Religious experiences, transformative paths and religious goals

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ABSTRACT: Though McNamara indicates that his focus is mainly on theistic forms of religious experience common in the West, it is important to consider how his broadly stated thesis might be affected by data from traditions other than those that are the focus of his book. Although he is right to call our attention to the processes through which religious traditions promote and religious practitioners cultivate experiential states, his approach is limited by his non-attributional conceptualization of religious experience as the culmination of one path toward one goal. A more nuanced approach would require attending more closely to 1) the diversity of ‘experiences’ that religious traditions set apart as being of particular importance, 2) the diversity of practices that are prescribed as being efficacious towards the attainment of those experiences, and 3) the dynamic relationship between individual practitioners and authorities of a religious tradition, wherein questions of authenticity arise and experiences are deemed ‘religious’ or not.

KEYWORDS: Patrick McNamara, neuroscience, religious experience, path schema

Patrick McNamara notes in his preface to his book, *The Neuroscience of Religious Experience*, that his ‘focus is mainly limited to the theistic forms of religious
experience common in the West,’ with ‘some account of non-Western [and] non-theistic […] forms of religious phenomena’ (McNamara, 2009, p. x). While we certainly cannot fault McNamara for acknowledging the limitations to his knowledge of the diversity of religious traditions, it is important to consider how the underlying (or overarching) theses of his project might be reconsidered in light of data from traditions other than those that are the focus of his book. To this end, we will address what we consider some of the strengths and weaknesses of McNamara’s understanding of religious experience, his use of an implicit path schema, which he refers to as ‘the journey,’ and his formulation of the goal of religious practices.

**Religious experience**

Throughout his discussion, McNamara seems to take the noun ‘religion’ and the adjective ‘religious’ for granted. In his study of religious experience, McNamara rightly diverts our attention from looking for a precise *region* of the brain to investigating ‘networks’ of brain activity that are the neural basis for ‘religious experience.’ However, instead of seeking to determine a particular network of the brain associated with *religious experience*, it would be more productive to look at the *range* of phenomena (and their corresponding brain states, to be sure) that people tend to identify as *religious* (McNamara, 2009, p. 13). We should not assume that there is a network in the brain that produces inherently *religious* experiences; by contrast, we need to be attentive both to the process of ascribing religious value to an experience and to the variety of experiences that traditions deem religious (Taves 2009).

McNamara, following Wildman and Brothers (1999), defines religious experience as a ‘subset of a broader range of “ultimacy experiences,”’ which ‘point to ultimate
concerns and elicit our most intense cognitive-emotional-spiritual engagement/commitment’ (McNamara, 2009, p. 148). In his discussion of the phenomenological properties of religious experiences, McNamara claims that ‘hundreds of controlled analyses of the phenomenological properties of so-called religious mystical practices are characterized by a consistent set of [seventeen] properties,’\(^2\) many of which McNamara argues ‘will be present most of the time when you hear a report of a religious experience from an ordinary and healthy person.’ Moreover, he claims ‘you tend to get the whole suite of these experiences in mystical or intense states and only a few of them in mundane, everyday forms of religious experience’ (McNamara, 2009, p. 16).

We have several issues with this characterization of religious experiences. First, while we agree in principle with McNamara that ‘reports of religious experience by many individuals can be sorted and studied using standard scientific and rational approaches,’ he does not cite nor are we aware of the ‘hundreds of controlled analyses of the phenomenological properties’ from which he argues this set of seventeen is derived (McNamara, 2009, p. 14).

Second, his list of properties does not adequately account for the variation of religious experiences across cultures. For example, in some prominent Hindu devotional traditions the path of practice is understood to culminate in an experience that is

characterized more by anguish and anxiety over separation from the beloved deity than by a ‘deeply felt positive mood’ or a ‘sense of integration within oneself and with others’ (McNamara, 2009, p. 15). Moreover, McNamara largely ignores the more ‘mundane, everyday forms of religious experience,’ privileging instead religious experiences that are claimed to have a profound and positive effect on the religious practitioner. This is evidenced by his particular interest in experiences that lead to long lasting effects and personal growth, the reports of which ‘are most reliable in individuals who can be called “mystics” or in those who undergo a conversion or who rediscover their religious life as mature adults’ (McNamara, 2009, p. 17). While McNamara does acknowledge that not all of the properties he associates with religious experience are always present, he neglects to integrate this insight into a more nuanced definition of religious experience.

Third, while we appreciate McNamara’s attempt to understand and articulate a list of stable phenomenological characteristics associated with religious experiences, these characteristics are not inherently religious. Rather, they may also be found in a range of experiences that people might not consider religious. For example, the experience of a home team scoring a winning point the last few seconds of a game may give rise to a feeling of ‘unity’ or sense of ‘integration with others’, a lost sense of or ‘transcendence of time,’ a ‘deeply felt positive mood,’ a ‘transient’ state of ‘euphoria,’ and an ‘enhanced sense of personal power’ or feeling of specialness; or a graduate student may experience a profound ‘feeling of insight’ while analyzing the influence of historical and contextual factors on the development of a religious tradition or sociological phenomenon that results in a sustained and ‘enhanced interest in writing.’ While many of the experiential properties that McNamara ascribes to religious experiences ‘will be present most of the
time when you hear a report of religious experience,’ it is important to recognize that they may also be found in a range of experiences for which people do not necessarily ascribe religious value. That is to say, they are not exclusively religious.

Religious paths and their goals

McNamara rightly suggests that ‘there are regular patterns in religious transformation’ that comprise ‘a kind of journey’ (McNamara, 2009, p. 17). It is often the case that religious traditions prescribe practices or behaviors that are intended to promote self-transformation in pursuit of or as part of religious goals. Attending to the similarities and differences of these transformations in the context of a path structure is a potentially very useful way of considering the significance of religious practices and resultant experiences cross-culturally. Religious paths, like other paths, share a similar structure insofar as they involve movement from one point to another. They do not, however, always involve the same kinds of experiences or lead to the same destination (Buswell and Gimello, 1992; Taves, 2009). McNamara, however, neglects the differences between various religious paths and instead puts forth a theory of the transformative path that attends to a singular pattern oriented towards a specific goal that he argues is common across traditions. It is here in McNamara’s attempt to chart the trajectory of this path, or ‘journey,’ that the Western Christian bias of his theory is most apparent. He articulates this trajectory as a ‘God-Self relationship journey’ during which the practitioner undergoes sequential stages of ‘infatuation, bliss, and love,’ followed by ‘a period of purification’ that finally results in a variety of positive qualities such as ‘quiet joy, freedom, peace, tranquility, vibrancy, contentment, generosity […], patience […] and a quiet determination to do “God’s Will.”’ Moreover, ‘throughout the journey, there may
be experiences of ineffable happiness and joys when one experiences a kind of
forgetfulness or dissolution of Self and a corresponding union with God’ (McNamara,

McNamara presents us with a structure in which one path leads to one goal: the
unification of the divided self and the ‘linking up’ to an ideal self through the efforts of
the executive self. He writes: ‘I contend that the goal of religious practices is the
strengthening of this executive Self. Religion creates this executive Self by providing an
ideal Self towards which the individual can strive and with which the individual can
evaluate the current Self’ (McNamara, 2009, p. 41). That many religious practices are
about self-transformation is a reasonable claim. But McNamara goes on to suggest the
following:

Religion is required to help build a Self that is capable of choosing the good and
the appropriate over long periods of time. The Self can choose the true and the
good by aiming at an ideal Self, ultimately God. Religion helps the Self attain to
or become the ideal Self (McNamara, 2009, p. 41).

This characterization of both ‘religion’ and the transformative path is premised upon an
individualistic path structure in which the goal is necessarily an ideal self that can be
identified if not with God than with a Platonic ‘good’ that affords particular advantages in
terms of behavior, mood, or cognitive development (see, McNamara, 2009, pp. 15-17).

Formulated in this way, McNamara’s theory of religious experience draws heavily and
quite obviously from Christianity. Because of his indebtedness to Christian figures like
St. John of the Cross and St. Thomas Aquinas (McNamara, 2009, pp. 18, 39-43),
McNamara has taken a culturally specific path structure and extrapolated a general theory
of ‘religion’ and ‘religious experience.’ It is not surprising, then, that this schema would not provide a sufficient explanatory model for other religious contexts.

McNamara’s discussion of the journey also suffers from overemphasizing ‘mystical experiences’ and the positive qualities associated with those states as the singular goal of the religious path. This limits the utility of his path structure for the study of other religious traditions in two significant ways: first, it employs a culturally specific theological framework that can not accommodate emic understandings of the transformative path in other traditions and second, it does not facilitate discussion of the wide range of goals within and across religious traditions that could otherwise be meaningfully discussed with the interpretive framework of a path structure.

However, we can still preserve the notion of the path or journey, while articulating it in such a way that it facilitates cross-cultural and comparative analysis. Paths articulated in other traditions, however, such as those found in Buddhist, Daoist, and various Hindu traditions, for instance, do not conceive of the goal as a union of the self with God. For example, the goal of meditation for many Tibetan Buddhists is the realization that the ‘self’—along with all other phenomena—is an illusory conceptual construct that lacks inherent existence of its own. They do hold that this knowledge is valuable in shaping the tradition’s understanding of an ‘ideal self,’ but they would never associate the ideal self with God. Furthermore, in various Hindu devotional traditions, the final stage of the practitioner’s journey would be better characterized by fits of ecstasy, periods of agonizing longing, and devotional obsession than ‘a long period of quiet joy,’ ‘patience,’ and ‘contentment.’ Nor should we assume that every path is structured around a purificatory stage that leads to the cultivation of positive qualities. For example, certain
Tantric traditions promote a transformative path wherein practitioners engage in a variety of ritual practices that practitioners of other traditions would see as deeply ‘polluting.’ Nor are the goals of these practices always the cultivation of positive qualities associated with the good and the ‘ideal self’; rather, their aim is often pleasure, bodily immortality, and worldly power. Thus, McNamara’s discussion of the journey suffers on account of being entirely too culturally specific, and too specifically Christian, to hold as a theory of ‘religious experience’ that works for the cultural diversity of religious traditions.

When implementing a path structure in the study of religion, it is also important to attend to the diversity of goals that may inform religious practices. For example, for lay Buddhists in Tibet, the practice of pilgrimage—which involves a variety of ritual offerings, prayers, and prostrations while circumambulating a sacred site, such as a mountain—is oriented not towards the attainment of enlightenment or even the cultivation of virtues, but rather to the accruing of positive merit in order to ensure a better rebirth. Or, in the case of Hindu traditions, practitioners engage in rituals to achieve a variety of goals. These can range in purpose from getting a good spouse or healthy child to attaining magical powers to achieving various forms of liberation to counteracting mistakes in other rituals. As scholars of a diverse array of cultural practices that are associated with ‘religion,’ we need an interpretive framework that allows us to investigate the path structure in a variety of contexts. In so doing, we need also to recognize that just as there is not one goal, so too there is not one path. Across traditions, we can find a wide range of practices advocated as being efficacious towards similar goals; and within traditions, there are frequently important debates on which practices are the most efficacious (or efficacious at all) in attaining a commonly shared goal.
In summary, McNamara is right to call our attention to the processes through which religious traditions promote and religious practitioners cultivate experiential states. However, this is best achieved by taking a closer look at 1) the diversity of ‘experiences’ that religious traditions set apart as being of particular importance, 2) the diversity of practices that are prescribed as being efficacious towards the attainment of those experiences, and 3) the dynamic relationship between individual practitioners and authorities of a religious tradition, wherein questions of authenticity arise and experiences are deemed ‘religious’ or not.

References


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