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Published in:

Beatriz Caiuby Labate & Henrik Jungaberle (eds.), *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca*,
Lit Verlag: Zürich / Berlin 2011.

Ayahuasca Groups and Networks in the Netherlands: A Challenge to the Study of Contemporary Religion

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The recent spread and development of “ayahuasca religion” in Europe and the United States has received surprisingly little attention from professional scholars of New Religious Movements or historians of religion generally.¹ Insofar as it has been discussed at all, the focus has been almost entirely on the legal rather than the religious aspects: any interest in the ritual use of ayahuasca *as religion* seems to be almost wholly absent from scholarly discussion so far. In this regard, research in English and other European languages about the European and North-American scene lags considerably behind, compared to the relative wealth of studies (particularly from an anthropological perspective) that are already available in Portuguese and Spanish about South American ayahuasca religion.² Given this situation, the present article should be seen as an attempt at stimulating academic debate in this area, by identifying some key theoretical, historiographical, and methodological challenges which “ayahuasca religion” poses for the study of religion in Europe and the United States.

Although the challenge posed by ayahuasca groups and networks is obviously not limited to the Netherlands, it can certainly be studied in that country under more favourable circumstances than in most other parts of Europe. As is well known (and discussed at length by van der Plas in this volume), the Santo Daime church in the Netherlands sought and gained the legal right to use ayahuasca as their central sacrament in 2001; but in addition, there now also exists a plethora of loose and constantly changing *networks* centered around the ritual use of ayahuasca. Similar networks exist in various other European countries as well, and if this article focuses on the Dutch scene, that is because the Netherlands may serve as a *pars pro toto* reflecting a much wider, more complex, and more varied European phenomenon. This domain is virtually uncharted territory in the study of religion, and should become a focus of more serious research.

After a brief introduction to the ayahuasca scene in the Netherlands, the article addresses three ways in which the phenomenon of ayahuasca religion poses a challenge to the study of religion generally. From a *theoretical* perspective, it forces us to revisit and reconsider certain ingrained assumptions about the definition of religion; from a *historical* perspective, it alerts us to a research hiatus concerning what is sometimes called “entheogenic” religion in Western culture; and from a *methodological* perspective it adds a new dimension – or so I will argue – to long-standing debates concerning the question of how (if at all) the experiential dimension of religion can be a legitimate object of scholarly research.

A Glimpse of the Dutch Ayahuasca Scene

As far as the author's information goes, ayahuasca religion in the Netherlands seems to be concentrated mostly in the large urban complex in the western part of the country, known as the *Randstad*, although the rituals themselves may sometimes be held in more rural areas. No quantitative data exist about how many people in the Netherlands have been or are regularly drinking ayahuasca, or how many groups and networks are currently active; and in fact, due to the absence of stable organizational structures and the constantly fluctuating nature of ayahuasca networks, collecting any reliable information in that regard seems close to impossible. The base of empirical information for this article therefore consists simply of those groups and networks with which the author happens to be familiar. They will be briefly introduced here, to provide some flavour of the variety that exists in this domain.

To begin with, there is of course the *Santo Daime church*, of which the Amsterdam branch has services every week in Amsterdam and in a small town north of the capital. The Santo Daime is the only group with a churchlike organizational structure: all the others should better be described as loose networks around specific persons ("shamans" and/or organizers of rituals³). For convenient reference each of these networks will be given a name, which is wholly fictional and of the author's own invention.

First, then, there is the *People network*, around a Dutch woman who has gone through an extensive initiatory apprenticeship with shamans of the Ecuadorian Shuar traditions (hence my name for this network: Shuar means "people"). While she has sometimes led rituals herself, she now mostly concentrates on inviting shamans (Shuar or other) to the Netherlands and organizing ceremonies led by them, sometimes in a Native American tipi, sometimes in a rented space. The ceremonies tend to be modeled after Shuar ritual, but various details from other traditions or from personal invention may be added, depending on who is in charge. As in all other such networks, new participants are introduced to a ceremony by somebody already on the email list; if the experience is positive, one may decide to join that list and proceed to introduce others, and so on. All the networks with which the author is familiar have some kind of "screening" procedure, to make sure that new participants are not taking antidepressants or other drugs known to be incompatible with ayahuasca; and newcomers are typically required to sign a document by which they declare that they are not using drugs, assert that they participate in the ritual of their own free choice, and exempt the organizers from legal responsibility.⁴

Second, there is the *Eagles network*, around a male Dutch shaman and ritual organizer well-known as an expert on psychoactive substances, and whose approach to ayahuasca is inspired by his intensive contacts with various South American traditions (Peruvian, Ecuadorian, Colombian, and other). He and an assistant, who has a similar degree of experience with Latin-American traditions, lead groups through the ritual by means of singing, drumming, and music, and may perform individual healings. As much as possible, the rituals are conducted in a tipi or yurt in a rural area, but as an organizer on behalf of traveling Latin American shamans, the group leader is also known to have organized rituals in a big church in Amsterdam, with numbers as large as over one hundred people.

The *Aquarius network* is very different, and much more small-scale. It is centered around a male Dutch shaman who organizes small rituals of up to twelve people, who usually meet in the living room of a participant. The rituals in this case are much more eclectic and experimental: for example, Santo Daime hymns may be combined with Hebrew prayers (the group leader is of Jewish descent), drumming, dancing, vocal improvisations, and so on. Rituals end with a communal sharing of food and personal experiences. In that regard it might be added here that according to a kind of “unwritten code,” it is well understood among ayahuasca drinkers that “what happens in the ritual should stay in the ritual”; or in other words, it is “not done” to gossip about the experiences or behaviour of individuals with which one has shared a ritual.

The *Pleiades network* is centered around a couple running a small, non-for-profit spiritual center in Amsterdam. This is without doubt the most overtly “New Age”-like network: the leaders and part of the participants have a strong belief in such things as angelic guides, ascended masters, cosmic cycles leading up to a transformational event in 2012,⁵ and so on. The male part of the couple is a gifted singer and instrumentalist, who opens the ritual with prayers and sacred tobacco, leads participants through it by means of live as well as recorded music, and also performs individual healings. His wife, a channeling medium, sometimes offers assistance during the rituals, and is the major source for this network’s background system of spiritual beliefs.

The *Bhajan network*, finally, is quite different, in that it is centered around a group with rather strong backgrounds in the Osho community and Indian spirituality generally, but does not really have a shaman in the usual sense. The group leader is merely a facilitator: he leads participants into the ritual by means of breathing exercises and chanting, but if there is any guidance during the rest of the evening at all, it is provided by a talented male singer/guitar player (sometimes assisted by a few other singers/musicians) who sings Indian Bhajans. Unusual for ayahuasca rituals (with the notable exception of the Santo Daime), many participants tend to join him in group singing throughout the evening. It should also be noted that this group does not use ayahuasca in the strict sense, but an ayahuasca analogue consisting of *Mimosa hostilis* and *Peganum harmala*.

More networks could certainly be added, but this should suffice for giving an impression. It is important to add that many personal contacts and friendships exist between the people participating in these networks or leading them, and one tends to encounter members of the same core group of experienced ayahuasca drinkers in different settings. What we are dealing with here is best described as a discreet ayahuasca milieu, subculture, or network of networks. In an influential article, the sociologist Colin Campbell (1972) coined the term “cultic milieu”; and if one ignores the pejorative and somewhat dated connotations of the term “cult” or “cultic” (nowadays scholars prefer to speak more neutrally about “New Religious Movements”), his description is still perfectly applicable:

Given that cultic groups have a tendency to be ephemeral and highly unstable, it is a fact that new ones are being born just as fast as the old ones die. There is a continual process of cult formation and collapse which parallels the high turnover of membership at the individual level. Clearly, therefore, cults must exist within a milieu which, if not conducive

to the maintenance of individual cults, is clearly highly conducive to the spawning of cults in general. ... Thus, whereas cults are by definition a largely transitory phenomenon, the cultic milieu is, by contrast, a constant feature of society. (p. 121-122⁶)

Campbell continues by emphasizing that such milieus are based upon a self-conscious attitude of “heterodoxy” and “deviance” with respect to the cultural orthodoxies of mainstream society. This feature, too, is strongly evident in the Dutch ayahuasca milieu. While participants are “drinking” (as the insider’s jargon goes) for very different reasons, whether spiritual, medical or psychotherapeutical, the more strongly committed ones tend to share a common pattern of criticism or downright rejection of mainstream Western society and its currently dominant worldviews. In stronger versions of this perspective, global capitalist consumer society is perceived as a huge, impersonal, demonic system of dominance and control, with politicians and the media hypnotizing the population into tacit submission and enslavement to “the matrix.”⁷ From this perspective, native American cultures and their shamanic spirituality are seen as preservers of a traditional wisdom that Western society has tragically lost: they belong to the “forces of Light” set against the powers of darkness that seek to enslave and dominate the planet. Entheogenic sacraments like ayahuasca are credited with the capacity of breaking mainstream society’s spell of mental domination and restoring us from blind and passive consumers unconsciously manipulated by “the system” to our original state of free and autonomous spiritual beings: quite like Morpheus’ “blue pill” in *The Matrix*, they open participants’ eyes, causing them to wake up to the true nature of the collective deception passed on as “reality” (‘the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth’,⁸ as eloquently formulated in *The Matrix*), and introduce them to a wider, meaningful universe of spiritual truth, love, and light. In short, they are seen as providing *gnosis*: a salvational knowledge of the true nature of one’s self and of the universe, which liberates the individual from dominion by the cosmic system.

A Theoretical Challenge: The Definition of Religion

From the perspective of the academic study of religion, the contemporary Western ayahuasca milieu presents us with a unique combination of problems. A first one concerns the theoretical question of what we understand by “religion.” It is well known that how society or the law defines religion can have far-reaching consequences for various religious minorities and their freedom of worship;⁹ but as will be seen, in the case of ayahuasca religion the ritual use of a psychoactive substance adds an entire new dimension to an already highly difficult and complex problematic.

That the definition of religion is much more than just an abstract and merely “academic” issue is perfectly demonstrated, of course, by the case of the Dutch Santo Daime church. As described in detail by van der Plas in this volume, a court agreed in 2001 that this church cannot practice its religion without ingesting ayahuasca (its central sacrament, referred to as “Daime”), and decided that freedom of religion should take precedence in this case over drug legislation. In so doing, it implicitly affirmed two things: (1) that the Santo Daime church is in fact a legitimate religion,

and (2) that the ritual use of psychoactive substances is not *ex principio* incompatible with the definition of “religion.”¹⁰

Neither of these two assumptions is uncontested, however. To begin with the first point: in the various debates and controversies about so-called “cults” or “sects” – with a French government report *Les sectes en France* issued in 1996 as a notorious example¹¹ – one may observe a disturbing tendency of wishing to deny to a great range of minority religions the right to be identified as “religion,” and hence to appeal to the freedom of religion. The strategy here is to distinguish between “sects” or “cults” on the one hand, and “religions” on the other, and then claim that freedom of religion applies only to the latter: sects/cults are presumably not “genuine” religions, and therefore cannot claim legal protection. Of course this requires the legislator to define what “religion” is, and how it is different from “sects” and “cults”; but in recent years, courts and governments seem to have learned, from hard experience, that the definition of religion is a theoretical can of worms, since there is no scholarly consensus about the issue.¹² This conclusion is reflected clearly in the French so-called “About-Picard” law of 2001: if certain crimes are committed by the management or executives of a so-called “sectarian movement,” this law now makes it possible to take legal action against those very organizations; but very significantly, the law does not even mention the word “religion” and avoids the issue of its relation to concepts such as “cult” or “sect.” Thus it steers clear of the thorny problem of religious freedom, but can still dissolve a religious organization if it engages in actions that are defined as illegal (for example, use of “drugs”).¹³

It is here that the difference between ayahuasca “groups” and “networks” becomes highly relevant. A law such as the French “About-Picard” is quite effective in regard to ayahuasca groups, such as the Santo Daime; but since it assumes that religions are church-like organizations, it cannot be applied to ayahuasca networks, whose only organizational feature is a list of email addresses on the computer of a shaman or ritual organizer. As such, the latter do not constitute a “sectarian movement” that could be legally prosecuted under the French “About-Picard” law: only individual participants might be prosecuted one by one.

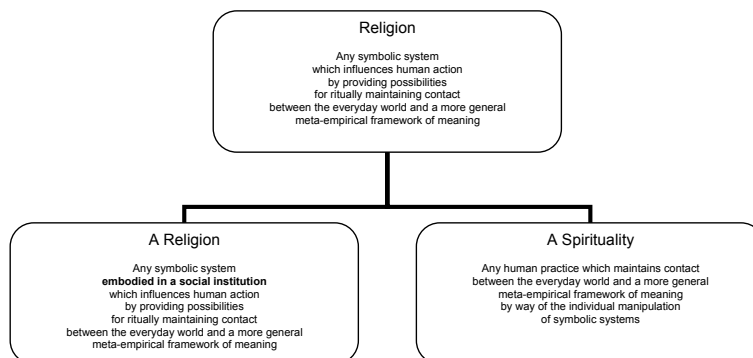
Interestingly, however, this very lack of formal organization typical of ayahuasca networks would seem to work *against* them in situations such as the Dutch one, where (in contrast to France) being identified as a religion *is* of great importance. Freedom of religion is protected by article 6 of the Dutch Constitution, but while the law speaks of “godsdienst of levensovertuiging,” it provides no definitions of those terms¹⁴: a situation that would seem to hail back to a time – the early nineteenth century¹⁵ – when “religions” could still be understood quite unproblematically as synonymous with *churches*, and the (essentially Protestant) identification of “religion” with doctrinal *belief* seemed self-evident. But both these assumptions are clearly grounded in a Christian/theological bias, and more specifically a Protestant one; and as a result, they are not only ill-equipped to handle the actual diversity of “religion” in contemporary society, but are also out of touch with modern academic perspectives: cross-culturally, many forms of religion have little or nothing in common with churchlike organizations, and many scholars would now emphasize ritual practice as more fundamental to religion than doctrinal belief.¹⁶

The law that protects religious freedom in the Netherlands is therefore grounded in assumptions that are questionable or simply incorrect from the perspective of the modern study of religion. If one were to remedy this situation, a radical solution would be to remove article 6 from the Dutch Constitution altogether (as has actually been proposed recently, for different reasons related to popular anxieties about the influence of Islam). The Santo Daime church would then lose the very foundation on which it is now permitted to drink ayahuasca, and would presumably revert back into illegality. As far as I can see, the only other solution acceptable from an academic perspective would be for the Dutch government to take the radical step of actually defining “religion” for legal purposes. But by doing so, it would indeed open the theoretical “can of worms” referred to above.

To show what is at stake here, I will nevertheless speculate briefly about the theoretical possibility of such a solution, if only as a thought experiment. With primary reference to one of the most famous and influential scholarly definitions of religion, proposed by Clifford Geertz (1966), I would propose to define religion technically as follows:

Religion = any symbolic system which influences human action by providing possibilities for ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning.

This definition was first proposed in 1999, with nothing resembling the Santo Daime or ayahuasca networks in mind; but it so happens that both of them would easily be recognized as “religion” according to such a formulation. Furthermore, within the category “religion,” I proposed to distinguish two subcategories: “religions” (sing. “a religion,” as distinct from “religion” generally) and “spiritualities” (sing. “a spirituality”, as distinct from “spirituality” generally).



According to these definitions, the Santo Daime church would qualify not only as “religion,” but as “a religion” as well, defined by the additional feature of being a

social institution or organization. Ayahuasca networks would *not* qualify as religions, but they are clearly engaged in creating spiritualities; and such spiritualities would qualify as forms of “religion.” In a legal system where “religions” and “spiritualities” would be accepted as the two forms that “religion” may take, ayahuasca networks (and many other kinds of contemporary non-institutional religion) could appeal to freedom of religion on an equal basis with the Santo Daime church.

I am convinced that the nature of the religious landscape in contemporary secular societies, where fluid “cultic milieus” of various kinds are now at least as important as traditional church-like organizations, requires a perspective along the lines outlined above or similar ones. Of course I am also well aware that such a solution to the problem of article 6 in the Dutch constitution is almost certainly utopian; but by discussing it at some length, I hope to have illustrated my point that not only is the present legal situation, at least in the Netherlands, theoretically deficient from the perspective of the study of religion, but better alternatives might be possible.

A definition as proposed here would also take care of the second problem to which I referred, above, in mentioning the 2001 court decision about the Santo Daime, namely the widespread assumption that use of psychoactive substances is *ex principio* incompatible with “genuine” religious practice. Once again, this assumption seems to have its origin in the disproportionate influence of Western (mainly Christian/theological) models on what is popularly recognized as “genuine” religion. Religion is supposed to depend on divine grace freely given from above, rather than on human manipulation of the divine from down below: the latter approach is commonly associated with magic, and seen as opposed to religion. From such a perspective, using ayahuasca to open a conduit to a higher, divine or spiritual reality is easily interpreted as a “magical” human attempt at manipulating the higher world and “forcing” visions to appear (which in that case must certainly be deceptive), rather than as a legitimate “religious” attempt at opening oneself to the divine and “receive” true visions. The normative theological (and more particularly, Protestant) agenda behind such a perspective is obvious: “true” religion is supposed to rely on freely given grace, as in Christianity, whereas “false” religion tries to manipulate the divine, as in pagan idolatry. The definition proposed above implicitly rejects any such distinction as incompatible with the theological neutrality axiomatic to academic scholarship in the study of religion. In this regard it is also in line with a growing consensus, among scholars of religion, about the implicit normative and polemical backgrounds of traditional “religion versus magic” constructs.¹⁷

To summarize my argument in this section: we are dealing with a fundamental incompatibility between popular and still dominant assumptions about the nature of “religion” which are derived from a normative Christian/theological bias, on the one hand, and the much more complex reality of how “religion” actually functions and exists in contemporary Western society, on the other. For many forms of religion belonging to a fluid “cultic milieu,” such as New Age-like phenomena of all kinds, this may be merely an academic problem that hardly affects practitioners in their daily lives. For many New Religious Movements, which tend to be perceived by society as “cults” or “sects,” it *is* a problem: the continued power, in secular society, of a discourse ultimately grounded not in critical scholarship but in theological bias can lead to serious government restrictions of their religious freedom. And finally, for various

types of ayahuasca religion (and “entheogenic” religions generally), the problem is even more serious, because their legitimacy as “religion” is called into doubt by at least *two* discourses at the same time: not only the one outlined above, which tends to see them as “cults” and therefore question their status as “genuine” religion, but also the no less powerful “drugs” discourse, which tends to consider that very status as irrelevant to begin with. This latter perspective – briefly stated, the common idea that “substance use” cannot possibly have anything to do with religion at all – brings me to my next section.

A Historical Challenge: “Entheogenic Religion”

The set of problems discussed in this section has to do with the *historical* perspective. Put quite simply, academically we are dealing with a serious deficit of knowledge concerning the role of “altered states of consciousness” (itself a contested and far from unproblematic term¹⁸) in the history of religion in Europe, and of pharmacologically-induced altered states more in particular. The scarcity of reliable and accessible information in this domain makes it extremely difficult for historians of religions to properly contextualize contemporary ayahuasca groups and networks from a historical point of view; as a result, they are bound to be perceived as weird “anomalies” with no real grounding in any “legitimate” tradition.

As regards the wider field of “altered states of consciousness,” I must restrict myself here to only a few very general remarks. The importance of terms such as ἔκστασις (ecstasy), μανία or *furor* (central e.g. to Plato’s *Phaedrus* but translatable in English only very inadequately, as “frenzy” or “madness”), *raptus* (rapture) and similar terms for unusual trance-like conditions is acknowledged – grudgingly or not – in such fields as the study of ancient Greek religion;¹⁹ and the centrality of γνῶσις as a term for direct experiential access to superior knowledge is recognized in the study of currents such as late antique gnosticism and hermetism. In both cases, however, the implications for our understanding of the religious currents involved are seldom drawn – if, indeed, they are perceived at all. For example, even though the late antique Hermetic texts are explicit in valuating γνῶσις as verbally inexpressible and superior to any rational knowledge, scholars nevertheless tend to highlight the philosophical aspects which their classical and philological training allows them to readily understand, while downplaying (unintentionally, and mostly unconsciously) the experiential dimensions in respect to which that same training leaves them quite helpless.²⁰ For the periods after antiquity, the influence of Christian theology, Greek rationalism, and (eventually) modern science on what was considered legitimate and reliable “knowledge” has had the effect of minimizing the role of “altered states,” which were largely relegated to the domains of excessive (and potentially heretical) religious “enthusiasm,” pathologized as mental illness, or interpreted theologically as demonic possession. As a result of this dominant legacy, the very idea of a religious practice focused deliberately on the induction of altered states of consciousness is – to put it mildly – unfamiliar to scholars.

A fortiori this is true for pharmacologically induced ASCs; and here, the ambiguous legacy of the 1960s counterculture has resulted in an even greater amount of

academic resistance – and for good reasons. In the wake of R. Gordon Wasson's popular theories about cross-cultural use of psychedelic mushrooms,²¹ many enthusiasts of the current psychedelic underground have come to believe that there exists such a thing as a suppressed European tradition of psychoactive plant use.²² In many cases the historical evidence for such historical constructs of "entheogenic religion" is quite feeble; in some other cases – e.g. the Mysteries of Eleusis,²³ or the witches' ointments in the Renaissance period²⁴ – the evidence would, I believe, deserve to be taken more seriously. But be that as it may, we certainly do not have anything that comes even close to a critical and reliable history of the role of mind-altering techniques (pharmacological or not) that might serve as a background for better understanding and evaluating the current phenomenon of ayahuasca groups and networks. Formulated differently: in the absence of a historical context for interpretation, such types of religion cannot but strike us as isolated anomalies.

In the rare cases where modern scholars of religion do touch upon these domains, they almost always place them within a theoretical and historical context called "shamanism": a concept that currently serves as the primary scholarly reference for various types of religion characterized by a deliberate focus on the induction of altered states of consciousness. But here, again, we are opening a can of worms: the popular concept of shamanism as a more or less "universal" type of religion, grounded in "archaic techniques of ecstasy" and present in various cultures throughout the world, has its origins in an extremely influential study by Mircea Eliade (1964) which is highly suggestive but extremely problematic as well.²⁵ It has been used sometimes to discover hidden "shamanic" traditions in European history, particularly in relation to witchcraft,²⁶ but any such attempt must stand or fall with how convincing one finds the concept of "shamanism" in the first place.

When it comes to contemporary ayahuasca groups and networks, one might seek to avoid concepts of a pan-European or universal shamanism by arguing, more modestly, that they represent cases of the *inculturation* of a specific type of South-American religious practice into a Western context. For several of the Dutch networks (the People, Eagles, and to some extent the Pleiades network) this is certainly correct. But in a case such as the Bhajan network we seem to be dealing rather with a syncretistic product of the "Oriental Renaissance," where Jurema (*Mimosa hostilis*) has been added to an Osho-inspired type of spirituality; the Pleiades network might as well be described as a "shamanically"-inflected form of Western esotericism and New Age; and the Aquarius network does not clearly fit into either of these categories. If this sample of networks has any representative value, the current "globalization of ayahuasca" can no longer be understood in a simple framework of inculturation.²⁷

In conclusion of this section: rather than grand concepts of "shamanism" as a pan-European or even universal phenomenon, what we need is thorough text-critical research into the sources pertaining to the European history of religious practices based upon the deliberate induction of ASCs – whether by pharmacological or by other means. Such research is still in its infancy at best, and as long as this is the case, ayahuasca religion will have a hard time being perceived as "legitimate."

A Methodological Challenge: Experience as Data

Finally, we come to a third, *methodological* challenge that ayahuasca groups and networks pose for the contemporary study of religion. How does one study such groups and networks? Indeed, is a legitimate scholarly study of the ritual use of ayahuasca possible at all? Here we find ourselves confronted with a methodological challenge that goes to the very heart of the study of religion as an academic pursuit.²⁸

The nature of the problem may conveniently be explained with reference to a quotation from Rudolf Otto's classic study *The Idea of the Holy*, first published in 1917. While introducing his topic, Otto (1926) opened his third chapter with the following, notorious sentences:

The reader is invited to direct his mind to a moment of deeply-felt religious experience, as little as possible qualified by other forms of consciousness. Whoever cannot do this, whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no further. (p. 8)

The reason, Otto went on to explain, is that without such personal experience it is impossible to gain any adequate understanding at all, and whatever interpretation or explanation of religion one may nevertheless come up with will certainly be rejected outright by any religious person. The passage is of great importance, for a double reason. First, it formulates an assumption about religion that still remains very common among the lay public ("don't you have to be religious to understand religion?"). And second, rejecting that very assumption ("no: studying religion and participating in it are two different things") is essential to the very identity of the study of religion as a discipline based upon critical academic research.²⁹ In fact, many modern scholars of religion, myself included, have in their student years been introduced to the discipline with this quotation as a fundamental *negative* example. If one follows Otto, the implication is that only mystics are allowed to write about mysticism; and taking the logic of his reasoning one step further, one will end up claiming that only Catholics can understand Catholicism, only Buddhists can understand Buddhism, and so on. Critical scholarship of religion from a perspective of neutrality regarding religious truth-claims³⁰ becomes an impossibility, for unless the scholar already shares the religious perspectives of whatever religion is being studied, s/he cannot understand its experiential dimension and will therefore necessarily end up misunderstanding and distorting the very object of research. By the same token, study of religions that are culturally or historically far removed from one's own period and cultural context will become an impossibility: after all, what does a modern Western scholar have in common, experientially or otherwise, with the native of a Melanesian village, or with a temple priest in ancient Egypt?

Fortunately for the discipline, then, Otto was wrong. There is abundant evidence for the fact that scholars are capable of writing intelligently and with profound insight about religions in which they do not personally believe or participate, and whose "experiential" dimension they therefore do not share. But this, then, brings us to the million-dollar question regarding research into ayahuasca religion: does this imply that in the case of ayahuasca religion, too, it is irrelevant whether or not the scholar of religion has any personal familiarity with what participants experience during the ceremonies? The "gut reaction" of many scholars will be to respond to this

question in the affirmative: whatever may be going on in the minds of ayahuasca drinkers is their own private business, and need not be of any great concern to scholars who are studying their religion. Such a position will strike any ayahuasca drinker as bizarre in the extreme, and yet it would seem to follow with compelling logic from the “anti-Ottonian” principle ingrained in the discipline.

In what follows I will argue that, in fact, it does not. Logical and irrefutable though it might seem at first sight, the argument is flawed in its assumption that it holds true for all types of religious practice; and in making such an assumption, critics of Otto ironically adopt from him an ethnocentric universalism which is incompatible with critical historiography. To see this point, it is crucial to understand first of all that although Otto claimed to cover religion “as such,” closer analysis of his book shows beyond a shadow of doubt that he was actually thinking along strongly Christian, and particularly protestant-evangelical lines.³¹ His famous category of “the numinous” (which, contrary to popular assumption, is by no means synonymous with “the sacred”) was conceived of as an *a priori* category in Kantian terms, and as a reality *sui generis* which could only be intuited by direct experience. The ability to do so, Otto believed to have been almost non-existent in the early stages of the evolution of religion, which he saw as dominated by “primitive superstition”; it was only in the Semitic religions that it began to come into its own, and over a long period of development, this ability of gaining access to the *sui generis* core of all true religion reached its culmination in Protestant evangelical religion. In short, the religious experience to which he referred in his famous quotation was actually the experience of the modern evangelical Christian: the further one moves away from this ideal, the more limited or distorted will be one’s idea of what religion is all about.³²

Otto’s theory was pure Protestant theology concealed as “study of religion.” Now, for our present concerns the important thing is to see that in his attempt to trace humanity’s gradual approximation towards the numinous through history, his attention was focused on a wide range of religious currents and phenomena – particularly the “Semitic” and biblical religions – in which the dimension of immediate personal experience might well be present, but is *not crucial*.³³ It is quite possible to be a practicing Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jew, or Muslim, without ever having any profound religious experience: for example, if a Muslim experiences feelings of reverence and awe while doing his daily prayer, that is great for him, but if he feels nothing, it does not make him a bad Muslim. In other words, his experiential capacity is not a criterion for his religious one. And even though some Oriental religions may, in contrast to most forms of monotheism, state that the personal attainment of an enlightened state of consciousness is a supreme goal of the religious life, one can nevertheless be a good Buddhist or Hindu without engaging in any sustained meditational, ascetic or other practice intended to achieve such a state. What this means is that, when all is said and done, personal religious experience is essentially a bonus: an extra that might or might not be valued positively, but is not crucial to what these religions are considered to be all about. As a result, it is perfectly possible to present quite adequate scholarly depictions and interpretations of these religions while paying little attention to their possible experiential dimensions. And conversely, highlighting that dimension in specific contexts may be an interesting scholarly exercise, but is not considered essential to understanding what these religions are all about.

For all such religions – the ones with which most of us are best familiar – the anti-Ottonian principle is perfectly correct: in order to study them in depth, scholars do not need to become insiders so as to experience them first-hand. However, I would argue that there does exist a category of religions for which the argument does not hold, because they have the peculiar characteristic of being *grounded in the deliberate induction of altered states of consciousness*³⁴. Since the induction of altered states is indispensable to such forms of religion, it is by definition impossible for them to exist without the dimension of personal religious experience. I already suggested that, for complex historical reasons, such forms of religion have tended to be seen as highly problematic in Western society at least since late antiquity; and while they have nevertheless cropped up again and again³⁵, the largely unconscious influence exerted by the dominant non-experiential paradigm has caused scholars to continue and perpetuate, rather than question or challenge, the tendency of presenting such forms of religion as relatively marginal. As a result, they have either received little attention, or have been interpreted along non-experiential lines, with their doctrinal or even behavioral aspects being highlighted at the expense of the experiential dimension³⁶.

To illustrate the nature of such forms of religion, I will here take the example of Neoplatonic theurgy. Neoplatonism has long been interpreted as philosophy only, whereas in fact its dominant manifestation represented by the school of Iamblichus was primarily of a religious and ritual nature.³⁷ In his classic treatise *On the Mysteries*, Iamblichus (2004) keeps emphasizing that theurgists are not (as the critics claim) trying to “magically” influence or draw down the divine powers, but rather, that by means of ritual action they are “disposing the human mind to participation in the gods” (p. 12). Theurgy is described as ‘a method of salvation for the soul’ because “in the contemplation of ... ‘blessed visions’ the soul exchanges one life for another and exerts a different activity” (ibid.).

Unfortunately we do not know how, exactly, theurgists achieved their impressive visions and the wholly “ineffable,” supra-rational experiences to which Iamblichus alludes again and again, in formulations that are both evocative and tantalizingly evasive. But whatever may have been the nature of their ritual techniques and procedures, by all accounts they were very powerful and effective. It is tempting to speculate (as has indeed been done by at least one qualified specialist³⁸) that the ingestion of some psychoactive may have been involved; but unfortunately, our best evidence in such a direction does not go further than some general references to vapors and aromatic smokes. Be that as it may, the parallels between the phenomenology of ayahuasca visions and the ceremonial contexts in which they are experienced, on the one hand, and what we find in Iamblichus’ *De mysteriis*, on the other, are intriguing to say the least: they would deserve a detailed comparison regardless of whether one sees anything in the “entheogenic” hypothesis. But for the present discussion, that hypothesis is ultimately irrelevant: the important point is, rather, that theurgy was undoubtedly an example of religious practice grounded in the deliberate induction of “altered states.” Whatever the precise techniques may have been, without the ritual induction of such states we have no theurgy.

But how, then, does one study such types of religion? Iamblichus’ text was a response to a contemporary neoplatonist, Porphyry, who looks at theurgy from a philo-

sophical and doctrinal perspective, but (according to Iamblichus) ended up missing the whole point about it. In a much-quoted passage, Iamblichus (2004) protests that rational thought is simply incapable of connecting the theurgists to the gods. On the contrary:

it is the accomplishment of acts not to be divulged and beyond all conception, and the power of unutterable symbols, understood solely by the gods, which establishes theurgic union. [for] even when we are not engaged in intellection, the symbols themselves, by themselves, perform their appropriate work, and the ineffable power of the gods, to whom these symbols relate, itself recognizes the proper images of itself, not through being aroused by our thought (p. 11).

Not unlike Porphyry himself, most modern scholars of theurgy have been far from convincing, to say the least, in their efforts to understand what Iamblichus was talking about in passages like these. The reason for this is not merely a lack of sources: in addition, while discussing theurgy they found themselves confronted with a radical gap of translation, because a theurgist like Iamblichus is using words and philosophical language to convey experiences which he himself claims go far beyond language and rational understanding. Scholars who study ayahuasca groups and networks today are confronted with the same paradox, but with the difference that whereas the details of theurgical ritual are irrevocably lost to us, ayahuasca rituals are readily accessible.

Having presented theurgy as a historical parallel to ayahuasca religion, I can now come back to the basic problem. Ayahuasca drinkers are bound to claim that scholars cannot possibly understand their religion unless they have personally experienced what happens to an individual under the influence of the sacrament. Most modern scholars are bound to reject this argument as a classic example of the “Ottonian bugbear” according to which only insiders can understand what their religion is all about. If they are right, the implication is that drinking ayahuasca is irrelevant to studying ayahuasca religion: it suffices to look at the doctrine and observe the rituals as an outsider. I argue that such critics would indeed be right in the case of the kinds of religion which tend to be most familiar to us, and which Otto had in mind as well. But in the case of religion grounded in the deliberate induction of altered states, the situation is different because the experiential dimension is not peripheral but central, and hence a different methodological stance is required: otherwise, the implication would be that scholars may study everything about such religion, but are allowed to ignore precisely what is most central to the religion in question. Such an approach could not but lead to a distorted view of the object of research. In cases such as neoplatonic theurgy we have no choice in the matter: all we can do is make the best of the sources still left to us. In contemporary cases such as ayahuasca religion, however, we do have a choice and hence no excuse: its experiential dimension is readily available for scholars to explore.

As we have seen, the logic of the Ottonian perspective implies that a scholar must essentially convert to a religion (or already be a believer) in order to understand it at all. But in the case of religion grounded in the deliberate induction of altered states this cannot be used as a valid excuse either, because conversion is not necessarily implied or expected.³⁹ One can experience a Santo Daime ritual without converting

to the church's doctrine; one need not share the New Age millennialism of the Pleiades network to experience ayahuasca in that context; and in fact, the leader of the Aquarius network personally does not buy any metaphysical concepts and insists on an essentially psychological interpretation, but that does not prevent New Agers or Santo Daime adherents from experiencing ayahuasca with him. Certainly there is no such thing as pure consciousness or pure experience unmediated by culture,⁴⁰ and therefore the experiences of a Santo Daime member whose mind is full of the church's doctrine will still be different from that of a sceptical scholar who drinks ayahuasca in an effort to learn what it is all about. But even so, there can be no doubt that having personally ingested the sacrament at least once, within the ritual context of the religion in question, scholars will thereby have learned essential things about it that they would not be able to learn in any other way.

This still leaves us with the problem of the gap of translation between experience and scholarly writing, caused by the inherent limitations of verbal and rational language in speaking about visions and experiences that are often described as "ineffable." To some extent such limitations should be accepted as inevitable, and as a good reason for some modesty about what scholarship can and cannot accomplish (after all, if nobody expects the writings of a sexologist to replicate the experience of orgasm, why should one expect scholarship of religion to replicate religious experiences?). But on the other hand, invocations of the "ineffable" are often rather transparent attempts at denying scholars the right to speak about religion at all. In the case of ayahuasca religion, we know notably from Benny Shanon's work that discursive language can indeed be used for giving a detailed scholarly account of what happens in ayahuasca visions. His *Antipodes of the Mind* (Shanon, 2002) provides the reader with a wealth of crucial empirical data that could not have been collected in any other way than by first-hand participation; and without such information, ayahuasca religion would remain a closed book to the wider scholarly community that has not personally experienced it. This study by a cognitive psychologist might be read as an effective refutation of Rudolf Otto: readers and scholars who have never drunk ayahuasca and have no intention of doing so need not follow his injunction to "read no further," but can read it with profit.

In this section I asked myself how scholars of religion can study ayahuasca groups and networks, and whether a legitimate scholarly study of it is possible at all. I conclude that it is indeed possible, but requires us to recognize the specificity of a category of religion defined by the fact that it is grounded in the deliberate induction of altered states of consciousness. Because in this category, as opposed to more familiar types of religion, those altered states are not peripheral but central, we will have to access them empirically if we wish to gain an adequate perspective on the religion at all. In other words, they must be experienced personally, at least by some scholars. Any scholarly interpretation of ayahuasca religion will remain flawed and incomplete unless it integrates a systematic analysis of the experiential dimension, as analyzed paradigmatically in Shanon's *Antipodes of the Mind*.

Conclusion

I have been arguing that the category of “religion based upon the deliberate induction of altered states of consciousness” has special requirements, both from a methodological and a theoretical point of view. “Entheogenic” forms of religion such as ayahuasca groups and networks should be recognized as particularly clear examples of this category, and it is to be hoped that scholars of religion will come to realize that they are important not only as an object of research in their own right, but also because such research has wider theoretical, historical and methodological implications for the discipline as a whole: in particular, as we have seen, it alerts us again and again to how strongly many of our “natural” assumptions about religion are still grounded in theological biases. Given all this, we should not fool ourselves about how much work still needs to be done: the very foundations for an adequate scholarly study of “entheogenic religion,” including ayahuasca religions, still need to be created.

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- 1 I deliberately restrict myself here to the academic study of religion as practiced in the context of the humanities (see also note 29). The two major academic journals for the study of New Religious Movements, *Nova Religio* and *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, have published not a single contribution on ayahuasca religion so far. The *Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements* edited by James R Lewis (2004) never mentions ayahuasca, the Santo Daime, nor União do Vegetal (UDV). On the extremely informative website of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), there is one short article in Italian by Massimo Introvigne, published in 2000 (Introvigne, ‘Le Chiese del Santo Daime’); other contributions on this site focus entirely on the legal battles. An email query circulated among all scholars connected to the INFORM network (courtesy of Eileen Barker, whom I want to thank for her help) yielded various references to ayahuasca religion in Latin-America, but as for Europe or the U.S., only a thesis in English on the Dutch Santo Daime church (Groisman, 2000, ‘Santo Daime in the Netherlands’), and an as yet unpublished online study by Lopez Pavillard, ‘Recepción de la Ayahuasca en España’. In addition, there is a very good and informative article by Carsten Balzer (1999) on the Santo Daime and the first beginnings of “New Age” ayahuasca rituals in Germany, followed by an English article (Balzer, 2005, ‘Santo Daime in Deutschland’; ‘Ayahuasca Rituals in Germany’); and much useful information about the variety of ayahuasca ritual practices is available in the section written by Arno Adelaars (Adelaars, Rättsch & Müller-Ebeling, 2006, *Ayahuasca*). Ayahuasca shamanism in the Western world does get some serious attention in Znamenski (2007, p. 147-164), *Beauty of the Primitive*. An important recent publication is Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill (2008), *Hallucinogenic Tea*.
 - 2 For bibliographical overviews of the literature, see Labate, de Rose & Santos (2009), *Ayahuasca Religions*. As regards the Brazilian scene, a collection of such research in English is available in a thematic issue of *Fieldwork in Religion* published (Labate & MacRae, 2006, “Light from the forest.” See also Dawson, 2007, *New Era - New Religions*).
 - 3 The term “shaman” is widely accepted in this milieu as referring to a leader of ayahuasca rituals; for the purpose of this article I adopt this emic usage, while acknowledging the considerable academic controversy (see elsewhere in this article and other articles in this book) about “shamanism” as an etic concept. There is some debate among participants in ayahuasca networks about whether any ayahuasca ritual leader has the right to call him/herself a “shaman”: some see it as a title that has to be “earned” during a long process of education and initiation in the context of an

- “authentic” native Latin-American ayahuasca tradition. While many networks are centered around a “shaman” in the sense of a ritual leader, others revolve around a ritual organizer whose role is merely that of inviting Latin-American shamans.
- 4 For more information on how the Santo Daime church first created their interview/screening models, see the article by Polari de Alverga in this book.
 - 5 For a short discussion of 2012 millenarianism, see Sitler (2006), ‘The 2012 Phenomenon’. The very emergence of 2012 millenarianism owes much to ayahuasca and entheogenic shamanism generally, as demonstrated in Hanegraaff (2010), ‘And End History’.
 - 6 Cf. discussion in Hanegraaff (1998, p. 14-16)
 - 7 The reference is, of course, to the famous 1999 movie by the Wachowsky brothers. In the ayahuasca milieu with which I am familiar, the metaphor of “the matrix” (directly equivalent to the concept of *heimarmenè* as understood in ancient gnosticism) has become a commonplace that requires no further explanation. On the gnostic nature of *The Matrix* series, see e.g. Flannery-Dailey & Wagner (2001), ‘Wake Up!’ and Bowman (2003), ‘The Gnostic Illusion’. For a first introduction to gnosticism generally, and its various “neo-gnostic” offshoots, cf. Hanegraaff (2005). The popular appeal of *The Matrix*, and a range of other recent films with similar themes, suggests that such “gnostic” perspectives are more widespread in contemporary Western society than one might think.
 - 8 Formulation by Morpheus during his first meeting with Neo in *The Matrix*. This dialogue amounts to a short catechism of neo-gnosticism.
 - 9 For a very illustrative discussion, see Introvigne (1999), ‘Religion as Claim’.
 - 10 Similarly, in a legal case in the U.S.A., both the UDV and the Oregon chapter of Santo Daime were considered bona fide religions. See Bronfman & Haber in this volume.
 - 11 Gest & Guyard (1996), *Les sectes en France*; and see the scholarly response documented in Introvigne & Melton (1996), *Pour en finir avec les sectes*.
 - 12 As illustration of this fact, see e.g. the many definitions proposed in Platvoet & Molendijk (1999), *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*.
 - 13 The relevant legal document is available online, and can conveniently be found via the Wikipedia entry “About-Picard Law.”
 - 14 For the English term “religion,” the Dutch language has two alternatives: “religie” and “godsdiens” (lit.: “service of god,” not to be confused with the German *Gottesdienst*, which means “church service”). They are roughly equivalent but not exactly synonymous in practice: “religie” has more neutral connotations whereas “godsdiens” is associated mostly with Christianity and especially Protestantism (many theologians of a more orthodox persuasion would even argue that other religions might be called “religie” – famously defined as “unbelief” by Karl Barth – but not “godsdiens,” precisely because they cannot be accepted as “serving [the true] God”). There is no satisfactory English translation for the term “levensovertuiging” (lit.: “life-persuasion”), but it clearly means any belief (or system of beliefs) people may have about the nature of existence. Undoubtedly the term “levensovertuiging” was added to “godsdiens” in article 6 in order not to discriminate against non-religious beliefs or convictions. But in the absence of a definition of “religion,” by which criteria the two should be distinguished, remains an open question; and perhaps most importantly, the formulation unproblematically accepts the quasi-protestant assumption that religion is essentially a system of “beliefs” or “convictions” (“overtuigen”).
 - 15 The first Dutch constitution was instituted in 1814. In the context of plans for uniting with the southern provinces, now known as Belgium, it was followed in 1815 by a second Constitution which – against the wish of those southern provinces – controversially maintained article 6.
 - 16 For the latter argument as applied to the study of Christianity, see Hanegraaff, (2003) ‘The Dreams of Theology’.
 - 17 The most thoroughly documented and authoritative recent example is Styers (2004), *Making Magic*. For an extensive discussion, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy* (forthcoming), chapter 3.

- 18 The terminology of “Altered States of Consciousness” (ASCs) became common coinage after 1969, in the wake of a classic volume edited by Charles T. Tart (1969), *Altered States of Consciousness*. Unfortunately, although Tart’s volume covered a wide variety of ASCs, in popular usage, the terminology has come to be associated primarily with LSD and other psychedelics; and more seriously, discussions in this field have been largely dominated by enthusiasts of the 1960s counterculture who were more interested in promoting psychedelics than in studying ASCs from a perspective of critical scholarly research. Due largely to this dominant association with psychedelics and their defenders, the concept of ASCs has not received the academic attention that it would deserve on theoretical grounds. Only recently do we find attempts at reclaiming the ASCs terminology for the academy, as in Cardeña, Lynn & Krippner (2000), *Varieties of Anomalous Experience*, and particularly Barušs (2003), *Alterations of Consciousness*.
- 19 For a very impressive inventory of these and similar terms and their appearance in the basic corpus of classical Greek texts, see Pfister (1970), ‘Ekstase’.
- 20 For this argument, based upon a detailed analysis of the relevant textual sources, see Hanegraaff (2008a), ‘Altered States of Knowledge’.
- 21 Wasson & Wasson (1957), *Mushrooms, Russia and History*. The breakthrough of Wasson’s theories to a mass audience occurred as the result of a famous article in *Life* magazine (Wasson, 1957, ‘Seeking the Magic Mushroom’).
- 22 For a well-documented, readable and ultimately quite sceptical account, see Letcher (2007), *Shroom*.
- 23 The case of Eleusis could serve as a textbook example of the politics of academic discourse in this domain. In 1978, the classicist Carl A.P. Ruck co-published a book with R. Gordon Wasson and the inventor of LSD Albert Hoffmann, titled *The Road to Eleusis*. In two separate chapters, Ruck developed an argument to the effect that a psychoactive substance, probably ergot, was used in the Eleusinian Mysteries for providing the initiates with a “mystical” experience they would surely never forget. Ruck’s second chapter is backed up by extensive documentation, and the argument was presented with considerable care and precision. *The Road to Eleusis* went on to become a classic of the psychedelic underground; and in 1987 the famous scholar of ancient religions Walter Burkert spent a few pages of his *Ancient Mystery Cults* to dismiss the hypothesis. In doing so, Burkert ignored most of Ruck’s sources and arguments, and relied heavily on some ill-informed generalizations about “drugs” (e.g. ‘the use of drugs ... does not create a true sense of community but rather leads to isolation’ [op.cit., p. 109]). Nevertheless, Burkert’s undisputed (and well-deserved) authority in the study of ancient religions has been sufficient for most classicists to consider the issue settled once and for all; and as for Ruck, no matter how interesting his arguments might be from a scholarly point of view, the unwise choice of publishing them in collaboration with two icons of the psychedelic underground has effectively ruined any chances he might ever have had for getting his hypothesis taken seriously.
- 24 Harner (1973), ‘The Role of Hallucinogenic Plants in European Witchcraft’. Somewhat similar to the previous case (see note 24), the academic recognition of Harner’s well-documented overview (part of an anthology which counts as an early classic in the study of ayahuasca religion) has been negatively impacted by his subsequent career as a neo-shamanic workshop organizer. The relevance of the witches’ ointment, which produced effects that are remarkably consistent with the well-known stories of magical flight and the sabbath (see Peuckert (1960), ‘Hexensalben’; Peuckert (1961), ‘Ergänzendes Kapitel’; Lussi (1995), ‘Verbotene Lust’), tends to be downplayed to a truly amazing extent in the standard academic literature on witchcraft, including even such a comprehensive standard work as Clark (1997), *Thinking with Demons*. Among the rare exceptions, see Castelli (1994), “‘Donnaiole, amiche de li sogni’”.
- 25 Eliade (1964), *Shamanism*. For critical discussion of the concept, see e.g. Hutton (2001), *Shamans*, 120-131; von Stuckrad (2003), *Schamanismus*, 123-135; Znamenski, *Beauty of the Primitive* (2007, p. 170-189); and many contributions to the three-volume anthology edited by Znamenski (2004), *Shamanism*.
- 26 One famous example is Ginzburg (1991), *Ecstasies*, who in this regard attempted to salvage a core of truth in the otherwise discredited theories of Margaret Murray (1963), *Witch-Cult in*

- Western Europe*, concerning an underground fertility cult. For a fascinating analysis and deconstruction of the idea of an ancient Greek shamanism, grounded in the work of Karl Meuli and E.R. Dodds, see Bremmer (2002), 'Travelling Souls?'
- 27 As shown by Balzer (1999), 'Santo Daime in Deutschland', even as far ago as 1993, when ayahuasca was first introduced to Germany and psychedelic internet communities were still in their infancy, the rituals in a "New Age" context immediately mutated into something strongly different from what they had been in South America.
- 28 It should be noted that the following discussion pertains to the study of religion as it has developed in the context of the humanities, where phenomenological and comparative approaches associated with authors such as Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, or Mircea Eliade have traditionally been very influential. The anthropology of religion has a different research tradition, and the dialogue between these two perspectives on the study of religion still leaves much to be desired. The same is true for the relation between the study of religion and yet another relevant discipline, that of psychology of religion.
- 29 Implicit in my formulation here is a distinction between the study of religion understood as a discipline based on critical academic research, on the one hand, and the so-called "religionist" approach widely present in religious studies in the United States (which does not accept the distinction drawn here, and thereby blurs the boundary between religious and scholarly discourse), on the other. In my opinion, religionism represents a failure to complete the process of intellectual emancipation by which the study of religion has broken free, historically, from Christian theology; to a large extent it should perhaps not be called "study of religion" at all, because in many cases it takes the shape, rather, of a kind of generalized metadiscourse about religion as such, with selective reference to data taken from the study of religion (for a detailed example, see Hanegraaff (2008), 'Leaving the Garden'). Please note also that a rejection of religionism by no means need to imply "reductionism" as the only possible alternative, although the methodological debate among scholars in the U.S. tends to create that impression: empirical/historical research based upon critical study of sources and/or direct participatory research certainly represents a third option intermediate between religionism and reductionism (see Hanegraaff (1995), 'Empirical Method').
- 30 The more general question of "objectivity" and "subjectivity" in scholarly research is a different issue, and obviously a very thorny one, which need not be discussed in the present context.
- 31 For the following analysis, see Hanegraaff (1999, p. 353-356), 'Defining Religion'.
- 32 As suggested in Hanegraaff (1999, p. 356-369), 'Defining Religion', it is therefore quite bizarre that Otto's concept was adopted by Mircea Eliade in his foundational and extremely influential study *The Sacred and the Profane* (Eliade 1959), for Eliade's view of "the sacred" is diametrically opposed to Otto's: 'Otto presents archaic beliefs as essentially pre-religious superstition, and sees the Jewish prophets as privileged "diviners" of an experience which culminates in Christianity. Eliade presents archaic "paganism" as real religion, and describes the Jewish prophets as having started the fatal process of "desacralization" which culminates, via Christianity, in the profane worldview of modern society. For Otto, evangelical Christianity was the highest religion; Eliade's argument, in contrast, would make it doubtful whether Christianity is a religion at all' (op. cit., 359).
- 33 There is a profound irony in the fact that precisely in *that* context Otto was calling attention to the primacy of religious experience. In fact, I would argue that the impact which his work had among his contemporaries can be explained largely from the fact that (on foundations that have much to do with the influence of Schleiermacher) it challenged common understandings of biblical and particularly Protestant religion as non-experiential.
- 34 Note that the distinction I am making here may well cut right through conventional categories, or through existing "religions." For example, I argued that Buddhism as such does not necessarily fall in this category; but a specific Buddhist monastic practice of prolonged and daily meditational practice, and aimed at the achievement of Enlightenment, could very well be described as religion of my second type.

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- 35 For example, an excellent study of how such religion may erupt even (or perhaps: precisely) in the heart of Protestantism, was published by Taves (1999), *Fits, Trances & Visions*. More generally, phenomena such as Pietism and contemporary Charismatic and Pentecostal renewal movements are obviously highly relevant here.
- 36 As an example for the latter: from an anthropological perspective one might well argue that contemporary Charismatic Christianity is a prominent example of religion grounded in the deliberate induction of altered states: after all, it can hardly exist at all, if the presence of the Holy Spirit is not experienced by participants and made manifest in trance-like states and attendant behaviour. But from a theological point of view, the same type of religion will be presented as grounded in biblical doctrine; and it will be argued that “ecstatic states” are merely a sign that believers are filled with the presence of the spirit.
- 37 Shaw (1985, p. 3), ‘Theurgy’: ‘It is a curious fact that Neoplatonism today is identified with Plotinus and an intellectual mysticism which denied formal religious worship, for in the history of the tradition Plotinus stands nearly alone in this attitude. In fact, Neoplatonism was far more influenced by the Syrian Iamblichus and his theurgical mysticism than by Plotinus’.
- 38 Luck (2000), ‘Theurgy and Forms of Worship in Neoplatonism’.
- 39 Nevertheless, it may certainly be implied in certain cases. If (as suggested in note 37 and 38, above) such phenomena as Charismatic or Pentecostal religion are seen as examples of religion based on the deliberate induction of altered states, it could be argued that a strong belief, or at least a strong will to believe, is a major factor in the induction process.
- 40 I am referring to the well-known debate about the nature of mystical experience, in which I would support the “contextualist” perspective associated in particular with the work of Steven Katz (e.g. ‘Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism’ [1978] and ‘The Conservative Character’ [1983]).

