

## **Eye-glazing and the anthropology of religion: the positive and negative aspects of experiencing and not understanding an emotional phenomenon in religious studies research**

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This article will look at the phenomenon of ‘eye-glazing’ and the impact, both positive and negative, that this unsettling phenomenon, sometimes observed in religious studies research, has had on my own development as an anthropologist working with Evangelical groups. It will examine the experience of being unable to understand and structure a particular ‘culture shock’ in one’s own research, focussing on eye-glazing, and will examine both the positive and negative consequences for the anthropologist from a personal perspective, placing its findings within the broader anthropological discussion. It will also aim to provide detailed descriptive examples of a fascinating phenomenon of which there has been relatively little discussion in the anthropology of religion.

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### **Introduction**

Roy Wagner (1984) has argued that the anthropologist experiences a kind of ‘culture shock’ when confronted with the culture that he or she studies. It is this very ‘culture shock’ that leads the anthropologist to attempt to understand the culture, and every aspect of it, through the structures of his or her own academic culture.<sup>1</sup> This article will draw upon my own fieldwork with Evangelical groups to examine the consequences of experiencing a powerful and haunting phenomenon during one’s fieldwork and being unable to fully understand it through the structures of anthropology. That is to say, it will explore my inability to fully understand a phenomenon through assessing it in terms of theories constructed around empirical research, or to feel that the phenomenon entirely made sense through doing so. It will argue that emotion can be a very useful part of fieldwork. This is mainly because, as I will argue, it is these experiences that can spark the thinking process, allow one to empathise with one’s subjects to a greater extent and, to put it colloquially, ‘keep you hooked’ on your subject throughout the research process. I have called the phenomenon in question ‘eye-glazing’: it refers to a withdrawn, glazed look over the eyes, which I have encountered, albeit infrequently, in the Evangelical groups into which I have conducted research. This phenomenon will be explained in greater depth below. But first, I will begin by raising some questions around why this phenomenon has been so difficult for me to ‘understand’ within an anthropological framework.

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<sup>1</sup> I quote this concept because the idea of ‘shock’ seems highly germane to my own experience. I fully appreciate, of course, that Wagner’s ‘postmodern’ standpoint has been heavily criticised elsewhere. See, for example, Lyotard (1992).

## On not comprehending an experience anthropologically

Both during and after fieldwork, I felt that I could not make sense of the phenomenon of eye-glazing anthropologically, nor by drawing upon any other scientific method. Precisely why this should be so is a fascinating question. I would submit that one possible explanation for this lies in the empirical-based, analytical nature of anthropology and its contrast with the sometimes powerful, indeed ineffable nature of experience. Anthropology is a science, or, at least, many of its adherents strive for it to be so. As such, while it may offer an explanation, or seemingly cogent linguistic summary, of a particular experience or phenomenon, it might be argued that there are some things that it, and other sciences, simply cannot capture. The experience of falling in love may be explained in terms of chemical reactions in the brain, evolutionary advantage and so forth but, even for the theorist, poetry might, sometimes, seem to more accurately make sense of it. The same argument might be made about religious experience. Rudolf Otto (1977) famously summarised religious experience as the 'numinous'—the '*mysterium, tremendum et fascinans*'. Otto argued that there was something profoundly emotional in religious experience. Indeed, he argued that there was something contradictory about it, something of the spooky. It was both fascinating—drawing one in—but frightening—and therefore something that repelled. I would make the same point in reference to what I call eye-glazing. It is an experience that I found to be haunting, spooky, profoundly emotionally unsettling, but also fascinating. Thus, in these senses, it is not unlike the experiences explored by Otto.

The question of why this phenomenon should evoke such a strong reaction is intriguing, though highly personal. It needs to be explored within the larger set of questions surrounding the methodological positioning of the anthropologist. Broadly speaking, it might be suggested that the function of an anthropologist, at least in theory, is to be if not an entirely detached observer, at least as objective as possible. Much has been written on the 'emic/etic' distinction in social scientific research. In summary, the 'emic' perspective refers to the 'insider' perspective. Thus, to examine a group from this perspective will involve examining their own understanding of their beliefs and activity. The 'etic' perspective is the 'outsider' perspective, which involves understanding the group by means of a way that they might not understand themselves, such as through the anthropological method. The emic/etic distinction was first coined by the linguist Kenneth Pike and later introduced into anthropology by Marvin Harris. The two scholars have disagreed considerably with regard to precisely how the terms should be understood, but the above definitions appear to be generally accepted. (For a detailed discussion of these issues see, for example, Headland *et al* 1990.)

Moreover, still broadly speaking, the insider perspective, often seems to be viewed as 'less rational' than anthropology when dealing with the anthropological study of religious phenomena. For example, the Holy Spirit, in my own research, might be held responsible for a great deal for which I might offer alternative explanations. Thus, as an outsider and an anthropologist, there is an implicit rationalism. Indeed, Ewing (1994:571) argues that it is almost 'embarrassing', as an anthropologist, to admit to seeing the world from a religious group's perspective. One is supposed to be rational in conducting analysis of religious groups who see the world, or aspects of it, in a supposedly unscientific manner. This might partly explain my inability to explain the emotional experience I had when encountering the eye-glazing. I felt repulsion, because I was experiencing something profoundly emotional that I should not have

been. But equally, it showed me something that I really could not understand—hence the fascination. The experience was certainly haunting and, if Otto is correct, then some kind of contradiction might be expected to underlie it.

Of course, another factor contributing to why I felt unable to comprehend this experience anthropologically is one of style. Indeed, this point might be made about academic writing more broadly. I would suggest that personal writing is discouraged in producing academic essays. While the anthropologist might, occasionally, publish his or her fieldwork notes, in general personal writing is perceived as poor style. The anthropologist might write about a personal experience, and his or her thoughts about it, as it relates to the theory being propounded. But in my own PhD training at least, I was, at first, criticised because my style of writing could, on occasion, be ‘too personal... too “journalisty”’. I was even encouraged to drop the word ‘I’ altogether. In older academic writing, it is possible to find the expression: ‘the present author would argue...’. I think that there is at least a case for arguing that, implicit in such language is the view, simply, that: ‘personal = bad’.

Because of these factors, eye-glazing has played no part whatsoever in my BA dissertation (on Charismatic Christianity), my relatively recently completed doctoral thesis or any research articles that I have published up until now. This is despite the fact, as I will later discuss, that it is highly significant in my development as an anthropologist. To some extent at least, social sciences traditionally encourage us to almost suppress emotion in favour of the goal of supposedly reasoned, rational analysis. Thus, in this regard, it is an unsuitable medium through which to examine eye-glazing, except as part of what might be called meta-anthropology. Indeed, this article can probably be seen as an exercise in this.

Thus, I consider eye-glazing to be worth exploring as a means of examining the positive and negative consequences of having a highly emotional experience during anthropological fieldwork. This article will look at the consequences for my own fieldwork and development as an anthropologist. It will examine this phenomenon, which I will call eye-glazing, drawing upon detailed descriptive examples.

## Eye-glazing: other research

There are no more than a few passing mentions of what I term eye-glazing in religious studies literature, and both are by sociologists (Barker 1989:111, Galanter 1999:107) who refer to a ‘glazed, withdrawn look’ and a ‘glassy stare’ respectively. Both emphasise that this ‘glassy stare’ seems, in their experience, to be unique to members of highly structured religious groups—or ‘charismatic groups’ as Galanter (*ibid*:1) terms them. Galanter claims that the stare has an ‘insulating effect’, pushing outsiders away:

Thus, the trance-like state appears to protect the sect’s boundaries. It would be more likely to develop in settings that threaten the group’s integrity so that an observer who is perceived as an antagonist is more likely to see the behaviour than one who is not. (*ibid*:107)

Barker (1989) observes the behaviour amongst ‘cult’ members when they are away from the group. Equally, many anti-cult and cult deprogramming organisations advise that a ‘glazed expression’ or a ‘glassy stare’ is a significant sign, amongst others, that a person may be involved in a cult (e.g. Burks 2005). As with my own experience, it

tends to have a profound effect on those who experience it. Indeed, Galanter (1999:107) refers to it as the 'boundary behaviour' (in charismatic groups) 'that has made the deepest impression on outsiders'.

It is this very example of 'boundary behaviour' that I intend to examine in this article. I will look at the limited previous discussions of this issue and argue that the various structures that they impose upon it, such as that it is a 'trance', do not appear to be entirely convincing. Indeed, I will aim, by means of detailed descriptions, to open up a discussion on this little discussed phenomenon. However, more importantly, I will look at the positive and negative consequences of such an experience with regard to one's fieldwork, which can range from empathising with those one studies to the problems of offending them.

Of course, this raises the question of the extent to which eye-glazing is a phenomenon. In discussing this, I take the word 'phenomenon' to refer to an empirically observable event and, moreover, one that recurs and does so in a certain context. Thus, I would firstly suggest that it is a phenomenon—and not only a matter of my own personal reaction—because I have observed it a number of times in very similar circumstances. But also, two other scholars have observed it a number of times, again in very similar circumstances in each case and in very similar circumstances to my own observation.

Another important issue in asserting that eye-glazing is a phenomenon is that it can be isolated empirically. In looking at this question, I will compare it to glossolalia. This is another phenomenon—widely observed in Evangelical groups—involving worshippers, in a trance-like state, ostensibly speaking some kind of 'language.' It is often referred to as speaking-in-tongues. (For further discussion see, for example, Goodman 1974.) Certainly, one might note a number of criteria to glossolalia—it would have to involve an incomprehensible language (with, to some extent, language patterns) and it would have to involve a religious-based trance-like state, such that this is observable. Otherwise, it is simply a person making a peculiar sounding noise. Equally, with eye-glazing, the eyes would have to show a 'glazed, withdrawn look' and it would have to be on the face of a member of a structured group. The same expression on the face of a drunk would not be eye-glazing. Of course, this raises a philosophical question: At what point is the expression sufficiently 'glazed' to be 'eye glazing?' Similar questions with regard to glossolalia are less difficult to answer because it is a recognised phenomenon—believed to be inspired by the Holy Spirit—amongst Evangelical Christians. Thus, it can be suggested that it is glossolalia because 'they say it is' and it is concomitantly observed by the outsider according to certain criteria. As far as I know, however, eye-glazing is not recognised by religious groups, let alone Christian groups. Thus, we are left in a situation in which there is no clear, objective criteria for claiming that something is eye-glazing other than the emotional reaction—a feeling of a 'glassy stare'—that might or might not come with it. It is not like crying—which is evidenced by tears—or even a frown. And this is perhaps the central difficulty in discussing the issue through social scientific analysis. While it is subjectively observable, it is very difficult to state by what criteria it is being observed.

On a final note, it might in theory be possible to expose people to this glazed expression and, through examinations of the eye and psychological examinations of observers, assert relevant criteria. But for reasons that will become apparent below, this would be very difficult to achieve in practice. It would only be possible to achieve

it by using actors, interacting with genuine Evangelicals for example, to simulate the conditions that bring it about. This would raise ethical questions and, it might be argued, would be fairly unworkable. So, again, there is the problem that what appears, at least, to be a phenomenon experienced during fieldwork cannot, due to its very nature, be explored using some of the strictures of a social science. It cannot be explored because, without broader scientific analysis outside the anthropologist's area of expertise, eye-glazing remains a matter of instinct and feeling on the part of the observer.

## Eye glazing: personal examples

### ***Rachael, College of St Hild and St Bede, Durham University, October 1999***

The first time I experienced eye-glazing was not during structured fieldwork. Indeed, the fact that it occurred could, at least in part, be put down to my own lack of fieldwork training at that point. It was October 1999 and I was a 'fresher' (new university student) at Durham University in the north-east of England. Almost all the 15 students on my corridor attended an evening event called the 'Hild Bede College Chocolate Party'. This was organised by the Christian Union, of which five undergraduates on my corridor were members. The Christian Union was an Evangelical student group. Its purpose was to create a 'witnessing community' in the college and to 'tell Durham University about Jesus Christ', as stated on the information leaflet given to me at the chocolate party. At the time, I was already anecdotally aware that members tended, for example, to reject evolutionary theory and the culture of promiscuous sex and heavy drinking that was perceived, at least, to be prevalent amongst undergraduates. One of the aims of the group was to persuade what they called 'Non-Christian' students to embrace an Evangelical form of Protestantism. (For a more detailed discussion of the social and religious beliefs of these students, see Dutton 2005.)

The Chocolate Party was set up to be light-hearted and fun. There were many 'getting to know you' games and those present were divided into teams which, through completing various absurd and amusing tasks, could win chocolate. After these games, a final-year undergraduate student, whom we will call Jane (all names have been changed), was introduced to those present. She proceeded to give what the Christian Union termed her 'testimony'. Jane explained that she had been brought up in what she referred to as a 'nominally Christian household', and that her parents would attend church at Christmas but were not 'truly Christians'. When she arrived at Durham University (specifically at Hild Bede College), she started attending meetings of the Christian Union and, concomitantly, began to ask herself who she really was and what the meaning of her life was. She realised that she was going to go to Hell and, one day, in the shower of my own corridor (fifteen rooms above a small gym), she had a vision of Jesus, was filled with 'utter joy', and became a 'true Christian'. She encouraged others to let Jesus into their lives proclaiming, 'I know... that my place in heaven is secure'.

By pure coincidence, after the speech, I found myself sitting between Jane and her fiancé. It seems that they had been told in advance, by Evangelical Christians on my corridor, that I was not one of their group. They began, in essence, to 'witness to me'. Thus, they asked me various questions about whether I believed in God and why it

was arrogant not to believe in God. They told me about how God had revealed himself to them. In a rather immature and regrettable manner, I simply threw the contents of my recently completed A Level in the Philosophy of Religion at them. In response to my arguments against the existence of God, the couple would heavily rely on each other, assisting each other in demonstrating, to their satisfaction, that my arguments were flawed.

Then the fiancé began talking to somebody else, leaving me alone with Jane. She attempted to counter my arguments about the Problem of Evil, and so forth, but finally, when she could not do so, I experienced the phenomenon for the first time. Her eyes became glassy and cold. It was as if I was not in front of her and she was looking through me even though she was looking directly at me. Indeed, she continued to respond to my points, all the time confronting me with this deeply unnerving stare. It was a personally disturbing experience. The stare was like the look one might see in the eyes of someone who had taken a large amount of skunk,<sup>2</sup> for example, but more, as it were, aware and conscious. Though it may have looked like the expression of a person in something akin to a trance-like state, the person in question remained perfectly lucid. Indeed, following Dwyer (1982:xxii) it might be described as an encounter with at least an aspect of 'the other' which, due to its power and strangeness, led to vulnerability and a desire, therefore, to understand this aspect of the other.

### ***Gwen, Kensington Temple, September 2001***

The second example that I shall give occurred during my undergraduate fieldwork for a dissertation on Charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity. During my fieldwork, I attended Kensington Temple, a large Pentecostal Church in Notting Hill in London, the congregation of which was composed largely of black people. However, I spoke to a small number of relatively young white people there who were doctors, solicitors and so forth. At the end of a particular Sunday meeting, I was approached by a woman in her mid-twenties, whom we will call Gwen. We got talking and she invited me to come to a fast food restaurant with her and her friends. At the restaurant, I told the six church members present precisely why I was there and what I was doing. Unlike at Durham, they did not attempt to persuade me with regard to Christianity. They simply answered the various questions I asked them. They all agreed, collectively, on one 'correct' answer with regard, for example, to what hell constituted and even to the extent to which it was permissible to drink.

I was especially interested in the phenomenon of glossolalia or speaking-in-tongues that I had noted at many Charismatic or Pentecostal Churches, and which was especially prevalent at Kensington Temple. This phenomenon is noted in many Evangelical groups and involves the worshipper speaking a kind of spiritual language, as I have already stated. The various members present, however, appeared to understand this phenomenon very differently from each other. When I pointed out to Gwen just how different her understanding of glossolalia was from the view of a member whom we shall call Chidi (who was of Nigerian heritage), I again experienced the same glassy stare described above. Gwen looked at me from across the table with the same stare that I had experienced at the Durham meeting. Again, though, she carried on talking. It was deeply disconcerting and, before long, I simply

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<sup>2</sup> Skunk is chemically enhanced and extremely strong marijuana. It was very popular at Durham University while I was there. For further discussion see, for example, Wylie, Scott and Burnett (1995).

felt I had to leave. It was extremely uncomfortable to remain. However, though Gwen had this glassy stare, she continued to speak in much the same manner she had previously, albeit not to me.

### ***Mark, Glasgow, October 2002***

The final example occurred near the beginning of three years of participant observation fieldwork for my PhD, in which I was looking at three different university Evangelical groups from an anthropological perspective. As part of my fieldwork, I attended Aberdeen University Christian Union's (AUCU) weekend retreat which was held deep in the countryside, the nearest large town being a suburb of Glasgow. Most of the students in the group were aware that I was not a member of AUCU and that I was a PhD student conducting research on them. They never attempted to engage in the kind of 'witnessing' that I noted at the meeting at Durham University. (For an explanation of the differences between these groups, see Dutton 2005.) As part of the retreat, Mark (again, not his real name) had been invited as a 'speaker'. Mark used to be a member of AUCU but now worked for the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF, to which British Christian Unions are affiliated). At the retreat, he was invited to run various activities and to preach. When I met him, he appeared to be somewhat forthright in telling me why I should give up studying Christianity and become a Christian, according to his understanding of the term. I disagreed with him on this, though I am confident that I did so diplomatically and I in no way criticised Christianity.

The next day, as I wanted a newspaper and was stranded in the middle of the countryside, he drove me to Bearsden, on the outskirts of Glasgow, to obtain one. On the way back, he engaged in the kind of 'witnessing' that I referred to at the meeting of the Christian Union in my college at Durham University. It was a 20-minute drive back, and when he found himself unable to answer my points—about the nature of conversion experiences, for example—I again experienced the glazed expression and I, in great discomfort, attempted to read the newspaper for the remainder of the journey. Once more, I would submit that the idea of anything comparable to a 'trance' would be problematic as Mark continued, otherwise, to act the same. Indeed, he continued to drive the car.

### **Common factors**

In a number of respects, the examples in Glasgow and Durham appear to have somewhat more in common with each other than the example from Notting Hill. In the former two cases, eye-glazing appeared to occur when the Evangelical in question was isolated from their group, and was unable to rely on the support of that group in order to assist them in a situation in which they perhaps felt uncomfortable because their views were being challenged. The circumstances of Gwen's eye-glazing were slightly different from the other two, as stated. In this case, other members of the group were present but I had, without meaning to, caused difficulties for her by demonstrating differences within an otherwise harmonious religious group. This appeared to cause difficulties, it seemed, for her in particular, and the consequence of her expression was that I ceased the apparently offensive line of questioning. However, in all three cases it can broadly be noted that members seemed to feel threatened by the line of questioning when the eye-glazing took place, and this was

perhaps especially so with Jane and Mark who were, in effect, alone with me when the phenomenon was observed.

These are just three examples of this kind of eye-glazing and, apart from anecdotally, I am unable to cite any others apart from those mentioned by Barker (1989) and Galanter (1999). However, I would argue that these examples are sufficiently similar to be classed as a phenomenon. In each case, we have members of what might be termed a highly 'structured' religious group. In each case, they are challenged with regard to their beliefs in a way that makes them feel, one would guess, uncomfortable and in each case we see the glazed, withdrawn expression. Although, of course, there are differences between the examples there is nothing that would seem to constitute an alternative explanation, such that this can all be dismissed as *post hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning. It is separate from a trance because, again in each case, those exhibiting the state remained perfectly lucid, which is not the case in other supposedly trance-like states examined in religious studies, such as glossolalia. It may not be a particularly common phenomenon, or commonly researched phenomenon. But, nevertheless, we see here the same thing happening a number of times and in very similar emotional circumstances.

As has already been discussed, another common factor, from a personal perspective, is that I felt the same each time. If Galanter's (1999) theory is correct, then this would be entirely expected. The behaviour has developed to make the observer feel a certain way and thus respond in a certain way. Thus, it could be claimed that, following this argument, the personal emotions of the anthropologist can be a salient part of examining and discerning group phenomena. Of course, the difficulty here is the possibility that the experience is purely a personal matter for one individual anthropologist. As such, the anthropologist's emotional response might be helpful in divining phenomena, but, to be broadly useful, it must be ensured that the response is not purely subjective. Hence, in my own case, I only started to try and look at eye-glazing anthropologically when I found that other researchers had witnessed the same thing. This said though, this discussion would seem to add some credence to Wagner's (1981) view that anthropological research can be a 'culture shock'. It can begin with an emotional reaction and it is this initial emotional reaction that can assist in leading to new ideas about the workings and structures of groups.

## Eye-glazing and fieldwork in the anthropology of religion: discussion

### ***An intellectual conversion***

As stated, there were both positive and negative consequences in experiencing this phenomenon. It is difficult to over-emphasise, to fieldworkers who have never experienced it, just how profoundly haunting and unsettling the experience is. Of course, it does no good to engage in hyperbole, but the look in Jane's eyes really did remind me of something out of a horror film. The most obvious positive consequence of this experience, with regard to my fieldwork, was that I became interested in fieldwork at all.

Much has been written about the experience of being an anthropologist and how this compares if not to a 'religious structure' then at least to a 'tribal' structure. An example of this can be seen in looking at fieldwork as a 'rite of passage' (Anderson



1990:4, Bacchichidu 2004:2). If one were to make a comparison based on religious groups, one might talk of 'conversion'. Conversion tends to refer, in essence, to a change of mind in a religious sense. Rambo (1993:137) emphasises that such a change in perspective tends to be part of a process, but that, even so, many converts can pinpoint when they 'converted' to their particular religion. Their turning-point will often be something dramatic and seemingly inexplicable, such as Jane's vision of Jesus in the shower.

In my own case, Jane's glassy stare was so haunting that I can highlight it as a turning-point in my academic perspective. It was highly significant in changing my essential question from 'Do religions make sense?' to 'How can religious phenomena be explained and why are some people religious?' When I began at university, I was very close to changing degree from Theology (which had a religious studies and thus anthropological component) to Philosophy. To a great extent, it was the power of this experience, and the fact that it was a massive 'culture shock' that I could not make sense of, which persuaded me both to stay with theology and to take-up the religious studies course offered by the department. Thus, in a sense, this haunting experience was a kind of intellectual conversion. It was the turning point in my realisation that I was not asking, as I now see it, the most useful questions. Had it not occurred it is very likely that I would not have become interested in the anthropology of religion and nor would I have become so interested in student Evangelical groups, into which I have since conducted considerable anthropological research.

### ***Rekindling the fascination***

Another positive aspect to the experience is, perhaps, slightly more prosaic. Much has been written on the human experience of being an anthropologist. Various researchers have looked at difficulties such as home-sickness, having to learn a foreign language or having to obtain funds. It is perfectly natural, in these circumstances, to question whether you wish to continue with your research. However, my experience of eye-glazing, and the fact that I do not understand it, is always there to rekindle my fascination in religious groups and, indeed, in the anthropology of religion more generally.

This can best be demonstrated by returning to the personal example that I examined above. When I experienced the phenomenon with Gwen, I had read Galanter's (1999) brief discussion and thought that, to a certain degree, I understood eye-glazing. It was a trance. However, when I experienced the phenomenon with Gwen I had just spent the evening at a Pentecostal Church and witnessed many people speaking in tongues. This would seem to exemplify a trance-like state. In general usage, trance appears to be defined as 'a hypnotic, cataleptic or ecstatic state', 'daydreaming' or 'a semi-conscious state' (taken from the Oxford English Dictionary). Some of those engaging in glossolalia had their eyes open and, indeed, their eyes resembled the 'glassy look'. However, Gwen had this look and yet was demonstrably lucid. In many ways, this made it all the more frightening and further demonstrated that I did not fully understand the phenomenon. Even if it was a trance, it was very different from phenomena which are generally so termed in religious studies. At the time, I had become somewhat bored with my undergraduate degree. However, having such a strange experience, for a second time, with a member of a Christian group, helped me to re-realise just how fascinating such groups are and just how much can be learnt from them. Fieldwork is an arduous process and many anthropologists will, quite naturally, become bored and despondent at some point. In my own case at least, an

emotional experience relating to my fieldwork helped to retain my interest, which was very important. But it also helped me to remember, specifically in relation to studying religion, that there will always be something beyond our comprehension as anthropologists. This, in itself, can provide further fascination and thus motivation. Emotional experiences, relating to fieldwork, might even be seen as re-awakenings of the original 'culture shock' that got us interested in the group in the first place.

### ***A means to empathy***

A further way in which the experience might be seen as positive relates to my understanding of the specific people upon whom I have conducted anthropological research: Evangelical Christians. As evidenced by Jane, the idea of a personal 'conversion experience' is highly significant to Evangelical Christians. To a certain extent, it might be regarded as a rite of passage for Evangelicals. After having such an experience, one's status is raised, one is considered to be properly a Christian and one undergoes the rituals of baptism and/or public testimony. As already stated, the conversion experiences are often dramatic, mysterious and deeply powerful. They may range from a feeling of joy to actual visions of Jesus.

Obviously, my unsettling and haunting experience of eye-glazing might be seen as fairly unremarkable in comparison. However, the experiences are at least, subjectively, not something that I can easily explain and are something I find emotional. Thus, I would suggest that they provide me with a certain degree of empathy with those whom I study. It is often easy, as an anthropologist of religion, to ask Christians about their religious experiences without understanding at all what they mean. One positive aspect of experiencing eye-glazing is that I can at least articulate an emotional experience that I do not understand and which, unlike falling in love for example, occurred within a purely religious context.

### ***Reflections on religious understanding***

A fourth positive consequence of my experiences with eye-glazing might be that they have contributed to deeper reflections on questions concerning my methodological position when studying religion. A number of other scholars have examined whether or not a 'religious understanding' is required in order to really understand religion. Wiebe (1999) maintains that it is not necessary. He argues that religious 'faith' (which might be seen as incomprehensible) is, in anthropological terms, inextricably linked to religious history and tradition. Whether or not the anthropologist experiences this faith, he or she can still understand it by contextualising and examining the tradition (ibid:270). In this, he looks at MacIntyre (1964:132), who claims that emic 'religious understanding', though useful, must ultimately be 'transcended' if religion is to be understood. The opposite argument was propounded by Clarke (1964:150) who, in the same volume, argued that one could only understand religion by experiencing it. Wiebe brings these two together, in a sense, by arguing that they are understanding the word 'understanding' somewhat differently. In this regard, both can be seen as correct.

I would develop this to argue that both kinds of understanding can be important in understanding religion. 'Religious understanding' can be useful (though perhaps not necessary in all cases) in empathising with the subject and in inspiring critical thought. But, as Castenada (1971:132) argues, the nature of the religious phenomenon is such that, if it is experienced, it will never quite seem to be understood. Equally,

Geertz (1999) questions the need for a stark distinction between an emic and etic perspective. He argues that the ‘trick’, in conducting fieldwork, is to employ a scholarly (or experience-distant) perspective in order to understand the religious group’s experience-near perspective. However, he emphasises that the fieldworker is also ‘experiencing’ (albeit in a relatively more distant way) something of the religious perspective.

Engelke (2002:3) summarises this perspective, arguing that the anthropologist has to ‘strike a balance’ while not ‘surrendering too much anthropological authority’. Indeed, he quotes Ewing’s (1994:571) view that anthropology traditionally responds negatively to the idea that the ‘native’ might know something about the world that the anthropologist does not. The scholar has to balance these two perspectives in order to understand the group. Indeed, Engelke (2002:8) argues that for two of the most well-known anthropologists namely Victor Turner and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, their personal religious beliefs were methodologically useful in ‘bridging the gap’ between themselves and the groups that they studied. The same, indeed, was true of numinous experiences they had that were congruous with the world-views of these groups. Moreover, Engelke argues that Turner conducted pilgrimage research towards the end of his life as at once a believer and an anthropologist.

Of course, if I were to pursue this argument as far as it can go, it might be argued that it would have been very useful for my research if I had had an actual conversion experience. However, I do not think that this is the case. I might have ceased to employ the anthropological method, in relation to Evangelical Christianity, if I had had such an experience. In making this point, I do not wish to suggest that it would be impossible, for example, for a Christian to conduct research on other Christians. However, I would argue that, at least with regard to the Evangelical groups that I have studied, it would be difficult for members to conduct research of this kind into fellow-Evangelicals. I take this view primarily because, in many cases, the presuppositions of Evangelicals that I studied were so starkly different from some basic research tenets within anthropology. So many things—such as glossolalia—that I would explain in anthropological terms such as a ‘trance’ were understood by the Evangelicals, within their world-view as the activity of the Holy Spirit. This is one example of how the groups that I studied were, in general, tightly structured groups that, in many ways, contrasted with the world around them in terms of world-view. Thus, while there may be some ways in which a committed Evangelical could conduct anthropological research on his or her own group, this would at the very least require some very difficult balancing between experience-near and experience-distant positions.

### ***The problem of ‘admitting’ to emotions***

There have also been a number of negative aspects to my experience of eye-glazing. Firstly, it is very unpleasant. Moreover, precisely because neither I nor other social scientists that refer to it witness it outside of ‘charismatic groups’, it might reinforce a prejudice that members of such groups are ‘different’, somehow ‘less rational’ and, therefore, there to be studied by the ‘rational’ anthropologist. However, my own experience of anthropological research would certainly make this prejudice difficult to maintain, at least in my own case. Though I may have striven to be rational, I actually experienced strong emotional reactions, if not towards my subjects then, at least, towards certain examples of their behaviour. Perhaps the perceived problem with admitting to such emotion is that one might run the risk of being taken less seriously as an anthropologist if one makes such an admission. One may even fear that an

admission of emotion will be employed as a means by which to dismiss one's work. My own experience, however, is that emotional reactions during research, if examined through sufficient self-reflection, can sometimes be very useful in attempting to understand, in my own case, a phenomenon noted in Evangelical groups. Hence, while it might reinforce a certain traditional prejudice on the one hand, on the other hand the phenomenon assists in forcefully rejecting such a prejudice.

### ***Threatening the subjects***

Another difficulty, however, concerns the question of how to respond when the fieldworker makes his or her subjects feel threatened. It is likely that very little has been written on eye-glazing because individual anthropologists of religion either do not observe it or, if they do, observe it on so few occasions that it is very difficult to have sufficient examples to engage in serious analysis. Broadly speaking, at least in my own case, noticing the eye-glazing phenomenon was a result, in essence, of a poor fieldwork method. In all three cases, I was an inexperienced fieldworker.

In the first instance, I was not a fieldworker at all. I was merely a curious undergraduate confronted, for the first time, with a group whose views I found to be rather shocking. If one were to follow the ethical guidelines set down by the Association of Social Anthropologists of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth (the ASA) for example, then one should not expose those one is studying to knowledge they have not requested and, therefore, one should be very cautious in critiquing their religious perspectives. On the second occasion, I was also an inexperienced fieldworker. I would speculate that my ability to point out the group's incongruities appeared threatening. It was also entirely unnecessary to point them out. The third occasion was, perhaps, less avoidable. Mark wanted to know my views on Christianity and, although these were expressed diplomatically, he manifestly did not like what he heard and found it threatening.

I suspect that a salient reason for this was that he, like Jane and Gwen, did not know me personally. Had I been conducting long-term fieldwork with any of those from whom I experienced the phenomenon, it may have complicated that fieldwork. There would always be the group member whom I had, in essence, offended and who had felt threatened by me. Mark was the closest to this, as he was involved, though not regularly, with the group I was studying. Naturally, this may have made it difficult for me or any future anthropologist to conduct research into the group.

But, even though these occasions may have been a result of what might at first glance look like poor fieldwork, I would still maintain that they are of broader interest. They are of interest because of the points of commonality between them and thus the possibility that some kind of phenomenon was observed. Thus, it might be suggested that the anthropological guidelines should be changed, so that clashes with one's subjects are not such a source of embarrassment amongst anthropologists. Indeed, it might even be argued, though I can appreciate that there are many difficulties with this argument, that anthropologists should be allowed to deliberately goad a sample of the members in order to assess the nature of emotional reactions in tightly structured religious groups. Certainly, it would be very difficult to accrue a reasonable number of examples of eye-glazing without testing it in this way. In many ways, the ethical standards for psychologists are very different. It is far more acceptable to evoke clashes with subjects in order to assess the results. Perhaps we should think about the

possible benefits of such a policy in the discipline of anthropology with regard to understanding certain emotional phenomena in religious groups.

Therefore, although it has traditionally been argued that we, as anthropologists, should ensure that nobody ever feels threatened, I would counter that such feelings will arise in normal human relations, and are perhaps even more likely to arise between an Evangelical Christian and an outsider than with me. While there may be a case for not deliberately threatening members, such situations, if they develop, may well be fascinating anthropologically. Of course, if one is going to allow these situations to occur, it may well be useful to apologise afterwards, especially if, unlike my case with Mark, it is obviously one's own fault. In other ways, it is obviously preferable to maintain good relations with members of the group, especially with the senior members who will often acts as gate keepers.

### ***Emotions and analysis***

Referring back to Wagner's (1981) notion of 'culture shock', the very fact that the experience of eye-glazing, in my case at least, was so haunting, meant that there was a great desire on my part to understand it and to understand it as soon as possible. This led me to attempt to develop all kinds of different theories which would at the very kindest be described, as one anthropologist of religion termed them, 'a bit far fetched'. When one has such a powerful experience during research it is very difficult to attempt to coldly analyse it. It is difficult, as it were, to 'sit back' and distance oneself from it. However, this distance is often very important in analysing fieldwork. The group that one has studied often starts to make more sense when one is no longer with them and is back in a more familiar environment. Indeed, it is now a number of years since I last experienced the phenomenon of eye-glazing and this cushion of time and distance has made the writing process considerably smoother than it would otherwise have been.

In making this point, I do not wish to imply that I have some aversion to emotion in analysis. I have already argued that emotion can be extremely useful in a variety of ways: it can evoke thought, it can rekindle the fascination and keep one interested, it can be a means to empathy and greater understanding, it can prompt deeper reflection on one's method and position, it can alert one to phenomena that would otherwise remain unnoticed and aid in interpreting them, and so forth. Indeed, I have made a case for a greater discussion of one's own emotions in anthropological writing. However, I also wish to underline that I think distancing oneself (in terms of time for example) allows one to more carefully think about and assess an emotional experience during fieldwork. This does not imply that I believe some elusive 'rationality' must be found in order to conduct analysis. I am simply suggesting that if one has a fascinating emotional experience during fieldwork, and, indeed, it appears to be part of a pattern, then it might be worth waiting a while before trying to compose some theory around it.

### **Conclusion**

An emotional and difficult-to-understand experience or phenomenon related to one's fieldwork can have many benefits for the anthropologist. In my case, the experience of eye-glazing—the glassy, withdrawn stare that has been noticed by some researchers studying highly structured religious groups certainly had some positive

consequences. It acted as a kind of 'conversion experience' through which I became interested in examining religion from a social scientific (and ultimately anthropological) perspective. Moreover, the fact that proposed explanations just did not seem to fit has meant that the 'mystery' phenomenon is always there to rekindle my fascination with the anthropology of religion and, to some extent, it allows me to empathise with the converts whom I have studied.

In this regard, I would support the summary of Victor Turner's experience that is given by Engelke (2002). The anthropologist's own emotional experiences can be useful in 'bridging the gap', but the important thing, as Engelke argues, is to maintain a healthy scepticism and at the same time to appreciate that there is another perspective. In appreciating this, it can be useful to experience it and it might even have something to offer the anthropologist. Indeed, I would go further than Engelke's summary and suggest that such experiences can rekindle a fascination that may be waning or spark a fascination with religious groups in the first place.

On a final note, it is said that the eyes are the window to the soul but, during eye-glazing, that saying simply ceases to be true and it is rather unpleasant. Certainly, eye-glazing is a fascinating area upon which I would like to see more research. Indeed, I would be interested in the experiences of any readers in this regard. Personally, though I found eye-glazing to be an unsettling experience and accept that the evidence points to it being a sign of having caused offence, it is nonetheless intriguing. It keeps me aware, as Wagner (1981) argues, of the extent to which the anthropologist in this case is little different from his subject, and the 'culture shock' it has caused means that I am very unlikely to ever lose interest in the anthropology of religion.

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