

A critical analysis of the naturalist
approach in the Cognitive Science
of Religion.
A re-reading of the Phenomenology
of Religion

Mathew Gough

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Abstract:

The dissertation will analyse the claims of the naturalist position which has been employed in the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR, hereafter). This reductionist approach has implications for the methodologies religious anthropologists and ethnographers use when collecting observational data. Furthermore, the CSR is not a part of a research experiment where scholars from a range of academic disciplines provide independent and often conflicting theses regarding the origin and persistence of religious belief. This viewpoint contends that the persistence of religion is due to evolutionary psychological factors. As a consequence there are recurring patterns within cultures where the notions of deities are constructed. The anthropologist Pascal Boyer argues that religious adherents are cognitively predisposed to assign human attributes to superhuman entities. This enables individuals to easily remember philosophical concepts regarding how the divine is understood in religious systems. Notwithstanding, there have been critics from the Religious Studies discipline who pose important questions concerning the CSR's radical reductionist approach. For example, Hojbjerg (2008, 105) asks: "it is justified to ask what is left for students of culture, including religion and ritual, to focus on, if not the baseline to which all conscious beliefs are reducible". This dilemma has generated important questions whether there are epistemological and ontological components in religious practice which challenges the CSR's approach. A scholar who constructed a phenomenological approach in understanding ontological experiences was Martin Heidegger. He understood that the focus of existentialism was the question of being. He argues that this led individuals to construct a question of the being wherein a philosophical conception of reality is developed. Heidegger's existential

phenomenology can be seen in the existential encounter when considering death. When an individual considers their own mortality a set of epistemological properties are generated that challenges the normative function of being. Through this encounter, oblivion is encountered by individuals who exist outside of culture. Subsequently, onto – theology is destroyed when a person encounters death. Ernesto de Martino developed an ethnographical account of individuals who through the act of mourning encounter oblivion of their world. Therefore, notions of the divine are devices which are designed to bring individuals back into the world. This humanist viewpoint rightly points out that existential phenomena such as, death are significant in how individuals exist within social structures. The radical reductionist approach of the CSR camp raises fundamental questions regarding the elimination of cultural anomalies. Indeed, there is substantial evidence that the brain reacts to the notion that death is imminent. Near death experience challenges the CSR approach because this phenomena clearly represents that death is an important subjective experience. Medical practitioners have observed that NDEs activates parts of the brain during moments of fear and stress. This view is supported by neuro – theologians who have conducted neuroscientific experiments which reveals that cognitive pathways increase. Indeed, Frontal Lobe and Parietal Lobe generate vivid hallucinations. In my opinion, there is an activation of a pan – psychological structure during NDEs. NDE represents the destruction of their world. Therefore, while the CSR's materialist approach provides an important perspective regarding the origin of religious rituals, there are phenomenological limitations to such an eliminative reductionist approach. The landmark works of de Martino and Heidegger demonstrate that existentialism is a significant aspect to the cognitive construct of the world.

Declaration

The work is original and has not been submitted previously in support of any qualification or course.

M. Gough

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1.1 Introduction

Questions concerning the relationship between culture, cognition and religion have been the academic focus in scientific disciplines because it is an intrinsic component in human physiology. As a distinctive member in the primate family, humans have obtained sophisticated cognitive abilities to construct and share religious ideas concerning alternative transcendent realities (Jensen, 2009, 31). To comprehend the physical properties that individuals possess that enables the capacity to reflect on religious ideas, scientific thinkers have gone to great efforts to develop theories to explain this prominent aspect of the human consciousness. The cognitive study of the mind has resulted in the construction of theories that explores "... the origins, mechanisms and function of religious belief and behaviour. This surge is for the most part a result of the emergence (or re-emergence) of the 'naturalistic' perspective in the study of religion..." (Visala, 2011, 1). The tenets of naturalism when assessing the origin of religious phenomena manifests a number of methodological assumptions. For example, neuroscientific disciplines consider the brain as the primary stimuli behind epistemological comprehension of cultural structures. Indeed, considering the mind as essentially a materialistic mechanism that generates emotional experiences due to certain devices being activated is a controversial claim. A vital aspect in the scientific assessment of how the brain reacts in specific environments, is the elimination of concepts that do not apply to their methodological criteria. Thus, there is a clear agenda within scientific disciplines that evidence that which does not advance their explanatory paradigm, will be rejected. A research programme has emerged in the Cognitive Sciences that is designed to provide experimental evidence is commonly known as the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR, hereafter). The CSR is not a discipline per se. Rather, the thinkers range from a

diverse range of subjects in the natural sciences and the humanities, such as, Anthropology, Cognitive Science, History, Neuroscience and Psychology (Day, 2007, 48). In addition, there is a methodological acceptance in the approaches which are developed that religious phenomena should be primarily analysed from a reductionist perspective. Geertz adequately provides an adequate description of the CSR view when he states that religious beliefs are "... an expression of cognitive mechanisms that are both biological and social which reveal themselves through culture..." (2011, 1). This research programme specifically aims to construct scientific theories that will unravel the origin of religious phenomena. A vital aspect of this academic endeavour is to identify the methods mental devices have developed to detect and register counter – intuitive agents (Visala, 2011, 24 – 25). Thus, thinkers within the CSR attempt to provide evidence for speculative theories which are not yet supported by empirical data. As a result, there is a wealth of hypotheses generated which is natural for a newly formed area of study. Thus, there is an extensive range of academic material available. As a consequence, it is difficult to determine a clear representation of the field (Tremelin, 2006, vii). The surge of academic interest in the scientific study of the mind and how it relates to religious phenomena is due to the recent advances in computational technology. This has resulted in scientists being able consider areas of the human consciousness which have been until now out of their academic scope. For example, the invention of neurological imaging techniques such as single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT) and functional magnetic resonance imaging system (fMRI) has radically improved how scientists are able to detect what happens to the brain during situations that initiate emotional responses (Runehov, 2007, 154 - 155). It is a logical prospect that scientific thinkers will begin to identify which cognitive devices are involved during religious experiences. As a consequence,

these type of radical reductionist approaches raise, important scholarly questions regarding how the CSR's theoretical paradigm for explaining religious phenomena will accommodate interpretive approaches within the humanities. As a consequence, a debate has emerged in various disciplines within the natural sciences and the humanities. Scholars in the anthropology of religion have rightly pointed out that if mental devices are responsible for human interaction then there is a valid question concerning the empirical relevance of ethnographical and phenomenological observations of religious ritual in the CSR. As Højbjerg (2008, 105) rightly points out:

"According to the standard view in cognitive science, most of our thought is unconscious, operating beneath the level of cognitive awareness and too quickly to be focused on. Given that this description of human cognition is correct, it is justified to ask what is left for students of culture, including religion and ritual, to focus on, if not the baseline to which all conscious beliefs are reducible".

Scholars in the anthropology of religion have primarily elaborated on factors that influence the contribution towards the construction of religious imagery. However, the principle phenomenological findings have been challenged in recent times by the radical technological advancement in neuroscience. Within the explanatory paradigm, there is a consensus that the mind should be considered the primary element that generates human experience including the mental comprehension of culture. As a result, thinkers reject the importance of culture within their methodological considerations. Therefore, it is unclear what the anthropological study of religion can contribute towards the CSR.

Thinkers from Theology and Religious Studies have called into question the claims of the CSR regarding the immense influence cognitive devices have in the construction of religious beliefs (Martin, 2008, 98). Religious anthropologists have gone to great efforts to identify factors that contribute towards the transmission of religious symbolism. It is through the ritual process that individuals comprehend how the divine relates to their daily existence. This is primarily achieved by a complex nature of transferring abstract concepts into a system of symbolic structures which are easily memorised. Scholars in the Study of Religion have focused on developed approaches that elaborate on the mysterious nature of religious essence. A fundamental aspect of Religious Studies is the phenomenology of religion. Indeed, this approach has been a key player in the Study of Religion within the West for nearly a century. There have been key thinkers such as Catherine Bell, Clifford Geertz, Ernesto de Martino, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger who have devoted a significant part of their careers to the phenomenological study of religious phenomena. When considering the validity of the naturalist approach, it is adequate to question whether key approaches in the Phenomenology of Religion do not possess the academic breadth to contribute to this new area of academic study. To provide a satisfactory answer to the research question, first the dissertation will develop a literature review to evaluate prominent theories within the CSR. Specifically, key thinkers, Pascal Boyer, Justin Barrett and Harvey Whitehouse will be of particular importance because they have contributed significant theories concerning how recent technological advances in neuroscience relate to the study of religious phenomena. Second, the thesis will critique the theories within this research programme by analysing the phenomenological approaches of Clifford Geertz, Martin Heidegger and Ernesto de Martino. The aim of this chapter is to present a phenomenological –

descriptive model which views the Being as the primary focus of religious ritual. Indeed, the philosophical purpose of religious systems is to provide emotional support that contributes towards a sense of psychological wellbeing. Indeed, this is primarily achieved by individuals entering into a metahistorical state where the divine is present. Third, the essay will critically analyse the current attitudes towards death in the West which is often ignored because of the negativity which is produced. Subsequently, the critical enquiry will propose that Near Death Experience (hereafter NDE) is primarily an epistemological crisis which is manifested due to individuals encountering the *Dasein* that exists beyond all intersubjectivity. Finally, the thesis will propose that practitioners in palliative care should incorporate a paradigm where the denial of death is a response to the psychological realisation that cultural systems cease to be relevant to individuals who are approaching their own demise.

The thesis will argue that the naturalist approach in the CSR has the capacity to be a prominent approach in the Study of Religion. However, a methodological bridge is required where scientific thinkers recognise the importance of prominent phenomenological theories. Specifically, the fact that CSR deny the importance of existential properties such as, emotional reactions, death and cultural factors is not convincing. In my opinion, the importance of ritual and death have an intrinsic rapport in religious systems. The existential implications of death has deep epistemological impact for individuals and cultural structures. As Ferrari points out (2012, 1): "What are we expected to do with the dead". De Martino was concerned with religion and other academic enquiries as much as it provided data on social concerns (Ferrari, 2012, 2). De Martino understood that the act of dying is a constant feature in individuals' comprehension of the world. Indeed, human beings are conscious that their extinction is impending. The philosophy of praxis provided a bedrock for his

theses on the relationship between culture and thanatology. As part of this school of thought was the contributions of Karl Marx and his insights on the place of religion in culture. Death has been a consistent feature in the epistemology of the individual. This is clearly seen in the humanities and in empirical science. However, the impact of death has generated controversy in Western society because it is ignored within mainstream society. As Sartori (2014, xvii) declares: "... is death that bad that we must do everything in our power to prevent patients from dying? What is death anyway? What happens when we die? Why are we so afraid of it?...". This question is the bedrock for de Martino's ethnographical survey of Tarantism. The act of facing oblivion generates unique epistemological properties on the individual who is dying and also on those who engage in mourning.

1.2 ***Research methodology***

In order to provide an adequate answer to the research question, the dissertation will develop a hypothesis which will seek to argue that individuals engage in religious rituals as a method of relieving cultural negativity. It is through a perceived crisis that a dehistoricification process is required. The metahistorical state is achieved by engaging in hybrid religious conceptions of reality where individuals find resolution to the crisis. Therefore, the ritual process is designed to establish a state where the cultural/ existential crisis no longer holds power. This can be argued to be a prominent aspect in the process of the emergence of NDE. Patients report experiencing autonomous phenomena while being medically incapacitated normally include culturally specific religious symbolism. Within a phenomenological paradigm, NDE can be classified as a psychological – protective mechanism where individuals create encounters with supernatural deities as a method of resolving fear. To justify the

hypothesis, the dissertation will apply a Heideggerian phenomenological approach which critically assesses the philosophical comprehension of the question of the Being. Indeed, it is essential that the critical enquiry assesses beliefs and practices of religious adherents within an empirical framework. To achieve this, the methodology will treat human interaction with religious ritual as a means of understanding their place within the temporal reality. Individuals are understood to be primarily concerned with the Being as the bedrock of reality (Maraldo, 2003, 31 - 32). This view expounds that individuals construct an onto – theology which constructs epistemological structures which constructs the essence of the self. Bloechl (2003, vii - viii) rightly points out that this process consists of a: “search for some particular entity that most exemplifies what it is to be. In this regard, occidental thought would be most familiar with the specific form that calls this most exemplary entity “God””. Conceptions of the divine are constructed through comprehending the mechanics of transcendent realities through cultural structures. Scholars employ phenomenology to analyse religious phenomena because this assessment is conducted without bias. As Heidegger (1990, 50) states: “...our treatise does not subscribe to a 'stand-point' or represent any special 'direction'... 'phenomenology' signifies primarily a methodological conception”. Therefore, the thesis defines the function of religious system as a method of considering the place of the dasein within the temporal reality. An essential component of this process is the function of myth within religious rituals. The essay will adopt Eliade’s etiological understanding of myth because it adequately considers the function of myth as a way of comprehending the beginning of the Being. As Eliade (1959, 6 – 7) rightly points out:

“Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the "beginnings." In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds

of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos... Myth, then, is always an account of a "creation"; it relates how something was produced, began to be... “.

It is through the philosophical contemplation of myth that individuals consider the temporal reality as originated and controlled by deities that ritual processes are constructed as a method of contacting those supernatural beings. Ritual performance is the outworking of the being attempting to reach deities who created the world. Indeed, the function of religion is firmly located in establishing the place of the being in an uncertain existence. Moreover, there is a limitation to a phenomenological scope when studying religious structures within diverse cultures. Therefore, the methodology will not attempt to assess various religious rituals because there are a number of cultural aspects which will require consideration in order to construct an adequate assessment. Rather, the critical enquiry will focus on two ethnographical investigations which were conducted within Southern Italy by the historian of religion Ernesto de Martino. However, there are limitations to the methodological scope due to the scientific findings, which will be analysed. The anthropological study of religion is firmly located within the social constructivist approach and the capacity to consider complex scientific theories is restricted. Therefore, the thesis will assess prominent theories within the Cognitive Science of Religion that provides explains religiosity.

2 Literature Review of the Cognitive Science of Religion

Keywords: anthropology, religion, theory of mind, cognition, neuroscience, methodology

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the thesis provided a context which has led to the research question for the dissertation. The aim of the literature review is to map the prominent theories within the Cognitive Science of Religion. This article will provide the groundwork for answering the research question: “To what extent does the CSR's theories of *sui genesis* of religion accommodate approaches from the phenomenology of religion?”. To achieve an adequate answer, a myriad of prominent theories will be analysed. First, the thesis will evaluate the academic environment which established the CSR as a feasible research project in the Study of Religion. Second, the dissertation will discuss landmark studies which established the reductionist approach that is foundational in the examination of religious phenomena.

The origins of Cognitive Science of Religion

To fully consider the importance of the CSR's treatment of religious phenomena; it is appropriate to elaborate key approaches which led to the emergence of this research programme. The CSR has received considerable support in both scientific disciplines and the Study of Religion. This can clearly be seen in the founding

of a dedicated University Institution (Queen's University Belfast, the Institute of Cognition and Culture) and an establishment of an academic journal series (Zygon, Journal of Cognition and Culture). Furthermore, in 2006 C. E. the international association for the CSR was inducted in Aarhus (Sørensen, 2005, 465). The success of this research project raises a significant question; why have prominent scholars in various scientific disciplines contributed a considerable amount of their academic efforts in developing theories in this emerging area of study. A notable thinker who provided an interesting piece proposing a methodological bridge between current scientific hypotheses of culture and the anthropological study of religion is Edward Slingerland in his article *Who's Afraid of Reductionism?* (2008 C. E.). He argues that the prevailing view in Religious Studies that the stimulus in religious belief is firmly generated in culture and not located within cognitive devices¹ is mistaken. As Slingerland (2008, 375) points out: "human-level structures of meaning should not be seen as possessing special ontological status, but rather must be understood as grounded in the lower levels of meaning studied by the natural sciences, instead of hovering magically above them". Essentially, he calls into question the relevance of the social constructivist approach when empirically analysing religious phenomena. As a solution, he contends that ethnographical observations should be configured within a scientific framework so it is specifically interesting to thinkers within the natural sciences. A fundamental part of his hypothesis locates the mind as the primary catalyst in human comprehension of deities² (Slingerland, 2008, 375). Slingerland's

1 Richard Dawkins constructed a theory in the monograph *The Selfish Gene* (2006 C. E.) that structures in culture are the result of memetic transmission. Indeed, he states that memes represents an actual process of ideas which survives by parasitizing the brain (Dawkins, 2006, 192). Initially, Dawkins received substantial praise for his theory on mimetics in culture. Moreover, in recent times, the memetic theory has been criticised as being outdated.

2 The historical developments which led to the natural scientific enterprise started in the Aristotelian worldview which eventually being replaced by the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment in the 18th Century. Moreover, the most radical philosophical developments took place in the 20th

view of culture raised important questions concerning the usefulness of the anthropological study of religious phenomena. It is through Slingerland's classification of religious phenomena as a product of cognitive facilities processing data by complex ontological sets that challenges key theories in Religious Studies (Visala, 2011, 86). Subsequently, thinkers began to consider theories which were primarily developed from scientific disciplines that considered religious phenomena as a natural manifestation of the human mind. The main thrust in this academic endeavour is to determine the cognitive location of the *sui generis* of religious imagination (Tremlett, 2011, 546 – 547). As such, it is through this conceptualisation of religion that provided the methodological foundation which led to the beginning of the CSR. Geertz (2011, 9) provides an adequate view of the CSR's consideration of the relationship between the mind and the generation of religious phenomena when he argues: "... a cultural system and a social institution that governs and promotes ideal interpretations of existence and ideal praxis with reference to postulated transempirical powers and beings... Such beings populate religious worlds in the guise of cosmologies, theologies and anthropologies" Within the CSR, notions of the divine are categorised as being a fundamental aspect³ of religious narratives which functions as a mental adhesive between the religious adherent and their cultural existence (Geertz, 2011, 9). Subsequently, an influential thinker who developed a landmark study into the relationship between the brain and the establishment of cultural structures is Dan

Century with the advances in technology. The vast improvements in scientific research and the cosmological understanding of the Universe (Barrett, 2004, 4 – 5).

³ An alternative view of the relationship between the mind and external phenomena has become popular in recent times. Indeed, Philip Clayton has published an authoritative piece entitled *Mind and Emergence* (2008 C. E.) where he contends that the relationship between divine beings and current cosmological observations suggests an emergent process exists throughout the Universe. Clayton concludes that emergent monist worldview is evident through the temporal reality (Clayton, 2008, 158 – 159). This philosophical worldview is problematic because the view that a type of monism exists throughout the temporal reality can not be verified due to subjective awareness of such a process existing.

Sperber. He was interested in the intellectual pursuit of considering the construction of symbolism that is present within different contexts. According to Sperber, the origin of the construction of symbolic concepts is generated by distinct cognitive tools. This semiotic explanation of religious symbolism is intriguing because it suggests that an existential encounter with an icon as the primary trigger that initiates religious performance. He adopted a functionalist model where the engagement with culture is generated in the mind where existential phenomena is manifested. This provocative view has been an influential factor within the CSR because it evaluates symbolism as an outworking of cognitive devices. As the academic interest in the cognitive study of culture began to increase, so did the range of prominent thinkers from diverse disciplines who construct sophisticated hypotheses. However, there was a distinct methodological gap in how this area of study would be conducted. While scholars were certain that the cognitive study of the mind could contribute towards the assessment of the formation of culture, there was a gap in their knowledge regarding how such an assessment should be empirically conducted.

2.2 *The Boyerian approach towards a scientific study of religion*

The anthropologist Pascal Boyer published the monograph *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas* (1994 C. E.) which suggested that as cognitive tools developed through evolutionary processes, they indirectly gave rise to notions of divine beings. As part of his paradigm, he advocated for an interdisciplinary approach which viewed the scientific study of phenomena as central. In effect, he challenged various traditional theories in cultural studies who ignored the universal features of cognitive devices (Barrett, 1996, 449). As a result, Boyer argues that parallel conceptions of divine entities demonstrate that there is a limit to the approaches used in the

anthropology of religion (Boyer, 1994, vii). As a solution, he suggests that religious belief should empirically examine their evolutionary roots. Essentially, the Boyerian model promotes a naturalist perspective where the existence of divine entities are generated by inserting concepts of natural conceptions of causal agents into entities with special abilities. The epistemological nature of divine beings is an evolutionary by – product of the brain collecting data from the external reality. For example, the cognitive identification process of comprehending the nature of divine entities can be summarised as “an omniscient God is created from the PERSON template with added special cognitive powers” (Murphy, 2009, 267). Thus, mental facilities contains inference systems that receive various types of information. As a consequence, the normative function of this cognitive structure is to construct meaning from various kinds of data. It is through this procedure that certain kinds of concepts such as, notions of gods become easily transmissible in culture (Boyer, 1994, 68). When a group of individuals share philosophical concepts that are registered by cognitive facilities; they are easily memorised and incorporated into their epistemological construction of the temporal reality. The evolutionary development of the mind is responsible for individuals’ capacity to find existential meaning which is outside of empirical analysis. It is through these special type of mental notions that is against the normative human conception of reality. As Boyer (1994, 69) argues: “...a very frequent type of counterintuitive concept is produced by assuming that various objects or plants have some mental properties, that they can perceive what happens around them, understand what people say, remember what happened and have intentions”. It is through this empirical observation that Boyer proposes that the brain is primarily configured to detect complex patterns within the temporal reality. Individuals’ mental facilities that control this process are unable to distinguish agents which objectively

exist within the external reality such as, other human beings and entities that supposedly exist within a divine capacity. As a consequence, anthropomorphic properties is a common occurrence where inanimate objects contain special attributes. It is through the ontological category that the counterintuitive beliefs concerning the existence of divine beings are produced. Therefore, according to Boyer, the notions of divine entities or paranormal occurrences are particularly attractive because human physiology operates in a specific way that is evolutionary valid to ensure human survival. Therefore, religiosity can be explained through mapping the biological dimensions amongst all human beings (Boyer, 1994, 38). A vital aspect of the Boyerian paradigm is that the critical enquiries into religious phenomena should be primarily undertaken by the natural sciences. This methodological assumption is vital to the CSR because Boyer assumes key theories in the anthropological study of religion as an asset to the physicalist approach. When Boyer established his academic system, he developed a set of principles which have subsequently been adopted by thinkers in the research programme.

“(1) The study of religion is considered to be explanatory in nature.

(2) The cognitive science of religion supposes that culture is not an independent level of reality. Religious phenomena consist of nothing more than special configurations and distributions of people’s ideas, discourses, and actions.

(3) The cognitive study of religion assumes that cognitive constraints (universal properties of the mind – brain) are relevant.

(4) Relevant properties of human minds are approached by formulating independent hypotheses of the human mind. Hypotheses are not to be formulated based only on cultural data acquired in an *ad hoc* manner.

(5) Religious representations differ from everyday domains of knowledge such as folk psychology and folk biology. The cognitive science of religion is needed because theories of cognitive anthropology are not sufficient”

(Visala, 2008, 110).

In the monograph *Religion Explained* (2001 C. E.), Boyer was concerned with elaborating how his paradigm should be adopted when conducting empirical investigations into the study of ritual. As fundamental aspect of his approach is considering diverse religious behaviour as a normative human quality which should be examined as a whole rather than focusing on separate traditions (Boyer, 2001, 11). Indeed, it is through this naturalist perspective that Boyer contends that optimum functioning brains have the capacity to adopt religious ideas into their daily existence. The reason why individuals are attracted to religious concepts is due to “*acquisition*” and “*transmission*”. It is through the interplay between two mental processes that human beings are attracted to a specific type of religious concepts that are subsequently easily acquired (Boyer, 2001, 15). As part of the criteria of assessing how the brain performs under certain physiological conditions, the brain is understood as the driving force behind all of human experience. The CSR determines that a catalyst of religious phenomena in diverse cultures is located within cognitive facilities which drives concepts which are easily memorised through ritual (Yelle, 2006, 373). Therefore, the aim of the CSR programme is to empirically identify the cognitive devices which manifests the belief in divine entities. Mental processes are considered a universal factor in religious experience (Tremlett, 2011, 545). Thus, the Boyerian model views religious belief as a malfunction of cognitive devices detecting superhuman agents as part of the normative process of the detection of causal agents. Indeed, the theoretical model that Boyer advocated provided the methodological foundations by which scholars from a range of disciplines could provide their own

approaches. It was through the anthropological insights that were central to the Boyerian paradigm that the natural scientists understood that a scientific study of religious phenomena was within their reach.

2.3 *Justin Barrett and the naturalness of religious belief*

The Cognitive Scientist Justin Barrett has been an influential scholar in the CSR. He has been responsible for developing key approaches which have proved significant in subsequent studies in the Cognitive assessment of religion. When he established his paradigm, he agreed with Boyer's contention that the belief in deities was counter – intuitive. However, he argues that the belief in any type of entities was the product of cognitive tools working naturally. Thus, extending Boyer's classification of the mental processes that initiate the generation of the belief in religious phenomena. According to Barrett, the belief in speculative concepts such as, ancestors, gods and other religious concept occurs because they constitute “minimally counterintuitive” (MCI, hereafter) perceptions of the temporal reality (Barrett, 2004, 22). It is through these cognitive tools that enable the mind to develop special representations. Indeed, Barrett explain how the creation of a MCI is generated by the violation of the reflective mode transforms a typical agent into the personal belief that that item possesses unique powers. Therefore, it was through his conceptualisation of religious belief that he considers the epistemological power of autonomous beliefs as consisting of: “... mental tools (especially the Theory of Mind) that handle such matters proceed seamlessly. However, because ancestor have no physical bodies, the notion of them also creates interest and speculation that might not take place when reasoning about ordinary people?” (Barrett, 2004, 24). It is through the mental tools that once the individual considers agency that does not exist

within the normative scope of the natural world, there is a process that occurs which generates a unique set of personal considerations that these concepts are easily memorable. The cognitive process of memorising religious concepts arises from their relationship between reflective and non – reflective facilities that are present in all human beings. A vital aspect of these mental mechanisms is that individuals understand the world in a manner that is distinct to homo sapiens (Barrett, 2007, 180). Therefore, culture and religion are a manifestation of these processes. This physicalist model locates the mind as the primary factor in the generation and sustainment of how individuals existentially consider the temporal reality. Barrett's theory of mind is dependent on the consensus that the conceptualisation of religious deities is achieved by an impressive array of equipment. Barrett compares the mind to a multifunctional stratagem which transforms raw external data from the temporal reality into information that are classified into specific types of data. Such as, the cognitive device which is response for the mental depiction of a tree is not associated with the physiological sensors that indicate when a part of the body is injured (Barrett, 2007, 180). The intrinsic factor in reflective beliefs is dependent on individuals' consciously accepting through philosophical or psychological determination. This is vital aspect in Barrett's view because he rightly observes that reflective beliefs are not generated by empirical validation or rationality. Notwithstanding, non – reflective beliefs are processed by background mental devices that individuals are not consciously aware of. Barrett provides an interesting example of the non – reflective beliefs when he states: "... research suggests that it is quite natural to assume non – reflectively (automatically and without conscious awareness) that members of other human groups (e.g., racial, regional and national) are more alike than people within one's own group..." (Barrett, 2007, 181). This belief is generated because the unconscious

apparatus memorises specific type of data that resonates with the individual. Barrett rightly points out that even though the individual in question may reject this bias, the non – reflective bias will remain. Indeed, Barrett provides an example of this when he states that there is an unconscious bias towards the belief in superhuman agency. He attempts to provide readers in *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (2004 C. E.) with a guide to maintain an atheistic existence where the author recommends spreading antireligious rhetoric (Bulkeley, 2006, 239). The radical reductionist approach that Barrett adopts clearly identifies the belief in god as an evolutionary by-product which is supported by his theory of mind. Towards providing evidence for his viewpoint, the Judeo – Christian theistic notion of the divine is analysed where he argues that this god emerges from an extension of reflective concepts of causal agents. As Barrett (2004, 87 – 88) contends: "... mental tools suggests that somebody has intelligently designed much of the world and may willingly embrace God as the Creator". Therefore, once the reflective belief about the structure of the natural world is fixed then individuals are prone to accept MCIs⁴. The theses of Barrett and Boyer had significant implications for the cognitive sciences because there had not been until that point a clear methodological basis for studying religious phenomena. Indeed, a myriad of inter-disciplinary approaches were suggested⁵. However, a gap remained regarding how the CSR could significantly contribute towards the anthropological study of culture and religion. The interpretive and explanatory disciplines were

⁴ An alternative cognitive theory of mind has received considerable success in the CSR which advocated the existence of a hyper agency detection device. A monograph that has received attention in popular culture is Jesse Bering's *The God Instinct* (2013 C.E.). The primary premise contends that the HADD is an evolutionary feature in early hominid settlements. Prior to this stage in evolution, early homo sapiens were identical to other creatures (Bering, 2006, 165). It is through this evolutionary process that individuals began to identify patterns which suggested the existence of divine deities.

⁵ A intriguing theory has been developed by Herz where she argues that all of human choice including the denial of rotting food is the result of specific cognitive devices reacting to evolutionary adaptations (Herz, 2012, 7).

considered incompatible because they had significantly different methodological considerations (Visala, 2011, 86).

2.4 Harvey Whitehouse and the two divergent modes of religiosity

The Social Anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse has been an influential thinker in providing contemporary cognitive theories concerning religious rituals and how it relates to ethnographical research. Indeed, it was through his ethnographic investigation in Papa Guinea that he constructed the idea that religious consciousness is not a singular process which is developed in the mind. It was through his dualistic understanding that he contended that the belief in the divine has two independent realities. Whitehouse elaborated on his approach in the monograph *Arguments and Icons* (2000 C. E.) where there are two interconnected modes of religious belief. He argued that the origin of religion can be understood as the doctrinal and the imaginary. Imaginary conceptions of the divine are present in small primitive societies where non – structuralist ideas about gods exist. Whereas, doctrinal conceptions emerge out of advanced cultural systems. As part of these two modes of religious belief, there are independent mental facilities which are significantly impacted by cognitive processes. First, the semantic memory system refers to what psychologists define as schemas; this theory denotes that individuals adopt roles in specific social situations (Whitehouse, 2004, 6). Second, Whitehouse was convinced that episodic memory devices activate certain memories on command when specific situations arise. This is important when religious adherents participate in religious ritual. Symbolic imagery triggers the cultural memories associated with the ritual process involved. This is the reason why the transmission of religious concepts are easily shared between cultures (Whitehouse, 2004, 65).

3 The relevance of the phenomenology of religion in CSR

Key words: anthropology, death, de Martino, epistemology, Heidegger, phenomenology, religion

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will assess whether the critique of phenomenology of religion from religious studies which emerges out of the scientific study of religion is accurate and should be replaced by naturalist approaches. To provide an adequate answer, the thesis will firstly evaluate the origin of the phenomenology of religion which provided the methodological ability to study religious structures within an empirical capacity. Second, Martin Heidegger's study of the question of the Being which had significant influence in phenomenology of religion. As part of his phenomenological analysis, Heidegger presented a critique of the physicalist approaches that are employed in the natural sciences. Third, the dissertation will construct a phenomenological survey of the ritual process which was conducted by Ernesto de Martino. The findings were formulated in Martino's ethnocentric model contended that the ritual process was a response to existential crisis or 'the Crisis of the Presence' which can only be resolved by entering into meta-history. Finally, the critical enquiry will consider the scope of the approaches that are developed by critically how prominent have conceptualised the importance of existentialism when individuals engage in religious rituals.

3.2 A critique of the CSR approach when considering religious phenomena

The relationship between recent advances in Cognitive Science and the insights that can be generated from the tools that have been developed has been significant in the CSR's consideration of religious activities. Indeed, it is through the task of thinkers who are attempting to establish this research programme as a key player in the Study of Religion that alternative approaches are rejected. It is through the use of naturalism that prominent approaches eliminate the importance of existential and cultural factors that contribute towards the belief in supernatural beings. Undoubtedly, the CSR's scientific examination of religion demands a decisive break from anthropological observations of religious systems. The treatment of religious phenomena is analytically constrained by overarching scientific methodological assumptions. This academic restriction can be analysed from the Boyerian paradigm where scientific studies can only be conducted through a physicalist framework. Therefore, scholars are limited in their methodological abilities because if they propose a contention that challenges mainstream theories then they will surely be rejected. The consequence of this view is that theoretical hypotheses that are proposed will suffer eventual elimination due to the updated scientific understanding of the intrinsic structure of the temporal reality (Visala, 2011, 87). This is a common prospect in scientific disciplines where once prominent theories are rejected due to their inadequate capacity to evolve. As Greyson (2010, 37) argues: "It is the exploration of extraordinary circumstances of mental function that reveals the limitations of the current model of mind - brain identity and the need for a more comprehensive explanation". This is highly problematic when attempting to determine the fundamental elements in the construction of religious performance. Thus, it is unlikely

that a naturalist approach will provide methodological breadth that is currently present in anthropological paradigms that observe religious phenomena. The anthropological method of assessing religious phenomena has solid methodological foundations that scholars have used to formulate their theses. Indeed, it is unclear how the approaches that are employed in the CSR will provide the academic scope of empirically assessing complex religious constructs that the phenomenology of religion has been able to achieve. Scholars within the CSR have been aware of this intrinsic weakness in the research programme. As a result, they have attempted to provide methodological configurations that are designed to transcend the eventual decay of scientific theories. Ilkka Pyysiäinen published the monograph *How Religion Works: Towards a New Cognitive Science of Religion* which called for a new approach in the CSR. He argued that thinkers should primarily focus on ritual processes as a method of discovering the intrinsic impact of cognitive faculties during such religious activities. Pyysiäinen begins his monograph by disagreeing with the common critique against the CSR that the essence of religion is beyond scientific measurement. Rather, thinkers are interested in "... how people communicate about the idea of something being a mystery, there is no a priori reason why this should be beyond the reach of scientific methods. After all, we are dealing here with human thought and behavior" (Pyysiäinen, 2003, vii). By the development of human thought, the scholar is referring to the development of approaches which will be specifically designed to identify cognitive faculties in ritual processes. It is through this classification of ritual structures that explanatory approaches⁶ reject interpretive methods. The principle reason why

⁶ There has been an interesting monograph published by the philosopher Thomas Nagel which is entitled *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo – Darwinian Conception of Nature is almost certainly Wrong* (2012 C.E.) who argues that the prevailing materialistic view of nature is wrong because it does not consider the epistemological categories that all human beings possess. As a solution, he argues for a neutral monist paradigm which considers a holistic view of individuals' awareness of the cosmos (Nagel, 2012, 33 - 34).

social constructivist methods are eliminated from his methodology is because he argues that approaches in the humanities are founded on folk theories of religion which are present within Christian – Judeo and Islamic traditions (Pyysiäinen, 2003, vii). The intrinsic limitations of interpretive approaches located within their definition of religion is restricted to Western notions of the divine. Indeed, it is through this categorisation of religion that Pyysiäinen rejects social constructivist approaches because they do not possess the methodological scope to adequately assess non – Western religious traditions. Rather, the agenda of his study is to build a case for a scientific explanation that can provide a holistic explanation for the function of religious phenomena as human activity that is not restricted by complex cultural systems (Pyysiäinen, 2003, ix). Within his definition of religion, the common scientific view that religious belief contains a *sui generis* is rejected. Rather, religious belief is considered to be a natural aspect of the human imagination. This view is convincing because the conceptualisation of religion as containing a measureable point of origin which can be empirically identified is a speculative notion. In its place, there is a drive to locate religious imagery as a product of cognitive facilities attempting to collect and process data. This view has clearly been adopted from Barrett's perspective on the naturalness of religiosity. However, the use of symbolism in ritual is increased as a method of expressing evolutionary adaptations. Individuals have obtained the ability to construct notions of religious narratives into symbolic icons. It is through this process that the imagery becomes an existential focus for religious adherents (Geertz, 2011, 9). Indeed, this view demonstrates that there is a clear empirical focus on the evolutionary origins of the transmission of symbols in the CSR. As part of this academic interest, Pyysiäinen has conducted an intriguing analysis of the evolutionary nature of the emergence of symbolic structures in ritual. As part of this assessment,

he critically evaluates the influential work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (year) who has been significant in the study of symbolism and culture.

This critical analysis of Geertz's assessment of the function of symbols in religion is unconvincing. Geertz rightly points out that the function of symbols is to transform abstract concepts into plausible additions of the temporal reality in a set of ritualistic actions that can be interpreted by religious adherents. Indeed, the existential meaning of these abstract concepts differ widely by their respective culture. However, the function of symbolic constructs is to provide individuals' with a reformed sense of disposition. According to Geertz, religion primarily consists of a system of symbols that are designed to initiate moods within a given context (Geertz, 1968, 2 - 3). It is through this phenomenological analysis that individuals are primarily interested in development of changing their perception of the temporal reality. In contrast, there is a limitation to the CSR's consideration of the diversity of religious beliefs. Whitehouse defines religious constructions into two camps – the imagery and doctrinal which exist at separate points depending on the advancement of the communities. He admits there is a difficulty in the implementation of such a simplistic religious theory in diverse traditions. Indeed, it is adequate to locate ritual process as an emotional enhancer for the religious adherent. As a consequence, their existential awareness of the temporal reality is significantly modified. In my view, Geertz' anthropological consideration of symbolism points out that a study of religious icons should begin with the existential framework of the religious adherent who is engaging in the ritual performance. Therefore, there are a number of methodological difficulties when presenting theories from a scientific dimension that would generate knowledge in the anthropology of religion. First, Religious Studies is primarily interested in the examination of human

activity when engaged in the belief in supernatural beings that is beyond the capability of scientific verification. Second, it is probable that an encompassing scientific study of religious phenomena will not be reached because of the complexity of the personal beliefs of the thinkers who are engaged in the empirical enquiry into religious action (Martin, 2012, 588). As a consequence, there is no way of empirically reaching an accurate consensus regarding which cognitive device is manifesting diverse religious experiences. Rather, it is a speculative exercise which will ultimately result in thinkers being unable to achieve satisfactory explanations for factors that generate diverse imagery in religious rituals. This view is supported by scholars in the humanities who contend that there is a lack of empirical data when determining the location of cognitive devices in the brain such as the HADD (Visala, 2011, 22). Indeed, the social scientific critique of the phenomenology of religion in religious studies has provoked substantial debate in various disciplines (Blum, 2012, 1025). The main aspect of the interdisciplinary discussion has been focused on how naturalist approaches could formulate findings using social scientific approaches. There is no way of yielding data which would support such theories because social scientific approaches are specifically designed to study phenomena from a contemporary scientific perspective. Approaches that adopt scientific methodologies to construct theses which attempted to identify the *sui generis* of religion rejects existential dimensions of individuals' belief in divine entities. Such phenomena is excluded from social scientific methodologies because the scientific tools which are used are unable to detect subjective phenomena which are generated in culture. This type of radical reductionist approaches has been advocated in the CSR as evidence for their hypotheses. Essentially, the natural sciences are designed to analyse phenomena which exist in the temporal reality. The physicalist approach surveys the evolutionary development of cognitive pathways.

However, there is a significant philosophical aspect in the CSR because thinkers have generated a dichotomy within their theses. Specifically, there is no separation between the material world and the existential. Indeed, scholars determine constructs such as, society and religion as the product of evolutionary processes. This dichotomy raises methodological questions about the radical reductionist approach and the academic consideration of ritual. The claim that religious belief are products of cognitive processes is not convincing because typically there are significant existential factors which lead individuals to follow a religious system. As a result, the CSR's reductionist approach is unable to achieve an appropriate empirical result because the scientific method views human action as being void of substance (Watson, 2014, 101). Indeed, empirical findings which are derived from experiments would not accurately reveal the existential realisations of religious experiences. Essentially, reductionist approaches that the CSR employs constructs a paradigm which does not include the complexity of human thought. Rather, it is appropriate to construct a theory of ritual performance which includes existentialism rather than applying a physicalist model of rhetorical transmission as a main factor behind the persistence of religious belief (Yelle, 2006, 372). An important area of philosophical insight concerning how individuals comprehend the temporal reality is located in the natural sciences. The materialist claim that existentialism is the manifestation of the brain responding to the data that is received from the external world has had immense influence on how human beings comprehend their own existence. This view contends that all phenomena in the temporal reality are controlled by mechanical laws (Greyson, 2010, 37). Thus, scientific thinkers who support this view are sceptical concerning claims of the afterlife because it was beyond their scientific capabilities to assess the validity. The inclusion of naturalism within the CSR's prominent methodological assumption is

not convincing. Therefore, a primary dimension of the CSR is answering the question why the transmission of religious ideas is a consistent feature within human civilizations. This is a significant aspect of the research programme because it is the conception of symbols is a primary aspect in this research programme because it has enabled individuals to capacity to share and comprehend religious narratives. To provide further evidence for this view, the thesis will examine the prominent theses within the CSR that utilises a strict naturalist approach. Indeed, this scientific enterprise has yielded a number of significant insights which has incorporated cutting edge scientific findings into the CSR's examination of religious phenomena. The claim that religious rituals are implicated by mental devices which react to evolutionary biases calls into question social constructivist approaches. The physicalist position locates the brain as the driving force in human experience and social interaction (Trimble, 2007, 4). This scientific viewpoint on the persistence of religious systems is problematic because it locates a religious adherent as an automatous agent who is physiologically reacting to their cognitive state. In neurophysiology, there is agreement amongst thinkers that human thinking is highly influenced by the mental condition of the brain. However, disagreements emerge amongst scholars when attempting to empirically identify the relationship between the workings of the mind and the physical stimuli that is influenced by external properties. Indeed, within the field of genetics, it is commonly known that diet, genes and quality of water influence how effectively the endocrine system functions (Badham, 1984, 40). Medical issues arise when these components do not provide the necessary requirements; then the body will cease to operate within optimal performance. For example, if a human does not consume water that contains "... less than half a microgramme of iodine per litre our thyroid gland will not function properly, and in consequence, we will find mental

activity difficult, memory and powers of concentration will weaken, and we will lack initiative and drive in our lives” (Badham, 1984, 40). This is an interesting fact because a fundamental aspect of contributing to a religious ritual is to be psychologically aware of the existential importance of the event. Thus, the phenomenological consequences of the thyroid gland malfunctioning can manifest significant difficulties in individuals’ concentration in each ritualistic stage. These type of questions concerning the degree of the impact human physiology has on the existentialism of religious believers’ comprehension of the divine during religious activities has influenced the cognitive sciences to establish the CSR. This presents a problem when attempting to adopt physicalist approaches. Prominent theories in the anthropological study of religion consider specific cultures as being influential in the specific existential function of religious systems⁷ which are grounded in culture. Indeed, a significant problem arises within physicalist approaches when attempting to verify scientific hypotheses in diverse religious structures using social constructivist approaches. The point of departure is located around the claim that the mind is the central component that generates religious phenomena. This is undoubtedly a controversial perspective in the anthropological study of religion because this methodological assumption locates religious phenomena as created in certain patterns in human cognition. This is the reason why prominent thinkers in this research programme reject anthropological theories in Religious Studies. Therefore, the construction of a unified reductionist approach⁸ within the anthropological study of religion is problematic. If the CSR’s

⁷ Karl Marx observes that religion is a human construct which attempts to contact the divine but rather finds the Being (Marx, 2008, 41). Marx provides a sufficient description of the existential function of religious structures when he states (2008, 41 - 42): “... Man makes religion, religion does not make man... It is the *fantastic realization* of the human essence because the human essence has no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore mediately the fight against the *other world*, of which religion is the spiritual aroma”.

⁸ The philosopher Mary Midgley contends that there is a paradox between scientific findings and how individuals comprehend the temporal reality. A primary reason for this conflict is located within reductionist approaches that conceptualises phenomena in an abstract manner. A fundamental part of

approaches reject anthropological observations of culture then it is unclear how these will be empirically tested. Indeed, this has been a focus of intense debate between the scientists and anthropologists because the radical reductionist approach locates interpretive theses as secondary resources. Purvis (2013, 65) supports this view when he states that: "... those who advocate for the "embodied" approach seek to extract religious studies from the "social constructivist quagmire... scholars of religion must dispense with the notion that abstract entities like religion and culture stand outside the individual". Thus, the claims in the CSR lack the empirical data which is necessary when constructing approaches using the scientific method. The critical enquiry supports the view that the radical approach within the CSR should incorporate specific phenomenological observations. Specifically the study of the *Dasein* and how the engagement with ritual processes has been an influential area of study in the phenomenology of religion.

3.3 The origin of phenomenological study of religion

The origins of the phenomenology of religion in Religious Studies can be rooted back to the German Philosopher Johann Heinrich Lambert in 1764 C. E. and in the English scholarly institution in 1798 C. E. by John Robison. Subsequently, the phenomenological study of religious phenomena has developed into a sophisticated school of thought in continental philosophy since the 19th Century. The agenda in the early studies in the phenomenology of religion was to establish a *Religionswissenschaft*. The science of religions did not consider the existence of the god as a proven fact. Rather, it was an approach that was interested in the religious

this philosophical worldview is the assumption that individuals' comprehension of the being is nothing more than an illusionary construction in the brain (Midgley, 2014, 22 – 23). This has significant consequences in how thinkers approach the question of the self in disciplines which adopt reductionist approaches.

experiences of individuals. Indeed, this German term was first used by Muller to refer to a discipline which did not seek to adopt insights from theology and philosophy. The intention of this new field of research was to empirically analyse religious structures. As part of the process, the phenomenology of religion adopted Muller's understanding of myth (Bell, 2009, 8 – 9). The interaction between myth and ritual is a fundamental topic in the phenomenology of religion. It is through this philosophical interaction that individuals interpret religious symbols as a method of gaining access to the divine. There has been substantial debate concerning whether myth or ritual was the start of the process which led to the construction of religious structures. For example, Eliade contended that religious consciousness was located primarily in myth because it provided an etiological depiction of how the world came into existence. Subsequently, it is through myth that individuals comprehend their place in the cosmic order (Eliade, 1963, 2). Within cargo cults, there was a persistent pursuit of creating rituals which created a bridge between this world and the divine. Therefore, the ritual process was undoubtedly concerned with attempting to discover their origins. In contrast, a popular thinker who contended that early religious structures were the manifestation of cognitive explanation in primitive civilizations was Tylor; scholars approved of his notion that myth is a method of intellectually comprehending the temporal reality. However, thinkers were sceptical regarding his naturalist conclusion by stating that Tylor had developed a theory from his own subjective experience (Bell, 2009, 9). The debate between anthropological and naturalist approaches has been a fundamental aspect in the historical development of Religious Studies. As a consequence, the methodological configurations, which were developed during this epoch were vital in the development of Religious Studies. The phenomenology of religion can be adequately described as a specific method of assessing religious phenomena rather

than an independent discipline⁹. As a result, the phenomenological approach can be adopted in a range of topics in Religious Studies (Sharma, 2001, 27). Consequently, the method has developed a number of important methodological assumptions when assessing the intrinsic nature of religious essence. The philosophical aim of the phenomenology of religion was not to consider religious experience as something which exists outside the scope of empirical study; rather it was interested in assessing the cultural and existential elements that contributed to religious life. This technique of comprehending religious phenomena as observable product of the human experience has led to scholarly acceptance that the phenomenology of religion is an important contribution to the anthropological study of religion. It has become one of the principle cornerstones for scholars who are interested in comprehending the experience of religious adherents. As Cox (2010, ix) points out: "... the phenomenology of religion has defined the dominant method in Religious Studies for well over 70 years and still represents a fundamental approach within mainstream thinking among scholars of religion". An important dimension in the phenomenological method was the scholarly focus on existentialism of religious believers. Indeed, this focus of study has generated intriguing questions concerning the reasons which lead individuals to adopt religious worldviews. To discover the elements that contribute towards the establishment of religious belief, the phenomenological assessment evaluates specific cultural dimensions (Flood, 1999, 3). The interaction between religious systems and culture is important aspect in the anthropological study of religion because scholars have determined that cultural structures configure how individuals interpret religious concepts (Bell, 2009, 33). Therefore, existentialism is an important factor in how thinkers consider religious consciousness. Indeed, the

dominance of phenomenology of religion in Religious Studies has provided the philosophical basis of Heidegger's study of the *Dasein*.

3.4 Martin Heidegger and the question of the Being

Martin Heidegger (1889 C. E. –1976 C. E.) was a major contributor in the development of the phenomenology of religion and a major advocate for existential philosophy. His corpus was concerned with how individuals ontologically comprehend their place in the temporal reality. An important aspect which emerged from his philosophical curiosity was concerning the nature of the *Dasein*. This philosophical question would become the focus of Heidegger's thinking during his career (quote). The main thrust in this academic pursuit was concerning the ontological existence of beings. This enquiry undoubtedly fascinated him to the point that as he progressed throughout his career, the philosophical nature of the question of the Being significantly altered. However, he was convinced that this area of philosophical enquiry was beneficial (Frede, 1993, 42). Heidegger contended that the question of the *Dasein* had been the focus of mainstream philosophical thinking into the nature of the metaphysical reality for two thousand years. Indeed, he was fascinated by the Greek philosophers especially Aristotle who were responsible for early questions concerning the nature of the Being (Frede, 1993, 43). It was through this philosophical curiosity that led the young Heidegger to enrol on a *Habilitationsschrift* which enabled him to teach at the University (complete) as a *Privatdozent* after a short period on active duty in the army in 1914 C. E. Consequently, it was during this period of his career that he began to develop his theory on the question of the *Dasein*. His first dissertation considered the influential work of Aristotle who was mystified concerning the materialistic substance of the being (Krell, 2011, xxiv). This question had

substantial effect on Heidegger's philosophical heritage because this perplexing enigma had not been fully solved in Western Philosophy. Thus, Heidegger was concerned with the nature of the being as understood by prominent Greek thinkers. As Frede (1993, 44 - 45) rightly points out: "It is Aristotle's doctrine of the categories of beings that Heidegger refers to when he presents his view...". It was through this philosophical enquiry into the ontological structure of the temporal reality that led Heidegger to begin to construct his influential corpus. Heidegger was undoubtedly convinced that the reason why philosophers had been unable to successfully answer this philosophical question was located in their comprehension of the question itself. It was his contention that the nature of the Being had a unique existential essence within each epoch. Therefore, an existential phenomenological framework was required to provide an accurate assessment of how the Being was understood. This is the reason why during his second degree, Heidegger rejected critical realism because he rightly contended that an abstract perspective does not possess the methodological power to explain the dimensions that contribute towards the subjective encounter with the Being. Rather, Heidegger confirmed that the study of the question of the being could only be achieved by realising that "... metaphysics was not the "Subject" of knowledge – theory but "the living Spirit" of a historical age" (Krell, 2011, xxiv). Indeed, the essence of the Being could only be existentially perceived by individuals' within a specific epoch. While Heidegger was primarily interested in philosophy, his empirical findings had significant impact on the phenomenology of religion. It was through his existential assessment that individuals primarily comprehend their place within the temporal reality in a specific historical age. Therefore, phenomenologists are required to consider each religious tradition as a cultural system which is designed to aid individuals to consider the *Dasein*. It is

inadequate to consider religious essence as fixed. Rather, it is an aspect of the human condition that is fluid in nature. Therefore, the phenomenological approach should configure the nature of the *Dasein* as primarily a concept that has no specific methodological direction. It is a philosophical paradigm that is interested in the existential nature of entities (Heidegger, 2011, 30). Subsequently, as Heidegger began to develop his philosophical treatise which would later become the *Time and Being* (1927 C. E.), he briefly examined the recent scientific advancements into the study of the mind. He was sceptical about the claim that an explanation of the essence of meaning could be established through a psychological analysis (Frede, 1993, 46). He rejected this reductionist viewpoint because he was sceptical that this existential attribute could be measured by scientific tools. To Heidegger, the nature of meaning did not exist within a physical mode. Rather, it was a manifestation of individuals' exposure to and existing within the temporal reality. Therefore, Heidegger was content that the emergence of religious consciousness is located in the existential awareness of the being.

3.5 *The validity of the naturalist approach within the Heideggerian paradigm*

In 1936 C. E., Heidegger participated in a lecture where he commented on the current advancements in the contemporary sciences. It was clear there was a sense of perpetual crisis in the humanities. His presentation was titled "Basic Questions of Metaphysics" where he discussed the common assumption that the medieval scientific method constructed data using speculative conceptual methods whereas modern science's worldview deduces the intrinsic structure of the external world through scientific measurement. Heidegger entitled this apparent dichotomy by constructing what he calls the *mathematical projection* (Krell, 2008, 186). As part of this paradigm, he commented that there is indeed a division between ancient, medieval and modern

sciences. The difference is located in the deployment of methods when comprehending the intrinsic structure of the external world. Notably, prominent natural scientists during the sixteenth and seventh century were also competent philosophical thinkers. He supports this claim by rightly pointing out that the naturalist scientists did not only record information; they also constructed sophisticated philosophical theses (Krell, 2008, 187). However, it was this philosophical stance that led Heidegger to distance himself from the naturalist view of reality. Rather, the Heideggerian model was concerned that “Every sort of thought... is always only the execution and consequence of a mode of historical *Dasein*, of the fundamental position taken toward Being and toward the way in which beings are manifest...” (Heidegger, 2008, 204). Indeed, the phenomenological was concerned with how the Being is comprehended in diverse religious structures. Heidegger’s phenomenological approach is convincing because the methodological focus is located on the religious believers’ notion of the world where divine entities inhabit. It was unclear how a scientific investigation of the mind would be able to locate the mental dimension that generated complex existential awareness of the being. Rather, Heidegger was interested in observing the actions of the religious adherent within a phenomenological scope where the manifestation of the *Dasein* within a specific epoch was located. As a result, thinkers who were interested in ethnographic research as a method of collecting data adopted Heidegger’s phenomenological approach.

The historian of religion Ernesto de Martino (1901 – 1965 C. E.) was born on December 1st 1901 C. E. in Naples Italy where he later received his initial academic training under the tutorage of influential thinker Adolf Omodeo where he graduated with a degree in philosophy. His thesis which was later published, criticised the historical and philological problem within the academic theories surrounding the

Eleusinian *Gephyrismi* (Jones, 2005, 2266). Martino was concerned with the psychological impact of the individuals who incorporate religious conceptions, such as magical rituals as a mechanism to avoiding perceptual crisis. He was particularly influenced in his early career by the historian of religion Rudolf Otto (1869 –1937 C. E.). Otto argued that the origins of religion was the philosophical outcome of reflecting on the structure of the Universe. However, Martino disagreed with Otto concerning the origin of religion as a product of *priori*. Instead, religious belief is regarded as a cultural facility to coping with uncertainty. The view that the sacred was distinctly otherness was rejected. According to Martino, the origin of Western civilization can be traced to a paradigm that was concerned with magic and the pursuit of rationality. This can clearly be seen in the dialectical transition from the "... demonological magic to Renaissance natural magic, with the Protestant polemic against Catholic ritual, with the founding of the natural sciences and their methods, with the Enlightenment and its faith in a reforming human reason and the various currents of thought tied to the discovery of historical dialectic and reason" (Martino, 2015, xi). This multidimensional aspect was engrained into the religious consciousness that a variant can be seen in contemporary Western society (Martino, 2015, xi – xii). To demonstrate the complex nature of the ritual process that is regularly conducted by religious adherents especially when considering mythological interpretations of reality. Martino (2001, 92) contended that: "Lucanian magic is a complex of socialized and traditionalized techniques aimed at protecting the presence from the "crisis of psychological misery"...". The agenda of Martino ethnographic investigation was to identify the cultural aspects which were responsible for the perception of alienation within Italy. A central aspect of this task was identify how the use of magic in the ritual process contributed towards how religious adherents understood the divine. Martino (2001,

92) states that: "Lucanian magic is a complex of socialized and traditionalized techniques aimed at protecting the presence from the "crisis of psychological misery"...". This is an important aspect in the critical enquiry because while there are significant scientific techniques that have improved the existence of individuals, religious systems remain to be an important dimension. To Martino, the existence of this dialectical structure is due to the negativity of existence in an uncertain reality and the incapacity to express certain behaviour (Martino, 2015, xii). There is a dimension of human existence which encounters trauma that is generated by a state of perpetual suffering (Massenzio, 2005, 214). According to de Martino, this phenomena is known within the common magical ceremonies in Lucania as binding. The characteristics of this psychological condition are described as a feeling of "... domination, a being acted upon by a force that is as strong as it is mysterious, one that totally removes a person's autonomy as well as his capacity for decision – making and choice" (Martino, 2015, 3). This presence can take a form of specific economic limitations in primitive societies such as, having a lack of personal wealth or obtaining an insufficient amount of food. There is a psychological glimpse that individuals' are not in control of their existence. Martino rightly observes that the psychological presence of the individual is a fragile process of existing between nature and culture (Massenzio, 2005, 215). The existential difficulty becomes clear through everyday negativity where the *Dasein* encounters crisis. As a response, individuals incorporate religious imagery into their perception of the world as a way of avoiding negation. As Martino (2015, 86 – 87) declares: "... it sheds light on the risk that the individual presence itself gets lost as a centre for decision and choice, and drowns in a negation that strikes the very possibility of any cultural action at all". The crisis of the presence is undoubtedly a ritualistic function that is designed to resolve the psychological sense of suffering within their

cultural existence. Indeed, the crisis of the presence is typically interpreted as a causal entity which exists within the temporal reality. To Martino, the reason why this psychological transformation emerges is due to the intense feeling of alienation from culture. Indeed, the result is an emergence of emotion where the individual encounters the existential feeling of: "... loss of authenticity of self and the world, where the flow of psychic life is accompanied by a sensation of alienation, artificiality, unreality, and distance" (Martino, 2001, 97). In response, the religious adherent required engaging in a religious ritual where the being was taken out of history. This ritual process is designed to locate the individual into a suspended transcendent reality (meta – history) where they receive healing from deities. Consequently, if the individual remained in their psychological trauma; it is likely that they would cease to exist. This is the primary reason why Martino was concerned with individuals who experience an existential phenomenon which involved; "... a breakdown in the sense of self, eventuating in passivity and ineffectual engagement with the world outside. "The risk of not being here" is a fundamental existential dilemma, with moral, psychological, and cultural dimensions" (Sanders, 1995, 324 – 325). Indeed, the experiential prospect of not existing within the world has severe psychological effects which De Martino explores within his corpus. De Martino provides an example of a cultural tradition within a Lucanian Village that generates a dramatic psychological response. He records that a young woman had been arranged to be married to a man who she did not possess emotional feelings for. As a response, one night she slept walked and unconsciously destroyed her wedding dress. The Catholic priest expounded that the woman had been possessed by evil spirits. Indeed, this is known as a regular occurrence among this geographical area that there is a nickname given to the women who suffer from this infliction - "sleepwalkers" (de Martino, 2001, 88).

The function of the body as the central point of the cultural tradition is damaged through the destruction of the wedding dress. Therefore, this female is responding to an existential crisis where the psychological effects of the impending wedding are overwhelming. Indeed, Martino employs a functionalist framework when considering the methods that individuals employ. Ferrari (2012, 34) provides an adequate description of de Martino's functionalist view of ritual:

“It thus appears that the realm of the concrete for de Martino is a pivotal concept.... The body, as both a signifier of and signified by culture, is at the centre of speculative discourse, while the mind is examined as psyche (in medical terms) and spirit (in cultural terms)... The work of the mind, an activity resulting from physical presence, is thus essential to understand chronological time and to build religion (metahistorical) time: myth”

The mind provides the existential characteristics which can only be expressed through ritual performance – entering into metahistory. In my opinion, the crisis of the presence is a state where philosophical constructs are devoid of meaning. Thus, to reconstruct cultural existence is to reach the divine where healing can be achieved. Essentially, to de Martino, death represents elimination from history where the individual no longer exists. Indeed, the ethnocentric model locates the self as escaping the crisis of the presence by entering myth where resolution is constructed. In my opinion, Heidegger rightly pointed out that the

4 Near death experience as the horizon of the end of their world - a phenomenological analysis

Keywords: near death experience, conceptual analysis, materialism, thanatology, palliative care

4.1 Abstract:

An intriguing enigmatic phenomenon which raises significant scholarly questions concerning death and the afterlife in the West is near - death experience (NDE, hereafter). The NDE raises perplexing questions about the limitation of the empirical tools that scholars use to assess realms of human experience. To find an adequate explanation for the phenomenological importance of the NDE. First the essay will evaluate the historical attitudes towards death in the West which have significantly influenced imagery of the afterlife in established religious systems. Particularly, the tendency of associating denial with death and the distinct psychological consequences that occur when individuals encounter the realisation of their mortality. Second, this section will evaluate how the existential significance of death generates an epistemological disruption of an individuals' psychological perception of reality. Third, the essay will discuss the implications of NDE on a materialistic explanation of the brain. Specifically, the critical enquiry will assess the neuro-theological claim that NDE is a cognitive program which activates in situations of extreme physical threat. Fourth, the dissertation will assess the phenomenological consequences of NDE in the care of terminally ill patients who are likely to report such anomalous experiences.

4.2 Introduction

The validity of radical reductionism within the natural sciences to offer explanations to all of human interaction including religious belief has been under attack in recent times. Indeed, the interaction between the *Dasein* and culture has been a topic of discussion. As already noted in the previous chapter, Heidegger rightly pointed out that the ontological focus of the being has undoubtedly been the focus of individuals' existential comprehension of the temporal reality. This philosophical movement can be attributed towards the establishment of the West as a major global power. Indeed, as part of this economic project, the Western civilization has undoubtedly been affected by capitalism. One of the driving forces in this economic project is the productions of desirable items that includes key aspects of the human comprehension of the self that is modified for the consumer. Indeed, Marx rightly pointed out in the Communist Manifesto (1848 C. E.) that the capitalist project has the capacity to transcend cultural boundaries. His philosophical vision has undoubtedly proved accurate in recent times where the desire to consume goods has influenced diverse cultures (Marx, 2014, 9). Indeed, religion has a specific function within the capitalist project where the concepts of the afterlife act as "... a narcotic, which, while it may be utilized to alleviate pain... Religion as an opiate, not only implies sedation from the life of exploitation, but also suggests a systematic and strategic attempt to deaden or absorb any critical impulse to liberation" (Luchte, 2009, 413). It is through the process of identifying the self as the being which is restricted in its capacity to express certain actions in culture. Indeed, a primary thrust in Marx's dialectical materialist model was to identify complex configurations of the evolutionary processes of individuals in civilizations. It was through this focus that he argued human beings contained a mechanism that enabled self-reflectiveness of their existential significance

in the external world. As a result, the human perception is an embryonic progression where a set fixed point is not present. Rather, the existential awareness of the Dasein is dependent on the engagement with the physical sphere (Raines, 2002, 2). Therefore, Marx was convinced that human beings were subject to evolutionary constraints just as other species. It is through this Darwinian understanding that he conceptualised religion as an ideology that is engineered to serve a specific purpose in culture. It is important to note that the naturalist model that Marx had been influenced by was inspired by the early insights of Charles Darwin. However, the technological apparatus available during the 19th Century C. E. had not progressed to the point where scientific findings could support the Darwinian model of evolution. Rather, Darwin and Marx understood the evolutionary processes within the human species as a binary model where empirical data was collected from observing the natural world. It is through this evolutionary paradigm that Marx configured his dialectical materialist model that human beings were specifically bound to this natural order. Indeed, it is through this philosophical analysis that he contended that religion should be understood as a category of concepts that had a specific purpose in the existential conception of the temporal reality. As a consequence, he rejected theistic claims because in his view, religious systems had a specific function in the daily existence of individuals. As Marx (2008, 42) states: "The criticism of religion disillusions man to make him think and act and shape like a man who has been disillusioned and has come to reason... Religion is only the illusionary sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve round himself". Indeed, the purpose of religion is to give individuals the impression that their current economic suffering is non-existent. It was being replaced by religious imagery that points to a new mode of reality. This is the primary function of religion in capitalist systems. In

order, to maintain political power, governmental systems require an ideological construct that provides a buffer for the working class who are not satisfied with their social standing. The economic focus on materialist consumption contains a distinct mechanism where the rich thrive and the poor suffer due to their inability to engage in the optimum vision of that culture. This psychological condition creates a sense of suffering which cannot be quenched by merely existing within a capitalist society. Instead, the desire of the labour workforce to liberate themselves from their economic constraints is subverted by religious systems. A primary component of this economic mechanism is interconnected modes that exist within religious systems. First, religion constructs a depiction which is subsequently sustained by that ideology. Second, the sacred is a mechanism that provides a philosophical commitment to the depiction of the transcendent. These two distinct modes are used to sedate the individual of their economic suffering that is a common occurrence within the capitalist system (Luchte, 2009, 414 - 415). It is through the phenomenological classification of religion as an ideology that individuals comprehend the picture as "... ultimately - de-temporalized - and thus, the notions, the pictures of the "natural" - of species, population nation, race, and humanity are merely idealizations (and erasures) of the concrete situations of the lived existence..." (Luchte, 2009, 415). The religious worldview suspends the external world as the real where the imagery becomes the existential comprehension of their position in the cosmic order. Indeed, the disaffection of living in a society that is increasingly interested in the production of goods creates a form of dissonance. A notable aspect that supports Marx's view of the psychological disconnect that is present in capitalist societies is the common desire of individuals to exist in a society where probable cravings and reasonable economic expectations exist (Jones, 2002, 7). Through the process of psychologically understanding their mere existence in a

society that is focused on materialism, individuals encounter the *Dasein*. It is through this matrix that individuals' encounter the aroma of the eternal bliss where their present existence is defined by strife. Indeed, notions of gods and the afterlife provide a utopian vision where current existential despair is minimised because daily negativity is considered insignificant when reflecting on eternal existence. It is through Marx's dialectical materialist paradigm that the conception of death can be classified as an encounter with the true essence of the *Dasein*. Within a society where there is a stark division between the rich and poor; the epistemological encounter with death undoubtedly challenges the norm of that ideological framework. It is my view that when individuals existentially consider their own mortality then the picture that is fundamental in dogmatic religion becomes inadequate. This can be argued to be one of the reasons why death is ignored in the West. Indeed, Marx rightly pointed out that the human thought does not consist of abstract concepts. Rather, religious beliefs are the product of "... a reversed world-consciousness, because they are a reversed world" (Marx, 2008, 41). While Marx did not specifically mention the death of the individual, the mortality of human beings can be associated with the alienation from the idealistic state. Therefore, through the act of the lived experience, the individual encounters the death of the self. Indeed, the oblivion of the first existence in this world where religion provides shelter for the being, the second permanent act of dying is the encounter with the true essence of the *Dasein*.

4.3 The denial of death as the result of the limitation of the ideological tenets of religion

It is through the analysis of Marx's dialectical materialism that the process of death can be understood as a psychological breakdown of possessing the ability to consider one's own mortality within a culture that is focused on the endless production of goods. Indeed, it is through the common perception that when an item does not operate within accepted boundaries, the owner can readily find a replacement. It is through this philosophical outcome that individuals are unable to existentially comprehend their fragility in the natural world. The permanence of death is an epistemological occurrence where the individual becomes non-existence within that economic system. Essentially, death is permanent because modern medical technology has no way of reversing its effects. This medical dilemma has created a dichotomy where individuals' existentially deny that this phenomenon exists. As Teodorescu (2011, 379) rightly contends: "The death denial undertaken by culture can seem bizarre, even shaky from a logical point of view, because it is complicated and has a polyhedral structure". Modern attitudes concerning how one should approach the act of dying is representative of the methods in which alternative human societies have created sociological paradigms where death is conceptualised. Indeed, the matter and substance of death has been a fundamental enigma in human civilizations since the beginning of recorded history. As a response, primitive cultures developed notions of the afterlife (Flood, 2008, x). For example, within the medieval epoch, questions about death was understood within a Christian theological scope. As part of this process, death was devalued because key thinkers attempted to resolve the existential anxiety through theological speculation. However, As European countries began to resort to scientific and secular development instead of Christian doctrines,

epistemological enquiries about death became a rational process. Consequently, a tension developed between Christian and rational approaches concerning how individuals should consider death (Laungani, 1998, 166). The transition in the philosophical approaches to death has created a tension in the methods individuals use to approach their own extinction. As a result, an epistemological dilemma is constructed where individuals do not discuss the dead but openly acknowledge the dying process (Anderson, 2001, 16). This type of psychological reaction to death is a response to how Western medical institutions treat individuals once they have died; family members who experience the dying process are exposed to "...an empty bed, an empty room, and no further need to make the anxious visit to the hospital. The one who is now dead has disappeared..." (Anderson, 2001, 16). It is clear that there is an abruptness to the epistemological norm in Western culture when individuals' are exposed to death. This is one of the primary reasons why death is profoundly shocking. In response, epistemological uncertainty is manifested in bereaved individuals where existential structures no longer manifest meaning. In essence, this is an existential process where individuals conduct a psychological cycle where death is considered to be insignificant in human existence (Anderson, 2001, 18). In addition, Western societies have become increasingly secular and the influence of established religion has diminished. As a consequence, religious rituals such as cremation and burial of the deceased which re-established emotional relief for grieving individuals have lost their power. Each epoch has constructed methods to deal with psychological anxiety that is manifested when individuals discover that death is inevitable. Furthermore, the prospect of dealings with one's own death has become significantly perplexed with the advancement of technology in the West. Indeed, an existential dilemma has arisen when individuals contemplate the end of their own existence. As

a result, western attitudes towards death is one of anxiety where cultural structures have little to offer in terms of reassurance. Sartori supports this view when she argues that the advancement of medical techniques brought the emergence of the "forbidden death" wherein, this "... change of attitude resulted in death becoming shameful... it became common practice to protect the dying person by lying about their impending death" (Sartori, 2014, 146). The place of death has inevitably been categorised as an uncertain aspect in the Western context. It is through this process that individuals' notions of the afterlife become a fundamental aspect of their existence. Indeed, where the medical institution attempts to preserve human life through the use of technology, the divine is employed to propose a worldview where the denial of death can be maintained because there is a future existence. Thus, a contextual conception of death as a religious symbol is essentially an attempt to restore the self. Within Martino's ethnocentric model, this can be understood as an epistemological result of individuals' comprehending the end of their cultural existence. This realisation provokes a distinct emotional reaction wherein a dehistoricification presents itself. It is through the act of their own demise that individuals' seek to enter into a meta - historical state. Conceptualising death as a trigger where cultural existence is no longer perceived by the individual; religious rituals become the location where the self can be regenerated. It is through this phenomenological analysis that the critical enquiry can demonstrate that the standard model in the CSR is not adequately considering the complexity of human existence. Indeed, Barrett and Boyer contend that notions such as death are irrelevant when considering the unconscious processes that may influence human opinions. It is through the employment of the physicalist approach that concepts such as MCI are limited in their capacity to examine existential phenomena. The phenomenon which is known as near – death experience actively

demonstrates my contention that explanatory and interpretive approaches are incompatible.

4.4 Near death experience and the revisiting of the quest to discover immortality

There are numerous features which individuals report during the NDE that raises perplexing questions regarding the methodological tools when attempting to construct explanations. The first scholar to develop an empirical analyse of the NDE was Raymond Moody (1944 C. E.). His academic agenda was concerned with subjective accounts of patients who were clinically deceased but were able to recollect conscious memories. The main thrust in Moody's work was a fascination with near death experiences that individuals report during cardiac arrest that he suggests proves the existence of the afterlife. His landmark monograph *Life after Life* (1975 C. E.) was the first scholarly piece to gain popularity. Moody employed a positivist approach where he conceptualised subjective testimonies as evidence that the afterlife exists. In providing evidence for his contention, he presented the view that NDEs had been an important factor in the religious consciousness of contemporary and primitive cultures (Moody, 1975, 162). For example, in his monograph, he argues that NDEs were present within the Judeo – Christian tradition, the philosophical works of Plato and the Tibetan book of the dead. He contended that there was a normative structure which is present when individuals have an NDE. For example, in 1969 C. E., medical practitioners in a coronary department are aware that a patient who has gone into cardiac arrest. Subsequently, nurses start CPR while other practitioners conduct normative procedures during this type of medical emergency (van Lommel, 2010, 4). There is no effect on the patient. Then, on the second attempt of de-fibrillating the

patient, the gentleman's cardiac regular recurrence was resumed. When the individual regains consciousness, he is distressed that he has been revived and began to describe a mystical experience that includes a phenomena such as a "tunnel, colours, a light, a beautiful landscape, and music" (van Lommel, 2010, 5). Moody argued that this unusual experience is evidence towards the afterlife. Therefore, his study was intended to provide evidence for the existence of the afterlife. However, there were problems with Moody's methodology because his conceptual analysis that constitutes an NDE is limited. Specifically, he proclaimed that individuals were clinically dead when such experiences manifested (Moody, 1975, 124 – 125). The main problem with the employment of the positivist approach is that he is unable to determine whether individuals were clinically dead when the NDE occurred. Notwithstanding, Moody's research into NDE provided the scholarly foundations for researchers to construct sophisticated theses regarding the tenets of this intriguing phenomenon. An interesting area of empirical research has been located in the historical relevance of NDE in various cultures. Subsequently, thinkers began to consider the positivist viewpoint of NDE that Moody had contended. There has been substantial debate regarding the view that the common characteristics of this phenomenon presents evidence for the afterlife. While the modern study of near - death experience has roots in the claim that reports of autonomous experiences where individuals journey to transcendent realities (James, 2006, 29). This has led to the view that NDE's have been a consistent feature in a myriad of cultures (Shushan, 2009, 37). There are reports of NDE in both advanced and primitive cultures. For example, gallop statistics from George Gallop Jr. have found that eight millions individuals in the United States of America have had autonomous experiences (Peake, 2011, 32). Subsequently, a trend has emerged in popular culture concerning the intrinsic characteristics of NDEs.

The applied function in the occurrence of this phenomenon has resulted in the academic consideration of a supernatural essence contained within the structure of NDEs. It is not surprising that religious systems have constructed the view that a consistent underlining structure exists which provides scientific evidence towards the existence of the afterlife. The traditional view of the Christian model of the afterlife has been brought into question in the modern epoch (Badham, 1984, 51). The theological adaption to the ontological structure of NDE is designed to provide empirical evidence for a religious worldview. However, this theological configuration has been criticised by a number of scholars. As a result, there has been a strong consensus among researchers that an underlining consistent ontological structure is present throughout the autonomous experience. This raises a significant question regarding how Western medicine should consider care for dying patients when individuals are having mystical encounters. Palliative care experts who emphasise the importance of providing an appropriate environment for patients have a unique perspective on NDEs. There is an urgency for medical practitioners to understand the existential process of death. Furthermore, there has been a lack of scholarly attention on the epistemological significance of NDE by philosophers, theologians and scientists. This has led to a lack of understanding into the autonomous experience which defies the naturalist approach. Indeed, thinkers contend that there are epistemological properties which challenges the Cartesian explanation of reality (Peake, 2011, 27 - 28). The naturalist perspective does not provide a holistic explanation of NDE because the approaches which are employed are designed to explain phenomena using scientific techniques. Consequently, there is a lack of empirical data which can be collected during such experiences. As a response a collection of theories have been suggested by scientists to explain NDEs; allocating these experiences to psychopathology, a sequence of

neurotoxic metabolic responses, distinct neuroanatomical malfunctions which generates unique brain function (Greyson, 2010, 38). However, the limitation of these theories is that their methodological treatment of the brain lack the explanatory power to explain NDEs. Rather, the subjective properties which are reported in the NDE requires an explanation that incorporates phenomenological insights on the being.

4.5 The neuroscientific critique of near - death experience

A clear contention can be made which locates the emergence of NDE as a by-product of the malfunctioning brain to a loss of oxygen. In a recent scientific study which focused on the NDEs of patients who were diagnosed with locked - in syndrome (LIS, hereafter) strongly supports the view that such phenomena is generated by the mind. This interesting case - study was conducted by Donneau which attempted to identify whether the common NDEs characteristics were present within the experiences of patients who were diagnosed with Infratentorial brain lesions (Donneau, 2015, 28 - 29). The study recorded eight patients with acute brainstem legions who reported phenomena which is classically known as NDEs. However, the common characteristics which are commonly identified with NDEs were absent. Rather, patients identified components which were disturbing. As Donneau (2015, 30) contends: "Our data shows that patients with LIS who retrospectively report a NDE subsequent to an acute brainstem lesion of ischemic or traumatic origin, experience this event as less positive as compared to "classical NDEs" following coma after supratentorial brain damage". The LIS NDEs features are distinct because the sections of the brain is damaged by Infratentorial lesions thus rendering it unable to generate positive characteristics such as, meeting with a deity, spiritual being or a life review. Furthermore, scholars have observed strikingly similarities between the NDE

which are induced by the administration of ketamine. This dissociative anesthetic was first synthesized by Calvin Stevens in 1962 who was a consultant at the Park – Davies and Warner Lambert research institute who was focused on finding an alternative to phencyclidine (PHP). The physiological properties include sensory loss and amnesia. However, current medical observations have determined that a loss of consciousness is not a common occurrence (Corazza, 2008, 82). Indeed, a noteworthy aspect of the use of ketamine is known to cause individuals to consider that they are dying. This sensation is caused by the combination of medical ingredients that are administered. This stimulant does not however, generate physiological difficulties where patients are in danger of death. This drug is in common use in a range of medical procedures. Indeed, this includes: "... asthmatic crisis, childbirth, and surgical operations, and occasionally in the treatment of migraine and in anesthesia for children... it is relatively safe because it does not usually suppress breathing as much as other anesthetics and has a short duration of action (30 – 60 minutes)" (Corazza, 2008, 82). The duration that the effects of the drug is experienced by the subject has been a primary reason why ketamine has become a popular component in the illegal drug markets. Indeed, an individual who has taken ketamine during clubbing events explained that the main reason why it has become a drug of choice is because there is an instant effect and the duration of the drug range from about ten to fifteen minutes. There is a clear phenomenological process attached to the recreational use of this drug because it is likely that individuals would like had prior experience with the typical effects that are manifested. Thus, individuals administrator ketamine to themselves because they desire to encounter a different reality where their economic suffering is not an important existential component. Rather, the raver attempts to comprehend the *Dasein* by its specific understanding within that epoch which is conceptualised as

encountering the other. This is the primary reason why the recreational use of ketamine in the rave subculture has become a prominent drug of choice due to the intense hallucinogenic effects and the absence of serious long-term physiological damage. To support my view, when administered with small doses (0.1–0.5 mg/kg/hr), this drug can produce vivid imagery which are strikingly similar to the typical tenets of NDEs. For example, the term 'urashima effect' adequately describes what occurs during these experiences; such as, "... entering new realities where they met other beings, such as angels, deceased loved ones, unknown figures and even, more rarely, God" (Corazza, 2008, 81). In my view, the similarities between the recreational use of ketamine and NDE demonstrate that individuals have the ability to construct psychological paradigms which often include prominent cultural aspects. This occurrence is to be expected because the brain is a highly complex structure that constructs imagery based on the specific local stimuli it is experiencing, in this case, the ketamine. Therefore the brain is apt to produce such subjective experiences in response to a fairly wide range of stimuli, particularly those which involve provoking a change in consciousness. Recent neuroscientific experiments conducted by the neuroscientist Persinger supports this view when his experiments generates mystical imagery which are similar to NDE. The electromagnetic device which is commonly known as the God helmet induced mystical phenomena within controlled laboratory conditions. He contends that the device generated autonomous phenomena is two distinct forms. The first form consists of an experience where participants encounter a unique sentient entity. The second experiential condition consists of a mystical experience where individuals are transported to alternative realities (Koren, 2010, 809). The popular view that there is an underlining core experience which is present in NDE irrespective of cultural differences is problematic. As Sartori (2014, 70)

declares: "in Western NDE literature only a small number of cases have been published from other cultures. There may be far more reports of NDEs within different cultures which are not written in English...". Therefore, the cultural diversities of NDEs restrict an adequate assessment which goes beyond a cognitive compensation of death. NDE researchers have recognised the dilemma and prefer to construct a paradigm of a "core experience" which is apparent despite all the possible cultural variations. Mark Fox argues that NDEs have a consistent characteristic theme. The normative encounters with light and awareness of peace and joy indicate that NDE contain a core experience (Fox, 2003. 98). However, this approach remains problematic. First, the mystical encounter with localised phenomena such as light or joy are cultural concepts which have religious connotations. Second, a model which prefers a core experience and ignores the cultural elements is speculative. Third, Researchers do not possess the empirical tools to assess whether data regarding transcendent realities are accurate. There is likely to be some bias that the advocates of this position are subjectively influenced by religious constructions that promote philosophical conceptions of the afterlife. Moreover, medical practitioners have observed that during experiences of trauma, the brain can generate imagery which is strikingly similar to NDEs. Localised variations points to a cognitive element which includes cultural and religious symbols. Indeed, Sartori (2014, 71) supports this view: "the reports give an insight into how NDE's are interpreted through the filter of different cultural conditioning. Each culture has slightly different views and influences regarding death". The progression of NDEs are determined by cognitive pathways which mediate a normative construction of reality. The fear of death presents a unique psychological structure which encourages individuals to reflect on ontological dimensions of reality.

4.6 The dialectical materialist view of NDE as a psychological escape from their economic suffering

An influential scholar who has conducted research, which critiques the naturalist reductionism of other studies is Orella Corazza. She has written a landmark monograph, *Near - Death Experience* (2008), where she attempts to resolve the mind - body problem by implementing Eastern philosophical concepts into the epistemological model. According to Corazza, the mind possesses a link with the cosmos which is assisted by the "use of tools" creates a semi - definite body - space around us, while our visual and tactile perception extends this dimension still further until it reaches the immensity of space" (Corazza, 2008, 1). However, Corazza considers the impact human physiology has on occurrence and function of NDEs. This view allocates the eliminative approach as a natural manifestation of cognitive pathways reacting to the loss of oxygen (Corazza, 2008, 119). In an attempt to gather scientific support for this view, experiments have been conducted where individuals' neurotransmitters react significantly to events. Subsequently, endorphins are released when there is a need of pain reduction or when the flight or fight mechanism is activated (Corazza, 2008, 119). However, Corazza rightly points out that there has been a limitation when attempting to provide an adequate explanation regarding the ontological aspects of NDEs. Scientific findings indicate that the release of endorphins do not manifest hallucinogenic states (Corazza, 2008, 119). Therefore, applying a pure scientific approach to NDEs is not adequate. At the very least, the emergence of a mystical state within such autonomous experiences presents an epistemological conundrum for the natural sciences.

Cultures commonly generate narratives concerning the afterlife which are designed to develop an existential narrative that are intended for coping with death. The structures which provide meaning of the self no longer provide sufficient meaning to the individual. Indeed, essentially one's own oblivion destroys their conception of reality. In my view, this is why the NDE occurs; it is an existential response to extreme anxiety. Individuals who experience this autonomous phenomenon claim that they are no longer fearful of dying. Indeed, individuals develop a psychological buffer where the post - self exists within a spiritual framework or in the "typical expressions such as "she will live on in us" are primarily meant to be understood metaphorically" (Rutjens, 2011, 138). The cognitive pathways compensate for anxiety which individuals during death through accepting notions of a post - self which includes cultural concepts of the after - life (Rutjens, 2011, 139). Indeed, there exist many non-specifically religious metaphorical and metahistorical cultural memes pertaining to death. Thus, the NDE highlights specifically the problems with the methodology of CSR, which ignores how culture affects religious adherence. According to de Martino's ethnocentric model, the NDE is an epistemological reaction to the awareness that one is approaching death. The act of dying generates specific psychological characteristics which do not exist in normative situations. It is convincing that NDE can be described as a crisis of the presence which occurs during the last moments of human existence. Indeed, patients who suffer from a cardiac arrest are aware that they have suffered a heart attack before losing consciousness. A fundamental aspect of the construction of the typical NDE structure involves specific cultural notions of the divine. Religious adherents emphasise mystical revelation and eliminate the importance of alternative sources of existential knowledge. Religious rituals are constructed where the dead are speculated to exist within a transcendent reality (Laungani, 1998, 4 - 5). Indeed, such

ontological structures indicate a post - mortem state which is designed to aid individuals to avoid the epistemological state of unbecoming through death. As part of this process, an autonomous phenomenon has been reported which raises questions about the naturalistic assessment of human experience. While NDE can provide intriguing experiences which challenge the naturalist approach, there is a lack of empirical evidence which explains what is occurring during such experiences. Rather, it is significant to construct an epistemological scope which allows for an arena where various dimensions of human knowledge is included.

When considering NDE within a dialectical materialist perspective, it is adequate to classify this phenomenon as a psychological construct which the brain develops during the last moments of existence. This state occurs because the notion of the sacred no longer provide a sufficient existential depiction of the temporal reality. As a consequence, individuals attempt to construct a depiction of the transcendent which normally includes religious imagery from their specific culture. Indeed, this occurrence is surely a psychological reaction to the materialisation of the periphery of the being. It is through this existential occurrence that the individual encounters the crisis of the presence or *Dasein*. Zizek (2015, 339) supports my view when he argues: "... Mortality is the first negation of immortality: we have to accept our finitude, we will return to dust, ultimately nothing will remain of us". It is through this philosophical acknowledgement that human beings comprehend their fragile existence. The psychological impact of this realisation destroys the religious imagery that has been a fundamental dimension to their understanding of the external world.

The psychological analysis of NDE is supported by a new area of research in neuroscience - neurotheology (Trimble, 2007,133). Andrew Newberg has constructed an adequate methodology which considers the scientific tools which the

neurotheological paradigm employs. In his monograph *Principles of neurotheology* (2010), neuroscientists construct a paradigm which incorporates recent neurological findings with theological reflections of major world religions. Newberg (2010, 66) defines the intrinsic structure of this approach as: "... the definition of megatheology implies that it must be acceptable to all religions (and even the non - religious).... One reason for neurotheology's potential in this regard is that its basis rests on two universal elements - religion and the brain". Indeed, within the neuro-theological paradigm, an agnostic approach is implemented which focuses on cognitive structures which is influential in religious experiences. When locating the megatheological approach within a psychological rendering of the TMA, it can be argued that the belief in transcendent entities can be understood as a reflective mechanism which is culturally constructed. However, there are questions which arise of out psychology which challenges the Western construct of the self.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the standard model in the CSR has the potential to provide sophisticated approaches in the anthropological study of religion. However, the approaches that are developed are limited because of the radical reductionist viewpoint that is a fundamental dimension in this research programme. Indeed, it is through the rejection of interpretive approaches that the CSR is unable to fully consider complexities of individuals' belief in divine beings. For example, Barrett and Boyer's assertion that the belief in deities are the manifestation of complex cognitive devices dismisses the existential experience of religious adherent. Therefore, it is unclear how the CSR will become a fundamental discipline within Religious Studies in the future. The rejection of phenomenological approaches presents a complex problem in explanatory and interpretive approaches. The methodological assumptions in the natural sciences and the humanities are radically unique because their conceptual understanding of the temporal reality are incompatible. For example, thesis has demonstrated that the Heidegger's question of the *Dasein* is a central aspect in the daily existence of individuals. It is through this phenomenological dimension that scholars have understood that the religious beliefs of individuals are complex. It is inadequate to locate the origin of religious belief as simply a product of evolutionary adaptation. Rather, Marx was correct when he stated that individuals are bounded by economic constraints where the perceptual sense of suffering is present. When considering his dialectical materialism, the crisis of the presence and the dehistoricification of the individual is established. The ontological constraints of death generates a sense of economic oblivion where the individual no longer exists in a meaningful way. Rather, the actuality of binding as Martino conceptualised the idea of suffering can only be subverted by entering into a metahistorical state where the

individual exists outside of history. Indeed, it is my contention that the emergence of NDE is a psychological buffer of the individual attempting to construct an ideological depiction of the sacred. This materialist construction will likely incorporate cultural notions of the divine because the NDEr has been exposed to that specific religious model. It is through the deconstruction of ideological constructs that individuals encounter the true essence of the being. The essence of death is the event that wakes the religious adherent from their illusionary perception of the temporal reality that religion has constructed.

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