

The Notion of Religious Experience

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We now turn to the question of religious experience. The notion of 'experience' in general is an ambiguous one and it is necessary first to analyse it before we consider *religious* experience. Religious experience is not one, simply definable, thing: rather there are a variety of experiences which, depending on the context, we can call religious.

Experience involves apprehension by direct acquaintance, and reference to experience implies that one must 'see for oneself' or undergo the experience for oneself. I cannot *describe* an experience adequately to those who have not had the experience for themselves. How could one, for example, describe the visual experience of the sky to a blind person, or the auditory experience of a piece of music to one who was deaf, or a sexual experience to a very young child? Put in another way, experience implies:

Knowing that something is so, as opposed to *knowing about* some-

thing by report e.g. as I know that there is no life on the moon.

Knowing immediately, as opposed to knowing something *by inference* e.g. as I know on the basis of medical findings that if I smoke I run an increased risk of lung cancer.

Knowing concretely, as opposed to knowing something in an *abstract* way e.g. as I know Pythagoras's theorem.

Knowing by direct observation, as opposed to knowing something *theoretically* e.g. as I know that light has a wave structure.

The Ambiguity of 'Experience'

There is however, a fundamental ambiguity in the notion of experience as it has developed since the seventeenth century. Thus, with respect to any experience, we can distinguish between (a) the experience taken as a psychological event or state in the person having the experience, and (b) the experience viewed as a form of awareness *of* some object. For example, Macbeth had a certain experience in that he had a visual experience of a dagger in the air before him although there was in fact no dagger there. This experience was a private psychological state which he could introspect and describe to us and it may therefore be called a psychological experience.

There is another aspect to an experience in that it is a form of awareness or consciousness *of* or *about* something; it must have some object. Thus experiences may be experiences *of* colour, or *of* heat, or *of* a tree. To be aware is to be aware *of* something; to be conscious is to be conscious *of* something; and to have an experience is to have an experience *of* something. Awareness and consciousness and experience are from this point of view not just psychological states of the subjects who are aware or conscious; rather, they are acts directed towards objects. We could call this aspect of experience 'object directed experience'.

When therefore, a person says that he has had an experience, he may be saying that:

- a certain psychological event or state has taken place in him, or
- he has become aware *of* something.

Thus, 'I have had a visual experience of X' may mean 'I have had certain introspectible and describable events occurring within me'; or it may mean simply 'I saw (was visually aware or conscious of) X'. Both aspects of an experience - the 'psychological' aspect and the 'object directed' aspect - go together of course and you cannot have the latter without the former, although emphasis can be placed on one or the other aspect.

The Notion of Religious Experience

This ambiguity in the notion of experience is reflected in the idea of religious experience, for sometimes religious experience is taken to mean being in a certain psychological state, and sometimes to mean being aware of some specifically religious object. Thus, 'I have had a religious experience' may mean: 'I have had certain peculiar feelings and sensations quite unlike ordinary feelings and sensations' (here the emphasis is upon the psychological aspect of the experience); or it may mean 'I have had an awareness of God or of some religious object' (here the emphasis is upon the object-directed aspect of the experience). In this latter case I am not just talking about my psychological states but about an act of awareness or consciousness of something.

Unfortunately, due to the historical development of the notion of experience it is difficult to keep these two aspects of experience distinct and consequently a good deal of confusion has been caused. Rudolf Otto, for example, does not always distinguish clearly between these two senses of religious experience. Thus at times Otto suggests that the experience of the *Numinous* or the *Holy* is describable in terms of certain psychological states - peculiar feelings of awe, dependency etc. - and that we then infer that there must be some object or reality answering to these feelings, as though God or the *Holy* or the *Numinous* had to be postulated as the only possible explanation of those psychological feelings or states. At other times, however - and this appears to be his main position - Otto claims that religious experience gives us direct awareness of and acquaintance with religious objects.

Again, W. T. Stace, in his book *Mysticism and Philosophy*, speaks as though one can describe religious experiences in purely psychological terms. And since, so he argues, the psychological feelings and emotions and mental states which make up religious experiences are indistinguishable from the psychological feelings and states induced by mescaline and LSD, we can say that the two are identical. Here is what Stace (61) says:

. . . Those who have achieved mystical states as a result of long and arduous spiritual exercises, fasting and prayer, or great moral efforts, possibly spread over many years, are inclined to deny that a drug can induce a 'genuine' mystical experience, or at least to look askance at such practice and such a claim. Our principle says that *if* the phenomenological descriptions of the two experiences are indistinguishable, so far as can be ascertained, then it cannot be denied that if one is a genuine mystical experience the other is also. This will follow notwithstanding the lowly antecedents of one of them, and in spite of the understandable annoyance of an ascetic, a saint, or a spiritual

hero, who is told that his careless and worldly neighbour, who never did anything to deserve it, has attained to mystical consciousness by swallowing a pill.

The Varieties of Religious Experience

The religious experiences vary considerably both in their objects and their quality. Some are purely visual experiences (seeing the face of Christ, or the figure of the god Mescalito coming out of the peyote plant, or the transfigured colours and shapes of physical objects); some are experiences of a special kind of energy or vital power suffusing the things of the natural world; some are experiences of liberation from the confines of the self and from the realm of rationality; some are experiences of being absorbed into something greater than the self; some are experiences that all is well with reality and that evil will not finally triumph over good.

Again, the quality of the experiences reported differs a great deal in that some of the experiences (e.g. that of St. Teresa) are rare and special, vivid and momentary; whereas others (e.g. that of the Australian Walbiri) are much more routine or repeatable, diffuse, and relatively continuous.

We have then to face the following difficulty: are the differences between these experiences so large and deep that it is impossible to find anything in common between them? And if this is so should we not dispense with the misleading term 'religious experience' since it suggests that there is an isolatable and definable kind of experience which may assume different forms while remaining essentially the same? This difficulty is compounded by the fact that the different religious experiences we have considered play very different roles (and have a very different meaning) within their own respective religious contexts. The experiences reported do not make sense simply considered in isolation; they make sense only when they are seen and interpreted within the whole particular religious form of life of which they are part. This is why, in a sense, our collection - and all such collections and anthologies - of reports of religious experiences are misleading since they give the impression that one can isolate or abstract religious experience from their respective religious contexts and compare them with one another.

Religious experience in the context of traditional Catholicism

Let us look, for example, at how the experience reported by St. Teresa of Avila fits into its religious context. In classical Catholicism religious experiences of the kind that St. Teresa reports play a relatively secondary role. According to orthodox Catholic theology such experiences are special and extraordinary graces vouchsafed by God on

rare occasions to particular individuals and they are not seen as a normal and ordinary part of the Christian life. In this view most Christians live the life of faith - believing in God by virtue of the grace of faith given to them by God - without ever enjoying any special religious experiences of the kind reported by St. Teresa. In fact, there has often been a distrust and suspicion of such experiences within the Catholic tradition, as St. Teresa herself found. So it was held that experiences of this kind could often be harmful delusions, or signs of spiritual pride, or temptations of the Devil, leading a person to prefer his own self will.

There are theological reasons for traditional Catholicism's distrust of religious experience. First, it was thought that if the individual lay claim to direct experiences of God, the sin of pride was involved, since there is such a gulf between the Creator and his creation. God may on occasion bridge that gulf as a matter of special grace and favour and allow people to have experiences of Him, but this could never be a normal or even frequent feature of the Christian life. Second, in traditional Catholicism there is a strong emphasis upon the Christian community (the *ecclesia*) so that a person is a Christian only if he belongs to the Christian community - 'the communion of saints'. The idea of the individual Christian face to face with his God alone and in isolation is not a typically Catholic one.

It is worthwhile teasing out these aspects of the traditional Catholic context within which St. Teresa had her religious experiences, since it enables us to see what role, so to speak, those experiences play and how they are to be interpreted. As we have said, for St. Teresa her religious experiences do not *justify* her religious faith since she would still be a religious person even if she did not ever have religious experiences. Nor are they for her of any significance in themselves or worth cultivating for their own sake, since as she says, they are significant and valuable only in so far as they lead one to a more moral and spiritual life - the life of Christian charity.

A recent Christian writer, William Johnston (1971: 130f) has some interesting remarks on the different attitudes taken towards religious experience by Zen Buddhism on the one hand and Catholic Christianity on the other:

. . . Everything in Zen is oriented toward enlightenment and toward the preservation of its spirit once found. Only the enlightened man can become a master and a recognised director of others, only the enlightened person can speak with real authority. And in this sense Zen can be called completely mystical since without enlightenment the whole structure falls to the ground. Christianity, on the other hand, though it contains a strong current of mysticism, is not essentially mystical . . . For the Christian life can be lived in full vigor without any

enlightenment like *satori*; no one need feel in the depth of his spirit the psychological shock of enlightenment or even the tranquility of the prayer of quiet; those who speak with authority make no claim to mystical enlightenment . . . Mysticism is valued only as a means to something more important - namely the charity which is the center of the gospel message.

Religious experience in ritualistic religions

Religious experiences play much the same role in religious forms of life where emphasis is placed upon the performance of rituals. Thus in the religiously based initiation rituals of the Australian Walbiri what is of major importance is that the young men be taken through the rituals. No doubt these dramatic rituals do have a profound psychological effect of a religious kind upon the novices but this experiential side is secondary. Regardless of what the novices may experience psychologically the rites have been observed and having passed through them the initiates are now men and full members of the tribe. Similarly in Confucianism the main emphasis is upon the carrying out of certain formalised actions of pious observance towards one's parents, ancestors and superiors, and any psychological experience that may result to those carrying out the rites is of secondary importance. (It is true, however, that in some religions the performance of ritual ceremonies is often a means of inducing religious experiences. This is to some extent the case with the Dinka.)

Experience based forms of religion

At the other end of the spectrum there are those religious forms of life where experiences are central and essential. Within these particular contexts the whole meaning of what it is to be religious is given by reference to these experiences. This is true of certain forms of Buddhism where the experience of enlightenment is the *raison d'être* of everything else; it is also true of certain forms of Protestant Christianity where the having of certain kinds of religious experience ('conversion', 'being saved', 'being reborn') is an index of one's religious status. William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* is largely concerned with experiences of this kind. As James once put it: 'The mother sea and fountain-head of all religions lie in the mystical experiences of the individual, taking the word mystical in a very wide sense. All theologies and all ecclesiasticisms are secondary growths superimposed . . .' Again, as we shall see, Otto views religious experience as playing a central role within the religious form of life. Unless one has had an experience of the *Holy* or the *Numinous* one cannot be, for Otto, a religious person in the full sense.

Other remarks could be made about the place of religious experience within the different religious contexts. Thus in some religious contexts religious experience is thought to be accessible to *everyone*, while in other contexts religious experience is thought to be the preserve of an elite of specialists or virtuosi. The great historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, remarks that in many 'primitive' societies:

Mystical experience is generally the prerogative of a class of individuals who, by whatever name they are called, are specialists in *ecstasy*. The shamans, the medicine men, magicians, healers, the ecstatic and the inspired of every description, are distinguished from the rest of the community by the intensity of their religious experience. They live the sacred side of life in a profounder and more personal manner than other people. In most cases they attract attention by some unusual behaviour, by the possession of occult powers, by having personal and secret relations with divine or demonic beings, by a style of life, or dress, by insignia and ways of speaking, which are theirs alone. By general agreement, these individuals are regarded as the equivalents, among 'primitives', of the religious elites and the mystic in other more highly evolved cultures. (1968 - 72)

The Context-Dependence of Religious Experience

The general lesson that emerges from this discussion is that, to a very large extent, religious experiences are context dependent in that they only have meaning within a given religious and cultural context or tradition. St. Teresa's experience of Christ would make no sense to her apart from the tissue of beliefs, attitudes and relationships invoked by the traditional Catholic Christianity of her time. It would be impossible for her to have the *satori* experience which occurs within the context or tradition of Zen Buddhism. And, alternatively, it would not be possible for the Buddhist experiences of pure awareness and detachment from the self to occur to a Christian for whom the salvation of the individual self is of central religious importance. Again, it is clear that Teilhard de Chardin's experience of the radiant face of Christ would be largely meaningless outside the context of his philosophico-theological theory about the divine energising of the cosmos. Similarly, the religious experiences of the Dinka are possible only within the framework of their culture based as it is, economically and symbolically, upon the possession of cattle.

We must, however, not interpret this context dependence of religious experiences in too strict a way, for if the religious and cultural context *determined* the nature of the experiences, so that one only had those experiences which the context or tradition dictated, then people would never have experiences which were at odds with, or went beyond, the received context or tradition. Therefore no change or innovation would ever take place within religious and cultural contexts. Clearly, the Buddha's experiences in some sense went beyond the accepted tradition of classical Hinduism and caused him to modify the latter. Similarly, Mohammed's religious experiences caused him to profoundly modify the religious tradition of which he was himself originally a part. Again, if religious experiences were *totally* dependent upon their contexts, then it would be impossible to make any comparisons at all between them. Yet clearly *some* comparisons can be made. Perhaps languages provide a helpful analogy here: though it is difficult to translate adequately from one language into another it is nevertheless possible to provide *some* kind of translation. One can, to some extent, stand outside the linguistic contexts in question and establish equivalences between them. In the same way, it might be said, it is possible, though difficult, to stand outside the various religious contexts and to make comparisons between them. Though the adequacy of comparisons between differing religious forms of life is as imperfect as the adequacy of translations between differing languages, comparison (like translation) is not impossible. In short, the comparison of different religions and religious experiences is as possible (no more and no less) as translation between different languages.

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