Reconsidering Religious Experience from the Perspective of Phenomenological Anthropology

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Although religious experience is one of the core issues in the study of religion, anthropological works have not devoted enough attention to lived or felt states of being in a religious context. Rather, scholarship concerned with religious practices in mainstream anthropology has taken either an interpretative approach, put forward by Geertz's essay "Religion as a Cultural System,"[1] or a social constructionist view, inspired by Asad's[2] critique of a universal definition of religion.[3] These have contributed a great deal to the understanding of the cultural and social context of religion, but have somehow neglected the subjectivity of religious experience or lived religiosity.

This essay attempts to address religious experience from a phenomenologically informed anthroplogical perspective. I contend that religious experience is first and foremost an existential modality of engagement with the world. Specifically, I will articulate this position by reviewing major contributions to the study of religious experience and add new insights to the current literature, and thereafter introduce some

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1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90–91. The author describes religion as a system of symbols, which in turn serve as carriers of meanings that establish powerful moods and motivations in individuals.

2. Talal Asad, *Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz* (Man, New Series, 1983), 18(2): 237–259.

3. The author focuses on the shaping role of power-institutions on religious knowledge. Precisely, he suggests to consider "what are the historical conditions necessary for the existence of particular religious practices and discourses," which social disciplines and social forces contribute to distribute and to authorize at different times. Asad, *Anthropological Conceptions of Religion*, 252.

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instances from ethnographic studies. First, I will briefly revisit some of the major works on religious experience, which either support or question the authenticity of the sacred in relation to the sociocultural context. Here, drawing from the phenomenological standpoint of embodiment, I will suggest how the existential ground of religious experience can help us to better understand the relationship between felt states and their cognitive representation. Second, I will introduce some ethnographic studies that show how religious experience is an embodied reality. Before approaching religious experience from a subject-centred orientation, there are two main epistemological considerations to be made.

The first consideration refers to what kind of methodological standpoint we want to employ in order to understand religious experience. Here I embrace a phenomenologically oriented anthropological perspective, with special regard to the standpoint of embodiment. According to the idea of embodiment, the body is regarded as the existential ground of cultural phenomena, and embodiment is the starting point for approaching human experience, in this case lived religiosity. For this purpose, I will build on some notions Merleau-Ponty put forward in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, and on recent phenomenologically oriented anthropological contributions, suggesting how an existentialist-phenomenological anthropology may help us to reconsider religious experience in a new light.

The second epistemological consideration refers to the definition of religious experience itself. What features make a particular human experience distinctively religious? Several works have identified religious experience with the sacred, numinous, holy, and other similar dimensions, all referring to the sense of a superior transcendental being experienced by the subject. It is important to note though that most of these studies have focused on the perception of the sacred in religious traditions, overlooking the religiousness of other human experiences. Some authors pointed out that religious experience should not be identified uniquely with mystical states, nor should it be confined to a given religious tradition. King, for example, speaking of sacred experience, places the body along a continuum, which goes from the extreme of mild and frequent experiences to that of mystical states.[4] Yet, Simon suggests, "There are other traditions or movements

4. Winston King, "Religion," in ed. Mircea Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1968), 282–293. Whereas the first category encompasses a

which may not normally be called religious but which nevertheless have formal characteristics making them analogous at least to religions, and which represent similar human feelings, impulses, and thoughts."[5] Rather than narrowing religious experience to the domain of the sacred in terms of an overpowering force, or to mystical states, this essay takes into account the existential ground that allows for different forms of religious objectification, including the sacred. Specifically, drawing from the idea of self as a processual whole determined by a constant feedback between embodied and cognized modes of experience, this essay considers how discontinuities of self intrinsic to our existential condition may be objectified as either an outer entity or integrated into self-representations in order to re-establish a sense of self-cohesiveness and to give meaning to alienated parts of the self.

The Phenomenological Standpoint of Embodiment

Like any other human experience, the religious one is also grounded in the body. In this sense, religious experience is a lived or embodied reality. In the last decades scholarly attention has been devoted to the role of the body in religion, not only for what concerns its symbolic representation in different traditions, but also, and more importantly, as a way to better comprehend the experiential foundation of religious phenomena. Studies concerned with religious experience have shown the inadequacy of the Western mind/body dualism rooted in Cartesian philosophy in acknowledging the importance of embodied dimensions of religion. For this reason, several of these studies have reformulated concepts from the phenomenology of perception Merleau-Ponty elaborated, for it provides a valid standpoint by means of addressing religion as a lived reality. Before considering current phenomenologically informed anthropological orientations, it would be

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sense of awe in the divine, a sense of joy and peace, but also intense physical sensations, just to mention a few, mystical experiences differ from the former in their irruptive qualities, which the author identifies with suddenness and spontaneity, irresistibility, absolute quality of conviction, and quality of clear knowledge. King, "Religion," 291–292.

5. Ninian Smart, "Understanding Religious Experience," in ed. Steven Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 11.

useful to briefly sketch out some of the cardinal ideas Merleau-Ponty put forward.

Building on the postulate of "being-in-the-world" the phenomenologist Heidegger (1889-1976) put forward, which poses human being as an open realm to and a practical involvement with the world, Merleau-Ponty regards this condition as an open situation toward an infinite number of potential resolutions. Focusing on perception, Merleau-Ponty takes the existential condition of being-in-the-world as a preobjective view, which is prior to stimuli and sensory contents and independent of voluntary thought or consciousness.[6] According to the author, in fact, "It is because it is a preobjective view that being-in-the-world can be distinguished from every third person process, from every modality of the res extensa, as from every cogitatio, from every first person form of knowledge—and that it can effect the union of the psychic and the physiological."[7] Then, by turning to the level of spontaneous perception, that is, before the conscious elaboration and representation of objects, Merleau-Ponty attempts to collapse the mind/body dichotomy.

Precisely, the author suggests that since we perceive through our senses, the body is the existential ground through which we familiarize with the world and get knowledge. Nevertheless, unlike the attribution of meaning to certain experiences, which is elaborated at the level of consciousness through reflexive cognitive processes, perception places human agency as a set of open possibilities to the world. At the preobjectified level of perception there is no elaboration of objects or of us thinking about the object, but only the pure living experience of the unity of the subject. The object compares in a final stage through "a process of focusing, and retrospective, since it will present itself as preceding its own appearance, as the 'stimulus,' the motive or the prime mover of every process since its beginning."[8] Perception then is an impersonal, anonymous, undetermined, pre-objective, and pre-conscious state of being, where the subject is not a spectator but a whole engaged with and open to an infinite number of configurations—culturally patterned—in the encounter with the world.

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6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New Jersey: The Humanity Press, 1962), 78–80.

7. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 80.

8. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 239.

With respect to the issue here examined, an important implication of Merleau-Ponty's formulation is that at the preobjectified level of experience the body may be regarded not only as the existential ground of culture, being the fundamental existential condition for our interaction with the world, but also, at this level, the body may be an existential disposition prior to the separation between self-awareness in the form of consciousness and the representation of its objects, where thought is a secondary, reflexive process given by the projection of the body into the world. In fact, in the immediacy of perception of either our own body or external things there is no consciousness of fully determinate objects yet, but only an immediate sensation that will be objectified in different ways according to both the subject's personal experiences and the sociocultural context.

In the anthropological field, some scholars have reformulated the phenomenological ideas of being-in-the-world and embodiment. Jackson, for instance, acknowledges a phenomenological perspective in the methodological stance of lived experience.[9] Specifically, the author provides an all-encompassing conception of lived experience emphasizing its dialectical irreducibility. In fact, writes Jackson, "[It] accommodates our shifting sense of ourselves as subjects and as objects, as acting upon and being acted upon by the world, of living with and without certainty, of belonging and being estranged."[10] Then, recalling William James's suggestion that experience includes both "transitive" and "substantive" elements, Jackson points out the ambiguity of self that should not be treated as a constant and autonomous element among others. Rather, self "is a function of our involvement with others in a world of diverse and ever-altering interests and situations."[11]

On another side, drawing partly from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, Csordas proposes embodiment as a methodological standpoint through which to analyze cultural phenomena.[12] The body is regarded as the existential ground of culture, the starting point for comprehending

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9. Michael Jackson, *Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).

10. Jackson, *Paths Toward a Clearing*, 2.

11. Jackson, *Paths Toward a Clearing*, 3.

12. Thomas J. Csordas, "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology," *Ethos* 18/1 (1990): 5–47.

various cultural objectifications of existential experiences. Through the presentation of some empirical examples from the domain of healing practice, Csordas aims to demonstrate how sensory experiences, grounded basically in one's body, can be culturally constituted and objectified in different ways. Csordas holds that at the level of perception, mind and body are not distinguished from each other, and it is starting from perception that we should ask "how our bodies may become objectified through processes of reflection."[13] Thus, following such an assumption, the author conceives of self as "an indeterminate capacity to engage or become oriented in the world, characterized by effort and reflexivity."[14] According to this view, indeterminacy is the existential ground of self, which through reflexive processes may result in the self-objectification of persons.

Yet, building on Csordas's phenomenological conception of embodiment, Seligman develops a model of self that encompasses not only cognitive and reflexive elements but also embodied aspects of experience.[15] One of the main arguments such a model conveys is that self is a locus of intersection between mind and body, "an emergent product of both cognitive-discursive and embodied processes."[16] By such a formulation, Seligman aims to explain that the sense of a coherent self is determined and maintained by the constant feedback between the cognitive and embodied level of experience.

Religious Experience and the Sacred Between Authenticity and Conventionality

The sacred is a cardinal dimension of religion and perhaps the most representative category employed by scholars to refer to the religious realm. Yet, it is also a particular mode of experiencing the world, which early

13. Csordas, "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology," 36.
14. Thomas J. Csordas, *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 5.
15. Rebecca Seligman, "The Unmaking and Making of Self: Embodied Suffering and Mind-Body Healing in Brazilian Candomblé," *Ethos* 38/3 (2010): 297–320.
16. Seligman, "The Unmaking and Making of Self," 298.

theories of religion addressed in opposition to the profane.[17] Durkheim, for instance, views the sacred as the result of a projection and reification of the power of society, which is perceived by its members in a disguised form. Moreover, the alienated power of the social group is experienced individually with an intense emotional force, which Durkheim defines as a "state of effervescence" or "collective effervescence."[18] Yet, a similar distinction is emphasized in Eliade's phenomenological approach to religion, where each individual perceives the manifestation of the sacred in the world, namely "hierophany," as "the revelation of an absolute reality."[19]

In general, we can distinguish between two main categories of scholarship concerned with religious experience, with special regard to the sacred: works that emphasize its authentic and unmediated character and works that attempt to contextualize it.

Orientations belonging to the first category have focused on the emotional and intuitive character of mystical and transcendental experiences, which give meaning to the mysteries of human life. The origin of this position is perhaps Hume, who first pointed out that religious beliefs, rather than developing out of reason, stem from fear and uncertainties of life, and that they are experienced individually through emotional states.[20] It was, however, the work of Otto, "The Idea of the Holy," that provided a compelling analysis of how the individual perceives the sacred, conceived as a striking experience characterized by strong emotional states. Otto claims that religious experience stems fundamentally from a feeling of awe and mystery, from the individual perception of something numinous

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17. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1958). Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1957). Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Orlando: Harcourt, 1987).
18. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 422. It is precisely in rites that Durkheim indicates how this process works. According to Durkheim, in fact, rituals and ceremonies arouse a "collective sentiment" in which individuals perceive something larger than themselves and subordinate to this intense wholeness (413). This process corresponds to the identification of the individual with the force of the collectivity, which is the community in its projected form and which is experienced with intense emotional response.
19. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 21.
20. Brian Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 141-142.

or supernatural. This feeling, according to the author, can be defined as the experience of the holiness, an instinctual emotional drive that is essentially non-rational and intuitional.[21] Intuition is also regarded as the core of religion in Schleiermacher's thought, for he identifies the essence of religion with the "intuition of the universe" experienced as an individual and immediate perception.[22] Schleiermacher points out how religious experience is embedded in the senses, "it stops with the immediate experiences of the existence and action of the universe, with the individual intuitions and feelings."[23] Therefore, he suggests that intuition is intertwined with feelings, and that the strength of the feelings, which "are supposed to possess us," determines the degree of religiousness.[24]

Later psychological interpretations further stressed the emotional character of religious experience. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in his classic work "The Varieties of Religious Experience,"[25] James defines religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."[26] In addition, the author points out how religious ideas are usually characterized by the belief that there is "an unseen order."[27] Similar to this view, Jung refers to the sacred as a psychological dimension, even though he emphasizes its universal character through the theory of "the collective unconscious" and the idea of archetypical models.[28]

In all the above theories, religious experience, specifically the sacred dimension, is characterized by extraordinary feelings independent of and preceding thought, in which something otherly is lived and experienced at the bodily level, usually accompanied by an overwhelming emotional

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21. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 5.

22. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 104.

23. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 105.

24. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 110.

25. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985)

26. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 34.

27. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 51.

28. In religious symbolism, Jung recognizes the same figures he met in the dreams and fantasies of his patients, arguing that such contents constitute archetypical models of psychic realities repeated among different cultures and times. Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion*, 167–174.

state. To a certain extent, this approach to religious experience suggests an ontological status of the sacred in human life, that is, a universal category independent of cultural context. Nevertheless, recent scholarship has questioned the universality of the sacred.

Taking into account what is commonly regarded as the quintessence of religious experience, a handful of edited works have shown the contextual character of mystical states.[29] Central to these works is the attempt to contextualize mysticism in relation to religious traditions in order to question the image that mysticism is an autonomous realm of experience independent of religious beliefs, practices, and communities. This endeavor has been supported by several contributions that have shown how the experience of the mystic is shaped by the concepts of the religious tradition the mystic belongs to. The mystic in fact is embedded in an educational process, wherein religious texts provide the concepts that somehow anticipate the experience reported. As Katz puts it, "There is an inherited theological-mystical education which is built upon certain agreed sources."[30] In a similar way, building on the thesis of Schleiermacher—religious experience as a sense of the infinite or a feeling of absolute dependence independent of culture—Proudfoot suggests that we cannot account for religious experience independently of concepts, beliefs, and practices.[31] Among others, the author supports the cultural shaping of religious experience by questioning one of the strongest drives of intuition, namely, emotion. He recalls the theory of Schachter, according to which it is the individual's beliefs about the causes of his arousal to determine the emotion he will experience. Therefore, the author concludes, "A person identifies an experience as religious when he comes to believe that the best explanation of what has happened to him is a religious one."[32]

If on one side these studies provide convincing arguments against a universal model of religion, they are nevertheless confined to the idea of religious experience associated with the sacred of the mystics. But religious

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29. Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

30. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, 6.

31. Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

32. Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 108.

experience does not cover solely the sacred dimension, nor can it be narrowed to those phenomena reported in mystical traditions. Moreover, although explaining how the sacred in mystic experiences is shaped by the doctrinal context to which mystics belong, these studies fail to take into account the fact that conceptualizations and theories found in the scriptural traditions are fruit of an experiential process. To put it differently, the same doctrines found in mystic traditions are rooted in human experiences, which have undergone a process of cultural objectification and secularization through religious scriptures and institutions. There is a need then for reconsidering the existential condition sacred experience stems from. I intend to move from these observations, but instead of attempting to address the genesis of religious experience, I will put forward a subject-centered approach informed by the standpoint of embodiment, by means of capturing the existential ground previous to different forms of religious objectification.

The Existential Ground of Religious Experience: The Embodied Self

Studies presented above show the common tendency in scholarship of religion to take human agency as a sort of black box influenced by either the feeling of something other or the cultural context. Regardless of whether the sacred is conceived as an emotional and intuitive force in control of one's self or as the product of an educational process, not enough attention is drawn to the role played by self-processes in mediating between felt and cognized forms of experience. In this sense, we may note how previous works are somehow embedded in the mind/body dichotomy. Thus, works that emphasize the non-rational and intuitional character of religious experience privilege body over mind. Opposingly, positions that focus on the role of the doctrinal tradition in the shaping of religious experience attach more importance to cognitive ways of elaborating the sacred. However, the standpoint of embodiment in a phenomenological sense can help us to collapse such a dichotomy.

In the light of the phenomenological ideas previously explained, we can say that the existential condition lying behind the cognized perception

of the sacred, as well as of other dimensions with similar characteristics, is the contingency and ambiguity of embodied or felt aspects of experience. We can even develop this idea further and say that both coherence and dissociation are intrinsic tendencies to our being-in-the-world. These tendencies operate at the intersection between embodied and cognized processes, making ambiguous and contingent felt states the bodily ground of objectified accounts—culturally patterned—according to both personal experience and sociocultural context. We can further articulate this formulation by elucidating a few cardinal concepts.

The first one is the definition of self. Previously, we have seen how self can be conceptualized as "processual" and determined by both reflexive self-representations or objectifications and embodied aspects that are prior to self-objectification.[33] Self then may be regarded as an emergent product of the constant feedback between cognitive-discursive and embodied processes. In this sense, embodied modes of experience can be objectified in different ways by reflexive cognitive processes so that the felt states can be self-represented as parts of a cohesive self or as alienated forms. This model of self is particularly instructive in explaining two fundamental phenomenological aspects often observed in religious experience: alterity and spontaneity.

"Alterity" is characterized by either the individual's generalized feeling of being overwhelmed by an upper and more powerful entity, or more simply by the sense of an intimate otherness. These dispositions can be viewed as two extremes of a continuum, wherein one pole is represented by an outer transcendental being, while the other pole can be identified with contemplative experiences, which unlike the former, do not produce an existential duality. Smart, for instance, elaborated this idea in his polarity theory of religious experience.[34] The theory frames experience in religious context within two main poles: the numinous experience of the holy—similar to the one previously described by Otto—and the contemplative or mystic experience, which in turn reflect respectively outward and inward oriented dispositions. Whereas numinous experience is characterized by a

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33. Csordas, "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology," Seligman, "The Unmaking and Making of Self."

34. Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of The Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

tremendous feeling of the holy as an "outside Other," "the second is the contemplative or mystical experience which does not postulate an outside Other and which feels the disappearance of the subject-object distinction."[35] Thus, these two modalities of experience can be viewed as two different ways of self-objectifying embodied or felt states of being under cognized processes: the alienation of parts of the self in an outside or supra-human Other, and the integration of these parts into a cohesive self-representation.

The other core concept informed by a phenomenological standpoint and strictly connected with the previous one is "spontaneity" at the pre-objectified level of experience. This condition has been thoroughly explained by Csordas[36], who, in accordance with the work of Merleau-Ponty, has shown that bodily experiences, such as those related to the sensorial and perceptual spheres, are an indeterminate set of potentialities of engagement with the world prior to cultural classifications. In other words, "spontaneity" as a phenomenological condition refers to the immediacy of felt states of being, which is determined by the open horizon of the senses. In this sense then, spontaneity may be viewed also as the existential condition of bodily experiences prior to cultural configuration.

Embodying Religious Experience in Spirit Possession and Healing Ritual

In the last decades we have witnessed an increase of anthropological literature on spirit possession[37] and healing practices,[38] demanding for a reconsideration of the centrality of bodily experiences. Transformation of

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35. Smart, *Dimensions of The Sacred*, 167.
36. Thomas J. Csordas, *Body/Meaning/Healing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
37. Vincent Crapanzano and Vivian Garrison, eds., *Case Studies in Spirit Possession* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977). Colleen Ward, "Thaipusam in Malaysia: A Psycho-Anthropological Analysis of Ritual Trance, Ceremonial Possession and Self-Mortification Practices," *Ethos* 12/4 (1984): 307–334. Ioan M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).
38. Edith Turner with William Blodgett, Singleton Kahona, and Fideli Benwa, *Experiencing Ritual: A New Interpretation of African Healing* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992). Elizabeth L. Lewton and Victoria Bydone, "Identity and Healing in Three Navajo Religious Traditions: Są'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhǫ́," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 14/4 (New Series, 2000): 476–497. Csordas, *Body/Meaning/Healing*.

bodily states, performance, speaking in tongues, trance, mystical communion, transcendence of passion and desire, self-mortification, and self-restraint, among others, are the phenomena most frequently reported in mainstream literature. Instead of focusing on these phenomena, the examples presented below are concerned with the existential ground of modalities of experience central to spirit possession and healing processes.

In the previous section, with respect to religious experience, particularly the sacred, we have seen how approaches that take the self as a black box shaped by either intuitional forces or the doctrinal background risk overlooking the relationship between embodied and cognized aspects. In this regard, drawing from the phenomenological standpoint of embodiment, it has been suggested in what way the existential ground of religious experience can be read in terms of self-cohesiveness and self-dissociation. Whereas forces emotionally felt out of human agency's control represent dissociated and alienated parts of the self, awareness and cognition push toward self-cohesiveness through the attribution of meaning to such discontinuities. Spirit possession and healing rituals associated with phenomena of possession provide a case in point to capture the embodied nature of fragmented parts of the self and their integration into a meaningful and coherent self-representation. In what follows, I will examine a few significant cases informed by ethnographic studies.

Spirit Possession

In religious context, as well as in several traditional cosmologies, spirit possession is the condition in which forces outside the realm of human agency, usually identified with spirits or deities, possess the body of individuals. This phenomenon is frequently accompanied by what scholarly literature has labeled as altered states of consciousness (ASC) or dissociation, terms that indicate different grades of alteration in the "normally integrated functions of consciousness."[39] Crapanzano defines spirit possession as "any altered state of consciousness indigenously interpreted in terms of

39. Seligman, "The Unmaking and Making of Self," 304.

the influence of an alien spirit."[40] In spirit possession, the possessing spirit may be viewed as either an outer entity or as part of the true nature of the individual. Yet, altered states of consciousness can be patterned in different ways depending upon the sociocultural context. In the introduction to her edited volume, Bourguignon recalls Ludwig's analysis of altered states of consciousness, noting that these states are ordered according to their neurophysiological underpinning rather than their sociocultural context. In this regard, she points out, "We may differentiate between the private, individual, unpatterned states and those that occur in culturally patterned, institutionalized forms."[41] Then, states can be culturally patterned in different ways, as either private or external, sacred or profane.

The phenomenological approach previously introduced allows us to see spirit possession in a new light. In fact, from the standpoint of embodiment—body as the subject of culture—we can examine the phenomenon of spirit possession at the preobjectified level of experience, that is, previous to cultural categorization. A few examples will help us to better comprehend this point.

Csordas provided an instructive work based upon his ethnography of a religious healing process of demonic oppression, showing how bodily sensations might be objectified in different ways.[42] Here the author approaches spirit possession drawing from the premise that both "demonic oppression" and "psychopathology" represent two cultural accounts or cultural objectifications of a common existential condition: the personal experience of suffering. The author outlines a series of sensory and bodily experiences and examines two cultural accounts of the same, conducted respectively by a group of charismatic healing ministers and a group of

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40. Vincent Crapanzano and Vivian Garrison, eds., *Case Studies in Spirit Possession* (Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, 1977), 7.

41. Erika Bourguignon, ed., *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1973), 8.

42. Thomas J. Csordas, "The Affliction of Martin: Religious, Clinical, and Phenomenological Meaning in a Case of Demonic Oppression," in ed. Atwood D. Gaines, *Ethnopsychiatry: The Cultural Construction of Professional and Folk Psychiatries* (Albany NY: State University of New York, 1992), 125–170.

mental health professionals.[43] Central to this work is the premise that the common existential ground of both religious and psychiatric accounts is given by the subject's condition of suffering as an embodied experience. According to this formulation, body experience itself is the starting point for analyzing cultural phenomena, the existential common ground of different cultural elaborations, in this case, demonic oppression and psychopathological interpretation.

In the second part of the work, Csordas recalls the range of sensory and cognitive modalities engaged and developed by the subject in relation to the two cultural accounts. By so doing, the author is able to further explore the existential ground of demon and disease. Moving from the phenomenological premise that one's body is the subject of perception, the author describes the individual's preobjectified world of distress. Specifically, Csordas notes that the existential condition of distress affected all the sensory modalities so that the subject is not able to engage the world as an open horizon. In this regard, the author reports this impasse through linguistic accounts: the voice and imagery are thematized as a cruel friend; bodily sensations of pain alienate the subject from parts of his body, triggering a sense of "dismemberment" and of "dissolution of body boundaries"; the sense of thickness and heaviness expresses an image of immobility of the body, which can be objectified as a manifestation of oppression by an evil spirit.[44] Thus, by analyzing the preobjective experience of distress, the author shows how the two accounts of this experience, namely, religious and medical, account for a common existential condition.

Seligman has presented another compelling case. The author explores experiences of selfhood and suffering among adherents of Candomblé, an African-derived spirit possession religion in northeastern Brazil.[45] Seligman aims to show the deconstructive effects of suffering on self through "experiential-embodied dimensions" and the healing function of spirit possession. Specifically, the author is interested in addressing "how

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43. The range of sensitive and cognitive modalities the author describes includes: auditory, visual, tactile, gustatory, and distortions of thought and emotion. Csordas, "The Affliction of Martin," 131–135.

44. Csordas, "The Affliction of Martin," 154–157.

45. Seligman, "The Unmaking and Making of Self."

selves suffer discontinuities and how such discontinuities can be repaired."[46] Seligman moves from the model of self as an emergent product of both cognized and embodied processes, putting forward the thesis that "the mental, emotional, and interpersonal upheavals experienced by mediums prior to initiation and their somatic or embodied suffering are mutually reinforcing, and together, act to create profound ruptures in the taken-for-granted experience of self."[47] The author notes that spirit possession might create the experience of one's body as a foreign object because the subject experiences discontinuities of self, "an intensely and consistently felt displacement of their taken-for-granted sense of being in the world."[48] But what is more important is that the embodiment of this alienating bodily experience becomes spiritually meaningful in the religious context through its integration into the awareness of self-coherence. As Seligman puts it, self-awareness "not only reconciles this experience with cognized self-representations, but affects those bodily experiences themselves by shaping patterns of attention that in turn affect what information is processed."[49] In other words, the embodiment of qualities attributed to the possessing spirit allows the individual to divert attention from suffering to the self-regulation of arousal, integrating these experiences in a new self-awareness. By presenting two cases, the author describes how healing modalities of spirit possession help individuals to re-establish a sense of self-coherence. In the first case, the person identifies with the spirit reshaping her personality according to its characteristics. In the second one, the possessed identifies with some parts of the spirit while rejecting other parts. [50]

Healing

Similarly to what has been said with respect to spirit possession, also in religious healing bodily experiences that threaten the cohesiveness of the self constitute the core element of the therapeutic process itself. Also here,

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46. Seligman, "The Unmaking and Making of Self," 298.
47. Seligman, "The Unmaking and Making of Self," 303.
48. Seligman, "The Unmaking and Making of Self," 306.
49. Seligman, "The Unmaking and Making of Self," 306.
50. Seligman, "The Unmaking and Making of Self," 314.

the constant feedback between embodied and cognized processes determine how the therapeutic process is lived by each participant and how spiritual dimensions provide the suffering with a sort of self–re-orientation in the world and give meaning to the existential condition of distress. Various bodily experiences connected to the idea of the holy can be observed in religious healing.

Drawing upon his fieldwork in a Catholic charismatic religious movement, Csordas explores the therapeutic process and experience of the healing ritual, attempting to provide a phenomenology of experiential transformation among individuals who participate in the therapeutic process.[51] Csordas takes into account the interplay between embodied and cognized forms of experience. He describes such a relation as a "modulation of orientation in the world," for consciousness is modeled by somatic modes of attention and in turn shapes a new self-awareness so that the subject responds to them by modifying one's activities.[52]

It will suffice here to point out two core concepts elaborated by the author with regard to the existential ground of the sacred in the healing ritual: "habitual posture" and "incremental efficacy." "Habitual posture" refers to the fact that disability, rather than a wholly defined category, is a marginal condition regarded as "a habitual mode of engaging the world."[53] Healing, the author suggests, is an existential process that consists of exploring the margin of disability, while motivated by the conviction of divine power. On the other hand, "incremental efficacy" refers to the fact that a total healing does not occur at once during the ritual process, but it is through the repeated exploration of the margin of disability that the person continues the performance of healing. In other words, the person's engagement in the process is related to the incremental efficacy.[54]

Another example of religious modalities of engagement with the world in the healing process is given by the re-establishment of meaningful relationships within the cosmos. This aspect has been thoroughly explored by Lewton and Bydone in a study of Navajo religious healing. The authors attempt to shed light on the therapeutic process in the healing ritual by

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51. Csordas, *The Sacred Self.*
52. Csordas, *The Sacred Self*, 70.
53. Csordas, *The Sacred Self*, 72.
54. Csordas, *The Sacred Self*, 72.

analyzing the embodied aspect of the synthetic cultural principle of SNBH (Są'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhǫ́). This acronym stands for a key concept in Navajo philosophy, encompassing cosmological ideas, spiritual beings, and interpersonal relationships. In this regard, the author aims to understand "the way it translates into the lived experience of Navajo individuals."[55] In these healing rituals the self is conceptualized and represented as a whole orientated toward the cosmos, an image expressed by the philosophical concept of SNBH. In fact, harmony and proper orientation in the cosmos constitute the precondition for the success of the therapeutic process. It is interesting to note that in this ritual setting spiritual dimensions are experienced as both the source of dissociative forces and the means through which the individual reconnects to the spiritual and material world in meaningful ways. In fact, Lewton notes that distress in most cases comes from unbalanced or disconnected relationships, and that the therapeutic process entails self–re-orientation—re-establishment of meaningful relationships—in relation to the environment.[56]

In sum, phenomena of spirit possession and religious healing provide instructive instances by means of analyzing the existential ground of religious experience. In these cases, felt aspects of knowledge can be either alienated from or integrated into cognitive self-representations. At the preobjectified level of experience, spiritual dimensions are embodied through the senses and impact the way the subject engages the world. At the conscious level, such sensations may be either alienated as threatening entities, as observed in spirit possession, or integrated into representations of self-coherence and self-integrity. Religious experience is determined by a constant feedback between these two levels and is played out in the shifting sense of self-orientation as subject and object, empowered and oppressed, coherent and fragmented.

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55. Lewton and Bydone, *Identity and Healing in Three Navajo Religious Traditions*, 479–480.
56. Lewton and Bydone, *Identity and Healing in Three Navajo Religious Traditions*, 492.

Conclusion

This essay has addressed the issue of religious experience from the perspective of phenomenological anthropology. Precisely, it has contended that religious experience is first and foremost an existential modality of engagement with the world.

In the first part, I introduced some core phenomenological concepts with respect to the standpoint of embodiment, specifically focusing on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and current phenomenologically oriented anthropological contributions. Then I reviewed major approaches to religious experience. Works considered reflect two main conceptualizations of the sacred: an intuitive and non-rational force characterized by strong emotional tones, and a cognitive product largely shaped by the doctrinal background.

I have pointed out that the attempt to emphasize either the emotional or the cognitive aspect of religious experience fails to capture the relationship between felt and discursive ways of knowledge, that is, how consciousness is embodied. In this regard, drawing from the phenomenological standpoint of embodiment, I have introduced a model of self that takes into account the role played by self-processes in mediating between embodied and cognized ways of experience. Precisely, it has been shown that whereas at the preobjectified level of experience there is an open-ended disposition of being-in-the-world, at the level of consciousness there are different ways of configuration, according to both the individual background and the sociocultural context.

Finally, I presented some anthropological works on spirit possession and religious healing, for they provide compelling instances of how religious dimensions are embodied and what kind of self-transformations they entail. In these cases, the existential ground of religious experience is the condition of suffering or distress, which impact sensorial modalities and influence the way the possessed engages the world. Ambiguous and contingent felt states of being may be objectified as either alienated parts of the self—spirits—or integrated into self-representations that give coherence and meaning to the subject. In this sense then, religious experience can be viewed as an existential modality of engagement with the world.