



TEORÍAS Y  
PRÁCTICAS  
EMERGENTES EN  
ANTROPOLOGÍA  
DE LA RELIGIÓN

Mónica Cornejo, Manuela Cantón  
Ruy Llera (Coordinador/as)

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# MEANING, COGNITION AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN THE EXPERIENCE OF A RELIGIOUS EVENT

CARLES SALAZAR I CARRASCO  
Universidad de Lleida

The first and fundamental problem that the analysis of experience poses to the ethnographer is that, as the Scottish psychiatrist David Laing wrote, nobody can experience another person's experience (cited by Kapferer, 1986: 188). How can an ethnographer know or enter into another person's experience of reality? Anthropologists normally argue that it is only through meaning that we are able to perceive other people's experiences. Unlike the event of an experience itself, which is always private and subjective, meanings are always public and intersubjective. Meanings originate in social relationships, and the particular kind of meanings that we anthropologists produce in our interpretation of other people's ways of life originate in the equally very specific social relationships that we produce through our ethnographic practice. In this way, we can see how the unknowable of the personal individual experience gets refracted into a different dimension. This is the intersubjective dimension provided by the process of signification in terms of which experience becomes a form of communication, interaction and social relationship.

There is, however, what we might call a second refraction of the event of individual private experience – a second way in which we can approach the analysis of experience. This is produced not by the intersubjective process of signification but by the objective process of cognition. The event of a personal experience is also a mental event and, as such, it is constrained by the cognitive systems that make up the human mind and by which information provided by the senses is duly processed and turned into mental representations. Whereas meanings are always cultural forms and, insofar as they are cultural forms, they are also particularistic, idiosyncratic, cognitive systems are universal and (largely) innate.

So, we have two different dimensions upon one single phenomenon, which is that of personal experience, something unknowable in principle but that can eventually be known through these two refractions: the intersubjective refraction, experience as meaning and communication, and the objective refraction, experience as cognition. What I would like to do in this paper is to try to bring these two perspectives together: mind and meaning, the mental and the social – two perspectives that are seen by many as pretty much antagonistic approaches to the study of human behaviour.

Let me go first into the kind of experience I wish to analyse. This is what I define as the experience of the religious or the experience of a religious event. I want to draw a distinction between this and what we normally understand by ‘religious experience’ in the sense, for instance, in which it was used by William James (1982) in his well-known essay. James understood by religious experience the experience of the supernatural, and he thought that that was the very essence of religious belief, religion in its purest form. For him, religion originated in that very personal, subjective and incommensurable feeling of a supernatural presence. This type of experience was different form ordinary experiences of reality, of the ‘natural’, in that unlike these it entailed an inner transformation of the subject, a kind of mystical re-birth. By contrast, what I mean by the experience of the religious is much closer to the ordinary experience of natural reality. There is no inner transformation of the subject in this kind of experience, nor is there any suspension of our mundane ontological intuitions concerning the nature of the real, that is, ordinary reality; on the contrary, it will be precisely through these mundane ontological intuitions that the experience of the religious will be assessed and, eventually, signified. Whereas religious experience is an extraordinary experience brought about by the perception of a (believed to be) supernatural presence, the experience of the religious is an ordinary experience brought about by the perception of an event or phenomenon endowed with religious significance.

The experience of the religious I wish to look at is a case of Marian apparition that took place in a rural parish of Co. Galway, in the west

of Ireland, in June, 1990. A Marian apparition is the apparition to one person or to a group of people, normally a very small group, of an image of the Virgin Mary. This supernatural event, which has been recurrent throughout the history of Christianity, used to be very common in Catholic Europe in the years after World War II – and in Spain in particular in the years after the Civil War. Later, irregular apparitions have continued to take place here and there, (nearly) always in Catholic countries. Perhaps one of the most famous has been the apparition that took place in Medjugorje, in Bosnia, in 1981.

The apparitions I am concerned with in this paper came about on a wall of a little church called the Church of Our Lady Comforter of the Afflicted, in the half parish of Fahy, and were widely publicised in the local newspapers. What follows is a brief summary of the news that appeared in the local press shortly after the apparitions had allegedly taken place.

The visions included Our Lady, Padre Pio, a baby in the womb and a pair of hands holding the Holy Host. The images were first noticed by 24-year-old twins, Sally Anne and Judy Considine, from Cork, who had previously experienced similar visions at other places. The twins had visited Fahy on a number of occasions in the past and were good friends of the local priest, Fr Cahal Stanley. They said they noticed the outline of a figure on the wall beside the altar during the special mass on Saturday night, June the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and received a message from Our Lady. They said afterwards that they were asked to pass the message on, which said: ‘I ask you to renew your devotion to and adoration of the Blessed Eucharist’. According to Fr Stanley, ‘the Considines mentioned it to me after mass. I could see the image of Our Lady. We went outside the church and got 15 people and asked them to come in to look. They could all see it. At around 10 pm the image of Padre Pio and a pair of hands holding the host began to appear on the upper part of the wall’. While the images of Our Lady and the Eucharist disappeared later that night, Fr Stanley goes on, an enlarged outline of Padre Pio moved down to the lower part of the wall. The image of the Trinity was also to be seen. An image of the baby in the womb was visible at the top of the wall on Sunday, while the outline of Padre Pio was evident at the bottom. Local artist Sheila Haugh sketched the

images and her drawings were displayed in the church together with the messages from Our Lady.

The messages from Our Lady were brief, and were received by the visionaries through ‘an inner voice’. Fr Stanley believes that She is encouraging people to pray and be aware of Christ and the Holy Sacraments. The child in the womb is a symbol of abortion – which at that time was still illegal in Ireland and it was a widely discussed topic.

Mary Donoghue, an elderly woman from Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, was another witness of the visions. According to her declarations to the press, the visions ‘are extraordinary’. She felt that Our Lady was trying to tell the people of Ireland something. ‘I saw the vision of Our Lady and Padre Pio and the hands holding the host on Saturday. The more I studied it, the clearer it became, I came back again today to pray’. Sandra Mc Loughlin, a middle-aged woman from Ballinfoile Park, in Galway, went to Fahy church on Sunday with her children, her father Bertie Mc Donagh and friend Ann Feeney. ‘I wasn’t 20 seconds in the church when I saw the image of the baby in the womb on the top left of the wall and the profile of Padre Pio in the middle. My father saw the baby too and my children saw Our Lady in the middle, Padre Pio and the unborn baby. We spend two and a half hours there, looking at the images and praying’. While admitting that she is not overly religious, Sandra says she was deeply touched by the experience. ‘It was a beautiful afternoon. There was a lovely scent of perfume in the church and the images were extraordinary. I was very moved and was near to tears. I will certainly go there again’.

Fr Stanley said that the manifestations might be the result of the tremendous devotion to Our Lady by the people of the area. But he stressed that there might be a perfectly logical explanation for the phenomena, adding that individuals witnessed different visions since Saturday. ‘There may be a logical reason for all this’, Fr Stanley concedes, ‘it may have been caused by the paint or something. But at this stage is a matter for all individuals to make up their own minds.’ He added that the vision of Padre Pio maybe connected to the worldwide prayer movement to have Padre Pio canonised soon (he

was canonised in 2002) and he added that there was a big devotion to Padre Pio in that area.

This is how the local press reported on the event in the aftermath of the apparitions. Next Sunday afternoon, June the 10<sup>th</sup>, I myself decided to go to the church with two friends. First, let me summarise again the information as it appeared in the local papers of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of June.

‘No formal investigation has yet been begun by church authorities’, we read in the *Connacht Tribune*, one of the local papers, ‘who are extremely cautious about the events in Fahy’. According to Bishop John Kirby of Clonfert, any investigation would be long and detailed and the church was very cautious about such reported happenings. But in spite of all these cautions (or maybe because of them), next Sunday, June the 10<sup>th</sup>, the tiny village of Fahy became the scene of a mass pilgrimage, when thousands of people thronged into the tiny Fahy Church. In little more than a week, it was then estimated that 25,000 had visited the church. The area around the church took the appearance of a fully-fledged pilgrimage site. A public address system was set up, the Rosary was recited over the loudspeaker system, temporary car parks were set up in the fields neighbouring the little church, and stewards were out on the roads leading to Fahy. A one-way roads system was established in a bid to deal with the huge crowds, but, despite this, people queued for well over an hour as pilgrims and sightseers waited patiently to visit the church.

Some pilgrims said outlines on the walls and peculiarities of light still occur in the wall and the visionaries themselves have dismissed claims that they might be caused by faulty paintwork or dampness. The police were on duty in the village for the whole Sunday afternoon in an effort to keep traffic moving, temporary toilet facilities were provided for the public in the community hall near the church, and even a stall selling pictures of Padre Pio and other sacred objects had moved into the area in front of the church. Traffic jams half a mile long built up on the roads leading to the village, though special signposting and the cutting back of roadside briars and hedges did facilitate the freer movement of traffic into and out of the village, which had never seen such crowds.

I had gone to the church with two of my friends and informants, Séan and his wife Mary, both in their early thirties. When we arrived, both of them queued to enter the church while I remained outside, taking pictures of the pilgrims and listening to their comments. Séan was rather sceptical about the whole thing right from the beginning, whereas Mary's attitude was somewhat more credulous. There were even a few bitter words between the two of them. 'Your religion has always been very weak', said Mary to her husband. 'I am a religious person in my heart', he retorted, visible irritated. Mary's gullibility, however, was not exempt from doubts. 'It might very well be in people's imagination', she conceded. 'It would be interesting to know what was there a month ago, for instance'. When she came out, she insisted now and again that she had seen something. She said that she could see the womb and the child inside but that she could not see the image of Padre Pio. One of the stewards, she went on, was telling people where to look at and you were also given a leaflet with the drawings of the images you were supposed to see. Séan said that you would be needing at least an hour watching the wall to see something. He added that he would like to go back there after a few weeks when the crowds are gone. Mary asked one of the stewards where the Virgin was and she was told that the two white holes on the wall were her eyes. But there were three white holes, Séan observed, what about the third one? Perhaps the nose, said Mary in jest.

While I was outside waiting for my friends, a woman coming out of the church said that she had seen the image of Padre Pio but she could not see Our Lady. There are some lines on the wall, but it is hard to make anything out of them, she commented. 'It is nice to see it'. She asked me whether I had taken any picture inside. 'That would have been a lack of respect', the sceptical Séan contended when I put to him that woman's comments. One of the stewards told me that he himself had seen some 'reflections', but that everybody sees different things. 'Everybody has his own beliefs'. They all were coming out claiming that they had seen something, but there was no agreement as to what. The church was very small and there was not enough ventilation for such a crowd. The heat inside was unbearable, that is the only thing they all seemed to agree on.

Two weeks after the apparitions were supposed to have taken place, the bishop of Clonfert, Most Rev. Dr John Kirby decided to intervene. In a special letter read at all Masses in the Diocese of Clonfert, he said that the Catholic Church had always been extremely sceptical of such claims. It accepted that such occurrences could happen but they were rare and the church had to be extremely cautious of them. The bishop said in his Pastoral: ‘The church has always reacted very cautiously and prudently in regard to these claims about visions and apparitions. It certainly accepts the possibility of apparitions, but recognises that these occur only extremely rarely. They are not part of the normal process by which we get to know God’s will for us. We get to know the will of God usually through the Bible and the teaching of the church. Private messages are not a normal part of God’s plan. Events in Ireland in the last few years have shown that caution in regard to apparitions and the like is highly justified. It is now accepted that the so-called visions of recent years are largely spurious. As Bishop of Clonfert I recommend a sceptical approach to all recent reports. Very likely there are natural explanations for the events claimed to have occurred’.

Official scepticism by the Catholic Church was echoed in some critical views. In a letter to the editor of one of the local papers, entitled ‘Apparitions – all a cod?’, we can read the following ironical comments: ‘The silly season is truly upon us; the tourists arrive for their annual fleecing, the polluted bay sparkles in the sunlight, and, lo and behold! The apparitions appear on the walls of a church. I suppose that statues around the country will be getting restless any day now (reference to another allegedly supernatural event that took place in Ballinspittle, Co. Cork, in the south of the country, in the mid 1980s, in which a statue of the Virgin Mary was supposed to move while people were looking at her]. In fairness, it’s a good gimmick. Whoever the local tourism official is, he gets full marks; this is cunning ploy that has proven very effective in this country. It’s just a pity that it involves making us look like eejits’. The letter finishes asking the editor why he decided to give full page coverage to such a nonsense.



So these were the facts. Let me now proceed to the analysis of these facts.

First, I wish to return to the distinction I mentioned before between religious experience and the experience of the religious. (Remember: religious experience as a transformative extraordinary experience, truthful perception of a supernatural presence, experience of the religious as a mere ordinary experience of something with religious significance.) It might be the case that for the original visionaries themselves, and a few others, this was without a doubt a fully-fledged religious experience in the sense I have previously discussed, i.e. the extraordinary experience of a supernatural event. Those who reported having seen something 'extraordinary', like Mary Donoghue, or those who said that they had been 'very touched and were near to tears', like Sandra Mc Loughlin, were probably talking about something, whatever it was, that was quite different from the perception of ordinary reality. But such was not the situation, it seems to me, for the thousands of people who went to the church in the following days. Perhaps many of them went there with the sincere wish to perceive a supernatural phenomenon that would make them go through the kind of deep and transformative experience that we define as a religious experience. But for the majority, I suspect, religious experience remained at best (perhaps not even that) an unattainable ideal that could only be made up for by a mere 'experience of the religious'. I am referring to all those who claimed 'to have seen something', but who could hardly understand or explain what that could be. For me these are sociologically and anthropologically far more important than the true visionaries, even though in many cases the difference between the two kinds of experience might not be clear cut.

Now despite being phenomenologically very different, the two types of experience have something in common: in both of them there is the perception of an external reality (natural or supernatural). Furthermore, the experience of the religious does not differ in any significant way from ordinary experiences of natural reality. We can appreciate that from many of the comments people made concerning what they could see and what they could not see. Some saw the image of Padre Pio but could not see Our Lady, whereas for others it was

only Our Lady what they could see and nothing else, others claimed to have seen ‘lines’, ‘lights’, ‘reflections’, while still others doubted whether it was all some sort of optical illusion. People talked about what they had seen and about what they had not seen in the very same way as they talk about any other kind of perception. Since I was not there myself –remember I did not go into the church (and this is going to be significant for what I will argue later)– I cannot provide my own view on the situation.

As I said at the beginning, in this analysis I will try to bring together two different perspectives. The first perspective consists in treating an experience as a mental event, i.e. something that happens in people’s minds (in interaction with an external stimulus, whatever that is). So let’s start with this definition of experience as a mental event. Now even though the capacity to see or not to see is closely related to a merely empirical fact, the object to be seen, it can also be readily associated with a state of mind that goes well beyond the bare perception of an external reality. One of the stewards said to me that different people saw different things, and then he added ‘everyone has his own beliefs’, as if the different things ‘seen’ could be explained as a result of the different things ‘believed’. More forcefully, my friend Séan’s scepticism triggered off his wife’s accusation of ‘having a weak religion’, as if the inability to see resulted from the lack of faith, or from a weak faith. All this takes us quite far indeed from ordinary perceptions of ordinary reality, we do not need to believe in anything in order to see anything. But it is this ambiguity or ambivalence, half-way between seeing and believing, that I wish to underline.

As Pascal Boyer (1994) has cogently argued, for any experience of a supernatural event to be believable, there has to be an optimum balance between the intuitive and the counter-intuitive. A totally counter-intuitive experience would be, literally, unbelievable for any human being, whereas an experience that perfectly matched our ontological intuitions concerning the nature of the real would, naturally enough, hardly qualify as an experience of a supernatural event. This balance between the intuitive and the counter-intuitive, or the ordinary and the extraordinary, can be readily identified, it seems to me, in the relationship between seeing and believing as regards the

particular case of supernatural apparition we have been looking at. To see is an ordinary perceptual faculty that we share with many other non-human animals, to evaluate what we see and act accordingly is a cognitive ability similarly widespread among the animal kingdom, with perhaps specific peculiarities for different species. Humans do not need any culture to tell them what they have in front of them, even though they will certainly need a language (and the culture that goes with it) to put a name on it. A system of cultural meanings with a totally contingent relationship with the underlying reality it is supposed to mean would not make any evolutionary sense.

Moreover, cognitive scientists argue that humans possess a cognitive template that they call Hyperactive Agent Detection Device (HADD). This is an evolved psychological mechanism that makes the subject susceptible to overestimate the responsibility of agents for outcomes when situations do not objectively justify it (McCauley and Lawson, 2002: 21). In other words, we are naturally more inclined to see an agent's responsibility in the production of a particular event that we cannot account for in any other way than to see it as the result of a purely impersonal cause. This makes evolutionary sense in terms of a 'better safe than sorry' adaptive strategy: to interpret the most little noise or change in the environment as having been made by a potentially threatening agent could have saved our ancestors from lurking predators or enemies (Guthrie, 1993).

Thus, it is not only our sensorial capacity to see and, especially, to perceive an unexpected event and act accordingly but also our evolved tendency to overestimate an agent's responsibility in the production of that unexpected event, which constitutes what we might call the cognitive basis of supernatural apparitions. This cognitive basis consists merely in a set of evolved pre-cultural psychological mechanisms the purpose of which is to process information provided by the senses and to stimulate a particular interpretation of that information so that a particular action is more likely to follow. But this cognitive framework does not mechanically determine an individual's final beliefs and behaviour in any particular way. We need culture for that. We need to turn a mere psychological expectation or predisposition into a cultural meaning.

We humans always mediate the perception of our environment with a system of cultural representations. And it is this system of cultural representations that will eventually tell us whether we are in front of a natural or a supernatural event, or half-way between the one and the other. In the ethnography above, we have seen that the expectation of agency, the tendency to see unexpected things as resulting from someone's action, does not necessarily involve that this someone, this agent, needs to be a supernatural agent: remember the somewhat bizarre conspiracy theory upheld by the sceptical writer of the letter to the editor of a local paper. On the other hand, it is also true that the possibility of a natural explanation in terms of an impersonal cause (dampness of the wall, etc.) was also suggested by different people, especially church officials. In fact, the possibility of a perfectly natural explanation was entertained by practically everybody – even the visionaries themselves had to explicitly deny that it was all caused by faulty paintwork or dampness – and yet, the fact that people went in their thousands to see the wall could in no way be explained by the belief in that natural explanation. In other words, people went there because even in some remote sense they thought (they had to think) that some form of 'unnatural' causation could be somehow present.

In order to fully explore this attribution of cultural meaning to experience I would like to move now to what I have called the 'intersubjective refraction' of experience, that is, the interactive process by which experience gains meaning. My first point is that culture is always interaction, relationship. In order to analyse anyone's culture we need to interact with them, to relate to them. Let me just draw the reader's attention to the particular interaction I had with my main informants on this occasion, Mary and Séan. It was me who saw the news on the apparition in the press and managed to persuade them to go to the church. It is hard to know whether they would have gone themselves if I had not been there to influence them to that effect. Whatever the case, it was clear that the reasons that moved them to go to the church were rather different from my own reasons to go there. The interesting thing is that this became very explicit when I realised that they did not understand why I had gone there.

In their view, there was a contradiction between, on the one hand, the fact that I asked them to go and the questions that I kept asking them concerning what they had seen and what they had not seen and, on the other, the fact that I eventually did not go inside the church to look at the wall. With hindsight, I tend to think that it was a mistake of my ethnographic practice not to have entered the church. So why is it that I did not enter the church? Even though I define myself as a catholic and a religious believer, I must say that on that occasion not for a single minute I entertained the possibility of a supernatural causation. Whatever the reasons for my scepticism (weak faith, secular upbringing, etc.), it was clear to me at that time that I had gone to the church as an anthropologist and not as a religious believer. Consequently, I thought that it would have been somehow dishonest for my part (with my friends and probably, and more decisively, with myself) if I had gone inside and tried to ‘see’ something that I was absolutely sure it was not there.

The logical conclusion of it all is that if I was really so concerned with my honesty perhaps I should not have gone there, and I should not have persuaded them to go, in the first place. But that was precisely my mistake. The point I wish to make, however, are the reasons why my, in their view, contradictory attitude could not be understood by my friends. They had gone there ‘to see’ what was going on, to look at the wall and find out whether there was anything extraordinary to be noticed, and they mistakenly thought that that had been my attitude as well. At no time they thought – or, at least, so it seemed to me – that I had not gone inside because of my weak faith, lack of devotion, etc. because in that case I would not have bothered going to the church to being with – ‘he doesn’t go because he doesn’t really believe in that’. Whereas a religious experience is a question of believing (if you don’t believe in Our Lady, you will never ‘see’ her, no matter what), and a natural experience is a question of seeing (you don’t need to believe in anything to see anything), an experience of a religious event is a question of seeing *and* believing. If I had wanted to go there, that meant, in their view, I had some kind of belief, but then, how is it that ‘I did not want to see’?

We find ourselves back to the question of perception and the experience of perception as it had been brought forward by what I dubbed the ‘objective refraction’ on experience. But this time, perception does not originate in a hard-wired evolved cognitive system. Perception is not now antecedent to cultural meaning but it originates in the very process of meaning production itself. Surely, the particular interaction I had with my informants cannot in anyway be generalised to the rest of the people who went there with a similar intention and who went through a similar experience. But in all appearances, judging by the information brought forward by the local press and the bits I gathered myself from other viewers, my informants’ meaningful experience was undoubtedly congruent with, if not equal to, many others. (And this is the way, incidentally, how I believe particular cultural meanings, as they originate in particular social interactions, can be validated, by seeing the extent to which they are congruent with other meanings rather than the extent to which they can be somehow faithfully replicated – whatever that means – in other interactions).

In the process of meaning production we have been looking at, through the interaction of myself with my informants, it could be argued that some meanings were shared by Séan, Mary and myself. That is what enabled us to talk about the event itself in a meaningful way to us all. Others, however, were not shared. For me, the experience was closer to the ‘believing’ pole than to the ‘seeing’ pole and, consequently, because of my lack of belief I decided not to go into the church. For them, by contrast, once the belief is taken for granted, it was more a matter of ‘seeing’ something, or not seeing it, and hence they could not understand why I just ‘did not want to see’ (if I was a believer).

In this paper I have tried to bring together two rather different perspectives on the analysis of a particular case of human experience: the experience of a religious event. First, the objective perspective has been provided by a cognitive approach, according to which our capacity to see and to interpret what we see, a very elementary capacity that we share with many other living organisms, is decisively and positively constrained by the evolved characteristics of our mind,

our inherited mental structures. Secondly, the intersubjective perspective has been provided by the particular interaction I had with the people who participated in that event, thanks to which a particular object of individual perception becomes an object of meaning, a cultural object. The only conclusion I wish to draw from the conflation of these two points of view is that both of them seem to be congruent with each other and yet irreducible. We cannot experience another person's experience, I said at the beginning, we cannot see with another person's eyes, the only thing we can do is try to imagine ourselves what it is that this or that person has seen, and try to understand whatever meaning that person gives to his or her experience – what it is that this or that person believes he or she has seen.

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