



## Acute religious experiences. Madness, psychosis and religious studies

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Acute religious experiences. Madness, psychosis and religious studies**, by Richard Saville-Smith, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, pp. 254, £76.50 (hardback), ISBN-9781350272910, £61.20 (e-book pdf), ISBN-9781350272927

Those who want to become acquainted with or want to delve into mad studies and mad studies reading of psychiatric and religious texts will find themselves well on their way with the book by Saville-Smith. And anyone who also wants to get acquainted with deconstruction as a method of reading and commenting on texts can doubly well turn to this author, who, inspired by Derrida (2001), applies the method freely and skilfully (p. 2). That is the double strength of this book when it comes to an old, undecided, and truly relevant theme across a range of academic disciplines.

Deconstruction, as a form of philosophical fieldwork and analysis, questions traditional binary and hierarchical oppositions. The long tradition of extraordinary, anomalous, religious experiences is full of that kind of opposition as in psychiatry with its binary approach of phenomena in terms of pathological or non-pathological, by concentrating on the former and regularly pathologising the latter. A necessary and fruitful deconstruction of such a hierarchical approach is clearly demonstrated in the work of William James (chapter 1). The same procedure is shown in the author's discussion of the binarity in the DSM-tradition (chapter 8) and throughout the whole book.

The book is made up of three parts. Part 1 discusses seven authors: William James, Rudolf Otto, Trautott Oesterreich, Mircea Eliade, Walter Stace, Walter Pahnke, and Abraham Maslow, whom each, in their own way, thematised the non-pathological of anomalous experiences. It is really a refreshing pleasure to get to know these celebrities from the author's point of view. Part 3 consists of a renewed reading of the Gospel of Mark with Jesus as a case study, especially because of two special experiences, his baptism, and the transfiguration on the mount. The middle part of the triptych forms the central part, consisting of three parts. First, the DSM tradition is examined, followed by Foucault's (1972) famous study *History of Madness*. Thirdly, the author gives his own design of acute religious experiences with the so-called D.R.E.A.D. framework as a heuristic tool: Diversity (is about the whole diversity of expressions), Religious (whatever people articulate as religious experience), Extreme (is about the quality of the experience), Ambivalent (ambivalence in the ongoing process of identifying acute religious experiences remains), Determination (is a matter of context, which does not exclude change beyond). That is how he gives a new/his narrative after the deconstruction. Part 1 gives him the material to build his non-pathological approach to anomalous experiences. Part 3 exemplifies his approach.

The reader might be surprised by the use of the word mad in mad studies. However, these are the terms the movement came up with: mad movement, mad studies as an emerging academic discipline. Saville-Smith does not hesitate for a moment to introduce himself to readers as a mad person ("I have the certificates" [p. 1]). He identifies himself, as others do, as mentally ill, psychiatric survivor, consumer, service user. He testifies this: "when I am sane, I am an atheist and when I am mad, I am driven by the hand of God" (p. 137). Here he immediately gives his critical view of psychiatry and its hermetically sealed normativity. Contrary to the idea that everything is pronounced in psychiatry, "my voice is silenced" (p. 137).

This silencing of the mad voice brings us to a common thread in the book, which is linked to the great work of Foucault. Foucault is, therefore, not only discussed in chapter 9, but

throughout the book. This gives me a reason to consider the mad person as a witness. The author does not use the term, but in terms of content, it is true that with his well-thought-out analysis, he himself bears witness to silencing the mad person. Clearly, being a witness is about more than self-disclosure. It is part of the mad studies approach, both as a source of knowledge and of meaning.

Let me explain. The author is rather critical of Foucault, especially about his statement that madness is “the absence of an oeuvre”. He calls it an epistemic injustice, which brings us to an issue that is most close to his heart. (p. 126). Foucault revisited his position probably in reaction to Derrida’s critique on that point in an essay appended to the full text, which can be read in the 2006 English edition. (The author calls this text a “delight to read” [p. 127].) Foucault declared: “By that very fact (referring to Freud’s work), madness appeared, not as a ruse of a hidden meaning, but as a prodigious reserve of meaning” (2006, p. 547). To James, rather than history, Foucault’s added text is prophecy: the not yet said of madness (2011, p. 392); Foucault turned from history to the future. In other words, it is language of prophetic testimony that holds a reserve of meaning. What does that mean? Is Saville-Smith also among the prophets?

This is how I understand his contribution to the mad studies approach. Bearing witness to, testimony is sharing an incident, an event, an anomalous or extreme experience which, due to its peculiarity or strangeness, is not obvious, is not self-evident (Van der Heiden, 2019). Testimony, as such, is already a vulnerable, fragile way of speaking. The speakers in tongues, prophets and poets speak that way. They are on the classic list (Max Weber’s) of the charismatics, and the religious virtuosos (shamans, ascetics, pneumatics, mystics). That still sounds quite exclusive, while there is no exclusive right to bear witness to it, I would say. The mad person is not to be excluded from such a list and is also such a witness! At the same time, it is noted that testimony holds a reserve. Witnessing, according to Van der Heiden (2019), is not only to present something but “also to keep back, to protect, and to offer a leafage to a misery that cannot speak for itself”, “and testimony needs a reserve from which it can draw the resources to speak in this way” (p. 132). If it is true, as it is said, that madness cannot speak for itself, it means that it requires witnesses such as the mad persons.

The author of *Acute Religious Experiences*, as bearing witness to, has not hesitated to take his (secular?) prophetic (scientific) role and has brought to language the domain of anomalous experiences and madness by creating an open place for it.

As far as I can see, the mad studies approach has not been covered before in this journal; it is about time.

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