

## EMBRACING APPARITIONS FOR UNITY: AGNIESZKA HALEMBA ON A MARIAN APPARITION SITE

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*Negotiating Marian Apparitions* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2015) is Agnieszka Halemba's second book about religion in the post-Soviet world. In this book, she describes in detail the Marian apparition site at Dzhublyk in Western Ukraine, which is relatively unknown in the English-speaking world as compared to such places as Lourdes, Fatima, or even Medjugorje. The site is relatively young, with the original apparitions having supposedly appeared in 2002—two girls, nine and ten years old at the time, went to fetch water from a spring and came back telling of a meeting with “a most beautiful white lady.” In the years since then, the river-side meadow has been mostly built over, with a chapel constructed where the girls said they saw Mary, and a number of other buildings built nearby for the use of the priests, nuns, and pilgrims. Numerous miracles have been reported to have taken place in Dzhublyk, including a bleeding cross, and significant numbers of pilgrims have been coming to Dzhublyk from the very start, wanting to participate in the events taking place there.

Unlike the majority of Marian apparition sites, Dzhublyk is connected to the Greek Catholic Church—an Eastern-rite Church that recognises the authority of the Catholic Pope—rather than the Latin-rite Roman Catholic Church. This has given Dzhublyk a more specifically Ukrainian character than it might have otherwise. Most of the pilgrims are from Ukraine and, apart from strictly religious services, Dzhublyk plays host to meetings expressive of national identity. As Halemba makes clear, the site has played a significant role in the politics of Transcarpathian Ukraine. From the earliest days, it has been seen as supportive of Ukrainian nationalism and opposed to movements that promote alternative views regarding what has historically been the complex identity of the Transcarpathian region. By exploring this aspect of the role of Dzhublyk, Halemba has written a book, which is as much about the religion and politics of Transcarpathia as it is about the miracle site itself.

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While Halemba's anthropological study of the Dzhublyk Marian apparition site is only weakly informed by the cognitive science of religion, her approach is very much open to a constructive dialogue between traditional anthropological work and the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that her book shows apparition sites as capable of providing CSR with much to consider, with potentially fundamental implications for the field. My aim will be to pursue just two of the lines of thought that Halemba's book invites a CSR scholar to undertake. The first issue I will discuss concerns the interplay between two aspects of religion that CSR has thus far failed to extensively explore—religious experience and religious organizations. Part of Halemba's interest is in showing how individual experiences come to be “embraced” by religious practices and organisations—an approach that she explicitly compares to the view held by Ann Taves. While Dzhublyk, according to Halemba, is not a good locale for studying this phenomenon—a claim I will very much question—Marian apparition sites in general present a prime locale for exploring this issue empirically. The second issue arising out of Halemba's book that I will focus upon is that Marian apparition sites function to promote prosocial behavior at a number of different scales that are not necessarily compatible. As Halemba observes, while calls for unity may sound catholic—to use that term in its original meaning—they are always effectively calling for unity with some particular group. Work on motivating prosocial behaviour should, and easily can, take this complex reality into account, I will argue—with significant benefit for CSR. In effect, I will claim that by looking at apparition sites such as Dzhublyk, CSR can make progress on both the issue of the prosociality of religion and upon understanding religion as involving cognitive byproducts—the two main areas of development within the field.

### Embracing experiences

Marian apparition sites are places where pilgrims come to witness the experiences that the visionaries claim to have had, as well as to have religious experiences themselves. As Halemba makes clear in her book, these sites present church organizations with both a threat and an opportunity. They are a potential threat due to the possibility of leading to the creation of a dogmatically unorthodox or even schismatic movement. At the same time, they are an opportunity because of the strong faith they stimulate among many of the people who become involved with these sites. As such, they invite analysis in terms of Whitehouse's (2004) modes of religiosity. In this section, I will examine how Halemba understands the relationship between religious experiences, religious institutions, and religious organizations, consider how that understanding fits with a CSR approach, and examine why apparition sites provide an excellent example to consider from this point of view.

Halemba's theoretical basis is a three-element account of how religions work, consisting of experiences, institutions, and organizations. It is explicitly connected to Ann Taves' (2009) work on experiences.

The first element in Halemba's account is that of the particular experiences, which in themselves do not have a specific meaning and should not be thought of as inherently religious. As an example, she uses the detection of agency caused by the hyperactive agency detection device (HADD) which, as she points out, will only be given a religious interpretation in certain circumstances. The question she asks is how those circumstances can be characterized—arguing that CSR is not able at this point to help provide an answer. I would add two further questions Halemba does not explicitly raise. The first is whether the HADD should be understood as producing experiences or, in fact, beliefs. The distinction is far from easy to make, but given that—if we accept Barrett's account (Barrett 2000)—HADD interprets certain inputs as caused by agents, it is already some of the way towards the belief end of the experience-belief spectrum. This is significant for our purposes in that CSR does not generally talk in terms of experiences but rather of beliefs and practices, with beliefs in particular having no clear place in Halemba's own account. The second question to be asked is a more general one: what is it that makes certain experiences more readily deemed religious? This is the other side of the coin to the question Halemba does ask, and should probably be answered at the same time. Of course, Taves makes inroads into answering those questions, and Halemba makes extensive use of Taves' answers to structure her own approach.

Drawing upon Taves, Halemba argues that experiences are in part deemed to be religious when they come to be incorporated in particular practices. This process she calls institutionalization, understanding religious institutions as “relatively stable social mechanisms patterning human behaviour” (8); that is, practices—the most common subject of anthropological studies. The other aspect of “deeming religious” that she talks about is Taves' idea of attributing specialness to things. Halemba keeps stressing that this way of thinking about religious experiences and practices is an analytical tool that need not be an ontological claim. However, given that proviso, one has to ask to what degree the concepts she is working with have any explanatory or predictive power—something that might not be a consideration for some anthropologists but is definitely an issue for the cognitive approach to religion. Having said that, a certain unease about the explanatory value of the religious-nonreligious distinction is, of course, par for the course within CSR. I would argue that the element that Halemba would need to explicitly include in the model to make the picture more satisfactory is that of religious beliefs. The attribution of specialness that Halemba takes from Taves is a matter of belief, after

all. Something else that Halemba does not explicitly include, but which she seems to accept, is that the experience-institution relationship is not unidirectional. Applying Whitehouse's (2004) approach, it can be said that religious institutions, i.e. religious practices, working in the imagistic mode produce religious experiences. And apparition sites provide a fascinating case study of this two-way relationship in the way that they both promote and rely upon religious experiences. This is important in that institutionalization should be understood as the ongoing process by which both experiences and practices come to take on a relatively stable form within a society. The remaining question in my mind is why Halemba chooses to speak in terms of religious institutions—a potentially confusing term—rather than religious practices.

The third element within Halemba's model is that of religious organizations. Her use of this term seems to be close to its common use. So, as she points out, religious organizations are typically thought of as agents capable of "giving opinions, issuing decrees, hiring and firing, involving themselves with public affairs, and so on" (9). Similarly to the way that particular experiences come to be institutionalized, particular institutions come to be organizationally embraced. Again, Halemba appears to have in mind a two-way relationship. On the one hand, practices come to be taken on by religious organizations and given a particular meaning or role within the organized religion. On the other hand, the religious organization becomes more relevant to the faithful thanks to its involvement with the practice. Similarly to institutionalization, religious beliefs would appear to play a key but unspoken role within organizational embracement.

So, according to Halemba, the religious status that some experiences and practices come to have within a particular culture largely depends upon how they come to be institutionalized or organized. For example, particular experiences might come to be interpreted as involving a Marian apparition, which involves particular institutions that are communicated and reproduced in the various locales where such apparitions are deemed to have appeared, and then, their significance for the Catholic Church is negotiated in order that they may serve to validate this Church rather than act as a potentially disruptive force within it. As Halemba observes, the post-Soviet sphere is of specific interest when it comes to understanding organizational embracement because the Soviet era saw a relative weakening of the organizational aspects of religion (24). This was not, despite the expectations of the communist governments, followed by a disappearance of the underlying beliefs, experiences, or actions. Indeed, as Halemba argues, religious institutions continued largely unabated despite the lack of religious organizations—much as they do in traditional societies. This, in itself, is an important point for any discussion of secularization and very much in line with the argumentation put forward

by Norris and Inglehart (2004)—Soviet society lacked the existential security that is necessary for secularization to affect people's individual religious lives rather than just the status of the organized Church.

Here, as in other places, Halemba uses the “negotiation” metaphor to portray the “give and take” between particular organizations, institutions, and experiences. However, I would suggest that it would be even more apt to talk about “domestication”—replacing a somewhat opaque term from social sciences with a term from the biological sciences, which captures much more of what is interesting in the relationships Halemba's model spells out. The two main lines of research within CSR—into religious beliefs and practices as cognitive byproducts, and into the social role of religions—have been connected by a number of researchers (Atran and Henrich 2010; Norenzayan 2013; Talmont-Kaminski 2013) via the claim that religions have recruited pre-existing cognitive byproducts to help motivate prosocial behaviours. The idea can be usefully compared to domestication. In domestication, a wild species comes to be spread by humans who then take over control of its breeding with the result that over time the species comes to be altered in ways beneficial to humans. Both the domesticated species and humans benefit. The domesticated species is protected and spread into new geographical areas by humans. Humans gain a new dependable source of food, materials, or labour. The case with both institutionalization and organizational embracement is analogous. In the case of institutionalization, particular experiences come to be interpreted as religious and become more common thanks to being induced by specific practices while those practices come to be popular in part thanks to the experiences they induce—be it because those experiences are desired in themselves or are seen as validating the practices. In the case of organizational embracement, particular practices are deemed to be part of a specific religious tradition, altered to fit that tradition and spread by it while, at the same time, the religion in question is validated and made relevant by having embraced the practice. Experiences and practices come to be domesticated.

Having presented the three-element model, Halemba focusses in her book on organizational embracement. She does this for two reasons. The first is that she feels that “the study of religious experiences and their transformations through institutionalisation and organisational embracement requires [a] much stronger interdisciplinary approach than [she] could follow throughout [her] research” (5). The second is that she thinks religious experiences do not play a significant role in the case of the apparitional site—Dzhublyk—that she studied, leaving her lacking in the raw material upon which to base that particular aspect of her anthropological study. Her reason for thinking this is that early on in the development of Dzhublyk, the original visionaries

came to have a very limited role, either having effectively left the site or by having their contact with the pilgrims limited and presented through the intermediary of the local priest. The first of these problems—the need for an interdisciplinary approach—is sure to be a significant issue for anyone and calls for collaboration between anthropologists such as Halemba and people with a range of other scientific backgrounds, as can be found working within CSR. The argument that Dzhublyk is not a site where religious experiences play a significant role, however, strikes me as incorrect in an important way and inconsistent with other things that Halemba claims.

As Halemba herself allows, the visionaries are not the only ones to have religious experiences at an apparition site. Indeed, it is the experiences of the pilgrims that are vital to Dzhublyk and any other Marian apparition site—a point that Halemba recognizes (64). These include not just participating in meetings with the visionaries—which is not a big part of “the Dzhublyk experience”—but also in any of a number of other events and feelings more or less specific to religious pilgrimage, including the shared efforts to reach the site, experiences of apparently miraculous events at the site, as well as various facets of the feeling of God’s presence that many phenomenologists of religion traditionally focussed their research upon. Halemba provides examples of the experiences that the pilgrims have and interpret as miraculous, including bleeding crucifixes and the miracle of the dancing sun—that particular phenomenon being known from Fatima. As Halemba observes, “such miracles are institutionalized and stories about them are told and retold in countless narratives circulating among the followers and in Dzhublyk-generated publications. A group of people looking at the sun in hopes of seeing some extraordinary phenomenon is a common scene at Dzhublyk, as it is at other apparition sites worldwide” (63). This is what draws pilgrims to the apparition site. This is what lies at the core of how apparition sites can help to validate religious organizations—as spelled out in Halemba’s theoretical model. Without considering experience, and pilgrim experience in particular, it is therefore impossible to fully understand the significance of the apparition sites. In fact, I would argue that the experiences of the visionaries come to have significance for religious organizations through their impact upon the experiences and practices of the pilgrims. The example of Dzhublyk shows, if anything, that the experiences of the visionaries are of secondary significance to those of the pilgrims. As has already been suggested, an interpretation of apparitional sites in terms of something like Whitehouse’s imagistic mode seems to be natural. Doctrinal religions, such as Christianity in most of its various guises, have the problem that the rituals they mostly rely upon fail to generate strong emotional reactions. This invites potentially schismatic imagistic movements (Pyysiäinen 2004). Marian apparitional sites provide

a way to include imagistic mode rituals, and the powerful experiences they are connected to, within a broader doctrinal religion. In light of this and Halemba's awareness of the general significance of pilgrim experiences, it is hard to justify how little she discusses them in her book.

Somewhat analogously to Halemba, CSR in general also does not focus upon religious experience. While it would require proper historical study to trace back the reasons for why a whole research tradition does not consider particular issues important, it may be in part because of the heavy focus on that topic by phenomenology and the specific theoretical assumptions phenomenology works with—those assumptions running largely counter to the approach taken by CSR. Indeed, Lawson and McCauley's 1993 discussion of the impact of those assumptions gives reasons to think that the picture of religious experience the assumptions enforce is too narrow for Halemba's ethnography as much as for a CSR approach. Of course, this does not mean that the phenomena in question cease to exist, just that they go under-investigated in the new theoretical and methodological framework. Going back to concrete examples, such as the experiences of the pilgrims at Dzhublyk and other Marian sites, may provide a new way into thinking about religious experience for CSR, and Halemba's theoretical approach to them welcomes cognitive elaboration. The obvious candidate for such collaboration is Tanya Luhrmann's 2012 work on the way American evangelicals learn to experience the presence of God in their every-day.

Let us, therefore, consider a particular example to bring together the points that have been made thus far regarding how experiences are deemed to be religious and the way they interact with religious practices and organisations. The example we will look at is that of hypnagogic states, and it would indeed require the interdisciplinary approach that Halemba calls for. Without carrying out such a detailed study of it, however, it is only possible to present an outline here—for a full account see Cheyne *et al.* 1999.

When people fall asleep, it is most usual for the initial period to be that of deep sleep. However, in certain circumstances such as when tired or when one's sleep cycle is disturbed, it is possible for the transition to go directly into REM sleep with the result that elements of the waking state and REM sleep come to be concurrent. This results in a number of fairly typical experiences such as temporary paralysis and hallucinations of shadowy figures. Hypnagogic states of this sort have been reported in many different circumstances and have been induced in laboratory settings. Significantly, they have been interpreted by those who experienced them without knowing their physiological cause as evidence of a number of different supernatural entities. The religious supernatural explanation that appears to have been suggested by these states to many throughout medieval Europe is that of the *succubi*—

malicious and lascivious female demons who would visit men in their bed to draw their semen. A more recent non-religious interpretation that appears to have gained much currency in certain circles is that of visitations by aliens. Hypnagogic states have also occurred to numerous people visiting the Marian apparition site of Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is hardly surprising, given that the pilgrims who journey there are often tired upon arrival and may have come from any time-zone around the world. In Medjugorje, these states appear to have been interpreted in a new and far more locally-relevant manner, however, as visitations by the souls of those who fought in the Yugoslavian civil war and who are now trapped in purgatory for the sins they committed in that war. The visiting souls are understood to be begging the pilgrims to pray for them so that they may be freed from purgatory and allowed to enter heaven. Not surprisingly, the practice of praying for those souls is common in Medjugorje. Arguably, this practice has the result of validating the Catholic Church through the figure of Virgin Mary as the necessary intercessor for such prayers to be effective.

The example appears to fit with the CSR view that religions recruit existing cognitive byproducts. Hypnagogic states are not functional in themselves but are the side-effect of the existence of REM sleep. Thus, for example, the temporary paralysis that people experience is a normal part of REM sleep, and its function is to protect us from hurting ourselves while dreaming. However, we are not normally aware of this paralysis because it does not usually occur while we are partially awake. The interpretations and practices connected to hypnagogic states vary with cultural contexts but are also not normally functional. However, in a religious context, they may be recruited to motivate prosocial behaviour—either directly or by helping to stabilize the religion as a whole. Much of this picture is educated guesswork at this stage. However, the point isn't to argue for the interpretation of the particular example but, instead, to show how the experiences that pilgrims have at apparition sites invite investigation using the multidisciplinary tools that CSR has at its disposal. Having said that, the example that has been discussed only really speaks to the issue of how it is that religions come to recruit existing cognitive byproducts, not to the question of how prosocial behaviour is motivated by religions. To explore that aspect of the picture, it is necessary to consider the effects that visiting an apparition site has upon prosocial behaviour.

### Unity and exclusion

According to the stories told about Dzhyblyk, soon after the Virgin Mary first appeared to them, the visionaries asked her why she had come. She said, "I want to help restore the authority of the priests among the people, to unite the divided people and to unite the Church" (2). The call for unity is a common one within religious contexts and fits well with the idea that reli-

gions have the function of motivating prosocial behaviour. Halemba, however, makes two vital observations whose implications she then pursues in order to better understand what the call implies in the case of Dzhublyk. The first is that such a call is open to a large number of potentially competing interpretations. The second is that “[t]o unite is also to create difference: to define the limits of the union and to distinguish those who are embraced by that unity from those who remain outside” (212). In other words, for every ingroup, there is an outgroup. The apparitions of Dzhublyk have had significant implications for how the people of Transcarpathian Ukraine in general, and the pilgrims who worship at Dzhublyk in particular, think about what groups they are, in effect, willing to cooperate with. The most basic point is that the ingroups that have come to be identified with Dzhublyk are not just religious. The site has come to play an important role in the politics of the region, and is seen as strongly supportive of the union of Transcarpathia with the rest of Ukraine on the other side of the mountains. On the other hand, its significance for religious groups has not been simply to strengthen the connection with the Church as a whole. Instead, it has had an impact on religious groupings in a number of ways that are in tension with each other.

CSR has made substantial progress on the question of the connection between prosociality and religion. The main tool for this progress has been the use of behavioural measures—in particular, the use of the Dictator Game—rather than the deeply problematic questionnaire measures that had been used previously. Two key insights gained have been the relative significance of participation in religious activities as opposed to espoused belief and the effectiveness of religious priming (Shariff *et al.* 2016; Xygalatas and Lang 2017). Two issues that have been raised are the cross-cultural differences in how people play the Dictator Game and the limitations of laboratory studies. The basic point raised by Halemba—that a call for unity is simultaneously a call for exclusion—cuts across these questions, yet affects them all. In effect, as we will see, it suggests potential ways forward in how measures such as the Dictator Game can be used in the future.

Some writers, such as David Sloan Wilson (2002), looking at the connection between prosocial behaviour and religion, seem to have drawn something close to an equivalence between prosociality and morality. Yet, it is simple enough to think of counterexamples. Corruption is reciprocal altruism, nepotism is kin selection—both a basis for some kinds of prosociality, both problematic because the choice of ingroup to be cooperated with in both cases runs counter to the interests of the wider community. In a sense, in both cases, the choice of ingroup is too parochial for our liking—much as is the case with racism or religious chauvinism in societies that are multiracial and multicultural. At the same time, norms of prosocial behaviour can be

too anti-individualistic to be considered moral in our societies when they require “too much” from the individual for the good of some broadly-constructed ingroup. In each case, we are looking at conflict between different potential ingroups that could be cooperated with. In the case of Dzhuslyk, the conflicts are many. Within Greek Catholicism, they concern—for example—the choice of the miracle site over the local parish or the choice of the local group over a global one. More broadly, they concern the choice of one of the many particular nationalisms that overlap within Transcarpathia. For the Greek Catholic authorities in Ukraine, the worry is that Dzhuslyk might become a schismatic group as well as that it might identify itself with, and become a centre for, a nationalism other than Ukrainian. While the question of what potential ingroups are vying for the prosocial behaviour of the pilgrims is one that is going to find parallels at other apparition sites; the details are always going to be specific to the particular site in question. Thus, in Medjugorje, the issue is one of the relationship between what is a pilgrimage site for people from around the world and its connection to Croatian nationalism. Methodology such as the Dictator Game can be readily modified to throw light on how pilgrims delineate the bounds of the ingroups they wish to cooperate with, and how the experience of pilgrimage restructures those boundaries. In a sense, all that is required is that information regarding the identity of the “player” to receive the money be modified appropriately. However, to do that in a way, which does justice to the particular realities of the field site where such work is carried out as well as to avoid potentially offending the subjects, a detailed understanding of that site of the kind offered by anthropological studies is necessary. Furthermore, this is bound to be tied up with the particular religious activities the pilgrims participate in, and what kind of priming effects particular religious symbols connected to the site have upon them. Without appropriate anthropological insight, the resulting differences in behaviour could be put down merely to cultural differences—the context of the behaviour lying very much outside of the laboratory setting.

Of course, the question of the context that helps to motivate prosocial behaviour brings us back to the issues of institutionalization and organizational embracement of experiences that were discussed in the previous section. Religious experiences at apparition sites are emotionally powerful and are highly likely to be among the most effective forms of participation in religious practices to motivate prosocial behaviour—for comparison, see Xygalatas 2014. However, what particular groups the pilgrims will be motivated to cooperate with will depend greatly upon the details of how the experiences and practices have been embraced institutionally. Studying this will require a multipronged, multidisciplinary approach of the very kind that Halemba was not able to draw upon when writing her book.

Halemba's book invites a cognitive science of religion "reading" because it presents us with a case study that invites the discerning use of tools that the cognitive science of religion already possesses while simultaneously calling for the development of new tools within the context of an approach that seeks to draw upon the techniques of both CSR and more traditional anthropological research methods. This is very much to be wished for. Researchers studying religion from those two perspectives often see the work of their counterparts as too narrow. But, this is very often due to the fact that they are looking at different aspects of the phenomena. Cooperation on a rich case study such as a Marian apparition site presents an opportunity to view the phenomena from more than a single perspective. Such an approach could then draw upon the rapidly growing tradition of cognitively-informed fieldwork as carried out by Dimitris Xygalatas, Harvey Whitehouse, and Joseph Henrich, among others.

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