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## Reconsidered A Building Block Approach

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Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block ...

Religious Experience Reconsidered lays out a framework for research into religious phenomena that reclaims experience as a central concept while bridging the divide between religious studies and the sciences.

Annotation Ann Taves addresses the subject of religious experience directly and the problems of reductionism and humanistic fears of the sciences indirectly and by example. The orientation of this book is practical more than philosophical.

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## Reconsidered A Building Block Approach

The essence of religion was once widely thought to be a unique form of experience that could not be explained in neurological, psychological, or sociological terms. In recent decades scholars have questioned the privileging of the idea of religious experience in the study of religion, an approach that effectively isolated the study of religion from the social and natural sciences. *Religious Experience Reconsidered* lays out a framework for research into religious phenomena that reclaims experience as a central concept while bridging the divide between religious studies and the sciences. Ann Taves shifts the focus from "religious experience," conceived as a fixed and stable thing, to an examination of the processes by which people attribute meaning to their experiences. She proposes a new approach that unites the study of religion with fields as diverse as neuroscience, anthropology, sociology, and psychology to better understand how these processes are incorporated into the broader cultural formations we think of as religious or spiritual. Taves addresses a series of key questions: how can we set up studies without obscuring contestations over meaning and value? What is the relationship between experience and consciousness? How can research into consciousness help us access and interpret the experiences of others? Why do people individually or collectively explain their experiences in religious terms? How can we set up studies that allow us to compare experiences across times and cultures? *Religious Experience Reconsidered* demonstrates how methods from the sciences can be combined with those from the humanities to advance a naturalistic understanding of the experiences that people deem religious.

Fits, trances, visions, speaking in tongues, clairvoyance, out-of-body experiences, possession. Believers have long viewed these and similar involuntary experiences as religious--as manifestations of God, the spirits, or the Christ within. Skeptics, on the other hand, have understood them as symptoms of physical disease, mental disorder, group dynamics, or other natural causes. In this sweeping

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work of religious and psychological history, Ann Taves explores the myriad ways in which believers and detractors interpreted these complex experiences in Anglo-American culture between the mid-eighteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Taves divides the book into three sections. In the first, ranging from 1740 to 1820, she examines the debate over trances, visions, and other involuntary experiences against the politically charged backdrop of Anglo-American evangelicalism, established churches, Enlightenment thought, and a legacy of religious warfare. In the second part, covering 1820 to 1890, she highlights the interplay between popular psychology--particularly the ideas of "animal magnetism" and mesmerism--and movements in popular religion: the disestablishment of churches, the decline of Calvinist orthodoxy, the expansion of Methodism, and the birth of new religious movements. In the third section, Taves traces the emergence of professional psychology between 1890 and 1910 and explores the implications of new ideas about the subconscious mind, hypnosis, hysteria, and dissociation for the understanding of religious experience. Throughout, Taves follows evolving debates about whether fits, trances, and visions are natural (and therefore not religious) or supernatural (and therefore religious). She pays particular attention to a third interpretation, proposed by such "mediators" as William James, according to which these experiences are natural and religious. Taves shows that ordinary people as well as educated elites debated the meaning of these experiences and reveals the importance of interactions between popular and elite culture in accounting for how people experienced religion and explained experience. Combining rich detail with clear and rigorous argument, this is a major contribution to our understanding of Protestant revivalism and the historical interplay between religion and psychology.

A leading scholar sheds critical light on the seemingly revelatory events behind new religions and spiritual movements Unseen



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presences. Apparitions. Hearing voices. Although some people would find such experiences to be distressing and seek clinical help, others perceive them as transformative. Occasionally, these unusual phenomena give rise to new spiritual paths or religious movements. Revelatory Events provides fresh insights into what is perhaps the bedrock of all religious belief—the claim that otherworldly powers are active in human affairs. Ann Taves looks at Mormonism, Alcoholics Anonymous, and A Course in Miracles—three cases in which insiders claimed that a spiritual presence guided the emergence of a new spiritual path. In the 1820s, Joseph Smith, Jr., reportedly translated the Book of Mormon from ancient gold plates unearthed with the help of an angel. Bill Wilson cofounded AA after having an ecstatic experience while hospitalized for alcoholism in 1934. Helen Schucman scribed the words of an inner voice that she attributed to Jesus, which formed the basis of her 1976 best-selling self-study course. In each case, Taves argues, the sense of a guiding presence emerged through a complex, creative interaction between a founding figure with unusual mental abilities and an initial set of collaborators who were drawn into the process by diverse motives of their own. A major work of scholarship, this compelling and accessible book traces the very human processes behind such events.

Over the past decade, religious, secular, and spiritual distinctions have broken down, forcing scholars to rethink secularity and its relationship to society. Since classifying a person, activity, or experience as religious or otherwise is an important act of valuation, one that defines the characteristics of a group and its relation to others, scholars are struggling to recast these concepts in our increasingly ambiguous, pluralistic world. This collection considers religious and secular categories and what they mean to those who seek valuable, ethical lives. As they investigate how individuals and groups determine significance, set goals, and attribute meaning, contributors illustrate the ways in which religious, secular, and spiritual designations serve as markers of value. Reflecting on recent

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ethnographic and historical research, chapters explore contemporary psychical research and liberal American homeschooling; the work of nineteenth and early-twentieth-century American psychologists and French archaeologists; the role of contemporary humanitarian and volunteer organizations based in Europe and India; and the prevalence of highly mediated and spiritualized publics, from international psy-trance festivals to Ghanaian national political contexts. Contributors particularly focus on the role of ambivalence, attachment, and disaffection in the formation of religious, secular, and spiritual identities, resetting research on secular society and contemporary religious life while illuminating what matters in the lives of ordinary individuals.

How is religious experience to be identified, described, analyzed and explained? Is it independent of concepts, beliefs, and practices? How can we account for its authority? Under what conditions might a person identify his or her experience as religious? Wayne Proudfoot shows that concepts, beliefs, and linguistic practices are presupposed by the rules governing this identification of an experience as religious. Some of these characteristics can be understood by attending to the conditions of experience, among which are beliefs about how experience is to be explained.

Drawing from sources including the ethology of art and the cognitive science of religion this book proposes an improved understanding of both art and religion as behaviors developed in the process of human evolution. Looking at both art and religion as closely related, but not identical, behaviors a more coherent definition of religion can be formed that avoids pitfalls such as the Eurocentric characterization of religion as belief or the dismissal of the category as nothing more than false belief or the product of scholarly invention. The book integrates highly relevant insights from the ethology and anthropology of art, particularly the identification of "the special" by Ellen Dissanayake and art as

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agency by Alfred Gell, with insights from, among others, Ann Taves, who similarly identified "specialness" as characteristic of religion. It integrates these insights into a useful and accurate understanding and explanation of the relationship of art and religion and of religion as a human behavior. This in turn is used to suggest how art can contribute to the development and maintenance of religions. The innovative combination of art, science, and religion in this book makes it a vital resource for scholars of Religion and the Arts, Aesthetics, Religious Studies, Religion and Science and Religious Anthropology.

The aim of the book is to provide a short and user-friendly introduction and critical discussion of the "building block" approach to religious studies, developed in recent years by Professor Ann (University of California, Santa Barbara) and Associate Professor Egil Asprem (Stockholm University).

Bruce Lincoln is one of the most prominent advocates within religious studies for an uncompromisingly critical approach to the phenomenon of religion—historians of religions, he believes, should resist the preferred narratives and self-understanding of religions themselves, especially when their stories are endowed with sacred origins and authority. In *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars*, Lincoln assembles a collection of essays that both illustrates and reveals the benefits of his methodology, making a case for a critical religious studies that starts with skepticism but is neither cynical nor crude. The book begins with Lincoln's "Theses on Method" and ends with "The (Un)discipline of Religious Studies," in which he unsparingly considers the failings of uncritical and nonhistorical approaches to the study of religions. In between, Lincoln presents new examinations of problems in ancient religions and relates these cases to larger comparative themes. While bringing to light important features of the formation of pantheons and the constructions of demons, chaos, and the dead, Lincoln demonstrates

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that historians of religions should take religious things—inspired scriptures, sacred centers, salvific rites, communities graced by divine favor—as the theories of interested humans that shape perception, community, and experiences. As he shows, it is for their terrestrial influence, and not their sacred origins, that religious phenomena merit consideration by the historian. Tackling many questions central to religious study, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* will be a touchstone for the history of religions in the twenty-first century.

He argues that "religion is a construction of European modernity, a construction that authorizes—for Westerners and non-Westerners alike—particular forms of "history making."

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