

# Afterword

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## **Context**

This special issue makes a welcome addition to the burgeoning anthropologically inspired work on Christianity. It takes as its central theme the thorny issue of religious experience, and in this case particularly the kind of experience that lies at the centre of Protestant Christianity – direct, unmediated experience of God’s presence. Refreshingly, it is framed not merely in terms of changes in intellectual fashion – the turns towards the body, the senses, ontology, aesthetics – but also in terms of substantial and substantive changes within Protestant Christianity itself. These changes may be linked to what we could call a Pentecostal revolution within Protestant Christianity, which has placed the experience of God at its centre – so much so that much Pentecostal effort goes in to inculcating such experience (Brahinsky 2012). Being experientially connected with God becomes an outcome, rather than a pre-condition, of religious activity.

The term ‘Pentecostal revolution’ stems from Ruth Marshall’s work in Nigeria (Marshall 2009), where she identifies a simultaneous reconfiguring of the political and religious landscape as Pentecostalism took hold and expanded across the country. The concept could equally be applied to other contexts. Although it is not clear the extent to which the rise of Pentecostalism has restructured entire polities in other contexts, as it appears to have done in Nigeria (though it may well also have done), it is certainly true that people’s spiritual, material, and political lives have been radically transformed through Pentecostalism. It is also true that the experiential focus of Pentecostalism has leached into a much broader range of Christian constituencies – from the Alpha movement (see Stout and Dein 2013) to Catholic Charismatic Renewal (see Csordas 1997) – such that it is a central pillar of much Christian activity in the contemporary world.

This empirical topicality, as well as its intellectual topicality, makes this a valuable special issue. Its articles cover a range of geographical and temporal contexts. Combining historical, literary, and Bible studies approaches with more contemporary anthropological ones, it tacks backwards and

forwards between 'old' and 'new' Christian contexts – Northern Europe and South America.

### **Method**

It is methodologically diverse. Although much of the work is 'ethnographic', it draws attention to the range of techniques and approaches that are necessary to explore the inchoate world of religious experience. Given the inherently and sometimes explicitly secular nature of European academic discourse – including anthropological discourse (see Stewart 2001) – the challenge of exploring religious experience has often been framed as one of exploring otherness; or in Cannell's words, 'taking seriously the religious experience of others' (2006, 3). To 'take seriously' often means to occupy – albeit in an imaginary or 'as if' way – the position from which such experience might be seen to 'make sense'. More subtly, and given the fact that in many cases for people who have religious experiences, those experiences don't necessarily 'make sense' to themselves, the task might be to occupy a position from which an experience – although inchoate – is seen as evidence of God's presence.

'Making sense' in relation to religious experience throws into relief the kinds of knowledge permitted in the process of 'sense-making', which in turn throws into relief the kinds of method we might use to explore religious experience. These methods in turn throw into relief the distinction between (secular) self and (Christian) other in the research process. The papers by Barnes and Rivers are the most notable in this regard.

In Rivers's exploration of Brazilian fighting ministries, in which evangelical Christianity is combined with the Japanese martial practice of jiu-jitsu to generate powerful and emotional experiences not merely of the martial practice itself but, through its rigours and constraints, of God, fighters literally sense God through grappling with each other, feeling pain and fear, but also control, mastery, and elation. To explore this Rivers takes on the task of 'carnal sociology' as developed by Loic Wacquant (2011), which seeks to establish methodological grounds for an exploration of processes that are embodied. It builds on Bourdieu's arguments concerning the logic of (social and bodily) practice, which is a logic beyond – and defying – the semantic logic of structural analysis (1990), and Bourdieu and Wacquant's call for a new 'reflexive sociology' that transcends the distinction between self and other, subject and object, in the research process (1992). Wacquant developed the idea in relation

to his own research on masculinity and exclusion in African American neighbourhoods of Chicago, during which he realised, first, that fieldwork in the city's many boxing gyms would serve him well, and second, that to understand the significance of boxing he would have himself to enrol and train – even compete – as a boxer. His argument was that the only way to understand bodily processes is to research them bodily. In the process, the researcher's own body becomes a significant tool of research, and the balance of participant observation is shifted to a type of observant participation (Wacquant 2011, 87).

The approach takes us back to a long-standing dilemma within the study of religion: whether researching religion requires the objective stance of a disinterested – perhaps secular – outsider; or whether to *really* understand another's religious experience one must oneself believe. It is one thing to understand the bodily practices of boxing or jiu-jitsu, and the kinds of experiences they generate, through participating in them as practices. It is another to attribute these experiences to the presence of God. In other words, is there something beyond bodily practice and participation that is necessary for an understanding of the position from which the activity of jiu-jitsu is simultaneously an elaborately cultivated bodily practice and an engagement with God?

For Barnes, the necessary extra step to a full understanding of religious experience is an acceptance of the existence of God. His challenging paper makes further methodological innovation, through the pursuit of auto-ethnography that implicates both his own and one of his main research interlocutor's conversion experiences. Auto-ethnography as method – or a term for method – has developed from something which resembled 'anthropology at home' or 'native anthropology' – rather traditional ethnographic research in communities to which one either belongs, or which are close to the communities in which one belongs, or in communities which are in the classificatory 'home' – the West, or Europe, or Finland etc (Hayano 1979). It has shifted towards a more introspective and reflexive project, focusing not on the community or culture of the ethnographer, but autobiographically on the ethnographer themselves (Reed-Danahay 1997). In Barnes's case, his own accounts of the moments of conversion are juxtaposed with those of his key informant, Dave, to demonstrate the significance of these foundational encounters with God.

## Ontology

For Barnes, himself a Christian, taking religious experience seriously is a given; God *is*, and the study of religious experience should proceed from this single, simple fact. The task in hand, then, becomes not so much explaining – or explaining away – why some people attribute certain experiences to the presence of God, but rather finding ways of faithfully rendering these experiences in description. This is a challenge equally for the ethnographer as for the Christian themselves – and in Barnes's case, they are one and the same.

Barnes makes an important contribution to the ongoing debates about ontology within contemporary anthropology. The so-called 'ontological turn' turns on a rethinking of anthropology's understanding of relativism (Holbraad 2012; Pedersen 2012). Where earlier accounts had rested on the assumption of a shared world, and shared nature, which was differently understood in different societies, through different cultures; different world-views; different epistemologies, this newer scholarship – ontographic scholarship – 'takes seriously' these differences to the extent that it considers them as different worlds. Rather than one world seen differently, there are multiple worlds, multiple natures, multiple ontologies. Where anthropologists encounter radical difference – radical alterity – in others, they must reconfigure the categories that make up their own world to enable them to enter theirs.

The pursuit of wonder (Scott 2013) inherent in this project hinges on the alterity of the ethnographic object. The importance of Barnes's paper is that wonder comes not from his encounter with an ethnographic other, but from his encounter with God. As a result, the ontographic project is turned on its head, as he presents himself – as in Wacquant's carnal sociology, only more so – as simultaneously subject and object; self and other.

Ontology is also addressed in Minna Opas's paper, on experiences of God among the Yine people in Amazonian Peru. For the Yine, God is a felt material presence perceived through the body, and particularly through a dedicated 'faith organ' – *ruwekinri* – that develops in the body and over time becomes progressively more attuned to God's presence. The Yine God is not merely present, however, but also active – as agent within a broader cosmology, or a broader 'world' of material and immaterial, human and non-human agency.

## Body

This agency is felt within and through the body. As a central theme throughout the collection, the body looms large in all the papers. Yet the precise nature of the body and the bodily remains open to question, not least for the Christian groups themselves discussed in the papers. In Ittzés's paper, the problem of the body is brought to light in sixteenth-century German Lutherans' discussions of body, soul, and the afterlife. Their particular concern was the interim state between bodily death and final, bodily resurrection. Rejecting Catholic notions of Purgatory, they nevertheless considered the interim state as one in which body and soul were separated, but in which the soul remained 'wakeful', and retained the bodily capacities of perception – seeing, hearing, and the recognition of others. Bodily capacities are ascribed to the soul, rendering the senses, and perception, transcendent. This forces us to reconsider our understanding of the relationship between the transcendent and the immanent within Christianity, placing religious experience – and engagement with God – at the intersection of the two.

This is clear for the Yine, for whom the transcendent is made bodily immanent in the *ruwekinri* faith organ, but also features in the other chapters. For Rivers, the immanent bodiliness of fighting brings Godly transcendence into play; the fighting body is a Christian temple. For Barnes, the extension of bodily perception – and bodily senses – to the spiritual is problematic. He argues that spiritual sensing – or sensing the spiritual – is *sui generis*; irreducible to normal, bodily, perception processes. Although the body might provide a source of metaphors through which to describe religious experience, it is qualitatively different from other experience. Thus, when Augustine talks of 'tasting' God, he is not referring to a literal tasting that employs the bodily taste organs and a sense of taste. Rather, he is using the bodily sensorium metaphorically in an attempt to describe the experience of presence. Barnes, then, stands in contrast to Ittzés; but is this distinction between on the one hand an explicit extension of the bodily into the spiritual and on the other a resistance to do so, a product of the difference between early modern and late modern Christianities; or is it simply evidence of the multiplicity of possible understandings of Christian religious experience?

An answer, perhaps, comes from Anna Haapalainen's paper on contemporary Lutheranism in Finland, at Michael's parish in Turku, where a range of different types of activity – prayer groups, Bible study and encounter services – guide practitioners towards a particular type of 'spiritual sensing'. The focus on pedagogy is important, as pastors guide parishioners towards not only theologically 'correct' interpretations of

religious experience, but also towards a cultivation of the appropriate means of sensing the spiritual. Here the emphasis is on seeing and hearing ‘through the heart’ – conceived not as metaphorical but more literally. The Evangelical Lutheran heart, we might say, stands in the same relationship to the presence of God as the Yine *ruwekinri* organ. While the Lutherans are probably not referring straightforwardly to the bodily heart – the organ of blood flow – neither are they simply speaking metaphorically. The listening and seeing heart is present in the body, and enables the sensing of the presence of God.

From this we might conclude that there is a potential range of Protestant spiritual sensoria, which conceive of the body and its senses in different ways – from the literal embodiment of *ruwekinri* to the not-quite-literal embodiment of the heart to the metaphorical embodiment of Augustine’s tasting. In each case sense-making combines with sensing – but in different ways and with different outcomes.

### **The Social**

Although the Lutherans discussed by Haapalainen are strongly individualistic, it is nevertheless in the social context that the dynamics of the presence of God is elaborated and understood. Indeed, all the papers included here, and the collection as a whole, emphasise the fundamentally social dynamics of religious experience. This is a welcome reminder that although Christianity – and particularly Protestant Christianity – often centralises the personal relationship with God, this relationship is shaped by and established within the contexts of the social. It is these different social contexts that inform and shape the range of different relationships between body, senses, and experience.

Thus, the social is a feature of Itzéz’s exploration of the interim state. Disembodied souls not only perceive things in the same way as bodies, they recognise significant others and, we might suppose, continue their social relations post-mortem. Similarly, the Yine, for whom the dream is the principal medium of engaging with God’s presence, consider dreaming to be a fundamentally social activity – both in terms of what happens *within* the dream and in terms of the social currency of recounting a dream. Dreams allow a person to engage in social relations with kin, spirits, and God, conceived of as consubstantive with the self. The Brazilian fighting ministries use fighting to co-produce the presence of God, resulting in intense emotions, with laughing and crying seen as social manifestations of

this presence. And for Barnes, the metaphorical serves as a social mechanism through which the spiritual sensory is expressed.

What emerges, then, is a range of ways in which the intimacies of engagement with God become collectivised, or distributed, across social space. Both in terms of their causes and their consequences, religious experiences of God's presence are thoroughly socialised; taking place in social contexts and understood in social contexts. This is not to say that they are reducible to social contexts. On the contrary. In their own ways, the papers here remain faithful to the aim of 'taking seriously' religious experience, and treating it on its own terms. In doing so they make a fine contribution to the study of Protestant Christianity, raising important issues to take forward into the future.

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