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Contemporary Spirituality and the Making of Religious Experience: Studying the Social in an Individualized Religiosity

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Abstract

The "turn to experience" has been described as one of the most defining characteristics of contemporary religion. Research on religion, and in particular on spirituality, therefore increasingly

concentrates on the description of its experiential dimensions. The turn to experience, however, asks for something more than just the observation that a particular dimension (experience) has become of greater value for practitioners of religion. Dimensions which have for a long time been central to the social-scientific study of religion, but are avoided in the practitioners' discourse and, surprisingly, in the social-scientific discourse as well, such as authority and power, turn out to be of lasting significance in the mediation and construction of religious experience. In this contribution, the authors take the social construction of religious experience in contemporary spirituality as a starting point for reflection and discussion on the methodological challenges of experiential religion for those engaged in the study of religion.

Keywords: contemporary spirituality; individualization; methodology; participant observation; religious authority; religious experience; subjectivization.

Introduction

While for many of the discipline's forerunners religion was understood as a collective endeavour, the sociology of religion has, ever since the sixties, strongly emphasized the individualized and subjective nature of contemporary religion. To account for the new state of affairs with respect to this field of study, sociologists have enriched the disciplinary jargon with a number of catchy terms, such as "consumer religion" (Possamai, 2005), "do-it-yourself religion" (Janssen and Prins, 2000; Janssen *et al.*, 2000), "pick-and-mix religion" (Hamilton, 2000), "religious bricolage" (Luckmann, 1979), "cut-and-paste religion" (De Koning, 2008) and "Sheilaism" (Bellah *et al.*, 1985) – terms which have easily been picked up by social scientists, journalists, policymakers and opinion makers alike. A growing body of literature, however, both from sociological and anthropological authors, begins to problematize these concepts and to discuss the underlying analysis of contemporary religion. So, the alleged individualized nature of contemporary religion is discussed by those who describe the new forms of sociality and community by means of which religious individuals organize themselves (Maffesoli, 1996; Roeland *et al.*, 2010). While it is admitted that traditional organizations and communities have lost much of their appeal, it is argued as well that those interested in religion and spirituality search for more "tribalized" (cf. Maffesoli, 1996) effervescence and networked (cf. Roeland *et al.*, 2010) sociality in for example internet communities (Aupers, 2006, 2008 [2004]; De Koning, 2008), festivals and events (St John, 2004), small groups, meditation centers and informal networks. The alleged subjectivized nature of contemporary religion, furthermore, is challenged by those who pay attention to the shared beliefs and dogmas of contemporary religion, which actually exist, although they are often hidden from the scholar's view by a discourse of authenticity and individuality (cf. Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Houtman, 2008; Knibbe, 2007; Roeland *et al.*, 2010).

Although it is widely admitted that the sociology of religion has become much more exciting and effective by widening its scope beyond the once dominant collectivities by means of which religion used to be organized, the discipline's portrayal of modern religion as uncommitted, strictly personal and subjective is increasingly debated. In this contribution, we link up with this sociological debate by offering an anthropological perspective on one – and perhaps the most pivotal – exponent of contemporary religion: spirituality. Spirituality can be described as an experiential oriented religious praxis which aims at individual wellbeing and personal growth. We will, in the first place, discuss a particular case, namely a meditation course, within the scope of the alleged subjectivization of modern religion. We aim to come up with a balanced and nuanced characterization of contemporary spirituality, by discussing on the one hand its tendency of subjectivization, which is in particular visible in its emphasis on (personal) experience, and on the other hand its social nature – which, as we argue, remains an essential aspect of contemporary spirituality. From there we want to discuss the methodological challenges with which the sociology of religion is confronted through the arrival of alleged individualized and subjective forms of religion. Given their eye for difference, irregularity and individuality, qualitative methods – and in particular participant observation – are arguably the customary methods to study such forms. After all, quantitative methods, which are in particular appropriate for studying collective and social patterns, seem to fall short in studying a phenomenon that prides itself on its subjective nature. However, as we will argue further on, by applying qualitative methods, the researcher stumbles exactly upon the social nature of contemporary religion – a sociality which is, moreover, not easy to detect by standard quantitative methods.

In the second section, we first discuss how individualization and subjectivization have been theorized in the sociology of religion. In particular the notion of experience will be taken up here, which, after all, is often presented as the prime subjective element of religion. In addition, this section will present some basic assumptions with respect to experience we often find in the sociological literature. The third section describes and analyses our case: a meditation course in an Amsterdam monastery. Our description of this case focuses especially on the way the religious experience is constructed in the setting of this particular case. We will argue that, although the discourse by means of which practitioners themselves frame the genealogy of their experiences is strongly subjectivist, emphasizing the individuality of the experience, the critical observer becomes aware of a number of social dimensions, among which are forms of authority and power, structures of legitimization, standards of authenticity and processes of authenticization. The

fourth section offers a number of methodological considerations and “tools” that may be helpful to researchers in the study of contemporary religion. The last section concludes this contribution.

The Turn to the Subject in the Social-scientific Study of Religion

Although the concept of subjectivization may have only recently entered the sociology of religion (cf. Heelas and Woodhead, 2005), the conviction that modern religion would evolve into a subjective affair dates back much further. Durkheim, for whom religion was essentially “something collective” (Durkheim, 2001: 46), already foreshadowed the sociological “turn to the subject” in his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), when he discussed the aspirations of some of his contemporaries “towards a religion that would consist entirely of internal and subjective states and would be freely constructed by each of us” (2001: 45). While Durkheim carefully explored the possibility that “this religious individualism may one day become a fact” (2001: 46), those sociologists writing in the post-sixties era were eager to postulate religious individualism as a fact, based on their observations of religious changes that took place in that era. People were indeed moving away from the churches. They turned down traditional Christianity and embraced all sorts of new religiosities, ranging from New Age, paganism and Wicca, to a variety of Eastern religions (cf. Campbell, 2007). Most of all, they mastered an ethos of authenticity, personality and individuality, as well as a discourse centering around notions such as “doing your own thing,” “finding your own way,” “following your own personal path” and “self-realization” (cf. Campbell, 2007; Taylor, 2007). The observation that religion was turning into something subjective, was easily made.

Central to many of the sociological accounts reflecting on this kind of individualized religion has been the notion of “experience.” Contemporary forms of religion are, in other words, understood as being “experiential,” in contrast to more “traditional” and “conventional” religions that – as the argument goes – were rather characterized by their stress on belief and authority. Such a religion would give way to forms of spirituality that are often labelled as experiential, thus emphasizing some of the main characteristics of these new forms, among which the “rehabilitation of the body” (Taylor, 2007: 211), the nurturing of feelings and emotions, the care and attention for the practitioner’s inner life, and in particular the positive valuation of subjective religious signification. These trends were seen as different from the disciplining of the body, emotions and religious signification that characterized traditional religion.

The change from belief to experience has in particular been widely discussed with respect to so-called inner-life or holistic (New Age) spirituality. Thus, Heelas, who presents the growth of inner-life spirituality in terms of a “spiritual revolution” (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Heelas, 2007, 2008; cf. Houtman and Aupers, 2007), has relentlessly hammered on the New Age notion of inner truth as opposed to the external, discursive truths of traditional religions (see Heelas, 1996, 2007, 2008; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). Hanegraaff discussed the return of Gnosticism and the emphasis on subjective, experiential truth in New Age spirituality:

[T]ruth can only be found by personal, inner revelation, insight or “enlightenment.” Truth can only be personally experienced: in contrast with the knowledge of reason or faith, it is in principle not generally accessible. This “inner knowing” cannot be transmitted by discursive language (this would reduce it to rational knowledge). Nor can it be the subject of faith (...) because there is in the last resort no other authority than personal, inner experience (Hanegraaff, 1996: 519).

Aupers (forthcoming), pointing at the popularity of New Age in popular culture (in particular in the world of gaming), states that New Agers criticize belief: “(...) they consider the self the locus of *experience* and argue that no truth, beauty or reality exists independently of the self and that reality in all its forms can only be experienced.” New Age, in short, seems to be (in the words of Heelas, 1996: 23) “beyond belief,” beyond what is thought to be a typical feature of religion, namely its emphasis on a system of conceptions (doctrines, dogmas) which is loaded with an authority that comes from outside, be it a Godhead, a holy text, a holy man or woman, an authoritative tradition or the truth of a particular religious community.

These observations highlight an important shared “dogma” of contemporary spirituality: that personal experience is thought to be the prime and fundamental epistemological principle (cf. Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Heelas, 1996, 2007; Houtman, 2008). However, we should not take this experiential bias for granted because it may lead us to a position in which we would all too easily reproduce the emic discourse on subjectivity in our analytical concepts – which is sometimes the case in those sociological accounts which describe contemporary religion as “subjective,” “individualist” and disposed of external authority and power. A view on power processes in spirituality is necessary because researchers seem to be satisfied to go along with the presumed free and creative nature of spirituality, without paying attention to the social mechanisms which make this freedom and creativity possible or impossible.

A more critical stance, therefore, would bring some nuance to the discussion, reminding the social sciences of one of its core assumptions, namely that human beings are social beings (cf. Houtman, 2008: 23). As we will argue further on, the sociological claim that in contemporary religion the religious subject acts as the

prime authority in religious signification is only partly correct. A threesome claim makes up our argument. First, while practitioners of spirituality may formulate their search for meaning as a strictly personal search, they tend to practise this search in groups (cf. Taylor, 2007: 215–17). Second, while these groups may be catering for individual seekers, and while the religious repertoires offered in these settings are clearly aimed at the individual seeker, the spiritual practice common in these settings is actually essentially social. Third, while these settings may be “thin” in contrast to more traditional “thick” settings (cf. Zijderveld, 2000) in this respect that authority is framed differently (“internal” instead of “external”), external authority is not absent from these settings: authority only takes a different, more subtle and implicit, shape. Let us explain these observations by discussing a particular case in detail: a meditation course that one of the authors visited for his research on Christian spiritual centres in the Netherlands.

The Construction of Religious Experience and the Role of Authority

The meditation course in the small Capuchin monastery in Amsterdam, in which Versteeg is a participant observer,¹ is one of the many spiritual events and trainings that are offered in this city. This particular course has been organized for a few years by one of the friars, a man in his fifties from a working-class background. Today, in the room next to the chapel, a group of nine people is present, sitting in a circle, including the meditation leader. In the middle of the room is a candle. Before the candle is a text of Meister Eckhart, a well-known medieval mystic. The text reads, in Dutch:

*Ga dan in je grond,
vandaar uit
worden al je
werken
vruchtbaar²*

Before the meditation we start with an exchange of experiences. This group has been meditating together for a few times already as participants in the course. Part of the training is practising meditation at home. Participants tell about their home experiences in the last weeks. Recurring themes are the difficulty to take a regular moment of quietness, doubts about the effect of meditation, but also the experience

1. The following description of the meditation session is taken from Versteeg's field-work report.

2. Go on, into your ground. From there all your works become fertile.

that indeed things change through the practice. The brother Capuchin addresses all the questions and emphasizes that an attitude of “not expecting” is crucial in meditation. By not expecting things to change but to practise “attention” for the things that “appear,” meditation is a way and a goal at the same time. One of the group members describes a more specific experience, about something that she took “with her” after the last meeting. The last time we had practised meditation with a specific word that we had to pick from a number of words chosen by the meditation leader. Our homework was to meditate on the same word in the following days. The woman had chosen the word “sea,” and although she felt it was a word that meant something to her, she says she did not dare to reflect on that word, because it gave her the feeling that this would cause unrest and sorrow. The meditation leader adds: “I would indeed be careful with that. Because the sea refers to the unconscious. The sea can be dangerous and this ‘sea’ can be dangerous too. I would say to you, don’t do it on your own. Find somebody to talk to. A friend, a mentor.”

This exchange is followed by some teaching on meditation. Meditation, the brother tells us, has three stages: (1) relaxing, which we can understand as leaving what keeps us tense, distancing from, letting go; (2) reflect upon, become aware; and (3) concentration, focusing our attention on one thing. Letting go means “let it flow away”; by distancing yourself you place something beside you and you don’t look at it again. “Wrap it in nice paper and put it down beside you.” Becoming aware means looking at something “without judging.” If you feel pain or unease, just become aware of that. Becoming aware all comes down to the attitude that things are “allowed to be there.”³ Lastly, meditation is focusing, doing one thing at a time.

We read the text by Eckhart a couple of times. The brother asks to see if we feel any obstacles when we read the text. Perhaps words we find difficult? Those are the words we have to focus our attention on. “Say it for yourself, in chunks. Go into your ground... In your ground... Your ground... Ground.” Then we start meditating. After a short relaxation exercise we are quiet for 15 minutes.

After meditation, another exchange follows. A number of participants say they found the text very inspiring. A young woman says that the text was an answer to the word “ground.” “Now I get why ‘ground’ had to have me. (...) It gives me an autumn feeling: going in the ground, under the ground, so that fruit will grow again.” An older woman says the text means a lot to her: “I feel it really means something to me because I really want to ground.”⁴

3. “*Het mag er zijn*,” a central adagium in this type of spirituality.

4. “To ground,” in the sense of “to earthen,” is a metaphor referring to the grounding of

A male participant, however, says that he had difficulties with the meditation. “On the one hand I find the text intriguing. On the other hand I think, this is complete nonsense. Your ground. What is that? From there all your works become fertile. What is that? Who says that? Why would that be so?” The brother answers him. He thinks you should not try to *understand* the text. “It has something to say to you. You know what the text has to say to you. I don’t have the answer; you give the answer yourself.” The text, the meditation leader says, is a condensation, an “essence.” It is like an onion. “You can peel the onion and repeatedly think you have reached the core, but then there is another peel.” The words of the text are peels, concentrated around an essence. The brother tells the man: “You only look at the outside.” I sense a similarity with the experience of the man and I tell the brother that I recognized the question and that I tried to become aware why I was irritated by the words. The brother Capuchin responds again by saying that I should not try to get it. “It has something to say to you. Only you have the answer.” Then I ask if it is possible to have answers that exclude other answers: “Suppose you think that this text reveals your deepest self and I think it doesn’t, is that possible?” The brother responds: “I find your answer not that important. It’s about the way leading to it, not the end goal. It’s not about the answer, but about the way you traversed.” That road can be “dead boring, empty and dark, what the mystics call the night.” “You can’t find anything there, but it is a way.”

The meditation session described in this vignette is typical for the kind of spirituality that is found on the alternative religious market. The fact that the example is from a Christian monastic setting does not alter that observation (see Versteeg, 2007). The basic structure of these kinds of spiritual courses is a form of relaxation and focused reflection. In conjunction with fragments of text (a poem, a guided fantasy, a part from the Bible, or simply practical instructions on how to attend to your breath), these techniques frame what we have called a “hermeneutic space” (Versteeg, 2006). The “hermeneutic space” is used as a form of hermeneutics in which individual experience makes sense of itself through a loose assemblage of signs and sensations. The individual participant in a meditation setting is encouraged to take up associations and feelings in order to create meaning, associations and feelings which are often part or become part of a personal narrative.

Striking is that there is hardly any message or viewpoint being communicated other than practical instructions. In this case we see how singular words (the words of Eckhart) cause people to show facets of their self and their life, not very

electrical installations, but in spirituality the expression (*gronden, aarden*) has become self-referential and it is rarely explained as a metaphor.

particular but giving a general sense of being in a process of learning to deal with life. As the example shows, for some participants meditation affects experiences of trauma and sorrow and they feel they can share this in a group of relative strangers. Spirituality thus offers a subjectivized route of exploration, placing the individual and her experience at the centre. One of the striking things, furthermore, is that there is almost no reference to God or anything sacred. There is only little input of “traditional” images and when traditional symbols, such as God, are used they are not used in a strongly discursive way. If there is something to be taught, the individual participants will have to find that for themselves. Only they can give the answer, thus underscoring the authority of the individual subject in religious signification.

Our case, however, also suggests that there is actually an implicit yet no less authoritative view of “sacredness” assumed and given in contemporary spirituality. The described example is in particular informative with respect to this, because of the interesting contrast that is created by the critical question of the male group member. The “incident” shows that the practitioners involved in this meditation course, who were invited to freely explore their own sense of sacredness, stumbled upon a number of boundaries which were strongly underscored and sustained by the very same practice. These boundaries become visible at the moment that the spiritual practice, and in particular one of its core elements, the meditation on the basis of a text, is in danger of becoming “profanized”: the moment that the words of Eckhart are represented by the critical male group member as being completely relative and the mystic’s words are depicted as redundant in the practice of contemplation. This particular moment occasions the meditation leader to correct the critical member, by implicitly stating that this present member has not displayed the “right” approach to such a text.

To be sure, it is not the correctness of a particular belief which is at stake in this case. The meditation leader keeps emphasizing that practitioners need to search for their own answers, and he does not interfere in people’s individual narrations of their experiences. What is at stake here is the approach and attitude towards the meditation practice. A particular attitude is assumed to be the right one, to be the appropriate way leading to experience; it is where experience and things coincide. Apparently, there should be an exercise of authority to establish this truth and to lead people away from the suspicion of having entered a vacuum.

Consequently, every experience is allowed but it is always accounted for as something personal, whether it is approved or not. Lack of support or positive feedback does not question the experience – for example, the experience that meditation is not helpful or irrelevant – but, as our example shows, it denotes the

spiritual status of the person who shares his experience. So, the meditation leader from our case does not explicitly rule out specific representations. Rather he creates an opposition between acceptance of an experience and the critical reflection on an experience, the latter being a position which defines somebody as observing himself from the outside, not willing or able to submit to a more pre-reflexive inside-experience of meditation. Hence, it is not the acceptance of an authoritative belief which is asked for in this context; it is rather that practitioners are expected to comply with a particular way of attaining and sharing a personal experience. Important in this context, or other forms of temporary and “light” communities, is the desired outcome of becoming an insider.

Notwithstanding its image and practice of experiential exploration, subjective association and personal meaning, this form of alternative spirituality shows some clear mediations of experience through which options of meaning are prescribed and contained. Although there is no institution or explicit ideology to back up this practice of signification and to make meaning a field of power relations, the interaction between meditation leader, individual member and group members clearly monitors experiences. Authority in this case is not doctrinal correctness but correct praxis. A correct praxis is an identity praxis in which individuals demonstrates that they are able to talk about themselves and to expose themselves in a way which reveals spiritual growth.

Studying Religious Experience: Methodological Considerations

Our example shows how researchers in the study of experience should look for the way in which practices become normal and normative, in particular in situations when apparent norms and codes are breached. Describing something that is “deviant” and the way in which this form of disputed difference becomes “normalized” is an important way to understand criteria for authentic experiences, not in the least when it takes place within the seemingly free milieu of alternative spirituality.⁵ This approach will lead the researcher to the boundaries of alternative spiritual repertoires, boundaries that are foremost found in ways of expressing and sharing within a group.⁶ Participant observation, thus, is not only an appropriate way to do

5. For example, the command of an authentic language of “depth,” which develops into stock phrases (Stringer, 1999) is important in these alternative spiritual contexts.

6. Attention for deviance may also demonstrate possible variations within the spectrum of alternative spirituality and as such the relative nature of these boundaries. The critical participant in this case did not lose his interest in spirituality but decided that he would look for a less “narrow” interpretation of meditation experiences. At the time he shared this in an

experience-near research, especially in the form of so-called experiencing participation (Lindquist, 1995); it is also a way to understand more of the social construction of experience. This layered process is not something that will become visible through a method of surveys and interviews, because this will mainly show a discourse of authenticity and individuality through which people learn to interpret what happens to them. The implicit and hidden nature of this reality construction is covered by a language that claims that what is experienced can be expressed. But by suggesting that stock phrases and discourse are the only access to experience, the experience becomes inaccessible, unless we take into account other, less standard, forms of expression.

The boundaries of alternative spirituality are not easy to detect and quantitative methods are hardly sufficient to analyse these boundaries. Through a quantitative approach the researcher will mainly find the spiritual jargon of inclusiveness, in which tensions, disagreements, restrictions and the subtle mechanisms of authority we distinguished in this contribution, will most probably not be mentioned. To trace these aspects, one needs to immerse oneself in the collectives in which practitioners of spirituality engage themselves. By participating, researchers become aware of the differing interpretations, the competitive discourses, and the frustrations and the disappointments of the participants. Researchers will be faced with the differences in opinion and the way these differences are handled – as in the case discussed above. They will hear the jokes and the gossip by means of which particular conventions are established (cf. Knibbe, 2007 and her contribution in this issue). They will become aware of the body language by means of which both acceptance and disapproval is communicated. They will hear and see the customary responses in the group to the words by means of which individuals express their experiences. They will, in short, stumble across what is accepted and what not; what is legitimate and what not; what is normal and what is deviant. Qualitative

interview, he was participating in group sessions with a Jesuit therapist working with psycho-synthesis, which inspired him very much. Other “deviant” examples from participants in alternative spiritual practices underscore the idea of variation and, a perhaps regained, subjectivity over and against the discursive subjectivity in alternative spiritual practices.

Some participants we interviewed were reluctant to specific textual content (Bible texts, for instance) or what they viewed as “exalted,” “vague” or “fluffy” approaches to meditation, while at the same time remaining involved with spirituality. One man in a Christian meditation group had difficulty with the constant referring to images of harmony in meditation by some meditation leaders. Harmony is false and easy, he said. Meditation should not be comfortable. “When I meditate I feel that my back hurts, that my posture doesn’t feel comfortable. Meditation is about observing such feelings and accepting them.”

methods point at the irregularities within a group practice and the processes which try to control these irregularities.

As we have suggested above, an obvious but often ignored way to get to study these mechanisms is by claiming a more outspoken role for the researcher. While we of course fully understand that this outspokenness poses difficult questions about the production of data in a research process, we feel that this part of participant observation is still largely being kept out of ethnography. At the same time, anthropologists will admit that it is a natural consequence of the viewpoint that the anthropologist is her own research instrument. An interventionist approach was disputed but taken for granted in action research (see Huizer, 1979), but why is even the slightest form of intervening ignored in anthropological research in general? The researcher represents the outside view, the dissenting voice, which can be made hermeneutically useful, in particular in the kind of voluntaristic client cults such as those spiritual groups that are consumer-based and lack most of the time an explicit ideological framework.

Conclusion

As spirituality is becoming an established field in the study of contemporary religion, scholars need to question the underlying notions of subjectivity and go beyond them. Subjectivization in religion is not the spiritual equivalent of the modern autonomous subject who controls his world through experience and self-discovery. On the contrary, even settings that are as fluid and temporal as Christian spiritual courses, show processes of the authorization of practices and ideas. One could even argue that it is in fact authoritative interpretation and supervision which make such fluid religiosity possible and which safeguards its continuity. The formation of this type of subjectivized religiosity is a social practice; it is a practice in which feelings and thoughts are expressed and shared. It is a practice in a group, in which the group resonates, monitors and authenticates what is being said. Becoming an insider, then, means submitting to practical correctness, that is, learning to appropriate a particular process of individual growth, internalizing an authoritative way of displaying one's emotions. This includes the command of a genre of experience, and the avoidance of other genres – in this case, for example, a critical text inquiry is overruled by pointing at the lack of personal lived experience in relation to the text.

We started our contribution by crediting the value of the current body of studies in contemporary spirituality. We also stated that research into this form of experiential religion generally shows a strong experiential bias in the used methodology. Little attention has been paid to the social processes which produce

experiences, and our aim has been to show how a particular qualitative approach can uncover these processes on the level of concrete situations of spiritual practice. More questions need to be asked about how people learn to internalize contextually authentic expressions in religious forms that have little or no institutional backup. We have shown through our case that this will require a qualitative research approach that is both critical and immersive.

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