



# Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things

*Ann Taves*

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The essence of religion was once widely thought to be a unique form of experience that could not be explained in neurological, psychological, or sociological terms. In recent decades scholars have questioned the privileging of the idea of religious experience in the study of religion, an approach that effectively isolated the study of religion from the social and natural sciences. *Religious Experience Reconsidered* lays out a framework for research into religious phenomena that reclaims experience as a central concept while bridging the divide between religious studies and the sciences.

Ann Taves shifts the focus from "religious experience," conceived as a fixed and stable thing, to an examination of the processes by which people attribute meaning to their experiences. She proposes a new approach that unites the study of religion with fields as diverse as neuroscience, anthropology, sociology, and psychology to better understand how these processes are incorporated into the broader cultural formations we think of as religious or spiritual. Taves addresses a series of key questions: how can we set up studies without obscuring contestations over meaning and value? What is the relationship between experience and consciousness? How can research into consciousness help us access and interpret the experiences of others? Why do people individually or collectively explain their experiences in religious terms? How can we set up studies that allow us to compare experiences across times and cultures?

*Religious Experience Reconsidered* demonstrates how methods from the sciences can be combined with those from the humanities to advance a naturalistic understanding of the experiences that people deem religious.

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