Religion and the Four Fields of Anthropology:
An Old-Fashioned View?

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Altered (or alternate) States of Consciousness occur in the context of religious belief and ritual in the vast majority of human societies. They are frequently at the core of religious traditions, both ancient and contemporary. They are also sources,--or claimed sources,--of religious innovation. As such, they are, or in my view should necessarily be, central to the anthropological study of religion in human societies.

I shall not attempt a definition of religion here. Its study, however, and specifically the study of altered states in the context of religion, lends support to the value of a four-fields approach in and to anthropology. The question, then, is: what can anthropology so conceived, a multifaceted, integrated anthropology, contribute to an understanding of the complex phenomena called ASC? How and why are they so intimately tied to religious practices and institutions? When combined, the classic four fields (and variations on them) allow us to "make sense" of ASC in their religious, psychocultural

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psychobiological, even ecological contexts. Even a cursory observation of a person in an altered states suggests that something is happening in the brain/body of the individual. Ignoring the potential of evidence from biology, including neurophysiology and psychoneuroimmunology, has led some observers to speak of either faking or pathology with amateur diagnoses. Yet focussing only on the psychobiological, neurophysiological aspects of these phenomena, ignoring their context and their meaning in that context, is clearly insufficient to an understanding of what is going on and of what impact the events of the ASC may have on the future life of the individual and the community in which they occur. Moreover, it is likely that processes implicated in the production and shaping of altered states are linked to systems of cultural meanings and social structural requirements. There is evidence that what appear to be the same factors inducing ASC yield different sorts of experiences and even different brain states depending on the cultural meaning and social contexts associated with them.

A multifaceted approach to a specific domain, such as religious belief and behavior, and altered states of consciousness in the context of that domain, shows the intimate interconnectedness of the fields of anthropology. It also throws light on humans as psychobiological/sociocultural beings. It is my contention, not a particularly original one for an anthropologist, that the human body provides the basic material for cultural elaboration, that our institutions, beliefs and
practices, have biological underpinnings and that the interplay of what can be seen at different levels of analysis is a worthy area of investigation. Altered states and their cultural utilization provide a perspective on the universality of religion and, indeed, the unity of the species. They are relevant to key characteristics of our species. Among these are the much vaunted human habit of assigning meaning and the equally significant trait of suggestibility, two characteristics intimately linked to each other.

The language we use to discuss the phenomena we deal with reveals our choices and orientations. I speak of Altered states of consciousness, rather than use one or another of the many terms found in the ethnographic and descriptive literature on religion. These include "trance", "ecstasy," "dissociation," but also "vision," and "possession," as well as "inspiration", "shamanistic state" or "out-of-body experience." ASC is a much broader term that grounds the discussion in the study of "consciousness," a subject about which we, admittedly, know little. Yet we begin with a recognition that whatever cultural constructions are tied to it, there is a brain/body that makes behavior and experience possible. In technical terms, we are most likely to be speaking of dissociational states, and may suspect the involvement of endorphins. These states involve diverse triggering conditions, are culturally variously interpreted and are experientially variable. Yet as Ludwig (1968) noted, they
share a number of important features. Among these is their subjective intensity and the heightened suggestibility they produce.

Dissociation is a psychological mechanism; it is not necessarily a pathological condition. It does not express or create a uniquely religious emotion, if such an emotion could be identified. It is sometimes felt as positive and desirable, sometimes as negative and undesirable. Both a desired and a feared form may coexist in the same society. To the extent that it involves euphoria, suppression of pain, or makes apparently extraordinary performances possible, ASCs may be addictive. That is, endorphins act in the brain in much the same way as some exogenous drugs do. Runners' high is a good example of all of this. It operates generally in a secular context. However, there are references to the "high" experienced in surfing which has been given religious as well as subjective ecstatic meaning. When these states are felt to be overwhelming, involving loss of psychological control, that is, when they are experienced as ego alien, the presence of extrahuman forces or beings seems to be convincing.

By choosing to speak about ASC rather than, say, possession, I am intentionally expanding the field of my discussion. There are several reasons for this. I want to stress their psychobiological dimension. Also, many societies have institutionalized ASC in a religious context, but do not have a
belief in possession linked to them. Comparisons are then possible between those who think in terms of possession and those who don't, yet have patterned forms of ASC. And finally, the people we study do not always make the fine distinctions we may choose to make. For example, Hezel and Dobbin (1996) recently pointed out that for the people of Chuuk, there is no clear difference between being influenced by a spirit and becoming the vehicle of a spirit. Moreover, because there are notions of spirit possession in our own Western heritage, whether from Hebrew, Christian or Greek sources, contaminating factors may enter into our communication with each other, our students and our readers, when such an apparently familiar term is used.

In the context of the present discussion, it is important to note the evolutionary background of the human experience of ASC which can be traced in animal behavior. There is some archaeological evidence for its antiquity; the "dead man" in the Lascaux paintings comes to mind, or the "sorcerer" in the cave of Trois Frères. If we include the half-human creature in the recently discovered Chauvet cave, dated at 30,000 BP, we go back very far indeed. We may wonder, incidentally, what the psychological, imaginative skills of the artists were, who produced such astounding, lifelike images in dark caves, without models at hand. Noll (1985) has suggested what he terms "mental imagery cultivation" as a basis for shamanic visions. It is
tempting to see such a process at work in these artistic production as well.

There is, then, biological, neurophysiological involvement in the behavior, although that is not as yet well understood. And there is a large body of social, cultural and psychocultural documentation and analysis available in the ethnographic and theoretical literature. The symbolic dimension is reflected in, among other things, vocabulary, esoteric languages and other aspects of language, including ecstatic utterances or glossolalia. As an artifact of trance, such ecstatic utterances bring us back to the neurophysiological aspects, as well as to a linguistic one. In specific areas, for example among the Maya, there is archaeological and epigraphic evidence of relevance. In sum, a large picture still remains to be assembled, only fragments of which are available now.

A full study of ASC in a religious context requires such a comprehensive approach as well as a comparative perspective. The investigation into these states is necessarily central to our study of essential aspects of the phenomenon of religion in human societies. There is nothing new here, except perhaps some of the details of the suggested implementation of such an approach. However, the "four-fields approach" is currently controversial and part of a larger argument among anthropologists about science versus humanities, a universalist orientation versus radical relativism, and so forth. The current arguments are clothed in
contemporary language, but in many ways they are not new: in the 1940s and '50s, people argued about the "centrifugal" and "centripetal" tendencies of anthropology. Should it, or should it not be a single discipline? I am, of course, not suggesting that anyone of us can work with equal competence in all areas; rather, I wish to stress a point of view, a perspective that is open to the relevance of the various dimensions of anthropology to a given problem and also the formulation of problems that take such a multiple perspective into account.

What we find depends to a large extent on the kinds of questions we ask. This is true also with regard to the issue of so-called culture-bound syndromes, which have provided some of the context for the study of ASC. Both meaning and suggestibility, mentioned above, are of relevance here. As experiences are described we note how physical changes are given cultural meanings and the consequences that flow from this.

Here are some examples: A folk illness called "Old Hag" has been reported from New Foundland; it involves the inability to move upon sudden waking, as well as hallucinations. On the basis of extensive fieldwork, Robert C. Ness (1978) has suggested that it corresponds closely to the clinical syndrome of "idiopathic sleep paralysis." Old Hag appears particularly among men who engage in strenuous physical labor. There are several local explanations for it; one involves notions of witchcraft. The phenomenon is widespread and the experience is frightening
enough that explanations apparently are needed and these are consistent with other beliefs, for example, beliefs about witches, specifically women witches. There is then a reciprocal relationship between beliefs that interpret experiences and experiences that reinforce them.

The neurologist Oliver Sacks interprets the drawings of fortifications and castles, reflecting the visions of the medieval mystic Hildegard von Bingen, as migrainous scotomata. He writes: "They provide a unique example in which a physiological event, banal, hateful, or meaningless in the vast majority of people, can become, in a privileged consciousness, the substrate of a supreme, ecstatic experience" (Sacks 1985:108). It should be added, that Hildegard von Bingen's "privileged consciousness" developed in a particular sociocultural context, that of medieval monasticism, rich in traditions of mystical visions. Also, she lived in a society in which there were castles and fortifications so that models for the physical aspects of her imagery were available to her. She did not invent, by herself, the idea of visions granting her special knowledge. She drew on her cultural knowledge to interpret and cope with her experiences, and turn them into a source of personal strength and growth. As is the case for dreams in some cultural contexts, the interpretation appears to be coterminous with the experience,--- part of it, not subsequent to it. Both dream and waking hallucination may be experienced as interpreted.
Here is another example: The medieval English mystic Margery Kempe has left a book in which she describes "the tokens," as she calls them, given to her by "Our Lord." One of these was a great deal of weeping. Of another she writes that it "endured for about sixteen years." It "was a flame of fire wondrous hot...burning in her breast, and at her heart, as truly as a man might feel material fire if he put his hand or finger therein..." Margery was at first afraid but then "the Lord answered to her mind and said 'Daughter be not afraid for this heat is the heat of the Holy Ghost, which shall burn away all thy sins. For the fire of the Lord quenches all sins. And thou shalt understand by this token that the Holy Ghost is in thee.'" Adamo (1996), a recent student of Kempe's book, has suggested that what she experienced may well have been "hot flashes," menopausal symptoms. And Sacks' comment on Hildegard's visions then may well apply here too: "a physiological event, banal, hateful, or meaningless in the vast majority of people, can become in a privileged consciousness, the substrate of a supreme, ecstatic inspiration."

Seeking meaning, making sense of something at first frightening, becomes not merely a way of finding closure and intellectual satisfaction, but also of discovering a means of coping with the experience as well as perhaps with other problems in the life of the individual. The explanation alters the experience, making it acceptable, even desirable, perhaps providing a basis for action. Thinking about witches may open up a strategy for revenge, for
undoing the symptoms or turning the harmful into something positive.

Here is a somewhat different kind of example. In Western biomedical psychiatry derealization and depersonalization are considered diagnostic features of pathology. In the training of yogis, however, divided consciousness is the very goal of meditation. When experienced by American meditators, as Castillo (1990) has observed among students of Transcendental Meditation, they may cause great anxiety. What is considered abnormal and experienced as frightening in one society, is desired and sought in another.

What, then, is the relationship of experience to meaning and vice versa? In our examples, I find three possible relationships. One: meaning may be part of the experience itself, as shown in Hildegard von Bingen's migrainous scotomata. Two: The meaning of the event becomes evident only after the fact. Both Margery Kemp's case and the Old Hag syndrome seem to exemplify this. And thirdly an attempt is made to achieve an experience on the basis of a pre-existing interpretation.

It is clear from these examples that ASCs are intense experiences, calling out for interpretation, that is, some form of subjective mastery. It is tempting to see interpretation as arising directly out of the experience. Cardeña (1988) experimented with what he called "deep hypnosis without specific suggestions" (1988:290), which he compares to shamanic induction.
He reviewed the relevant literature and he notes (p.298) strong similarities between accounts of shamans and of persons in deep hypnosis, persons he calls hypnotic "virtuosos." Both sets of accounts include alterations of body image and out-of-body experiences; there are reports of various sorts of hallucinations, including journeys and adventures, and at the deepest level, perception of music, colors, a timeless/spaceless realm; also, becoming light and energy, loss of identity, absolute mental quiet, etc. These descriptions fit reports of near-death experiences as well as shamanistic trances but not ASCs experienced in contexts interpreted as possession.

The similarities between pathological and religious ASC are troubling and raise the question whether, and if so why, abnormal brain states have at various times become models for religious experience and are then systematically learned. Such states are called "pathomorphic" by Jillek (1974) and "pychotomimetic" by Schwartz (1976). They, and others, see them as modelled on pathological states and also as valued and integrated into ritual. Why would people take abnormal states as models of valued behavior? How have frightening experiences been transformed into something to be desired and worked for? Our discussion of culture-bound syndromes may offer a clue to this puzzle. Also, these states often are, or appear to be, spontaneously therapeutic. They represent, what Wallace (1956) called, cases of "mazeway resynthesis." Here, new positive
meaning is given to painful, perhaps shocking experiences and behaviors. Founders of new religions, whether Handsome Lake of the Seneca, or Mother Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers, are examples of such transformations. Ritual treatments, attempting to emulate the spontaneous critical experiences of the founders, may be transformative for sufferers and bring their altered states under ritual and ideological control. In the Christian tradition these may be conceptualized and experienced as conversions. Often, then, the former patient becomes a permanent member of a group in which the critical experience of an ASC is re-enacted over and over again.

How does all this relate to the matter of the four-fields approach in anthropology? These examples, each in its own way, bring together human biology, neuropsychiatry, historical or ethnographic sources and contexts, ASC and the world of the spirits, explanation and therapeutic systems, and the symbolic and linguistic devices used to structure them. Together the fields provide explanatory approaches to human behavior. And they do so in opposition to the false dichotomy of "nature vs nurture" that seems to have cropped up in popular writings with renewed vigor. At a time when we know from research in psychoneuroimmunology (Kiecolt-Glaser et.al, 1995,1996) that stress, of whatever kind, depresses the immune system, slows wound healing, and increases susceptibility to disease, whether in medical students or Alzheimer caretakers, that marital
conflict is bad for one's health, any talk of nature vs nurture is absurd. An integrated anthropology, drawing on biological as well as social science knowledge can play a significant role. 

Conclusions

To answer my original question, is the four-field approach in anthropology old fashioned, I say no. By drawing on a variety of examples I hope to have shown that to consider a widespread type of religious behavior and experience it is helpful to look at the phenomena in question from as broad a range of complementary perspectives as possible. Such a complex anthropology opens up perspectives that a one-stranded approach could not give us. After all, what about this species makes religion--however defined--a significant aspect of the lives of societies and as well as of individuals? Whatever is of such great antiquity and wide distribution in the species must necessarily be ankered in the characteristics of that species, and that, ultimately cannot leave out biology.

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