

United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities

**Religious Studies After Methodological Atheism:
Terror Management, Transcendental Experience,
and
Modes of Social Science**

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Abstract

Methodological atheism is one of the predominant axioms of religious studies research over the past fifty years. This guideline states that researchers shall not attribute religious experiences documented in the field to supernatural causes. Rather, they must “bracket” the supernatural. This essay first explores recent criticisms of methodological atheism. It then explores the role of methodological atheism in the two religious studies disciplines of psychology and sociocultural anthropology through case studies of Terror Management Theory and Theologically Engaged Anthropology. The essay concludes by comparing the cases of psychology of religion and anthropology of religion, and by drawing conclusions about the viability of methodological atheism, or its alternative, a standard of public evidence, in these two disciplines.

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Introduction

Methodological atheism has been an important axiom in studies of religious experience over the last fifty years. It states that supernatural interpretations and explanations of religious phenomena must be “bracketed” in scientific studies of religion. Supernatural explanations have been assumed not to be proper in scientific writings. More recently, methodological atheism has been subjected to debate. Social scientists and scholars of religion have increasingly called methodological atheism into question, some suggesting methodological agnosticism instead, and some calling for a standard of public evidence. This essay will first trace the theoretical debate over methodological atheism. Then, it will consider two case studies of how two different social scientific traditions have treated atheism and the supernatural. The essay will conclude with reflections on newer arguments for a standard of public evidence.

Chapter 1

After Methodological Atheism and Agnosticism

The widespread practice of methodological atheism in religious studies and adjacent disciplines has its roots in the work of Peter Berger, particularly in his classic, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*.¹

Berger states that

it is impossible within the frame of reference of scientific theorizing to make any affirmations, positive or negative, about the ultimate ontological status of this alleged reality [religious meanings.] Within this frame of reference, the religious projections can be dealt with only as such, as products of human activity and human consciousness, and rigorous brackets have to be placed around the question as to whether these projections may not also be something else than that (or, more accurately refer to something else than the human world in which they empirically originate). In other words, every inquiry into religious matters that limits itself to the empirically available must necessarily be based on a 'methodological atheism.'²

Religious studies methodologist Jason Blum presents Berger's argument as a succinct syllogism:

1. Research in the secular academy (i.e., research that is not theological in nature) necessarily relies on empirical evidence.
2. Religions often include claims that cannot be assessed on the basis of empirical evidence.
3. Therefore, researchers working in the secular academy (i.e., non-theologians) cannot make conclusions concerning the status of religious claims having to do with the supernatural. Therefore, they must assume, for purposes of research, that all such claims are "projection[s] of human meanings into the empty vastness of the universe."³

¹ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

² Berger, 100.

³ Jason Blum, "Beyond Methodological Axioms," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89, no. 2 (June 2021): 441.

Berger's formulation thus assumes that nothing supernatural can ever qualify as empirical, an assumption that will be explored later in this essay.

More recently, some scholars have argued that methodological agnosticism would be better than methodological atheism. Douglas Porpora was an early voice who called out the ontological implications of methodological atheism.⁴ Compared to methodological agnosticism, which he suggests involves "genuine neutrality" on matters of the supernatural, "methodological atheism enjoins a stronger form of bracketing. Belief in the reality of a supernatural object of religious experience is not only suspended for purposes of comparison. Instead, the reality of any supernatural object of religious experience is forever debarred from consideration within sociology as a possible – even if partial – explanation of the experience."⁵ In other words, atheism cannot be purely methodological. It inevitably bleeds into the ontological claims of scholarship, because it is too difficult to keep methodology and ontological claims separate.

Porpora suggests methodological agnosticism as an alternative. He claims that a methodological agnosticism is already practiced within psychology, though as we will see in Chapter 2 of this paper, methodological agnosticism is not universal within psychology. Porpora cites, in particular, William James and the tradition in psychology that follows him.⁶ One such work is *Varieties of Anomalous Experience* by Cardena et al.⁷ About this book, Porpora writes that

⁴ Douglas V. Porpora, "Methodological Atheism, Methodological Agnosticism and Religious Experience," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 36, no. 1 (2006): 57–75.

⁵ Porpora, 58.

⁶ Porpora, 72–74.

⁷ Etzel Cardena, Steven Jay Lynn, and Stanley Krippner, eds., *Varieties of Anomalous Experience* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000).

the Jamesian connection is clear. The book encompasses research on such phenomena as near-death, psi-related, hallucinatory, past-life, and out-of-body experiences. The work canvassed is remarkable in a number of respects. First, remarkable for a publication of the American Psychological Association is how interdisciplinary the work is. Represented along with psychology is psychiatry, medicine, physiology, parapsychology, history, anthropology, and even a sociologist or two. In refreshing contrast with sociology, the intent seems to be not to affirm a discipline but to answer questions. Toward that end, perhaps the most remarkable feature of the book is the range of answers – and data – considered. The literature on near-death experiences is exemplary. Considered explanations include physiological, psychological, and cultural. Notably included too, however, is the “mind-body separation and afterlife hypothesis.” Even putative paranormal phenomena are evaluated rather than ruled out a priori.⁸

Thus Porpora concludes by recommending the replacement of methodological atheism in sociological studies of religious experience with “the methodological agnosticism already being practiced by psychology.”⁹

Michael A. Cantrell makes a stronger claim in rejecting both methodological atheism and methodological agnosticism.¹⁰ Methodological atheism is rejected for reasons similar to Porpora.¹¹ Cantrell cites Douglas Ezzy who writes that although methodological atheism “does not typically entail belief in the supernatural, it does entail belief *about* the supernatural. Specifically, anthropological and sociological monographs have systematically denied the existence of religious beings and forces. This denial is not ‘unbiased’ or ‘objective.’ Rather, methodological atheism is equally a product of the influence

⁸ Porpora, “Methodological Atheism, Methodological Agnosticism and Religious Experience,” 72.

⁹ Porpora, 74.

¹⁰ Michael A. Cantrell, “Must a Scholar of Religion Be Methodologically Atheistic or Agnostic?,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 2 (2016): 373–400; Michael A. Cantrell, “Must a Scholar of Religion Be Methodologically Atheistic or Agnostic?,” in *The Question of Methodological Naturalism*, ed. Jason Blum, Supplements to Method & Theory in the Study of Religion 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 222–50.

¹¹ Porpora, “Methodological Atheism, Methodological Agnosticism and Religious Experience.”

of ‘personal convictions’ and ‘philosophical belief.’”¹² Methodological atheism amounts to “cultural imperialism that has resulted in the systematic misinterpretation of religious practice.”¹³ Cantrell matches and raises Porpora in arguing that “the rationale for the claim that nonatheistic commitments are not proper constituents of scientific theories is itself laden with highly controversial metaphysical or epistemological commitments that go beyond mere methodology.”¹⁴ ¹⁵ For instance, Cantrell notes that a personal commitment to metaphysical naturalism might be involved, or a belief that there can be no scientific knowledge of the sacred, and yet these might go undetected in the name of methodology.¹⁶

Cantrell also moves beyond Porpora in rejecting methodological agnosticism, which he deems “only marginally less problematic than” methodological atheism.¹⁷ He makes the strong claim, in confronting Berger’s arguments, that “the ‘world’ of... believers... is not reducible to the ‘world’ of the unbeliever, with the sacred left over as some additional residue.”¹⁸ In other words, the sacred is not something that can be simply subtracted or bracketed out, leaving a profane world that is uncontroversial and the same to believer and

¹² Douglas Ezzy, “Faith and Social Science: Contrasting Victor and Edith Turner’s Analyses of Spiritual Realities.” in *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*, ed. G. St. John (New York, NY and Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books, 2008.) quoted in Cantrell, “Must a Scholar of Religion Be Methodologically Atheistic or Agnostic?,” 2016, 8–9.

¹³ Douglas Ezzy, “Faith and Social Science: Contrasting Victor and Edith Turner’s Analyses of Spiritual Realities.” in *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*, ed. G. St. John (New York, NY and Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books, 2008.) quoted in Cantrell, 8–9.

¹⁴ Porpora, “Methodological Atheism, Methodological Agnosticism and Religious Experience.”

¹⁵ Cantrell, “Must a Scholar of Religion Be Methodologically Atheistic or Agnostic?,” 2016, 11.

¹⁶ Cantrell, 11.

¹⁷ Cantrell, 16.

¹⁸ Cantrell, “Must a Scholar of Religion Be Methodologically Atheistic or Agnostic?,” 2018, 227.

unbeliever alike. The profane world, for the believer, is infused with characteristics and consequences of the sacred. Therefore, methodological agnosticism is no more objective than methodological atheism. Cantrell writes,

as discussed above, the sacred is empirically available to the believer in *this* world. The significance of this fact is that, just as the believer does not live in the ‘world’ of the unbelieving atheist, so he does not live in the ‘world’ of the unbelieving agnostic. Consequently, it is hard to see why it should be normative for a scholar to shoehorn her scholarship to conform to conceptual categories most congenial to the views of unbelievers.¹⁹

Further, “methodological agnosticism imposes an additional restraint that hinders scholars from articulating good reasons to believe that some religious experience is a delusion or grounded in false consciousness” because methodological agnosticism forces the scholar to withhold all judgments about religious experience, pro or con.²⁰

Cantrell denies the notion that the academy is religiously neutral. Rather, Cantrell suggests that the academy is aligned with liberal Protestantism.²¹ Therefore, objectivity is actually best served by factoring in the religious position of the scholar.²² In the end, Cantrell suggests that it is not the case that “‘anything goes.’ But, as historian of religion George Marsden has suggested, it does mean that scholars are free, for example, to investigate issues in the form of the question, ‘If so and so religious belief were true, how would it change the way we look at the subject at hand?’”²³

¹⁹ Cantrell, 240.

²⁰ Cantrell, 240.

²¹ Cantrell, 241.

²² Cantrell, 242.

²³ Cantrell, 247.

In a recent article, methodologist Jason Blum weighs the scholarly conversation on methodological atheism and agnosticism, including Berger, Porpora, and Cantrell.²⁴ Like Porpora and Cantrell, Blum rejects the idea that atheistic bracketing can be separated from actual ontological claims of atheism.²⁵ Like Cantrell, Blum also rejects methodological agnosticism. While “methodological agnosticism’s claim to neutrality is... more defensible than that of its atheistic counterpart,” methodological agnosticism also fails because it prevents the scholar from saying much of anything if the axiom is faithfully followed.²⁶ Blum cites an argument by Craig Martin that methodological agnosticism in effect reduces scholarship to a radically emic stance: “research is thereby reduced to the simple reproduction of subjects’ own accounts, and any further analytical tasks are barred in the name of neutrality.”²⁷

Blum importantly explores the relationship of atheistic and agnostic methodological axioms to the difference between interpretation and explanation, or in other words, to “emic” vs. “etic” analysis.²⁸ Methodological atheism and agnosticism have been recommended in large part due to the importance of etic analysis (or in other words, explanation, or the investigation of causation with regard to religious experience). Interestingly, Blum seems to suggest that emic and etic analysis, or interpretation and causation, are necessarily sequential steps of scholarship on religious experience.²⁹ I would argue that the accuracy of

²⁴ Blum, “Beyond Methodological Axioms.”

²⁵ Blum, 439.

²⁶ Blum, 449–50.

²⁷ Blum, 450.

²⁸ Blum, 450–56.

²⁹ Blum, 456.

this assumption varies widely by discipline, and even traditions within disciplines. For instance, from what I can gauge regarding Terror Management Theory in psychology (in Chapter 2 of this essay,) research revolves around explanation. This is not necessarily universally the case across the social sciences.

The tradition of “thick description” within sociocultural anthropology, pioneered by Clifford Geertz, aims to illuminate the “native’s point of view,” and is therefore heavily emic, or oriented toward interpretation of local meanings.³⁰ Geertz advises “generalizing within the case,” a limited form of explanation based on local meanings, rather than broad causal theory construction.³¹ “Generalizing within the case” involves diagnostic analysis, or fitting concepts to local facts and narratives to render them more cross-culturally intelligible.³² Theory hovers close to the data, rather than rising into more abstract general theory.³³ The field of anthropology, when adhering to such a viewpoint, advances bit by bit in specific, empirical, ethnographic texts, rather than in theoretical treatises.

Other modes of anthropology are far more explanatory in nature, such as Roy Rappaport’s analysis of the religious rituals and diet of the Tsembaga people.³⁴ Rappaport assumes, along with Homans, that religious ritual does not have the supernatural effect that the participants intend, but rather that religious

³⁰ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30; Clifford Geertz, “‘From the Native’s Point of View’: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding,” in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 55–70.

³¹ Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” 26.

³² Geertz, 26.

³³ Geertz, 24.

³⁴ Roy A. Rappaport, “Ritual Regulation of Environmental Relations Among a New Guinea People,” in *Anthropology for the Nineties: Introductory Readings*, ed. Johnnetta B. Cole (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 389–403.

ritual serves certain social functions.³⁵ In addition, Rappaport argues that religious ritual regulates the distribution of protein in Tsembaga society in the form of pork from ritual pig slaughters.³⁶ Thus, Rappaport's analysis is very etic, or experience-distant, in comparison to the thick descriptions rendered by Geertz.

In any case, the emphasis on methodological atheism and agnosticism is revealed in Blum's analysis to imply that we want to discover the *cause* of religious experience. If we stop at discovering what religious experience *means* to people, it is arguably far easier to accommodate ideas of the supernatural, for we are mostly documenting the meanings generated by informants. These distinctions have been implicit (rather than clearly delineated) in the entire conversation on methodological axioms in the study of religious experience. They are more clearly brought to the fore by Blum.³⁷ When we are clearer on what we wish to accomplish regarding religious experience as scholars of religion, it is easier to come to terms with the role of supernatural explanations.

Ultimately, Blum argues that neither methodological atheism nor methodological agnosticism is tenable as a normative prescription for religious studies because each is inevitably entangled with ontological claims, whether explicit or implicit.³⁸ Therefore, Blum suggests that religious studies do away with methodological axioms entirely and rely instead on the standard of public

³⁵ Rappaport, 389.

³⁶ Rappaport, 402.

³⁷ Blum, "Beyond Methodological Axioms."

³⁸ Blum, 450–56.

evidence.³⁹ This has the advantage of not proscribing supernatural explanations *a priori*; all explanations, whether supernatural or naturalistic, will hinge on the availability of publicly documentable evidence that leads to repeatable explanatory efforts. “The notion of evidence” that Blum promotes “is broad, referring generally to any phenomena that are publicly ostensible to multiple observers and therefore not restricted to detection by only a single consciousness.”⁴⁰ This standard, I would argue, has the practical consequence of eliminating many supernatural explanations anyway, simply because mystical experiences tend to be highly individual. However, as I will explore in Chapter 3 of this essay, the individual experiences of the researcher may also be supernatural in nature, and may well be difficult to separate from the rest of the ethnographic data. First, in Chapter 2, we will explore the role of methodological and overt atheisms in the psychological field of Terror Management Theory.

The following two chapters will put Blum’s public evidence model to the test. Blum’s standard of public evidence may be the best compromise available to scholars of religion, but does it come at any cost?

³⁹ Blum, 457–63.

⁴⁰ Blum, 458.

Chapter 2

Terror Management Theory and its Critics

Terror Management Theory has been perceived as one of the most trenchant contemporary academic challenges to the authenticity of religious experience, leading scholars such as Richard Beck to acknowledge the power of functionalist criticisms of religion and craft alternative arguments for religion.⁴¹ This section examines Terror Management Theory and related literature as a case study of religious studies methodology, and specifically, of scholarship on religious experience. Terror Management Theory, in short, argues that religion functions as a buffer to people's anxiety about death, putatively casting doubt on the authenticity of religion.

Ernest Becker, the originator of what has become Terror Management Theory, was ostensibly an anthropologist, though he delved into much psychology, psychoanalysis, and existentialist philosophy in *The Denial of Death*.⁴² Becker's main point was that cultures are essentially hero systems which distract participants from the inevitability of death. In other words, cultures structure and influence the specific ways in which the achievements of individuals allow them to persevere heroically in the face of their ultimate demise. Culture is a distraction from death.

Terror Management Theory, in its current form in the discipline of psychology, has been developed especially by the scholarly trio of Sheldon

⁴¹ Richard Beck, *The Authenticity of Faith: The Varieties and Illusions of Religious Experience* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012).

⁴² Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1973).

Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, who published *The Worm at the Core*⁴³ as a summary of their research, aimed at an educated public. The atheism of this work is more than methodological bracketing: it is, rather, quite overt. Solomon et al. state that “our ancestors ingeniously conspired to ‘Just Say No’ to reality by creating a supernatural universe that afforded a sense of control over life and death, enabling them to bound over the ‘yawning chasm’ and cross the cognitive Rubicon that triggered humankind’s evolutionary explosion.”⁴⁴ The invention of the supernatural may have served a purpose in human evolution, but it was a fabrication nonetheless, according to these psychologists.

Solomon et al. devote the whole of Part II of their book to the role of death in human cultural and biological evolution, as well as histories of the project to escape death through immortality, whether literal or symbolic.⁴⁵ Chapter Four includes a section entitled “Mortal Terror and the Invention of the Supernatural.”⁴⁶ The authors make the argument here that the supernatural is fabricated, and functioned in evolution to encourage courageous behavior in our ancestors:

People terrified by the prospect of their own demise would be less likely to take risks in hunting to increase the odds of landing big game, to compete effectively for mates, or to provide good care for their offspring. So our ancestors made a supremely adaptive, ingenious, and imaginative leap: they created a supernatural world, one in which death was not inevitable or irrevocable. The groups of early humans who fabricated the most compelling tales could best manage mortal terror. As a result, they would have been the most capable of functioning effectively in their environment and thereby most likely to perpetuate their genes into future generations.⁴⁷

⁴³ Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2015).

⁴⁴ Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, 64.

⁴⁵ Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, 63–123.

⁴⁶ Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, 67–69.

⁴⁷ Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, 67.

Thus, the supernatural is assumed not to be real, because the idea of it was helpful to early humans. (This is a logical non-sequitur.) This denial of the supernatural is clearly more than methodological.

Chapter Five concerns the supernatural most directly.⁴⁸ The chapter begins with a review of the Gilgamesh story, in which the snake spoils Gilgamesh's plans for immortality by eating his magical immortality plant. The authors describe ancient Chinese and Egyptian burial practices and the beliefs about the afterlife that accompanied them, as well as modern-day beliefs from Islam and Christianity. They cite a poll from 2007 which shows that 74% of Americans at that time believed in an afterlife.⁴⁹ Next, the authors review the history of attempts by such thinkers as Socrates and Descartes to deduce the existence of souls. Solomon et al. argue implicitly that since the nature of beliefs about the soul has varied somewhat from place to place and time to time, that the soul must not really exist.⁵⁰ In a facetious mode, Solomon et al. state that "throughout history, humans have had souls, although the specific nature of them varies considerably across time and space."⁵¹ Could not widespread variations on the theme of the soul point just as easily to lost cultural wisdom in modernity – believers "touching" different parts of the "elephant" – as to widespread delusion?⁵²

⁴⁸ Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, 82–99.

⁴⁹ Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, 87.

⁵⁰ Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, 88.

⁵¹ Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, 88.

⁵² Thatamanil, John J., *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

Later, in Chapter 7, Solomon et al. reduce religious experience and belief to the terms of contemporary psychiatry: “If just one person believed that God spoke to Moses in the form of a burning bush, antipsychotic medication would be sought to relieve this poor soul of his florid delusion. But when the same belief is shared by millions of people, it becomes unassailable truth.”⁵³ In general, the approach to religion and religious experience in *The Worm at the Core* is far more than methodologically atheist, but rather overtly atheist. The book makes repeated reductionist arguments that conform to the unproven assumptions of the contemporary majority in science.

Richard Beck is an openly Christian psychologist and a contemporary critic of Terror Management Theory. In *The Authenticity of Faith*, Beck⁵⁴ sets out to salvage theism from the perceived devastating attack from the “masters of suspicion,” particularly Sigmund Freud. Part One of the book details the assault of the masters of suspicion on classical apologetics, especially the intentional shift of the conversation from matters of ontology and epistemology to functional critiques which build a circumstantial case, or a casting of doubt, on theism. Beck traces this shift from the early masters of suspicion, including Karl Marx, Charles Darwin (and since he was not personally hostile to religion, his followers), and especially the trenchant criticisms by Freud, through the existentialist thinkers such as Otto Rank, Irvin Yalom, and Ernest Becker, among others, to contemporary Terror Management Theory.

⁵³ Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*, 133–34.

⁵⁴ Beck, *The Authenticity of Faith: The Varieties and Illusions of Religious Experience*.

The central weakness of Beck's book is that he capitulates on the question of functional critique in the name of progressing the debate between believers and critics of religion. "For almost one hundred years it has been almost impossible to make progress regarding Freud's critique of religious belief in *The Future of an Illusion*," writes Beck. "For most of this time skeptics and believers have largely engaged in a fruitless flame-throwing war producing more heat than light. This is largely due to the fact that the battle has been waged on the wrong turf... until the issue was taken up in psychological laboratories, there was legitimately no way to make progress."⁵⁵ Yet I argue that packing up ontology and epistemology and taking up the debate entirely on functional turf comes at too high a cost. Beck purposely abandons the ontological and apologetic debates discussed in the first half of the book and seeks to make an argument for theism in the second half of the book based on laboratory data analysis. The second half of Beck's book proceeds to make a relatively weak argument that so-called "sick souls" (in the terminology of William James) hold religious beliefs while acknowledging death and eschewing comfort from belief in God.

"Sick souls" are less likely to believe that God is personally protective from misfortune, illness, or death, that God will provide guidance, direction, or insight to them, that God has created a special purpose for their lives, that God is available to help with even trivial situations, or believe in a divine purpose or plan amid the seeming chaos of life.⁵⁶ Since "sick souls" nevertheless affirm the

⁵⁵ Beck, 195.

⁵⁶ Beck, 158–59.

existence of God, Beck claims to have found a counterexample to Freud's (and others') insistence that religious belief results from a need for consolation and the denial of death. Writes Beck, "we would have in this instance evidence (though no proof) that faith does not *necessarily* involve existential illusion, that faith can be educated to reality."⁵⁷

Yet at what price does Beck simply go along with the terms of the game as defined by the masters of suspicion and the TMT researchers? Beck puts the case for religion on an unnecessarily defensive posture. It is perfectly natural for people to feel nurtured by religious belief. People also feel better when they get enough oxygen, or fruits and vegetables, but it does not follow necessarily that oxygen and healthy foods are false concepts. In other words, nourishment does not necessarily imply a negative ontological status. (It, in fact, may hint at the opposite!) Beck fails to question and confront what exactly the "masters of suspicion" and contemporary TMT scholars are doing methodologically. The trouble lies in the functionalism and positivism that have persisted in the discipline of psychology, to which Beck may be partially blind because he is a psychologist as well. Beck agrees to the terms of a game he cannot expect to win convincingly.

A more successful rebuttal of the atheism in Terror Management Theory would take on the functionalist doubt-casting in a more direct fashion, challenging the logical fallacies and leaps inherent in the functionalist arguments, and forcing Terror Management Theory to retreat at least to a more methodologically atheist

⁵⁷ Beck, 252.

posture. Better yet, a successful critique of Terror Management Theory could insist on more-than-circumstantial public evidence that there is, or is not, a God and afterlife. The empirical standard cuts both ways – the question of afterlife or no afterlife should be settled on the preponderance of the evidence in one direction or another, or not at all.

Chapter 3

Ethnography of Religious Experience and Theologically Engaged Anthropology

What does Blum's standard of public evidence mean in the context of contemporary sociocultural anthropology? Historically, sociocultural anthropologists have largely adhered to Berger's axiom of methodological atheism. Deviations from this axiom are controversial but are growing in support. Rane Willerslev and Christian Suhr are two Danish anthropologists who have contributed a recent article on the role of faith in anthropology, which has been published alongside three largely sympathetic rejoinders and a response by Willerslev and Suhr.^{58 59} They confront methodological atheism with a call for methodological openness and humility:

Our claim is that anthropological insight cannot be achieved through reasoned discourse alone. Sometimes a qualitative shift in perspective is required by which the fieldworker is forced to embrace what otherwise appears to be logically impossible or absurd. In this article we focus specifically on the impact of such disruptive experiences for anthropologists who are engaged in the study of religious, spiritual, or magical practices, but we suggest that such experiences may be equally important to anthropologists who study other facets of human life that are not explicitly religious. Religious traditions offer a language through which to deal with such shifts in perspective, and in this article we propose they might best be described as "leaps of faith."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Rane Willerslev and Christian Suhr, "Is There a Place for Faith in Anthropology? Religion, Reason, and the Ethnographer's Divine Revelation," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8, no. 1/2 (2018): 65–78.

⁵⁹ T. M. Luhrmann, "The Real Ontological Challenge: Rejoinder to Willerslev, Rane, and Christian Suhr, 2018.," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8, no. 1/2 (2018): 79–82; Michael W. Scott, "God Is Other(s): Anthropological Pietism and the Beings of Metamorphosis. Rejoinder to Willerslev, Rane, and Christian Suhr, 2018.," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8, no. 1/2 (2018): 83–86; Jacob Copeman and Hagstrom, John, "The Absence of the Divine: Rejoinder to Willerslev, Rane, and Christian Suhr, 2018.," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8, no. 1/2 (2018): 87–91; Christian Suhr and Rane Willerslev, "Response: Faith in Anthropology," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8, no. 1/2 (2018): 92–96.

⁶⁰ Willerslev and Suhr, "Is There a Place for Faith in Anthropology? Religion, Reason, and the Ethnographer's Divine Revelation," 65.

“Leaps of faith” involve the “acceptance of experiences that we cannot hope to understand.”⁶¹ In developing anthropological “leaps of faith,” Willerslev and Suhr employ the philosophy of Kierkegaard in identifying the utility of unsettling experiences in the field that challenge rational explanation on the part of the anthropologist, and sometimes on the part of the anthropological subject as well.

The authors cite at least two examples of the mutual failure of rational explanation. One is from the reports of explorer Knud Rasmussen, who when questioning an Inuit shaman about the rationale behind his culture’s taboos, was reminded by the shaman that Rasmussen had no explanation for all the undeserved suffering in the world. The shaman concluded by saying that the taboos simply are the way things are.⁶² Another example is from the fieldwork of Willerslev in Siberia, where his Siberian interlocutor insisted that Willerslev let go of trying to explain a vivid dream: “I don’t know why, but that’s the way it is... One needs to let go of proof, since there is none.”⁶³

Willerslev and Suhr each contribute examples from their respective fieldwork experiences of how potential encounters with the divine disrupted their sense of scholarly “objectivity” and the traditional separation of the scientist from the subject. Willerslev, as noted above, experienced a vivid dream while hungry in Siberia, in which he devoured the milk and flesh of a woman in a cabin in the forest. The next day, Willerslev went hunting and killed a cow moose and its calf, whose milk and meat sustained Willerslev and his Siberian friend. The

⁶¹ Willerslev and Suhr, 68.

⁶² Willerslev and Suhr, 71.

⁶³ Willerslev and Suhr, 69.

experience disoriented Willerslev's sense of scientific objectivity. Neither he nor his Siberian friend Ivan could explain the dream, and it remained an "inexplicable 'paradox' that he could only embrace with a leap of faith."⁶⁴

Suhr studied Muslims in Denmark who practice exorcism when faced with possession by jinn.⁶⁵ In the course of an exorcism, Suhr "himself started to hear the manipulative whispers of jinn and had to protect himself."⁶⁶ The jinn Amir "speaks Arabic in a deep guttural voice" through the body of Feisal, who reportedly does not know Arabic himself. Suhr becomes confused as well as emotionally invested as the exorcism progresses: "At the same time my mind spins with suspicion, I keep reciting a supplication from the Qur'an for protection. My body shakes when Amir looks at me through Feisal's eyes. I know I must not fear the jinn. When people start to fear, they get caught."⁶⁷

Willerslev and Suhr relate the abolishment of methodological atheism to the issue of emic vs. etic analysis through a discussion of the controversy surrounding the anthropologist "going native."⁶⁸ "Going native," or in other words, embracing such a radically emic stance that the anthropologist wholeheartedly identifies with the views of those the anthropologist is studying, has long been proscribed within anthropology as much as methodological atheism has been proscribed. "There has been much debate," write Willerslev and Suhr, "around the risk of fieldworkers becoming entirely consumed by the cultural and religious

⁶⁴ Willerslev and Suhr, 69.

⁶⁵ Willerslev and Suhr, 69–70.

⁶⁶ Willerslev and Suhr, 69.

⁶⁷ Willerslev and Suhr, 69–70.

⁶⁸ Willerslev and Suhr, 70–72.

beliefs of their informants – a supposedly dreadful situation, in which the anthropologist loses her or his sense of scholarly distance... This seems to us a decidedly misplaced fear.”⁶⁹ Willerslev and Suhr emphasize that “the native” is a construction after all, and one that should not be overblown or imagined as homogeneous.

All the same, a few anthropologists such as Edith Turner “have argued that in fact we do need to go native in order to truly grasp what our informants are telling us.”⁷⁰ Turner reportedly saw a “spirit emerge from her informant’s back during fieldwork in Zambia:”

I saw with my own eyes a large thing emerging out of the flesh of her back. It was a big gray sphere – a sort of plasm – about six inches across, dark and opaque. I was amazed – delighted. I still laugh with the glee at the realization of having seen it, the lhamba spirit, and so big!⁷¹

While there are certain benefits to “taking indigenous cosmologies seriously,”

Willerslev and Suhr also point out that informants have their own doubts about religious activities:

The Siberian hunters, for example, are by no means naïve animists in the sense that they faithfully believe everything their myths and dreams tell them about the existence of spirits. Likewise for the Muslim patients and exorcists who constantly call the truth value of their diagnoses and means of healing into question.⁷²

Thus the informants have their own layer of “objectivity,” or at least doubt, that is an important social fact for anthropologists to discover. We are left, though, with

⁶⁹ Willerslev and Suhr, 71.

⁷⁰ Willerslev and Suhr, 71.

⁷¹ Turner, Edith. 1992. *Experiencing ritual: A new interpretation of African Healing*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.) Quoted in Willerslev and Suhr, 71.

⁷² Willerslev and Suhr, 72.

the question of whether the anthropologist has entirely abandoned his or her own etic analysis in favor of emic documentation.

What would even constitute public evidence in sociocultural anthropology? The discipline has long operated in a lone-wolf system of ethnography in which, by and large, individual anthropologists go out into “the field” and study peoples who have significant differences from the anthropologist’s home society. In what sense are ethnographic fieldnotes repeatable? It is arguably the case that the ethnographer never sets foot “in the same river twice.” Ethnographic fieldnotes seem to be a one-off occurrence rather than a form of repeatable observation. Furthermore, the presence of the ethnographer clearly influences the data collected, and the experience of the ethnographer is part and parcel of the overall data collected and cannot be easily separated out. These at a minimum are the challenges presented by sociocultural anthropology to the scientific standard of public evidence suggested by Blum above.⁷³

Reflexivity has been a popular concept in anthropological methodology over the last forty years. Salzman cites the famous example of Renato Rosaldo’s “Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage,” in which Rosaldo depicts how he came to understand Ilongot headhunting better after the experience of losing his wife (anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo) in a tragic accident.⁷⁴ According to Salzman, “in Rosaldo’s view, a researcher’s ‘position,’ both structural and experiential, shapes perception and cognition, thus limiting what the researcher can learn and

⁷³ Blum, “Beyond Methodological Axioms.”

⁷⁴ Philip Carl Salzman, “On Reflexivity,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 807; Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 1–21.

know. Reflexivity aids a researcher in taking these limitations into account but does not allow the researcher to escape them. All accounts are partial because any observer and commentator is positioned."⁷⁵ Rosaldo takes this to a postmodern extreme in denying that there is any possible objectivity or truth. Salzman and George Marcus are right to associate reflexivity with postmodernism.⁷⁶ The question here is whether a postmodern sensibility can influence anthropological research through ideas such as reflexivity without sacrificing the entire scientific project. Particularly in the domain of anthropology of religion, can openness to alternative ontologies (such as Muslim exorcism or Zambian spirits) inform ethnography and yield greater understanding rather than less (or no) truth?

Willerslev and Suhr discuss Kierkegaard's view of Socrates: "far from being an arrogant advocate of reason, Kierkegaard's Socrates realized the limits of reason to the point where he opened himself up to religious faith."⁷⁷ Socrates emphasized his own ignorance, which was not only theoretical but practical:

Kierkegaard pointed out that this stance of ignorance is true only because Socrates was true to it by living it: "Theory and practice in [Socrates] were in harmony." In other words, to be a Socratic thinker is not to produce abstract philosophical doctrines, but to live them. Socratic thinking, therefore, is not a theoretical doctrine, but a practical one.⁷⁸

Willerslev and Suhr state that "anthropological analysis rests on the anthropologist's willingness to live ethnographically. This personal commitment to

⁷⁵ Salzman, "On Reflexivity," 807.

⁷⁶ George E. Marcus, "On Ideologies of Reflexivity in Contemporary Efforts to Remake the Human Sciences," *Poetics Today* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 383–404.

⁷⁷ Willerslev and Suhr, "Is There a Place for Faith in Anthropology? Religion, Reason, and the Ethnographer's Divine Revelation," 72–73.

⁷⁸ Willerslev and Suhr, 73.

existential transformation of the self is as essential to the anthropological project as it was to Socrates.”⁷⁹

In the end, it is apparent that Willerslev and Suhr are not pushing anthropology to the same postmodern extreme as did Rosaldo. Public evidence will inevitably look different in sociocultural anthropology from how it looks in more positivist disciplines such as psychology. According to Willerslev and Suhr, the task of the anthropologist is not to take things “too seriously.”⁸⁰ By this, I think they advise the anthropologist to work within the limits not only of what the informants can know, but also within the limits of what the anthropologist can know by beginning to see things from the informants’ perspectives. Etic analysis thus follows humbly on the heels of the emic.

⁷⁹ Willerslev and Suhr, 73.

⁸⁰ Willerslev and Suhr, 74–75.

Conclusion

What can the examples of Terror Management Theory in psychology and Theologically Engaged Anthropology (such as the work by Willerslev and Suhr) in sociocultural anthropology tell us about methodological atheism, or how to move beyond methodological atheism? Both Terror Management Theory and Theologically Engaged Anthropology are literatures in which methodological atheism is breached, in the former case by introducing overt atheism, and in the latter case by submitting atheism to significant questioning. Both literatures expose the weakness of methodological atheism. Terror Management Theory exposes the difficulty of holding to atheism as only a methodological axiom, whereas Theologically Engaged Anthropology shows the benefits of overriding methodological atheism.

The case of sociocultural anthropology, and Theologically Engaged Anthropology in particular, demonstrates the costs of holding strictly to a standard of public evidence. A strict interpretation of the public evidence standard would eliminate the possibility of exploring the possibilities of ethnographic informants' spiritual experiences, not to mention the spiritual experiences of ethnographers themselves while in the field, because the evidence is documentary and not easily repeatable. A strict interpretation of public evidence seems better suited to laboratory science, which is more repeatable and can involve control groups and even double-blind research designs. The standard of public evidence, in practice, highlights the epistemic and methodological diversity of the social sciences, which ranges from methods

closer to the natural sciences in fields such as psychology, to more interpretive and experimental modes such as those employed in sociocultural anthropology. A one-size-fits-all approach to public evidence thus comes at too high a cost and would preclude highly creative and envelope-pushing methodologies.

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