitory and ephemeral nature of reality, thereby freeing me from my attachment to the big and small concerns of life, and sparking within me a powerful form of compassion for all living creatures. *The experience will change my life and bring meaning and purpose that I never imagined possible.* Second, several of my New Age friends urge me to try any number of ways of connecting to the flowing energies just beneath the surface of ordinary life. Their Daoist-like worldview predicts that I will have powerful experiences of feeling centered, energized, and healthy to an unprecedented degree. *The experience will change my life and bring meaning and purpose that I never imagined possible.* Third, several of my evangelical Christian friends want me to experience the presence of the risen Jesus Christ as a living personal being, constantly communicating with me and being my companion in the trials and joys of this life, and my guide to the life beyond. All I have to do is confess my sins, welcome Jesus Christ into my life as my Lord and Savior, and love him and follow him with all my heart and soul and mind and strength. *The experience will change my life and bring meaning and purpose that I never imagined possible.*

What do these experiences have in common? Well, obviously, a number of people are trying to convert me to something, and evidently I come across as the sort of person who could profit from a conversion experience. But I want to draw your attention to something else, namely, the role that RSEs play in these conversion efforts. I am being asked in the first instance not to be a Buddhist or a New Ager or a supernaturalist evangelical Christian, but rather to undergo an *experience that will speak for itself*. My friends are confident in their beliefs because the RSEs they have had feel so compelling to them, and seem to confirm their beliefs so strongly. They believe that if I have these same experiences, then I will also believe as they do.

This illustrates the role that RSEs play in solidifying a person's religious commitment. But there is no surprise there. Most of us build our worldviews around the existentially potent experiences of bliss and trauma that we undergo in the course of our lives. RSEs are also the power source for the health and vitality of most religious movements. When diverse people reinforce each others' beliefs and encourage each other to adopt similar interpretations of potent experiences, their individual commitment to the group's doctrines and goals soars. They become like-minded: they know what they believe, feel confident about how to behave, and have ingroup companions with whom they can share some of the deepest parts of themselves, parts that outgroup people can never understand.

For me to have powerful experiences in Tibetan Buddhist meditation confirms the almost scientific predictions of Buddhist doctrine and thus helps to legitimate Buddhist religious identity. If I am healed and strengthened by resting with a crystal over my sixth chakra, then I may become convinced of the wondrous spiritual depths of the natural world, thereby confirming the New Age worldview and contributing to the piece-by-piece legitimation of the loose-knit social identity of that spiritual movement. If I viscerally feel the presence of Jesus Christ with me, I will confirm in my own experience the truth of Christian claims about God and the world, and thus participate in the person-by-person legitimation of that movement's identity.

RSEs play a powerful role in nurturing religious movements. So it is no surprise that some people study RSEs specifically in order to protect and strengthen the identity of a religious or spiritual group to which they are already thoroughly committed, and that others conduct such studies to put in place information that they hope will impact those religious self-interpretations. The Dalai Lama encourages the neurological study of meditating monks in part for this reason, and in part as an artful way to spread enlightenment; he is impressively open about his motivation (see Dalai Lama 2003). Some people study paranormal phenomena because they seek scientific confirmation of experiences that have been extremely meaningful to them or because they feel worried about people being deluded by their strange experiences (for a representative sampling of historical, philosophical, and research studies see Griffin 1997; Haynes 1982; Persinger 1994b; Randi 1982; and the work of the Society for Psychical Research, the Parapsychological Association, the Academy of Parapsychology and Medicine, the Academy of Religion and Psychical Research, and the Stanford Research Institute). Some people study glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, either because they long for scientific confirmation of what they most dearly believe about that phenomenon – namely, that it is a genuine language and not comforting regressive babbling in a socially acceptable context – or in order to put in place basic information that allows others to formulate a sound interpretation of their experiences (see linguistic studies such as Bryant and O'Connell 1971; Goodman 1972; Samarin 1972; and the survey in Mills 1986; psychological studies such as Kildahl 1972; and neurological studies such as Persinger 1994c and Newberg *et al.* 2006). And some people are powerfully motivated to study RSEs in order to show that they are delusions, thereby confirming their deeply held anti-supernaturalist and anti-religious worldview (see Booth *et al.* 2005; Persinger 1983, 1987, 2002, 2005; St.-Pierre and Persinger 2006).