Culture and the Problem of Proclivity

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In socio-cultural anthropology, when we study culture we often study form and not content. We study the representation of kinship, the imagery of the ordered social relationship, not actual biological relatedness. We shy away from a discussion of the nature of madness to look at the way madness is shaped by local culture–the way it has been named defined, treated, responded to. That is what our theory invites us to do. In David Schneider's famous first line: "This book is concerned with American kinship as a cultural system: that is, as a system of symbols" (Schneider 1980 [1968], p. 80). In that theory, we mean by "culture" the categories a society generates around and out of its social order – concepts of witchcraft, symbols of divinity, images of the bad and the good. The definition of culture as concepts and categories which express and maintain the social order first emerged out of the early seminar room discussions in the era of British structural-functionalism. It soon became instantiated in American anthropology and indeed became a professional credo of the American style of anthropology, as Talcott Parsons divided up the responsibilities of the social sciences. When Clifford Geertz, borrowing from Clyde Kluckhohn, asserted that symbols were models of and models for reality, he was enacting Parsons' division of intellectual mission from the great mélange of Harvard's Department of Social Relations: mind to the psychologists, social structure to the sociologists, culture to the anthropologists. For the British, socio-cultural anthropology retained the responsibility for both social structure and for culture, but still in British anthropological theory, culture remained a thing of concepts and categories, signifiers rather than the signified.

Yet what anthropologist does not have a story of their own stunned astonishment as the cultural symbols they have come to study – abstract, other, distant, the fanciful beliefs about which we strive not to show our unbelief – become for a moment as real as flesh? Kirsten Hastrup calls these "raw moments." As an anthropologist of Icelandic people, she was studying among other quaint concepts their folkloric notion of hillmen who emerged out of the dense clouds shrouding the peaks. One afternoon

she was one on of these peaks alone, searching for an errant goat, when the mist descended. And then she saw a gaunt and purposeful hillman striding towards her through the clouds. Paul Stoller (Stoller, 1987) had come to study sorcery among the Songhay of Niger when he visited a famed sorceress and discovered during the night that she had bewitched him into paralysis. He could not move.

Those raw moments, and the frustration that an anthropology focused upon categories cannot capture lived experience, has become the impulse behind the new turn to a theory of "embodiment." "In Nepal," Robert Desjarlais reflects, "I found that "knowing through the body" often centers on knowledge of the body, for how I came to hold my limbs in Helambu led to a tacit assessment of how villagers themselves experience somatic and social forms… experiencing my body in this manner influenced my understanding of Yolmo experiences…" (Desjarlais 1992, p. 27). Thomas Csordas, perhaps the leading contemporary spokesperson for this position, frames the argument as a rejection of the classic binary. Drawing from Merleau-Ponty, he argues that "on the level of perception it is thus not legitimate to distinguish between mind and body" (Csordas 1994, p. 9). For him the puzzle becomes the creation of the object of the self out of social practice. Such theorists take experience as their object of study. They resist the idea that discourse alone could account for the complex phenomena they describe. They urge fellow scholars to understand that cultural categories become inscribed upon the body, and that it is the inscription which the proper study of the anthropologist. Such scholars hesitate at the distinction between the cultural and the experiential. That is the power of the theoretical commitment to "embodiment," that it resists the binary distinction between culture and the body and the insistence that culture alone is the proper focus of the anthropologist.

Yet false distinctions can be useful heuristics. This volume invites us to adopt a "radical empiricism." It asks that we treat as "data"–that word which signifies so much to a science-minded community–not only what we see as ethnographers, but what we experience. Knowing the limits of the distinction between cultural categories and bodily experience, I want for the purposes of analysis to use the distinction to force us to pay attention to our own experience as ethnographers. When we treat our own raw moments as data, they demand that we take seriously the limitations of a category-centric approach. They force us to take seriously the different ways in which we pay attention to cultural categories. And that, in turn, can teach use something about the process through which

embodiment takes place. This paper contributes to the recent development of the anthropological theory of embodiment by focusing on what and how we learn.

I was sitting in a commuter train to London the first time I felt supernatural power rip through me. I was twenty three, and I was one year into my graduate training in anthropology. I had decided to do my fieldwork among educated white Britons who practiced what they called magic. I thought of this as a clever twist on more traditional anthropological fieldwork about the strange ways of natives who clearly were not "us." I was on my way to meet some of them, and I had ridden my bike to the station with trepidation and excitement. Now at my seat, as the sheep-dotted countryside rolled by, I was reading a book written by a man they called an "adept," meaning someone regarded by the people I was about to meet as deeply knowledgeable and powerful (The book was *The Experience of Inner Worlds*, by Gareth Knight). The book's language was dense and abstract, and my mind kept slipping as I struggled to grasp what he was talking about, and I wanted so badly to understand. The text spoke of the Holy Spirit and Tibetan masters and an ancient system of Judaic mysticism called kabbalah. The author wrote that all these were so many names for forces that flowed from a higher spiritual reality into this one through the vehicle of the trained mind. And as I strained to imagine what it would be like to be that vehicle, I began to feel power in my veins – to really feel it, not to imagine it. I grew hot. I became completely alert, more awake than I usually am, and I felt so alive. It seemed that power coursed through me like water through a chute. I wanted to sing. And then wisps of smoke came out of my backpack, in which I had tossed my bicycle lights. One of them was melting.

This impressed me. I had gone to graduate school because I was fascinated by the problem of mind: how humans thought, what constrained our thought, and in particular, the problem of irrational thought, which is the problem of how apparently reasonable, pragmatic people could accept beliefs which skeptical observers–more "rational" observers–simply couldn't believe. In the literature, magic was always used as the best example. A man puts a special amulet in his field to keep people from stealing the crop, the skeptical observer can't believe that the amulet works, and yet the man puts the amulet in his field year after year. What is he thinking?

Then I took that train ride to London. I didn't quite know what to make of the experience. In fact I think I didn't even mention it to anyone for months. In the meantime, I began to learn to practice magic.

In the world I had entered, people are trained in what are considered to be basic skills which are thought to enable them to recognize, to generate, and to manipulate magical forces. The exact purpose of the training varied from group to group (people who called themselves witches talked more about generating power, while those who thought of themselves as practicing "high magic" talked about manipulating existing power) but the actual training structure was common. Moreover, all groups recognized the need for training, and all groups identified some people as more skilled than others, and a smaller group of people as experts. Some groups even had formal, take home courses. Before I could be initiated into the most elaborately hierarchical and secretive of magical groups, I was required to take a nine-month home-study course complete with supervisor and monthly essays. It was one of two home-study courses I took. These courses were not dissimilar from other published courses offered to new students in magic. Lessons typically demanded that the student learn the knowledge associated with that kind of magic (how magical power was understood, which symbols represented it) and, typically, they asked students to personalize that knowledge, to see it as relevant to and embedded within their lives. But they also demanded the acquisition of two attentional skills: meditation and visualization. Each course demanded that the student learn to quiet the mind, and to focus on some internal experience (an image, a word, or on the apparently empty mind itself). Each course also demanded that the student learn to relax and to see with the mind's eye some unfolding narrative sequence. Here is an example from on one of my early lessons, which I did, in some form, for fifteen minutes a day for nine months:

> Work through these exercises, practicing one of them for a few minutes each day, either before or after your meditation session.
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> 1. Stand up and examine the room in which you are working. Turn a full circle, scanning the room. Now sit down, close the eyes and build the room in imagination. Note where the memory or visualizing power fails. At the end of the exercise briefly re-examine the room and check your accuracy. Note the results in your diary.
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> 2. Carefully visualize yourself leaving the room in which you are working, going for a short walk you know well, and returning to your room. Note clarity, breaks in concentration, etc, as before.

> 3. Go for an *imaginary* walk; an imaginary companion, human or animal, can accompany you. Always start and finish the walk in the room you use for the exercises. Note the results, etc, as before.
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> 4. Build up in imagination a journey from your physical plane home to your ideal room. Start the journey in real surrounds, then gradually make the transition to the imaginary journey by any means you wish. Make the journey to and from the room until it is entirely familiar.

The idea behind this (what I came to think of as the theology of magic) was that if you could learn to see mental images clearly, with borders, duration and stability, those images could become the vehicle for supernatural power to enter the mundane world.

What startled me, as a young ethnographer, was that this training worked. At least, it seemed to change the way I experienced mental images. After about a year of this kind of training, my mental imagery *did* seem to become clearer. I thought that my images had sharper borders, greater solidity and more endurance. I began to feel that my concentration states were deeper and more sharply different from the everyday. And I began to have more of what a psychologist would call 'anomalous experience,' the kind of thing that had happened to me on the train. I had a vision, or more technically, a hallucination. It was, admittedly, an early morning vision. (It is easier to have visual and auditory hallucinations on the verge of sleep.) I had been reading a novel written by this kind of magical practitioner, really trying to imagine what the characters were experiencing, and one morning I awoke to see some of the characters standing by my window. I shot up in bed when I saw them, and they vanished. But for a moment, I really saw them. And I felt different in rituals, when we shut our eyes, sank into meditative states, and visualized what the group leader told us to. At those times, when I was trying so hard to see with my mind's eye and to be completely relaxed but mentally alert, it seemed as if there was something altered about the way I experienced the world–in my sense of self, sense of time, sense of focus, but also and less metaphorically, in what I sensed: in the way I saw, heard and felt, even when I knew that I sensed was internal and imagined. This was not true for all ritual gatherings, but in those rituals in which I felt fully absorbed, the difference from the everyday was striking. Of course I was socially immersed in this world, and I was learning new ways to interpret my awareness and my experience. But it didn't feel to me that I was "just"

acquiring knowledge. I felt that I was acquiring new psychological skills, and that the skills could be taught and mastered. And as I acquired those skills, the world became drenched in meaning. Nothing happened by accident anymore. A phone call, the kind of fruit the greengrocer sold, a book I glanced at in a window–everything seemed connected to my thoughts, my visualizations, and my dreams.

I was still cautious about telling anyone outside my little magical world about these experiences. I mentioned them on a page or two in the book I eventually wrote about magic (*Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, 1989) but I buried the account on page 348. That was cowardly, if perhaps also wise. Those experiences completely changed the way I thought about magic.

I had gone into the field looking for discourse, broadly conceived. Whether you understand that word from a Foucauldian perspective or from the perspective of cognitive science, I was looking for the words people used and the narratives they spun and the consequences of their interpretations for their choices and actions. Like most anthropologists before me, I assumed that to study magic was to study the way people organized knowledge: the way they identified what counted as evidence for these forces, the way they compared (or failed to compare) the "outcome" of rituals over time, and the metaphors and narratives they used that might lead them to think differently about magical forces than they might think about an experimental procedure in a laboratory. I thought I would be telling a cognitive story–an account of the kinds of categories people acquired, how those categories were structured and the way they were learned. In the crudest rendering, I assumed before I did the fieldwork that people who believed in magic had different cognitive models–different ideas–and that the ideas were what led them to think differently about cause and effect.

Instead, what the unusual experiences taught me was that people who believed in magic had different *bodily feelings* (again, broadly construed) as well as different ideas. They certainly acquired a set of cognitive models, but those models became meaningful, salient, for them because they confirmed those ideas in their own personal experience of their world. They felt the power, they heard the gods, and they saw the spirits. There was something more complicated going on that simply the acquisition of discourse.

My unusual experiences would not, of course, have taught me this if no one else seemed to have such experiences. If that had been true, I would have learned, I think,

about my own psychic health, and not about the local culture. But in fact other people did report unusual experiences, and they did so with pride. Moreover, they attributed them to the training, or at least to the process of becoming skilled in magic. They all thought that training was important; they all thought it was hard and took work; and they all thought that training changed the way that you experienced your world.

Moreover, the training they advocated had shared features found around the world in what are often called "spiritual disciplines." There is a great deal of historical and ethnographic evidence that the attentional skills of meditation and visualization have been taught throughout history and across culture, that they are learnable skills, and that mastery of those skills is associated with intense spiritual experience.[1] These practices encourage what I would now call involvement, a simple behavioral pattern in which a subject displays intense involvement in internal sensory stimuli with diminished peripheral awareness. The techniques probably encourage absorption by related means. Meditation probably inhibits sensory responsiveness to external sensory stimulation by dampening reaction, while visualization probably discourages such responsiveness to the external by intensifying internal stimuli and in effect drowning out external sensory stimulation. We use the word 'trance' to describe deep absorption. An interest in trance states is even more widely distributed that the specific attentional practices of mediation and visualization. Trance states play a role in nearly every known culture, although their role in those cultures seems to wax and wane. And whether or not the specific attentional techniques of meditation and visualization are culturally encouraged, typically the trance is entered through the use of some kind of sensory manipulation–chanting, altering the light, fantasy, pain, rapid

[1] Systematic visualization practice is found in Asian monastic tradition, in medieval Christianity and it remains the cornerstone of arguably the most successful spiritual conversion practice in Catholicism, the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. The practice of visualization is also widely distributed in shamanic or shamanic-style religions, although the training may appear less systematic to an observer, in part because it is apprentice-based and taught in a preliterate context. Most ethnographies of shamanism are clear that the shaman must be apprenticed and trained. Those ethnographies that describe the training in detail suggest that such training consists in expert coaching to enable the apprentice to enter an altered state and to see certain kinds of images clearly and reliably. The practice of meditation is equally widely distributed, and famously present in many Eastern spiritual systems, where it is presumed to be a skill that can be learned and which, when learned, will deliver to the practitioner a series of intense spiritual experiences. Meditation has garnered the lion's share of the scientific study of spiritual practice, and because of this we know that consistent practice may produce physiological changes. Discussions include: Bourguignon 1979; Austin 1999; Beyer 1978; Carruthers 1998; Crocker 1985; Csíkszentmihályi 1990; Fromm and Katz 1990; Goleman 1977; Happold 1963; Noll 1985.

whirling–techniques which decrease peripheral awareness and enhance absorption in internal sensory stimuli.[2]

At the time I modeled this process ethnographically as "interpretive drift." If you looked at what individuals were implicitly and explicitly taught about magic in the different everyday settings in which they engaged it, there were two different kinds of learning that took place. There was discourse, the ideas which people acquired from books and from each other, cognitive models and representations about their world. I could see that the social interactions between people practicing magic provided a newcomer to magic with a host of phrases, associations, and symbolic representations with which to think about magic. There was didactic teaching in courses run by practitioners and the knowledge presented by the many books people bought about magical ritual and the various symbolic systems associated with it: astrology, mythology, the tarot, kabbalah, alchemy, and the like. Casual conversations were also crucial in providing to individuals a way of thinking about magical ideas, and newcomers learned from the ways in which more experienced magicians talked about them how the ideas hung together as a system, loosely construed, and how they could be used to identify and explain events. This kind of formal and informal learning centered on the domain of ideas: categories which are learned in social discourse, which can be understood as schemas, and which hang together and are acquired through narratives, concepts, systems of information.

Then there was what one could loosely call practice and its psychological sequelae. New magicians learned to meditate and to visualize. They would learn to close their eyes for fifteen minutes a day, sink into an absorbed state, and see in their minds eye a trip to a sacred garden in the clouds. There they would clean their altar, fill their chalice, and converse with spirits. They learned to journey on what they called the astral plane, experiencing themselves as flying over London and swooping down as hunters, pre-Potter wizards with no need for brooms. Their daydreams grew more intense; their images grew more vivid; they experienced themselves as losing time in this world as they traveled into others. They recorded their dreams in bedside dream books and their dreams become drenched in symbolism. This was not the same learning experience as simply acquiring cognitive models in casual conversation. To

[2] See the discussion in Luhrmann 2004.

be sure, they used those cognitive models to interpret those experiences. They studied alchemy and alchemical symbols appeared in their dreams. But the learning was of a different nature.

Back then I also described what I thought of as a third form of learning around the way individuals learned to manage conflicting self-representations. In magical practice, this was important because people who practice magic are on the one hand committed to their practice and invested in being magicians; yet on the other hand, as middle class, well educated individuals, they realize that many of their peers believe that they are foolish or even crazy to practice magic. Individuals who practiced magic learned to use particular metaphors to capture and explain this apparent dissonance to themselves: they spoke about magical power being "on another plane" or "part of another reality." They then had a variety of philosophical reflections on these dual "worlds" which were more or less important to them, depending on their sense of disjunction between the two "worlds". This now seems to me to be as an issue of epistemological commitment, a way of negotiating how true, how real, you hold these claims to be. For the moment I will put that learning domain to the side. Instead I want to emphasize the difference between learning the categories, and learning the practice, and I want to point out that my own bodily feelings forced me to recognize that categories are not enough. Newcomers to magic did not simply accept the cognitive models of magical practice with which peers and experts presented them. They confirmed those ideas in their everyday experience of their world, and when their practice led them to experience magical power in their bodies, the discourse seemed much more real.

It is a risky business to use your own bodily experience – your own raw moments–to draw inferences about the lives of people in other social worlds. The word "empathy" is supposed to refer to the listener's capacity to feel at the moment, to some extent, what the speaker is feeling. It is the attempt by a listener to understand, from the inside, what the speaker's experience is like. It is, of course, an impossible task. But it is partially possible through the use of our own emotional response. I think the best account of the ethnographer's main goal is that the ethnographer attempts to grasp the task that the fieldsubject must master in order to be minimally competent in their domain – that task of being a Bororo man or woman, the task of being a competent psychiatrist, the task of living an agricultural life to the rhythms of a subcontinental monsoon. Like psychoanalytic patients, fieldsubjects rarely say all that that must be

said to understand them, although in the case of the fieldsubject the issue may be less unconscious conflict than the absurdity of asking a fish to describe water. Part of understanding that task is to understand the emotional cost and consequence of the enactment of the task, what it feels like to manage your life decisions according to the outcome of the poison oracle. And there, our personal experience as ethnographers can be an important guide to the emotional experience of others. One reason why Evans-Pritchard's Azande were so engrossing is that he said that he himself could live by the rhythms of the local divination. He was able to manage it and not be driven mad; and so we readers were willing to accept, if given further evidence, that even the Azande were logical, in their own way. Had I not paid attention to my own experience in the field, I would have missed the phenomenology of magical training, which is both its most interesting aspect and the aspect missed by the scholarly approaches to irrationality which focus on cognitive heuristics and biases.[3]

And yet it is terribly risky. The psychodynamically minded describe this danger as "counter–transference:" an emotional judgment that rises out of the listeners' own life circumstances, and not out of anything the speaker has said.[4] You find yourself furious at someone because he or she unwittingly echoed a demeaning voice from the past. You use your own emotional experience to interpret the way other people are responding: and you are wrong. Psychoanalysts insist that their candidates themselves go through analyses, and while few believe, as perhaps they once did, that such analyses make it possible to listen free of your own emotional entanglements–to listen, as they put it, without memory or desire–it probably helps. Margaret Mead famously thought that all ethnographers should experience personal therapy for the same reason. It's not a bad idea. Training in psychotherapy probably makes one a better ethnographer.

In my own case, however, the danger of inferring from my own experience was more blunt. When I began interviewing Christians who were encouraged to train in the spiritual disciplines as seriously as the magicians, I discovered that only some had the unusual experiences that many of the magicians I knew had reported.

[3] I have in mind the work of Tversky and Kahneman, which while brilliant underestimates the experiential dimension of the frame, that people may not only have different interpretive frames but even differential evidence with which to make their judgments.

[4] The classic ethnographic study of transference and countertransference in anthropology is Crapanzano, *Tuhami* (1990).

In 1997 I began to do fieldwork in the growing points of American religion, in spiritualities where the participation had expanded significantly since 1970. I spent months in a black Catholic church, months in a new age Anglo-Cuban Santeria house, months in a shul for newly orthodox Jews, months in an evangelical church. All these are examples of the intense American interest in developing an intimate relationship with the divine experienced through unusual moments of spiritual experience. There are many theories of the causes and consequences of this shift in American religion to a more concrete experience of God: Vincent Crapanzano (Crapanzano 2000), Wade Clark Roof (Roof 1993), Robert Wuthnow (Wuthnow 1999), Robert Bellah (Bellah 1970), Thomas Frank (Frank 2004), and others. My focus here is however not political, but practical. I am interested in understanding how it is done, how someone comes to hear the audible voice of God and to feel wrapped in God's embrace. This is the problem of how God becomes real for people. It is an old problem and a deep one, whether or not you believe in God.

I have done my most intensive interviewing in Chicago, in a new paradigm Christian church called the Vineyard Christian fellowship, now with over 600 churches nation-wide. "New paradigm" Christian churches pair conservative theology with liberal social conventions (their congregants dance, see movies, date, and even drink in moderation) (Miller 1997). Such churches meet in gyms, not churches; they use a rock band, not a choir; most people including the pastors dress casually; and they target the young, often deliberately planting seedling churches in college communities. They are Bible-based, by which is meant that the written Bible is seen as the only decisive authority, and the words of the Bible are taken to be literally true. They are also entrepreneurial, well organized, and technologically sophisticated. They spring from the same reformist principle that has animated Protestantism from the beginning: to throw out the middleman of institutional religion, and to connect the believer directly to God. "What drew us together?" the national leader of the Vineyard asked in a recent gathering. "A dislike for church and a hunger for the holy spirit." And yet Sunday mornings at a Vineyard are relatively tame. People do not speak in tongues or fall, smitten by the Holy Spirit, during the service. But new paradigm churches do want people to experience an intimate relationship with God. They set out to make God real by modeling a relationship to God as the point of life – and incidentally, of going to church – and modeling prayer as the practice on which that relationship is built.

These churches democratize God, and they democratize intense spiritual experience. They expect all their congregants, not just the elite, to experience God as a best friend as well as a holy majesty, and they expect that intimacy to develop during prayer. They also expect that prayer is hard and requires training and practice; and they expect God to answer back in dialogue, through images, impressions, and unusual sensory experience. As one of the most popular books asserts: "Prayer is two-way fellowship and communication with God. You speak to God and He speaks to you. It is not a one-way communication."[5]

It would be hard to over-estimate the importance placed on prayer and prayer experience in a church like this and indeed, in Christian America today. Many of the best selling Christian books are books on prayer technique, and they sell in the millions. One such example is Richard Foster's *Celebration of Disciplines*. The book is a straightforward and accessible summary of the classic spiritual disciplines, and it leads with chapters on each of what he calls 'the inward disciplines:" meditation, prayer, fasting and solitude. He describes prayer as a learning process, and describes meditation–his first discipline–as most effectively achieved through the imagination. "Perhaps some rare individuals experience God through abstract contemplation alone, but most of us need to be more deeply rooted in the senses" (Foster 2003, p. 25). He says that meditation cannot be learned from a book, but only from its practice, and advises the reader to find a comfortable position that won't be distracting, to relax, and to focus on the written word of God. "Seek to live the experience, remembering the encouragement of Ignatius of Loyola to apply all our senses to the task. Smell the sea. Hear the lap of water along the shore. See the crowd. Feel the sun on your head and the hunger in your stomach. Taste the salt in the air. Touch the hem of his garment …."(Foster 2003, pp. 29-30). This is the basic structure of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, and it is the structure of the training I was given in magic so many years ago.

Such books often begin by presenting concrete sensory experience of God in the Hebrew Bible as the everyday relationship for which the ordinary believer should strive. One well-known evangelical text is *Hearing God: developing a conversational relationship with God*. The author Dallas Willard begins by saying that God's face-to-face conversations with Moses are examples of the "normal human life God

[5] *Experiencing God,* Blackaby and King 2004, p. 174.

intended for us" (Willard 1999, p. 18). The text then tries to lead the reader to have this experience. In *God Whispers*, another manual, the author says: "From the first moments in the garden of Eden, mankind was introduced to the voice. Adam and Eve communed with their creator. When they called out to God, they didn't get silence" (Feinberg 2005, p. 3). *Experiencing God* – four million copies sold – tells the story of Abraham and Moses, and asserts: "In the Scriptures. knowledge of God comes through experience. We come to know God as we experience Him in and around our lives." (Blackaby and King 2004, p. 7). Throughout, unusual sensory experiences are presented as spiritual guidance, and as God's communication to his followers. Here is an example from another beloved text, *Is that really you, God?* "Suddenly I was looking at a map of the world, only the map was alive and moving! I sat up and shook my head and rubbed my eyes. It was a mental movie. … Then just as suddenly as it had come, the scene was gone" (Cunningham 2004, pp. 32–3).

There is persuasive evidence, then, that the congregant learns the cultural idea that God should be experienced by the senses. A psychological skeptic could argue that what congregants learn is to use the categories of sensory experience and nothing more. Clearly some of what they learn is interpretation. They are being taught in part to interpret everyday experience as bearing the signs of God's presence. This interpretation is explicitly part of the learning process described in *Dialogue with God*, another well-known book[6]. The author begins by saying that he used to live in a rationalist box. He yearned to hear God speak to him the way God spoke to others in the Hebrew Bible–and he believed that God still spoke to others the way he did in ancient Canaan. Alas, he was unable to hear God speak to him until he realized that God's voice often sounds like his own stream of consciousness, and that the Christian just needs to know how to pay attention to his own awareness in order to hear God speaking directly and clearly. "God's voice normally sounds like a flow of spontaneous thoughts, rather than an audible voice. I have since discovered certain characteristics of God's interjected thoughts which help me to recognize them" (Virkler 1986, p. 29). That is the point of the book: to help you to identify what, in your experience of your own mind, are God's thoughts. "You need to learn to distinguish God's interjected

[6] I came across this as a teaching text for a Vineyard weekend course entitled "the Art of Hearing God." The course was technically offered by a separate body from the Vineyard, but was taught in a Vineyard by a Vineyard pastor.

thoughts from the cognitive thoughts that are coming from your own mind" (Virkler 1986, p. 31). God's voice, the book explains, has an unusual content. You will recognize it as different from your ordinary thoughts. You feel different when you hear God. "There is often a sense of excitement, conviction, faith, vibrant life, awe or peace that accompanies receiving God's word" (Virkler 1986, p. 30).

At the same time, there is also persuasive evidence that congregants learn that prayer practice is very important. It is also clear that congregants are being taught the classic attentional techniques that have been used to generate religious experience across the ages. *Dialogue with God* begins by saying that a man who knew how to hear God's voice "knew how to go to a quiet place and quiet his own thoughts and emotions so that he could sense the spontaneous flow of God within" (Virkler 1986, p. 6). The author provides explicit exercises to help his readers do likewise. He sells a 'centering cassette' for that purpose on their website. In fact, he recommends a 'prayer closet,' a place where you can go, unplug the phone, and be fully quiet in prayer. He recommends journaling to write down and discard distracting thoughts; he recommends simple song to focus the mind in worship; he recommends breathing techniques to breathe out your sin and breathe in the healing Holy Spirit; he recommends the complete focus of the mind and heart on Jesus. He acknowledges that many of these techniques seem very eastern, but distinguishes them from Zen and other forms of meditation on the grounds that eastern meditation contacts "the evil one," while he uses the techniques to contact God.

And indeed, as I found when studying magic, the accounts people gave suggest that congregants learn more than discourse and more than a style of interpretation. Much of the account one would give of spiritual experience in the Vineyard church I studied is similar to the account I gave of the magic. People reported unusual experiences. These experiences seemed to be heightened by what I would describe as prayer "training." Training was perceived as essential and as hard, and it was perceived by congregants to have consequences. At the beginning of the spiritual journey, new believers often did report an unusual powerful experience, like hearing God speak audibly or feeling the Holy Spirit flood through them. Such experiences were rare in the worshipper's life, but they were very important. As new believers began to pray, if they prayed assiduously and in a focused way, they were likely to say that they received images, impressions and sensations during prayer, and that these were God's often

coded communications. They were also likely to report that the images got sharper over time, that they became more absorbed in their prayers, and that they became better prayers.

Andy, for example, became a Christian during college. His conversion experience was dramatic, a classic experience of the Holy Spirit.[7]

> She [the leader] said some of you might be feeling the spirit on you now, and I noticed about myself that my breathing was getting like really deep and like I was starting to shake a little bit. I just feel like my body has so much energy, and it's like I'm gonna just leap out of my seat and just go running like 50 miles or something. [She's …] like some of you may be sweating, and I'm like yeah, I'm sweating. She's like some of you might have oily palms, and I'm like yeah, I got oily palms, and she's like some of you might be shaking and heavy breathing, and some of you might just be like jittery. And I'm like check, check, check, check, I've got all that.
>
> I could hear people praying around me and saying certain things, and, and, I mean it was kind of like you could say that it felt like I was in a bubble and everything outside of this bubble just would not exist. Like it was just time for me and God in this one little tiny capsule and the rest of the world can go by it like a billion miles per hour and I wouldn't care.

He no longer has such powerful experiences, although he wishes that he did. "Like, I was like the first day I got this whole cake, and then from now you get to have little servings of it from time to time again, but sometimes it's bigger and sometimes it's smaller." At beginning, he didn't know what people meant when they said that God spoke to them. "I'd always hear Christians talk about how they heard God speak to them. At the beginning of my Christian walk for like the first nine months I was totally, like I wish I could hear him talk." Then he began to pray seriously, reading through five biblical chapters each day and trying to see them and be in them and have them be alive. And he began to feel that God was interacting with him, nudging him to do this or that. He began to pray for people, and he would experience what he called

[7] It took place in the Alpha course Holy Spirit retreat. The Alpha course is a very widely used course to introduce non-Christians to Christianity.

"impressions," ideas about what he should pray for and how, which he believed had come from God. And he began to feel that God was a person for him. "It is like having an imaginary friend, in a sense, because I talk to him all the time like he's always next to me, but [it's not imaginary because] you know that he's there." And he has heard God speak to him, audibly, although only on a few occasions.

Amy grew up in a more sedate Christianity. She never expected to have direct contact with God, although she was always a believer. Then she began to go to the Vineyard. "I always saw prayer as talking to God, but I didn't realize that he was also gonna talk to me and I needed to just sit there and just listen." She began to pray seriously, about forty five minutes every day, focusing on the Bible and on people she feels she needs to pray for. Now, when she is praying for someone, she will sometimes see something in her mind's eye, an image or a verse, that will change what she prays for them. When she is praying out loud for someone with her hands on them – at the Vineyard, this is called prayer ministry – she will feel God speaking to her at the same time that she is speaking to the person she is praying for, as if she and God are talking as the same time she prays aloud. "I would feel like God would show me something that, you know, he wants me to speak out to them to encourage them, you know, at the same time that I'm praying, you know, I'm talking to him about what's going on." Sometimes when she is praying alone, something will come to her mind that she feels are the right words to pray for the other person and she'll tell them about it the next time she seems them, that this was what she was led to pray.

Amy feels that the images she gets in prayer have become clearer, and she feels more confident recognizing when her thoughts are in fact what God is saying to her, and not the detritus of an ordinary human mind. "The more you do something the better you get at it, you know. If you play a piano piece and you just play it over and over and over again, and then you finally get it, so you can play it perfect every time–it's a lot like that. When you get that first word [of God], you're like 'whoa, that was awesome,' and then you ask, and you keep asking for another one, and eventually that comes."[8] And for her the relationship with God has become vivid and personal. He feels like someone she can talk to throughout the day, chatting about the little

[8] Amy's quotations have been edited for clarity, as she uses many repeated words and phatic phrases. The sense has not been altered.

things that matter to her. "Sometimes I imagine he's walking there right along side me. I actually can sometimes imagine that there's a physical person there, going along with me, and we're having a great conversation" She has felt His arms around her, and she has heard him speak out loud–not often, but occasionally and audibly. Once, sitting by the lake, she heard Him say, in a voice she heard outside her head, "sit and listen." But those dramatic moments are unusual and unimportant compared to the vividness of the everyday relationship. Amy loves her relationship with God. Sometimes she'll go on what she calls "date night" with God. She'll walk out to the lake, maybe with something to eat, and just sit them, talking to him, feeling his arms around her shoulder, sometimes talking out loud to him.

But not everyone in the church experiences God that way, despite the explicit encouragement to do so in the books people read, in the sermons on Sunday morning, and in the casual conversations people have with one another. Jake grew up in a Vineyard church. When he was in high school the church had a revival. Many people were saved, and many people who were already saved found that they had vivid experiences of God's presence. That never happened to Jake. "I remember really desperately wanting to draw closer to God," he recalled, "having one of these inspired Holy Spirit moments that maybe sometimes get more attention than they deserve … mountain top experiences, tangible signs and wonders. I wanted those and I sought those out but I never really found myself encountering them." It was hard for him, and he was demoralized when nothing happened. "There was a time when I was seeking God during that period of high school where that was very frustrating. Why doesn't God speak to me in ways that I hear when dad speaks to me or mom speaks to me?" Now he has made his peace with his sense that he is just not someone who experiences God that way. He experiences God as close, but he does not have the chatty relationship to God that Andy and Amy seem to have. He doesn't find himself talking to God routinely throughout the day. "I mean they'll be sporadic prayers, quick prayers mostly not, you know, deep long prayers." He doesn't have many images when he prays, and they don't seem important to him. "I don't picture anything when I pray. I know some people picture things when they pray or praise an image of God or something. I don't."

Nor is Jake so unusual. "Please pray that I will hear God speak in a booming voice," Zeke pleaded one evening in Bible Study. Like most people in the church, he wanted concrete encounters with God, and he felt badly that he did not have

them. When I sat down with him in an interview, he was glum. "I don't have these superpowerful experiences that make me fall to my knees."

What this taught me anthropologically was that there more to the theoretical account of learning I gave in the construct of "interpretive drift". It now became clear, based on the difference between Amy and Andy on the one hand and Jake and Zeke on the other, that there was some kind of difference in *proclivity*, a difference in the capacity for and/or interest in having such unusual sensory experiences. And indeed there was ethnographic material to support a claim about proclivity. Both in the magical world and in the evangelical world there is recognition that some people are better at the spiritual disciplines than others. In both worlds, there is recognition that there is something like "natural" talent, and that those who have such talent are more likely to become expert when trained. In both worlds, there are names for such experts. In the magical world, they are called "adepts;" in the evangelical world, "prayer warriors." And in those different worlds there is often widespread agreement about who counts as an expert. This should be enough to persuade one that there is more to being a Christian than just learning discourse. If all they learn is discourse, after all, all good, compliant Christians should report the same spiritual experiences. But they don't.

And just as my own raw moments were crucial in leading me to understand that there was more to understanding than discourse, I knew that if I wanted to understand the problem of proclivity – in effect, the problem of the way people were different from me, not alike – I would have to use a method that let me see past my own predispositions and interests – my own transference, if you will – in order to grasp something of the way people differed. I turned to methods borrowed from academic psychology, where the researchers' personal experience is written out. Academic psychologists are as allergic to the personal experience of the observer as clinical psychologists are sympathetic. Their method – what they call 'science' – depends upon removing the emotional experience of the observer from the observations. It is their way of removing the risk of seeing on the basis of your bias.

By the time I began to do fieldwork in the Vineyard church, I had decided to supplement my ethnographic participant observation and my open ended interviews with more focused interviews which asked people specifically about their spiritual experience, and about what a psychologist would call anomalous experience. Because I

was also interested in the psychological routes to these experiences, I had people fill out all kinds of different questionnaires.[9] Most of them failed, by which I mean that people didn't like them and didn't say yes to many items. One of them, however, seemed to pick out the difference between people like Andy and Amy and people like Jake.

This was the Tellegen absorption scale, developed and introduced in 1974 by Tellegen and Atkinson, who had set out to find a pen and paper measure of hypnotic susceptibility. The scale correlates only modestly with the current gold standard measure of hypnotic susceptibility, and modestly with dissociation. It seems instead to capture something broader than trance itself. The questions tap subjects' willingness to be caught up in their experience – particularly in their imaginative experience, and in nature and music. Tellegen and Atkinson argued that the attentional style captured by the questions created "a heightened sense of the reality of the attentional object, imperviousness to distracting events, and an altered sense of reality in general, including an empathically altered sense of self" (Tellegen and Atkinson 1974, p. 268). What the instrument seems to capture is someone's willingness to allow him- or herself to be absorbed in internal or external sensory experience for its own sake, to enjoy the involvement in itself rather than experiencing it primarily as a means to some other goal. And that of course is precisely the domain that magical training and prayer training encourages. That kind of spiritual training specifically asks the exercitant to focus inwardly the absorbed attention on internal sensory experience. Tellegen even argues, in an aside, that the attention to one's internal thoughts "hangs together" with vivid imagery and altered states, suggesting that the construct of absorption captures that combination of imagery, internal focus and altered state that seemed central to magical practice as I described it ethnographically.

Later, Tellegen argued that there were clusters of experiential response within the scale. He identified eight such clusters: 1. *Imaginative involvement* in items like these: "If I wish I can imagine (or daydream) some things so vividly that they hold my attention as a good movie or story does" and "When I listen to music I can get so caught up in it that I don't notice anything else." 2. *Emotional responsiveness* in items like these: "I can be deeply moved by a sunset" and "I like to watch cloud shapes

[9] For example: the Dissociative Experiences Scale, the Launay-Slade Psychosis Proneness Scale, the Curious Experiences Scale, Claridge's Schizotypy scale, the Spiritual Well-Being Scale, and so forth.

change in the sky." 3. *Responsiveness to highly inductive [e.g. hypnosis-inducing] stimuli* in items like these: "When listening to organ music or other powerful music I sometimes feel as if I am being lifted into the air" and "The sound of a voice can be so fascinating to me that I can just go on listening to it." 4. *Vivid re-experiencing of the past* in items like these: "Sometimes I feel and experience things as I did as a child" and "I can sometimes recollect certain past experiences in my life with such clarity and vividness that it is like living them again or almost so." 5. *Expansion of awareness* in items like these: "I sometimes "step outside" my usual self and experience an entirely different state of being" and "At time I somehow feel the presence of someone who is not physically there." 6. *Powerful imaging* in items like these: "If I wish I can imagine that my body is so heavy that I could not move it if I wanted to" and "Sometimes I can change noise into music by the way I listen to it." 7. *Imaginal thinking* in items like these: "My thoughts often don't occur as words but as visual images" and "Sometimes thoughts and images come to me without the slightest effort on my part." 8. *Cross modal experiencing* in items like these: "Different colors have distinctive and special meanings for me" and "I find that different odors have different colors" (Tellegen 1981, pp. 220–1).

There is surprisingly little empirical work with the scale, particularly on normal populations. What work has been done has tended to focus on "openness to self-altering experiences," "imaginative involvement," or fantasy (McCrae and Costa 1983; Glisky et.al. 1991; Wild, Kuiken and Schopflocher 1995). One well known paper demonstrates that those who have a "fantasy prone" personality style are more likely to score highly on absorption (Wilson and Barber 1983). Other papers demonstrate that high absorption, as measured by the Tellegen scale, correlates with enjoying reading novels and listening to music (Nell 1988; Snodgrass and Lynn 1989) and with the ability not only to have altered states, but while in such states to experience greater alterations in imagery and awareness (Pekala, Wenger and Levine 1985). More recent work, mostly done with people reporting psychiatric pathology, has demonstrated that people who report that they have been abducted by aliens have on average higher Tellegen scores, and those who report repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse also have higher Tellegens, although those who reported childhood sexual abuse which has not been repressed do not. And while absorption as measured by this scale seems modestly connected both to hypnotic and dissociative experience, the relationship

is real. The Dissociative Experiences scale, probably the most widely used measure of dissociation, bases a third of its items on absorption. (Another third measures amnesia, and the final third, depersonalization). Spiegel and Spiegel (Spiegel and Spiegel 2004) suggest that hypnosis can be thought of as one third absorption, one third suggestion and one third dissociation Many studies have found a moderate correlation between response to the Tellegen and hypnotizbility (Nadon et.al. 1991). And while there are still debates on the relationship between dissociation and hypnotizability, there is no doubt that absorption is clearly moderately to strongly correlated with both (Whalen and Nash 1996).

Now, with a potential measure of proclivity in hand, I went back through my interviews in a more systematic manner. I re-interviewed people, and interviewed more of them. I gave them the Tellegen, I asked them a set of specific and open-ended questions, and I did some post-hoc coding of the responses to see whether the experiences they reported varying systematically with their Tellegen scores.[10]

First, I asked them how long they prayed. There was no relationship between the time they devoted to prayer, and their Tellegen score. I put together a series of questions about the sensory experience of God: whether the subject reported experiencing God with their senses; whether they described getting images often when they prayed; whether they said that they got sensations or thoughts when they prayed; whether they said something that indicated the vividness of those experiences, as for example when one woman said, "It's almost like powerpoint sometimes." I included in this category "pseudo-hallucinations", or experiences that the subject experienced as momentarily veridical and external but knew immediately were not. For example, Amy commented that she had begun to see things occasionally as she walked down the street, but she knew they weren't really there. I included hallucinated smells and hallucinated touch; the hallucinations people had between sleep and awareness, like hearing someone call their name and waking them up out of sleep; and fully awake hallucinations, as in a woman who distinctly heard God tell her to get off a bus because she was about to miss a stop. And I included in this category any spontaneous comment the subject made about loving the Holy Spirit side of God. I gave subjects a point for any of these questions, which they answered in the affirmative. Here there was quite a

[10] These results are also reported in Luhrmann, Nusbaum and Thisted, n.d.

clear relationship – a statistically significant one, at that – between a subject's Tellegen score and their reported sensory experience of God.

What does this tell us? To those skeptical of such instruments, perhaps not much. After all, it is not clear what kind of psychological process the absorption scales pick up, or even whether it picks up a complexly trained skill or a pre-existing trait – although I can say that some congregants score highly on the Tellegen even when they have had little prayer practice, and that people's responses to the scale seem relatively stable over time. That is, as most researchers using the scale have reported, the scale seems to measure a *trait* like being tall or insecure, which is a more stable feature of a person, rather than a *state* like being hungry, which changes significantly from hour to hour. And so it seems quite interesting that those who seem to have this trait-like interest or capacity in absorption should have sensory experiences of God. It was also, on a personal note, soothing. I have confessed to that I had a hallucination; and I can now say, with quantitative confidence, that over a third of my twenty eight subjects have had a hallucination. And if you score above 18 on the Tellegen, you are six times more likely to have a hallucination than someone who scored lower.

But I also looked at the way people talked about their personal relationship with God, the degree to which they did experience God vividly in the way that the books and the pastor suggested that they should. I asked everyone I spoke with whether they would pray to God about something other people might regard as trivial, like a haircut. Some people looked vaguely insulted at the thought of addressing majesty about such a topic; some people laughingly told me about sitting in the salon and praying solemnly that the cut would be a good experience. (You can't get different answers to this question if you ask about parking. Everyone prays to God about parking.) I asked people whether they spoke to God only during moments of formal prayer, or whether they chatted to God freely, walking to class or putting petrol in the car, at different moments throughout the day. I asked people whether they thought of God as their best friend, and how he was different from an imaginary friend. Some people said that the difference between God and an imaginary friend was that God was real; other people quietly said that they didn't think of God that way at all. I asked people whether they got angry with God, not because of a distant tragedy – genocide in Darfur, for example – but because of something personal and intimate. Some people said things like, "Angry? I've yelled out loud at Him, in fact only last

week…" and other people looked taken aback and clearly felt uncomfortable with the idea. I asked people whether there was a teasing, playful side to their relationship with God, whether they ever tried to make God laugh, or whether he ever teased them. I gave a subject a point for each item (trivial prayer; chatting; best or imaginary friend; personal anger; play) they affirmed. I also made a judgment, based on their description of their prayer experience, on whether they experienced prayer as a dialogue, and gave them a point if I thought they did.

Here again, the vividness is significantly related to the Tellegen. And if you regress vividness against the time that someone prays, it turns out that both play a role, although the numbers are so small that the effect nearly disappears. If you hold the Tellegen score steady, the more the subject prays, the more vivid God becomes for him or her.

This is a much more interesting finding. The church teaches that congregants should be in a personal relationship with God: that God should be like a buddy, a chum, as well as a mighty and majestic lord. Books and sermons and conferences model a God who is a confidante, who cares about your trivial personal issues, someone big enough to handle your little games and rages. And still it is only some people who have this experience, who find themselves in intimate personal closeness with God.

This takes me back to the beginning of the paper, but from a different angle, and helps me to make the argument with which I began. Discourse and categories are not enough. Becoming a believer in this kind of church – the kind of church that arguably now dominates the American landscape – is not just about adopting a set of ideas that someone else has handed you. It is about being able and willing to confirm these ideas in your own experience.

And so a more sophisticated model of learning religion would include not only belief and practice, the two lynchpins of the model I called "interpretive drift," but proclivity as well. Even if we do not know exactly what the underlying psychological mechanism is, we know that not all people who are members of this cultural community experience the ideas of the culture in the same way. They must have something else: willingness, a capacity, perhaps an interest in allowing those cultural ideas to change their lives. Culture does not change the world for everyone in the same way.

There is a sobering message here for our understanding of the ethnographic method. The lesson that proclivity affects the way an individual responds to cultural

models and social practices is as true for the ethnographer as it is for those he or she studies ethnographically. The judgments we make about other societies are affected by our own bodily and psychological orientations, the way we bend and flow. Our own personal interests and psychic uncertainties of course affect the topics we chose, and the issues to which we are drawn: we knew that. But it may also be true that the person who writes about religious experience may write differently if she has been knocked sideways in an invocation. If you have heard the mermaids singing, you are more likely to ask people about mermaids in different ways than if you have not. As anthropologists we have grappled with these issues before, most famously when Alasdair MacIntyre and Peter Winch collided over the question of whether a person who did not believe in God could understand the experience of one that did. But in that debate, as so often in our field, the emphasis was upon cognition and knowledge: the concepts you believed in, the knowledge you held to be true. We are slower to think about anthropologists as having different proclivities, different psychological and bodily capacities, but they are at least as important. We know that those who believe in God and those who do not may write differently about religious practice – but we have been slower to recognize that those who have vivid imaginations, perhaps those who have had a hallucination, may attend to different features of religious experience, whatever beliefs they hold.

Which is fine. But just as we acknowledge that we should admit to our own beliefs when writing about belief, or at least recognize the possible impact of those beliefs, we should acknowledge that our own proclivities could be impediment or advantage when writing about certain topics. Some years ago a volume came out on mental imagery, edited by a well-respected philosopher.[11] He began the volume with a subtle and sophisticated argument against mental imagery, on the oddity that the phrase even existed in our descriptive vocabulary, as if we believed that we had pictures in our minds. Then there followed a series of articles, among them Shepard and Kosslyn's famous experiment through which they demonstrated that most people do, in fact, behave as if they have pictures in their minds, and process their evidential experience through the use and manipulation of these pictures. The editor had a summary piece at the end in which he commented that perhaps he, the editor, just didn't have mental images. Perhaps philosophers, he wondered, were just the kinds of people who were

[11] Block (1979)

less likely to experience themselves as having pictures in their minds. If psychological and bodily proclivities make a difference to the way people use and understand cultural models, it is to the advantage of the anthropologists to understand their own proclivities and the way those proclivities may shape the way they learn about culture in the field. Otherwise they run the risk of sounding foolish, like someone who doesn't remember his dreams and treats cultural models of dream interpretation as metaphors, or someone who doesn't realize that hallucinations are rare and treats all reports of unusual experience as descriptions of the world as it is.

If this can be seen as an attempt to cut culture down to size, as Clifford Geertz described the point of his own work to be so many decades ago, it becomes also a testament to how powerful these cultural ideas can be in the lives of those who take them on. This kind of religious belief is a commitment to a sensory override of the most basic mechanisms of our body: our ability to see, to hear, to feel, to smell. The fact that the true override – the hallucination – happens so rarely is testimony to how hard it is, and how deeply culture reaches into the minds of those who experience the true override and its partial correlates, the capacity to feel God's touch, to listen to His voice, to be with His spirit as one is with an ordinary human. And that, as Rita Astuti points out,[12] becoming a moving insight into how hard people work to create out of dull materials a world which conforms to the moral vision they seek.

In the end, the ethnography that the ethnographer delivers must persuade the audience independently of the ethnographer's experience in the field. The more you know of yourself, the way you learn, and the way those tendencies are distributed among human beings, the more wisely you will gauge the way your own experience will inform you about the experience of others and about what and how they learn. But it is always worthwhile to pay attention to your experience. If I hadn't paid attention when what felt like power shot through me on the train, I would missed half of what was going on with magical practice.

Even so, I never figured out what was going on with the batteries.

[12] Astuti, in press.

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