Introduction

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Religious Experience

This volume arises from a project that brought together cognitive scientists of religion (CSR) in face-to-face contact with historians and other scholars in the humanities concerned with the religious history of antiquity in a series of meetings and conferences, some held in the UK, some in Denmark. The objective was to provide up-to-date historical data for cognitive scientists to analyze, up-to-date theories about cognition for historians to exploit, and an opportunity for both groups to discuss the contributions they could offer one another, through bringing the two disciplines (traditionally quite separate) together. This volume seeks to extend this project through a collection of essays mostly by those scholars. Each chapter reports on a problem of understanding that arises from some ancient religious activity and seeks to bring together the different insights of the two disciplines.

The notion of ‘religious experience’ has been, since the very early years of the nineteenth century, of key importance to any discussion of the individual’s relationship to the powers they worship, in any religion. In order to carry these ideas further, we need to explore and, if possible, define the terms of the debate and crucially the phrase itself – ‘religious experience’. This may seem at first sight a reasonably undemanding requirement: an experience is a happening of which an individual or group is aware. ‘Religious’, like ‘religion’ and ‘religions’, is notoriously difficult to define, but does at least allow the giving of examples to illustrate what is to be understood: presence at a sacred event, a message understood to be from the gods, the reading out of holy texts, and so on.

Scholars have sometimes claimed that the very notion of ‘religious experience’ is laden with ideological and political significance. One suggestion is that the notion of religious experience leads to and supports the
idea that there are universal religious phenomena. The notion of ‘mystical experience’, for instance, and its acceptance as a ‘core’ religious experience, has been taken to provide an instance of an experience that is unmediated by any ‘linguistic, cultural, or historical contingencies’. This is one kind of universalization, one that, over time, and across different writers, using a variety of evocative vocabulary, has embraced the possibility of a direct encounter with the divine. But we can also note that a paradigm of universalization may remain, even when scholars introduce naturalizing explanations: for example, Ann Taves has explored how, as new frameworks for the interpretation of mental states developed, such as psychology and psychiatry, religious explanations persisted. Others have drawn attention to the same phrase working as a divisive term: how, over time, it has become ‘freighted with the politics of true and false religion, ... caught up in “tangled reciprocities” that undermine the distinction between the authentic and the simulated.

In many of these examples, there is an implicit claim that experience is somehow a thing separate from us, with which we come into contact; it is based on an understanding of the self as an object that can be analyzed, and that interacts with phenomena external to itself. We might re-describe this using the approach suggested in Ann Taves’ examination of religious experience. She suggests that we re-identify ‘religious experiences’ as ‘experiences deemed religious’, an insight which the participants in this volume have found very helpful. This key observation shapes her discussion of both top-down and bottom-up processes or accounts of those experiences. Top-down processes occur when thoughts trigger feelings or when thoughts and feelings trigger perceptions; all such experiences vary with culture and context and are often influenced by cultural and social values, norms, and assumptions. Bottom-up processes occur when thoughts and feelings are triggered by physiological processes or perceptions; these have often been considered to be unvarying.

However, recent work in computational neuroscience understands perception and cognition to involve prediction across different levels of information processing in the brain based on prior learning or

1 With Proudfoot (1985: xiii); he questioned the assertion that such experience is a ‘universal’ phenomenon that spans all of the major religious traditions, and suggested instead that it arose as an uneasy bridge between Christian and non-Christian camps, a means of preserving (p. 134) ‘the validity of Christian revelation without ... impugning ... non-Christian rivals’.
3 Taves 1999: 4–12.
4 Hall 2003: 249.
5 Taves 2009: xiii.
assumptions – so-called priors’. The priors weight information processing in the brain to produce different outcomes in what the behavioural neurologist Marcel Mesulam described as our ‘highly edited subjective version of the world’. This paradigm, known as predictive processing (or ‘active inference’), is essential to our ability to navigate the physiological, natural, social, and cultural environments that we are embedded in. Cognition proceeds on the basis of maps that are configured by prior experience, brain and body processes, and cultural and social models of behaviour that are continually updated throughout life. In this view, cultural learning (or culturally embedded learning) potentially has marked effects on seemingly spontaneous or automatic responses to the world – including habitual cognitive-affective responses and accompanying behavioural as well as autonomic and endocrine responses (such as frenzied compared to quiescent ‘trance’). Consequently, ‘bottom-up’ or automatic neurophysiological processes should not be thought of as unvarying but as also constrained by shared learning and contexts in the course of development and enculturation. How a species-typical repertoire of cognitive and brain systems is differentiated by individual and shared learning is a matter of ongoing research within developmental and cultural neuroscience.

The links between these complex processes are difficult to delineate in terms of simple causality. As Ann Taves insightfully notes, ‘... constructivist theories have been insensitive to the distinction between top-down and bottom-up processing and the differential role of cultural input along the gradient that interrelates them’. The editors and contributors to this volume accept the complexity, multimodality, and multicausality of human life, for while we as social creatures construct social and cultural worlds – including how we ‘experience’ our bodies in those worlds – as Thomas Csordas, drawing on Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu, has argued, our brains and bodies are also constructing those very same worlds. Indeed, today philosophers, neurologists, and cognitive scientists are actively promoting a much broader, more embodied, emergent, enactive,
and extended understanding of cognition. We may be constructing social reality, as noted by Searle, but we are not constructing fundamental physiological processes produced by the body systems, such as the endocrine system, the digestive system, the brain and nervous system, etc. Our cultural practices may influence these systems and help us interpret their effects, but they do not construct them. Most of the physiological processes are unconscious, and they can give rise to background emotions and experiences that individuals cannot explain.

Taves’ re-description of ‘religious experience’ (as ‘experiences deemed religious’) allows us to analytically differentiate between the ‘experience’ and its implied religiousness, thus avoiding the implication that religiousness constitutes an unchanging, unarguable characteristic built into a particular experience. But the word ‘deemed’, of course, raises the question of who would be the postulated doer of the deeming. At one extreme, it might be deemed by the person having the experience; at the other extreme, it might be deemed by a whole religious hierarchy, in which case the person having the experience would be constrained by that authority. In practice, claims to ‘experience’ might seem to offer an authoritative note of subjectivity and authenticity; in historiography, the use of material that apparently describes direct experience in this sense might be contrasted with interpretations that are objective or empirical.

This underscores the importance of considering the implicit epistemology and truth claims associated with reports of ‘religious experience’ – whether they are presented within the ‘emic’ terms of a tradition, or the ‘etic’ terms of academic or other specialist discourse. This question of the extent to which any physiological symptom or feeling in the body, or perception in the mind is mediated or interpreted is, of course, highly relevant to this volume. Because of the nature of our focus, historians of ancient cultures must explore these questions not only with regard to the content of our evidence, but also with relation to the identification of that evidence in the first place. We are largely dealing with

18 Damasio 2000; Gallagher 2006.
19 Although from a phenomenological perspective, a claim to experience can be considered ‘empirical’ even if its claim to truth is not accepted at face value.
20 Sharf (1998: 96) argued that such approaches can serve ‘to legitimise certain vested social, institutional, and professional interest[s]’.
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sources that offer glimpses of events, rather than first-person descriptions of inner processes: of the two definitions of experience that Sharf offers, our material tends to be closer to the first – that of ‘living through’ or ‘participating in’, which appears to imply social contexts – than the second, which describes ‘experience as a subjective “mental event” or “inner process” that eludes public scrutiny’.\(^{21}\)

At first sight, this might seem to preclude the objectives of a cognitive approach, but in fact it is a crucial methodological insight. These essays are not (or not only) intended to make the experience or experiences of our ancient subjects visible, but aim rather, recalling Joan Scott’s analysis of experience, to try to understand their ‘inner workings or logics’ – as revealed in textual evidence or material representations – as constraints on experiences.\(^{22}\) As this may in turn suggest, the editors of and contributors to this volume see broader ramifications arising from these investigations. Rather than assuming that the term ‘experience’ means taking the existence of individuals for granted, we note, with Scott, how talking about experience prompts questions about ‘how conceptions of selves (objects and their identities) are produced’. As Scott notes, ‘it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience.’\(^{23}\)

For the ancient subjects of our investigation, part of that constitution consisted of their (perceived) interrelationships with the world of supernatural entities, conceived as generally being inaccessible except through culturally specific means of communication (although, importantly, the gods themselves were understood to be capable of interacting with mortals through their own initiative outside such ritual practices). As this suggests, not only are we concerned about the notion of ‘experience’, we must also underline the meaninglessness of the notion of ‘religious’, or perhaps rather its meaning-fullness. As Jonathan Z. Smith notes, this ‘second-order, generic concept’ sets a disciplinary horizon for scholars for their own intellectual purposes, ‘and therefore is theirs to define’.\(^{24}\) This has tremendous resonance for ancient historians, since, for those who talk about religion in ancient Greece and Rome, it is something of a trope to observe that there were no contemporary terms for this; in Classical Greek, there simply was no equivalent word; while the Latin term – religio – from

\(^{21}\) Sharf 1998, 104; Proudfoot 2010.

\(^{22}\) Scott 1991: 779.

\(^{23}\) Scott 1991: 780; see Ochs and Capps 1996.

\(^{24}\) Smith 1998: 281. For a discussion of CSR definitions of religion see Geertz 2016b.
which our ‘religion’ is ultimately derived, has a rich variety of usages, none of them corresponding to the modern sense of the word ‘religion’.²⁵

The use of the terms ‘religious’ or ‘religion’ in this volume must be regarded as being for our hermeneutic convenience. For the most part, they are used to describe interactions that include the gods (or other supernatural entities), and that are found in a wide range of both evidence and contexts. The contributions range across a wide variety of both ancient contexts and sources, exploring and integrating literary, epigraphic, visual, and archaeological evidence. Each chapter’s investigation draws attention to a different theme, which we have highlighted in our grouping of the chapters, but these are, obviously, not the only ways of viewing these contributions.

Similarly, across this volume, there is no single definition of ‘experience’; instead, the authors explore the question of its meanings, rooting their investigations in broader dimensions of Greek and Roman cultures, and in the interactions between individuals and the wider societies in which they lived. Their contributions analyze not only the emotional, sensory, and mental dimensions from which ‘experience’ emerges, but also the generative role played both by space and the shaping of space, and by material culture. They use a wide range of theoretical approaches, although most involve an embodied approach, to explore a broad range of evidence.

The Context

The essays were largely developed during or as a result of the Cognitive Approaches to Ancient Religious Experience (CAARE) network, by participants in the network’s events (these are described in more detail below). We have also commissioned two further essays from scholars who did not participate directly in the events, but became part of the larger network that CAARE developed.

Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the UK, CAARE ran from 2014 to 2016, developing out of a previous small project, led by Esther Eidinow and Thomas Harrison, which was funded by the British Academy. The first project brought together scholars of diverse ancient cultures to examine: (i) how authority may be imposed in ritual beliefs and practices, and by what means it is maintained and (ii) how ideas and concepts of religious belief and ritual practice move across time, and/or between generations and through space. These initial

thematic explorations identified a clear interest among scholars for pursuing a dedicated and interdisciplinary network of the kind described here, with a closer focus on ancient Greek and Roman cultures. It also led to partnership with Professor Armin W. Geertz and the opportunity for the network to hold one of its workshops at the Religion, Cognition and Culture Research Unit (RCC) and the MIND Lab at Aarhus University, Denmark.

CAARE’s participants were exploring new approaches to ancient religions. Previous scholarship on ancient religions has often (implicitly) served an ideological purpose, designating ancient cultures as ‘other’, and reinforcing preconceptions about the differences between ancient and modern religious experience, and, more particularly, the distinctive nature of Christianity. More specifically, previous scholarship on ancient religion had focused on the external activities of historical subjects, and stressed the role of ritual and practice. While more recent research was arguing for a more prominent place to be given to the role and experience of individuals, this was chiefly being done by questioning the existing, central place of polis religion in scholarship on ancient Greek religion, rather than successfully introducing (or even suggesting) new models. Inevitably, scholars of ancient religion had been engaging in rather piecemeal fashion with cognitive approaches, but these approaches were yet to be established.

The developing discussion risked being drawn into a simple polarity between physical aspects (ritual) and mental aspects (belief).

One ongoing ambition of CAARE has been to try to address this context, and to show that cognitive approaches have the potential, not perhaps to generate a ruling model like that of the polis, which is perhaps not anyway desirable, but to breathe significant new life into these fields of study. In general, the participants have felt that a more theoretically sophisticated approach is needed that will open up questions around the physical, emotional, and cognitive aspects of ancient religions, which includes the meaning of ritual and the significance of practice. In order to develop understanding of ancient religions, both in academic and public arenas, research is needed that will cross disciplinary divides, providing data to test scientific models, and offering new methodologies to consider historical paradigms used to think about religion and society.

See for a summary of these approaches, Harrison 2015.

And we may be turning a corner as these approaches become more familiar. Thus, for example, Jennifer Larson’s admirable survey volume, Understanding Greek Religion (2016), has been praised for the lucidity of its presentation of CSR as well as its skillful synthesis of recent and relevant scholarship, e.g. Pirenne-Delforge 2017: 48 and Geertz 2017: 44–45.
We might add that these insights seem also to hold true for the cognitive study of religions, where a similarly reductive approach threatens, which aims to construct cross-cultural, diachronic models to explain religious practice and belief, but lacks complex examples of historical evidence. As has been argued: ‘The current multidisciplinary conversation is in a moment of pitched debate, when the role of neuroscientific methods and findings in understanding religious experience is affected by intersecting political struggles over which ideology drives the narration of what it means to experience and participate in “religion” or “spirituality”.’ The focus of this research tends to be on current subjects and contemporary religious practices, which risks leading to universalist claims that are often untested by historical or cross-cultural data. Where historical evidence is included in the data under examination, a quantitative approach may ignore crucial qualitative aspects and the essential role of contextual interpretation – ‘differences that make a difference’ – to the formation and significance of experience. Cognitive scientists have stated their belief that greater collaboration is needed, not only between cognitive scientists and anthropologists, but also between these scholars and historians.

The Process

CAARE was intended to build on this initial work to address a new area – the experience of religion – using a new approach, identifying transhistorical, transcultural ‘symptoms of religion’, bringing together scholars from the ancient history of religions on the one hand and the cognitive science of religion on the other, to investigate the nature of individual religious experience. It allowed the scholars systematically to examine a set of evidence and questions in a collaborative environment, providing an unusual opportunity to develop a sustained and interdisciplinary research focus. The network aimed to develop a new agenda for interdisciplinary research, testing cognitive approaches to religion with evidence from the ancient world, and investigating whether and how scholars of ancient religions could use cognitive theories to develop insights into ancient religious experience.

18 Kime and Snarey 2018: 309.
To achieve these goals, the network ran two interdisciplinary workshops. Both workshops featured presentations from key speakers, introducing data and approaches for participants to work with:

- Workshop 1 ‘Symptoms of Religious Experience’ aimed to identify and examine ‘symptoms’ of religious experience in ancient Greek/Roman evidence. This was intended to provide all participants with data, both extensive and nuanced, that offered examples of cultural interactions, tradition, innovation, and transmission.
- Workshop 2 ‘Symptoms of Current Experience’ brought to bear relevant cognitive approaches in the analysis of these ‘symptoms’. It was intended to provide scholars of ancient religion with heuristic tools to investigate the evidence for individual religious experience in ancient cultures, dismantling current assumptions about the nature of ancient religious experience and the limits of evidence.

The first meeting of the project (held in London, with the generous support of the Institute of Classical Studies) was designed to provide participants with an initial body of ancient evidence. Topics were selected that reflected different contexts of religious experience – moving from external physical spaces to internal phenomena. Those giving papers were asked to think about a topic and then present key sources that, in their opinion, offered evidence for a particular ‘symptom’ of religious experience in that context. Discussions focused as far as possible on drawing out details of both the nature of the symptom (physical and mental) and its context. Themes and questions that emerged concerned the transmission of knowledge and/or understanding – how and why certain religious ‘cultures’ die and others take over and spread – and in particular the roles of social learning, social scripts or schemas, and charismatic authority. Participants were also interested in the relationship between ancient religious experience and modern interpretations of certain experiences as pathologies, and asked, for use in the next workshop, that relevant participants share information about current research into religious systems as cognitive governance systems; new methods using big data sites, which enable the modelling of discourse over time; explorations of the impact of certain experiences, including sensory experiences, the impact of discourse (written and spoken), perceptual illusions, and anthropomorphism; and experimental approaches and how they might contribute to approaches and theories in historical studies. On the question of ‘religious experience’, the workshop concluded that we needed to think in terms of experiences deemed religious, rather than
‘religious experience’, and in that context consider the role of the senses and emotions in those attributions; the interplay of local knowledge and/or understanding with experience, including space and the shaping of space; and the ways in which we attempt to explain rituals, ancient and modern.

The second meeting of the network, which took place in Aarhus, was designed to provide participants with papers on methodology, as well as case studies of research and work-in-progress in the cognitive science of religion, including papers on embodied cognition, the methodological issues that arise in experimental anthropological studies of religious behaviour and experience in real-life settings, the role of the experimental method, modern clinicopathological explanations of ‘symptoms’ of revelatory experience that explored the interaction between experiences and behaviour and brain activity, and data-intensive knowledge discovery in the study of religious textual traditions.

Several themes emerged from this workshop, which illustrated for participants the value and indeed necessity of interdisciplinary engagement to improve understanding of religiously interpreted experience and its relationship to the biographical and cultural contexts within which it occurs.

Contributors reflected in particular on how cognitive and neuroscience accounts have viewed religiously interpreted experience with an appeal to universal mechanisms (and often through the lens of psychopathology in the case of neuroscience). These accounts have, however, tended to be insensitive to the influence on experience of local attributions of meaning. This partly reflects the practice of seeking universal mechanisms, but also occurs because of the absence of a widely accepted framework for understanding how attributions can influence cognition and brain function. A relative lack of detailed knowledge of religions of some practitioners, and perhaps also the range of cross-civilizational phenomena that can be understood as religious, may also motivate a search for universal mechanisms that are insensitive to local variation. By contrast, humanities and social science accounts have located experience and its meanings within their social and cultural context. Also, the understanding of ancient societies provided by classics and related disciplines has extended the range of phenomena that any adequate account of religion and religiously interpreted experience must account for. Yet humanities and social science accounts have not in general informed attempts to identify the cognitive and brain processes underlying variations in experience – in other words, the full set of processes by which religiously interpreted experience arises within specific human contexts.