

Narrative and Religious Experience

David Yamane*

University of Notre Dame

This paper argues that when sociologists study religious experience we cannot study "experiencing" — religious experience in real time and its physical, mental, and emotional constituents — and therefore must study retrospective accounts — linguistic representations — of religious experiences. It is in the nature of experiencing and its linguistic expression that the two are loosely coupled and therefore we do not study phenomenological descriptions of experiences but how an experience is made meaningful. On this basis, existing studies of religious experience are criticized, and an alternative, narrative approach to studying religious experience which is sensitive to its unique ontology is elaborated. The paper concludes with some brief suggestions for applying the narrative approach to studying the meaning of religious experience.

This paper addresses the current *methodological* limitations in studies of "religious experience."¹ It was born of a lingering dissatisfaction I felt employing

* Direct correspondence to David Yamane, Department of Sociology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame IN 46556, email: yamane.1@nd.edu. This paper is dedicated to the memory of my friend and advisor, Richard Schoenherr (1935-1996), who passed away unexpectedly as I was finalizing revisions to the manuscript. I am grateful for the challenging and constructive comments offered by *Sociology of Religion* Reviewer A. I would also like to thank Mike Jindra and the "Lakeshore Book Club" — Chris Fassnacht, Virginia Gill, Josh Rossol, and especially Bob Moore — who provided me with the necessary "plausibility structure" without which I could not have pursued this line of inquiry. A much earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Religious Research Association, Washington, D.C., November 1992. Writing and re-writing was supported by a fellowship from the American Sociological Association Minority Affairs Program (funded by N.I.M.H. grant #MH15722-13). None of the aforementioned are responsible for the shortcomings of this analysis.

¹ I have flagged "religious experience" here to reflect the lack of a definitive understanding of what is meant by the term in the current literature (Poloma 1995). For purposes of this paper, I accept Hoge and Smith's (1982: 72) approach of adopting "a definition of 'religious experience' [which includes] all experiences interpreted as religiously important by the [subjects] themselves." Not all scholars would agree with this move. For example, Davis (1989: 30) is explicit about her belief that certain experiences are more genuinely religious than others, arguing that "not all experiences in a religious context are 'religious experiences' — an itch during communion is unlikely to be, for instance! Similarly, the perception of religious texts and works of art and the participation in religious rituals, though experiences with religious content, do not in themselves constitute 'religious experiences'" (p. 30). Davis clearly means to include under the rubric religious experience only those dramatic encounters with God, spirit, or ultimate reality which scholars have called "mystical experiences." While this Jamesian focus on "those religious experiences which are most one-sided" (James 1902: 44) dominates the area, there is an alternative, if less traveled, road which scholars might take in approaching religious experience. It is a path cut by Sir Alister Hardy of the Religious Experience Research Unit at Oxford University. In contrast to the Jamesian tradition, Hardy (1979: 18-19) and his colleagues have been interested

conventional methods of analysis in my own studies of religious experience (Yamane and Polzer 1994; Yamane 1998). Though he is not a social scientist, a lesson my father taught me long ago inspired this attempt to redress that discontent. His advice was this: always use "the right tool for the right job." This lesson applies as much to scholarly research as to carpentry. Unfortunately, one's facility with a hammer can lead to the temptation and tendency to see every job as requiring a hammer. In the same way, the social sciences' extensive, and at times excessive, reliance on survey methods is akin to a carpenter with a toolbox full of hammers. My argument here is that students of religion need to think seriously about what the right tool is for the job of studying religious experience. I want to suggest that we consider an underutilized methodological tool, one which is uniquely appropriate to the ontological peculiarities of religious experience. A narrative approach is "the right tool for the right job."

The jumping off point is the work of Neitz and Spickard who independently and together have taken "steps toward a sociology of religious experience" (Neitz and Spickard 1990). The work of Neitz and Spickard represents the best effort to conceptualize religious experience sociologically; however, because they focus exclusively on *theoretical* development, their work, while highly suggestive, is also methodologically limited. Neitz and Spickard (1990) develop Schutz's theories as they relate to religious experience, and also consider Csikszentmihalyi's theory of "flow" experiences as a possible foundation for a sociology of religious experience. From these theorists they take the idea that there is an inherent sociality to religious experience, one which is socially-learned and non-conceptual (Csikszentmihalyi's flow) and even preconceptual (Schutz's shared inner-time consciousness).

It is precisely the insightfulness and creativity with which Spickard and Neitz have pursued conceptual issues in studying religious experience which obscures the fact that, in those instances when they do attempt to apply their theory, their analyses have grave shortcomings. This is especially true of Spickard's (1991) attempt to apply Schutz's theory of a shared inner experience of time to traditional Navajo religious rituals. Spickard claims that like musical performance for Schutz, ritual is a reordering of shared time: "Like music or poetry, prayer is a polythetic phenomenon. It presents a stream of images that structure inner time. It guides the hearer from image to image: backward as the images repeat what has been, forward as they foretell what is to come" (1991: 200). He further argues, "As people experience the [Blessingway myth] again [in

in religious experience as "a continuing feeling of transcendental reality or of a divine presence," not simply dramatic experiences, but also "seemingly more ordinary but deeply felt experiences." For Hardy, *all* of an individual's lived experience is a candidate for study under the broad umbrella of religious experience. Religious experience in this view refers to all of the individual's subjective involvement with the sacred: the sense of peace and awe mysticism and conversion, the presence of God, absorbing ritual experience, and on and on. Thus, it is Hardy and his colleagues, not James and his descendants, who allow us to truly appreciate the *varieties* of religious experience (Yamane 1998).

ritual prayer], the world is renewed. In Navajo eyes, the ritual literally recreates the world" (1991: 201). The problem with this analysis is that, while Spickard claims to know what happens when Navajos experience the Blessingway myth in ritual prayer — "the world is renewed" — and even claims to know this from the Navajo point of view — "In Navajo eyes" — his account of the experience of Navajo religious rituals provides not a single word from *any* Navajo who had actually experienced any ritual. This is a crucial oversight since anthropological evidence suggests that "participants in a performance do not necessarily share a common experience or meaning; what they share is only their common participation" (Bruner 1986: 11). Thus, while the subject matter calls for an approach which is "experience-near," Spickard's method is "experience-far." While Spickard takes a bird's-eye view of Navajo ritual experience, what is needed is a "jeweler's-eye view" (Marcus and Fischer 1986: 15, 30). Geertz (1986: 377–78), a major proponent of analysis that is "experience-near," further warns that the "empirical passage" between cultural productions and personal experiences is "treacherous." Because of these perils, more explicit attention must be paid to what we study when we study religious experience — that is, to the empirical passage to religious experience — than Neitz and Spickard have paid, at least thus far.

Having made my critique as strong as possible, the fact remains that the work of Neitz and Spickard is the best and most promising sociologists have done on this topic to date. Given the shortcomings of their empirical approach, it should be clear that we have a long way to go. Having recognized the importance of the experiential dimension, it is incumbent upon interested scholars to consider the relative merits of different ways of empirically studying religious experience. It is such a consideration that this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing recovery of the experiential in the social scientific study of religion (see also Poloma 1995; Spickard 1993).

This paper proceeds as follows: I argue that when we study religious experience we cannot study "experiencing" — religious experience in real time and its physical, mental, and emotional constituents — and therefore must study retrospective accounts — linguistic representations — of religious experiences. It is in the nature of experiencing and its linguistic expression that the two are loosely coupled and therefore we do not study phenomenological descriptions of experiences but how an experience is made meaningful. On this basis, I critique existing studies of religious experience before elaborating a narrative approach to studying religious experience which is sensitive to its unique ontology. I conclude with some brief suggestions for applying the narrative approach to studying the meaning of religious experience.

THE NATURE OF EXPERIENCE AND ITS EXPRESSIONS

It seems obvious that any serious investigation of the experiential dimension of religion should begin with a consideration of *experience* itself. Surprisingly, other than Neitz and Spickard, no social scientific studies of religious experience have seriously engaged this issue. The root problem with existing studies of religious experience can thus be found in the failure of researchers to seriously reflect on the *nature of experience* and its consequences for what we study when we study religious experience. Experience has a different ontological status than, for example, gender or years of schooling completed, and it therefore poses special problems for researchers, though one would not know this from reading existing studies of religious experience. In taking further steps toward a sociology of religious experience, we must have a closer look at the nature of experience generally, of which religious experience is a particular variety.

What, then, is the nature of experience? Like a stream, experience is an ongoing temporal flow of reality received by consciousness, where consciousness is understood more broadly than simply as cognition (Bruner 1986: 6). Experience involves not only cognition but feelings, expectations, and bodily states (Merleau-Ponty 1964); reality presents itself to us not simply in language or linguistic categories, but also in images and impressions (Fernandez 1986). We can use the gerund "experiencing" to emphasize the ongoing quality of experience in this sense. Sociologists cannot empirically study experiencing, thus understood, for it is a wholly private, individual affair inaccessible to any currently known methods of social scientific research.

Before we give up the study of experience, however, we need to take note of the distinction Turner (1986) makes — following Dilthey (1976: 210) — between *experiencing* and *an experience*. While experiencing is a constant temporal flow from the standpoint of an individual and therefore *cannot be directly studied*, an experience is "the intersubjective articulation of experience" (Bruner 1986: 6) and therefore can be studied.

Given this distinction, when we undertake to study an experience (or a collection of experiences), we need to do so with caution. Because intersubjective articulation only comes with reflection on experience, it can only occur after we step out of the stream of experience (Bruner 1986: 6). Actively experiencing and reflecting on experience are clear and distinct activities. One cannot experience and reflect on experience at the same time. This is evident in even the most reflexive sociological attempts to grasp lived experience. For example, Ronai (1992) describes the difficulty in trying to create a narrative which directly conveys her lived experience of being an erotic dancer/researcher. The distinction between experiencing and reflection on experience becomes evident as she begins to write about her lived experience as a dancer/researcher.

Is this the 'real' lived experience, my typing this right now, this very second? This is silly. I reflect and start typing, and the reflection is already replaced by the typing experience.

Childlike, I regress into endless digression, a snake chasing my own tail and swallowing it until I finally disappear into absurdity (Ronai 1992: 104).

Her frustration at the inability to experience typing and reflect on the experience of typing is indicative of her inability to capture the lived experience of being an erotic dancer. As Ronai (1992: 104) notes, "When one describes one's experience, the text is always transformed by the telling of it." Though she therefore adopts a writing style she calls "the layered account" which "is designed to convey the blurred and intertwined quality that writing about the lived experience of dancing entails," Ronai (1992: 104) is nonetheless only reflecting on an experience, not experiencing.

The frustration Ronai endured in trying to authentically capture her lived experience is mitigated if we give up the notion that we can somehow capture the *essence* of experiencing in our intersubjective articulations. This is no more possible than capturing the essence of a river in a bucket of water.² Especially when the articulation of an experience is temporally distanced from the experiencing itself — when the telling is a week, a month, a year, or several years later — experience and its expression can be very loosely coupled indeed. We are brought back to the treacherous empirical passage about which Geertz warns us. To return to the exemplary existing program of study of religious experience highlighted above, Neitz and Spickard (1990) recognize to some extent the nature of experience — at least they draw upon Schutz's transformation of Bergson's *duree* in the concept of "inner-time consciousness" — but they don't take as problematic the *empirical study* of *duree*, as does Schutz. According to Moore (1995: 707), Schutz held that "only by stopping and reflecting on the stream of *duree* can the ego lift a particular experience out of that flow and discriminate it from the rest of experience. Thus, all subjective meaning, including the spatio-temporal world, is constituted in retrospect through reflection, rather than in the present moment of the lived experience (*Eriebnis* or *duree*)" (Schutz 1932: 45–52). A student of Schutz's social philosophy, Berger (1969: 20) has noted "the fact of language . . . can readily be seen as the imposition of order upon experience. Language nominizes by imposing differentiation and structure upon the ongoing flux of experience. As an item of experience is named, it is *ipso facto*, taken out of this flux and given stability as the entity so named."

The pivotal implication of the foregoing for our studies of religious experience is that it shifts our focus from the experiences themselves to their expressions in language. Because we cannot study experience in itself — i.e., *experiencing* — we must study *retrospective accounts* of experiences. This is a fundamental fact with which sociologists interested in religious experience must deal. We simply must bracket any claims to apprehending religious experience in itself

² This analogy has been repeatedly suggested to me by Virginia T. Gill and Robert J. Moore, to whom I am indebted for the idea.

and instead give our full attention to the primary way people concretize, make sense of, and convey their experiences: through language, and in particular, through narratives.

Religious Experience: Interpretation "All the Way Down"

At this point, I must briefly address what is to my mind one of the most important and interesting issues in studying religious experience: the relationship between experience and interpretation. I am arguing that, from a practical, methodological standpoint, we can only study the after-the-fact interpretations that people construct and convey to understand the meaning of their experiences — how they turn experiencing into an experience. In arguing that the data which we have to study when we study religious experience are the retrospective accounts people give for their experiences, I do not mean to say that the experiencings which occasion the interpretations are themselves "raw" or uninterpreted, devoid of any socially transmitted images, languages, or views (Ellwood 1980: 141). We know that existing social or cultural structures predispose us to experience certain emotions, sensations, and bodily states in particular, culturally inscribed ways.

Thus, Katz (1978, 1983) suggests that there is no such thing as an unmediated experience. *All experience is always already shot through with interpretation.* As Neitz and Spickard (1990: 25) put it, "experiences are transformed — before and after the fact." People do not simply interpret their fundamentally similar experiences differently, they have different experiences to interpret. The cultural system in which we participate affects the way we experience the world (Wuthnow 1992: 13). Taking individuals' narratives as our data in studying religious experience does not mean, therefore, that we cease to be concerned with the sociological aspects of religious experience, including the ways in which religions as cultural systems help to structure and evoke people's experiences (Bellah 1970: 252–53; Geertz 1973; Proudfoot 1985: 39–40; Stromberg 1994). As Poloma (1995: 179) has argued, "Sociology's task is to study both the interface of the objective social context and its bearing upon religious experience as well as subjective interpretations of religious experience and how they impact the social world." In this work, I have self-consciously emphasized the latter part of this dialectic since it has been comparatively greatly neglected (but see Yamane and Polzer 1994 where I emphasize the former).

The Representational Capacity of Language

Because language is so central to the approach I am advocating here, we must be perfectly clear about how we understand the *representational capacity* of language. Language, according to Rorty (1979) and other contemporary philosophers, is not a mirror of "reality." What is true of linguistic representations of the

physical world is all the more true of the fleeting and elusive world of experience. Experience does not and cannot *determine* its expression in language. This is what is meant by saying that experience and its expression in language are loosely coupled: the interpretation of the experience is "relatively autonomous" from the event itself.³ What is required, then, is not a realist social science aimed at accurately describing and explaining religious experience, but an interpretive social science concerned primarily with *understanding*. To understand religious experience is to know about its *meaning* to understand how people make religious experiences meaningful, and to appreciate how that meaningfulness is conveyed. As Denzin (1990: 5–6) has argued, narrative is central to this project: "Experience and its meaning are always indeterminate, shifting, and changing from moment to moment. Some experiences elude representation, but significant moments of experience are given in representations which are always narratives, stories, and fictions made up out of the events at hand." Before elaborating a narrative approach to studying the meaning of religious experience, I turn to a brief critique of the methodological shortcomings of existing studies of religious experience. The root of these shortcomings is in their failure to ask the very question which I have just raised and addressed about the nature of religious experience and its expressions in language.

PREVIOUS APPROACHES TO STUDYING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE⁴

If Nietz and Spickard's approach to studying religious experience has limitations, the approaches other scholars have employed over the past thirty years offer no satisfying alternatives. Rather than recognizing the subjective and fleeting nature of religious experiencing and the centrality of language in capturing and conveying these as experiences, previous studies have simply relied on the standard methodological tools for data collection and analysis. These tools are inadequate and even inappropriate for the task because they rest on the naive view of language just criticized and its attendant epistemological realism about the capacity of language to transparently represent experience.

³ "Relatively" here signifies that this is not an *ex nihilo* creation, but a transformation of the phenomenologically given materials (i.e., the sense data). The metaphor of meaning "construction" implies that there are raw materials available to work with. The danger comes when the *interpretation* of experiencing is taken as a *description* of experiencing in itself. Lawson (1997: 54) has made a similar point in studying religious stories generally (see also Wuthnow 1997: 254).

⁴ Due to space constraints, this review concentrates only on certain exemplars of the two dominant approaches and includes only those studies which are *primarily* concerned with religious experience. It may, therefore, overlook some studies which are less susceptible to my criticisms.

In this section I will briefly review the two dominant approaches to studying religious experience. The first approach is that which employs closed-ended surveys to *measure* religious experience and statistical methods to *causally explain* it. For convenience, I will call this approach "quantitative." The second approach uses open-ended surveys or interviews to collect *descriptions* of religious experience which are then *classified* into categories either inductively or deductively. For convenience, I will call this approach "qualitative."

Quantitative Studies of Religious Experience

Two concerns distinguish quantitative studies of religious experience: measurement and causal explanation. It is typical of mainstream social science to be concerned with issues of measurement, maintaining with Lord Kelvin that "when you cannot measure, your knowledge is meager and unsatisfactory" (inscription on the University of Chicago Social Science Research building; Bulmer 1984: 151). The most frequent form of measurement in existing studies of religious experience is the single, standardized, structured interview question with closed-ended response categories. The two best known data sets created by using closed-ended survey questions are those of the Gallup Organization and the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). Gallup has repeatedly asked representative samples of Americans, "Would you say that you have ever had a 'religious or mystical experience' — that is, a moment of sudden religious awakening or insight?" (Back and Bourque 1970; Bourque 1969; Bourque and Back 1968; Gallup 1978; Gallup and Castelli 1990; Gallup and Newport 1990), and NORC periodically includes in its General Social Survey a question which asks, "How often have you had one of the following experiences? Felt as though you were very close to a powerful, spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself?" (Greeley 1974, 1975; Yamane and Polzer 1994).⁵

The proportion of respondents in these various surveys and studies who report having had religious experiences (as "measured" in each respective study) range from 20 percent in the 1962 Gallup Poll to 53 percent in a 1990 Gallup Poll. Overall, the average positive response rate to these types of questions has been estimated at 35 percent (Spilka *et al.* 1985: 182). That is, across all the surveys, about 35 percent of respondents report having had at least one religious experience as operationalized in the different surveys.

Having thus "measured" religious experience, attention turns to *causally explaining* it by making it the dependent variable in a statistical analysis (usually linear regression and its variants). Factors which have been used to explain variance in religious experience *explananda* include education, income, race,

⁵ Hay and Morisey (1978), Thomas and Cooper (1978), and McClenon (1984, 1990) use the NORC question in their studies, but not GSS data.

gender, region of residence, size of community, religion, political party, political opinions, and age (Bourque 1969; Back and Bourque 1970; Bourque and Back 1971); closeness of parents, closeness of respondent to mother/father, joyousness of father's/mother's religion, and life satisfaction (Greeley 1975); and attendance at religious services, prayer, and religious views (Yamane and Polzer 1994).

The problem with this type of quantitative research is that while we know that something of interest is going on, we know not what. All of these survey-based studies have an *explanandum* which can nominally be called "religious experience," but they are sufficiently different in their operationalizations that there is no consistent interpretation of what those answering positively in each case are affirming. Whether or not we agree with global critiques of closed-ended surveys (Denzin 1989b), the difficulty in interpreting questionnaire responses which exists in all survey research is especially problematic in those studies which aim at such "soft" areas of human existence as feeling and experience (Wuthnow 1976, Appendix). Beyond this, quantitative studies of religious experience tell us *nothing* about the *meaning* of the experience for the actor involved.

I have engaged in this method of studying religious experience myself (Yamane and Polzer 1994), and despite feeling confident that my analysis has made some contribution to understanding this important phenomenon, it is nevertheless heavily dependent on epistemological leaps of faith with which I am increasingly uncomfortable. I had to make what Duncan (1992: 668) has called the "Faustian bargain with statistics" which is so common to contemporary sociology. It is a bargain, he notes, which "gave us [sociologists] instant, voluminous, and easy results — but results that often were mischievous or meaningless when they were not both." The approach I advocate here avoids this dilemma.

Qualitative Studies of Religious Experience

Qualitative studies of religious experience differ from quantitative studies in important ways. Whereas the latter are interested in measurement, the former are interested in *description*; and whereas the latter are interested in causal analysis, the former are interested in *classification*. The different foci, however, do not make existing qualitative approaches any less problematic as ways of studying religious experience.

The dominant qualitative approach takes the form of a structured question for a filter, followed by a more or less open-ended interview of those responding positively to the filter. The data from the interviews are then content-analyzed and coded into categories, usually inductively. For example, Hay (1979) interviewed 100 students, 65 percent of them affirming that they had at some time had a religious experience as defined by Hardy's (1979) structured question: "Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or a power, whether

you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self" Those 65 percent were then interviewed about their experiences, and the substantive descriptions given in their responses were categorized into eight "classes" of experience such as "awareness of a power controlling and guiding me," "experience of a unity with nature," and "awareness of the presence of God." In a later work, Hay and Morisy (1985) surveyed a random sample of adults in a British city ($n = 172$), of whom 62 percent responded positively to the filter question. Despite roughly the same positive response rate to the filter question as in Hay's (1979) earlier student sample, somewhat different "types" of religious experiences were coded from the open-ended follow-up. Again inductively, Hay and Morisy were able to group the responses into eight categories, such as "presence of or help from God," "premonitions," and "presence of or help from the deceased." Other studies follow this same model, although they inevitably construct different classificatory schemes (Thomas and Cooper 1978; Margolis and Elifson 1979).

The most ambitious attempt to date to collect and classify qualitative descriptions of religious experience is that of zoologist Sir Alister Hardy (1979), founding director of the Religious Experience Research Unit at Oxford University. Hardy collected more than 3000 descriptions of religious experience between 1969 and 1979 by soliciting in newspapers and pamphlets, and through interviews. From these he generated twelve main divisions, each of which was then subdivided into more specific categories, ranging in number from 0 to 20. All told, Hardy's classification scheme has 92 different categories. For example, experience type 1 (c) is "sensory or quasi-sensory experience: visual" ("a particular light"), while 3(b) is "sensory or quasi-sensory experience: touch" ("comforting"). The most common classification was 9(b): "dynamic patterns in experience" ("initiative felt to lie within the self, but response from beyond; prayers answered"), which encompassed almost one-third of the respondents.

All of these qualitative studies of religious experience suffer from two major problems. First, they are often purely descriptive: merely coding responses into different "types" or "classes" of religious experience. Taking a naive view of the articulation of experience in language, they fail to appreciate the complexity of the relationship of the linguistic expressions of experience to experiencing itself. These approaches see people's descriptions of religious experiences simply as realistic representations, not as interpretations or retrospective accounts which seek to render the experiences meaningful and which therefore change over time with the experiencer's life circumstances, or with the social context of the telling. Second, by using a closed-ended question as a filter to select those who will be interviewed about their experiences, these qualitative researchers run the risk of filtering out those who do not understand their experiences in the terms given by the researcher. A classic example of this problem can be found in Glock and Stark (1965) who asked a sample of Christians whether they had ever had "a sense of being saved in Christ." As it turned out, Protestants use this

language of "being saved in Christ" more than Catholics, and thus had higher response rates: 37 percent to 26 percent. What appears as a major difference in religious experience turns out to be largely an artifact of the language used in the survey.

General Criticism of Existing Studies of Religious Experience

Though each of the two approaches just reviewed have their own unique weaknesses, there is also an unspoken common thread which runs between them. They share an objectivist understanding of reality and language, if we understand the objectivist orientation as seeing the world and our experience of it as consisting of objects, properties, and relationships which exist independent of our interpretations of them, and believing that "language expresses concepts that can map onto the objects, properties, and relationships in a literal, univocal, context-independent fashion" (Johnson 1987: x). In this respect, these social scientists adopt what Stromberg (1993: 2) calls the "referential ideology" of meaning in language which holds that "language points to an independently existing reality and that it can be used to describe that reality in terms that convey, without fundamentally distorting, its characteristics."

Unlike an objectives approach, an interpretive sociology maintains that all sociological data are "always already interpreted." Maines's (1993: 25) criticism of the use of closed-ended survey questions applies *especially* to religious experience: "a '7' is not always a '7,' but instead is much like a word insofar as it is only a representation of something else that itself is only an interpretation." While the case of open-ended interviewing differs somewhat, it too treats the descriptions produced in interviews as objects which can be coded and classified like any other "social fact." Given the nature of experiencing, it is true that we must always study *representations* of experience; *however*, these representations cannot be taken as pure descriptions as objectivist approaches tend to do. To the contrary, as Riessman (1993: 15) argues, "all forms of representation of experience are limited portraits. Simply stated, we are interpreting and creating texts at every juncture, letting symbols stand for or take the place of primary experience, to which we have no access. . . . All we have is talk and texts that represent reality partially, selectively, and imperfectly."

To summarize the criticism raised in this section: both existing quantitative and qualitative studies treat representations of religious experience as if they were fixed and transparent objects to be measured or classified. But to grasp the truly human aspect, the *meaning*, of religious experience, we need an approach which takes as its task the "analysis of meaning in linguistic expression." In the following section I propose an alternative, a *narrative approach*, which takes seriously the interpretation of meaning through language and thus can be seen as a variety of what Habermas (1988: 175) has called a *sprachverstehende Soziologie*, a "linguistically oriented interpretive sociology."

TOWARD AN INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: UNDERSTANDING MEANING THROUGH NARRATIVE

It was Max Weber (1978), taking up the interpretive stand of Dilthey (1976), who directed sociologists to understand the centrality of meaning in studying society, and students of Weber, like Geertz, understand the analysis of human life to be "not an experimental science in search of laws but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (1973: 5). However, as Wuthnow (1987: 65) correctly notes, *meaning* has many meanings. Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi (1991: 216) correctly recognizes that meaning "is a concept difficult to define, since any definition runs the risk of being circular. How do we talk about the meaning of meaning itself?" These warnings notwithstanding, a working definition must be advanced. For this definition, I rely on Csikszentmihalyi, who highlights three meanings of meaning, the first of which is the sense I intend in this paper.

Its first usage points toward the end, purpose, significance of something, as in: *What is the meaning of life?* This sense of the word reflects the assumption that events are linked to each other in terms of an ultimate goal; that there is a temporal order, a causal connection between them. It assumes that phenomena are not random, but fall into recognizable patterns directed by a final purpose (Csikszentmihalyi 1991: 216, emphasis in original).

This understanding of meaning immediately points up the relevance of narrative. Because "significant biographical experiences are told and retold in narrative form" (Denzin 1989a: 38), interpretive sociologists of religion logically turn to narratives in investigating the meaning of religious experiences, for when people narrate events and experiences in their lives, they are constructing and conveying meaning.

Whether this is "narrative's moment" (Maines 1993) or whether we have entered into a new "age of narrative" (Josselson 1995: 31), it has become axiomatic in the 1980s and 1990s to note the ubiquity of narrative among humans.⁶ In addition, it is increasingly common to mention the proliferation of definitions of "narrative" which have come with its renaissance in the human sciences (e.g., Ewick and Silbey 1995: 200). I therefore agree with McCabe

⁶ Which raises a question which I cannot answer fully or directly in this paper: "why is it that narration is so universal, present in all human beings everywhere? . . . Exactly what psychological or social functions do stories serve? Just why do we need stories, lots of them, all the time?" (Miller 1990: 66-7). Perhaps because human beings are meaning-seeking animals (Geertz 1973). Or perhaps we are, as Brooks (1984) has argued, the symbol-using animal, *homo significans*, the sense-making animal (cited in Miller 1990: 68; also Polkinghorne 1988). Some have even suggested that human beings be characterized as *homo narrans* (Journal of Communication 1985; Myerhoff 1978). If any or all of these are true, then it is easy to see why Kerby (1991: 4) has suggested that narrative functions to satisfy our need for meaning and order in life: "it is in and through various forms of narrative employment that our lives . . . attain meaning."

(1991: 1) who argues that "it may be more useful . . . to eschew formal definition and instead adopt a working definition of narrative that delineates certain features accounting for the family resemblance among various types of narrative." What virtually all scholars who take narrative seriously have in common is the belief that "all forms of narrative share the fundamental interest in making sense of experience, the interest in constructing and communicating meaning" (Chase 1995: 1).⁷

Minimally, three basic elements constitute the heart of any written or spoken narrative (Ewick and Silbey 1995: 200).⁸ First, there must be events or experiences which are selected for consideration. Second, in the narrative, those events are temporally ordered, often presented with a beginning, middle, and end. Third, and most important, the events or experiences are subjected to a *moral ordering*. It is insufficient to understand narrative simply as the "recounting of a series of facts or events and the establishing of some connection between them" (Fowler 1992: 156). A sequence of experiences can only be a *meaningful* sequence if they are ordered and reordered according to some overarching theme (Miller 1990: 69). Frequently, these themes are drawn from culturally-available and acceptable "vocabularies of motive," genres, or myths (Wuthnow 1997; Lawson 1997; Stromberg 1994). Ricouer (1991) has used the term "emplotment" to designate this crucial element: not only are experiences and events placed in a sequence, but they are set in motion toward some end goal, given a purpose in the context of the individual's life; in short, they are made meaningful.

Thus, narratives are a primary linguistic vehicle through which people grasp the meaning of lived experience by configuring and reconfiguring past experiences in ongoing stories which have certain plots or directions and which guide the interpretation of those experiences. In searching for the meaning of a religious experience, therefore, we need to examine how people emplot or configure religious experiences in narratives. The narrative approach, while not denying that religious experiences have an objective existence, suggests that

⁷ While chasing etymologies can often obscure as much as it enlightens, I think in this case it would be difficult to understate the importance of the etymology of the term "narrative" in understanding its individual and social function. As W. J. T. Mitchell (1981: x) suggests, "The idea of narrative seems . . . to be repossessing its archaic sense as *gnarus* [Latin] and *gnosis* [Greek], a mode of knowledge emerging from action, a knowledge which is embedded not just in the stories we tell our children or to while away our leisure but in the orders by which we live our lives." Thus, narrative is a type of knowledge which is "not primarily rational knowledge. The Greek language distinguishes between scientific or reflective knowledge ('He knows mathematics') and knowing through observation or experience ('He knows me'), which is *gnosis*'" (Pagels 1981: xviii). In this sense, narrative is a relating or telling — from the Latin *narrō* (White 1981: 1n) — of an experiential knowing or knowledge (*gnarus* and *gnosis*).

⁸ Though I am considering only linguistic forms here, I recognize (with Barthes 1982: 251) that there exist an "almost infinite diversity of forms" of narrative: "Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's *Saint Ursula*), stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation."

because experiencing is an ongoing temporal flow, its objective existence is fleeting. By the time the individual comes to understand the experience, it has past. What remains is the memory, the interpretation, the linguistification, the recounting, the emplotment, the narrativization. This is the "data" which sociologists must study.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY⁹

If, as Bathes (1982: 251) suggests, "the narratives of the world are numberless," then perhaps the possible applications of a narrative approach are as well. A quick perusal of some major repositories of narrative analyses suggests as much (see Mitchell 1981; the *Journal of Narrative and Life History*; the Sage series on "The Narrative Study of Lives" [e.g., Josselson and Lieblich 1995]). Given this diversity, it would be naive and counterproductive for me to conclude by enumerating the proper way(s) to apply the narrative approach in any particular study of religious experience. Indeed, what Maines (1993) has called "narrative's moment" in sociology can be seen as a part of what Marcus and Fischer (1986) term "an experimental moment" in the human sciences. There are no hard and fast rules to follow in applying this perspective in future studies; scholars should not expect a routinized method nor a standardized theoretical school nor a typical application (Bertraux and Kohli 1984: 233). The value of narrative lies in its redirection of thought for religion scholars. It opens new avenues for investigation. My proposals for further study, therefore, are suggestive not definitive. Interested readers can take further steps by developing this general approach in specific studies in ways which suit their needs and interests.

What, then, might narrative analyses of religious experience look like? We could do longitudinal studies to map how the meaning of a religious experience changes over time as people configure and reconfigure them as part of their ongoing life stories. We could examine whether narratives of religious experience are structured in such a way that meanings are restricted (centripetal) or opened-up (centrifugal), and whether certain persons or groups are more inclined to one structure or the other (Witten 1993). We could bring together Berger's (1979) claim that religious experiences are inherently threatening to religious authority and Neitz's (1987) claim that they can strengthen religious authority by understanding that some experiences are emplotted in "subversive stories" which challenge existing structures of authority and others in "hegemonic tales" which uphold existing authority structures (Ewick and Silbey 1995).

⁹ Due to space constraints, I am unable to discuss practical aspects of implementing this approach (but see Mishler 1986; Polkinghorne 1988; Riessman 1993; Josselson and Lieblich 1995).

Conversion Experiences

One area in which a narrative approach has clear relevance and in which some progress has already been made is in studying that subcategory of religious experiences known as *conversion experiences*. Conversion experiences are often recognized as crucial to religious conversion since they motivate the dual processes of self-transformation and commitment to a religious group or faith (Snow and Machalek 1984; Stromberg 1993). Less accepted as crucial in the achievement of conversion is the rendering of the conversion experience as meaningful by emplotment in a narrative. This oversight is important since, as Stromberg (1993: xi) has argued, "it is through the use of language in the conversion narrative that the processes of increased commitment and self-transformation take place."

Even when retrospective accounts of conversion experiences are examined (e.g., in James's *Varieties*), the understanding of the nature of those accounts is often badly flawed. According to Stromberg (1993: 14), "Normally the conversion is viewed (both by believers and by students of the conversion) as an historical, observable event that is referred to in the conversion narrative. It is furthermore assumed that the transformational efficacy of the conversion experience occurs in the original event." By contrast, a narrative approach recognizes that there is no such thing as a "conversion experience" in-and-of-itself. There are simply experiences which are made meaningful after the fact, often in terms of narratives furnished by the "local culture" (Gubrium and Holstein 1995) of certain religious groups. Of course, involvement in the group prior to the experience can *predispose* a person to a particular narrativization, though it cannot *determine* the emplotment. As Snow and Machalek (1984: 176) argue, "specific ideologies do not strictly determine the character of the converts' accounts; rather, they provide the basic algorithms upon which the convert constructs an 'appropriate' account of his or her conversion experience." Commitment to the new group is effected in the process of constructing the conversion narrative, which is "a practice through which believers seek to establish some connection between the language [of the group to which they are converting] and their own immediate situations. In other words, . . . some point of tangency must be established where the canonical language and experience merge." This aspect of the narrativization of the conversion experience is what Snow and Machalek (1984: 176) refer to as an "alignment process" which links the individual to the group.

Although they didn't fully realize the significance of the insight, in arguing that "biographical reconstruction" is central to the achievement of conversion, Snow and Machalek (1984) were highlighting the importance of narrative in the process of self-transformation associated with conversion. Conversion experiences lead to biographical reconstruction, or re-narrativization of one's life, because they are *epiphanies*. Epiphanies, according to Denzin (1989a: 15), are

“moments that leave marks on people’s lives [that] have the potential for creating transformational experiences for the person. . . . They are often interpreted, both by the person and by others, as turning point experiences.” The self-transformation which results from these conversion experiences-*qua*-epiphanies is a narrative accomplishment (Kerby 1991).

Conclusion

The main goal of this paper has been to call to attention a deficiency in existing studies of religious experience, and to suggest an alternative focus and approach for interested scholars. In this concluding section, I have tried to offer brief suggestions for future study, recognizing that these suggestions in no way exhaust the possibilities which at this point are wide open. One critique which might be made at this point is that a narrative approach can only yield a multitude of understandings of particular individual lives with no general import. Although it is true that a narrative approach complicates the relationship between the particular and the general — since our statistical aggregations allow us to lapse into “treating diversity as error variance” (Josselson 1995: 32) — I view this simply as a recognition of the complexity of the empirical passage from the particular to the general. Chase (1995: 20) has correctly argued that “by analyzing the complex process of narration in specific instances, we learn about the kinds of narratives that are possible for certain groups of people, we learn about the cultural world that makes their particular narratives possible — and problematic — in certain ways.” She concludes that “the significant point here is that the general (cultural and discursive resources and constraints) is not fully evident to us in advance; we know the general fully only through its [particular] embodiments” (Chase 1995: 20).

This is surely difficult to swallow for sociologists who have been trained to prefer the deductive approach of imposing categories of interpretation on people’s lay understandings of their lives and experiences. And I would not want to rule out *a priori* the possibility that standard, hypothetico-deductive methods of “explanation” may eventually be employed, with different forms, structures, or types of narratives becoming the *explananda* and different social or psychological forces being introduced as *explanans*. This approach, however, must be secondary to the hermeneutic recovery of meaning through narrative, which is the primary goal of an interpretive sociology, for “without the prior reconstruction of meaning any attempt at explanation is bound to fail” (Alexander *et al.* 1993: 11).

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