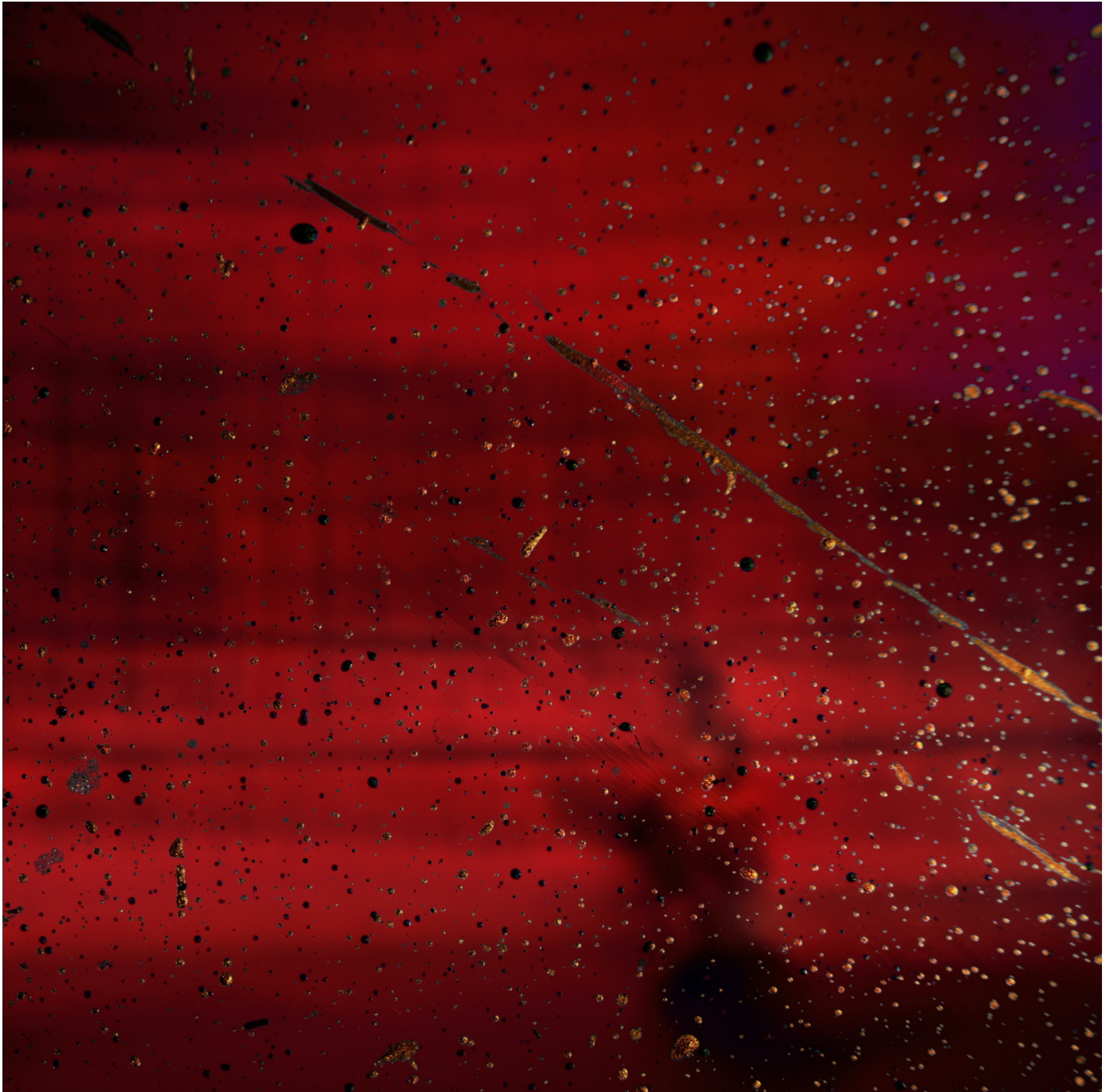




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Reflections on the Field

A Note on Religion as Symbolically Mediated Cosmoaffect

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Abstract

To paraphrase Ecclesiastes (12:12), “of making many definitions of religion there is no end.” Over more than half a century teaching and writing on comparative religion, I have developed many versions. Informed by Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s (1962) *Meaning and End of Religion*, the functional elements of religious traditions were fairly consistent. However, what were these elements intended to communicate or evoke? Here was the definitional rub. This note outlines my various efforts over the years—including “worldview,” “cosmology and axiology,” “cosmovision”—none ultimately satisfactory. My recent discovery of affect theory provides the springboard for a new term “cosmoaffect” to express the meaning I am after.

Keywords: methodology, comparative religion, defining religion, cosmology and axiology, cosmoaffect

I address here the problem of searching for a religiological term, that is, a term appropriate to the attempt to set out an understanding of religion. It is reasonable to hope that a clarification of terms will lead to a useful understanding of what we look at when we study religion.

In most of my lecturing and writing over past decades I have said something like this:

Religion is a human activity in which persons *participate* in an *historical tradition* that induces and expresses the *faith* or *existential selfhood* of the participants in virtue of the tradition’s *symbolic communication* of a

cosmology and axiology, that is, a vision of the world as it truly is and commensurate values.

The concept of participation has been clear enough; it means engagement with the expressive genres of story, myth, ritual, architecture, music, priests and processions and so on.

There has been more difficulty in articulating what this participation does to the devotee. My answer, as noted, has been that such participation induces and expresses their faith. The echoes of Wilfred Cantwell Smith are obvious; in fact, I am chagrined to discover how repetitive of Smith's (1962) dual concepts of cumulative tradition and personal faith this all is. There are, however, obvious difficulties in Smith's brief definition of faith as the ability to see God. But in pressing for an expanded understanding of faith I experienced problems. I tried the familiar term world-and-value view but generally abandoned it because of its suggestion of a propositional philosophy of life.

Typically, I used the term "cosmology and axiology" but with misgivings because of its association, in some quarters, with space exploration and black holes. I also contemplated the use of "social imaginary" but dismissed this because I concluded both terms were potentially misleading; "social" because it might limit its application to one facet of a comprehensive cosmology—the human social; and "imaginary" with its connotation (at least in English) of fiction, which is radically different from the consciousness of the devotee who sings "I know that my Redeemer liveth."

As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz says in "Religion as a Cultural System":

It is this sense of the "really real" upon which the religious perspective rests and which the symbolic activities of religion as a cultural

system are devoted to producing, intensifying and, so far as possible, rendering inviolable by the discordant revelations of secular experience.¹

For a time my provisionally preferred term had become "cosmovision," borrowed from David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovisions and Ceremonial Centers*.² Carrasco's work was seized upon because of its provocative inclusion of what I deemed necessary ingredients of a useful definition of religion. "Cosmo" conveyed the sense of the totality of our experience, of what is real and formative. Understandings that focused only on gods I judged too limited. "Vision" pointed towards religion's intended subjective result: a way of seeing, a vision that transcends ignorance and illusion. However, the metaphor of sight still did not capture the full experiential scope of the meaning I was after.

Throughout my teaching and scholarly writing, my attempt to clarify the meaning of religion was complicated by the insistence that my focus was not on doctrines or rational beliefs about the world, given my premises that rational propositions can only inadequately grasp the real lifeworld, but—as I long told my students—on a *feel* for the world. While "feel" has subjective dimensions it also conveys an application to what is experienced as objectively out there and on which the feelings are fixed. The word "feel" also has problems of ambiguity. It may conjure up for some emotional sources of religion exemplified by Rudolf Otto's sense of the numinous with its feeling states of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, by which is meant a non-rational sense of awe and otherness that attracts and draws us at the same time as it overpowers and abases. While relevant to discussions about religious origins and the nature of the sacred,³ this is not what is meant here.

Recently, I have hit upon yet another proposal that perhaps comes closer to what is generated in the lives of devotees by their religious participation. On reading Hua Hsu's article about Lauren Berlant's affect theory in *The New Yorker* I pondered whether the term "cosmoaffect" would serve my purposes.⁴ Further reading, especially of Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, disclosed a cluster of terms like the following used to convey the thrust of affect theory: non-verbal, pre-linguistic, linguistic fallacy, feelings rather than a set of ideas, the body.⁵ But is this not what perceptive religionists have always known? Ritual, for example, typically entails first, the expressive use of the body and second, the cultivation of sentiments of sacrality.

I did not derive my present proposal directly from my brush with affect theory. Rather, I was encouraged to use a term whose sense had long been implicit in my working assumptions in the study of religions. What affect theory also provided was assurance that this was the right track to pursue.

I locate a decisive contribution to this affect line of thought to what I first read in Alfred North Whitehead some seventy years ago. I resonated with his warning about the fallacy of misplaced concreteness: abstractions like ideas must not be mistaken for the concrete world.⁶ Additionally, his perception that the principle of causality is neither a formal a priori of reason nor an empirical inference, but rather is the feeling of how one bodily state follows another, reinforced my qualification of logical system and moved me towards the primacy of emotional expression.

Whereas *Cruel Optimism* inclines towards culturally circumscribed probes (like politics, relationships, sex, property, employment), religious affects are cosmological, that is they purport to be authentic responses to the way the world—reality as such—truly is. Beyond this, the

religious person's faith—the internalization of that amalgam of feelings towards the world and from the world—necessitates an axiology or way of life. A single but critical word conveys this connection: "Therefore." Because you experience things in a particular way, you ought, therefore, to behave in a commensurate way.

I believe cosmoaffect is the way I would now want to define what participation in an historical religious tradition does to the participants' consciousness. Admittedly, cosmoaffect is an awkward neologism and its four syllables lose crispness (worldview, for example, has only two syllables in English but suffers from the intellectualist patina it seems to have acquired). The term cosmoaffect covers two important bases: first, it applies to the whole of reality (cosmos) and second, it points to the feeling quality of the existential response entailed (affect).

This does not mean that rational or doctrinal assertions may not be present as part of the devotees' historical tradition, or that they may not be ferreted out by analytic construction. But they are subsidiary to the core of religiousness, which is the affective response to engagement with human existence, historical time, the natural environment, and ultimacy. These feelings towards the elements of our encountered world determine how we look upon them and behave within them.

So now, instead of trying to understand the existential selfhood of an interlocutor by asking "what is your cosmology and axiology?" I may, with more accuracy, ask "what is your cosmoaffect and axiology?" (Admittedly, not an easy way to initiate pub chatter!)

Note that this way of inquiry, by focusing on the faith (cosmoaffect) of participants, puts the emphasis on the subjective side of the "real world/personal faith" relationship. It does, nevertheless, imply a reference to

what is outside the consciousness of the religious devotees who look upon their cosmoaffect as appropriate to the world as it really is and in which they are summoned to live.

My confidence to pursue this direction was reinforced by a re-reading of John Wisdom's article "Gods." Each of the two disputants in John Wisdom's famous parable of the garden in "Gods" had a different *feel* for the garden; one experiencing it as the object of a providential gardener's care, the other as a neglected, unkempt garden.

Their subjective feel was not a result of different access to facts about the garden; they experienced the same empirical facts such as watering and weeding. This could imply that there is no necessary connection between objective facts about the world and subjective feelings towards it. But this would differ from the analysis that I proffer here. In Wisdom's analysis, there is no experimental or empirical basis to validate one feeling over the other; both disputants see the same garden. My argument, nevertheless, posits an existential, experiential connection between feeling and fact. The fact in question, however, is not an empirical justification of particular feelings; rather it is the underlying reality itself.

The advocate of the existence of a tender gardener persists in noticing the garden's revelatory power because he feels that conviction to be appropriate to his feeling of the active presence of an invisible gardener. In other words, the world does really possess those qualities that warrant a particular feeling response. This relation of affect can be represented by a cluster of words like outlook, perception, discernment, arousal, stance, evaluation, engagement.

To back up to where I came in. That we have to navigate within and around a real world outside us is, for most, an incontestable fact. What is debatable and vexing is that the nature of this objective world is not self-evident. What is the best pathway, the least dangerous route, the most enjoyable, and least harmful way to manoeuvre within this world? For that, it helps a great deal to have an understanding of this world into which we are thrown. That is what religions aspire to do; to provide acceptable answers to the existential queries about nature, history, humans, and gods.

In seeking to understand religious persons I ask, first of all, how do the narration of their traditional sacred stories and the practice of their rituals generate their feeling for the historical process? This would convey their likely orientation toward issues of ethnicity, nationalism, identity, and historical teleology. Second, what do they feel about humans? This would cover, for example, bioethical issues like death, advance directives, and questions of sexuality and good and evil. Third, what are their feelings toward the natural environment? This might indicate where they might go on issues of clear cutting, pipelines, open pit mines, and contamination of water courses. Fourth, what is their feeling about ultimacy? Are there powers and beings or perceptions that transcend the everyday and ordinary? Disclose your cosmoaffect and I will understand so much about you that the rest is commentary. Our methodological task as scholars of religion seeking to understand the faith of others is facilitated by using a comprehensive, serviceable focusing concept of religion.

