What Makes an Experience 'Religious'?
The Necessity of Defining Religion

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I recall sitting in my office in Edinburgh University in 1996 when I received a telephone call from Peggy Morgan. She asked if I would consider serving as the Bulletin Editor for the British Association for the Study of Religions, of which at the time she was the Honorary Secretary. I had just been at Edinburgh for three years, having arrived from the University of Zimbabwe in 1993, and was relatively new to the BASR. Nonetheless, I was honoured to be asked and readily accepted. That initiated a long and fruitful collegial relationship with Peggy that saw me work with her as a fellow faculty member at Westminster College, Oxford in 1998-99, as the BASR Secretary after she became President of the Association in 2000, as founding editors of the Advances in Religious Studies Series of Continuum (now Bloomsbury) and as close working partners when she was External Examiner for Religious Studies at Edinburgh University. Peggy and I have maintained a close friendship over the years, mostly through meeting at the conferences of the BASR, but also at the conferences of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR), and at numerous seminars in Oxford and Edinburgh.

With the many ways our paths have crossed over the past twenty-five years, I have considered how I might reflect in my contribution to this much-deserved *Festschrift* on a subject that does justice to our mutual academic interests. I could have highlighted Peggy's dedication to promoting inter-religious understanding, considered her firm commitment to exploring issues raised by new methods in the study of religions, referred to her earlier work on religious education in schools or analysed her particular interest in the contribution of Ninian Smart to the British interpretation of the phenomenology of religion. I have chosen none of these, but want in this chapter to explore some new ways of thinking about 'religious experience', a topic that is relevant to Peggy's academic work having served as Director of the Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) from 1996 to 2002, when it was located in Westminster College. During her time as Director of the RERC, she sought to enlarge the remit of the academic study of religious experience by linking it methodologically to the programme of non-confessional Religious Studies she learned first as a student at Lancaster University. In the remainder of this chapter, I want

to follow Peggy's lead by exploring the fundamental theoretical and practical question that asks what are the necessary conditions that must exist when distinguishing a religious from a non-religious experience.

The Object of Religious Experience
According to William James and Alister Hardy

In 2015, Peggy wrote the first article in the inaugural issue of the open access *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience,* which is published by the Religious Experience Research Centre, now located at the University of Wales Trinity St David, under the editorship of its current Director, Professor Bettina Schmidt. In her article, which carries the title, 'Continuing the Heritage: William James, Alister Hardy and the Work of The Religious Experience Research Centre', Peggy traces the history of the study of religious experience primarily through the work of the founder of the RERC, the marine biologist Sir Alister Hardy, and the seminal figure in the study of religious experience, William James (Morgan 2015: 3-19). After he retired from the Chair of Zoology at Oxford University in 1969, Hardy, who since a boy had a strong interest in religious experience, established the Religious Experience Research Unit at Manchester College, Oxford. He began collecting and collating statements in response to the question, 'Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?' (Schmidt 2015: 1-2). Hardy published this question in British newspapers and began a project of classifying the responses he received following the taxonomic procedures he learned as a marine biologist. At the time of writing, the RERC has compiled and codified over 6000 entries based on testimonies of individuals who have described their own religious experiences, some of which now have been obtained from sources outside the English-speaking world.

In her contribution to the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience*, Peggy draws attention to similar methods employed by William James and Alister Hardy. Relying on research on conversion experiences conducted by his PhD student at Harvard University, Edward Dillen Starbuck, James organised religious experiences according to four basic typological classifications: that which cannot be communicated using ordinary language (ineffability); that which opens the individual to a special knowledge (noetic quality); that which cannot be replicated (transiency); that in which the individual's will is suspended and subject to a superior power (passivity) (James 1902: 380-81). James presented his findings in the Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 1901-1902, which were published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Although

James wrote in many other connections, including philosophy and theories of science, his work on religious experience became the starting point and foundation for subsequent modern studies in this field. Peggy notes that James and Hardy developed typological classifications of religious experience as 'scientific pragmatists', who derived their findings not from ideological presuppositions but from the application of experimental methods (Morgan 2015: 8).

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James (1902, 31) defined religion as '*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine*' (emphasis in original). It should be noted that James was not rejecting sociological interpretations of religion in this statement by his apparent emphasis on the individual and solitude, but was explaining the context for his research into religious experience (See, Carrette and Lamberth 2017: 206-08). Nonetheless, he does make it unmistakably clear that religious experience must relate to what the individual considers divine, a thread, as we will see, is followed in later definitions. James (1902: 38) explains that he uses the 'divine' not only to refer to 'the primal and enveloping and real' but to suggest the deep importance of the object of experience to the individual, who, as a result, responds to the divine 'solemnly and gravely'. Of course, James understands differences in the intensity of experiences, but he maintains that for the experience to be 'religious', it must reflect an encounter with a 'primal reality' that is treated with utmost seriousness and not 'by a curse or a jest' (James 1902: 38).

In her article focusing on William James and Alister Hardy, Peggy contends that both James and Hardy understood religion as 'personal' (Morgan 2015: 12). After citing James's well-known definition of religion that I noted above in support of this assertion, she turns to a more detailed analysis of how religion and, hence religious experience, was understood by Hardy, In his important book, *The Spiritual Nature of Man*, Hardy refers to religion as a 'feeling of contact with a Greater Power beyond the self' (cited by Morgan 2015: 12). He adds: 'The main characteristics of man's religious and spiritual experiences are shown in his feelings for a transcendent reality' (cited by Morgan 2015: 12). Although Peggy uses these statements to support the 'personal' nature of religion, they suggest equally that because religion is seen always as relating to a greater power or transcendent 'reality', what makes an experience religious and distinguishable from other experiences for James and Hardy is precisely its relation to such an alleged reality. This widespread interpretation is supported further if we look at a sampling of how scholars writing in respected reference books have defined the 'object' of religious experience.

How Religious Experience is Commonly Defined

An informative entry on 'Religious Experience', published in the *Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions* in 1981, was written by H.N. Malony, who at the time was Professor in the Graduate School of Psychology in Fuller Theological Seminary. Malony provides a classic example of a scholar who defines religious experience as related to transcendental entities. In his opening sentence, he provides an overview of what he discusses in the article and, at the same time, makes clear the parameters within which he considers an experience to qualify as 'religious':

> An encounter with what is seen as transcendent reality; varies among major religious traditions; can be theistic or nontheistic, individual or group, passive or active, novel or recurring, intense or mild, transitory or enduring, tradition-centered or not, initiatory or developmental, expected or spontaneous; types may include ascetic, mystical, or prophetic, either reviving, affirming or converting, either confirming, responsive, ecstatic or revelational (Malony 1981: 613).

He then defines the focus of religious experience as 'a claim of an encounter with a novel object, i.e. the divine'. This 'accounts for its uniqueness in comparison to all other types of experience' (Malony 1981: 613). A religious as opposed to a non-religious experience, therefore, for Malony, is identified exclusively by an encounter with a transcendent entity. It need not be novel or intense, and there is no necessary relationship between a religious experience and a particular belief about the nature of the divine.

This definition of religious experience, or permutations of it, has been repeated in numerous publications, three of which demonstrate deepening levels of sophistication. For example, Robert Kaizen Gunn's entry in the *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion* defines religious experience simply 'as an experience of the transcendent or the supernatural (or some equivalent term)' (Gunn 2010: 773). A related, but more technical analysis, is provided by Keith E. Yandell in his article on 'Religious Experience' that appeared in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, in which Yandell defines religion soteriologically. He argues that every religion 'has two essential components, a *diagnosis* and a *cure*' (Yandell 2010: 405) (emphasis in original). The important distinction between a religious and a non-religious diagnosis is that a religious diagnosis 'asserts that every human person has a basic non-physical illness so deep that, unless one is cured, one's potential is unfulfilled and one's nature crippingly flawed' (Yandell 2010: 405). As a result,

a religious experience occurs when a person is cured of the non-physical illness that inflicts itself on every human as it has been diagnosed by a particular religious tradition. Writing in the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, Jerome Gellman defines 'religious' as referring to an alleged out of the ordinary experience 'purportedly granting acquaintance with, or supporting belief in the existence of, realities or states of affairs not accessible by way of sense perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection' (Gellman 2015: 155). In each of these definitions, reference is made to what the individual perceives as the non-ordinary causes of the experience: 'transcendent or supernatural' (Gunn); knowledge of cures of a 'non-physical illness' that stifles individual development (Yandel); that which is inaccessible by way of ordinary perceptions, including sense, bodily or mental apprehensions (Gellman). In his entry on Religious Experience in the *Sage Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion*, Mihai Coman classifies these typical ways of defining religious experience as emphasising 'a certain type of experience, radically different from any other type of human experience', which, as interpreted   by theologians and phenomenologists, such as Rudolf Otto, Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade, is treated as not having been 'influenced by linguistic, cultural, or historical circumstances', that is as remaining 'untouched by profane things' (Coman 2020: 685).

Much recent academic work has been done on re-thinking religious experience that pushes our understanding of the 'religious' nature of such experiences beyond theological or ahistorical assumptions. Two examples include the monograph by Ann Taves, entitled *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (2009), and Bettina Schmidt's edited volume, *The Study of Religious Experience: Approaches and Methodologies* (2016). Of particular interest to me in this context is the manner by which Taves proposes to separate 'religion' from 'non-religion' by constructing a pragmatic interpretation of religion, with quite practical implications for the study of religious experience. After reviewing Taves's approach, in what follows, I offer my own analysis of religion and religious experience, one in which I contend that, for an experience to be religious, there is no requirement to posit a transcendental object as the focus or alleged cause of the experience.

Ann Taves on Religion as 'Things Considered Special'

Chapter one of Taves's book carries the simple title, 'Religion', with the sub-title, 'Deeming Things Religious'. Initially, Taves distinguishes between what she calls a 'sui generis' approach to religious experience, which assumes that some experiences are inherently religious, and ones that are ascribed as religious by those who have undergone

the experience. These two perspectives are reflected in approaches to the study of religion: the first represents the idea that religion stands as a category by itself that cannot be reduced to other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, biology or any other field of study; the second argues that religion, in Taves's (2009: 16) words, 'is purely relational and has no essential content of its own'.

By differentiating between sui generis and ascriptive methods, Taves suggests that defining religion or religions substantively is confusing. A far better approach is to study what people deem religious, that is, what they 'view as special, or that they set apart' (Taves 2009: 17). On this model, it is possible to re-frame how religious experience is understood. Rather than following the 'sui generis model', which assumes that 'there are uniquely religious (or mystical or spiritual) experiences, emotions, acts, or objects', the 'ascription model' contends 'that religious or mystical or spiritual or sacred "things" are created when religious significance is assigned to them' (Taves 2009: 17).

Taves (2009: 18-19) argues that during the latter half of the twentieth century, scholars of religion advanced as a 'disciplinary axiom' that religion constituted an irreducible object for study that could only be explained in religious terms. It was accepted that to do otherwise was to fall into the trap of reductionism whereby religion was erroneously interpreted in nonreligious terms. According to Taves, this had unintended consequences for the comparative study of religions, the field with which most scholars in the 'sui generis' camp associated. If religion is irreducible to that which is nonreligious, the consequence is that religious studies scholars limited themselves to comparing what they defined as religious things, such as Eliade's cosmogonic myths or Wilfred Cantwell Smith's expressions of personal faith (See Cox 2010: 64-68). The ascription model, as outlined by Taves, makes genuine comparative studies possible because, she argues, 'it frees us to compare things that have features in common, whether they are deemed religious or not' (Taves 2009: 19). It also has the advantage of urging scholars to understand why 'people deem some things … as religious and others as not' (Taves 2009: 19).

The study of religious experience on the ascription model is based on empirical methods for interpreting causality and thereby avoids the theological associations of the sui generis model, which assumes that 'religious things, existing as such, have special inherent properties that can cause things to happen' (Taves 2009: 20). Scholars of religion, that is those who study what people deem religious, focus on how people 'characterize things as religious' and as a result how they 'endow them with the (real or perceived) special properties that are then presumed to be able to effect things' (Taves 2009: 20). Even scholars who define religion non-theologically, fail to achieve genuine empirical results because they limit themselves to studying what *they* deem to be

religious rather than investigating whether 'people directly involved with the "thing" in question deem it religious or not' (Taves 2009: 21).

Were Taves to have stopped at this point, she would have been left open to the charge that the scholar of religion simply accepts commonsense, unreflective ideas about what constitutes religion and what types of experience qualify as being religious. She admits that 'even if our primary interest is in how people on the ground deem things religious…we still need to specify what we mean by "religious"' (Taves 2009: 22). In order to avoid the problem of falling back into the error of the 'sui generis' model, Taves introduces the concept 'specialness' as a 'generic net that captures most of what people have in mind when they refer to "sacred," "magical,", "spiritual," "mystical," or "religious"' (Taves 2009: 26). She claims that she is following in the steps of Durkheim by adopting this approach, who referred to 'sacred things' as 'things set apart and forbidden' (Taves 2009: 26). In like manner, it is possible to study what things people identify as special and 'if there are particular types of things that are more likely to be considered special than others' (Taves 2009: 26). This enables 'specialness' to be studied both behaviourally and substantively. In this way, Taves addresses the problems created by all attempts to define religion, while at the same time resolving the dichotomy set up between sui generis and ascriptive methods in the study of religions:

> Rather than stipulating a definition of "religious ascriptions" or "things deemed religious," we can use the idea of "specialness" to identify a set of things that includes much of what people have in mind when they refer to things as "sacred," "magical," "mystical," "superstitious," "spiritual," and/or "religious". Whatever else they are, things that get caught up in the web of relations marked out by these terms are things that someone or some group has granted some sort of special status (Taves 2009: 27).

If we follow Taves, an experience to be considered religious must satisfy two conditions: it must be deemed religious by the individual experiencing it and/or the group among whom the experience occurs; and it must be granted the status of 'specialness' by the individual who has undergone the experience and/or the group of which the individual forms a part.

Defining Religion

I have worked for the past twenty years on developing an increasingly restricted definition of religion, partly in response to the challenge to Religious Studies articulated by Timothy

Fitzgerald in what I regard as his groundbreaking book, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000). My first effort at doing this was published as the Afterword to the volume commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the British Association for the Study of Religions entitled *Religion: Empirical Studies*, edited by Steven Sutcliffe and published in 2004 (Cox 2004: 259-64), a volume for which Peggy Morgan wrote the Foreword (2004, xiii-xv). In my contribution to the book, I began a process in which I gradually added layers to my argument that religion can be defined analytically in non-theological terms. I based my initial theory largely on the work of the French sociologist, Danièle Hervieu-Léger. In her book, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (2000), first published in French in 1993, and in a later chapter appearing in a volume on issues in defining religion edited by Jan Platvoet and Arie Molendijk (1999: 73-92), Hervieu-Léger defined religion in purely sociological terms by stressing its transmission from generation to generation in the collective memory. In my subsequent publications, I have slowly refined what I mean by religion so that in my most recent monograph, *Restoring the Chain of Memory: T.G.H. Strehlow and the Repatriation of Australian Indigenous Knowledge* (2018), I have arrived at a definition of religion that is socially contextualised and, I believe, is entirely free of theological associations.

In her discussion of sociological theories concerning the place of religion in the late twentieth century, Hervieu-Léger (1999: 76) suggests that the predictions of the demise of religion have been proved wrong by the contemporary situation, but in a quite ambiguous way. In line with the secularisation thesis, society in the West has for many years been experiencing the 'evaporation of the socio-religious link which once constituted long term support for the construction of a religious culture encompassing aspects of social life', but, at the same time, we are witnessing the unexpected, or at least unanticipated, wide dissemination of religious belief (Hervieu-Léger 1999: 76). This latter phenomenon suggests that 'religion still speaks … But it does not speak in those areas where one might expect', that is, within institutions like churches or mosques or through official channels of the historical religions (Hervieu-Léger 1999: 76). Rather, 'one discovers its presence, diffuse, implicit or invisible, in economics, politics, aesthetics, in the scientific, in the ethical and in the symbolic' (Hervieu-Léger 1999: 76). This broad dissemination of religion in modern life makes defining religion at once extremely difficult, but necessary. The scholar needs to know what to investigate as 'religion' when describing and analysing what Hervieu-Léger (1999: 76) calls 'the diverse surreptitious manifestations of religion in all profane and reputedly non-religious zones of human activity'.

If we follow Hervieu-Léger's train of thought, we will see that the question confronting scholars is not, for example, could a modern spectator sport like football be considered a 'religion' any more than it asks if modern expressions of Christianity,

Judaism or Islam can be considered a religion. According to Hervieu-Léger, the important issue for a socially embedded modern definition of religion pivots on the question of legitimisation. How is the act of believing legitimised? And here Hervieu-Léger arrives at the essential and necessary condition for religion to exist in any human community: 'There is no religion without the explicit, semi-explicit, or entirely implicit invocation of *the authority of a tradition*; an invocation which serves as support for the act of believing' (Hervieu-Léger 1999: 87-8, emphasis in original). On this accounting, what makes something religious depends on whether or not the forms of believing invoke or 'justify themselves, first and foremost, upon the claim of their inscription within *a heritage of belief*' (Hervieu-Léger 1999: 88, emphasis in original). Religious groups define themselves 'objectively and subjectively as *a chain of memory*, the continuity of which transcends history' (Hervieu-Léger 1999: 89, emphasis in original). By relating to a chain of memory, religious communities collectively share in acts of remembrance of the past which give 'meaning to the present' and contain the future (Hervieu-Léger 1999: 89). Hervieu-Léger (1999: 88) calls this proposition a '*working hypothesis*', the aim of which is to create 'one sociological theory (among others)' that responds to the question of how religion is manifested in modernity (emphasis in original).

In *Restoring the Chain of Memory*, I argue that religion consists of three necessary elements: community, authority and tradition (Cox 2018: 30). This reflects a socio-cultural definition of religion that stands in contrast to numerous other ways religion is described, such as belief in supernatural agents, the deliberate affirmation of individuals to alleged transcendent demands, a relationship of humans to a power or powers greater than themselves, a solution to questions about ultimate meaning, or the sense of or feeling for the numinous. Communities, as Hervieu-Léger observes, need not be restricted to traditional institutions, since even individuals can be bound to a 'heritage of belief' on which they construct 'the meaning they give to their own existence' (Hervieu-Léger 1999: 90). For example, individuals who take part in contemporary 'new age' movements, such as trance dance or drumming sessions as practised by neo-shamanic groups, sometimes simply as weekend participants, will discover that the organisers appeal to ancient shamanic traditions to legitimise the authority on which they base their message (Cox 2015: 15-19). This is what Hervieu-Léger means when she observes of such groups that it matters 'little that the reference to past witnesses is 'in the main extraordinarily inconsistent and fanciful' (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 81). What matters is 'the imaginative perception of the link which across time establishes the *religious* adhesion of members to the group they form and the convictions that bind them' (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 81, emphasis in original). This leads to her conclusion: 'One would describe any form of

believing as religious which sees its commitment to a chain of belief it adopts as all-absorbing' (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 81).

This interpretation of religion is particularly useful for analysing religion in light of problems inherent in the so-called religion-secular divide, or in the current movement to distinguish religion from non-religion in the field of 'non-religion studies' (Lee 2012; Cox 2016: 26-31). It also sheds light on what Ninian Smart differentiated as genuine religion from religion-like contemporary movements, such as nationalism, patriotism or even sport. Smart's dimensions of religion (Smart 1977: 15-25) could be applied nicely to religion-like activities, or what he called 'secular world views' (Smart 1992: 25), but he argued that they could not be classified as 'religion' because they lacked a transcendental referent and because participants in such movements did not themselves consider their activities religious (Smart 1992: 25). If we follow Hervieu-Léger on this point, we collapse the strong differentiation between religion and the secular in classical secularisation theory, but, as a consequence, we need not separate religion from non-religion on the basis of belief in out of the ordinary, transcendental entities. What identifies religion as opposed to non-religion depends on the authority by which identifiable communities are legitimated and the sense of obligation such authority maintains, even over individuals, who may only loosely relate to community activities. If I return to the case of neo-shamanic groups, what constitutes a shamanic experience as 'religious' is not that references are made to travelling to other worlds and encountering unusual spirits, such as power animals, but that the beliefs in such worlds and spirits are legitimised by appeals to an ancient, primal and universal human tradition that authenticates the participation of individuals in the transitory group. Or, to take another more generalised example, the overpowering force of world capitalism is rooted in an authoritative ideology that is all-encompassing and demands conformity by members of most contemporary societies. This fits Hervieu-Léger's definition of religion, despite the fact that capitalism fosters intense individualism and competition, a spin-off of the same authoritative tradition. In such an analysis, strict dichotomies between religion and the secular, religion and non-religion, based on   beliefs in transcendental entities, fail, whereas analyses of the sources of legitimation and authority prove helpful and productive in identifying what we mean by religion in the modern world.

Religious Experience as the Experience
of an Overwhelming Authoritative Tradition

According to my definition, religion does not refer of necessity to a transcendent source nor must it be related to that which extends beyond ordinary explanation, but it must include identifiable communities, authority and tradition, all understood in terms of Hervieu-Léger's 'heritage of belief' forming a chain of memory. If this is accepted, what we mean by 'religious' experience must be reframed by removing it from its connection to theological or quasi-theological assumptions about the 'divine', a 'Greater Power' or a 'transcendent reality'. A religious experience, to be religious, must occur in the context of what individuals or groups experience when they are placed into a situation whereby a tradition to which they relate, either explicitly or implicitly, exercises an overwhelming power over them. It does not matter if such an experience occurs in moments of patriotic fervour, at great sporting events, when purchasing a new home in the market economy, when attending a political rally or being baptised by the Holy Spirit in a Pentecostal Church. The criteria for the experience to be religious must relate to a tradition that has been embedded in the individual or group consciousness and that by its transmission has produced the environment for the experience to occur.

The term 'overwhelming authority' does not imply that the experience is overwhelmingly intense, sudden, novel, unanticipated or extreme. It does suggest that the experience results from adherence to a tradition that is legitimised in a way that results in its exercising profound authority over groups or individuals. If we take one of Ninian Smart's 'religion-like' examples, American patriotism, we can see precisely how this works (Smart 1992: 24). The tradition out of which American patriotism emerges relates to stories about the founding of the nation, including the authority vested in the written constitution, and the struggles for independence embodied in the early freedom fighters during the Revolutionary War. Of course, the tradition was not new; it was emerging throughout the eighteenth century in the form British liberalism with its ideals of individual liberty and was informed by the development of capitalist ideals in the late eighteenth century as expressed in the writings of Adam Smith. Nonetheless, for the ordinary American, from an early age, the idea of individual liberty, the freedom to develop according to one's own efforts, and the notion that opportunity is extended to all are enshrined in the collective consciousness. Every American school pupil knows by daily repetition the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag and no sporting event from high school basketball to professional baseball begins without the spectators standing and singing the National

Anthem. Patriotism forms a part of the fibre of the American tradition and it is transmitted with an overwhelming authority. At times, it produces experiences of deep emotion and intensity, as experienced by memorials to the victims of the Twin Towers attack in New York on September 11, 2001, which was regarded as much more than a single event, but thought of as an unforgettable violation by those intent on destroying the American way of life. Other experiences of American patriotism can be much less intense, but no less important, such as might be experienced when a person approaches a view of the Rocky Mountains while travelling in a car from the east, a sight that might prompt the individual to suddenly sing the song, 'America the Beautiful'. The point I am making is obvious: unless one thinks of America as a transcendent reality, a divine entity, or a supernatural being, what makes the experiences of American patriotism 'religious' is precisely the community adhesion that forms the American nation, which is borne by a tradition that has been transmitted from generation to generation by those in authority from governmental officials through educational systems to the media. Even in today's polarised state, loyalty to the national interest binds patriotic Americans together regardless of where they situate themselves on the political spectrum.

Clearly, what I have suggested about American patriotism can be applied to societies that possess a strong focus on the divine, as in some Islamic states, or among groups that interpret their traditional social structure as having been established by supernatural entities. With respect to this latter example, I have written in numerous places about Indigenous Religions, particularly as I have researched them in Alaska, Zimbabwe and Australia (Cox 2007; Cox 2014). I have discovered that the most important elements in indigenous societies are precisely the manner whereby localised traditions are maintained by appeals to an authoritative tradition, even though such appeals have adapted to numerous outside interventions, including colonial governments, Christian missions and neo-colonial economic interference. What makes it possible to speak about Indigenous Religions as a whole, although with great qualification, does not result from beliefs in spirits or the living forces within nature, but the manner whereby beliefs in spirits, usually ancestors, are used to re-enforce the traditions through which the communities trace their identities. Oftentimes today these same traditions form the basis for recovering the past and restoring the chain of memory that had been interrupted by invading cultures. Indigenous Religions thus can be identified by kinship ties and quasi-legendary stories about founding ancestors through which the authoritative tradition is transmitted in the collective memory. In Zimbabwe, for example, the social order of local communities mirrors the spiritual world based on ancestral traditions; it is this which makes their stories and

rituals 'religious'. The experiences of spirit possession, ancestor protection, or healing by unseen forces do not make such experiences religious; they are religious because they are embedded in a 'heritage of belief'.

Defining Religion and Things Deemed Religious

My interpretation of religious experience shares some common themes with the theory advanced by Ann Taves, particularly her emphasis, which was voiced also by Ninian Smart (1992: 25), that a scholar studies as religious that which is deemed religious by individuals or a community. If we follow my theory, which I have argued is consistent with the phenomenological method that insists on including the perspectives of adherents, a tradition that is transmitted must be accepted as authoritative by participants; it must be owned or named as such, even if only implicitly, and linked through tradition to a shared memory. This, however, is as far as I can go with Taves's insistence on religion as that which is 'deemed religious', because what I call religion in my definition need not be deemed *religious* by those participating in the tradition. American patriotism or other forms of nationalism, such as that reflected in the rituals surrounding Remembrance Day in the United Kingdom every November, in most cases, would not be deemed religious by those participating in the national remembrance, despite the pressure exerted on celebrities, politicians and the general public to wear a poppy as a symbol of the collective memory that legitimises the authoritative tradition of the nation. On my definition, American, British or other forms of patriotic nationalism are fully religious because they manifest the three elements necessary for religion to be present: community, tradition and authority. By contrast, if we follow Taves on this point, seemingly if people do not deem patriotism religious, it cannot be deemed religious by scholars who are conducting research on how people respond to national demands for loyalty. Surely, this stifles critical thinking by limiting what is possible to define as religion entirely to 'insider' or 'emic' perspectives. It also reduces what is meant by empirical research to mere observation by excluding the place of hypotheses and testing in constructing the framework for investigating data.

Of course, my approach is susceptible to the complaint that *I* have decided what religion is rather than allowing participants to determine what *they* deem to be religion. This means that what I define as religion might be unrecognisable as such by those who take part in activities that fit my definition. This objection has often been raised by those who study localised, kinship-orientated traditional societies, who commonly have no word for religion in their language. They rather speak of a way of

life that includes everyday occurrences like eating, working in the fields, caring for animals or sexual activity – things scholars would not normally include as religion but which are interlinked with other events that would seem to qualify as religion, such as death rituals, appeals to ancestors for protection and honouring spirits responsible for successful harvests. This, however, is precisely my point. I include everyday activities as religious if they are connected holistically to customary ways of life that have been established by long traditions that are enshrined in authoritative social structures, which in turn are transmitted from generation to generation in the collective memory.

That I call ordinary activities a part of Indigenous *Religions* clearly is done for academic purposes in order to clarify for other researchers in the scholarly community what I mean by the term, and also to communicate to the wider public information about indigenous societies in order to foster understanding and promote tolerance. That the communities themselves do not (or at least did not) separate life activities into categories conforming to the Western concept 'religion' does not prohibit me from using the word, if I communicate clearly what I mean by it, qualify the contexts in which I use it and admit the limitations it imposes. In his extremely helpful chapter, entitled 'To Define or Not to Define', in the book on definitions of religion he edited with Arie Molendijk, the Dutch scholar, Jan Platvoet, justifies defining religion in just this way. He argues that the primary reason for defining religion is not to provide 'a universally valid definition', which, he admits, is 'unattainable' (Platvoet 1999: 255), but 'to clarify the precise meaning in which a scholar uses the term when communicating … findings to the scholarly community for critical testing, and to the general public for information' (Platvoet 1999: 260).

Religious Experience:
A Conclusion

The contemporary study of religious experience owes much to the work of the Religious Experience Research Centre to which Peggy Morgan made a significant contribution. In this chapter, beginning with Peggy's discussion of William James and Alister Hardy, I have argued that what constitutes the field of religious experience depends on how we define the category religion. I have shown that many academic writers conform to the popular understanding of religious experience as a personal or group encounter with a transcendent, divine or supernatural reality, or, at the very least, as an extraordinary interaction with someone or something that extends beyond normal sense, bodily or mental functions. I have also explored how in her book on

religious experience, Ann Taves sought to overcome the problem of prescribing the nature of religion in advance by simply asserting that religion is what is deemed religious, and that religious experience reflects an encounter with 'specialness'. I have contended that this theory runs the risk of reducing scholarly research on religious experience to unreflective, commonly accepted understandings of religion in ways that suppress critical thinking.

Building on my definition of religion, I have suggested that the study of religious experience ought not to be constrained by theological or quasi-theological assumptions. Rather, experiences should be classified as religious insofar as they result from the social contexts that create religions. On this analysis, religious experiences occur among identifiable communities, which are constituted either explicitly or implicitly, and which reflect the overwhelming authority of a tradition that has been legitimated through its transmission from generation to generation in the collective memory. This means, of course, that much of what fits into the category religion involves experiences with alleged transcendent realities, but it is the interaction between communities and their authoritative traditions, not the purported presence of supernatural entities or out of the ordinary encounters that makes the experiences religious. My conclusion closely resembles the argument for the study of religious experience to be firmly rooted in empirical research that Peggy Morgan developed in her inaugural article in the *Journal for Religious Experience*, with which I began this chapter. The emphasis that Peggy and I share on a non-theological interpretation of religion enables scholars to study, as religious, varieties of human experience that mould the attitudes, beliefs, opinions, behaviours and reactions of people based on evidence that is experimentally validated and explained in socio-cultural terms.

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