

Nonlocal Consciousness and the Anthropology of Religion ¹

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Most discussions of religion center on dogmas and beliefs, either of a particular religion or a comparison across denominations. I would like to look at religion from the perspective of a consciousness experimentalist, setting aside the dogmas and beliefs.

When I look at religion, any religion, as an experimentalist, what I see is a cohort of people consensually holding a worldview. The process of assembling the cohort seems to me very much like Thomas Kuhn's description of the paradigm process. The paradigm in religion is defined by scripture and dogma. The paradigms differ in many ways but they all have one thing in common. All are centered on the aspect of consciousness that in science we call nonlocal, and that is now being explicitly researched in near death studies, therapeutic intention work, and remote viewing.

In religion the individual experience of nonlocal awareness is called spirit. The eternal aspect of the self, religions' soul. It is a concept amenable to objective verification. We see one aspect in the near-death studies. Thanks to the research at the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, we also know something about the continuity-of-consciousness. This extraordinary decades-long project, led by two generations of physicians, first Ian Stevenson and then, when he retired in 2002, taken over by Jim Tucker, in the most methodical and rigorous manner have studied reincarnation. Their data, like that on NDEs, presents a compelling objectively measured

And while I am on it, I think it is notable that although consciousness is often conceived of in physics terms, some of our most important insights about consciousness have come from medicine – the research on NDEs, therapeutic intention, and reincarnation being examples.

As a researcher, I think enduring religions should be seen as examples of empirical science. I use the term enduring religions to distinguish from transitory cults. All of the enduring faiths over generations and millennia developed a kind of empirical

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neurobiology involving opening to nonlocal consciousness. I see this process echoed in acupuncture, which developed over 6,000 years ago,¹ and ayurvedic medicine which developed from 3300-1300 BCE.²

There is an innate recognition of the reality of nonlocal consciousness in all religions. A small group of materialist scientists, another small cohort of atheists and a few other small factions may think otherwise, but for the bulk of humanity across time, geography, and culture, within the religious spiritual context the reality of nonlocal consciousness has been foundational.

Across all religions rituals are designed to the same end, to train a person to attain and sustain intentioned focused awareness. The mechanism to do this is grounded in the rituals. That is why the cultures of martial art dojos, Buddhist temples, and Christian monasteries are based on a life-style of attaining and sustaining intentioned focused awareness, though it will be expressed in many different ways.

In consciousness research we confirm the wisdom of that religious anthropology. We know from the experimental data that meditators routinely do better at non-local tasks than non-meditators.^{3,4} Whether the task is remote viewing, or expressing therapeutic intention, or any other nonlocal task. Why? Because meditators can attain and sustain intentioned focused awareness better than random people who lack this training, and intentioned focused awareness is how one opens to the nonlocal. What differs is not the process of the experience, but the assessment we make of the experience through the culture of our worldview. Be it religion or science, we interpret the experience. In science we assess nonlocal consciousness not through faith but in objectively verifiable ways. We have protocols, and instead of dogmas and beliefs, we have objective measurement, and the shared world view that facts matter.

Experiencing nonlocal consciousness is the fundamental experience of religions to open a timeless spaceless domain. That is not really surprising since a nonlocal consciousness experience is faith's birth cradle. Regardless of denomination, dogma, or belief, all religions begin with a single individual who experiences a nonlocal consciousness event. Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, whose birth is dated between 578 and 447 BCE, awakens in the hermit-age of Arada Kalama, a teacher of meditation who shows him how, through meditation, he can attain the "state of non-existence;" and he does experience this state of intentioned focused awareness. There are several versions of Buddha's awakening. I will use the description of the scholar monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu, (Geoffrey DeGraff) an American Buddhist monk of the Thai forest Kammatthana tradition, whose books and videos have had a major impact on the modern understanding of Buddhism.

He writes, “The Buddha described the Awakening experience in one of his discourses, first there is the knowledge of the regularity of the Dhamma — which in this context means dependent co-arising — then there is the knowledge of nibbana. In other passages, he describes the three stages that led to insight into dependent co-arising: knowledge of his own previous lifetimes, knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of all living beings, and finally insight into the four Noble Truths. The first two forms of knowledge were not new with the Buddha. They have been reported by other seers throughout his- tory, although the Buddha's insight into the second knowledge had a special twist: He saw that beings are reborn according to the ethical quality of their thoughts, words, and deeds, and that this quality is essentially a factor of the mind. The quality of one's views and intentions deter- mines the experienced result of one's actions.”⁵

Jesus, at the beginning of the Common Era, at the age of 30, experiences an opening of consciousness when he is baptized and goes to meditate in the wilderness.⁶ In 610 CE, at 40, Muhammad experiences a revelation in a cave called Hira where he had gone to meditate. The archangel Gabriel appeared to him and told him he would be a messenger of God.⁷

Those individual revelations only become the basis of a religion, however, if they are recognized by others. Revelation is an individual experience, but religion is a group consensus, that is what separates cranks from prophets who must have personalities charismatic enough to attract people to come and listen to them. Every- thing after that is the product of human thought and action. From the accounts of the teachings arise scriptures and the institutions that grow up around those teachings, manned by individuals who commit themselves to maintaining the dogma. But it all begins with one person's nonlocal consciousness experience or experiences. And that person's experiences of the non- local becomes the path.

With that foundation it isn't really surprising that religions seek to give practitioners a measure of focused control over mind and body, holding out the promise that they, too, may be able to open to the nonlocal aspect of consciousness. Inevitably the paths incorporate some model of nonlocal unity promising it as the path or the way. Empirical observation across millennia has vouchsafed the efficacy of rituals that create intentioned focused awareness.

In Christianity the spirit of the Lord is the creative power of life.⁸ It is an incorporeal feeling of connecting with a greater conscious unity. In the New Testament spirit is described as that aspect of consciousness wherein a direct relationship with God is possible.⁹ It is the spiritual aspect that enables continuing conversation with the divine Spirit.¹⁰ Totems like rosaries, religious statues, and structured prayers help the follower to develop intentioned focused awareness, which research has shown is the key to opening to nonlocal awareness.

The Christian saint and Carmelite mystic St. Teresa of Avila, in the sixteenth century, counseled:

*“This magnificent refuge is inside you. Enter. Shatter the darkness that shrouds the doorway. Be bold. Be humble. Put away the incense and forget the incantations they taught you. Ask no permission from the authorities. Close your eyes and follow your breath to the still place that leads to the invisible path that leads you home. Follow your breath.”*¹¹ It is a statement from a medieval Roman Catholic that a second century BCE Buddhist could have comfortably made, and did.

The Buddhist Patanjali Yoga Sutras, which date at least to the second century BCE, illustrate this. They speak at length about moving into nonlocal awareness through meditation. Psychologist William Braud, who made a particular study of this, noted: “The sixth, seventh, and eight ‘limbs’ of ashtanga Yoga are dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation), and samadhi (profound absorption), respectively.”¹²

The Patanjali source refines this further, Braud explains. “The repeated continuation, or uninterrupted stream of that one point of focus is called absorption in meditation (dhyana), and is the seventh of the eight steps” (tatra pratyaya ekatanata dhyanam). When these three are practiced together, the composite process is called samyama. Samyama might be translated as constraint; thorough, complete, or perfect restraint; or full control; it might also be translated as communion or mind-poise. Samyama conveys a sense of knowing through being or awareness through becoming what is to be known. Through mastery of samyama comes insight (prajna), and through its progressive application, in stages, come knowledge of the Self and of the various principles of reality (tattvas). With increasing yogic practice come a variety of mystical, unitive experiences, states, conditions, or fulfillments—the various samadhis—along with the attainments or powers (siddhis).¹³

The linkage with the nonlocal and the creation of sacred space is another manifestation of consciousness threaded throughout religions across time, geography, and culture. There is always a dedicated place to meet, whether it is a temple, a cathedral, a synagogue, or an Etruscan oak grove. Why does this place issue seem to matter so much? Is there something objectively verifiable about “sacred” space beyond the obvious psychological emotional importance? The research data suggests there is. It is more numinous.

Carl Jung described numinosity thus, “We should not be in the least surprised if the empirical manifestations of unconscious contents bear all the marks of something illimitable, something not determined by space time. This quality is numinous.... numina are psychic entia...”- Jung says “numina are psychic entia.”¹⁴ I think the research confirms that. Numina, I believe, should be thought of as information. Numinosity is a

kind of nonlocal informational architecture that can be detected by consciousness, and to some degree manipulated through intentioned focused awareness.

The more frequently attention is focused on anything the more it develops numinous qualities, which may be of positive or negative valence. The more numinous the object, the easier it becomes for others to unconsciously sense this quality. Numinous constructs excite a stronger psychophysical response than mundane objects, and as such they can be unconsciously discriminated from less-numinous objects.

In remote viewing research we know that targets of greater numinosity are easier to perceive than targets that may have similar physical characteristics but are less numinous. Functionally, that means that Chartres cathedral is easier to see than a warehouse of the same size. Why? Because Chartres, from the moment of its conception and for all the centuries since that moment, has been the focus of unnumbered acts of intentioned awareness experienced in a heightened state of emotion. In contrast nobody pays any attention to warehouses. Similarly, water left in a room where therapeutic intention is regularly expressed has a different infrared spectroscopy profile than control water located in another space.

The dynamics of numinosity even extend into the letters of the languages in which Scriptures are written. Can that be possible? It is such a radical idea that I want to present seven experiments carried out in different places, at different times, by different researchers. Five of them involved a prediction of improved memory, one involving improved confidence, and one involving a greater sense of “spirit” for real vs. fake words. They all focused on a model of consciousness reported by British biologist Rupert Sheldrake that he called Morphic Resonance.¹⁵ A model that is closely resonant with the idea of numinosity.

The first test involved memorization of a nursery rhyme in Japanese by non-Japanese speakers, one a real nursery rhyme and two that were meaningless. Then participants in the UK and the USA were asked which they could remember better, predicting that the real nursery rhyme would be easier to remember because of morphic resonance. Rupert Sheldrake, who formulated the idea upon which the study was based reports “that this was indeed the result, to a statistically significant degree.”¹⁶

A second test was reported by Gary Schwartz, then a Yale professor of psychology, currently Director of The Laboratory for Advances in Consciousness and Health at the University of Arizona. Schwartz used 48 three-letter Hebrew words from the Old Testament, of which 24 were common and 24 were rare words. From each of those words he produced a meaningless anagram by scrambling the letters, thus producing a total of 96 “words.” Participants who did not know Hebrew were shown these words one by one and asked to guess their meaning by writing down the first English word that came to mind. They were also asked to estimate their confidence in

their guess. He found on average that the group of 90 participants were significantly more confident about their guesses when viewing real words than scrambled words, even though they did not know some of the words were real and others false.¹⁷

The third test was reported by Alan Pickering a psychologist specializing in cognitive psychology. At the time he was a lecturer at The Hatfield Polytechnic (now the University of Hertfordshire) in England. Like Gary Schwartz, Pickering used real and scrambled words. In this study they were drawn in Persian script. Participants were shown a word for 10 seconds then asked to draw it. Independent judges evaluated the reproductions without knowing which words were real or scrambled. The judges assessed that the real words were reproduced significantly more accurately than the false words. This finding was later successfully repeated in student projects using Persian and Arabic words.¹⁸

A fourth study was carried out by Arden Mählberg, an American psychologist at the Integral Psychology Center. Mählberg took a slightly different tack, instead of language as that term is usually understood he used a code. In 1836, Samuel Morse inventor of the telegraph created a code, assisted by Joseph Henry and Alfred Vail that permitted messages to be sent as a series of electric signals. The code consisted of a sequence of dits, a short signal, in written form represented by a dot, and dahs, a long signal, represented by a dash.

Mählberg created a series of real Morse code messages and a similar looking but fake code. His participants were all people who did not know Morse code, a rather specialized skill. The protocol was a comparison of the ability to learn the fake and genuine Morse code. On average, participants learned real Morse code significantly more accurately than the new code.¹⁹

A fifth study was carried out by German psychology professor Suitbert Ertel, at the University of Göttingen. Ertel tested recognition of hiragana, a phonetic form of Japanese writing and predicted that these characters would be recognized better when they were the right side up than when upside down, since right side up would correspond to the “morphemic form” known by Japanese writers. This is what he found. In another experiment, he compared memory for fake vs. real hiragana characters and found that real characters were remembered better than fakes. Ertel then ran additional, more complex tests, which resulted in ambiguous outcomes.

Robert Schorn, professor of psychology at Department of Psychology and Medical Sciences, University of Health Sciences, Medical Informatics and Technology (UMIT), Hall in Tyrol, Austria, Gottfried Tappeiner, professor in the Department of Economic Theory, Economic Policy and Economic History at the University of Innsbruck in Austria, and statistician Janette Walde Department of Statistics also at the University of Innsbruck conducted a sixth study relevant to the anthropology of religion. They used

symbols such as flags, emblems or trademarks that were once well known but were now forgotten, or symbols that are very familiar to some people but not others, such as the Chinese Coca-Cola symbol, or Far Eastern religious symbols.

For each real symbol, a fake symbol was created using similar patterns and complexity. Participants were then shown pairs of symbols, one real and the false, in a random order, and they were asked to judge which of each pair had more “spirit.” They selected real symbols significantly more often than the fake ones. In a follow up test this group compared real Russian words written in Cyrillic along with meaningless anagrams. Again real and false words were presented in pairs, and participants judged which word had more “spirit.” As before, real words were selected significantly more than the anagrams.²⁰

Kimberly Robbins and Chris Roe, both part of the Psychology Division at the University of Northampton, Park Campus in Northampton, England, designed an experiment similar to the one used by Ertel, this time using real and fake Chinese characters. Sixty participants who knew nothing of the Chinese language or the characters used to write it, were shown five real and five fake Chinese characters in a random sequence. Then on a sheet with 20 characters they were asked to circle the 10 they had just seen. They recognized the real characters significantly better than the false ones.²¹

What is all this data telling us? The forms of the rituals of religion, the places where these rituals are conducted, even down to the letters in which the scriptures cited there are written, are founded in consciousness.

Finally, let me turn to the elements of the rituals themselves because they too, I think, were all designed through empirical observation across generations with nonlocal consciousness in mind. Although the dogmas and culture of each religion are very different, the rituals are remarkably similar and constitute protocols for opening to nonlocal consciousness, in the same way that a research protocol supports individuals opening to nonlocal consciousness in a remote viewing experiment. The only real different is context and intent. In religion the context is a religious service or practice, and the intent is to have a sense of spiritual connection. In science the context is a laboratory experiment and the intent is to describe a target the viewer will be shown in, say, an hour.

When the faith-believers gather in their “sacred” space their collective intent expressed through the recitation of the words in the language similarly make the rituals numinous, and it begins with a statement of intention. In Christianity it is often the Nicene Creed, in Judaism it is the Shema, Buddhists don’t pray to a deity conceived as the Creator, as is the case in the Abrahamic religions. Buddhist use mantras, recognizing them in much the same way that science does. As the Buddha Dharma Education

Association explains it, “Tibetans pray in a special way. They believe that when certain sounds and words, called mantras, are said many times, they arouse good vibrations within the person. If a mantra is repeated often enough it can open up the mind to a consciousness which is beyond words and thoughts.”²²

Through all of the rituals there are prayers, sermons and homilies, all oriented toward creating common intention, and this is accompanied by singing, chanting, dancing, drumming to further augment this linkage. Brain entraining ensues in which the congregations brains become synched. Gabe Turow at Stanford University describes this. “...ritual technologies like chanting, drumming, mantra recitation, and prayer, all utilize repetitive sounds to help induce a wide variety of states of consciousness that correspond to the tempo or rate of the repetition.”²³

Studying this has been a significant research effort of Radiologist Andrew Newberg at the University of Pennsylvania. He has used standard imaging technologies focused on monitoring the brain activity of spiritual practitioners as they exercise their practice, scanning the brains of nuns, Sikhs, and Buddhists. His research has detected changes in their brains and reported, “Meditation involves attentional regulation and may lead to increased activity in brain regions associated with attention such as dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) and anterior cingulate cortex (ACC).”²⁴ From New- berg’s work and that of other researchers has arisen the subdiscipline of Neuro- theology.

For me what is perhaps most interesting of all in studying both religions and science is that this is one of history’s great confluences, the practices of the religion and the practices of science have found common ground, and reached the same conclusions.

Endnotes

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