

religious experience

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specific experiences such as wonder at the infinity of the cosmos, the sense of awe and mystery in the presence of the holy, feelings of dependence on a divine power or an unseen order, the sense of guilt and anxiety accompanying belief in a divine judgment, and the feeling of peace that follows faith in divine forgiveness. Some thinkers also point to a religious aspect to the purpose of life and with the destiny of the individual.

In the first sense, religious experience means an encounter with the divine in a way analogous to encounters with other persons and things in the world. In the second case, reference is made not to an encounter with a divine being but rather to the apprehension of a quality of holiness or rightness in reality or to the fact that all experience can be viewed in relation to the ground from which it springs. In short, religious experience means both special experience of the divine or ultimate and the viewing of any experience as pointing to the divine or ultimate.

Study and evaluation

“Religious experience” was not widely used as a technical term prior to the publication of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) by William James, an eminent U.S. psychologist and philosopher, but the interpretation of religious concepts and doctrines in terms of individual experience reaches back at least to 16th-century Spanish mystics and to the age of the Protestant Reformers. A special emphasis on the importance of experience in religion is found in the works of such thinkers as Jonathan Edwards, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Rudolf Otto. Basic to the experiential approach is the belief that it allows for a firsthand understanding of religion as an actual force in human life, in contrast with religion taken either as church membership or as belief in authoritative doctrines. The attempt to interpret such concepts as God, faith, conversion, sin, salvation, and worship through personal experience and its expressions opened up a wealth of material for the investigation of religion by psychologists, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists as well as by theologians and philosophers. A focus on religious experience is especially important for Phenomenologists (thinkers who seek the basic structures of human consciousness) and Existentialist philosophers.

A number of controversial issues have emerged from these studies, involving not only different conceptions of the nature and structure of religious experience but also different views of the manner in which it is to be evaluated and the sort of evaluation possible from the standpoint of a given discipline. Four such issues are basic: (1) whether religious experience points to special experiences of the divine or whether any experience may be regarded as religious by virtue of becoming

related to the divine; (2) the kinds of differentia that can serve to distinguish religion or the religious from both secular life and other forms of spirituality, such as morality and art; (3) whether religious experience can be understood and properly evaluated in terms of its origins and its psychological or sociological conditions or is *sui generis*, calling for interpretation in its own terms; and (4) whether religious experience has cognitive status, involving encounter with a being, beings, or a power transcending human consciousness, or is merely subjective and composed entirely of ideas and feelings that have no reference beyond themselves. The last issue, transposed in accordance with either a Positivist outlook or some types of Empiricism, which restrict assertible reality to the realm of sense experience, would be resolved at once by the claim that the problem cannot be meaningfully discussed, since key terms, such as “God” and “power,” are strictly meaningless. . . .

Religious experience and other experience

Views of experience in general

Religious experience must be understood against the background of a general theory of experience as such. Experience as conceived from the standpoint of a British philosophical tradition stemming from John Locke and David Hume is essentially the reports of the world received through the senses. Experience, as a tissue of sensible content, was set in contrast to reason, understood as the domain of logic and mathematics. The mind was envisaged as a wax tablet on which the sensible world imprints itself; and the one who experiences is the passive recipient of what is given. It is possible to distinguish and compare these sensible items by means of understanding, but the data themselves are available only through experience—*i.e.*, the sensation of things and reflection upon thought and mental activities, feelings, and desires. According to this classical empiricist view, all ideas, beliefs, and theories expressed in conceptual form are to be traced back to their origin in sense if they are to be understood and justified.

The above view of experience came under criticism from two sides. Immanuel Kant, an 18th-century German philosopher, who still retained some of the assumptions of the position he criticized, nevertheless declared that experience is not identical with passively received sensible material but must be construed as the joint product of such material and its being grasped by an understanding that thinks in accordance with certain necessary categories not derived from the senses. Kant opened the way for a new understanding of the element of interpretation in all experience, and his successors in the development of German Idealism, Johann Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, and

G.W.F. Hegel, came to characterize experience as the many-sided reflection of man's multiple encounters with the world, other men, and himself.

A second attack on the classical conception came from U.S. Pragmatist philosophers, notably Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, for whom experience was the medium for the disclosure of whatever there is to be encountered; it is far richer and more complex than a passive registry of sensible data. Experience was seen as a human activity related to the purposes and interests of the one who experiences, and it was understood as an interpreted product of multiple transactions between man and the environment. Moreover, stress was placed on the social and funded character of experience in place of the older conception of experience as a private content confined to the mind of an individual. On this view, experience is not confined to its content but includes modes or dimensions that represent frames of meaning—social, moral, aesthetic, political, religious—through which whatever is encountered can be interpreted. James went beyond his associates in developing the broadest theory of experience, known as radical empiricism, according to which the relations and connections between items of experience are given along with these items themselves.

Critics of the classical view of experience, while not concerned exclusively with religious experience, saw, nevertheless, that if experience is confined to the domain of the senses it is then difficult to understand what could be meant by religious experience if the divine is not regarded as one sensible object among others. This consideration prompted attempts to understand experience in broader terms. Cutting across all theories of experience is the basic fact that experience demands expression in language and symbolic forms. To know what has been experienced and how it is to be understood requires the ability to identify things, persons, and events through naming, describing, and interpreting, which involve appropriate concepts and language. No experience can be the subject of analysis while it is being had or undergone; communication and critical inquiry require that experiences be cast into symbolic form that arrests them for further scrutiny. The various uses of language—political, scientific, moral, religious, aesthetic, and others—represent so many purposes through which experience is described and interpreted.

Views of religious experience

Specifically religious experience has been variously identified in the following ways: the awareness of the holy, which evokes awe and reverence; the feeling of absolute dependence that reveals man's status as a creature; the sense of being at one with the divine; the perception of an unseen order or of a quality of permanent rightness in the cosmic scheme; the direct perception of God; the encounter with a reality "wholly other"; the sense of a transforming

power as a presence. Sometimes, as in the striking case of the Old Testament prophets, the experience of God has been seen as a critical judgment on man and as the disclosure of his separation from the holy. Those who identify religion as a dimension or aspect of experience point to man's attitude toward an overarching ideal, to a total reaction to life, to an ultimate concern for the meaning of one's being, or to a quest for a power that integrates human personality. In all these cases, it is the fact that the attitudes and concerns in question are directed to an ultimate object beyond man that justifies their being called religious. All interpreters are agreed that religious experience involves what is final in value for man and concerns belief in what is ultimate in reality. . . .

The structure of religious experience

The self and the other

All religious experience can be described in terms of three basic elements: first, the personal concerns, attitudes, feelings, and ideas of the individual who has the experience; second, the religious object disclosed in the experience or the reality to which it is said to refer; third, the social forms that arise from the fact that the experience in question can be shared. Although the first two elements can be distinguished for purposes of analysis, they are not separated within the integral experience itself. Religious experience is always found in connection with a personal concern and quest for the real self, oriented toward the power that makes life holy or a ground and a goal of all existence. A wide variety of individual experiences are thus involved, among which are attitudes of seriousness and solemnity in the face of the mystery of human destiny; feelings of awe and of being unclean evoked by the encounter with the holy; the sense of a power or a person who both loves and judges man; the experience of being converted or of having the course of life directed toward the divine; the feeling of relief stemming from the sense of divine forgiveness; the sense that there is an unseen order or power upon which the value of all life depends; the sense of being at one with the divine and of abandoning the egocentric self.

In all these situations, the experience is realized in the life of an individual who at the same time has his attention focussed on an "other," or divine reality, that is present or encountered. The determination of the nature of this other poses a problem of interpretation that requires the use of symbols, analogies, images, and concepts for expressing the reality that evokes religious experience in an understandable way. Four basic conceptions of the divine may be distinguished: the divine as an impersonal, sacred order (Logos, Tao, *rta*, Asha) governing the universe and man's destiny; the divine as power that is holy and must be approached with awe, proper preparation, or ritual cleansing; the divine as all-embracing One, the ultimate Unity and harmony of all finite realities and the goal of the mystical quest; and the divine as an

individual or self transcending the world and man and yet standing in relation to both at the same time.

The two most important concepts that have been developed by theologians and philosophers for the interpretation of the divine are transcendence and immanence; each is meant to express the relation between the divine and finite realities. Transcendence means going beyond a limit or surpassing a boundary; immanence means remaining within or existing within the confines of a limit. The divine is said to transcend man and the world when it is viewed as distinct from both and not wholly identical with either; the divine is said to be immanent when it is viewed as wholly or partially identical with some reality within the world, such as man or the cosmic order. The conception of the divine as an impersonal, sacred order represents the extreme of immanence since that order is regarded as entirely within the world and not as imposing itself from without. The conception of the divine as an individual or self represents the extreme of transcendence, since God is taken as not wholly identical with either the world or any finite reality within it. Some thinkers have described the divine as wholly transcendent or “wholly other” than finite reality, some have maintained the total immanence of the divine, and still others claim that both concepts can be applied and therefore that the two characteristics do not exclude each other. . . .

John Edwin Smith

Additional Reading

The nature of religious experience

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), a classic philosophical and psychological study; Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige*, 9th ed. (1922; Eng. trans., *The Idea of the Holy*, 1923; 2nd ed., 1950), a study of the nonrational in religious experience; J.M. Moore, *Theories of Religious Experience, with Special Reference to James, Otto and Bergson* (1938); James A. Martin, Jr., *Empirical Philosophies of Religion* (1945); and C.C.J. Webb, *Religious Experience* (1945), contain valuable appraisals and a good bibliography; H.E. Brunner, *Wahrheit als Begegnung* (1937; Eng. trans., *The Divine-Human Encounter*, 1943); and Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (1923; Eng. trans., *I and Thou*, 1937 and 1970), express the view that authentic religion is based on personal encounter between man and God; John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (1934), argues for the “religious” in experience; E.S. Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion* (1940), represents the Personalist view that personhood is the most basic quality of reality; W.E. Hocking, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience* (1912, reprinted 1963); and J.E. Smith, *Experience and God* (1968), emphasize the experiential basis of the question of God; and Alister Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious*

Experience (1979), a collection of 3,000 personal reports.

Religious experience and other experience

H.D. Lewis, *Our Experience of God* (1959); and J.E. Smith, *Religion and Empiricism* (1967), deal with the bearing of different conceptions of experience on religion; Josiah Royce, *The Sources of Religious Insight* (1912); W.G. de Burgh, *From Morality to Religion* (1938); and Paul Tillich, *Morality and Beyond* (1963), treat the relation between religion and morality; Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Vom Heiligen in der Kunst* (1957; Eng. trans., *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, 1963), treats the relation between art and religion.

The structure of religious experience

John MacMurray, *The Structure of Religious Experience* (1936, reprinted 1971); J.B. Pratt, *The Religious Consciousness* (1920); Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (1957); and A.N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (1926), deal with psychological, theological, and metaphysical aspects; Joachim Wach, *The Sociology of Religion* (1944), is an indispensable study of the social expression of religious experience; William A. Christian, *Meaning and Truth in Religion* (1964); F. Ferre, *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion* (1967); Ninian Smart, *Philosophers and Religious Truth* (1964); and J.E. Smith, *Reason and God* (1961), deal with the issue of the cognitive import of religious experience; J.H. Leuba, *The Psychology of Religious Mysticism* (1925), argues against its cognitive import; W.E. Hocking, *Science and the Idea of God* (1944); W.T. Stace, *Religion and the Modern Mind* (1960); and H.N. Wieman, *The Wrestle of Religion with Truth* (1927), discuss the relation between religion and science; J. MacQuarrie, *God-Talk* (1967); I.T. Ramsey, *Christian Discourse* (1965), and *Models and Mystery* (1964), represent the linguistic approach to religious experience; Mircea Eliade, *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour* (1949; Eng. trans., *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 1954; rev. ed., 1965) and *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959), interpret religious experience through myth, symbol, and ritual.

Situational contexts and forms of expression

Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (1936, reprinted 1957), invaluable for the meaning of worship and its forms; P. Edwall *et al.* (eds.), *Ways of Worship* (1951), treats the liturgies of the major Christian communities; Emile Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912; Eng. trans., *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 1915, paperback 1961), presents the “group theory” of religion; C.C.J. Webb, *Group Theories of Religion and the Individual* (1916), a critique of Durkheim; Mircea Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth* (1958); Arnold van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage* (1909; Eng. trans. 1960); and Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933; Eng. trans., *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 1938), on initiation rites and the cycle of sacred life; Joachim Wach, *The Sociology of Religion* (1944), the best

source for the relation between religious and nonreligious groupings.

Types of religious experience and personality

Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (*op. cit.*); and Joachim Wach, *The Sociology of Religion* (1944), and *Types of Religious Experience* (1951), invaluable for the

analysis of religious roles and personalities; Alfred Guillaume, *Prophecy and Divination Among the Hebrews and Other Semites* (1938); Rudolf Otto, *Religious Essays* (1931); and John Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion* (1922; paperback ed., 1961), deal with the meaning of prophecy in the Semitic traditions.

"religious experience," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* <<http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-9109480>> (12 October 2006).