

Varieties of Non-ordinary Experiences in Brazil —a Critical Review of the Contribution of Studies of ‘Religious Experience’ to the Study of Religion

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Abstract According to the latest national census, 64.6% of Brazilians identified themselves as Roman Catholic. However, the census has little or nothing to do with actual practice or belief. Professing to be a Christian (within any confessional specification) is still part of being Brazilian. But the self-identification does not take into account that religiosity is expressed in very diverse ways nor does it prevent people from believing and practising one of the many Brazilian traditions though identifying themselves as Christian in the census. This perception represents the framework of the following discussion of non-ordinary experiences in Brazil, whether they are perceived as religious, spiritual or ‘just’ extraordinary. This article presents an overview of studies about non-ordinary experiences in Brazil. The aim is to show the importance of these experiences for the understanding of the religious landscape of Brazil.

Keywords Brazil · Religion · Religious experience · Spirituality · Anthropology · Candomblé · Spirit possession · Umbanda · Pentecostalism · Spiritism

The field of religious experience is an ambivalent area within the academic study of religion. To a certain degree, it has something to do with the origin of the interest in religious experience within theology (e.g. Schleiermacher 1999 [1799]) and the aim of the academic study of religion to distance itself from its theological roots. The other problem is the unclear definition of religious experience and its often limited application from a Western perspective. Religious experience happens inside people, and it is therefore impossible to empirically proven its existence. Theologians such as Rudolf Otto who was influenced by Friedrich Schleiermacher cherished its numinous character

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and argued even that it would be impossible to study it without having had such an experience oneself (Otto 1936 [1917]). From an academic and secular perspective, this theological approach is highly contested. To valorise ‘experience’ above ‘scientific verification’, the ‘subjective’ over the ‘objective’ (Sharf 1998) is problematic for academics (McCutcheon 2012) despite the post-colonial turn to embrace the position of the other. Consequently, scholars within the academic study of religions shy away from the study of experiences that take place inside the mind of believers and leave it to anthropologists who welcome the ‘exotic’ nature of these experiences and to psychologists who focus on the mind. It is therefore no wonder that the key text in this area is William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* (2008 [1902]), published more than 100 years ago and based on his Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh in 1901/1902. As a psychologist, James valued personal experiences more than any other religious dimension. His focus was on emotion, and he even argued that the type of person that someone is determines the form of religious experience that this person would experience. While he used the term ‘religious’ and often cited the experiences of key religious figures such as the Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad, James tried to clear ‘religious experience’ from any reference to the supernatural. He also argued that someone’s beliefs and knowledge, or, in other words, the cultural and personal contexts, influence the experience and the way that someone relates to it. For instance, whether someone interprets an experience as demonic or divine depends according to James on the context that someone lives in. He even insisted that it depends on pre-existing belief systems whether elements are perceived as important enough to be narrated or as unimportant and soon forgotten.

Despite James’s early attempt to include a range of experiences under the heading of religious experience and his broad definition of religion, the study of religious experience still struggles with its Western bias. From its beginning, the definition of religious experience was intertwined with Schleiermacher’s understanding of religion and therefore closely associated with a Western ideological framework. As a result, people associate religious experience with Christianity, for instance, visions of the Virgin Mary or hearing the voice of God, and disregard any other experiences such as visions of a deceased relative or near-death experiences. While the academic study of religions has moved away from its original eurocentric focus on Christianity and other so-called world religions and embraces the study of indigenous religions, new religious movements and other forms, the term religious experience still struggles with its Western-centric definition. Though scholars tend to categorise all non-ordinary experiences as religious, people experiencing it have a more cautious understanding of what they experience. A consequence is the rejection to identify their experience as religious. Accepting the limitation of the term Ann Taves proposes the phrase ‘experiences people consider special’ instead of the term religious experience (2009:12). Other scholars use terms such as spiritual (e.g. Rankin 2008), non-ordinary (e.g. Glass-Coffin 2013), extra-ordinary (e.g. Young and Goulet 1994) or paranormal in order to include all types of experiences, including the ones people experiencing them describe as non-religious. The struggle finding an all inclusive term sometimes overshadows the fundamental problem with its definition and the lack of an acceptable methodology. Some argue that we need to overcome cultural bias by turning our attention towards the collective or ‘lived’ experience of a religious community. But how far can we go and remain true to our academic integrity? Sharf illustrates the problem by looking at reports of alien abduction. While scholars agree that there are no alien abductions, we

do have a vast amount of accounts of them. Sharf argues therefore that if we read these reports as religious narratives, they are not different from reports of experiences by mystics or shamans (Sharf 1998: 110). In the end, it depends on the understanding of people having the experience.

Following this critique, I decided to use the term non-ordinary experience instead of religious experience in order to embrace all kinds of experience, whether they are perceived as religious, spiritual or 'just' extraordinary though my solution ignores the emic perspective that the experiences can become quite ordinary for some people who experiencing them. The aim of this article is to demonstrate the significance of studying these experiences for the academic study of religion. I argue that the study of non-ordinary experience can be used to challenge the Western bias that still lingers at the core of the study of religion. Most of the experiences described here as non-ordinary are located at the periphery of the religious practice. Consequently, they are often excluded from the study of specific traditions. Studies of Christianity, for instance, will usually not mention speaking in tongues or exorcism—unless the focus of the study is directly on a group that cannot be understood without this experience. But this distinction between peripheral and centre, vernacular and mainstream overlooks the reality of religious practices. Shifting the focus of the study of religions to practice (Vásquez 2011) allows us to embrace all kinds of activities, whether they are located at the centre of the tradition or at the fringe. It also highlights the importance of the local context and the multi-faceted interpretation of them within the local framework. I argue that we need to approach non-ordinary experiences as a deictic term (Lambek 2008, Schmidt 2016c) and accept that the specific meaning depends on the given context. The academic study of religion needs to embed as its core activity the study of local features of religious practices including non-ordinary experiences. For that reason, I emphasise in this article the centrality of these experiences for the understanding of the religious landscape of Brazil.

Brazil is a predominately Christian country though the number of self-identifying Christians is dropping. In the last national census of 2010 (IBGE 2010), 64.6% of the population identified themselves as Roman Catholic and 22.2% as Protestants (*evangélicos*). These two figures point to a significant change in the religious landscape of a country where Roman Catholicism was the official religion until 1891. Nonetheless, despite the drop in people identifying themselves as Roman Catholic and the rise of people identifying themselves with one of the many Protestant churches, Christianity and the veneration of the Virgin Mary and the saints are still one of the core aspects of Brazilian culture, even for people describing themselves as atheist or agnostic (see Engler and Schmidt 2016). Hence, the self-identification in the census does not take into account that religiosity can be expressed in very diverse ways. It also does not prevent people from participating in rituals of other religions, sometimes even up to becoming fully initiated members. Brazil has a range of traditions that resonant for the believers with Christianity but have emerged from the encounters between Iberian Catholic, Indigenous and African cultures and developed into distinct traditions. While according to the census, only around 3% of Brazilians self-identify with Spiritism, Umbanda or one of the Afro-Brazilian traditions, Andrew Chesnut estimates that 15–20% of Brazilians practise more or less regularly Umbanda or one of the Afro-Brazilian traditions (Chesnut 2003: 106–107). In order to understand the religious landscape of Brazil, one has to study therefore these practices.

Brazilian religions have some distinct features that offer interesting insights into the field of religion. One is the focus on healing that characterises Spiritism, Umbanda, Afro-Brazilian religions as well as several Christian denominations (see Greenfield 2008). The offer of help with illnesses and other worldly problems constitutes one of the main attractions and puts them even in competition to each other (Greenfield and Calvacante 2006:84). The result is a high degree of religious mobility as people move around in search for help. Another widespread feature of the religious landscape that is closely connected to the offer of help is the emphasis of many traditions on non-ordinary experiences and in particular mediumship. Means to help these ‘clients’ is the communication with the spirits via mediums. Hence, the solution for a problem is linked to the belief in spirits and deities and their impact on humans. In order to find the cause as well as the solution of the problem, people approach mediums to facilitate the communication. Sometimes, the solution can even be to become a medium oneself, hence the experience itself.

The Contribution of Anthropology to the Study of Non-ordinary Experiences

Anthropologists have studied non-ordinary experiences from its beginning. One of the founding father of anthropology, Edward B. Tylor, studied, for instance, spiritualism and even defined religion as the belief in spirits. However, one of his contemporaries, Andrew Lang (1899), noticed that Tylor’s scepticism affected his objectivity towards this kind of non-ordinary experience. His personal disregard of a well-known spiritualist medium of his time, Daniel Dunglas Home, influenced the way how Tylor examined the séance with this medium as an excerpt from his *Notes on Spiritualism* (1872) shows. ‘My distrust was excited by Home’s cleverness, and the way in which he could get a pretty woman like Mrs. Walter Crookes to dance with joy at sitting down to his performance, paw about him, call him Dan, etc., which all his intimates have to do’ (Tylor 1872, cited in Morton 2016¹). Lang’s critique of Tylor’s lack of professionalism with regard to spiritualism, however, had no impact on the high standing of Tylor within anthropology. Lang, on the other side, who argued for the inclusion of own experiences in anthropology became obscure which Bowie links to his openness towards spiritualism (Bowie 2016: 23). Tylor’s scepticism towards the acceptance of non-ordinary experience became a common thread within anthropology and shaped the anthropological approach towards non-ordinary experiences, despite the fascination of anthropologists towards exotic rituals. Bonnie Glass-Coffin (2013) even argues that the tendency of anthropologists to contextualise local accounts of non-ordinary reality serve ‘domesticating and dismissing them, colonializing knowledge even as they claim to honour the truth of the Other’ (2013: 117). Similar to the academic study of religion, anthropologists struggled with the nature of non-ordinary experiences as being unavailable for empirical verification. A common solution that is still dominant in anthropology is to present the accounts as narratives from the believer’s point of view but to remain on the outside. Hence, the cultural relativistic framework of cultural

¹ Part of the exhibition *Anthropology, Spiritualism, and Photography* in the Pitt-Rivers Museum Oxford (18 November 2016), see Morton (2016).

anthropology allows anthropologists to describe these cultures and their non-ordinary experiences from the emic perspective without sharing the experience. However, the study of initiatory religions such as most of the Afro-Brazilian traditions restricts access to knowledge to the grade of initiation. As Edward Evans-Pritchard found out during his fieldwork on Zande witchcraft (1976 [1937]), some information cannot be shared with people who are not initiated. While Evans-Pritchard paid an assistant to undergo the initiation to become a healer, some current anthropologists follow a different approach.

In the last decades, a new ‘experiential’ strand of anthropology gained momentum due to the influence of Edith Turner (1992, 1993) who has pioneered the development of anthropology of experience based on the work of her late husband, Victor Turner. Fiona Bowie describes it as ‘alternative anthropological tradition’, which is based on an ‘experiential lineage’ (Bowie 2016: 21). Feature of this branch is the inclusion of one’s own experience with the non-ordinary reality which brings scholars, as David Young and Jean-Guy Goulet argue, outside the comfort zone of academia and pushes us into unfamiliar territories. They write that ‘Extraordinary experiences tend to challenge one’s conceptions of reality in the sense that normal ways of classifying perceptual data are no longer adequate and the boundary between the real and the imaginary is blurred’ (Young and Goulet 1994: 7–8). Turner pushed anthropologists to take these experiences serious and to include them as ethnographic data. However, as Young and Goulet write, some anthropologists distinguish between taking them serious and literate, in particular with regard to the interpretation of one’s own experiences. While Turner demanded to accept the accounts, others did not go so far. ‘In other words, they believe that native accounts of what the anthropologist regards as an extraordinary experience should be taken seriously but do not have to be taken literally’ (Young and Goulet 1994: 10).

The inclusion of one’s own experience is increasingly a common feature of studies of initiatory religions. However, this step to become initiated in order to gain knowledge that is restricted to the grade of initiation is still controversially on both sides, among the academic peers and the religious communities. Knowledge gained through initiation is considered sacred and limited to people that have passed the initiation. The publication of knowledge gained because of an initiation is perceived by practitioners as treason and highly unethical. And also, the academia responds to the border crossing still negatively.² Consequently, many anthropologists do not reveal that they have become initiated in order to prevent to be excluded from academia because of presumed failed objectivity (Young and Goulet 1994: 8). Young and Goulet’s solution is to point towards the possibility of a ‘multi-faceted view of reality’. They write in the introduction of *Being Changed by Cross-cultural Encounters: An Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience*: ‘Extraordinary experiences force one to deal with the possibility that reality is culturally constructed and that instead of one reality (or a finite set of culturally-defined realities), there are multiple realities—or at least multiple ways of experiencing the world, depending upon time, place, and circumstances’ (1994: 8). As illustration, they point to the film *Rashomon* (1950, Akira Kurosawa) which shows one event (a killing) from the perspective of various participants without offering viewers

² See Capone (2010).

one single solution at the end of the movie but a multi-faceted view of reality (1994: 11–12).

There are some interesting parallels to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and his theory of perspectivism (1998, 1992). Viveiros de Castro argues for the inclusion of different perspectives; hence, in addition to the perspective of human beings, we should also consider the perspectives of animals, spirits and other entities. Like *Rashomon* that ends without a solution Viveiros de Castro avoids any claim of ‘truth’ and leaves the question which (if any) perspective is ‘true’ open. Recently, some anthropologists such as Charles Emmons (2014) go a step further and argue that spirits are also ontological ‘real’ and the experience with them consequently empirical verifiable (Bowie 2016: 28–29). And here is according to Young and Goulet the main objective of the anthropological approach: the development of a model of reality based on cultural diverse and sometimes opposite worldviews (1994: 12). Young and Goulet argue that we should read the accounts of non-ordinary experiences as potential contributions to an understanding of reality instead of only as texts.

However, despite some influence in particular among students of anthropology, this experiential line of anthropology is still at the periphery of the discipline. The shift towards the cognitive study of religion within anthropology (e.g. Whitehouse 2005) has emphasised again the scepticism against all kinds of non-ordinary experience and to a certain degree also furthered the dichotomy of the Western ‘rational’ thinking on one side and the ‘irrational’ experiential one on the other side. A closer look at studies of non-ordinary experience in Brazil highlights the need to overcome the notion of a ‘correct belief’ or a ‘correct scientific explanation’ as it shows the importance of a multi-faceted and polyphonic approach to non-ordinary experiences.

Studies of Non-ordinary Experiences in Brazil³

The religious landscape of Brazil is complex and fluid and escapes ‘neat standard categories’ (Engler and Schmidt 2016: 7). A common feature of many Brazilian traditions is an emphasis on non-ordinary experience, usually associated with healing and the solution of other worldly problems. Studies of non-ordinary experience in Brazil focus often on spirit possession rituals and in particular among Afro-Brazilian religions though non-ordinary experiences are also a feature of other religions. Folk Catholicism with its veneration of the Virgin Mary and the saints, for instance, also includes a range of non-ordinary experiences often linked to healing (e.g. King 2014). Nonetheless, most studies focus on spirit possession and trance, which is the core practice of Afro-Brazilian traditions, and have been described—very colourfully—since colonial times when visitors became fascinated by these rituals. Hence, from the beginning, the study of non-ordinary experiences in Brazil expressed a Western bias against these experiences that was very common in that time.

A pioneer in the study of spirit possession in Brazil was Raymundo Nina Rodrigues, the founder of academic studies of Afro-Brazilian culture. His disciple Arthur Ramos looked at spirit possession rituals from a psychological perspective. Under the influence of scholars of African cultures (like the US anthropologist Melville Herskovits and the

³ This section is a revised version of Schmidt (2016b).

Senegalese writer and politician Cheikh Anta Diop) who overcame nineteenth-century evolutionism, Ramos looked for the historical roots of African culture in Brazil which he considered a part of the vaster African heritage community. He contradicted the dominate opinion of his times that possession in Candomblé was just madness and tried to find other psychological explanations. Ramos represented an important voice against the Western centric understanding of religion and prepared the path for the next generation of scholars in Brazil that emphasised the healing feature of rituals with non-ordinary experiences.

Another still common approach in studies about spirit possession focuses on the aesthetic side of the performance. An early scholar in the field was Edison Carneiro who became fascinated by the performance of Candomblé possession rituals. Carneiro started a Brazilian tradition of personal alliances between researchers and Candomblé priests and priestesses that changed the study of non-ordinary experiences in Brazil. Carneiro offered public platforms to representatives of Candomblé houses at the first Afro-Brazilian Congresses in 1934 and 1937, which he organised together with the anthropologist Gilberto Freyre (Sansi 2007: 53). His initiatives opened the field for an increasing number of devotees that pursue training and even higher education degrees at universities in order to study their own tradition. The result is a highly sophisticated debate among practitioners about their tradition in Brazil today with an increasing number of publications, conference papers, lectures and even PhD theses by practitioners presenting and analysing their own religion. However, the aesthetisation of possession rituals that started with Carneiro and led Leiris (1989) to describe possession as ‘lived theatre’ allows scholars to ignore questions about authenticity and reality. Possession remains in the realm of aesthetic value (Sansi 2007: 54). On the other hand, however, it acknowledges the creativity within Candomblé as it ‘gives leeway to the individual follower to integrate personal religious experience.... Personal vocation and the capacity of a medium to physically relate with an *Orixá* during possession is a means of innovation and inspiration’ (Suhrbier 2012: 469). This strand of studies of non-ordinary experience that focuses on the aesthetic side of the rituals as well as the physicality of the experience (Motta 2005) offers also an opening to anthropologists attracted to the Afro-Brazilian religions and who follow into the experiential line of anthropology introduced earlier.

Another ongoing path within studies of spirit possession focuses on gender. An early scholar in this field was Ruth Landes, a US anthropologist for whom Carneiro facilitated access to Candomblé in Bahia. Landes’s study, *City of Women* (1947), is one of the most well-known studies, though not the first of its kind. Though Herskovits disagreed with Landes’s interpretation of the predominance of women in Candomblé, her publication inspired anthropologists to continue her work (e.g. Pressel 1973). Landes argued that Candomblé possession rituals gave women and homosexual men, both socially marginalised groups in the Brazilian society, a position of power and enabled them to express and develop their creativity. Her findings are echoed in spirit possession studies all over the world (Bourguignon 1976) which ascribe spirit possession ‘to women, the poor, and the religious other (the “primitive”, the “tribal”, the third-world woman, the black, the immigrant)’ (Keller 2002: 4). Though research has shown that possession rituals are not always limited to marginalised and powerless members of the society (e.g. Donovan 2000), the overwhelming presence of female mediums in Afro-Brazilian religions has been described and studied by numerous

scholars. Lerch (1982: 237–238), for instance, explains that the role of a medium in Umbanda offers women ‘access to “power” and thus offsets the relative powerlessness typical of comparable socio-economic roles available to them in the modern society’. However, recent studies (e.g. Hayes 2010, 2011) show that although women tend to outnumber men as mediums in Umbanda, the ability to become mediums is not restricted by gender or sexuality. Nonetheless, the predominance of female and homosexual mediums is still regarded as an important feature of Candomblé. It is argued (e.g. Wafer 1991) that Candomblé but also other Afro-Brazilian religions offer via the possession rituals a place where being different is accepted and allowed. However, while people are drawn towards possession cults that are perceived as peripheral as a reaction to political powerlessness and socio-economic marginality, Donovan (2000) highlights that one can find among the practitioners many who are not socially or politically marginalised.

Despite the focus on Afro-Brazilian religions, there are also some studies about women and possession in Pentecostalism. Possession is regarded as embedded in exorcism (Birman 1996), a core practice in several Neo-Pentecostal churches (Silva 1998).⁴ The focus here is on women as they are regarded as the main (sometimes the exclusive) target for exorcism rituals in Neo-Pentecostal churches. In a study about the women’s role in the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (short IURD, for *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*), Pimentel (2005) argues that the IURD theology explains why women are the preferred bodies to experience demonic possession. While it is regarded as the responsibility of men and women to liberate the world from the evil spirits that are seen as responsible for all misery and evil (Oliva 1995), it is women’s role as mothers and housewives to keep evil away from the family. It is therefore the duty of women to fight demons that afflict members of their families. Pimentel even argues that the being the instrument of demonic possession and exorcism gives women new significance: ‘In other words, the demon takes from the devotees the blame for their actions, but not the responsibility of an individual to confront and liberate. The responsibility is placed on the shoulders of women’ (Pimentel 2005: 123). Spirit possession becomes therefore seen as evil as the term is limited to possession by demons. Nonetheless, as Pimentel’s study shows, despite being the instrument of liberation and consequently healing, women do not receive a permanently elevated social position. While the manifestation of the demon in the body of a woman enables the identification and consequently the liberation of the possessed person, the success is firmly linked to God’s word and—as a result—to the power of the (male) pastor (see also Oliveira 1998).

Another strand in studies of Brazilian possession rituals interprets possession within a psychological framework. Zacharias (1998) presents, for instance, a Jungian application of the archetypes on the *orixás*. However, Ribeiro (1982) challenges the interpretation of spirit possession as a merely psychological phenomenon though he also defines possession as a ‘dissociative personality phenomenon’. Nonetheless, he argues that we need to distinguish it from other levels of dissociation including trance.

⁴ Speaking in tongues and other rituals connected with the Holy Spirit are usually not described as possession by devotees as well as Pentecostal study scholars though other scholars include these practices (e.g. Alexander 1989; Donovan 2000).

In a different direction, Engler (2009) focuses on agency. While the common understanding is that people experiencing spirit possession are not fully the agents of their actions, hence not fully responsible for their actions because of the altered states of consciousness, Engler shows that there is indeed a distinction in the way how practitioners react to and assess the intentionality of mediums and possessing agents. Comparing Umbanda and Kardecism with regard to the attitude of the practitioners towards agency during the possession rituals, Engler draws a fine line in distinguishing Spiritism and Afro-Brazilian religions, traditions that are too often confused and mixed in one bunch due to their many variations and mergers. Engler, however, points to ritual differences between Umbanda and Kardecism with regard to the attitude of the mediums towards agency and—firmly linked to it—consciousness (2009: 486). Goldman (1985) makes also a contribution to the understanding of what goes on during possession rituals though from a Candomblé perspective, representing even a kind of Candomblé theology. Goldman argues a person ‘is presumed to be multiple and layered, composed of agencies of natural and immaterial elements’, and among these immaterial elements are the African deities, the orixás, ancestral spirits and the human soul (2007: 111). Prior to the initiation into Candomblé, a human being is therefore incomplete. Only the initiation finishes the creation process and transforms an unfinished, undifferentiated human being into a structured person.

The link between non-ordinary experiences and healing has also attracted the attention of psychiatrists who begin to realise that therapeutic trajectories may often trigger spiritual experiences or vice versa. As the psychiatrists Moreira de Almeida, Lotufo-Neto and Koenig state, ‘the clinician who truly wishes to consider the bio-psycho-social aspects of a patient needs to assess, understand, and respect his/her religious beliefs, like any other psychosocial dimension’ beyond the prejudice which characterised studies in this field (2006: 248). Consequently, Moreira-Almeida and other Brazilian psychiatrists as well as psychologists study increasingly non-ordinary experiences in order to understand the relationship between religion and the diagnosis, aetiology and treatment of psychiatric disorders (Moreira-Almeida et al. 2015:1). An example of this approach is the recent study by Julio Fernando Peres and others (2012) in which they measured the brain activity of ten Brazilian mediums during psychography (automatic writing, ‘while in a dissociative trance state’ according to Peres et al. 2012: 2). Based on so-called neuroimaging, they state that areas of the brain that are usually associated with writing are ‘under-activated’ during the time that the mediums were in a dissociative state, when compared with brains of people not in a trance state. The authors do not offer an explanation for their findings but insist that studies based on neuroimaging techniques, which they regard as hard facts, are replicable (Peres et al. 2012). The aim of this and other studies in the growing field of neuroscience is to investigate possession scientifically (in the sense of ‘objectively’) despite its being subjectively experienced (Bowie 2012, 2013). The problem with this strand of studies is the purely medicalised understanding of the experience that overlooks the multi-faceted perspective and the polyphonic interpretation of the experience by the practitioners (Huskinson and Schmidt 2010). One can see in these studies a similar attitude to Tylor’s scepticism presented earlier, just in a different context.

A similar approach is also visible in the new field of cognitive science of religion that presents another scientific framework for the study of non-ordinary experiences. Emma Cohen (2007) and Harvey Whitehouse (2005) argue that it is possible to

discover which aspects of spirit possession are biological and which are cultural. They regard spirit possession as a universal trait, and they hold that, by studying it within the framework of cognitive science, it is possible to demonstrate that ‘human minds develop in fundamentally similar ways the world over, even though cultural settings differ widely’ (Whitehouse 2005: 19). Following Whitehouse’s cognitive approach, Cohen (2007) argues that, despite of numerous cultural interpretations of spirit possession, it is possible to explain what (and why) happens in a possession ritual in terms of generalisable psychological factors. The multi-faced understanding of non-ordinary experiences becomes neglected in favour of universal mechanisms of cognition that ‘generate predispositions and tendencies towards certain patterns of thinking and behaviour’ (Cohen 2007: 181). My research in the mega-metropolis São Paulo (Schmidt 2016a) has shown more diversified social and gender stratification of communities practising spirit possession, which contradicts Cohen’s observation of ‘lower-class, marginalised/unemployable/oppressed sectors of society’ (Cohen 2007: 194–195). I argue therefore against an exclusive emphasis on psychological features when explaining spirit possession. While the cognitive science approach can be useful for explaining certain aspects of religious phenomena, it is important to include into the interpretation other aspects that can also influence religious practices.

Conclusion

This article presents an argument for the inclusion of the study of non-ordinary experiences within the academic study of religions. While most of these experiences are located at the periphery of the religious practice, they represent nonetheless an important feature of the Brazilian religious landscape. As Sutcliffe and Gilhus argue ‘religion does not exist in a pure form in cultural processes’ and each separation is artificial and unstable (Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2013: 12). By shifting our attention to the study of non-ordinary experiences, we can develop an understanding of religion how it is lived. Non-ordinary experiences do not fit in neat categories—but neither does religion. The experience is interpreted by people experiencing it according to the cultural and historical context, the understanding of the community, the gender of the experiencer and other factors. Analytical theories about non-ordinary experiences struggle often because they originate before the background of the Western idea of religion (see also Johnson 2011). The only way to move forward is to embrace locally specific features of the experience as well as the polyphonic understanding of it.

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