A Critical Assessment of Psychological Theories of Ecstasy. Towards an Integrative Model for Theorising Ecstasy

Moritz Deecke
University of Leipzig

Abstract
In this article a number of approaches toward ecstasy or ecstatic spirit possession are explored that take a decisively non-sociological approach to the subject. They stress the importance of acknowledging ecstasy and related phenomena not as by-products of social struggle but as actual experiences that are events with meaning and importance in the biographies of those who experience them. Some of these are psychological theories (exemplified by Abraham Maslow), some are theological (Teresa of Ávila), and some stand in between (Martin Buber). These psycho-theological theories contribute to understanding ecstasy and have to be taken into account. Emphasised at the end of the article is the need to reconcile these views with the seemingly contradictory theories of ecstasy such as that of Lewis.

Key words: Martin Buber, Abraham Maslow, Teresa of Ávila, ecstasy, trance, spirit-possession, integral theory, integrative model, psychology of religion

In the preface to the second edition of his Ecstatic Religion1, Ioan Myrddin Lewis answers the criticism that his sociological theory ultimately draws on psychological reasons to explain spirit possession. His answer – that psychological and sociological issues are always and intrinsically intertwined and that therefore the sociological fallacy (according to Durkheim) does not apply to him – is in my opinion satisfactory. One might add that psychological explanations vice versa ultimately refer to social matters. But in Lewis’s theory sociological factors serve as the predominant features of explanation, just as there are other theories that put their primary emphasis on the psychology of ecstasy.

In my previous article\textsuperscript{2} I argued that Lewis’s theory of ecstasy, though highly valuable and endowed with high explanatory power, falls short in being able to explain some instances (one might say categories) of ecstasy. In his paradigm ecstatic spirit-possession is always used to improve or protect material or social status. Therefore it can be defined as a “means of fighting for material goods and social power between social agents (e.g. classes, sexes)”\textsuperscript{3}. Even though this actually often proves true, it cannot explain all those instances of ecstasy in the history (or present) of religions where ecstastics do not strive for more power or goods, but often do not show much interest for both possessions or higher regard. It also falls short of explaining how it is the case that in many non-hierarchical and non-exploitative social settings ecstatic spirit-possession prevails in some form or another. But most important perhaps is the fact that Lewis’s paradigm generally interprets ecstatic spirit-possession as a direct or indirect form of aggression, whereas ecstasy is often described as an experience of abundant love, beauty and bliss for which an aggressive mind-set, and therefore an act of aggression, is not likely to follow, but the contrary.

Even though Lewis makes repeatedly assurances that the actual act of possession is a question that the social anthropologist cannot decide on, his statements such as those that Somali women’s argumentative strategies against the allegation of fraud-possession by their husbands are an “ingenious sophistry”\textsuperscript{4} prove him wrong. In fact, the trajectory of his argumentation as a whole leads to the denial of the possibility of the authenticity of ecstasy at all by reducing all of them to by-products of what really matters: power. This contradicts theories that take ecstasy (or ecstatic spirit possession) seriously as a psychological state. In the following pages three of these approaches will be explored and their claims explained. They take ecstasy as a latent possibility that can be actualised and often leads to profound individual transformation. The article ends with highlighting the contradictions of these approaches to Lewis’s sociological theory and the need for an interpretative framework that reconciles them.

**Martin Buber’s refutation of sociological approaches to ecstasy**

In 1910, at the first meeting of the *Deutscher Soziologentag* (“German Sociologists’ Day”) Martin Buber responded to a presentation by Ernst Troeltsch that provided a typology of the sociological categories of church, sect, and mysticism. The last of these can be understand as one of the major cultural frameworks in which ecstasy appears in the history of religions. Buber commented on that lecture with the objection that mysticism is actually not a fait social, but quite the opposite:

\textsuperscript{3} *Ibidem*, p. 289.
\textsuperscript{4} I.M. Lewis, *op.cit.*, p. 68.