

Seeing Jesus

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Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh (see citation below), have some interesting observations about what we in the Enlightened, scientific, technological, modern West accept as "seeing."

They cite the work of anthropologist Felicitas Goodman, and John Pilch (citing the work of Erika Bourguignon and Arthur Kleinman), that "seeing" is a culturally tutored phenomenon.

That is, we are taught what can be seen, and block out / filter / do not notice / do not pay attention to any non-socially sanctioned experiences. Because "paying attention to non-socially sanctioned experiences" is another way of being called "crazy."

I was struck by their reference to a study by Bourguignon of 488 societies in all parts of the world. She found that in 90% of these societies the capacity for ecstatic experience and visions are normative, and are understood to be an alternative form of perception of a second, connected, real, reality that is otherwise not readily experienced.

They quote Bourguignon's conclusion:

Societies which do not use these states clearly are historical exceptions which need to be explained, rather than the vast majority of societies that do use these states.

And then Malina and Rohrbaugh offer their own observations:

For most of the world, even today, a report of alternate states of awareness would be considered quite normal.

Thus it would be quite anachronistic and ethnocentric to take our post-Enlightenment, post-Industrial Revolution, technologically obsessed society as normative for judging anyone other than ourselves.

Why are we in the West so different from 90% of other societies?

The physician-anthropologist Arthur Kleinman offers an explanation for the West's deficiency in this matter. "Only the modern, secular West seems to have blocked individuals' access to these otherwise pan-human dimensions of the self."

What is the Western problem?

The advent of modern science in about the seventeenth century disrupted the bio-psycho-spiritual unity of human consciousness that had existed until then.

According to Kleinman, we have developed an "acquired consciousness," whereby we dissociate self, and look at self "objectively." Western culture socializes individuals to develop a meta-self, a critical (inner) observer who monitors and comments on experience.

The meta-self stands in the way of unreflected, unmediated experience which now becomes distanced. The meta-self does not allow the total absorption in lived experience which is the very essence of highly focused (alternative states of awareness.)

If we recognize that our Western "objectivity" is simply socially tutored subjectivity, we might be more empathetic with persons of other cultures who report perceptions that we have been trained to find incredible, and have lost the capacity to experience for ourselves.

But in the centuries before and after the time of Jesus (and in many societies even in our own time), countless persons reported a range of visions and appearances involving alternative-but-nonetheless-real realities. That is, the Biblical accounts of seeing the risen Jesus are normal. They could certainly be debated (as to their meaning) and disputed (as to whether the disciples were trying to pull a hoax), but no one at that time would think that seeing someone from the dead was irrational or impossible.

There is no reason not to take the experiences of the followers of Jesus seriously, at their word, in their context and culture. And instead of asking of them - from our particular historical consciousness - "Yes, but is it REAL?" But rather to ask - from their particular historical consciousness - "Why are we so limited in our seeing?"

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The above is quoted and adapted from, ***Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John***, Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, 1998, Augsburg Fortress Publishers, pages 282-285