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REVIEW

Paul in Ecstasy: The Neurobiology of the Apostles's Life and Thought. By COLLEEN SHANTZ. Pp. viii + 267. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. ISBN 978 0 521 86610 1. £45/$80.

THE first thing that needs to be said about this remarkable book is that it is an exciting and brave book. The second of those epithets might be a prelude to a polite rejection of its findings because they are tendentious, or stray beyond the bounds of what is currently acceptable in the discipline. That is not the case. There is no doubt that this is an unusual thesis, but its peculiarity is the reason for its bravery. It is explicitly interdisciplinary, and, what is more, retraces a course which has been eschewed by much modern historical scholarship—the application of neuroscience to the religious experience of the leading New Testament writer, Paul of Tarsus. There is a double jeopardy here: interdisciplinarity, of course, but also the exploration of the experience which is referred to in (and behind) the text as a significant factor in the writer's experience and one that has major ramifications for understanding his thought. The interdisciplinary nature of this book has prompted the need for a comprehensive review in which the different facets of this book can be adequately assessed. We have been engaged in an ongoing conversation on the nature of visionary experience over the last three years, together with Professor Stephen Pattison of the University of Birmingham and this joint review has arisen out of that collaboration.

Colleen Shantz's study explores a neglected field, and suspicion of mysticism and religious experience, rooted in theological fear of the dynamic unpredictability of the mystical and the experiential in Christianity, has coloured the way these issues have been treated within biblical studies. The book, which started life as a doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Leif Vaage, represents something of a milestone in the spasmodic, but necessary, exploration of the nature of early Christian experience and in particular Pauline ecstasy. The study sets out to show that Paul's Christian career as a founder of communities and as a thinker was rooted in experience: 'the compelling and embodied knowing of ecstatic experience is necessary (though by no means sufficient) to account for Paul's Christianity' (p. 208). So, rather than reading the ideas in the letters as ends in themselves Shantz

bids us consider them as 'inadequate and misaligned substitutes for something that was more important for Paul'. The book is therefore a challenge to those who think that the construal of reality is always verbally constituted, as this ignores affective, predominantly non-verbal modes of experience.

The book looks at discussions of Pauline mysticism and the ways in which Paul has been seen as an opponent of the ecstatic. The second, and perhaps most innovative, chapter locates Paul's ecstasy in his experience and uses cognitive neuroscience to explore brain functioning during normal and altered states. The 'pay-off' of the discussion of the neurological understanding of religious ecstasy is that it provides a scientific means of examining subjective experience. Shantz indicates that this approach offers insights into the text which the usual method of textual parallels cannot—in particular Paul's confusion about his bodily state and the unutterable words.

The next chapter applies this knowledge to the most obvious account of ecstasy—2 Cor. 12:2–4. Of particular interest is the status of the body during the experience and the meaning of the words that cannot be spoken. The heuristic value of the scientific discussion comes into its own here. The next chapter expands the concern to other passages including 2 Corinthians 3–5 and Romans as well as Paul's account of seeing Christ. Here the author questions whether such passages are best understood when seen as aspects of Paul's theology (as traditionally understood) or better seen as testimony to an experience of change, in which Paul writes out of the experience of a different kind of reality in himself and his identification with the exalted Christ. Here what the author describes as the 'afterglow' of religious experience pervades the theologizing that Paul did in his communications with the early Christian churches. Shantz considers Paul's visions of the risen Christ and the practice of prayer in the Spirit. She indicates the importance of the way in which such experiences are a key part of Paul's public discourse and his claims about the gospel. Ecstatic experience enables the crucified messiah to be a transformative force in Paul's own life and in the lives of those to whom he writes. It is this experience, she argues, which best explains the basis of Paul's Christ mysticism.

The penultimate chapter then considers ecstasy as part of communal life. The wider ramifications of Paul's personal experience are extended to a consideration of those passages where the concern is communal, e.g. 1 Corinthians 12–14. Here anthropological discussions are used to explore the function of altered states of consciousness in human communities. Paul,

Shantz argues, is 'urging the development of a form of ASC (altered states of consciousness) that he feels is better suited to the evolving circumstances and well-being of the community'. There is an interesting exploration of the way in which individual ecstasy interacting with local conditions provides a more public and less insular view of what passes as appropriate religious practice. It is not that glossolalia is inadequate and prophecy, being more rational, is more acceptable; rather there is a different form of ecstatic practice which provides guidance to the group and better integration with outsiders, whether they are believers or unbelievers.

It could be argued that questions about the relationship between text and experience should be resolved not by an appeal to neuroscience, but by a textually informed phenomenological approach. On this view, the reconstruction of Paul's religious experience from textual analysis can be informed by study of contemporaneous forms of religious experience and mysticism in particular, and comparative religion more generally. An ostensible family resemblance between a Pauline report of religious experience and contemporaneous or more general types of religious experience would lend credibility to the idea that Paul's language was informed by experience—rather than being sufficiently explained as a product of reason and rhetoric independent of experience. From this perspective, research into brain behaviour associated with religious experience may be no more relevant to understanding the influence of experience on the Pauline texts than is research on the neurobiology of speaking or writing. It is experience, and its role in inspiring and constraining words, actions, and writing, which is of primary importance.

Against this, the cognitive neuroscience of religious experience can be invoked in several ways. For Shantz's purposes, the most relevant is to use neuroscience to explain differentially putative features of Paul's religious experience, which have been proposed on the basis of textual analysis. In other words, if neuroscience can help explain an alteration in experience that Paul appears to be describing (e.g., unutterable words), which would otherwise be surprising or difficult to explain, then neuroscience helps to establish in general terms that such experiences do exist and have a neurobiological explanation; which therefore lends credibility to the argument that Paul may have been having an experience of this kind, as against some alternative interpretation of the text in question.

One of the challenges confronting Shantz is that much of the current neuroscientific discourse about religious experience has been shaped, whether overtly or covertly, by ultimate concerns, such as the existence (or non-existence) of God, or the value of Buddhist meditation. For example, the discourse about altered states of consciousness may reflect the influence of theological assumptions insofar as it abstracts and privileges apparently shared aspects of religious experience from diverse traditions, rather than treats as equally fundamental distinguishing features at the individual and communal level. Thus, an abstracted category such as 'absolute unitary being' functions not only as a putative natural science taxon but also as a 'higher order' theological taxon. As such, the specification of a neurobiological basis for a type of experience is taken to support a theological argument about what is common to diverse religions. Equally, the specification of brain bases for generic categories of religious belief and experience (such as Ramachandran's 'god spot' in the temporal lobe) can function as a form of eliminative reductionism, whereby a totalizing, naturalistic explanation is taken to dispense with the possibility that God can be a potential constraint on the sense of God, and/or implicitly pathologize or devalue religious experience.

To comment on these wider debates in the present context is not to dismiss them. Rather, it is to underline how epistemologically critical a critic must be when using this body of theory and evidence to evaluate particular hypotheses about Paul's reconstructed religious experience—not just in terms of the proposed neuroscience, but also in terms of the construal of religious experience of any given theory. Shantz does indeed distance herself from some of the wider concerns (especially in the footnotes). It is, however, probably fair to say that the explanatory unity of the current neuroscience models is overstated, and the provisionality and relative paucity of evidence for them understated. There is much about the relationship between brain and experience which is not understood—including religious experience. Similarly, some of the exposition of neuroscience (for example, the relation of consciousness and 'brain mapping'; in what sense neuroscience is predictive; or brain evolution) is open to question, whilst not being essential to the key task of identifying what, if any, models of brain function help explain specific features of Paul's religious experience and writings. Also, the appropriation of the 'ASC' terminology is tendentious, given that it tends to privilege the universal over the 'differences that make a difference' at the level of the content and attributed meanings of experience at

both an individual and communal level. An alternative approach might be to think in terms of 'family resemblances' between experiences rather than universal categories with different labels, since the former metaphor does not privilege species-typical over group and individual forms of and constraints on experience. This has the scientific advantage of drawing attention to the need for more comprehensive explanations of all aspects of a given experience, rather than a component or dimension which is shared in common with others; and is less likely to import covert assumptions about what is or is not valuable about a given experience.

With these provisos in mind, Shantz succeeds in making a persuasive case that neuroscientific explanations of body awareness and language, and their alterations in experiences of loss of body awareness and ineffability, help explain Paul's 'confusion about his bodily status and his assertion of unutterable auditions' (p. 108). In particular, interpreting the texts in the light of neuroscience models draws attention to analogous experiences which the neuroscience models seek to explain, which then help to choose between alternative possible interpretations of the text. Whilst the neuroscientific accounts are provisional and will certainly be corrected and extended, Shantz makes a good case that enough is known to inform biblical interpretation.

The book is principally about ecstasy and altered states of consciousness. But as any student of religious experience knows there is a spectrum of psychological states (of which dreams form the most obvious example) which push the concerns beyond simply the ecstatic to include more liminal phases. Shantz rightly points to the experiential dimension of participation in Christ. Shantz argues that Paul's claims are more intelligible when they are seen as responses to the bodily phenomena of ecstatic experience, in which neurochemical analgesics and euphorics are released, in which the pain of the weight of the human flesh is neurologically numbed, and in which cognitive constructs of personal boundaries are temporarily blurred. Pithily, but tellingly, she suggests that Paul's 'Christ-mysticism' is not so much theology in search of a metaphor as an ecstatic experience struggling with the limits of words.

Shantz has put her finger on a tension in much Pauline scholarship. In the way in which most of us write about the Pauline corpus there is readily evident a tension between that sense of dealing with a person, Paul, while all we have are his words. It is the preoccupation with the latter, and the profound unease with the quest for the man, and even more what might have been

going on in his head and his heart which Shantz gets us to reconsider. For the interpreter of the Pauline corpus, it becomes all too easy to think of Paul as a familiar, a companion, whom we can know through his words. We may not agree with him but we very quickly become interpreters of Paul. But as soon as we have done so, we have opened ourselves to the doubts that Shantz has articulated and the questions which she is raising. Paul was an embodied person who not only spoke and wrote but acted and effected as he himself famously pointed out, to his own detriment, in 2 Cor. 10:10. To understand Paul is to search for the complex human to which the words bear witness, however florid the rhetorical flourish and intense the power-play involved. After all, Paul himself questioned the Corinthians in words in what he wrote about glossolalia and placed bodily mutuality as the hallmark of relating. There seems something theologically appropriate, therefore, about the task that Shantz has set herself.

In her discussion of Romans 8 Shantz suggests that what we find here is 'an expression of the tensions of someone who has experienced two distinct bio neurological states. Paul is caught between the somatic transformation that he has experienced in trance and the more common bio neurological apprehension of his own body' (p. 129). In Rom. 8:22–7 she plausibly suggests that Paul is describing ecstatic prayer, a passage which, as she puts it, is 'saturated with knowledge of ecstatic religious experience'. That passage is by no means the only one in the Pauline corpus, as Shantz points out.

One passage she does not discuss which does raise very important issues not only for Paul's ecstatic discourse but also for 'ecstasy in practice' are the final verses of 1 Corinthians 2. Here the communion with the Spirit is key to knowing the things of God, so that the individual does not need any human teacher. Not surprisingly this passage was a great favourite of prophetic radicals down the centuries who bypassed authoritative channels of communication like the Bible and ecclesiastical tradition in favour of unmediated knowledge of the divine. What seems to be characteristic about 1 Cor. 2:10–16, however, is that this evinces less evidence of the ecstatic and more of what might pass for 'normal mysticism' as the individual seeks through the Sprit to know the deep things of God and be taught directly without human intermediary the divine way. One wonders if 1 Corinthians 2 should be put in the same kind of category as Romans 8 (and indeed 2 Corinthians 3–5) or is better understood as a related but essentially different kind of experience and is to be placed along the spectrum of experience—probably not

ecstatic, perhaps even not an altered state of consciousness, but nevertheless a form of epistemology which is not only crucial to the life in the Spirit which Paul seems here to approve without reservation, but also one where knowledge does not come by the exercise of logic or normal canons of reasoning. That said, Paul clearly considers that he has better access to the deep things of God, and that he is better able to know the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16).

Those of us who have been convinced that the texts mean what they say when they describe ecstatic experiences, whether heavenly ascents or the bodily sensations that accompany them, have no way of being able to persuade more sceptical colleagues that the texts are not fictional constructs or rhetorical devices. There seems to be an insuperable barrier between texts and experience which no amount of conviction and intuition can help the sceptical to traverse. What Colleen Shantz has done is offer a possible, and plausible, way of moving in the direction of understanding the relationship between the two. It is a welcome and original breakthrough not only in the study of the religion of Paul but of the widespread phenomena of visionary and ecstatic experience in antiquity.

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QUINTON DEELEY
Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London

CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND
University of Oxford
christopher.rowland@queens.ox.ac.uk