

Cognitive Emotions and Emotional Cognitions in Religious Studies

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Religion, Cognition, and Emotion

A surprisingly large number of the challenges confronting teachers of religion revolves around determining the relative roles that should be accorded to emotion and cognition respectively. In publicly supported institutions, the perceived challenge is to minimize emotion in order to maximize the objective, non-partisan, intellectual pursuit of the knowledge of religion—and for some very good reasons. Deviation from this ideal could well lead to muddled understanding at least and a lack of intellectual rigor at worst and so undermine any claim religious studies might have to being an academic discipline among disciplines. Open and free inquiry cannot be hampered by blind religious devotion or the persuasive influence of religious authorities however benign these might be. Furthermore, religious studies carry the additional responsibility of maintaining the line of separation between church and state. They must be seen as nothing more than a “teaching *about* religion”—a somewhat distanced enterprise from the swirl of commitments, excitements, and passions of the religions they examine.

In church supported institutions, on the other hand, the challenge is somewhat a reverse of this for here part of the intent is to “teach *for* religion” and so commitment, involvement, and passion are actively promoted. Here, faith is experienced as more than belief, while hope through despair, awe in the presence of the Almighty, and a longing for holiness are cherished and nurtured as foundational for religious growth. Learning the skills of critical thinking and rational argument are encouraged but often in a supporting role to appropriating and applying a heritage of beliefs and practices, personally and wholeheartedly.

These distinctions between cognitive-centered and affective-centered approaches may be overdrawn, but questions emerge which address the tendency to move in the direction of either extreme. On the one hand, does all emotion potentially dull the perception of truth and undermine rigor

ofunderstanding? On the other hand, are logic, evidence-seeking, and meticulous reasoning by nature at odds with worship, a longing for holiness, or devotion to God? The combined impact of these questions led me to an exploration of that ground where reason and feeling might meet. I began with Israel Scheffler's "In Praise of the Cognitive Emotions,"¹ in which he analyzes four instances of emotions which serve cognitions or arise from the epistemological status of particular cognitions. His paper prompted me to wonder what one might find if something of a Copernican revolution took place and one could look also for instances where cognitions might serve emotion or arise from the ontological status of particular emotions. This led to the positing of emotional cognitions which approximated reverse images of the cognitive emotions.² Where Scheffler probed the realm of scientific learning, I have argued that these categories are usefully applicable to arts and music education.³ Here, we shall ask if they are also applicable in religious studies so that we might analyze and critically assess the role of each.

Cognitive Emotions

In exploring the duality of reason and feeling, Scheffler identified "rational passions," a term first suggested by R. S. Peters.⁴ These are those emotional dispositions which are internalized as rational norms and make up what he calls "an intellectual conscience:" "a love of truth and a contempt for lying, a concern for accuracy in observation and inference, and a corresponding repugnance at error in logic or fact, . . . revulsion at distortion, disgust at evasion, admiration of theoretical achievement, respect for the considered arguments of others,"⁵ and so on.

There is a corresponding "conscience" for religious studies. We might even add some further commitments that are unique in this setting; for instance, an *appreciation* of and *respect* for the faiths of those under study, a *willingness* to accept that there are different understandings of self, other, and God, even an *empathy* toward or at least a *restraint* in judgment of those subscribing to alternative worlds of meaning, a *humility* about the limitations and failings of one's own faith while maintaining a sense of what it means to be *loyal* to a tradition, and so on. These are "passions" because they demand a rigorous commitment, yet they retain a rational flavor because they emerge from an underlying conviction.

Scheffler also describes "perceptive feelings"—emotional filters through which we view the world, interpret its objects, and evaluate its critical features. Through them, he suggests, "we gain enormous new powers of fundamental description"⁶ whenever we make critical appraisals of the environment. In

scientific studies, these feelings are about potential leads and possible outcomes and so empower description and help direct research strategy. If perceptive feelings play a significant role in the study of inanimate objects, physical systems, and the hypothesized realities of science, then their role in the study of human meaning-making, committed loyalties, and expressions of faith and belief is even more fundamental.

To understand the meaning of religious symbols, the researcher needs to bring a feeling for the phenomena as human beings relate to them. Paul Tillich recognized this “feeling for” in the study of religion. However, he overstated the case by arguing that bringing critical judgement to bear on a religious claim requires one to be “grasped by the spiritual power of this event and through it . . . enabled to evaluate the witnesses, the traditions, and the authorities in which the same spiritual power was and is effective.”⁷⁷ If such a complete immersion in the emotional and intellectual life of the other under study is required before one can access that other world of meaning, there would be very little mutual understanding across religious boundaries, for one does not step so easily out of one’s own situatedness into another’s. If, on the other hand, there is no sensitive participation, again inter-religious understanding would be difficult if not impossible, because the religious life is among other things a feelingful life and without some empathy for another’s religious experience one can hardly claim to have come to an understanding of it. In other words, while one can intellectualize about religious expressions, their full impact and significance must also be felt, imaginatively at least, to be really known and critically assessed.

This is foundational in Mircea Eliade’s principle, “a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied *as* something religious.”⁷⁸ This has been further elaborated in John Hick’s discussion of the expression, “the religious study of religion.”⁷⁹ Such an undertaking, Hick explains, is the constructing of hypotheses which take full account of the information and methods provided by the sciences but is applied to exploring the variety of human responses to what is perceived to be a transcendent reality. In his words, the study aims to be “religious but not confessional.” He endorses the possibility of a scientific examination of religious emotions explored from within the religious experience with imagination and feeling, but without the conviction of or a commitment to the religion subscribed to by a believer. This distinction between religious experience imaginatively reconstructed and religious experience actually practiced is key to understanding the role of perceptive feelings in the academic study of religion.

Scheffler’s description of “theoretical imagination” is a particularly daring attribution to emotion, because both theory and imagination strike

one at first as being cognitive acts. However, he attributes to imagination much more than cognitive qualities. He sees it as a feelingful process, involving excitement, impertinence, dash, and zest. The process of scientific theory building is, he claims, not merely a matter of fact-gathering and the methodical application of scientific procedures, but is a matter of “boldness, verve, and speculative daring” throughout.¹⁰

The religions are among the most highly speculative enterprises in which human beings engage and the sheer amount and kind of quantifiable data to be considered has to be approached with intuitive daring and panache. Critical interpretations and questionings of established ideas, cherished self-understandings, and fixed habits are also undertakings of theoretical imagination demanding a noticeable level of impertinence. Frequently, religious scholars find themselves on the progressive edge of otherwise conservative traditions of meaning—a position that is not always comfortable or valued. Without daring and courage, “feeling and flair,” the study would falter and explorations of religion would be, to use Scheffler’s phrase, not only deadly, but indeed “dead.”¹¹

The paramount “cognitive emotions” are those emotions which are specifically cognitive by virtue of the fact that they rest upon a supposition of a cognitive sort”— that is to say, a supposition relating to the content of the subject’s cognitions . . . and . . . bearing upon their epistemological status.”¹² Scheffler focuses on two of these: the “joy of verification” when the results of an inquiry meet our expectations and the feeling of “surprise” when they do not. These cognitive feelings are the emotional capstone to a successful inquiry. Even unexpected outcomes are not necessarily indicative of a failed inquiry but of unanticipated possibilities. In fact, the surprise over an outcome may be a good sign that an inquiry has been conducted with integrity.

If these cognitive responses are part of the scientific enterprise, it should come as no surprise, then, that discoveries of ideas about the nature of self, world, or even God in the great religious meaning-making systems can and often do also evoke surprisingly powerful emotional responses, which are the direct result of a cognitive insight or discovery, and which are, therefore, rightly categorized as cognitive emotions.

In religion, there has long been an awareness of this very real possibility; in fact, there is a religious word for the most memorable of these experiences, “epiphany.” In the strong sense, an epiphany is an appearance or manifestation of God; in a weak sense, according to Webster’s dictionary, it is the sudden, intuitive insight into reality or the essential meaning of something. While these explosive cognitive experiences may be deliberately planned for in religious education, is an epiphanic moment appropriate in

the academic study of religion? In the weak sense of the term, the moment of “catching on” or “getting the point” is indispensable in the learning experience, but what of the strong sense? What if students experience more than the joy of verification or the surprise of falsification and actually find grounds for religious faith?

Exposure to the sublimities as well as the defects in religious traditions, whether one’s own or another’s, can be deeply disturbing and/or exhilarating. In the record of her spiritual and intellectual journey, *Encountering God*, Diana Eck describes her engagement as a twenty-year-old Christian scholar with the powerful witness of Indian intellectuals, Hindu and otherwise, as a “shaking of the foundations” of her faith and belief.¹³ “Shaking the foundations” is a phrase she borrows from Tillich who also experienced the transformation that comes from being exposed to ideas outside of his own background and tradition.¹⁴ As an indirect consequence of taking my class on Religion and the Public Schools, a course that looked at the philosophical, historical, legal, and social impacts of a multifaith society on the public schools, one student enrolled in a Zen class. Another who was estranged from her family and church determined to reconnect with both, and another was prompted to strategize about the religious education he would provide for his new-born daughter. These personal responses, some with all the accoutrements of an epiphany, were not discouraged, but neither were they actively encouraged. They were, however, real responses to the learnings and insights gained from the course. The students experienced the emotional impact of “coming to know” in the study of religion. Such emotional cognitions are a byproduct of learning and teaching that are as appropriate and inevitable in religious studies as they are in other studies.

In each of the instances of cognitive emotions, however, one gets the impression that as the categories are applied to religious studies, they are not quite as distinct as Scheffler describes them in scientific thought. This may be because the activity of religious meaning making, even the study of another’s such activity, is not so coolly detached from the life of the one who studies it nor is it so self-consciously rational and so determinedly objective an enterprise as the undertaking of science purports to be. In applying the notion of cognitive emotions to the study of religion, the notion itself is transformed. Coming to know religions is an enterprise empowered by emotions and one can expect that a brush with the potency of ideas about ultimacy, sacrifice, hope, moral commitments, wonder, and the other elements that make up the matériel of the religions may not only contribute to extending students’ knowledge of religion but may also impact their inner life of feeling.

Emotional Cognitions

All this prompts the search for the logical alternative to cognitive emotions—cognitions that serve the emotions and cognitions that are prompted by emotional moments. One kind of service to emotion provided by cognition is evident in what might be termed “expressive information”—the reasoning that guides and disciplines emotional responses. Here we may rearrange Scheffler’s statement, “As cognition without emotion is vacuous, so emotion without cognition is blind.”¹⁵ In giving sight to emotion, reasoning fills the role of determining which emotions should be carried through to expressive action and which expressive responses are appropriate.

As Nel Noddings reminds us, there is no rule that can be invoked to govern all occasions of a particular emotion, but—and in this the cognitive demands may be even greater—there are contingent considerations.¹⁶ Being able to recognize the feelings that motivate a particular behavior, to identify alternative outlets for feelings, and to predict outcomes, imagine consequences, and assess their effectiveness are all cognitive tasks contributing to the emotional life. Importantly, reason does not repress or override emotion in this process. Rather, it selects among possible emotional responses, rejecting some, choosing others for the sake of a predetermined goal.

In the study of religion, the student may be moved by an encounter with the passions, commitments, and excitements that make up the experience of religion but whether one is attracted to or repulsed by these aspects of the religious life, the study can have academic integrity. This integrity will depend on how well the students have been able to negotiate their emotional responses in the light of the purposes of the study. If the goal is to understand a particular way of thinking, the student will need to establish an intellectual space for reflective objectivity. If the goal is to find personal meaning, the student will need to channel, discipline, and fashion the emotional impulse along appropriate lines.

Another role for cognition in the service of feelings is to contribute to an understanding of the emotional life, that is, to “passional knowledge.” The most powerful human emotions characterize the religious life and are explored in religious beliefs, practices, and artifacts. At their most profound, the religions tend to employ non-discursive and non-literal symbol schemata to express these emotions—music, architecture, costume, ritual, gesture, myth, parable, and story. As Nelson Goodman explained, these symbolizations tend to be dense, replete, and highly nuanced.¹⁷ Because the figurative constructions of religious expressiveness are developed suggestively and their interpretations are made subjectively, the insights they give into the

religious life are often implicit, idiosyncratic, and ambiguous. Nevertheless, expressive and interpretive skills can be developed and refined, ideas about and explications of particular religious works can be shared, and traditional interpretations of the emotional life are formed over time. Clearly cognitive processes are implicated throughout in the development of these kinds of understandings.

The enhancement of appreciation for the interior environment potentially expands one's adaptive capacities in the personal and social realms. Furthermore, understanding the emotions and their impact on human activities can qualitatively improve the exercise of reason by alerting one to emotional pitfalls such as prejudice, and the possible negative effects of ambition or ego-protection on the one hand, and to the influence of positive feelings such as satisfaction, surprise, and wonder on the other.

Adopting Scheffler's concept of imagination as a feelingful process, we may propose a third occasion where cognition serves emotion: "imaginative reconception." Here "reconception" is used in the sense suggested by Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin: it is a "making" and a "remaking" of worlds of knowledge.¹⁸ Understanding does not begin with nothing. Rather, it begins with concepts which it makes over. The process may correct, replace, alter, exemplify, express, re-present, or develop an original understanding.

Paradoxically, the religions give an "other worldly" take on reality in an effort to grasp what Eliade calls the "really real." They develop a world of doctrinal propositions, a chimerical land of mythical times and supernatural beings and powers, a universe suggested by ritual, gesture, music, or sacred space. In these ways, spiritual "truths" otherwise unrecognized in the material world become apparent and can be experienced. These presentations cannot be dismissed simply for appearing unscientific for the imaginary becomes the vehicle for representing and exploring profound understandings.

For our purposes, the interesting question to ask is: What prompts the reconception or remaking of an understanding? Goodman and Elgin's answer is suggested in the opening line of their preface: "Reconception may be occasioned by a catastrophe, an inspiration, a worry, a query, a mistake."¹⁹ We may extend these suggestions by adding that remakings of understanding are at times prompted by a sense of growing discomfort with old conceptions; a felt traumatic need for something better; an impulsive or intuitive insight; a yearning for a more satisfactory explanation, depiction, or expression; frustration with the inadequacies of present ideas; and so on. Strictly speaking, these are not cognitive acts in the narrow sense of the term "cognitive," but rather cognitive-emotional events: emotional energy is generated along with intellectual effort. The intellect, in sum, does more than just know—it is creative, imaginative, responsive, and feelingful.

We can also propose along with cognitions that serve the emotions the further category of “emotional cognitions.” These are the rational consequences or responses to some feelingful moment or, in other words, cognitions that presuppose and throughout depend on an emotional origin or center.

Religion, although it appears in many forms, might be regarded as a member of this category, at least in its most essential and profound aspects. At the heart of religions is an array of deep emotions, characteristically including speculative awe, wonder, fear, a sense of powerlessness, urgency, energy, solemnity, and yearning. A number of philosophers and theologians have endeavored to describe these emotions more specifically. Friedrich Schleiermacher²⁰ claimed that central in religion is the feeling of utter dependency sensed by one finite in the presence of the Infinite, while Rudolf Otto summarized these original feelings as *mysterium fascinans et tremendum*.²¹ Paul Tillich identified the significant element of religion to be “ultimate concern.”²² This expression, even with its flaws and ambiguities, still comes close to the heart of a definition of religion. Part of its power is that it captures something of this coming together of heart and mind, for “concern” indicates both an idea and a feeling. This core of emotional experience, however it might be labeled, is then constructed and explained in myth and theology and reenacted and sustained in ritual. Distinguishing belief systems and institutional structures are an elaboration and maintenance of the initial sentiment, and so development into a particular religion becomes a matter of cultural influence, historical setting, and personal inspiration. Looked at this way, religious belief systems and ceremonials are not irrational, but reasoned formulations of an emotional event of deep significance.

One of the criticisms of these arguments for the emotional essence of religion has been that religion is reduced to feeling, and its objective content to a psychological phenomenon. The notion of “emotional cognitions,” however, permits us to distinguish religious meanings from emotional episodes. As “cognitive emotions” identifies certain kinds of *emotions*, so “emotional cognitions” identifies certain kinds of *cognitions*. Where it applies to religions, this notion permits us to speak of religious meanings as centered on some emotion or cluster of emotions, but as cognitions, they are nevertheless subject to the usual critiques regarding their authenticity, accuracy of insight, and degree of explanatory power. That is, the possibility that they can be meaningful and enrich understanding is not ruled out simply on the grounds of their emotional underpinning.

Human thought is made up of the interplay among reason, logic, feeling, sensation, passion, intuition, imagination, and speculation evidenced in the

construction of understandings, ideas and solutions, and the expression of emotions, attitudes, and aspirations. While an analysis may focus on a particular process or product, the experience of the thoughtful, feelingful life is usually not so singular. Its multi-facetedness is reflected in rational passions, perceptive feelings, theoretical imagination, and cognitive emotions, and in addition, expressive information, passionate knowledge, imaginative reconstruction, and emotional cognitions. The interplay between reason and feeling reveals the mutual enrichment and empowerment each brings to the other. The cognitive processes are sensitized, focused, invigorated, directed, broadened, and sharpened by the emotions; the emotional processes are informed, selected, communicated, appreciated, enhanced, cultivated, formed, and expressed by reasoned analysis and judgment. Thus Scheffler's conclusion holds: "The growth of cognition is thus, in fact, inseparable from the education of the emotions."²³

Notes

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5. Scheffler, *Cognitive Emotion*, 4-5.
6. *Ibid.*, 6.
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10. Scheffler, *Cognitive Emotion*, 8.
11. *Ibid.*, 8.
12. *Ibid.*, 9-10.
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23. Schleffler, *Cognitive Emotion*, 15.