

## Experiential careers: the routinization and de-routinization of religious life

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**Abstract** This article develops the concept of experiential careers, drawing theoretical attention to the routinization and de-routinization of specific experiences as they unfold over social career trajectories. Based on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in two religious communities, we compare the social-temporal patterning of religious experience among newly religious Orthodox Jews and converted Muslims in two cities in the United States. In both cases, we find that as newly religious people work to transform their previous bodily habits and take on newly prescribed religious acts, the beginning of their religious careers becomes marked by what practitioners describe as potent religious experiences in situations of religious practice. However, over time, these once novel practices become routinized and religious experiences in these situations diminish, thus provoking actors and institutions in both fields to work to re-enchant religious life. Through this ethnographic comparison, we demonstrate the utility of focusing on experiential careers as a sociological unit of analysis. Doing so allows sociologists to use a non-reductive phenomenological approach to chart the shifting manifestations of experiences people deeply care about, along with the patterned enchantments, disenchantments, and possible re-enchantments these social careers entail. As such, this approach contributes to the analysis of social careers and experiences of “becoming” across both religious and non-religious domains.

**Keywords** Religion · Phenomenology · Careers · Experience · Routinization · Orthodox Jews · Muslims

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Sitting with a Hassidic friend of mine, a rabbi and teacher, he tells me a joke he just heard. “A rabbi wakes up in the middle of the night, screaming. Alarmed, his wife asks him ‘Mendel, what happened?!’ Sobbing, in the beginning he can’t even answer her. After a while, and after she implores him again and again, he says ‘Well, it was so strange, but I dreamt that God was dead.’ His wife is taken aback, but after thinking about it a little she says ‘Well Mendel, you are a Rabbi. You pray.... You are engaged with God all day. It is only natural that you will have this kind of nightmare.’ Surprised, her husband retorts ‘What are you talking about? I haven’t thought about God in years...’” (Fieldnotes, Orthodox Jewish rabbi in LA)

Sometimes the faith is high, sometimes the faith is low. The ease and feeling of practice can fluctuate.... Sometimes I feel like God is just there, man—everywhere, in everything. Other times, well, sometimes you feel like you’re just goin’ through the motions, unfortunately. (Interview with Abe, a convert to Islam)

Based on participant-observations and interviews in two religious communities, this article presents a comparative analysis of the experiential careers of Muslim converts and newly Orthodox Jews. As the above quotes illustrate and our analysis shows, one of the most evocative tensions in both communities we studied was the relationship between actors’ level of involvement in religious practice and what they spoke of as experiences of the divine. Rather than an upwards curve, towards greater and greater heights of experience, many of our interlocutors described their trajectory as initially marked by emotionally moving moments in which they sensed the divine, followed by periods in which members said that they “could not feel God.”

Moreover, in both cases, we found a similar process of embodied learning and habituation that was inextricably linked with these temporal changes in experience. In both communities, new members initially had to rein in old bodily habits and re-shape their practices in religiously prescribed ways. These everyday bodily struggles became productive sites for experiencing what members spoke of as religious experiences. However, as adherents continued to practice their religions, these same practices became routinized. Religious experiences in these sites did not dissolve completely, as members consciously tried to revive the religious intent in “rote” rituals and the cycles of both Jewish and Islamic religious calendars often broke the routinization of practice and re-enchanting the religious world. Nonetheless, religious experiences in those earlier situations diminished and practitioners often mourned their demise.

While this study of the careers of religious experience is necessarily particular in its empirical details, we argue that it offers a general theoretical contribution to sociologists studying the social and temporal dynamics of experience. First, we highlight the analytic potential of focusing on experiential careers—the patterned fluctuations of experience social actors go through as they participate in a specific field of practice. Using experiential careers as our unit of analysis, we demonstrate how focusing greater attention on *when* particular experiences emerge within the temporal flow of social actors’ lives allows sociologists to interrogate the inevitably social processes shaping individual experience (see also Tavory 2010) without getting mired in intractable epistemological debates over whether experiences are “phenomenally real” or “discursively constructed.”

Second, by documenting how religious practices that once afforded experiences of the divine become habituated over time, this study draws attention to a more general experiential dynamic inherent in the routinization of practices that people expect to exceed or surpass the mundane and, subsequently, put them in contact with something about which they care deeply. Religion, in our case, is a particularly illustrative site in which to study experiences related to these “supra-mundane” and deeply cared for dimensions of practices, especially as they unfold over the course of a social trajectory. There are, however, many non-religious domains of practice in which similar experiential careers are apparent. One can think, for example, of the excited sense of possibility a writer experiences when typing the first few lines of a manuscript, or the nervous and erotic excitement between two people making love for the first time. Then, later on, we can imagine the same writer having to muster great willpower even to look at the seventh or eighth manuscript she is now writing, and the very same lovers wondering how passion has gone out of their relationship. The theoretical synthesis we develop here thus provides sociologists with conceptual tools to approach broader questions concerning the routinization and de-routinization of practice and experience, along with all the enchantments, disenchantments, and possible re-enchantments these social trajectories entail.

### Staking a theoretical space for experiential careers

Contemporary theoretical debates about experience, and especially about religious experience, have been concerned with the proper relationship between experience and its discursive representation. In the study of religion, across disciplines, scholars tend to take one of two approaches: a strong phenomenological approach that argues that there is such a thing as a religious experience that can be observed across time and cultures apart from its linguistic representation—a tradition beginning with Schleiermacher (1996 [1799]) and represented, for example, by Rudolf Otto’s (1923) focus on experiences of *Mysterium Tremendum*. Alternatively, others opt for a discursive approach and argue that it is impossible to speak of religious experience without attending to the way experiences are produced by discourse (Proudfoot 1985), or, in a slightly softer version, that discourse is the only aspect of religious experience to which sociologists have access (Yamane 2000).

This tension between the discursive and the phenomenological, however, is not pre-ordained. We take seriously the critiques of discursive sociology, suggesting that sociologists pay careful attention to what religious actors say about their experiences instead of assuming that religious experience is universal—characterized by feelings of collective effervescence, transcendence, liminality, *mysterium tremendum*, pure consciousness, chains of memory, interaction rituals, shared inner time, flow, or what have you<sup>1</sup> (see also McRoberts 2004). On the other hand, we take issue with the assumption that experience can only be approached through its representation in discourse. An exclusive focus on discourse foregoes the corporeal aspects of religious life, ignoring how practices such as religious ritual can structure human experience at

<sup>1</sup> For these approaches to religious experience, see Collins 2004; Durkheim (1965 [1912]); Turner 1969; Hervieu-Léger 2001; Neitz and Spickard 1990; Spickard 1991.

the non-discursive levels of bodily perception, attention, and affect (see, for example, Mahmood 2005; McElmurry 2009; Pagis 2010; Winchester 2008). Reducing “experience” to “talk about experience” ignores the enculturation of the body and circumscribes ethnography to the analysis of situational talk.

While we cannot assume perfect correspondence between peoples’ non-linguistic practices and their post-hoc discursive representations, linguistic representations of experience are not radically disassociated but are rather intertwined with non-linguistic, embodied behaviors (see also Barsalou 1999; Bender 2010; Ignatow 2007; Johnson 2007; Lakoff and Johnson 1999). As Ann Taves (2009) points out, and as our analysis shows, religious and spiritual traditions not only provide discourses through which people can re-articulate everyday experiences in religious terms (although this is certainly important). These traditions also provide embodied practices (e.g., ritual prayers, meditation, musical performance) that work to shape everyday experience itself. Thus, the religious molding of experience cannot be reduced to discursive attributions or framings alone, but must take into account the cultural production of bodily habit, attention, and affect as these intersect with discursive representations.

Building off these insights, we disaggregate the term “religious experience” and instead focus on actors’ “experiences-deemed-religious” (Taves 2009; see also Nelson 2004). Analytically, this means we begin with one group of experiences-deemed-religious by actors themselves—namely, experiences in which they felt the presence or a strong awareness of the divine. Without essentializing religious experience, we are more interested in the ways specific religious practices shape actors’ thoughts, feelings, and modes of attention, and how this shaping of bodily experience is articulated in actors’ discourse about religious experience.

Thus, instead of trying to ascertain what these experiences are in some universal or essentialist way, we explore where and when they occur, charting how these particular experiences deemed religious change and manifest in different situations and at different times. We use phenomenological insights in order to construct an account of the shifting situations in which these experiences appear and disappear. Instead of defining religious experience, we treat it as a “hole,” a moment of rupture or disjunction in the stream of experience in which actors experience states they define as religious.

The broader comparative aim of our analysis, however, requires us to spell out some more generalized account regarding the temporal and situational structure of these experiential shifts or disjunctions. Here we turn to Alfred Schutz’s (1962; Schutz and Luckmann 1973) notion of “finite provinces of meaning.” Everyday purposive action is, in Schutz’s terms, performed in “the natural attitude,” in the world of “paramount reality.” But this world is only one of an entangled plethora of worlds of meaning, each with its particular accent of reality or unreality. In our everyday life, we often move to other, “finite provinces of meaning,” and we must reorient ourselves, often in the form of a jolting shock (as when suddenly we wake up from a deep sleep).

What is important for us in Schutz’s formulation is that provinces of meaning are not primarily differentiated in terms of their content (religious vs. secular, for example), but in terms of their experiential “accent,” both in terms of the cognitive frames each of them entails (see also Goffman 1974) and in their embodied forms

(see Katz 1999). It is in this sense that Schutz's conceptualization provides us with a way to think about the change in experiences deemed religious. Simply put, it urges us to ask *how* actors approach the religious act. Rather than assuming that religious acts automatically “belong to” a religious province of meaning, we can see how acts are done, whether there is a shift in the way actors approach the religious act, or whether it is very much part of the flow of everyday life.<sup>2</sup> Routinization, then, is not only the suspension of creative intelligence, as Dewey (1933) would have it, but also the incorporation of religious actions into the world of everyday life. As Berger and Zijderveld (2009, p. 81) note of these phenomenological aspects of routinization, “As time passes, the astounding character of the ... event weakens and everyday reality asserts itself. The astonishment gives way to routine and habit. The extraordinary becomes ordinary again.”<sup>3</sup>

To theorize this tension between routinization and finite provinces of meaning in greater detail, we focus on the relationship between “intentionality” and embodied orientations and practices. Intentionality, as we use it throughout the article, refers to a term developed by Husserl to denote the assertion that any experience is always oriented towards an object within consciousness (see Husserl 1982 [1913]).<sup>4</sup> Bracketing the question of what the “true” content of religious experience *is* (and obviously whether its referent exists “out there”), we focus on these moments in which actors' consciousness is directed towards a religious “province of meaning.” We then tie this question to the question of bodily practice as it is defined in the work of Merleau-Ponty (2005 [1945]) and Drew Leder (1990), both of whom focus on bodily orientations as part of the structure of experience. More specifically, from Merleau-Ponty we take the insight that bodily orientations define the structure of experience, in that the bodily position and habits of actors define how they will “make sense” of the world. From Leder, who builds directly on Merleau-Ponty, we take the insight that in routinized action bodily orientations usually “disappear” in the sense that they are so taken for granted that they recede from consciousness. Only in “dysfunctional” states (such as pain, hunger, or novel circumstances) do we have to attend explicitly to the body, thus making it an object of consciousness. Or, in our terms, a practice becomes so embedded in everyday life that it ceases to transport actors from the natural attitude.

The perspective we develop allows us to ask two empirical questions. First, it allows us to see if there are situations in which experiences deemed religious are more

<sup>2</sup> We do not, however, make claims regarding the content of a “religious province of meaning.” Instead, as we emphasize below, we note that actors spoke about these experience as falling beyond the natural attitude, and practically cordoned off these moments in action.

<sup>3</sup> This focus on routinization also echoes Weber's discussion of the vicissitudes of charisma. Indeed, Weber's *Veralltäglichsung* is not only translatable as “routinization,” but, more literally, as “everydayization” (see Berger and Zijderveld 2009, pp. 80–81). This use makes “charisma” a seemingly compelling way to speak of un-routinized (and de-routinized) situations. Indeed, this echoes Weber's (1978, p. 1134) own comments, where he points out that “every event transcending the routines of everyday life releases charismatic forces” (see also Shils 1965). But where Weber assumed that such “charismatic forces” are immediately attached to a relatively stable charismatic identity, the moments we write of are far more fleeting. Thus, although this paper could be read as a foray into a specific form of the routinization of charisma, such a reading would force us to radically re-work the notion of charisma, specifying it as something characterizing particular situations rather than fixed identities.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Polanyi (1983) makes a similar observation, when he talks about every experience having a “from-to” structure.

common than in others. Using phenomenological tools of analysis, we can then see what occurs in the stream of everyday experience in which actors are embedded that makes specific situations prone to transport actors away from the natural attitude. The comparative aspect of our analyses makes this especially useful, as we can compare observations not only within each field but across ethnographic field sites. Second, we can then chart and account for the experiential careers of religious life, thinking about actors' temporal trajectories rather than treating them as frozen and unchanging (see Abott 1997; Strauss 1993). Thus, if we think about the times and places of religious experiences rather than attempting to fix the meaning of the experience itself, we can ask if and why people have such experiences in different situations at different points of their religious careers.

Thinking about the experiential careers of newly religious Jews and converts to Islam provides a concrete case through which we can start to disentangle other "careers" of practice and experience. This framework speaks to a literature that emerged in the Chicago school of ethnography (see, e.g., Becker 1953; Becker and Strauss 1956; Hughes 1958; Strauss 1993), but rarely took embodied experience into account. Drawing on sociological accounts of learning a particular embodied mastery (see Sudnow 1978; Wacquant 2004; Winchester 2008), we make the point that "becoming" means not only mastery and an incorporation of a socially located position (see Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), but may also involve the routinization of deeply "cared about" horizons of experience that a practice had once afforded (see also Berger and Luckmann 1967). In religion, as in many other domains, becoming an adept means that we may become habituated to such experiences and ways of being, a process that may occlude the very experience actors sought out as they entered their career trajectory. Thus, becoming an adept practitioner involves not only a re-molding of bodily practice and a construction of a new and enticing world of meaning, but also a routinization manifested by the incorporation of what were once distinct provinces of embodied meaning and experience into the flow of everyday life.

## Settings and methods

Data regarding Jewish "newly-religious" members is taken from a long term ethnographic project conducted by one author between 2005 and 2010, concerning everyday community and religiosity of an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles. In the following analysis the author both draws on observations made in the Chabad community—considered one of the biggest Hassidic groups in the USA today (Fishkoff 2005; Mintz 1992)—which is heavily invested in "bringing back" non-Orthodox Jews into Orthodoxy, as well as observations of people who became religious through other strict Orthodox sub-affiliations. The author draws primarily on ethnographic data collected through over 4 years of participant observation. During this time, the author participated alongside members at their daily prayers, Saturday prayers, holidays, and communal events in multiple neighborhood synagogues. The author observed and participated in more than 400 such meetings during the same period, and attended all holidays as well as joining members for meals and informal conversations.

The author introduced himself as a researcher to members in the beginning of the project, and periodically during the study, and sought permission to conduct the study, to which members all assented, with the exception of a few members who assented to the observations, but asked that he not write about them specifically. Although the author is not Orthodox, as he is both Jewish and Israeli, members took him in, invited him to meals and events, sometimes consulting with him on the meanings of Hebrew terms, and expecting he will become more observant as a result of his involvement. These observations and interviews resulted in over 1,000 single spaced pages of notes and transcripts, which were then analyzed through heuristics developed in grounded theory (see Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Data concerning Muslim converts is taken from an ethnographic study in Missouri conducted by the other author from October 2004 through February 2006, specifically, from observation and participation in the local Islamic community and in-depth interviews with converts. Many observations took place at the local Islamic Center, the only place of collective worship for Muslims in the area and a hub for community activities such as holiday dinners, weddings, and religious discussions and lectures. While ethnic particularism is a common feature of the American religious landscape (Warner 1998), this religious community was an exception. The Islamic Center was a multicultural and transnational space, with Muslims of various ages, races, ethnicities, nationalities, and even religious sects<sup>5</sup> active in the community at large. Throughout the research, the author also routinely interacted with community members outside of the space of the mosque, conversing and observing within their homes, over dinner or coffee at local restaurants, or on the nearby college campus. More fully participatory modes of research included fasting for the last week of Ramadan after being invited to do so by a convert, and periodically engaging in ritual prayer (*salat*) and Qur'anic recitation. Such participatory techniques were extremely beneficial for the author, not as a privileged window into the minds of individual converts, but as a way to explore the efficacy of religious practice itself. Such participation allowed the author to compare his “normal” experiences of everyday life to the shifts in subjectivity experienced while engaging in particular religious practices, thus deepening—and often challenging—his initial assumptions about conversion, religious experience, and the significance of practices in the conversion project.

The author also draws on in-depth interviews with 11 adult converts in the community. Because the Islamic Center did not keep any official membership records, interviews were generated over the course of the research by seeking out Muslim converts during visits to the center and by enlisting the knowledge and helpful assistance of other Muslims in the community. While the convert population was predominately young (in their twenties and thirties) and white, the author also interviewed members across age and race lines. Interviewees were between ages 20

<sup>5</sup> A majority of Muslims in the community, however, identified as Sunnis, meaning that the mosque did tend to have more of a “Sunni flavor” as one of the Shia members of the community put it. When asked, however, about their identification with a specific theological tradition, most converts felt uncomfortable aligning themselves exclusively with one or another, preferring to identify as “just Muslim.” However, six of the converts did tell the author that they “leaned more toward Sunni interpretations” of Islam, while one said he leaned more toward Shia interpretations and theology. Such complex identifications (and refusals of identification) themselves raise interesting questions about the contours of Muslim identity in the US context, but such a discussion would require another paper.

and 55, and included seven self-identified white-American converts, three self-identified African-American converts, and one Bosnian-American convert who did not self-identify racially. In the fieldwork and the interviews, the author spoke with people who had been converts for an extended period of time as well as the very recently converted. The range of this dimension was from just several months to almost 30 years. The justification for this focus was to collect the most diverse cases possible given the lack of official records and to capture similarities and potential differences among converts. The interviews followed a semi-structured format and ranged from 90 to 135 min in length.

After the question of experiential careers emerged as a sub-set of observations across field sites, the authors went on to categorize and theorize the data further, based on a continual process of “internal falsification” of possible explanations (see Katz 2001; Timmermans and Tavory 2007). In the case of one author, initial interviews did not specifically cover the interactions described below, so the author went back and specifically asked a number of interlocutors if they had similar experiences to those documented.

Although there are obvious differences between the religious traditions we compare, there are a few similarities that make these sites amenable to comparison. First, both in Orthodox Judaism and in Islam there are many rules of practical observance, and some actually substitute the term Orthodoxy with “Orthopraxy” for these reasons (see, e.g., Sharot 1991). Second, in both cases, the initial entry into religious life is relatively easy. In Muslim conversion, the new convert only needs to accept Islam formally and publicly to become a Muslim; although Orthodox Jewish conversion for non-Jews is a long and tortuous process, the observations here are taken from newly religious Jews who did not practice Judaism as a religion, yet were considered Jewish by Orthodox Jews due to their ethnic affiliation—moving from an ethnic to a religious affiliation within an ethno-religious category. In this case, then, Orthodox Jews saw them as *already* Jewish, rather than “converts,” and expected them to keep religious edicts while already accepting them as potential members. Third, both in Hasidic Jewish Orthodoxy and in the Islamic center studied here, the place and authenticity of “religious experience” was a focal concern. Thus, members in both sites were also pushed to think about and to evaluate their experience, and to ascertain whether, and where, they had such experiences.

Lastly, although in both ethnographic studies the authors interacted often with women as well as men, as both authors are men and rules concerning the spatial segregation of men and women (particularly men and women who are not family members) are fairly strict in both communities, more of our observations are of male interlocutors—with some of whom we have developed intimate friendships. Thus, although the authors are aware that there may be interesting gender differences in the embodied trajectories of men and women, our analysis below focuses more on similarities in the trajectories among men and women than on the differences between them.

### Patterns of experiential careers

Like other careers, the experiential careers of newly Orthodox Jews and newly converted Muslims follow a patterned trajectory. This trajectory-structure is understood



within the two communities, and others often “make sense” of actors’ actions and experiences in light of their perceived point within it (see also Mahmood 2005; Winchester 2008). We thus do not divide the analysis by field site, but rather by the career stage within which actors are embedded. We begin with the newly converted or “novice” actors, and then move on to the same actors after they have been religious for a while, and actors who have been religious either for a long time before observations began or from birth.<sup>6</sup>

### Bodily tensions and the re-orientation of intentionality

In speaking and interacting with both Muslims and Orthodox Jews about their conversions, we found that the beginnings of their careers were often marked by novel experiences that members interpreted as divine presence. These experiences were inextricably related to members’ taking on of a host of new bodily practices such as prayer, fasting, covering, dietary laws, and customs. In both cases, the religious edicts were enmeshed in the structure of everyday life. Newly religious members prayed at certain times, refrained from eating certain foods, said specific blessings before a drink of water, a meal, when they woke up, even after going to the toilet.

For the newly religious—both in the Jewish and Muslim settings—this meant they had to stop themselves in mid-action, take stock of their religious obligations, and perform a religiously prescribed action before going on with the flow of action in which they were engaged. Religious practice, then, was not only enmeshed in their everyday life, but also punctuated it. These interruptions of action were often quite drastic in the beginning, as the actor needed to reorient her action while engaged in a very different stream of practice, as the following Orthodox Jewish example shows:

At a friend’s house, a man that became religious a year ago. While we are talking, he takes a cup of water. Then he stops the conversation, saying, slowly, in heavily American-accented Hebrew “Blessed are you, my Lord the King of the world, that everything is done as he willed.” he says the words slowly, passionately. After a couple of seconds of silence, we resume our conversation.

This is a fleeting moment, almost invisible. And yet, members often talked about these situations as extremely meaningful. The fact that the first thing one has to do in the morning is say a long “dawn” prayer, and ritually wash the hands after the night’s sleep, that every snack had to be accompanied by the correct prayer, was extremely evocative. Indeed, when the author asked one newly religious Jew what drew him to become Orthodox, it was these actions, rather than the larger rituals or theological abstractions, that he spoke of: “it is the minutiae. The fact that there is Godliness in the little things, that I have to say a blessing every time I take a drink.”

<sup>6</sup> The temporal logic of interviewing and observing actors who were either born religious or converted a long time before observations began parallels the logic of temporality used by demographers when they construct “synthetic cohorts” (see, for example, Preston et al. 2001). We thank Bruce Western for this insight.

Similarly, for Muslim converts, the point of all their new practices was explicitly about developing what many Muslims call *taqwa*, an Arabic term that roughly translates to “God-consciousness,” or “awareness of God.” As Derek, one of the Muslim converts in the community put it:

Some Christians claim that Islam is a ‘works-based’ faith because of all the focus on doing things in addition to believing the right things. But the fact of the matter is, these practices facilitate sticking with the religion by making you more aware of God and his presence and authority in your life. I mean, what kind of believer would I be if I didn’t do these things? My answer is, well, not very much of one, because without these [practices], I would not be conscious of God and submitting to his authority, not very much anyway. It’s called *taqwa* in Arabic, and it’s really central to understanding why, you know, why you should prostrate yourself five times a day and do all of these other things. These things put you in contact with your Creator.

Religious practices, then, were thought of as primary modalities for experiencing the divine. For converts like Derek, the initial adoption of practices such as prayer, fasting, and, particularly for women, covering (or *hijab*) at the beginning of their conversions became potent sites for such experiences (see also, Mahmood 2005). To get a more thorough understanding of these new religious experiences, however, we need to understand how the adoption and regular utilization of such practices evoked new experiential structures and provinces of meaning that often existed in tension with old habits of thought, feeling, and perception. As with Orthodox Jews, such tensions often created ruptures or “gaps” in the everyday experiences of newly converted Muslims—ruptures that, at the level of explicit discourse and narrative, were often attributed divine significance.

Utilizing the phenomenological lines of argument outlined above, we can examine how particular religious practices worked to orient converts’ bodies and subjectivities away from the mundane engagements of everyday life and toward objects of experience deemed divine, towards a religiously perceived province of meaning. In this sense, these actions re-oriented actors’ intentionalities, moving them from the action in which they were engaged to the religious. For Muslim converts, ritual prayer, or *salat*, provides an apposite case. *Salat* was emphasized among converts when they talked about the initial development of an awareness of God in their everyday lives. As in the case of Orthodox Jewish prayers, to understand this quality of prayer, we need to understand how *salat* served to reorganize the flow of converts’ experience through restructuring their bodily orientations to everyday space and time. Performed five times a day—early morning (*fajr*), midday (*zuhr*), afternoon (*asr*), dusk (*maghrib*), and evening (*isha*)—*salat* demands the converting Muslims’ attention throughout the day. A relatively recent convert named Karen explained this through making a distinction between her mundane experience of everyday time and the divine, authoritative, time of God:

You know, it’s a funny thing really, but for most of your day you’re on somebody else’s clock, whether it’s your own, your boss’s, your friends’, your family, whatever. But when you’re praying, that’s God’s time. And that takes precedence over everything else. Whether you’re studying, at work, playing

around, whatever, prayer takes precedence.... It's just a way to help me remember God all the time. Like it's always on my mind because when you pray five times a day, every time of the day you're thinking about, okay, I need to pray. I have to remind myself constantly, I need to pray soon, I need to pray soon.

This attribution of divine authority is performed discursively, yet intimately intertwined with the embodied experience of training one's self to respond to "God's time," and move from the world of everyday life to a religious province of meaning. The difficulty of such training was evident in the early stages of the conversion career, as many converts had a hard time remembering to pray and often missed prayers altogether (see also Pagis 2010). The struggle to restructure one's bodily attention and memory enacts a distinct, lived tension between two experiential structures of time—between that of paramount reality and the times one is praying. This lived tension between competing experiential orientations (Leder 1990) is then taken up at the level of discourse and interpreted as a tension between mundane "everyday time" and transcendent "God's time."

This focus on temporality was also seen in newly religious Orthodox Jews' preparation for the Sabbath. During the Sabbath, members had to re-orient their everyday practices even more radically than they did in other times. Thus, for example, Orthodox Jews could not manipulate electricity, as this would be considered a proscribed form of work. For newly religious members, this was an experiential minefield. To take a couple of seemingly mundane examples, smoking was strictly prohibited, and walking out of the bathroom, they could not turn off the lights, having left the lights on from well before the Sabbath began. And yet, craving for a cigarette constantly reminded some newly religious members of their Orthodoxy, stopping one's hand from reaching for the light on the way out of the toilets was hard. At least two newly religious households the author visited decided to fix the light switch in the bathroom with a band-aid on the Sabbath, so when their hand automatically moved towards the switch, there would be enough "resistance" to stop them from accidentally turning off the lights.

Furthermore, prayers and time-bound practices not only involve a practical reorganization of time, but also enact experiential schemes of divine authority. In the Muslim *salat*, for example, one does not just pray five times a day, one prays in a certain way—a way that involves prostrating one's entire body to the ground. During daily prayers, Orthodox Jews have to bow down before God in specific points in prayer. Many converts, and particularly men, explained that they had conflicted feelings about this act in the earlier stages of their conversion careers, often describing themselves as feeling not only humbled, but even "humiliated" in face of God. A convert to Islam named Musad, for example, said:

It [*salat*] is definitely humbling, and, at first, I even found it humiliating. Especially lowering myself to the ground. The prostration, when I first started doing that, I was feeling a little bit like, "Why should I be putting my head on the ground?" I used to feel kind of weird and, you know, embarrassed because I had never done that before, you know, literally bowed down like that. It was definitely a pride thing, not wanting to submit.

Here again we observe how bodily practice created a tension in lived experience. Prostrating oneself to the ground, especially, triggered unexpected feelings of humility (even humiliation for some).

What is particularly interesting in these examples is that these seemingly mundane situations were some of the most potent sites for experiences of “the divine.” While the convert herself engaged in prayer or other religiously prescribed practices, she found herself overtaken with feelings that she herself did not expect or could not control (see Katz 1999). Indeed, in many instances of observation at the local Islamic Center, the author observed men and women become emotionally moved, even weep, during their prayers. As newly religious Orthodox Jews must check the habit of turning off the light switch or had to stop in mid-action to perform a prayer, they often spoke of feeling Godliness. In phenomenological terms, the conflict of bodily habits with the new bodily regime prescribed by religious edicts forced members not only to re-structure the body, but created a “rupture” in which actors re-oriented themselves away from the natural attitude and toward provinces of meaning in which experiences deemed religious could emerge. In this sense, bodily tension became the “trigger” for experiences deemed religious for both Muslim converts and newly religious Orthodox Jews. These bodily tensions, however, were far from stable. As newly converted members continued to practice their religion, these tensions often receded from consciousness, experience became routinized, changing the structure of our interlocutors’ religious lives.

#### On the routinization of religious experience

While instances of experiences deemed religious could occur among even the most seasoned members in both Muslim and Jewish contexts, converts experienced these feelings most strongly at the beginning of their religious careers. Both new and more experienced converts often talked about how the frequency and quality of these religious experiences changed. One Orthodox Jewish interlocutor who had become Orthodox more than 20 years ago compared the move to Orthodox Judaism to a romantic relationship “In the beginning, it is like falling in love, you feel it all the time, it is just amazing. But then, later, it is different; you can go through weeks, months, without really feeling it.”

These sentiments are echoed and articulated by Fatima, a female Muslim convert who tried to make sense of her conversion experience:

I remember having such strong and complicated feelings when praying. I still do have strong feelings, but they were especially strong and really kind of complicated when I first started. I even cried sometimes. And I’m not a crier, you know? [laughs]... I think the power of it is really feeling that initial submission to God, to His will instead of your own. And it’s not an easy thing to do. So you feel this push and pull between your old ways of doing things and God’s way. And you feel the weight of that during prayer, I think.

These moments, at least as this convert describes them, do not actually disappear in the course of the religious career. Routinization was not complete. Members still spoke of experiences of the divine, both within religious practice, and at other times.

But in the situations we describe, the preponderance of such experience diminished. If the initial stages in taking the mantle of religious life were marked by a powerful tension between previous bodily habits and new religious edicts, this tension lessened as new bodily habits were inculcated; routinization was intimately tied to embodied trajectories.

The differences between these initial stages and later ones can be seen in the effort needed to perform prayers and other religious practices. After a while, especially in the case of daily prayers, most prayers are memorized. Rather than a conscious effort, it becomes a bodily habit that can be engaged in while thinking of other things (see also Dewey 1933). Through 4 years of participant observation in a Jewish Orthodox neighborhood-community, one author found that while he needed to focus on the words he read during the prayers in the first year or two, after a while he could chant the prayers without even being sure what he chanted, thinking about the tasks of the day ahead, taking mental notes, or just daydreaming.<sup>7</sup> This, obviously, was not specific to the author, as the following fieldnotes excerpt makes clear:

In synagogue, I come in. I see a friend of mine in the midst of prayer. His lips are moving in prayer, but his eyes are roaming, looking slightly bored, He nods to me as I come in to the hall, while still praying, he shakes my hand and smiles, then continues praying facing the dais.

Similarly, the other author found that converts who had practiced Islam for several years often talked about the problem of “slacking off” in their practices. What was interesting is that they were not referring to ceasing to do the practices themselves (converts almost uniformly *increased* the frequency of their practices as their religious careers continued), but rather to their inability to sense or feel the practice’s efficacy as they had before. Some admitted to thinking about other things—like work projects, children, and grocery lists—during *salat* instead of focusing on God. For some long-time Muslims, even practices such as fasting during Ramadan became sites of an experiential struggle to remain involved. Musad, who had been a practicing Muslim for 13 years, stated that he was trying to make fasting “harder on myself.” When asked why, he said that for the past several years he had experienced fasting as “just getting by, just getting through the physical hunger and thirst part of it instead of focusing on the spiritual and religious aspects of those things.”

This routinization of religious practice is seen as a pragmatic problem not only by the authors—as an irony playing behind the backs of congregants—but by members themselves. Indeed, this is one of the topics most dear to members’ hearts, and people talk about it quite often without being prodded. The topic becomes articulated in jokes and rabbis’ and imams’ constant warnings and reprimands:

The rabbi of the synagogue talks about *Kavanah*, divine intention in action. He tells a story about a Hassidic guy that came to see the Rebbe [the leader of a Hassidic group]. The Rebbe told him to look at the prayer book while he was praying. The Hassid didn’t get it, he knew the whole thing backwards and forwards, and was a little put off by the Rebbe’s advice. A few months later,

<sup>7</sup> As writers both in the realm of music-playing (Sudnow 1978) and of boxing (Wacquant 2004) have shown, part of mastery is the ways in which actions become “natural,” and thus tacit (see also Polanyi 1983). In the language of Bourdieu (1977), a bodily habitus or “hexis” is inculcated.

while reciting from memory, he found himself looking at the beams of the synagogue roof, wondering how strong they were, and how they were built. Then, suddenly, he understood the Rebbe's advice.

At the end of the *khutba* (sermon) before Friday prayer, the imam gently chastises the congregation for what he sees as “messy prayer.” He tells them to make sure they are standing shoulder to shoulder, focusing, and doing their *rakats* (the cycles of prayer) correctly. He tells them that “right prayer is done with the whole person—body, mind, and heart.” All these elements rely on the others. If the body is not correct, “the mind and heart will wander from Allah.”

Whereas at the beginning of the religious career the focus in prayer and other practices was partially achieved through the conscious effort of simply “getting it right,” it later became part and parcel of other mundane actions. In the beginning of the last section, one author demonstrated how a newly religious Orthodox friend needed to stop everything in order to say a prayer. After 3 years, however, the very same person spoke and acted very differently:

I sit with a friend, and we talk. In the middle of a sentence, he raises his glass to drink something, and I see his lips moving for a second, muttering a blessing inaudibly, before he continues the sentence in our conversation.

And the same interlocutor who spoke at length about the minutiae of religious edicts at the beginning of his religious career, said years later that:

The blessing.... It has become a part of drinking water, like you reach your hand to the cup. It is the same way, the lips just move. It is like a part of drinking.

In a somewhat parallel example regarding the practice of *hijab* among long-practicing women converts in the Muslim community, the author found that while covering was a premier bodily site for the production of experiences deemed religious at the beginning stages of women's conversion careers, it too receded from consciousness after several years of practice. As Sarah, a Muslim for almost 14 years, stated:

Honestly, I don't really think about having it on anymore, unless someone makes a big deal about it.... It's just what I wear now. Nothing special.

What is striking in these quotes is the way in which practices not only become routinized in the sense that they are “easier” to perform, that they are “mastered,” but in that they become part of a different stream of action. Saying the short blessing before the drink of water is neither a break in action, nor of intentionality. It is not that the actor shifts her attention to a religious province of meaning effortlessly. Rather, saying the prayer becomes *part of* the act of drinking itself. As the hand reaches the cup, the words are uttered. In an experiential sense, the words uttered are no different from the hand reaching for the cup, an embodied part of taking a drink. In a similar way, the feel of *hijab* becomes less a constant reminder of divine authority and tends to recede into the background of the habitual styles and actions of everyday life, though the convert may re-attend to it through people's interactions with her (see Tavory 2010).

In Schutz's (1962) terms, the same string of action that was once located within different provinces of meaning, was now part of the same seamless flow. If, at the beginning, actors had to re-orient themselves to the task at hand, they later performed the very same actions while remaining within the natural attitude—thinking of their day, “just getting by,” or combining religious practice (such as the moving of lips in prayer) with other actions located squarely within the realm of everyday life. If the experience of the early convert is that of a break or a rupture between the focus on the action at hand and the religious practice, thus creating a break in the intentionality of action, the experience of the seasoned convert (or those born into a religious life) is usually that of an uninterrupted stream of action. The focus does not usually shift in mid-action, and the intentionality of prayer, for example, is directed not toward the divine but often to the mundane action of drinking itself.

Again, it is not that religious experiences cease to occur altogether. Religious experience still appeared in other situations, and the very same people who would say the prayers while thinking of their day at work, would sometimes, when something happened in their lives, or if they were in a pensive or thankful mood, be intently engaged in prayer. But the possibility of a break in intentionality became something that had to be consciously worked at, struggling against the habitual inertia or pull of routinization—something to be revered, a shadow of a possibility rather than an automatic reminder of a religious project of self constitution. In this sense, the romantic relationship metaphor presented by the Orthodox Jewish interlocutor above is apt. Even in the most routinized of married relationships, love is sometimes felt; but, as the joke with which we began the article illustrates, long periods can elapse where, contrary to all appearances, it is not.

#### De-routinization: personal and institutional re-enchantments

The experiential process we describe above was not a sociological construct hidden from members. In Ricoeur's (1970) terms, we are not engaging in hermeneutics of suspicion. Rather, both in the Muslim and in the Jewish Orthodox communities we studied, it was a lived issue, a matter to be grappled with, one of the themes that emerged often in conversations, sermons, and interviews. In other words, this was an existential-pragmatic challenge that both lay-members and religious functionaries faced and needed to solve. This section outlines some attempts to re-enchant religious practice, both on the level of people's everyday methods of re-creating the rupture they experienced earlier on, as well as some religiously codified institutional practices that reproduced such moments.

One common way to do so, which we already alluded to above, was in admonitions and sermons from rabbis and imams. In one Chabad Hasidic synagogue, geared especially to newly Orthodox Jews, to *Baalei T'shuva*, the rabbi often spoke about the importance of focusing on the act of praying as well as on the everyday blessings accompanying the day. He admonished members not to let religious actions become “rote” or “dead rituals.” Members themselves spoke with the author about how they tried to focus by closing their eyes, or by rocking back and forth while praying, trying to summon an intentionality that often slipped away. In addition to these admonitions, members in the Orthodox community also told stories about the ways in which

religious luminaries dealt with such routinization, or rather, how these moments *never became routinized* for these figures:

Rabbi Chelev-Hittim tells about his father-in-law. “I used to take my children there for *Shabbos* [the Sabbath]. They didn’t appreciate it then, but the blessings there were amazing. He would sing the *Shalom Aleichem* and the pre-meal blessings for half an hour [a chain of blessings that usually takes five minutes], focusing on every word.”

Instead of saying the Sabbath prayers quickly, to get on to the serious business of eating the Sabbath meal, his father-in-law—a renowned rabbi—took his time. The point *was* the prayers, not so much the meal. The prayer was not only a ritual preparation but a goal in itself, an opportunity to enter into a distinct religious world of meaning. Others told of how revered rabbis, both historical figures and current leaders, infuse intent, *kavanah*, into every mundane activity, but especially in prayers. One member told of a rabbinical leader he met in New York, how he closed his eyes and intently uttered the blessings on a cup of water. These were the men to emulate, figures whose greatness was manifest precisely in these moments, in being impervious to routinization.

In the Islamic field site, many members talked about the importance of “timing” their adherence to religious practices—in other words, the importance of taking on new religious practices in a gradual fashion. On the one hand, converts and other Muslims saw taking on new religious practices (e.g., special prayers, extra fasts, lessons on Qur’anic recitation, and Islamic theology) as crucial for warding off spiritual malaise and for the continued development of *taqwa*. One convert, Nina, spoke about how she and her husband took on a new practice every Ramadan and then attempted to keep it for the rest of their lives. In explaining the logic of these additions, she stated, “You can’t remain complacent in your faith. You always have to be taking steps towards God in order for Him to continue to move towards you.”<sup>8</sup>

As religious experiences diminished within the sites of previous practices, adding new practices allowed this experience structure to move on to new situations. Karen, for example, spoke to one author about her experiences of beginning to take classes on *tajwid*—the rules of enunciation, etiquette, and sensibility that govern how the Qur’an should be read aloud:

I’ve read the Qur’an dozens upon dozens of times, but [learning *tajwid*] has opened up a whole new set of understandings for me. It’s really been an amazing experience.... I am learning how holy the Qu’ran truly is ... how the voice of Allah speaks through the text in a way that I’ve never quite grasped before.

On the other hand, however, converts and other members of the community also spoke of the related danger of taking on too many practices too quickly. Many talked

<sup>8</sup> Orthodox Jews similarly talked about how they had to strive constantly to do something more, to constantly add to their religious fervor. One famous rabbinical interpretation of the bible makes this point in relation to the stone incline men had to climb to reach the tabernacle, an incline that had no stairs. This was a metaphor for religious life, members explained. You can never stop complacently at any given point (as there are no stairs), and if you do not strive to move up, towards greater and greater observance, you will slide downwards.



about the dangers of what was called “Salafi burnout.” Salafis are members of a modernist sect of Sunni Islam sometimes associated with Islamic fundamentalism who believe Muslims should model their lives after the Prophet and his companions in the early days of Islam. Salafis are particularly known among Muslims for the intensity of their piety. However, the term “Salafi burnout” refers not so much to Salafis themselves, but more often to enthusiastic Muslims who attempt to integrate too many pious practices into their lives too quickly. The “burnout” idea comes from the belief that when one attempts to take on a very pious lifestyle, one will become exhausted because the high level of behavioral piety is not matched by an attendant level of inner spirituality or *taqwa*. As one convert explained:

There are people out there who get really excited and, in the first week [of converting], they grow out a beard and start wearing the long, white jalabia for the men.... But what happens then is you can't keep it up for very long, I don't think, and then you get tired of it. So what happens when you get tired? What parts of it go? What parts of it stay? That's a hard decision to make.

A few Muslims admitted to experiencing such “burnout” themselves at some point in their conversion careers, and spoke about the importance of taking on practices in a more gradual fashion to avoid such spiritual disillusionment. Religious leaders in the community were also aware of this danger. During a Friday prayer, for example, an imam announced that a young woman had just said her *shahada*, the declaration of faith converts must say in order to become recognized members of the Islamic community, or *ummah*. During this announcement, he warned other members of the community not to push the new member to take on practices before she was sufficiently ready. “Becoming a Muslim is not something any of us do all at once,” he stated. “Each of us must build our connection to God at our own pace.”

The strategies and incidents described above are well established, in the sense that routine stories and admonitions are told about them. They are also personal, in that the struggle against routinization occurred in the realm of personal practice—although some of the practices were done in public space, and in both cases it was sometimes hard to separate the personal struggle from more strategic enactments of a specific presentation of self (Goffman 1959). The data thus point to a shift in the project of religious self-constitution among converts. From a focus on the actions themselves—where novelty elicits moments of rupture—the struggle moves to the revival of rupture as against bodily habituation that would produce “dead” ritual.

There are, however, other ways—more broadly institutionalized and central to the religious traditions themselves—that work to reverse the routinization of experience and bodily habituation and thus re-enchant religious life. The structure of the yearly cycle, and the religious holidays within it, also worked to de-routinize experience. If the Sabbath and *jum'ah* prayer, for example, were de-routinizations of weekly practice (and were therefore easily routinized themselves), there were other holy days and occasions interspersed in the religious calendar that stood in contrast to the daily way in which religious practice shaped experience.

Thus, for example, the Jewish Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*, was considered the most experientially rich day of the religious calendar. During the Day of Atonement, members had to perform a series of practices that stood in opposition to the way they

were habituated to religious practice throughout the year (see also Leach 1961). First, the fast itself constantly reminded members (especially near the end of the day) of their faith, a resurgence of the body, much like the “dys-appearance” of the body that Leder (1990) speaks of. As people became more and more aware of their hunger, they were reminded of practice as a specifically religious project, meant to attune the worshipper with the object of worship. But beyond the fast itself, the day was ripe with transformations and inversions. Thus, as opposed to the regular bowing in supplication during prayers, during the Day of Atonement, members fully prostrated themselves, re-creating moments of abject humility that may have become invisible. Lastly, instead of wearing the regular black garments, the “*capote*,” hasidic men wore a “*kittel*” a white robe. Thus, people experienced a simple perceptual contrast: where everybody previously wore black, everyone now suddenly wore white, making both the self and other co-religionists stand out against the habituation of religious attire.

Similar de-routinizing dynamics can be observed during Islamic holidays such as *Ramadan* and *Eid al-Adha*. While Muslims can and often do engage in periodic fasting throughout the year, the fast of *Ramadan*, prescribed in the Qu’ran itself, takes on special significance as it necessitates an entire month of fasting. In honoring the revelation of the Qu’ran to the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims abstain from eating and drinking during the daylight hours, only breaking their fast once the sun sets. Visceral feeling of hunger and thirst that emerge from the depths of the body and slowly build as the day (and month) progresses re-oriented even the most experienced converts to their dys-appearing bodies and the effects such a practice had on their experience of everyday life. Converts talked about *Ramadan* as “a space out of time,” “a month of renewal,” and to the fast as a form of “spiritual training” (see Winchester 2008). Moreover, the fact that the month of *Ramadan* falls according to the cycles of the Islamic lunar calendar and not the Gregorian solar calendar means that the holy month “shifts” into different seasons over the course of a few years. This too has de-routinizing effects on the bodily habits and experiences of the fasting subject. As one convert put it:

You can somewhat prepare for Ramadan but never completely, because one year you’ll be fasting and celebrating around Christmas along with everybody else and having a bit of a break because of the [Christmas] holiday, but then another year you’ll be fasting in the middle of summer when the days are extremely long. So that makes the experience a little different each time. It keeps you on your toes.

Thus, in both Islam and Judaism, the routinization of religious experience was potentially countered in two ways. First, habituation and the disappearance of the divine within routinized practice were countered by people’s conscious projects of re-enchantment. Members tried to take on new edicts, or simply—knowing that some practices became rote—tried to re-orient themselves consciously to the divine. On another level, the organization of religious practice itself afforded members with moments and times in the year in which such routinization of practice was disrupted, thus positioning them, again, in a situation in which they encountered a tension between a habituated practice and a de-routinized form of orienting the body, re-opening the experiential spaces that were partly shut by routinization.

## Discussion and conclusions

This article uses a phenomenological approach to outline the experiential careers of newly religious Orthodox Jews and converts to Islam. In both cases, we find a similar trajectory. At the beginning of their religious careers, converts talked about strong experiences of the divine in situations in which they had to re-orient their bodies to religious practice. These situations—when they have either to suspend their stream of everyday action or simply to focus on religiously prescribed action—afforded new members with a means to re-orient the intentionality of their actions away from the natural attitude of everyday life and towards a province of meaning they described as religious. Later in their religious careers, however, as religiously prescribed actions became routinized embodied habits, these situations often lost this deeply “cared for” quality, and the re-orientation to the divine occurred far less often. Thus, in both groups, bodily mastery diminished some of the very experiences that often drew new members to religion. Converts treated the disappearance of the divine from these situations as an existential and pragmatic problem, attempting to re-enchant these moments as a conscious project.

Our usage of phenomenology here differs from other sociological approaches that have heavily drawn on phenomenology in a few ways. Although, like some other practice theorists, we are interested in the bodily experience of “becoming” (see Sudnow 1978; Wacquant 2004), we do not see the practical mastery of a socially organized activity or identity as necessarily an end in itself. Unlike Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* (e.g., Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), we are not primarily interested in the fact that part of occupying a social position is in incorporating tastes, perceptions, and temporalities that are socially located. Although we heartily agree with this thrust of Bourdieusian sociology, we are primarily interested in how these experiences shift over time and in what these shifts can tell us about the potentials and challenges of “becoming.” On the other hand, unlike more ambitious phenomenologists (e.g., Csordas 1994; Katz 1999; Neitz and Spickard 1990; Spickard 1991), we do not try to translate experience into phenomenological categories. Thus, we treat the process of mastery, and the inculcation of bodily orientations, as a prism through which we can ask questions about the situations in which experiences emerge.

This use of phenomenology allows us to contribute both to the study of religious experience as well as to the sociology of careers and the relationship between embodied practice and projects of “becoming” more generally. Thus, we approach a phenomenology that is truly social. We look at shifts in experience—the relation between the careers of socially located subjects and the changes in their ways of experiencing a “cared about” object of their career. Avoiding reductive approaches to experience that assume an unbridgeable gulf between experience and its cultural representation, we advocate an approach that takes into account both actors’ ascriptions and their bodily orientations towards experience. Both aspects, moreover, are inescapably social in that: (a) they are embedded in the shared ritual and discursive practices of a social world, and; (b) the salience and significance of these experiences is fundamentally shaped by the temporality of a social career.

In the realm of the sociology of religion, our analysis of experiential careers provides a unit of analysis that allows researchers to investigate the temporality of experience in the lives of actors engaged in a particular religious tradition. Although

it is clear that experiential careers cannot be conflated with religious careers, these are connected. Thus, our analysis not only provides new answers to the socially structured temporality of experiences deemed religious, it also raises new questions—e.g., are there specific points of time in a religious career when the “drop out” rates of new converts are highest? Do new sects tend to “up” the ritual demands over time in order to avoid experiential slumps?

The phenomenological tools employed here are thus useful for scholars who wish to study religious experience while bypassing what are frankly more theological debates about what religious experience essentially “is.” Our focus on actors’ own attributions and practices, as well as the specific streams of action in which such attributions are most likely to occur, allows for fruitful comparative analyses of “the problem of presence” (Engelke 2007) across a variety of religious groups and traditions. In our own comparative analysis, we have focused on two “rite-heavy” religious traditions. In such traditions, the divine can be found in the drinking of water, the rumbling of the gut during a fast, or in the humility of a prostrating subject. The question of where and when other religious groups and traditions find religious experience remains open.

More generally, this approach to experiential careers contributes to the burgeoning sociological work interested in exploring the (inter)subjective and experiential dynamics of bodily habits and practices (see, for example, Aalten 2007; Benzecry 2009; O’Connor 2007; Pagis 2010; Sennett 2008; Wacquant 2004; Winchester 2008). While the Bourdieusian concept of habitus rightly looms large in these conversations, there remains what many scholars have referred to as a conceptual gap or “black box” between the system of dispositions embodied in bodily habits and the relational system of social positions (DiMaggio 1979; Jenkins 1992; Tavory 2010; Wacquant 2004). In other words, the Bourdieusian conceptual apparatus does not provide an account of the ongoing oscillation and fraught dynamics of human experience that so often characterize a prolonged engagement in a field of practice (see also Atkinson 2010). By looking at the relationship and tensions between different bodily schemas and the ongoing attempts to maintain such tensions as a way to create a space for the emergence of experiences people care for and about, we demonstrate how phenomenological concepts such as intentionality and finite provinces of meaning, combined with a focus on the temporality, can help us chart the dynamics of experiential careers.

As this point makes clear, such an approach need not be reserved solely for the study of religion. The relation between shifts in experience and projects of “becoming,” after all, are not the prerogative of religious groups. Indeed, the experiential careers we chart could be found in any field that valorizes certain practices as exceeding the mundanity of the everyday and orienting one toward a different, and deeply cared for, horizon of meaning. The aesthetic excitement of aspiring artists, the bodily elation of athletes, or even the intellectual excitement of scholars, can benefit from emphasizing experiential careers. When does an opera bring tears to the aesthete’s eyes (Benzecry 2009)? When does a boxer experience a fight in the ring as a transcendent experience (Wacquant 2004)? When, on the other hand, do moments that once afforded these intense experiences lose their luster? And how can such experiences be re-enchanted or reclaimed? If the processes we describe here are any indication, experiences of both intensity and loss may be part and parcel of many social careers.

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