

TOPIC 7. THE FRUITS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: TRANSFORMATION AND CREATIVE INSPIRATION

As well as the potential mental health benefits of religious experience as mentioned above, there are often other lasting results. The term ‘fruits’ of religious experience is usually taken to refer to a new or renewed moral or ethical awareness gained by the individual as a direct result of the experience, recalling Ninian Smart’s ‘ethical’ dimension of religion. Here this ethical dimension is meeting the ‘experiential’ one. This demonstrates how it is problematic to isolate one dimension of religion from another, for they are in constant interaction.

As with other elements of religious experience, a quantitative, non-evaluative phenomenological approach may be taken towards the question of fruits. For example, experiencers could be asked to present their own accounts together with their understanding of the effects of their experience(s) on their lives. They might record a change of attitude and mood, of belief, occupation, or general way of life that resulted from experiences.

Franks Davis quotes the philosopher C.D. Broad (*Religion, Philosophy and Psychological Research* 1953, p. 196) as saying that subjects of religious experience make ‘actual ethical discoveries which others can afterwards recognise to be true, good and useful’ (cf. Maslow 1964). Typical reports include a sense of transformation, and of life having been changed through the gaining of wisdom from the experience. This is often accompanied by a desire to engage in charitable or otherwise philanthropic work, and for increased community participation.

The theme of fruits is also important in evaluative approaches to religious experiences. These evaluations might take place within the framework of a religious tradition’s ‘testing’ a subject for orthodoxy, of philosophers questioning the meaning or religious experience, or of psychiatrists assessing the psychological state of a patient.

Franks Davis (1989:71) has pointed out that ‘“spiritual authorities” such as the classical mystics are remarkably unanimous in their choice of criteria’ for distinguishing between genuine and ‘delusive’ experiences. One of these is ‘moral and spiritual fruits’; the others are ‘internal and external consistency’, ‘consistency with orthodox doctrine’, ‘evaluation of the subject’s general psychological and mental condition’. It is interesting to note that perhaps most modern researchers would have difficulties only with the criterion of ‘consistency with orthodox doctrine’. Indeed, the teachings which arise out of the experiences of both mystics and prophets often challenge existing social norms and can cause friction within a community.

William James wrote that religious experiences ‘must be tested not by their origin but by the value of their fruits’. The value of religious opinions should be judged by our own immediate feeling, and what we can ascertain of their experiential relations to our moral and ethical ‘truths’. His criteria for judging religious experiences, it will be remembered are, ‘immediate luminousness, philosophical reasonableness and *moral helpfulness*’. This is in opposition to the psychological reductionism of Freud and others who view religion as rooted in neurosis, and something to be outgrown and discarded. It has also been argued that ‘fruits’ may be the main distinguishing trait between ‘genuine’ religious experience and those induced by drugs: that the positive ethical after-effects are allegedly of a more lasting nature in ‘true’ religious experiences (Rankin 2005: 48). This is somewhat speculative, however, and has been contradicted by the recent research of Griffiths et. al. (2006; see Reading List 6 above).

One must be careful not to over-generalise, however, or even to romanticise religious experience. In practical terms, we all evaluate claims of religious experience on the basis of moral fruits. If a person claims to hear the voice of God telling him/her to kill people, we are naturally sceptical and think that the person is deluded. We generally do not believe there is any spiritual validity to the suicide and murder cults of The Manson Family, Jonestown, or Heaven’s Gate, that their leaders were in direct communication with the divine, or that they were reincarnations of Jesus Christ, the Buddha, extraterrestrials, etc. as they claimed. We are more sympathetic, however, when a person reports that God has told him/her to go to do relief work in war torn zones, or to return from a near-death experience to care for their family.

The issue is further complicated by the fact that even certain branches of mainstream religions have advocated violence (and indeed continue to do so), attempting to justify it with reasons of faith. This issue has been addressed by Bowker (1987) and Hick (1989; rev. 2004). The latter acknowledges that most, if not all religions, have been guilty of violence and immorality and none have the sole claim to noble actions. All have inadequacies, and lives and deeds within them which are cruel and exploitative as well as ‘saintly’. Of course, it could be argued that any religious experience which is ‘evil’ or negative is not ‘true’ or ‘genuine’, though there are problems with ‘outsiders’ (i.e. the non-experient) making value judgements or imposing definitions upon the experiences of others.

The usage of the term ‘fruits’ in this context is biblical: ‘The fruit of the righteous is the tree of life’ (*Proverbs* 11:30); ‘But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control’ (*Galatians* 5:22-23); ‘By their

fruits ye shall know them' (*Matthew* 7:16). The experiences of the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures lead to their criticisms of social injustice and corruption. The prophetic task of speaking truth, of denouncing hypocrisy and injustice can be seen as emerging centrally out of an encounter with Transcendence, in an effort to manifest on earth the way things Ultimately are.

Berger (1969) argued from the perspective of Liberation Theology that there are various 'signals' of the Divine, such as our senses of justice and hope (and even sense of humour), and that these lead to practical social action. Such themes are certainly prevalent in accounts of religious experiences, as well as their 'fruits' (which, Berger would argue, is simply another form of religious experience, or manifestation of the Divine). These fruits are not something people have achieved by their own efforts, but the result of something from outside them entering their lives: the fruits of the Spirit.

Of course, the idea of a relationship between religious experience and positive practical or spiritual outcomes is not exclusive to individuals of Abrahamic faiths. The differences in conceptions of the ideal human virtues, or 'fruits', in different religions has been explored in an anthology edited by Morgan & Lawton (rev. ed. 2007). In Hinduism, for example, the human ideals are non-violence, truthfulness, not stealing, purity, self-control, and duty to family and community. In Buddhism they are ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. There are also the four holy states of mind (or *Brahmaviras*): benevolence or friendliness, compassion, joy in other's joy, and equanimity. In Sikhism, the virtues are truthfulness, self-control, just behaviour, not exploiting others, courage, humility, and contentment. It is also important to recognise that ethics themselves differ both between and *within* religious traditions.

A general distinction can be made between two different models here: one emphasises working from the transformation of the heart/mind outwards, and the other from the actions of the body inwards. This an important distinction when researching the link between fruits religious experience. Note that in both models, however, these ideals or fruits across cultures are rooted in human action, and thus *experience* – as well as in the teachings of the individual traditions. Many variations and permutations can be found in different stands of each tradition. Religious experience is thus not exclusively the extraordinary, but can also be the every day.

Another view of the relationship of ethics to religious experience can be found in Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*, mentioned earlier. At the beginning of Chapter I, Huxley classifies three layers of the perennial philosophy:

The Metaphysical that recognises a divine reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds.

The Psychological that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine reality.

The Ethical that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being.

Huxley discusses these in hierarchical terms, stating that :

In studying the Perennial Philosophy we can either begin at the bottom, with practice and morality; or at the top, with a consideration of metaphysical truths; or, finally, in the middle, at the focal point where mind and matter, action and thought have their meeting place in human psychology.

...the lower gate (Ethic) is preferred by strictly practical teachers – men who, like Gautama Buddha, have no use for speculation and whose primary concern is to put out in men's hearts the hideous fires of greed, resentment and infatuation.

Bear in mind when reading this that some might not see the Buddha as primarily a practical, ethical teacher.

Huxley continued:

The psychology of the Perennial Philosophy has its source in metaphysics and issues logically in a characteristic way of life and system of ethics. Starting from this middle point of doctrine, it is easy for the mind to move in either direction.

The subject of fruits is also important to the issue of the objective reality of religious experiences. We have already encountered some of the arguments for a genuine metaphysical or transcendent basis for religious/mystical experiences. Another argument is that the 'fruits' of the experience actually constitute a compelling case for such a reality in themselves. If the experiences are not 'real', the argument goes, why are their effects so real, and so profound?

Although James (1902: 268) described the fruits of religious experience using the Christian term 'saintliness', he clarified that he was using it as a collective name for the fruits of religions in general, and that 'there is a certain composite photograph of universal

saintliness, the same in all religions of which the features can easily be traced.’ These features are:

1. **A feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world’s selfish little interests.**
2. **A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control.**
1. **An immense elation and freedom as the outlines of the confining selfhood die down.**
2. **A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious reflections.**

The practical results are:

Asceticism: chastity, obedience, poverty

Strength of Soul: patience, fortitude, equanimity, tranquillity

Purity: nothing brutal or sensuous

Charity: tenderness for fellow creatures

James gives many examples of personal testimony to support his ideas.

Hick (rev. 2004) is in harmony with James’ analysis in many ways, particularly on the shifting of concern from ego-centeredness to Reality-centeredness which produces ethical fruits.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION

This part of the Section deals with the relationship between creativity, aesthetics, and the experiential aspects of religious life. Wuthnow (2001) writes ‘artists offer insights into the ineffable aspects of the human condition’, emphasising their personal experience with the sacred.

Schleiermacher (1799: 51) compared religion to music, calling it ‘one great whole; it is special, a self-contained revelation of the world’, while characterising it in terms of having a spiritual ‘common core’ though expressed in culture- and individual- specific modes. He wrote:

In sacred hymns and choruses to which the words of the poet are but loosely

and airily appended, there are breathed out things that definite speech cannot grasp. The melodies of thought and feeling interchange, and give mutual support, till all is satiated and full of the sacred and infinite (ibid: 152).

The artistic context of religion was central to Otto's life and work. A collector of religious artefacts, he was interested in art aesthetics as evocation and expression of religious experience. Otto argued that where rational language cannot express the numinous, the feeling can be transmitted and evoked in other ways: architecture (cathedrals and temples), monuments, music, and dance. Art can thus be a non-verbal expression and evocation of otherwise ineffable experience.

Echoing Schleiermacher, he wrote:

....beyond dispute art has been a means of creating a unique impression – that of the magical – apart from and independent of reflection. Now the magical is nothing but a suppressed and dimmed form of the numinous, a crude form of it which art purifies and ennobles. In great art the point is reached at which we may no longer speak of the 'magical', but rather are confronted with the numinous itself, with all its impelling motive power, transcending reason, expressed in sweeping lines and rhythms (Otto 1917: 66-67).

Otto described the sense of spiritual connection he gained from seeing a Trimurti (three-faced Hindu sculpture) on the island of Elephanta near Mumbai:

Shiva is represented here as the one who creates, preserves and destroys the world, and yet as the one who also saves and blesses. Nowhere else have I found the secret of the transcendent, the other world more grandly and perfectly expressed than in these three heads.... To see this place were alone worth a journey to India, while from the spirit of religion which has lived here, one may experience more in a single hour of contemplation than from all the books (in Almond 1984: 24; see Reading List 2).

Otto also stressed music as an important means (though like all others, inadequately so) of expressing the numinous, while at the same time being analogous to it. In his own experience in the synagogue in Morocco referred to earlier, the *sound* of the Hebrew words seems as important as their meaning.

Otto took also recognised the importance of the *absence* of stimuli and the affective importance of darkness, silence and space (and the Buddhist 'emptiness', *sunyata*), reflecting ideas of non-being as well as being:

We can only understand by recalling the 'nothingness' and the 'void' of the mystics.... For 'void' is, like darkness and silence, a negation that does away with every 'this' and 'here', in order that the 'wholly other' may become actual' (op. cit.: 69-70).

Hardy (1979: 28; 84-5) recognised music (as well as silence) as one of the triggers of religious experience. There are also many relevant accounts in the RERC archive. Here are excerpts from two very different examples :

I was touring with my parents in France and left them outside the cathedral at O---- where a wedding was taking place. I stood quietly in the aisle while a violin soured and quivered to the vaulted roof. It seemed to take me with it and I could hardly stand. I wanted to sink down and kneel in reverence and in joy. It was such a precious and rare experience that I held it in my heart. Once I tried to share it with my cousin, but what was jewel to me was nothing to her, so I kept it in my heart (Archive #3800).

The night was warm and still, and the night was full of stars. I had no particular feeling beyond a slight nervousness about being out so late in a lonely spot; on the whole I think I was enjoying the walk. I had reached my mother's house when I suddenly realised that the whole sky was alive with sound. Out of the deep silence grew a whole orchestration – not of music, but of a harmonious blending of sounds, as though an infinite number of radio transmitters were emitting signals, each one with its own unique pitch and rhythm of pulsation. There was no melody and no form: I just knew that what I was hearing was the music of the spheres, something that has no beginning and no ending, and the grandeur and simplicity of this filled me with amazement and delight.... Perhaps the oddest part of this experience was that it felt so normal (Archive #2138).

Hills & Argyle (1998) assert that:

There are some clear similarities between musical and religious experience. Both can evoke a powerful and fairly intense emotional response which is generally highly positive. Both have elements which are private to the individual, and occur in a social context such as a public act of worship or musical performance. Music and religion are also associated in practice. It has been found that music is the most common 'trigger' of religious experiences.... Both experiences possess mystical and transcendental elements which are difficult to communicate. The positive emotions arising from music are often described in religious language.

The role of artistic expression in religious experience was also acknowledged by Ninian Smart as one of the 'dimensions' of religion (the Material: architecture, painting, sculpture, ritual objects, etc). There is a problem of definition here, for many expressions of religious thought and experience do not have material expression, such as music (except since the early 20th century and the development of sound recordings), and oral traditions. Many doctrinal religious texts certainly merit a description as art (literature, of course, being one of the arts). What is the difference between these texts and other religiously-inspired poetry and prose?

William James (1902: 369) wrote of the connection between religious experience and poetry:

Most of us can remember the strangely moving power of passages in certain poems when we were young, irrational doorways as they were through which the mystery of fact, the wildness and the pang of life, stole into our hearts and thrilled them. The words have now perhaps become mere polished surfaces for us, but lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch these vague vistas of life continuous with our own, beckoning and inviting yet ever eluding pursuit. We are alive or dead to the eternal inner message of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility.

There are many other questions to think about in this area, particularly in response to Otto. To what degree can art be seen as a true expression of religious experience? Can it be an alternative to verbal or scriptural expressions, or is it by definition supplementary? Can sound and images embody spiritual concepts in themselves, or is it entirely a matter of interpretation? Would Tibetan Buddhist overtone chanting, for example, hold any spiritual meaning for an Anglican congregation? The issue is similar to that of defining religious experience itself: is a work of art spiritual only if the artist designates it as such? Furthermore, to what degree are these expressions of religious experience, and to what degree are they 'publicity' specifically intended to promote and preserve the status quo of the particular tradition? To what degree can the religious impulses behind the construction of the Egyptian pyramids be compared with those behind the construction of European cathedrals? What makes a work of art 'religious'? That it has a religious subject, that it evokes a religious or spiritual response in the viewer/listener, or that it conveys some personal religious or spiritual experience of the artist?

Once again, there is also the issue of cultural perspective and interpretation. Huxley (1954: 37) noted that in the Far East landscape painters considered their art to be religious, but that in the west they mainly consider it secular.

Considering that so many reports of religious experience involve awareness of, and feelings of connection with nature (in fact, nature is another primary trigger of religious experience), it is not surprising that much religious/spiritual art reflects themes found in the natural world. These kinds of experiences often bring a profound sense of unity and oneness with nature, so that they might be discussed within the category of 'nature mysticism'.

Wordsworth is one example of a poet deeply connected with what he perceived to be the divine residing within the natural world. In his poem 'Tintern Abbey', he wrote:

**...And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime**

**Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things....**

As Hick (1999: 111) has pointed out, this is an example of a religiously ambiguous situation: 'Many others must have been where Wordsworth sat... without the scene stirring within them any such sense of Transcendence'.

One of the RERC archive accounts gives an example of the spiritual impact of the aesthetic impact of a natural scene.

**In Wales I went for a walk one evening alone... the setting sun blazed out
turning the whole world crimson and gold, there was a gust of wind, and I felt
as if I had been swept into the very heart of all that glory and colour, taken
over by something outside myself of which I was a part (Archive #821).**

The person reporting this experience links it to another aesthetic/religious experience she had in Chartres Cathedral, and to seeing the colour and pattern of a common weed's tiny clustered flowers. This recalls William Blake's poem 'Auguries of Innocence', which he began:

**To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.**

Otto (1917: 68-9) was also struck by the connection between nature and religious experience. He wrote:

The semi-darkness that glimmers in vaulted halls, or beneath the branches of a lofty forest glade, strangely quickened and stirred by the mysterious play of half-light, has always spoken eloquently to the soul, and the builders of temples, mosques and churches have made full use of it. Silence is what corresponds to this in the language of musical sounds.... Besides silence and darkness oriental art knows a third direct means for producing a strongly numinous impression, to wit, emptiness and empty distances (ibid: 68-69).

Just as art can trigger a religious experience in the viewer/listener, religious experience can enter art through the artist and serve as (?divine) inspiration. Vincent Van Gogh (who painted many of his pictures in an asylum) attempted to portray in his *Starry*

Night something ‘that one can only call God’. He also saw this ‘something’, and tried to portray it, in the vibrant faces of the ordinary people he painted.

The Christian existentialist philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich (1987: 234-5) described a religious experience he had in 1919, which was triggered by viewing the Botticelli painting, *Madonna With Singing Angels*. He wrote:

Gazing up at it, I felt a state approaching ecstasy. In the beauty of the painting there was Beauty itself. It shone through the colors of the paint as the light of day shines through the stained glass windows of a medieval church.

As I stood there, bathed in the beauty its painter had envisioned so long ago, something of the divine source of all things came through to me. I turned away shaken.

That moment has affected my whole life, given me the keys for the interpretation of human existence, brought vital joy and spiritual truth. I compare it to what is usually called revelation in the language of religion. I know that no artistic experience can match the moments in which prophets were grasped by the Power of the Divine Presence, but I believe there is an analogy between revelation and what I felt. In both cases, the experience goes beyond the way we encounter reality in our daily lives. It opens up depths experienced in no other way.

I know that the picture is not the greatest. I have seen greater since then. But that moment of ecstasy has never been repeated.

In this example, the work of art which triggered Tillich’s experience was explicitly religious, and from his own (Christian) religious tradition. In contrast, Thomas Merton (1974: 133), the Trappist monk and Catholic spiritual writer, was deeply affected by a religious work of art from outside his own tradition. When visiting Sri Lanka, he saw a famous forty-five foot stone statue at Polonnaruwa, depicting the Buddha at peace at the time of his death or entry into Nirvana:

I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the obvious clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, the design of the monumental bodies composed into the rock shapes and landscapes, figures, rocks and tree.... I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. The clear *evidence* of the reclining figure, the smile, the sad smile of Ananda standing with arms folded. The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem and really no ‘mystery’. All problems are resolved and everything is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya [the nature of truth].... everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.

Lealman and Robinson compiled a booklet of the reflections of four twentieth century artists, some of which are concerned with human experience of the transcendent. One is the

Russian sculptor Naum Gabo (1890-1977), whose works are abstract in form and not ‘obviously’ or ‘explicitly’ religious. Yet Robinson & Lealman (1980: 10) quotes him as saying:

I have chosen the absoluteness and exactitude of my lines, shapes and forms in the conviction that they are the most immediate medium for my communication to others of the rhythm and the state of mind I would wish the world to be in. This is not only in the material world surrounding us but also in the mental and spiritual world we carry within us. I think that the image they invoke is the image of good, not of evil; the image of order, not of chaos; the image of life, not of death.

Hardy (1966: 123) quoted from Professor Alan Stephenson, the zoologist and painter:

What is beauty? A glimpse of heaven? A painter can transmit beauty without knowing it: if he feels beauty, it will leap from his brush to his canvas. He may not realise at the time that he has succeeded in recording it, but later it will stream back to him from the canvas, and perhaps almost frighten him, because it is a cosmic force.

Kandinsky (1810-1944), the Russian painter and pioneer of abstract art, also wrote on the subject in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910). He wrote of yellow as the most spiritual colour, and that art is like religion in that its development consists of sudden illumination. He saw art as an experience of the spirit, and believed that the talent of the artist is *feeling*, that an artist touches the vibrations of the soul through the use of colour. Other modern artists who viewed their art as spiritual expression include Mondrian (1872-1944), and Rothko (1903-1970).

You will find many accounts in the RERC archive linking art to religious experience. You may also want to view the exhibition on Spirituality and Art that is on the top landing of the Sheikh Khalifa building. The collection was curated by Edward Robinson, a former Director of the RERC, and himself an artist. There is a catalogue describing the works, though it may be interesting for you to view them first in order to see how your interpretations might differ from the ‘official’ ones; and how a fuller understanding of the artists’ meanings might change your perceptions of the works.