

July 2021

## Teaching Redescription with Aliens

Daniel Ullucci  
dullucci@stonehill.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://soar.stonehill.edu/jrca>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ullucci, Daniel (2021) "Teaching Redescription with Aliens," *Journal of Religious Competition in Antiquity*. Vol. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://soar.stonehill.edu/jrca/vol2/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SkyhawksSOAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religious Competition in Antiquity by an authorized editor of SkyhawksSOAR. For more information, please contact [skyhawkssoargroup@stonehill.edu](mailto:skyhawkssoargroup@stonehill.edu).

## Teaching Redescription with Aliens

Daniel Ullucci

Stonehill College

This reflection is derived from experience teaching “redescription” in a variety of Religious Studies classes at Rhodes College and Stonehill College<sup>1</sup> using an unusual text, Susan Clancy’s *Abducted: How People Come to Believe They Were Kidnaped by Aliens* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

Redescription is fundamental. All of us in Religious Studies likely teach and/or model some variation of this basic analytic move, whether or not we use the term “redescription” popularized by Jonathan Z. Smith and others.<sup>2</sup> The basic process of analyzing the emic concepts and terms of our data using etic scholarly concepts is indispensable to the academic study of religion. (Critically analyzing and assessing our etic scholarly categories (“rectification”) is just as important, and it is important to point this out to students when discussing redescription. This essay will only deal with redescription. I would point to Jennifer Eyl’s essay “Rethinking Monotheism in the Classroom: How to Illustrate a Problem,” in this journal, for a creative and helpful example of rectifying categories.<sup>3</sup>)

Redescription is, however, a bit hard to teach, and for many students, at first, approaching religion this way just does not *feel right*. Students are often preoccupied with the idea that redescription introduces *bias* (a word that has become a dog whistle; see Fox News’ frequent use of the banner “Bias Alert!”), is *distorting*, or that it *does not take the evidence seriously*. This last objection is, in my experience, the most common. Students assume that by understanding religious phenomena in any way other than the way practitioners themselves understand them, we are somehow *not taking religion seriously*. This is a classic defense of the

---

1 Rhodes and Stonehill are both small liberal arts colleges (Rhodes has ca. 2100 undergraduates, Stonehill ca. 2500). Rhodes, located in Memphis, TN, is private and religiously non-affiliated. Stonehill, located in Easton, MA, is private and Catholic. Both schools draw nationally and internationally, but the majority students at both schools are from general Christian backgrounds who often, however, come with little knowledge of the Bible and no exposure at all to the historical critical study of religion.

2 For examples, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), *et al.* Smith’s writing and analysis can be very challenging for students (and professionals). For a more lucid presentation of Smith’s approach to comparison and redescription, see Burton Mack, “On Redescribing Christian Origins,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8.3 (1996): 247-269, esp. 254–59. I thank my reviewer for this important point.

3 See also Michael Satlow’s “Disappearing Categories: Using Categories in the Study of Religion,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 17.4 (2005): 287–98. I thank my reviewer for this suggestion.

insider personal perspective as the only valid perspective, and it involves a slippage of focus that students often do not recognize.<sup>4</sup>

The insider's personal experience is important and valid (of course), but it is not always the thing we want to know. I often use the example of war to illustrate this slippage. If you want to know what it was like to be in combat in the Vietnam War, you should talk to a veteran who lived through those harrowing experiences. Nothing else will do—certainly not the account of some academic who has never been within a thousand miles of a real battle. *However*, if you want to know the history of the war, the geopolitical background of the war, and specific events and strategic decisions that resulted in a particular soldier being in combat at a particular place and time, talking to a veteran cannot necessarily help you. This is a different question, which requires different data. Many veterans can, of course, answers these questions, too, but they learned those things somewhere else, not in combat.

Likewise, if we want to know what it is like to be a Christian in a particular place and time, we should solicit the personal experience of Christians in those places and times. There are, however, a lot more questions we could ask about Christianity as a historical phenomenon beyond the personal experiences of Christians. Students can see quickly that, just as the combat veteran has critical knowledge in some areas, but not all areas, religious practitioners have personal experiences that are important for some questions we might ask about religion, but not *all* questions. This does not in any way discount, marginalize, or invalidate personal experience. It does dethrone it from its position as the only data that matters, something students naturally do all the time when studying other aspects of human life, but which often still feels *wrong* to them in the context of religion.

It is also helpful to point out to students that, were they to take the approach that personal experience is the only way to study religion (the only way to *take religion seriously*), this would mean that they have absolutely no ability to understand any other religion besides their own. In that approach, the only way to understand anything about Buddhism is to become a Buddhist. Students quickly see that this is an absurd position. They also quickly see that spending a semester studying Buddhist texts and even practicing meditation, etc. cannot give you the real experience of being a Buddhist. To think that it can is superficial at best, and more likely voyeuristic, or worse; it also would force the essentializing of 'Buddhist experience.'<sup>5</sup>

---

4 For the classic critique of this view in the study of religion, see Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001). For a discussion of the slippage of questions and roles, see Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), particularly the first chapter entitled "Theses on Method" (also published as "Theses on Method," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8.3 (1996): 225–227).

5 Lincoln makes this point effectively in "Theses on Method." Lincoln, *Gods and Demons*, 2–3.

The alien abduction data, and specifically Clancy's book, can help here because it is such a clear example of how scholars must separate emic from etic, data from analysis, and personal experience from scholarly redescription. What makes Clancy's book so good for this is (1) her lucid writing and analysis, and (2) the data set she chose.

### A Bit about the Book

Clancy came to alien abduction data in a roundabout way. She was mainly interested in memory, specifically the phenomenon of created memories (the ability of humans to develop strong, detailed, and even visceral memories of events which can be definitively proven to have never occurred). She began by studying repressed and recovered memories in the context of sexual assault. Quickly she realized that this was a highly problematic data set for her purposes. What Clancy needed was a data set where she could be *sure* that the remembered events were not real. Alien abduction was a brilliant choice.

(N.B. If you believe alien abductions are real—and this is significantly different from the belief in intelligent life elsewhere in the universe, a prospect I take to be all but definitive—this approach can still work for you. In any case, you *will* encounter students who believe alien abductions are real. In my experience, this approach will still work for them, too, because, while they believe that some alien abductions are real, they often quickly accept that the particular cases Clancy outlines do not represent genuine abductions.)

The main points of Clancy's analysis are: people who believe they were abducted by aliens are cognitively normal; they live generally normal lives and display no symptoms of psychological disorders. They do, however, share a combination of particular factors that contribute to alien abduction beliefs, which Clancy identifies. These include: (1) social dislocation, (2) exposure to culturally specific abduction 'scripts,' (3) belief in the validity of 'repressed memories' and 'recovered memories' as well as contact with people who claim the ability to recover lost memories, (4) experiences of sleep paralysis, (5) seeking behavior, and (6) the conviction that their experience has transcendental significance. What Clancy produces is a thorough analysis of the social, cultural, and historical factors contributing to belief in alien abductions. She demonstrates how, under specific conditions, perfectly normal people can become absolutely convinced that they have been abducted by aliens. She takes her data (first-hand accounts of abduction experiences) "seriously, but not literally (138)." That is, she re-describes the data in scholarly terms. This is exactly the goal of introducing students to redescription in the study of religion.

### Classroom Approach

This is the procedure I use: I have the students read the whole book. It is 192 non-dense pages, which I recognize can still seem like a lot of time and pages to achieve one specific theoretical/methodological point, but the point is so important and so fundamental to academic study (in all areas, not just Religious Studies) that it does, indeed, seem to me justified. I then give students a quick lecture to provide historical framing. We discuss the coincidence of alien abduction phenomenon with the space race. We look at key abduction ‘scripts’ such as the story of Betty and Barney Hill, the urtext of most American abduction stories, noting that these scripts are culturally specific. We consider the context of new revelations about the size of the universe and possibility of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe by studying the famous Drake equation.<sup>6</sup> We then have a class discussion along the following lines.

The questions here are the real questions I ask. The responses, of course, vary, but these are the kinds of answers I usually get and they give an indication of where I’m hoping to lead student thinking.

Q: What is Clancy trying to do, simply report the personal experiences of abductees or explain the phenomenon?

Explain. The personal experience of abductees is the starting point, not the goal. She is not attempting to simply produce an anthology of abduction stories.

Q: Why is “They’re crazy!” not a useful or accurate explanation?

These people are not clinically insane. They are normal people who genuinely believe these things have happened to them. This belief has, in many cases, seriously impacted their lives. We need a more sophisticated explanation.

Q: What does she mean by saying she “takes the evidence seriously?”

---

<sup>6</sup> This is a famous thought experiment introduced by astronomer Frank Drake to consider the likelihood of making contact with intelligent life in our galaxy (for a quick intro see <https://www.seti.org/drake-equation-index>). The equation begins with the rate of star formation and then considers all the factors limiting the chances of intelligent life (% of stars that have planets, % planets where life actually arises, % planets where life achieves intelligence, etc.). Drake’s point was that even if you set all the parameters very low (you imagine that the factors contributing to intelligent life are extremely rare) the number you are starting with (the number of stars in the galaxy) is so astoundingly huge that the probability of all these factors aligning at least once somewhere else in the galaxy becomes fairly significant.

She does not assume these people are just crazy. She does not assume they are making it up (for attention or some other reason). She *believes that they believe* that this really happened.

Q: What would *not* taking the evidence seriously look like?

She could conclude that they were just making it up or that they were insane. The important thing for students to see here is that either of these approaches would end the analysis. If the ‘victims’ are just lying, no more needs to be said. The explanation of alien abduction is that it is just lies. Likewise, if we conclude that these people are insane, nothing more needs to be said. The explanation of alien abduction is mental illness. Realizing that these explanations don’t work is a critical step. This is what forces analysis and redescription.

Q: What does she mean by saying that she “takes the evidence seriously but not literally?”

Just because these people believe these events happened does not mean she has to, as well. If she did, this would also end the analysis. Again, it is important for students to see this step. If these people really were abducted, then the explanation for alien abduction is that aliens are really here on earth abducting people! *Not accepting the emic explanation is the starting point of analysis.* If she took these accounts literally, there would be no analysis, just repetition of the data. Her analysis explains how people could genuinely believe that these things happened when they did not. This is a redescription of the alien abduction phenomenon.

Q: How do we relate this to the study of religion?

We want to take our evidence seriously but not literally. We want to explain why someone believes that Apollo appeared to them. We want to take them seriously. If we assume that they are crazy or lying, no real analysis takes place. At the same time, not accepting their emic account (not taking the data literally) is the starting point of analysis. If we take them literally, we are just reinscribing their own emic religious beliefs (they think Apollo appeared to them because he really did). In that case we are not really doing anything as scholars, we are just repeating the data itself—as Lincoln says, we are being amanuenses.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Lincoln, *Gods and Demons*, 3.

Q: How would we respond to the following objection: “If a person says that Apollo appeared to them, who are we to question that?”

We are critical scholars! We do this all the time. Would we say, “In 1692 Elizabeth Hubbard said Sarah Good was a witch, who are we to question that?” We don’t have to believe in witches to understand the Salem witch hysteria. Refusing to start with the premise that an old woman in Salem village was actually a witch is not *bias* or failure to *take the data seriously*. It is the starting point for analysis, the goal of which is to understand (in critical historical, social, and cultural terms) why those young women made those specific accusations and, more importantly, why they were believed by competent rational adults (redescription).<sup>8</sup>

### Final Thoughts

Once students have some experience thinking through redescription using Clancy’s data, they quickly pick up what this would look like in the context of religion. The Salem witch hysteria is a good bridge example. I find that this approach appeals to two groups of students that are often not engaged with the academic study of religion: (1) students with strong confessional commitments, and (2) students with no confessional commitments who think religion is just made-up nonsense. (The first group is the group I think we often consider the real challenge to teach, but I feel like the second group is growing, and presents similar challenges for us.) The first group resists the study of religion as an attack on their faith. The second group sees religion as silly and meaningless and thus sees no point in studying it. This framing allows the first group a model for bracketing their beliefs from academic study. Redescription offers an alternative explanation of personal religious experience that one can take or leave. It does not deny personal experience. The second group sees that religion is a complicated social phenomenon worthy of study. They see that “They’re crazy!” is not a useful explanation. They see a model for academic study where the goal is not to get them to accept religious claims, which they often assume is the covert aim of a class in Religious Studies.

The book is relatively inexpensive (circa \$23 paperback; \$14 Kindle edition) and Amazon has many used copies listed. A warning: my bookstore has had increasing trouble getting enough copies. You may need to resort to the eBook version (which students often

---

<sup>8</sup> The Salem witch hysteria makes an excellent second case study if time allows. I have also presented the material above and then had students write a paper analyzing the Salem witch hysteria on their own as practice. This made a good introductory assignment in a methods and theories course.

prefer anyway). It is a quick read, but if time is a problem, it would be possible to achieve the goals laid out above by reading only chapters 2, 3, 4, and 6.

I have used this book as the opening example in eleven courses, two upper-level methods and theories courses and nine first-year seminar style courses. I found that it worked equally well in both settings as the more advanced students had, often, not had extensive exposure to the concept of redescription presented in this way. The approach went faster in upper level classes, but needed no real change. We are attempting to instill a scholarly instinct here, and I think frequent exposure in multiple forms is beneficial (it certainly was for me).

Students often comment on the interesting ‘aliens’ class in course evaluations. It also works as a hook that resets student expectations right at the beginning of the class. So many of our students have only one model for what the study of religion can look like (the confessional “religious education” model). As a result, they often go into a required Religious Studies course resigned to suffering. Showing another way right at the start may change the way they see the class and how seriously they take it.