



A Critical Assessment of Lewis's Sociological Theory of Ecstasy. Towards an Integrative Model for Theorising Ecstasy

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Abstract

This article provides the first step of a threefold argument on why an integrative model for theorizing ecstasy is necessary and how this could be accomplished. This article sets out with some preliminary epistemological remarks on normativity and religious experience as a legitimate object of inquiry that have to be made in order to prepare the larger argument. Afterwards I.M. Lewis's sociological theory of ecstasy will be outlined and its numerous advantages pointed out. The strength of the theory lies mainly in explaining ecstasy in highly hierarchical societies and in those cases where it occurs in connection with material gain. It fails however to be applicable in situations when the subjects do not achieve or aim at achieving improvement of their material or societal statuses, but quite contrarily (and gladly) give up possessions and positions. The same applies for social structures where a high degree of equality has been achieved and ecstasy or ecstatic spirit-possession does not have to function as a releasing remedy for social tensions. These cases of ecstasy can better be explained by theories that could be called "psychological", or even "psycho-theological", that will be discussed in the next paper.

Keywords: ecstasy, trance, comparative religion, mysticism, shamanism, integrative model, Abraham Maslow, Ioan Myrddin Lewis

Słowa kluczowe: ekstaza, trans, religioznawstwo porównawcze, mistycyzm, szamanizm, model integracyjny, Abraham Maslow, Ioan Myrddin Lewis

Introduction

Recent research on various phenomena of ecstasy and theories on it has shown that to date no attempt has been made to bring the highly different approaches by different researchers that have accumulated over the last decades into a systematic whole to

make informed intercultural comparisons possible¹. I have therefore been looking for a model that could offer some guidelines for historic and systematic research to convincingly allow us to integrate them into a bigger picture. As a result, I will attempt to offer a model to resolve the most crucial antinomies. It could possibly also be useful for the discipline of the academic study of religions² as a whole, as it helps to reconcile the fruitless and seemingly everlasting fundamental debates between the competing approaches of hermeneutics and positivism³. The diverging theories on ecstasy will serve as an example.

In order to do this, I have planned three major argumentative steps that will be published in three distinct articles in this journal. In the first article I will, after making some general epistemological remarks about the study of religions, outline the useful and concise theory of ecstasy that was developed by the social anthropologist Ioan Myrddin Lewis, pointing out its eminent value but also showing its highly limited scope. In the second article I will show examples of competing explanations of ecstasy that conflict with the sociological approach and that, since they have been developed in the disciplines of psychology or theology, for simplicity's sake will be called psycho-theological theories. This article will end with a statement of the incommensurability of the two fundamentally different approaches. In the last article I will make suggestions for a theoretical model that solves the seeming antinomies by giving each theory its own, well-defined scope.

Preliminary epistemological remarks

Since it is necessary to loosen the absolute grip of some of the fundamental and generally accepted guidelines of research before an integrative model can be applied, there is a need to give a preliminary explanation of the ways in which some of these guidelines (only if they are taken as absolutes) have become harmful and why it is advisable, without abandoning them altogether, to maintain a flexible distance to them. They concern (a) the notion of normativity and (b) religious experience as an object of enquiry in the study of religions.

Normativity

In the approach that I want to present some explicit normative components will be involved, though they do not operate in a simplistic manner by speaking of morally "good" or "bad", but rather in terms of increasing complexity in the development

¹ This is the first in a series of three separate but interconnected articles that aim at establishing such an interpretative framework.

² Or scientific study of religions, history of religions, religious studies, in Germany nowadays almost unanimously "Religionswissenschaft" (science of religion).

³ H.G. Kippenberg, *Rivalitäten in der Religionswissenschaft. Religionsphänomenologen und Religionssoziologen als kulturkritische Konkurrenten*, "Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft" [ZfR] 1994, no. 1, p. 69–98.

through the course of natural and cultural history. A higher complexity, e.g. of the human brain and its structure functions, states of social organisation, art, science, etc., usually provides for deeper levels of understanding, reasoning, emotion, insight, and possibilities. But it also brings with it greater pathologies if these developments get out of hand. In this sense, the development of greater complexity can generally be regarded as a good thing even if the greater possibilities to transcend bring with them greater possibilities of failure. I believe, however, that normativity is not the essential ingredient of this approach, but that the analytical tools that are provided here are also useful for scholars who do not agree with the value of complexity.

I deliberately put the question of normativity at the beginning of this paper, because it touches on a fundamental question of the humanities: is a strictly descriptive human science possible? If it is, do we want it under any circumstances? And if not, what do we do instead? From my current state of experience I have found that calling for a strictly descriptive approach in the humanities is a loan that so far has never been redeemed.

As Hans-Georg Gadamer stated with regard to Dilthey⁴ that the main temptation for the humanities lies in trying to employ “the” scientific method in a strict sense, that has led to awe-inspiring results in the sphere of controlling nature, on their object of enquiry – human history in the broadest sense. The seemingly purely descriptive, value-free, and highly abstract modes of research do not, however, lead to non-normative research in the humanities but, quite to the contrary, tend to conceal the underlying, implicit notions of normativity. Though I strongly advocate independent scholarship and try to maintain it myself, it is important to bear in mind the fact that just because one refrains from explicit normative statements such as “This should be done”, “That ought not to be done”, one has somehow left the realm of the political (again, taken in the broadest sense, one might also say “moral” or “religious”). For not only do the findings of academic scholars act on social processes outside the university, but they also serve the function to help the scholar to maintain his or her way of being-in-the-world, to establish and defend his or her worldview. Explicit normative statements are not the only way to convey notions of good and bad. The selection and arrangement of the material, the way it is presented, to whom it is told and how, and also all that is *not* said, allows notions of how one should live to be transported. Often this method is even much more effective than explicit normative propositions in influencing people. All this under the banner of descriptive and value-free science. This could be called subtle normativity.

Gadamer maintains that there is no *principal* difference between understanding the meaning in the normative interpretation of a legislative text and the understanding of a different textual genre. “The distinction between a normative function and a cognitive function rips apart what clearly belongs together”⁵. And I would go on to

⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen 1990, p. 276.

⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, 1960. *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 294 [translation M.D.].

stress that the strict and final separation of knowledge (science) and morals eventually leads to immoral, and not as possibly intended, amoral⁶ science.

This is roughly why I am offering an approach here that carries in its rational and academically sound framework some open forms of normativity. For if normativity cannot or should not be banned from academic (and scientific!) inquiry entirely, we are obliged to lay out where we are coming from. In addition to being useful in organising different research interests, easing communication, and solving some antinomies, I believe that the integrative model I will apply here would also help us to correct some misconceptions about religion and spirituality in the age of Enlightenment by offering greater differentiation, and to overcome total postmodern arbitrariness (often a harmful form of higher complexity).

Religious experience as a legitimate object of inquiry

In the field of the study of religions, there has been a long debate on the notion of religious experience as a legitimate object of inquiry for the researcher⁷ (and I would maintain that the discursive lines of pro and con are largely identical with those of hermeneutics and positivism respectively phenomenology of religion and sociology of religion). This is mainly so because religious experience, roughly characterised as transcendental, non-empirical, and highly arbitrary, is often referred to as the direct opposite of scientific experience, held to be immanent, empirical, and falsifiable. These are important points, and they are to a certain degree true. But for quite a number of phenomena, such as ecstasy, this attitude would be hastily negligent and possibly miss some of the most interesting points if the individual experiential side of the coin is not taken into account at all. *Is* ecstasy even a *religious* experience? If we take ecstasy seriously as a psychological state⁸, it has to figure as an altered state of consciousness that objects of inquiry refer to in religious or secular idioms. And could a strict and systematic difference between the two be maintained at all? Many scholars have systematically omitted the research of the inner realm of *religious* (?) experience, because it “resists definition by design”⁹. I wish very briefly to highlight only one pivotal point of this interconnected realm of problems.

⁶ In the sense of having entirely left the sphere of good and bad, cf. F. Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft*, Stuttgart 1988.

⁷ The debate goes back a long way. Here are just a few more recent and interesting examples: H. Seiwert, *Systematische Religionswissenschaft: Theoriebildung und Empiriebezug*, “Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft” 1977, no. 1, p. 1–18; R. H. Sharf, *Experience* [in:] M.C. Taylor, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago–London 1998, p. 94–116; M. Jung, *Erfahrung und Religion. Grundzüge einer hermeneutisch-pragmatischen Religionsphilosophie*, Freiburg–München 1999; *Erfahrung als Kategorie der Frühneuzeitgeschichte*, P. Münch, (rsg.), München 2001, p. 271–337.

⁸ I believe that the study of religions should be highly interdisciplinary and comprise at least the subdisciplines of history of religion(s), sociology of religion(s), psychology of religion(s), anthropology of religion(s), philosophy of religion(s) (e.g. aesthetics), and psychology of religion(s) as outlined in: H. Cancik, G. Kehrler, H.G. Kippenberg et al., *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, Band I, Stuttgart 1988.

⁹ R.H. Sharf, *Experience...*, p. 94.

Sharf knows that the problem of inner experience concerns not only religious experience but experience in general¹⁰, but he does not carry his insight to the conclusion that actually waits at the end of this road. For in the humanities in general without the notions of inner experience and the idea of *real* subjects that *have inner experiences* of identity, self, intentionality etc. they would lose their entire purpose and have to lay down their work. Why treat religious experience any differently? Either inner experience is a valid field of research in all the humanities or in none. Often the enquiry of psychological religious states is seen too critically by the positivist (or behaviourist) research tradition, because it is methodologically difficult. Despite being difficult, though, it remains very important. The criticism is valuable as long as it improves the modes of inquiry, not if it puts a stop to this whole idea of research. For it is overlooked that the insecurity about valid propositions about inner experiences similarly holds true for *all kinds of experiences*. The distinction between the outer and the inner as a criterion for fidelity is too shallow to serve as grounds for valid research. Even if it is valuable in some circumstances, it is totally impractical as a foundation of the humanities, because we thus end up with subjects that are merely objects.

I would hold, for example, that in his or her practical work no researcher, as far as common sense is concerned, would object to the reality of inner experiences such as greed, compassion, happiness, loneliness, will, fear, aggressiveness, kindness, etc. as the flipside of the behaviour of the human beings he/she investigates. They greatly help to explain human actions and behaviour. In fact, in all the humanities these are fundamental terms that are barely reflected because they are so self-evident to researchers that they do not even think about problematising them. Psychology without a notion of self is senseless, economics without somebody wanting something is futile. Need or greed themselves are, for example, invisible, hardly objectifiable etc., yet justified speculations about these inner states of the subjects via their external objectifications are essentially the foundation of the humanities¹¹.

But when it comes to experiences that only *very few individuals share* so far (and are still widely unknown in the discursive community), e.g. an abundance of beauty, a sense of eternity, abounding love, ecstasy described as bliss, *sat-chit-ananda*, *suessekeit*, ... the sceptical (and sometimes with good reason!) generally denies their existence. And while this is right for *some* cases, it surely is not for all. The enquiry of inner states is not a problem as long as the members of the scientific discourse community basically share the same experiences as a matter of course. The scope of understanding is limited by one's own horizon. One should (in my opinion) always be open to the expansions of horizons¹², especially as an academic researcher. And if

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ In the philosophy of the mind the problem of the inaccessibility of inner experience of the other is referred to with the notion of *qualia*. But this problem holds true for *all* subjective, conscious, intentional experience, be it so-called "religious", economic (wanting something), social (liking someone) and so on. So the rejection of admitting the importance of subjective experience in the study of religions could be prejudiced, since *the real transcendence is not the one he assumes his "religious" object of inquiry to have but lies in the other person*.

¹² H.-G. Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I...*, p. 307–308.

horizons are expanding (and they eventually always do), a broader array of different types of experience will also come into acceptance.

Should inner experience be left completely out of the picture because “it resists definition by design”? Though I do not want to push the limits too far, it is with good reason possible to say that *everything* in the world resists *definition* by design (self-reflective scientists can tell you a thing or two about this). On the other hand, it is clear that intersubjectivity is more easily established over a pot of tea than over a pot experience. But then it is also quite clear that *nothing* is as close to the subject as its own *inner* experience and that it is not illogical or way out of line to assume that other subjects have it too. Therefore, it has an entitlement to systematic inquiry with the means of first and second-hand observation, and accurate verbal descriptions. Where, if not at the university? And what *if* there are e.g. genuine ecstatic experiences behind important incidents in the history of religions: every explanation of subsequent human behaviour will be *false* if it is not taken into account¹³.

The integrative model that I will introduce in the third article after having outlined the idea of so called “psychotheological” theories of ecstasy in the next one is an approach that emphasises the necessity of a multi-perspective view of ecstasy (and other phenomena in the study of religions). But I wish to end this paper with the critical appraisal of a very useful and highly operational sociological theory of ecstasy by giving an account of its basic premises and functioning first, and thereafter to point out its shortcomings and deficiencies.

A sociological theory of ecstasy and its advantages

The first comprehensive sociological theory of ecstasy was developed by Ioan Myrddin Lewis and first published in 1971¹⁴. For brevity’s sake I will largely draw from Köpping’s¹⁵ excellent summary of Lewis’s theory, for it will suffice for the intentions of this paper.

What are the basic social constituents of ecstasy? Lewis argued that there are basically two major distinguishable forms of ecstasy. In one case it occurs in relation to the main godheads of the social group in power, in such a way that thereby the system of shared and common values is maintained and strengthened. It also protects the interests and possessions of the powerful, privileged and wealthy. Lewis refers to these occurrences as “main morality cults”. In the other case, ecstasy takes place among marginalised or mainly powerless groups, where there is a difference of authority, wealth, and prestige to those dominating the society as a whole. This applies especially often to women. “Whenever women e.g. belong to the underprivileged

¹³ If one wishes to do so, relations between inner experience (“Erleben” according to Dilthey) and its outer expression (“Ausdruck”) can be experimentally verified in probabilistic terms. No *certainty* will be developed. But there *is* no certainty.

¹⁴ I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion. A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*, London 1989.

¹⁵ K.-P. Köpping, *Ekstase* [in:] *Vom Menschen. Handbuch historische Anthropologie*, C. Wulf (rsg.), Weinheim–Basel 1997, p. 548–568 [translation M.D.].

class, they are haunted by ‘peripheral’ spirits, which gives them a more privileged position, because the wishes that they utter while in the possession of ‘bush-spirits’, have to be fulfilled by the men”¹⁶. Possession is here of course interpreted as a form of ecstasy. Lewis then expands his possession-paradigm: an accusation of witchcraft (or sorcery) is a *direct* form of aggression, usually brought forward by adherents to a higher standing group against a lower one. It is not the possessed who is morally responsible but an exceptional non-conformist individual of the weaker group. The possession of an underprivileged individual instead, is an *indirect* form of aggression, because “the structurally weaker manipulates the stronger, but without questioning his authority. As an important prerequisite functions that the possessed cannot be held morally responsible for his actions”¹⁷.

These are the main characteristics of the social structural functions. Thus, in an important sentence Lewis sums up his ideas as follows: “What we have found over and over again in a wide range of different cultures and places is the special endowment of mystical power given to the weak. If they do not quite inherit the earth, at least they are provided with means which enable them to offset their otherwise crushing jural disabilities. With the authority, which the voice of the gods alone gives, they find a way to manipulate their superiors with impunity – at least within certain limits. ... [And] this is broadly satisfactory to all concerned, subordinate as well as superior”¹⁸. And, even more sharply: “Usually, as we would expect, downtrodden men and women are possessed by gods which, in fantasy, express their hopes and fears and bespeak upward social mobility”¹⁹. And I would agree that this interpretative paradigm helps to understand and explain a great range of ecstatic phenomena. The central achievement of this approach with historical materialist indebtedness and psychoanalytical sympathies (much of ecstasy is explained as sexual frustration) is that it discloses hidden motivations that lurk behind these occurrences of ecstatic spirit-possession. Thus we can conclude that, according to Lewis, *ecstasy is a means of fighting for material goods and social power between social agents (e.g. classes, sexes)*.

There are many examples of the structures as Lewis indicated them. One finds them not only in the regions from which he draws most of his source material (the Maghreb, Central Africa and Southeast Asia), but also in many times and regions: the differentiation between main morality cult and peripheral cult applies for North American traditions in the distinction between priest and shamans²⁰ or for large parts of the religious history of Christian Europe, e.g. in the antagonism between the Catholic Church and witchcraft; it explains large parts of the behaviour of the ancient Maenads, and possibly the St. Veit dances of the Middle Ages.

This theory is concise, comprehensive, and economical, but does it really explain *all* circumstances and occurrences of ecstasy?

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 560.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 560.

¹⁸ I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion...*, p. 104.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 96.

²⁰ Cf. e.g. M. Eliade, *Schamanismus und archaische Ekstasetechnik*, Zürich–Stuttgart 1957, p. 286.

Its Deficiencies

As elegant in its build-up and as convincing in its explanatory power it may be, it reaches its limit when critically applied to a broader range of material. What about those cases where someone underprivileged is ecstatically befallen by a spirit and thereupon does not try to ameliorate his social status or his material possessions? What about individuals that simply withdraw from society upon their experiences? What about those cases where the ecstatic of the higher classes does not use his befallenness to make an accusation of witchcraft and his subsequent actions do not lead to a stabilisation of the society as a whole? To point to a well-known example: the former Jewish sage Saul, who was to become the apostle Paul upon the famous incident on the road to Damascus, did not gain a higher social status, nor did he increase his wealth after he was blinded for three days following an ecstatic vision of Christ. Quite the contrary: he lost all his status and belongings, his influential post in the Jewish community, only to become an outcast and member of a persecuted sect, eventually to be killed for his ecstatically acquired belief. Jesus, certainly not devoid of the attributes of an ecstatic, gave a clear instruction on how to deal with concerns of fortune or power, ecstatically acquired or not: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s” (Matt. 22, 21). In Acts (Acts 4, 34–37) it is narrated how some of the ecstatic community of Jesus’ first followers gave up their possessions.

But to avoid the rocky cliffs of Eurocentric or Christian bias: what about Islamic mystics such al-Hallaj²¹ or al-Ghazzali²²; of whom the latter temporarily lost all his status as one of the most influential Muslim scholars of his time, and the former jubilantly sacrificed even the conditions of possibility for *any* possession whatsoever by provoking the authorities to torture and eventually execute him by exclaiming “ana al’haqq” (“I am *the* Truth”), in Islam an act of major blasphemy?

Whether one regards these instances as pathological or not is not the pivotal issue here: these and other men (and the history of religion is full of similar examples of women) despised the world and all its forms of wealth, status, and fame. It would be going too far to discuss the complicated interrelations between sense of self, group identities, and the possible injection that the real reason behind the switching from a privileged, wealthy community (e.g. the Jewish upper class ca. 35 AD) to a persecuted and poor minority (e.g. the Christian community around 35 AD) might be some sort of psychological benefit, a stronger sense of self or uniqueness or the like. Though I cannot entirely dismiss the claim of some secondary psychological motivations such as belonging to a group of outlaws, it stretches my notion of common sense too far. And I fear that the researchers who do so might be forcibly imposing a set of motivations common to highly individualised postmodern individuals with their own idiosyncrasies on the lives of people to which they do not apply. To sum

²¹ Cf. L. Massignon, *La passion de Husayn Ibn Mansūr Hallāj: martyr mystique de l’islam exécuté à Bagdad le 26 mars 922; étude d’histoire religieuse*, Paris 1975.

²² Cf. al-Ghazali, *Der Erretter aus dem Irrtum. Aus dem Arabischen übersetzt, mit einer Einleitung, mit Anmerkungen und Indices herausgegeben von Abd-Elsamad Abd-Elhamid Elschazli*, Hamburg 1988.

up this part of my argument: the interrelationship between ecstasy and asceticism remains, to put it mildly, underdeveloped.

Moreover: can all forms of ecstasy really be claimed to be a form of *aggression*? In my opinion, much of Lewis's personal pessimistic worldview shines through at this point of the argument. Are there plausible alternatives to this usually social-Darwinist interpretation? Halina Marlewicz is one who has offered a much friendlier interpretation with the notion of "Love" in what she calls a "metaphysical Encounter" by referring to the hermeneutics of Gerhard Oberhammer²³. In fact, what *about* all the cases of ecstasy that are often claimed to have coincided with feelings of abundant and overflowing love, happiness, ultimate fulfilment etc., of which Heinrich Seuse²⁴, Teresa of Ávila²⁵, John of the Cross²⁶, Ramakrishna²⁷ or Plotinus²⁸ are but a few examples? Can they be interpreted as forms of aggression without overstretching Lewis's paradigm? And what about the dialectics of aggression and non-aggression in one and the same person? How convincing is it to assume that these forms of ecstasy would afterwards be turned into forms of aggression and can be understood only as such?

And to go on: what about egalitarian societies where hierarchical differences between the sexes²⁹ have been overcome by un-hierarchical structures and severe forms of suppression have been uplifted such as in some of the Quaker communities³⁰, the Rainbow Tribe³¹ and most of the post-industrial holistic meshworks? Or also within strata of modern societies, where women participate in public life and the material inequality between classes has been substantially improved, yet ecstasy does not subside? According to Lewis, ecstasy would subsume in such circumstances, which it often does not. The only difference that takes place is that in highly rational and secular societies ecstasy is usually not explained as spirit-possession but, for example, as experiences of flow³² or peak-experience³³. Or in practices as *going out to dance* it is lavishly disguised under the names of musical styles (*trance*) or narcotic substances (*XTC*).

²³ H. Marlewicz, *Love breaks open in the relatedness of an "encounter". The metaphysics of "encounter" in religious hermeneutics of Gerhard Oberhammer*, paper presented at The First International Cracow Study of Religions Symposium "Religions: fields of research, methods and perspectives", 12–14 Sept. 2012.

²⁴ Cf. H. Seuse, *Deutsche Schriften*, K. Bihlmeyer (rsg.), Stuttgart 1907.

²⁵ Cf. Teresa de Ávila, *Obras Completas*, Madrid 1994.

²⁶ Cf. San Juan de la Cruz, *Obra Completa*, vol. 1, Madrid 1991.

²⁷ Cf. F.M. Müller, *Ramakrishna. His Life and Sayings*, Kalkutta 2001.

²⁸ Cf. Plotin, *Seele–Geist–Eines*, Hamburg 1990.

²⁹ "In societies dominantly structured by kinship institutions, sex distinctions have great structural importance". V. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, New York 1994, p. 98.

³⁰ Cf. R. Larson, *Daughters of Light: Quaker Women Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad, 1700–1775*, New York 1999.

³¹ The Rainbow Tribe is a loose and egalitarian network of postmodern individuals ("Hippies") that meet at least once a year in a greater "gathering" to live together and celebrate. Some of their modes of celebration can be called ecstatic. The academic literature on this is scarce.

³² Cf. M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow – der Weg zum Glück*, Freiburg, Br.–Basel–Wien 2010.

³³ Cf. A. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*, New York 1994.

These observations do not make Lewis' theory superfluous. Quite the contrary: by limiting its scope it becomes apparent that to a range of phenomena it is really applicable and that in those cases its explanatory value is quite high. It is not possible, however, to subsume *all* occurrences of ecstasy under this paradigm without begging the question or doing interpretative violence to them. Therefore in the next article we will consider a set of theories ("psycho-theological") that can justifiably be said to conflict and compete with Lewis's view though they also have valid grounds to stand on, before in the third article I will make a suggestion as to how such contradictions can be solved and mitigated.