I Have a Hunch

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Abstract
Using the same arguments that, in the 1960s, were successfully employed to establish the institutionally autonomous, non-reductive study of religion (generally understood as the public, institutionalized expression of a private experience, belief, or faith), this essay argues for the urgent need to establish a phenomenology and a hermeneutics of hunches—posited here as being among the only truly cross-cultural dispositions shared by all human beings.

Keywords
hunches, religious experience, belief, faith

Look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't.
—Macbeth, Act 1, Scene v

Despite my earlier, more youthfully provocative forays into discussions on theory in the study of religion, lately I’ve had reason to take a little more seriously the motivation behind my colleagues’ many references to studying beliefs, experiences, meanings, identities, and impulses, all of which are understood as dispositions that, although private, are nonetheless also considered to be: 1. public (inasmuch as people express them [a key verb here]), 2. universal (inasmuch as large numbers of people apparently share them, thereby making individuals into groups), and 3. virtually timeless (inasmuch

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as these groups apparently endure over time, possessing what some today call cultural memories [look no further than the common phrase, “the American experience” or even “the human spirit”]). Seeing such key terms and assumptions used again and again as the starting point for scholarly analysis (terms that signify to me that recovering the research subject’s transcendental meanings and experiences is generally agreed as the goal of scholarship), encourages me to make a disclosure in print that I’ve never yet had the heart to make in public: I have hunches; there, I’ve said it. I have hunches and I experience them as internal states that periodically sweep through me, registering somewhere deep in my being. My hunches, somewhat like the “pre-cog” visions in that futuristic Tom Cruise movie, are about moments in a possible future and they cause me to adjust my behavior in the present. It’s difficult to express this deep, visceral experience within the limitations of language, I know, but I have hunches and I live my life accordingly; in fact, I’m having one right now: I have a hunch that you know what I’m talking about.

It was this hunch about the universality of the hunch that first made me feel that hunches were cross-cultural—a feeling that, over time, led to my belief that a rigorous, scientific study of the meaning and the rich variety of hunches was worth pursuing. But it was my realization that I am not alone in holding this belief that encouraged me to go public (for example, the vast majority of scholars of religion agree that, despite their empirical invisibility, such interior states are our ultimate object of study). In fact, recognizing that my belief in the existence and causal power of hunches was little different from almost any reader’s commonsense belief in the authorial intentions and meanings that lurk within a text (such as this very one), made coming out even easier.

But I can guess what you’re going to say—and by the way, substituting that utterly dismissive term “guess,” which is nothing more than an ignorant stab in the dark, is an insult not only to those of us who have faith in our hunches but also those pursuing the thick description of the hunch—you might say: Why do we need to establish a phenomenology and a hermeneutics of hunches? Aren’t others already studying these sorts of things, such as psychologists? Why do we need new budget lines and new institutional sites for the scientific study of the hunch? Anyone familiar with the forces lined up against our resourceful predecessors in the study of religion—those historians of religions who, in the late-1950s and early-1960s, had to respond to those trying to prevent the establishment of publicly-funded Departments of Religious Studies (at least in the US)—will recognize such questions for what they are: an unbelieving reductionist’s attempt to negate the meaning and significance of the hunch, our faith in them, and thereby derail our development of the special methods needed for their proper study.
My reply, then, is that I believe—sincerely and deeply believe—that we, as scholars, are ethically compelled to correct the over-emphasis on the cognitive content of the hunch, for it overlooks the richly textured, lived experience of those who report having hunches. This is why I distinguish hunches not just from idle guesses, as I’ve already indicated, but also from more systematic hypotheses or predictions. Certainly, because hunches are human phenomena, they do indeed have, for example, a psychological and a social component; thus, there is no doubt that parts of the hunch can be reduced to, say, a testable prediction (based on generalizations from past observations, i.e., inductive reasoning), but, in my experience—and I’m assuming that we are all agreed that it is our faithfulness to the experience of the participant that drives our work—scholars who think that they have sufficiently studied hunches by merely reducing them to predictions fail to take seriously the unique, irreducible nature of the hunch, for even when a hunch seems incorrect, it nonetheless still teaches us something about our richly textured subjectivities—indicating that the value of the hunch lies in its deeper truth, its meaning, and not its mere accuracy. For as I’m sure you all have felt, having a hunch is an emotive thing, a form of unmediated, non-cognitive communication with the self—or what Carl Jung famously described as “perception via the unconscious” (1968). So, while there may be certain aspects of the hunch that those in other already established disciplines can study, their methods do not fully account for the kernel that remains once we have studied the psychology, sociology, history, and anthropology of this trans-human experience. Studying the hunch in its fullest, most authentic and concrete sense—both its meaning to the participant (i.e., the hermeneutics of hunches) and the varied forms taken by the hunch in different times and places (i.e., the phenomenology of hunches)—can therefore be achieved only by an institutionally autonomous comparative science of hunches.2

But despite many of us believing in hunches—and believing in them in precisely the same way that we already believe that our beliefs motivate our actions3—there is a small but nonetheless influential group of critics in the

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2 I am indebted to Mircea Eliade, among others, for this highly effective line of argumentation. See, for example, the Foreword to his mid-twentieth century classic, Patterns in Comparative Religion: “I do not mean to deny the usefulness of approaching the religious phenomenon from various different angles; but it must be looked at first of all in itself, in that which belongs to it alone and can be explained in no other terms” (1996: xvii).

3 This belief in belief is easy to document, such as in any courtroom in which the accused’s motive is part of the evidence or in the work of virtually any pollster trying to determine such things as how people’s religious beliefs cause them to draw certain conclusions about gay marriage, abortion, or vote in a certain way.
academy today who would argue that, in making the sort of claims that I am advancing here, I am confusing first order description of how a group of people talk about themselves and their worlds (such as their local debates about what this or that means to them) with second order scholarly analysis of such debates and self-reports (such as investigating the material conditions that make the production of meaning, regardless the type, possible in the first place or why one among many possible meanings wins the day and comes to be seen by participants as commonsense). What’s more, in portraying mere description and paraphrase as scholarly analysis critics argue that we are reproducing and thereby legitimizing what is actually just folk psychology (e.g., the popular idea that we have internal states called beliefs that motivate our behaviors and that we have private experiences and meanings that we only later express publicly in symbolic form). The problem, they claim, is that a scholarly paraphrase of a group’s commonsense account of the world fails to examine the wider, non-intentional structures that made, for instance, talk of hunches, beliefs, experiences, even inner impulses and meanings, possible and credible in the first place.

Failing to take seriously our belief in, and thus our shared experience of, the private, interior world, these overly critical scholars explain it away as derivative of what, for them, are their even more primary, public conditions (e.g., non-intentional structures such as the economic system, the system of gendered relations, the structure that we call the liberal democratic nation-state, etc.). I think here of four examples of such critics: Donald Lopez, Robert Sharf, Joan Wallach Scott, and Slavoj Žižek. Due to the limitations of space, consider merely the following four representative quotations, in which each of these writers historicize, socialize, politicize and thereby dismiss the irreducibly originary, causal nature of the dynamic interior world from which hunches (not to mention beliefs, meanings, experiences, and impulses) arise.

First, consider Lopez’s and Sharf’s essays in Mark Taylor’s Critical Terms for Religious Studies; from his essay entitled “Belief,” Lopez concludes:

the statement “I believe in . . . ,” is sensible only when there are others who “do not”; it is an agonistic affirmation . . . . Thus a statement of belief is a convention appropriate to a specific situation, sanctioned by a history and a community. As Wittgenstein notes, “the expression of belief . . . is just a sentence;—and the sentence has sense only as a member of a system of language; as one expression within a calculus”. (1998: 33-4)

And from his essay, “Experience,” Sharf argues:

The rhetoric of experience tacitly posits a place where signification comes to an end, variously styled “mind,” “consciousness,” “the mirror of nature,” or what have you. The category is, in essence, a mere placeholder that entails a substantive
if indeterminate terminus for the relentless deferral of meaning. And this is precisely what makes the term experience so amendable to ideological appropriation. (1998: 113)

Contrary to those of us who, like the musician, poet, or artist experiencing the sublimely motivating force of creativity,4 have experienced the power of the hunch for ourselves, both Lopez and Sharf argue that representing the individual as socially autonomous and motivated by an active, inner life is itself a political strategy whereby the contingent and inevitably public situations that determine such things as who gets to count as an individual are erased from view and thus protected from analysis, leaving only their discursive products, as if they were naturally occurring, stand-alone facts—much, such critics might argue, as a properly performed point with one’s index finger draws people’s eyes to a newly curious object across the room instead of toward the one doing the pointing. Demeaning the inherent value of the object that attracts our attention, reductionists like Lopez and Sharf would instead see such a gesture as an attempt by one speaker to coercively override the standards of others, leading us to conclude that those who adjust their bodies in response to a speaker who points to some object at the back of the room are simply exhibiting their docile participation in (and yet their active reinforcement of) a taken-for-granted authority system—a system and a participation that, the critics argue, evade analysis when we merely focus on the object and not the institutions that made it an item of discourse.

As you might imagine, for such writers portraying local discursive products as if they were facts of nature (such as people’s claims to having such things as experiences, beliefs, impulses, let alone hunches) fails to count as scholarship—a move that seems to presume, rather pompously I admit, that scholarship is somehow set apart from the lived experiences of the real people whom we study—an approach that critiques those of us who study what we call actual, concrete, and deep things by saying that (thinking back to Lopez’s nod to Wittgenstein) words like actual, concrete, and deep are just that, words. Nothing more or less—that is, saying that something is deep doesn’t make some posited “it” any deeper; instead, they argue that these are all words that authorize one position over all others, much like children, or politicians,

4 I am in the debt of, among others, Rudolf Otto (e.g., his famous opening paragraph to chapter III of The Idea of the Holy), for pointing out the manner in which the ineffable as experienced in aesthetics is essentially comparable to such feelings as religious experiences and, I would argue, hunches. Although I have no evidence to support this contention, I have a hunch that it was just such a presumed linkage that, at least in part, led to each of 2011’s issues of the Journal of the American Academy of Religion to open with a poem.
defending the legitimacy of their claims by saying that they really really really believe in something.

Critics therefore argue that taking at face value the use of such words as “belief” or “experience” is not what amounts to the sort of critical approach that gets to call the university its institutional home. For example, Joan Wallach Scott, former president of the American Historical Association, ends a long review essay on the place of the category of experience in historical studies by concluding as follows:

What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested and always therefore political. The study of experience, therefore, must call into question its originary status in historical explanation [i.e., the assumption that scholarship begins with people's disclosures of their experiences]. This will happen when historians take as their project not the reproduction and transmission of knowledge said to be arrived at through experience but the analysis of the production of that knowledge itself. (1991: 797)

And what might analyzing the production of experience—what amounts, rather counter-intuitively I might add, to writing a history, sociology, politics of belief—look like? Slavoj Žižek, among our more promiscuous intellectuals today, sketches its outlines in the opening to his anthology on ideology:

Religious belief, for example, is not merely or even primarily inner conviction, but the Church, as an institution, and its rituals . . ., far from being a mere secondary externalization of the inner belief, stand for the very mechanisms that generate it. When Althusser repeats after Pascal: “Act as if you believe, pray, kneel down, and you shall believe, faith will arrive by itself,” he delineates an intricate reflective mechanism . . . That is to say, the implicit logic of his argument is: kneel down and you shall believe that you knelt because of your belief—. . . in short, the “external” ritual performatively generates its own ideological foundation. (1997: 12-13; italics in the original)

In other words, such critics argue that we talk of belief, faith, and inner impulses as actual things despite all knowing that, to stick with Pascal's original example, no Roman Catholic child first kneels (i.e., an observable action) because he or she believes or has faith (i.e., because of an inner disposition); instead, they argue, they kneel because everyone else kneels, a social uniformity operationalized by mom or dad pressing down on their little shoulders again and again, making tender but no less coercive physical action and peer pressure the cause of the action to such sceptics—an action whose repetition leads subjects (a word that now takes on even more theoretical significance) eventually to understand themselves as believers (with “believer” itself being a newly re-defined word as well, now signaling one's status as a particular sort of group member). Belief, in this model, is a trace of a prior social occasion, somewhat like Frank Sinatra sang in “I Believe”: “And when it's Christmas
time I believe in Santa Claus.”\textsuperscript{5} Or, to rephrase: to the question, “Why do you believe that the University of Alabama’s football team is worth cheering for,” a student of mine once impiously answered: “Because my grandfather made me watch the games with him.”

In shifting our focus from our ability merely to recognize the obvious worth of the team to the purely happenstance social situations that, over time, made Santa worth believing in, and in redirecting our scholarly attention away from the game and to the moment when the little boy is, as Louis Althusser might have phrased it, interpellated as “fan” and as “grandson,” we see the great tragedy of this sort of critical approach: the inherent value of the free floating signifier has been lost—whether it is what we consider to be a compelling piece of music, the deep meaning of a text, the beauty of a painting, the sacredness of a symbol, or the intentions and even the agency of the author.\textsuperscript{6} For now, those isolated, enduring things that we once knew as value, truth, beauty, sacrality, and yes, even meaning and identity, are (as Emile Durkheim has persuaded some overly impressionable thinkers) no longer expressions (there’s that word again) of a unique and enduring inner impulse only secondarily manifested in the world. As such, to refer again to “old blues eyes” singing about what he believes, to the song’s question, “Why do I believe,” we will no longer be satisfied with the song’s answer: “I guess that I believe because I believe…” Instead of what cynics will surely characterize as circular, self-authorizing rhetorics, disclosures of belief will now be heard as a discursive residue of prior, non-intentional public situations (such as the meanings that readers of this text likely believe they have floating in their heads being seen as the product of an English grammar that was pounded into them as children by authority figures). And thus such critics conclude that carrying out scholarship that debates the meaning of some signifier (much as the same exegetical methods are used by so-called secular as well as theological scholars in many areas within Biblical studies)\textsuperscript{7} or argues for the correct way to express some

\textsuperscript{5} Lyrics by Sammy Cahn and music by Jule Styne (1947)—written for the 1947 MGM musical, “It Happened in Brooklyn,” starring Frank Sinatra and Jimmy Durante and directed by Richard Whorf.

\textsuperscript{6} Although I do not have a sound argument to use in refuting Althusser on this point, perhaps citing his apparent admission to having strangled his own wife as well as the time he subsequently spent in an asylum is sufficient to undermine a reader’s confidence in his critical position on this point.

\textsuperscript{7} For instance, they might cite the recent blog post by Jacques Berlinerblau, “An Afternoon with the Society for Pentecostal Studies” (http://chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/an-afternoon-with-the-society-for-pentecostal-studies/41496 [accessed December 4, 2011])—despite his outspoken criticisms of the presence of theologians in our professional associations (such as the Society of Biblical Studies), according to his blog both secular and theological Biblical studies share the same goal of finding meaning in the text (i.e., exegesis).
identity (like the many scholars today who distinguish normative, peaceful, and thus orthodox Islam from what they then characterize as its dangerous deviations) leaves those contingent and authorized situations intact and unexamined. Regardless of how it is portrayed, such scholarship is (according to the critics) actually highly conservative inasmuch as something historical and thus contingent (such as the very judgment that this and not that form of Islam is a deviation) is portrayed as inevitable and necessary—what that dilettante Roland Barthes famously described as “the ‘naturalness’ with which newspapers, art, and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history” (1973: 11).

But how, you may wonder, would this critical approach impact my commonsense proposal for a hermeneutics of hunches? Not well, is my simple answer. We have already witnessed the adverse effect that such a critical turn had on the academic discipline of history a generation or two ago, when radical social historians undermined what some now disparagingly call the “great man theory of history” (inasmuch as it was argued that portraying history to move by means of the deeds of lone social actors, such as Caesar or Napoleon, was an ideological fiction); we know too well how this same move curtailed an anthropologist’s right to interview only the men or the leaders of a village (inasmuch as critics argued that moving too quickly from the observation of select parts to conclusions about the whole served political agendas); we’ve also seen how an area study such as Biblical studies has had to regroup when a small, disgruntled band of scholars claimed that it was not enough simply to interpret the meaning of the Word of God—something that had been a noble pursuit for thousands of years—but that, instead, we must try to explain why and how a social world could produce (and more importantly subsequent worlds reproduce) such texts and see them as sensible and useful in ever-changing conditions—worlds that included competing sub-groups, all with

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8 Aaron Hughes (e.g., 2008) comes to mind as a lamentable exception inasmuch as he argues that, as scholars, we instead ought to be studying the manner in which (in the case of Islam, in particular) normative Muslim identities are styled and authorized—whether that activity is carried out by the people whom we study or in the scholarship of those with whom we work.

9 I refer to Barthes, even the entire “science” of semiotics, as a dilettante since he makes the outlandish claim that all signs can be studied in the same fashion, as a part of a larger system of signification. Clearly, anyone who thinks that, for example, professional wrestling can be studied in the same fashion as the Bible has failed to delve into the obviously deeper meaning of the latter.

10 Although some may challenge my use of “impact” as a verb, I feel that it makes the causality, which David Hume argued was simply an inferential product of our judgment (as opposed to something empirical that we can actually observe in the world), sound far more real, solid, and dare I say impactful, than opting simply for a word such as “influence.”
their own interests and representations (ensuring that today it is highly problematic to assume that we, as scholars, can sensibly talk about such harmless generalizations as “the Bible says” let alone describing the contours of “the Muslim mind” or “the African-American experience”). And it is unlikely that literary studies will ever sufficiently recover from Jacques Derrida’s preposterous claim that there is no outside to the text, Barthes’s silly idea that the author is the fictive product of a reader’s imagination, and that, no matter how closely we read Macbeth, we will never know what Shakespeare quite literally had in mind by having Lady Macbeth utter the words that, for whatever reason, appear as the epigraph to this very essay. If such time honored academic fields as history, anthropology, Biblical studies, and literature have been struck so hard by what is really nothing more than a scholarly fashion, if the purely private bedrocks of the academic study of religion—belief, experience, and faith—are now understood by some misguided thinkers to be anything but the pristine and originally innocent things that William James once knew them to be, then what hope has the science of hunches?

Contrary to what I may have argued in earlier publications, and regardless of the reputation those writing have earned for me as being a threat to the very field in which I earn my living, I now believe—dare I add the word deeply, to make the ethereal realm of my belief all the more weighty and thus compelling—that more than the science of hunches is at stake in this debate. In fact, at the risk of sounding overly theatrical, let me add that Western Civilization itself—e.g., our unique notions of canon, tradition, meaning, justice, property, ownership, the free market, national identity, privacy, intentionality, and even the idea of the individual citizen which is the foundation of it all—may

11 Luckily, there still are those among our ranks who, somewhat like the colonialist-era scholars whom we no longer read for some reason, understand how essential commonalities can indeed be understood to unite people across time and space, regardless of the many other observable ways that they may seem to differ. I have in mind Jacob Olupona who, in his very recent introduction to a review symposium on Arvind Sharma’s volume on the philosophy of religion in so-called “primal religions” (a traditional, perhaps even classic, category valiantly revived by Sharma, hence Olupona’s own admission that the works cited by Sharma are “perhaps a bit old fashioned” [792]) writes about how the preference for burial, rather than cremation, “reveals a general African tendency...”—though Olupona immediately goes on to find an exception in west Africa, where this “general African tendency” is not shared (2011: 791-2). Of importance is to not that his own discussion (791) makes evident the influence across the African continent of Christian and Muslim imperialist attitudes toward burial—attitudes and practices evident worldwide, of course—does not deter Olupona from admirably asserting that there is something generally African in this attitude.

12 Most recently, see this claim as made by Nathan Schneider in his article, “Why the World Needs Religious Studies,” published online by Religion Dispatches (http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/culture/4636/why_the_world_needs_religious_studies_/ [accessed December 8, 2011]).
rise or fall by our ability to combat this currently fashionable but dangerous critical approach. (In fact, the American dream itself is now under attack: I think here of the National Public Radio story from the Fall of 2011, reporting that the Pew Charitable Trust's Economic Mobility Project has determined that regardless how fervently or deeply we may believe in the upward mobility of the American dream it is actually one's non-intentional structural conditions [like what profession your parents had, did they go to college, did they own a home, etc.] that determine one's own class mobility. Simply put, they concluded that believing that hard work gets you ahead doesn't necessarily get you ahead; being born to the “right” parents is a far better predictor.)

For by concluding that talk about such seemingly credible, taken-for-granted dispositions as deep beliefs, faith, feelings, impulses, experiences, intentions, and meanings is no different whatsoever from talking about such apparently silly things as hunches, and by arguing that scholars ought to do something other than merely adopt local, commonsense folk notions and then use them as if they were cross-cultural universals, such a critical approach not only makes a mockery of the lived experiences of the real people, in concrete situations, whom we study (by suggesting that they are not the final authority on how their own worlds work) but also mocks the scholars who understand that their role is merely to paraphrase, as faithfully as possible, what the so-called real people are already saying for themselves about themselves.

So where does this leave us? Well, if, as stated by Bruno Latour, in the opening to his 2010 book, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, “Belief is not a state of mind but a result of relationships among people” (2), then scholars will have to completely rethink how it is that they go about their studies—I’m not optimistic about this, by the way, since they have long completed their own school work and earned their degrees, so it is unlikely that they will think they have anything new to learn. If they are willing to retool, then they will need to consider that so-called individuals (whether doing fieldwork or reading texts) and their claims of interiority are the tips of institutional icebergs, thereby never succumbing to the temptation to time-travel by thinking that any one disclosure, any one meaning, is somehow closer to an original or more authentic source. They will also need to take seriously that following scholars such as Latour means that we cannot simply universalize and ontologize anyone’s so-called experiences as if they were real things in the world. Ultimately, this all means making their own practices their object of study, and becoming

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(as Jonathan Z. Smith has been too often quoted as writing), the sort of historian of religions who is relentlessly self-conscious (1982: xi).

And thus, as Pierre Bourdieu phrased it in the Introduction to *The Logic of Practice*, we arrive at the preposterously self-involved position where we must pay more attention to ourselves, the ones doing all the pointing (i.e., all the defining), than the supposedly interesting things that once attracted (another key word, as if by their own animal magnetism?) our attention. For, following the scholars quoted above means that we

must not only, as objectivism would have it, break with native experience and the native representation of that experience, but also, by a second break, call into question the presuppositions inherent in the position of an ‘objective’ observer who, seeking to interpret practices, tends to bring into the object the principles of his relation to the object. (1992: 27)

This implies not studying the meaning of an object—whether it be the Bible or a hunch, I guess—but, instead, the historically embedded conventions that allow some thing to become meaningful for a specific group at a specific time; it implies no longer studying the identity of a group but the contingent structures in which particular social actors come to think of themselves as having shared affinities and estrangements (to borrow terms from Bruce Lincoln) as well as the techniques they use to authorize those structures as if they were eternal and universal; it entails ending our studies of traditions and instead examining the contestable means by which traditions and canons are created and legitimized, as if they carry an internal eternal kernel.

Simply put, adopting such a critical approach means that my hunch that you too have hunches tells me more about my social world than it does about you and yours, making my beloved category “hunch”—not to mention the categories experience, belief, faith, meaning, and impulse—a surprisingly poor analytic term. If so, then I fear what might happen to the proposal for a Consultation on the Hermeneutics of Hunches that I was hoping to submit to the American Academy of Religion’s Program Committee, for possible inclusion in an upcoming annual meeting. For if I take such criticisms seriously, really really seriously, then my earnest hope for my proposal to be accepted, and my even more deeply held hope for the establishment of this bold new field, seems to be in complete jeopardy. And to think that I had hoped so hard..., so very, very hard....

Come to think of it, it suddenly occurs to me that scholars do not give nearly enough attention to the category “hope” as a cross-cultural human universal—after all, “[i]f we define religion as the systematic expression of the interplay between traditional faith and transforming hope, then hope is of the essence of religion” (Slater 2005: 4125). Overlooking for the moment
that there’s really no compelling reason whatsoever to define religion in this manner—other than to get the word “hope” into play in the opening line to an encyclopedia article—I have a hunch that a comparative science of hopefulness deserves our immediate attention. . . .

References


