Beyond religion to human existence: a shift in the study of media, religion and culture?

Paper presented to the DIGMEX Conference, Sigtuna, Sweden, 26-28th November, 2015

Peter Horsfield

The cultural study of the interaction of media and religion has become a significant field of interdisciplinary research in the last couple of decades. Part of the productivity of this new field comes from a shift away from considering religion solely through the narrow lens of the formal beliefs, rituals and practices of traditional religious institutions, towards a wider lens of what is believed and practised by people in their daily lives. This has resulted in a questioning of previous substantive approaches and definitions of what "religion" is (see, for example, Bergunder, 2014; Hoover, 2002; Lynch, 2007a, 2009; Meyer, 2012; Saler, 2000; Woodhead, 2011). However finding an alternative definition of religion to describe this broader field of interest has been problematic and elusive. Some of the concepts being explored are those of spirituality, esotericism (Kirby, 2013), the secular-sacred (Knott, Poole, & Taira, 2013; Lynch, 2007a, 2007b), , the "functionally religious, the "virtually religious," the "virtually sacred," (Geraci, 2014) and "religion-like" phenomena.

However, with this broadening of the field of study, it is now becoming difficult to know what the "disciplinary horizon" of religion study is (Smith, 1998) - what phenomena qualify, or don't qualify, to be considered as "religious" (Schilbrack, 2013), or the object of religious studies. In what ways is what is being called religious or religion-like have any substantial difference from what cultural studies, for example, may simply call culture, meaning-making, or ritual.[1]

To a certain extent, these problems arise because of the constraints imposed by the categorization of religion in the historical demarcation contests of secularization.[2] What we are dealing with is the disciplinary

confusion of post-secularization. I have two questions about this. One is whether, in this reconfiguration, the concept of religion has become so broad that it is losing any real hermeneutical meaning and it is time to look for another approach to consider these wider phenomena in their own terms. The second is whether the widening of the net of what is called religion isn't a further surreptitious colonization of human experience by religious institutions for whom this has been their designated terrain.

It is here that I found myself resonating with Amanda's proposition, which I first heard at the conference in Canterbury last year, that we need to reaffirm that existence precedes religion, and that religion needs to be properly understood not as the catchall for anything or everything that has a touch of something ethereal about it, but as just one of the different ways by which humans seek to deal with and express socially some of the inescapable demanding aspects of human existence (Lagerkvist, 2014).[3]

I think doing this is important for a couple of reasons.

One is that in the contests of modern secularisation, the institutions and ideologies of religion were assigned custody and given naming rights for particular aspects of social reality that, at the time, empirical theory wasn't really interested in. Once they had adjusted to this secular re-positioning, religions generally found a good deal of social prestige and political influence as the primary custodians of some key dimensions of human existence and experience. As a result, in a post-secular society, we are still required to access those dimensions of human existence through the lens and hegemonic discourse of religion, even though that discourse and its related practices no longer serve the purpose for a large number of people. This simply reinforces the social hegemony of religion and its institutions.[4]

The second reason why I think it's important to find an alternative discourse is because not doing so leaves under-resourced those people who reject religious discourse for any number of reasons, but who have no alternative legitimate discourse for giving voice to ineffable experiences or challenges they encounter in their human journey.

I want to illustrate this with a story. A number of years ago I was invited to speak to a meeting of a Rotary Club. I chose as my topic, "I'm not religious, but..." and I looked at a number of dimensions of everyday life we encounter

in which we experience or are forced to deal with situations which push us beyond our normal autonomous, action-taking, logical ways of handling situations. After the talk, a guy who was a merchant banker came up to me, and in a quite agitated way told me an account of how the previous year, for his 40th birthday, his kids gave him a parachute jump. He said he jumped out of the plane, his parachute opened, the plane disappeared, and he found himself suspended all alone in the silence above the earth. And then, he said, I had this overwhelming feeling of being extremely small, but at the same time very important.

It's a not unusual phenomenon, that's been variously identified as "nonordinariness," (McClennon, 1994), mystical, something "special" (Taves, 2009), or "extraordinary experiences" (Shushan, 2014), to which religious signifiers have been attached.

But then, this hard-headed merchant banker said something that has stayed with me ever since. "I'm not religious, but I don't know what to do with it."

It seemed to me that we do not have a recognised intelligent secular language for dealing with those sorts of experiences: not just in terms of their physical occurrence, but in terms of their existential significance. If we could find one, or more discursive ways of giving expression to these dimensions of human experience, religious discourse would find its proper place as just one of several "languages" by which non-empirical aspects of human existence might be understood and expressed socially.

The third reason why I think it's important is because it challenges a reductionist view of secularization, that the only reality with secular legitimacy is that which is materialistic, instrumentalist and subject to empirical verification.

I want to advocate that secular human reality contains qualities of transcendence or non-empirical imperatives that need to be recognized, analyzed and theorized in secular terms.

What are these qualities of transcendence or imperative.

What, then, marks these "transcending" dimensions of human existence, and in what ways are they different from any aspect of human experience or

cultural practice? The word transcendence may not be the best word to use, but I'm having trouble finding a better one. Joanna's concept of immanent transcendence is close to it, situations or experiences that do not remove us into a different dimension but reflect a particular dimension in our everyday experience. (Sumiala, 2013)

What is it about these situations that gives them a particular quality of existence?

They are situations we encounter, things we need to deal with, or experiences we have that call us out of ourselves or present us with a realisation that we are part of a reality that is bigger than ourselves; that make us aware that while being autonomous individuals, we are not entire of ourselves, nor fully in control of our own welfare and destiny.

While these dimensions emerge within and are contiguous with everyday situations we are in or experiences we have, I would distinguish them by three characteristics.

One is they bring a sense or realisation of a reality beyond ourselves that needs to be taken into account, whether that reality is a natural world, physical or psychological processes of development that come in our genes, a cause and effect relationship we are immersed in or subject to, or inescapable interdependence on others.

A second is they tend to carry a quality of imperative, a sense that while we have and exercise human autonomy, there are some things that we encounter or that come to us that go beyond a sense of choice: they appear inevitable or inescapable – they have to be done.

The third is that they often require an element of faith – they are often situations or experiences that require us to act or deal with something where we cannot fully know, control or guarantee the outcome.

Situations and experiences

I see these dimensions of our human existence as being present to us as both situations and experiences.

Situations of transcendence are encountered in the normal activities of life where we are required to deal with situations that are not of our making or

realties beyond ourselves, decisions we are required to make where the outcome is not predictable or guaranteed, demands that constantly interrupt our intentions or planning, set-backs we encounter, steps of faith we need to take in order to live. Though they are generally routinized in our daily behaviour, they condition us into our existence as dialectical: we experience life as contingent but also planful, stable but also unpredictable, satisfying but also disturbed, self-directed but also other demanding.

Experiences of transcendence are those in which we become conscious, at times in a heightened way, of these contingent, inter-dependent, vulnerable, surprising characters of our existence. As noted earlier, different scholars refer to them variously as "extraordinary experiences," (Shushan, 2014), "wondrous events," (McClennon, 1994), "non-ordinariness" (Brainard, 1996), peak experiences (Sumiala, 2013), or something "special" (Taves, 2009). While in general discourse they are often described in religious terms, I would argue that categorizing them inherently as religious experiences has a distorting effect by perpetuating a secular-religious division that is no longer linguistically, ideologically or politically desirable.

It is generally in these intense experiences of transcendence that we become conscious of the contiguous, fragile, inter-dependent, personally insufficient yet personally distinctive character of our routinized everyday lives. For this reason, these experiences of trancendence are often marked by a quality of imperative that is replete with ethical implications for how we view ourselves and how we live our lives.[5] It is often in these everyday experiences of transcendence that we gain perspectives by which to recognize and examine the situations of transcendence we live with in the less focused, more mundane living of our daily lives.

The encountered dimensions of transcendence

Because I'm a "categories" sort of person, I want to identify five dimensions or categories of transcendence that we encounter. There are more, and these are not separate from each other, but inform each other.

One is **a sense of giftedness**. These are situations or experiences we encounter marked by a quality of our being given something that is not of our creation, or effort, or deserving. It is as if it is a gift of life itself. In this I would include such phenomena as the earth or life as creation, innocence, beauty,

tranquility, integration or wholeness, love, forgiveness, the kindness of strangers, communitas. The ethical imperative contained in the situation or experience is one of gratitude, generosity and reciprocity.

A second dimension of our self-transcendence is **expansion**. It is a felt need or drive to develop, to actualize, to expand, to grow, to continually improve or reach beyond ourselves. The transcendence of the experience is deeply rooted in the physical drive we inherit through the hormones, genetic material and growth impulses of our human bodies. It is notable in human activities of invention, creativity, curiosity and travel.

The third is **obligation**. The transcending of a singular focus on ourselves, our self-survival and self-interest is due significantly to our socialization and our practical awareness of our interdependence. But these are internalized to such an extent that it ceases to be a conscious choice and becomes an imperative of duty, community, destiny that calls us out of ourselves into a larger identity.

The fourth encounter with the transcendent nature of our human existence is **threat**. In everyday experiences such as sickness, loss, death, disruption, disturbance, disintegration, we become conscious that, for all of our being a unique centre of consciousness through which the world comes into being in a distinctive way, that our lives are contiguous and we are easily dispensable and forgotten. One day we will cease to be, yet the world beyond us will carry on as if we were nothing.

The fifth dimension of our transcendence is **the need to integrate.** For some reason, it is not enough for us as human animals simply to have repetitive, sequential or random sensate experiences or thoughts – we feel compelled to link these together into constructed conceptual or narrative connections in order to "make sense" or experience them "properly". Included in these are our common human drives on a personal and social level to develop a sense of identity or a sense of direction, and the universally recognized quest for meaning. The failure to do so successfully often presents us with the transcendental threat of disintegration or anomy.

"Immanent" transcendence

In talking about human transcendence in this way, it should be apparent that I am not talking about a separate dimension of life that can be optionally engaged or dispensed with. For that reason I find the secular-sacred, scientific-mythological frame for discussing these aspects of human existence quite inadequate, no matter how much we try to broaden the concept of the sacred.

I'm identifying innate qualities of our physical, psychological, social and secular existence as human animals, that need to be addressed in some way, as much as our essential physical needs do, if we are to be human as we understand it.

Religion is only one of the social formations that have arisen in the expression of these transcendent aspects of our existence. Among the others are philosophy, which explores self-transcendence in systems of thought and ethics, and the creative arts and industries, which provides avenues for expression of self-transcendence in creative language, music, built environment, painting, dance, and the various virtual realities.

I would argue, therefore, that trying to analyse or explain the changes that are currently taking place in social expressions of compelling dimensions of human self-existence by extending the lens and scope that are appropriate for just one of the social formations by which they find expression, religious formations, is a limited, and in some ways hegemonic, approach.

We may derive more benefit by rejecting the secular-sacred split that has been the constraining perspective in the field of the study of media and religion, and looking again at some of the non-empirical, compelling dimensions of human existence, and looking at in what ways these are finding new forms of address and expression within a new technologically mediated social environment.

References

Bergunder, M. (2014). What is religion? The unexplained subject matter of religious studies. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion, 26*, 246-286.

Brainard, F. S. (1996). Defining "mystical experience". *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, LXIV*(2), 359-393.

Fitzgerald, T. (1997). A critique of 'religion' as a cross-cultural category. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion, 9*(2), 92-93.

Fitzgerald, T. (2000). *The ideology of religious studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Geraci, R. M. (2014). *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hoover, S. (2002). How families use media: Reflections on religion in the media age.

Kirby, D. (2013). *Fantasy and belief: alternative religions, popular narratives and digital cultures*: Acumen Publishing.

Knott, K., Poole, E., & Taira, T. (2013). *Media portrayals of religion and the secular sacred: representation and change*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Lagerkvist, A. (2014). Digital thronness: toward an existential approach to the cultues of connectivity. *Submitted to New Media and Society*.

Lynch, G. (2007a). What is this 'religion' in the study of religion and popular culture. In G. Lynch (Ed.), *Between sacred and profane: researching religion and popular culture* (pp. 125-142). London: I.B.Tauris & Co.

Lynch, G. (2009). Object theory: toward an intersubjective, mediated, and dynamic theory of religion. In D. Morgan (Ed.), *Religion and material culture: the matter of belief*. London: Routledge.

Lynch, G. (Ed.) (2007b). *Between sacred and profane: research religion and popular culture*. London: I.B. Taurus.

McClennon, J. (1994). *Wonbdrous events: foundations of religious belief*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press.

Meyer, B. (2012). Material religion - how things matter. In D. Hourman & B. Meyer (Eds.), *Things. Religion and the question of materiality*. New York: Fordham.

Saler, B. (2000). *Conceptualizing religion: immanent anthropologists, transcendent natives, and unbounded categories*. New York: Berghahn.

Schilbrack, K. (2013). What *isn't* religion? *The Journal of Religion, 93*(3), 291-318.

Shushan, G. (2014). Extraordinary experiences and religious beliefs. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion, 26*, 384-416.

Smith, J. Z. (1998). Religion, religions, religious. In M. C. Taylor (Ed.), *Critical terms for religious studies* (pp. 269-282). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Sumiala, J. (2013). *Media and ritual: death, community and everyday life*. London: Routledge.

Taves, A. (2009). *Religious experience reconsidered*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Woodhead, L. (2011). Five concepts of religion. *International Review of Sociology - Revue Internationale de Sociologie, 21*(1), 121-143.

---

[1] Fitzgerald, for example, notes, *"One finds in the published work of scholars working within religion departments the term 'religion' being used to refer to*

such diverse institutions as totems . . . Christmas cakes, nature, the value of hierarchy, vegetarianism, witchcraft, veneration of the Emperor, the Rights of man, supernatural technology possession, amulets, charms, the tea ceremony, ethics, ritual in general, The Imperial Rescript of Education, the motor show, salvation, Marxism, Maoism, Freudianism, marriage, gift exchange, and so on. There is not much within culture which cannot be included as religion." (Fitzgerald, 1997)

[2] Smith associates the historical origins of the modern concept of religion with 16th century colonization: "It is a category imposed from the outside on some aspect of native culture. It is the other, in these instances colonialists, who are solely responsible for the term. (Smith, 1998)

[3] Though in thinking this through, I found myself in surprising sympathy with those who advocate that the functional approach to the study of religion has become a little anarchic. Shilbrack's argument, for example, has some appeal: that to have any analytic value, the concept of religion should have both a normative and functional component and should be applied therefore only to "those practices, beliefs and institutions that recommend normative paths based on super-empirical realities" and that "address a heterogeneous and open-ended variety of functions" for their adherents." (Schilbrack, 2013)

[4] It's surprised me at times to get reactions from my cultural studies colleagues in faculty seminars or research symposia to any attempt to broaden the concept of religion beyond a substantive one and opposition to applying functionally religious categories to what they see as essentially cultural activities. A number of scholars make similar arguments (See for example, Fitzgerald, 2000; Schilbrack, 2013). At first I thought they were being defensive or reactive, but looking at it again I can see a resistance to the creeping colonising power of the concept of religion as the sole legitimate interpretation of particular human activities, and the political function that serves in legitimizing the hermeneutic power of religion in general that religious institutions draw social legitimacy from.

[5] Compare, Otto's sense of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, Kant's categorical imperative, or the Catholic concept of "natural theology"