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Religious Experience in Hindu Tradition

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Abstract
This article argues against the popular stereotype of religious experience having been invented by modern scholars. It examines understandings of religious experience from a variety of Hindu traditions, from the Vedas to the present.

Introduction

Religious experience has long been a contentious issue, full of arguments about legitimacy and interpretation. Several recent authors have described the difficulties in defining the term. For instance, Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) has noted that the term can refer to a personal encounter with God (the Judaeo-Christian god or otherwise), ordinary experience as interpreted through the lens of faith, and the non-theistic experience of 'sacredness' or 'ultimacy'. Religious experience may be understood as discontinuous with daily life (transcendent) or continuous and it gains significance only because of its interpretation within an institutional and social context. Robert Sharf (1998) notes the difficulties of analyzing subjective mental events, and describes religious experiences as ranging through feelings, moods, perceptions, dispositions, and states of consciousness, which involve pre-reflective experience. He finds terms like 'religious experience' too vague and unreliable to have any value.

In the West, one major debate about religious experience contrasts the constructivists and the perennialists. Constructivists claim that all religious goals and symbols are socially created, and that religious experience is a projection of ideas from the culture. There is no ultimate religious goal common to all mankind, and religious experience is primarily social and political, frequently used to validate the current authority structure. The perennialist argument is that there is a god or ultimate reality that transcends all symbols and cultural differences, and that religious experience gives insight into that reality. It is thus a valid and important phenomenon, which gives access to truth that cannot be reached in other ways. This debate has been ongoing since the time of the European Enlightenment (though its roots are much earlier) and it is a useful background for the

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discussions of the role of religious experience in Hinduism. We shall return to this argument at the end of the article.

While most writing on the topic has emphasized Western models, more recently Asian religions have been directly incorporated into the arguments about religious experience. The critiques tend to include the following areas (with quotes from Sharf's article 'Experience', 1998):

1. Ideas of religious experience in Asia are not really indigenous ideas – they are 'a relatively late and distinctively Western invention'.
2. What earlier ideas exist in Asia about religious experience show that it is unimportant. There is no pre-colonial emphasis on experience, its importance only comes from Western-trained writers like Radhakrishnan. Religious authority is rarely based on 'exalted spiritual states'.
3. There are false, inconsistent or dubious claims about religious experience, such as claims of alien abduction. Since some claims of subjective religious experience are false, therefore all claims on the topic are false.

In order to address these arguments in the context of Hinduism, I shall look at terminology and specific ideas of religious experience in the major forms of Hinduism, and discuss concepts of supernormal perception and spiritual discernment in Hindu philosophy. To respond to the above arguments and generalizations, it is important to give specific counter-examples.

The Language of Religious Experience

As we have noted, in English, the term 'religious experience' is difficult to define, because it has many referents. It has no single meaning, but rather a cluster of meanings. For the most controversial type of experience, which involves the supernatural, we can say that most definitions include the perception of God or the divine, and states of love, knowledge and union that are related to that perception.

In Hindu tradition, religious experience is also difficult to define, because there are several terms that fit different aspects. Let us look at some of these terms, which are quite ancient ones, not resulting from colonialism and 'Western invention'.

Besides the various terms associated with *jnana,* such as *abhijnata*, translated as experience, knowledge, and wisdom (Biswas & Dasgupta 1983), there are two terms that fit more closely the English understanding of the term 'experience'. One of these is *darsana*, and the other term is *bhava*.

Darsana is experience associated with seeing or observation, especially the perception of a deity. It is used primarily to mean religious vision, though the term can also refer to philosophy and science. The term may refer to philosophical schools, and to 'seeing' from a given perspective. Such *darsana* may be spontaneous, as when a statue of a god or goddess is suddenly perceived as living (and the observer is said to have *darsana* of the deity). Or the person may have spiritual knowledge from repeated

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direct perceptions (*bhuyodarsana*). Such experiential knowledge is considered to be very valuable in various types of Hinduism, especially in the bhakti traditions. As Eck notes, the central act of Hindu worship, from the perspective of the lay person, is to stand in the presence of the deity, and to see and be seen by the deity (Eck 1981).

The other term for experience is used more popularly. While *darsana* is used within traditional philosophy, the term *bhava* tends to have different uses in the literature and in popular religion. Some dictionary meanings include existence, condition, mental state, emotion, mood, and ecstasy (Biswas & Dasgupta 1983). Other dictionaries include such terms as essence, imagination, divinity, yogic powers, rapture, and possession trance (Das 1979). However, local Hindu informants divide the meaning of the term into secular (*laukika*) and religious or supernatural (*alaukika* or *adhyatmika*) definitions. Secular definitions include responses to art and beauty, emotion, passion, feelings and ideas. Religious definitions include the experiences of holy men and women, the relationship between the soul (*jivatman*) and the god, surrender to the goddess, intuitive thought, forgetting the material world, and absorption in the deity (McDaniel 1989). Such *bhavas* may be experienced inwardly, or acted out when the person is said to be *bhavavesa*, or overcome by *bhava*. There is also the term *anubhava*, which refers to ecstatic emotional states, and expresses *bhavas* through the body.

These terms represent valued states in Hinduism, from both the pan-Indian Sanskrit tradition and regional traditions of West Bengal. However, they are general terms, and in order to understand the development of the concept of experience, we must look at terms from within some major types of Hinduism.

Vedic Religion

In that notably pre-colonialist work, the Rig Veda, there are many descriptions of religious experience. The dating on the Rig Veda is much debated, with estimates ranging from 2000 BCE–600 BCE. In the Rig Veda, descriptions of religious experience come from the *rishis* or seers (who have visions of the gods and of other worlds), from the priests who take the drug *soma*, and from the long-haired ascetics or *kesins* who 'ride the winds'.

The Vedic seers had experiences often called mystical and 'supranatural', a visionary 'beholding' or experiencing that allowed them to write the hymns in which gods speak in the first person and the worlds of the gods or *devas* are described. Many hymns speak of the divine light that the *rishis* have seen, and quote the words of the gods that they have heard. These hymns are considered by most forms of Hinduism as revelatory (*sruti*), and are highly valued. Religious experience involves vision of the 'shining ones', of the heaven of endless light (*svarga*), and of *brahman*, the source of the greatness of the gods.

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The most famous description of ecstatic religious experiences in the Rig Veda is probably that of the drinkers of *soma*, whose insights were respected by the community. In Rig Veda VIII. 48.3, a seer speaks of his experiences:

> We have drunk the soma
> We have become immortal
> We have gone to the light
> We have found the *devas*
> What can hostility now do to us
> And what the malice of mortal men, O immortal one! (O'Flaherty 1981)

Another example of experience from Vedic times was the Kesin hymn of Rig Veda X.136, which describes the flight of the long-haired ascetics who were believed to visit other worlds and become possessed by gods. The hymn moves from third person to first person:

1. These ascetics, swathed in wind, put dirty red rags on. When gods enter them, they ride with the rush of the wind.
2. 'Crazy with asceticism, we have mounted the wind. Our bodies are all you mere mortals can see.' (O'Flaherty 1981)

While it is a more common style to write in the third person for hymns, there are many accounts that speak directly of personal experience, and in them the seers are said to speak the words of the gods directly.

The Vedic seers describe the light of lights, which is sweet as honey, and its overflowing sweetness brings human beings to the land of immortality. They go to the gods, ascend into the light, and they are transformed. Religious experience is important in Vedic tradition, because it gives supernatural vision and immortality to the seer.

Upanishadic Religion

In the Upanishads, which are commentaries on the Vedic texts, we have many stories and metaphors that describe the practice and goals of contemplation. Their dating is much debated; Klostermaier estimates between 1500 BCE and 500 BCE (Klostermaier 1994). These texts contain first-person accounts of contemplative states, which in general involve blissful joy, union with ultimate awareness or *brahman*, and the dissolution of the individual ego. Brahman is the Absolute, ultimate Being, that which is truly Real. Experience of *brahman* is compared to a grain of salt dissolving in water and becoming one with it, and with the rivers that run to the sea and enter it fully. A good description comes at the end of the Kundika Upanisad:

> Stirred by the wind of illusion, the waves of the whole universe
> Repeatedly rise and fall within me, the ocean of total bliss . . .
> Like the sky am I, far, beyond the reach of time . . .

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Like the sea am I, without a farther shore . . .
I am pure consciousness, the witness of all!
I am free from the thought of 'I' and 'mine'! I have no lord! . . .
I do not act, I do not change, I have no parts, I have no form.
I am eternal, I have no thought, I am unique, I have no support.
All are myself and I am all! I am unique and I transcend all!
I am my own eternal bliss, pure undivided consciousness! (Olivelle 1992)

In the Paramahamsa Upanishad 2.49, the state of *brahman* is described more simply:

I am indeed that calm and unchanging Being, a single mass of bliss and consciousness. That alone is my highest abode. By knowing that the highest Self and the lower self are one, the difference between them dissolves into oneness. (Olivelle 1992)

Sometimes *brahman* is understood as a force that grasps the individual, and philosophy and ritual cannot determine its actions. As the Mundaka Upanishad 3.2.3 states,

This self cannot be grasped by teachings or by intelligence, or even by great learning
Only the man he chooses can grasp him whose body this self chooses as his own. (Olivelle 1996).

It is direct experience that gives knowledge of *brahman*, as the Kena Upanishad 2.4 states:

When one awakens to know it one envisions it, for then one gains the immortal state. One gains power by one's self (*atman*). And by knowledge, the immortal state. (Olivelle 1996)

This value of this state of experience is described by the sage Yajnavalkya in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.3.32–33. As he explains to the king:

He becomes the one ocean, he becomes the sole seer! 'This, Your majesty, is the world of *brahman*.' So did Yajnavalkya instruct him. 'This is his highest goal! This is his highest attainment! This is his highest world! This is his highest bliss!' On just a fraction of this bliss do other creatures live. (Olivelle 1996)

The Upanishads speak of the divine eye with which people perceive *brahman*, which is the light of lights. Union with *brahman* is supreme unsurpassable bliss, indeed there is a level of the self or *atman* composed entirely of bliss. This union brings freedom from death and rebirth, from suffering, from ignorance, from 'the knots of the heart' desire, doubt and fear. Such experience is eternal delight and peace, and unlimited freedom in all worlds. One is able to recognize truth, consciousness, and bliss (*sat, chit,* and *ananda*), and alternatively goodness, beauty and truth (*sivam, sundaram,* and *satyam*).

While the Upanishads are often accused of avoiding descriptions of religious experience, and being suspicious of claims of personal experience, if we look closely we can see that the religious claims of these texts often

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come from first-person accounts. It is perhaps paradoxical to say that the ultimate personal experience is merging with the impersonal Brahman, but this is the perspective of Advaita Vedanta philosophy. Although the writing involves paradox, as does most mystical writing, we nevertheless see writers who are trying to describe experiences that they find difficult to express in ordinary language.

The Yoga Tradition

According to the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, liberation comes through asceticism and contemplation. One of the most important experiences in meditation is *citta-vritti-nirodha*, the silencing of the activities of consciousness. This leads to the state of perfect contemplation or *samadhi*, which in turn leads to the ultimate state of liberation or *kaivalya*. During meditation, consciousness becomes like transparent crystal, and eventually the person may become the object of concentration, 'shining with the light of the object alone.' While liberation is the ultimate goal, the Yoga Sutras detail the various supernatural experiences or *siddhis* that may occur during certain types of meditation. These perfections or attainments may occur due to birth (and the karma from past lives), drugs, mantras, *tapas* (asceticism and purification), and states of *samadhi* (Prasada 1988). They allow the person to develop discrimination and to able to differentiate between pure spirit (*purusa*) and the *gunas* or aspects of life and thought that belong to matter, and they are aids in the development of concentration. They are less valued than the higher forms of experience described in the Yoga Sutra I, 18–19, which involve the two forms of *samadhi*: these are *samprajnata* (achieved by yogic effort, and which has four sub-stages) and *asamprajnata* (which occurs spontaneously, to both humans and supernatural beings).

Other texts on yoga emphasize the dissolution of the intellectually created world of concepts, and the revelation of the interior world of the spirit. Sense perception is suspended, and the person experiences the bliss of dissolution in the practice of *laya yoga*. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* describes the yogi as 'empty within and without like an empty pot in space, and also filled within and without like a pot in the ocean.' In the ultimate state the yogi is empty yet full, experiencing the union of *jivatman* (individual soul) and *paramatman* (absolute or highest Self). All of these experiences are important as developmental stages, but the highest stages are the most valued religious experiences.

While most yogic texts are written in the form of handbooks and manuals, we do have personal accounts of yogis and yoginis. For instance, the Kashmiri yogini Lalla Devi describes her meditation (in poem 31):

> I pulled the reins of the steed of the mind
> I compressed the life force circulating through the ten channels . . .
> Concentrating on the om-sound
> I made my body like blazing coal.

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> Leaving behind the six crossroads
> I traveled the path of Truth.
> And then I Lalla, reached the Abode of Light. (Parimoo 1978)

The major value of the yogic experiences during meditation is to lead to the ultimate experience, to the abode of infinite light, the experience of perfect liberation (*jivanmukti*) in this life.

The Tantric Tradition

There is a close relationship between the yogic and tantric traditions. The origins of tantra are usually said to be around 500 CE (though some scholars point to older precursors). Over the next thousand years, it elaborated theories and practices, which have influenced both philosophical and devotional traditions in Hinduism. The tantras usually emphasize the gods Shiva (especially in the Kashmiri Kaula tradition), or Krishna (in the Vaishnava Sahajiya tradition) or the goddess Shakti (in the South Indian Shri Vidya and Bengali Shakta tantric traditions). Tantric ideas and rituals have also been influential in Buddhism, especially in Tibetan Vajrayana.

While Hindu devotionalism describes the highest religious experience as intense love of the deity, in tantra the highest state is union with a deity. This is considered not only possible, but ultimately the goal of human life. Tantra emphasizes the union of opposites: spirit and matter, *brahman* and the physical world (*jagat*), and god and humanity. While the modern sensationalizing of tantra has emphasized sexual union, this is only one form of union among many others that are more important to the tradition. In Kaula thought, the highest goal is the 'vision of the truth of the *kula*' (*kula-tattva-artha-darsana*), which is the direct intuition of ultimate reality. One gains the god Shiva's perception, in which all things appear the same, divine and otherwise (*sama-darsana*). In the Shri Vidya tradition, the earlier religious experiences (the momentary ecstasies or states of *kshana samadhi*) are temporary instances of the highest state of *sahaja samadhi*, a spontaneous state in which the person can perceive any world, divine or human, clearly.

Many tantric texts discuss the importance of religious experience. In some, ecstatic states act to verify religious claims. In others, these states are themselves the goal of the practice. The medieval *Kularnava Tantra* has long been an important text for both Kashmiri and Bengali tantric traditions. It describes the state, and the value, of absorption in the god Shiva, which it calls *samadhi*.

> 9.14 He [the yogi] does not hear, or smell, or touch, or see; he does not know pleasure and pain, he does not analyze. Like a log, he does not think, he is not aware of anything [material]. One who is thus absorbed only in Shiva is said to be in *samadhi*.
> 9.15 Just as no differences exist when water is poured into water, and milk into milk, ghee into ghee, so there exists no difference between the individual self (*jivatman*) and the highest self (*paramatman*) . . .

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> 9.25 In comparison to the pure and supreme state of consciousness attained by the great yogi, even the states of gods and other divine beings have no value.
> 9.26 For one who has seen (*darsana*) the all-pervading, peaceful, blissful and imperishable, nothing remains to be attained or known. (Das 1976 [1363 BS])

The *Kularnava Tantra* is a text that speaks clearly and unambiguously about the importance of experience, especially that of union with Shiva (*sivatva*):

> 8.85 He gazes outward but looks inward, and his eyes are unblinking. This is the *sambhavi mudra*.
> 8.86 This is the greatest of *mudras*, the true form of the bliss of union (*samarasa*), expressing the nature of the self. By means of this, the devotee truly becomes Shiva. There is no doubt about this.
> 8.87 Persons engaged in study of the self can know some of this bliss. But this state is beyond description and must be experienced, as the pleasure of drinking sugared milk must be experienced. (Das 1976 [1363 BS])

The tantric tradition involves complex ritual actions, and these actions (*sadhana*) engender a wide variety of religious experiences, which are described in the texts. The *Kularnava Tantra* gives one set of examples.

The Dharma Tradition

Of all types of Hinduism, this tradition has the least emphasis upon religious experience. Leading the dharmic life is fulfilling one's obligations according to age, gender, caste, region, and many other factors. The goal is being successful, living well as a householder if one is an adult, supporting past and coming generations, and living a moral life. In the past, members of this approach to Hinduism would contribute to temples and give offerings to deities, but no personal experience was expected. This tradition has been much influenced by modern secularism and Westernization, and some members today deny the existence and value of religious experience. Others may put off religious goals until a future rebirth, or at least until retirement, at which time they may withdraw from the world and follow a guru or perform meditation and other religious practices. There is a long tradition of tension in India between dharma (the good life, lived in harmony with the universe) and liberation or *moksha*, which leaves the world behind. It is not difficult to argue for the unimportance of religious experience in Hinduism if this is the only type of Hinduism that is examined. Yet the conflict between dharma and *moksha* is an ongoing debate in India.

Folk Religion

Folk and tribal religions are likely the oldest continuous forms of religion in India, but as they are largely based on oral tradition, it is difficult to prove their origins and examine their development. There are debates

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whether folk and tribal religions are subtypes of Hinduism, or separate belief systems – though clearly many types of folk religion incorporate Hindu deities and worship rituals.

There is no one definitive type of folk or tribal religion in India, but we can generalize a few common themes. Possession by gods and local spirits tends to be very important, and people who experience trance states are often understood as lay religious authorities. Sometimes there is group possession by ancestors as well, which is usually understood as a message for the community (trance is often sent by the primordial ancestress, the old woman or *budi ma*). Revelatory dreams and dream commands by deities are valued, and in many cases these are the origin stories for pilgrimage sites and holy places. These places are often natural locales where deities are believed to live, or burial grounds where ancestors dwell. There are religious specialists, male and female, called by various names (in West Bengal, *ojhas* and *gunins*), who undergo training in healing and other rituals. Often their training involves images of death and ascetic practices, and is accompanied by visionary experiences and vivid dreams. While sometimes such roles are hereditary, more often they come as a result of a 'call' from a deity or an unusual experience that the person cannot explain otherwise (McDaniel 2004).

The Bhakti Tradition

The majority of Hinduism today involves some form of *bhakti*, or loving devotion to one or more deities (Klostermaier 1994). This devotion should not merely be ordinary respect and obedience, but *parama prema*, the highest love, which brings a person to perfection. It is passionate longing for God's presence, and the joy that results from that longing (*premananda*, the bliss of selfless love) brings both immortality and knowledge of the god. The *bhakti* tradition rejected religious limitations on the basis of caste and gender, and offered access to God to a wide range of people.

There are many *bhakti* denominations or lineages (*sampradayas*), with the largest number of devotees worshipping the god Vishnu and his avatars or incarnations (including Krishna and Rama). These are followed by dedication to the god Shiva, and to the goddess Shakti or Devi (especially known in her forms of Kali, Durga and Parvati). In this section, we shall focus upon Vaishnava bhakti, which has the largest breadth of devotional literature.

While *bhakti* can refer to a variety of approaches to the deity, the most intensely loving form is called by Hardy 'emotional Krishna bhakti' (as distinguished from the earlier tradition of *bhakti* understood as loyalty and respect). Hardy writes that it grew up with the Bhagavata Purana and the seventh to ninth CE Alvar saints of South India (Hardy 1983).

Since that time, many Vaishnava works have discussed the importance of religious experience. In his tenth century CE *Bhakti Sutras*, which are

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dedicated to the god Krishna, the writer Narada describes degrees of devotional love. One begins by glorifying and appreciating the god's greatness, then loving his beauty, worshipping him and remembering him constantly, identifying with being the god's slave, then his friend, then his parent, then loving him as a wife loves her husband. The devotee should entirely surrender to Krishna and feel absorbed in him, yet still feel sorrow at the pain of separation from him. This feeling of union yet separateness is considered to be the highest religious state by Narada in his Sutra 82 (Tyagisananda 1978). Such experience is not intended to be left behind when a person achieves liberation – it should ideally go on forever.

The *bhakti* writer Ramanuja identifies the god Vishnu with the *brahman* of the Upanishads, and Vishnu comes down to earth from heaven to give mankind salvation. The most important religious event is self-surrender or *prapatti*. This is a state of absolute delight, resulting from Vishnu's mercy, and the highest state to be attained by human beings. For the *bhakti* writer Madhva, the ideal state for the devotee is reflecting God's splendor, perfectly identifying with Vishnu and seeing the world through his eyes. For the writer Vallabha, God's grace leads the devotee to eternal passionate love, in which can participate in the god's eternal play (*nitya lila*). The devotee attains the emotional states of *bhajananda* (the bliss of love) and *svarupananda* (the bliss of perceiving the god's true form), and becomes like Krishna's milkmaids or *gopis* with their minds entirely focused on the god.

One of the clearest examples of the importance of religious experience in Hinduism comes in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition of West Bengal. This tradition was inspired by the fifteenth-century saint Caitanya Mahaprabhu, who was believed to be a joint incarnation of the god Krishna and his consort Radha. The highest religious goal of this tradition is to experience all of the variations of intense love, the sort of passionate love experienced by Radha and her milkmaid friends the *gopis*. The legitimacy of these states of love is shown by the ecstatic experiences known as the *sattvika bhavas*, which include trembling, sweating, paralysis, crying, hair standing on end, changing skin color, and loss of consciousness. Thus, we see that religious experiences are not only legitimized by institutions – they may also be legitimized by other religious experiences.

Such emotional states may be results of meditative practice in current or past lives, or occur spontaneously as a gift of Krishna's grace. When the states of intense emotion (*bhakti bhava*) develop, the emotion is said to be deepened and condensed, with a heart full of continual burning desire. Separation from the god is misery, while his vision gives infinite pleasure. The devotee goes through many stages of love until he or she reaches the highest state or *mahabhava*, which has two modes: sharing the loving bliss found only in Radha and the *gopis*, and the sharing the state of passionate delirium found only in Radha herself, in which she experiences all possible emotions simultaneously. Texts like the *Bhaktirasamrtasindhu* and

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the *Ujjvalanilamani* describe the spiritual development of the devotee, from the mild emotions that occur as a result of ritual, to the passionate love that comes from true devotion (McDaniel 1989).

The religious goal of most forms of Gaudiya Vaishnava ritual practice is ecstasy to bring the person a direct vision of the god Krishna, and to have a continually new and passionate relationship with him. This religious experience is not tangential – it is central. The goal of the practice is not eliminating impurity, or gaining power.

For some forms of Gaudiya tradition, the ability to love Krishna involves developing a new spiritual body, known as the *siddha deha*. This is an eternal body, in the form of a handmaiden to the *gopis*, and it is understood as immortal. The religious emotions engendered by intense Vaishnava practice are too strong for an ordinary soul to bear – one needs a special spiritual self whose essence is love. This self holds the religious passions in this life, and continues to be in the presence of Radha and Krishna in their eternal paradise after death. Because the flow of Krishna's love is like an ocean of bliss, a body of non-physical bliss is needed to contain it.

While this is the highest state in Gaudiya Vaishnava theology, we do see other states that are valued: the appreciation of beauty and its essence (*rasa*), the joy that comes through chanting mantras and singing hymns (*kirtan*), the appreciation that comes during the visualizations of the Vaishnava paradise. While the yogic traditions emphasize the importance of religious knowledge, Vaishnavism values love more highly, and the true devotee is one who experiences and expresses that love.

Arguments

Let us take another look at the claims about religious experience in Asia that were mentioned at the beginning of this article. Is it the case that there was no indigenous value on religious experience, and that it was simply lacking in Hindu religious literature until the British educational system put it there? Clearly, this is not the case – post-colonial writers did not invent the importance of states like *brahman*, *kaivalya, samadhi*, and *mahabhava*. Nor can we say that interpretations that value such experiences are recent – there are long commentarial traditions that analyze and encourage such experiences, from the Upanishads onwards.

Can we say that the idea of religious experience itself is so vague that it is useless? This might be the case for analytic philosophy, or for pragmatism, where the only worthwhile questions have very clear and unambiguous answers. However, such an approach denigrates all subjective experience, so that appreciation of music, feelings of love and joy, and emotional involvement with drama and theater are all useless to discuss – and the Hindu *rasa* tradition of aesthetic experience values all of these.

As we compare understandings of religious experience in Hinduism and in the Judaeo-Christian West, what is striking is their similarity. Both

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differentiate between natural and supernatural religious experiences, both have understandings of divinity as personal (a God or gods) and impersonal (an Ultimate Reality or Source), both have types that value religious love and wisdom. While the West may have more emphasis on conversion and faith, and India more emphasis on mystical union and purification, there is a large area of overlap between their understandings.

Is it the case that all religious experience can be dismissed because of false claims about it by individuals? In Christianity, there is a long tradition of spiritual discernment, the ways to distinguish the origins of religious claims in God, Satan, or the human imagination. There are many reasons for false claims – voluntary or involuntary, originating from fantasy or trauma, from misunderstanding or sensory error. In the West, this is why spiritual direction has long been important to religious practitioners.

In Hinduism, we see the 'discernment of spirits' in both the role of the guru, and in the philosophy of religion. The guru is a person whose authority is quite often charismatic, and based upon those 'exalted spiritual states' mentioned as irrelevant by critics of religious experience. However, it is these states that allow the guru to be understood as able to evaluate the experiences of others. While some gurus gain their status from heredity and lineage (there are people who are born into guru status, and others who are named by institutions), many gurus gain their role based on their experiences, the *bhavas* that they undergo and that they can transmit to others. Guru and saint (*siddha*) biographies abound in stories of spontaneous supernatural events, religious emotions shared by crowds in 'waves of *bhava*', gurus who have visions and can read the thoughts of their devotees and bless them in special ways. Many gurus are outside of lineages and institutions, with only an initiating figure far in the past (whose religious persuasions are often unknown), and sometimes only a call from a god or goddess in a dream or vision. Yet, they are understood to be able to evaluate and guide the religious experiences of others, and are often called upon to do so.

The questions of false or illusory experience, whether alien abductions or sky flowers or ropes mistaken for snakes, have long been of interest to Indian philosophy. Hindu philosophers did not make the blanket claim that all experiences were reliable, but they also did not dismiss all experiences because some claims were problematic. Many thinkers would allow for the existence of a 'flash of intuition' (*pratibhajnana*) about a future event. More controversial were the intuition of sages (*arsajana*) and yogis (*yogipratyaksa*). For sages, the merit that resulted from austerities was understood to create a special type of perception, knowledge that is valid but not of sensory origin. Yogic perception comes about through the removal of mental impurities, and can include occult perception (*siddhadarsana*). Yogic perception has often been divided into two types: ecstatic, which gives insight into the essential nature of the universe, and non-ecstatic, which gives information of subtle, hidden, and remote objects (Sinha 1969). Because

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yoga philosophy traditionally accepts that all events, past and future, exist simultaneously, and that temporal order is a construction of the intellect, the yogi may have access to all times and all objects.

However, there is room for error. The yogi's perceptions may be distorted by such qualities as illusion, egotism, and restlessness. A major problem is the identification of self and mind, which can appear identical but are different. The mind (*buddhi*) is changeable and capable of error, subject to past memories (*samskaras*) and their intellectual and emotional associations, while the deeper self is beyond these problems. There may be misidentification, distorted interpretation, or simply wrong perception. There are supernatural events that precede the state of liberation, and they can be confused with illusory ones. It is only when the sage is understood to be free of the effects of karma that his or her experiences become true for all devotees. Otherwise, they are judged in terms of probabilities and individual faith in the guru and god.

We also have a school of thought on religious experience that admits its existence, but devalues it and understands it be a sign of illness. As with Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson's writing about India's religious mysticism as a set of pathological states, with saints and ascetics portrayed as traumatized individuals whose mystical visions reveal a cultural type of 'psychic fainting', Asia in general and India in particular has been interpreted as a place of world-denying people who dread experience and long for escape from it (Masson 1981). Masson talked about the flight from emotion in Indian religion, and this view has become popular among some later scholars (with psychoanalytic training and otherwise). From this perspective, religious experience is admitted as significant, but it is interpreted as pathological or regressive.

Much of the writing today against the existence and value of mystical and religious experience comes from constructivist writers. From the constructivist perspective, it is conceptual schemas or presuppositions that come from a religious tradition that determine or shape mystical experiences. Such schemas tell mystics what to expect, and then the mystics project or believe themselves to undergo such expected experiences. For writers like Katz, Penner, Gimello, and Proudfoot, mystical experiences are products of culture, and one cannot have a 'new' or 'original' mystical experience. Some constructivists are more rigid, claiming that cultural concepts totally determine experience, while others simply claim that there is no 'pure consciousness' experience (as we might find in Advaita Vedanta), and that all mystical experience requires concepts, and is in some fashion mediated. From the constructivist perspective, there would be no such thing as William James' description of mystics for whom experience is primary and original, 'not a dull habit, but an acute fervor.' From the constructivist perspective, all mystical experience is 'second-hand religious life', as James describes it, an imitation of institutional ideals.

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The usual critique of the constructivist view is that it deals poorly with innovation, heresy, and alternative interpretations of text. However, it may also leave out data – religions tend to support people who support them, and such supporters enter religious history as saints and leaders. We do not know who was scorned or ignored, because their experiences did not fit into the accepted model. In my own research area, West Bengal, mystics whose experiences did not fit cultural models were usually dismissed as insane, and had a hard time getting their claims and experiences accepted.

From the other understanding of mysticism, the perennialist perspective, all mystical experience leads towards a common core, and is interpreted or expressed differently in different religions and cultures. The experience often comes first, and then the person must figure out what it means. This approach goes well with Vedanta and the experiences of infinite light and unity with nature that are found in world religions, but works less well with theistic forms of mysticism, in which the deity is quite specific. Perennialists emphasize the unity in world religions, while constructivists emphasize difference. The most well-known writer on the perennialist position is perhaps Robert Forman, who describes the constructivist position as 'almost an article of faith in the academy' (Forman 1989). He writes on 'pure consciousness events' and understands mysticism to show a fundamental human connectedness. Other perennialist writers include Underhill, Smith, Huxley, and Stace. This position contradicts constructivism and argues that not all human experience is a result of conditioning and expectation.

There are also constructivist writers who emphasize the role of colonialism in the Western reconstruction of Indian experience, as a 'Mystic East' that never existed. According to this perspective, Western observers project their own ideas of mysticism onto India and 'the Orient', and Eastern mysticism is invented by Western writers through erroneous translations and false descriptions.

Hindu practitioners in India today have varied ways of understanding mystical experience. During fieldwork in India, I interviewed renunciants, brahmins, people possessed by Sanskritic devas and local gods, yogis, and Hindu believers of many sorts. Most did not speak English. The only people who agreed with the Western categories of constructivism described here were the communists (CPIM) with whom I spoke – and many of them were 'secret practitioners' (they came to the burning ground after midnight, when nobody could see that they were meditating). Their view of history would accept religion as being historically constructed. And as communists, their views were not primarily Hindu, but rather Western.

Constructivist ideas did not make sense to the renunciants interviewed. Many practitioners spent years going from one guru to another, attempting to understand their spontaneous experiences (which often did not fit into traditional models). They were not 'perennialists', not philosophers and

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linguists, but they had experiences that they felt were important and they sought to understand them. They also sought to learn the appropriate rituals to perform, an important sign of the acceptance of an idea in India. These seekers – who were native Hindu, not Westerners – might find a deity to worship, or a yogic meditation to practice, or an ashram to join. All of these were attempts to seek a place in the religious world when their experiences did not fit the accepted model.

Academics in India could understand the idea that people might imagine religious experiences to gain power and respect. But for the more serious renunciants (*sadhus* and *sadhikas*), this was hypocrisy or insanity. A *bhava* was a way to understand the deity or the supernatural worlds, but these could only be really known through direct encounter. Understandings given by revelatory texts are sacred, but there is always more to learn from an infinite ocean of possibility.

If we return to the critiques that began this article – that religious experience is not an indigenous idea, that it is unimportant, and that all claims on the topic are false – we can see that both Indian religious history and Indian practitioners would have problems with them. There are Indian scholars today who are speaking against these ideas, saying that constructivist and colonialist writers are stealing away their religious values by claiming credit for them. This article is an overview of some indigenous mystical ideas in Indian thought that did not come with colonialism, but existed long before the Europeans ever came to visit. It also shows that there is indeed respect for the old, but also room for new ideas and understandings of mystical experiences.

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Short Biography

June McDaniel is Professor of Religious Studies at the College of Charleston. Her research is in the areas of Hinduism (primarily Bengali bhakti and tantra) and mysticism. Her first book *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal* (University of Chicago Press, 1989) was a study of ecstatic religious experience in India based on sacred text, hagiography, and interview data. It showed some problems in distinguishing ecstasy from madness in Hindu religion. Her second book, *Making Virtuous*

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Daughters and Wives: An Introduction to Women's Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion (State University of New York Press, 2003) was a study of women's ritual practices. Her third book *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal* (Oxford University Press, 2004) was an analysis of major the forms of Bengali Shakta religion. She is currently working on a book dealing with mystical experience and its interpretations in the modern West. She has published articles on religious emotion, ritual theory and practice, Hindu devotional groups, women and religion, fieldwork ethics, and trance states, among other topics. She has done field research in India on year-long grants from Fulbright and from the American Institute of Indian Studies. She is currently co-chair of the Mysticism Group of the American Academy of the Religion, founding co-chair of the AAR Anthropology of Religion Group, and former co-chair of the AAR Ritual Studies Group. Her BA was in Studio Art from the State University of New York at Albany, her MTS was in Theology from Emory University, and her PhD was in History of Religions from the University of Chicago.

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