

Topic One – What is Religious Experience?

‘Religious experience’ is a problematic term to define, particularly in relation to a) other aspects of religion; and b) similar terms such as ‘spiritual’, ‘transcendent’, and ‘mystical’ experience. Perhaps the one of the biggest problems with the term ‘religious experience’ is that such experiences are often reported by people who do not consider themselves to be religious at all, or are even atheists. The experience, therefore, can be independent of any single belief-system, institution, or worldview. Therefore the term ‘spiritual’ experience may be preferable, for it provides a framework for such experiences in the non-religious. The term ‘religious experience’ also seems to be rooted in western ideology (specifically Protestant Christian; see Sharpe 2003) in which ‘religious’ experience is seen as fundamentally separate from other types of experience. Such a distinction may not be relative to other traditions.

The term ‘spiritual’, however, has connotations of being non-traditional (at least to western perspectives), including feminist, green, liberal, New Age and eastern (or quasi-eastern) orientations. This is in contrast to the authority, exclusivity, doctrines, and strictures often perceived as characteristics of organised *religion*. This is, of course, in distinction to ‘spiritualism’, which is the practice of allegedly communicating with spirits of the dead. ‘Transcendent’ is perhaps more neutral, as Meg Maxwell (1990) has argued, though it too is problematic for it implies a distinction between religious experiences of ‘this world’ and those which transcend it. Many religious experiences are very much part of the world, and not beyond’ it. Like the term ‘mystical’, ‘transcendent’ may more accurately refer to a particular type of religious/spiritual experience.

The term ‘religious experience’ is generally used here for reasons of broad academic acceptance and tradition, rather than as a validation of its usefulness or an endorsement of its appropriateness.

There is no single correct way to define these terms, or indeed to classify an experience of which we may have no first-hand understanding. In other words, if an experient considers their experience to have been ‘religious’, ‘mystical’, or ‘spiritual’, it is not for the scholar to deny this characterisation and substitute a term which the experient might consider inappropriate or inaccurate. Franks Davis (1989)

views religious experience as experiences which the subjects themselves describe in religious terms or which are intrinsically religious.

She describes six types of religious experience:

- a. ***Interpretive:*** In which the subject interprets events within the framework of his or her religious belief system, even if the event does not have claimed anomalous features.
- b. ***Quasi-Sensory:*** Experiences which feature physical sensations (hearing voices, seeing visions, feelings of being touched, feelings of motion or levitation. The specific form of such experiences is related to the subject's individual background.
- c. ***Revelatory:*** Sudden inspiration, enlightenment, insight, or revelation.
- d. ***Regenerative:*** Experiences with spiritually renew the individual, and their faith.
- e. ***Numinous:*** Feelings of awe and insignificance at the power and majesty of the divine or some sort of transpersonal ultimate reality; and/or feelings of it being 'other' and not part of the self (which, paradoxically may give rise to feelings of oneness with the divine/ultimate reality).
- f. ***Mystical:*** Comprised of the four characteristics of apprehending an ultimate reality, freedom from limitations of space and time, a sense of oneness, and feelings of bliss or serenity.

You will, of course, find various classifications and categories of religious experience which will agree or disagree with Franks Davis. You will also run across various other similar or related terms, such as 'ecstatic experience', 'limit experience', 'peak experience', 'exceptional human experience', as well as terms for states of consciousness such as 'transcendental', 'cosmic', or 'divine'. Regardless of what definitions or typologies you use, you should always be careful to clearly state your uses and definitions of terms in your research, and to be consistent.

Whatever definition is to be used, it is clear that there is a wide variety of experience which may be called 'religious': shamanic journeying, out-of-body (OBE), and near-death experiences (NDE, the subject of an optional module you may wish to do); spontaneous epiphanies leading to conversion; visions of religious or spiritual figures or of apparitions of deceased loved ones; meditative states; ritual, ceremony, or prayer leading to a sense of communication or relationship to the divine; a sense of connection with the divine through righteous and/or charitable living; hearing 'divine' voices giving advice, encouragement, or instruction; pilgrimage; healing through prayer, through the 'power' of saints, or other allegedly divine or shamanistic

intervention; conversion either to a spiritual or religious orientation, or a change from one to another (possibly brought on by an ‘extraordinary’ religious experience, though can be seen as a religious experience itself); or simply an ineffable *feeling* of the divine or transcendent beyond the physical senses. Such experiences may occur in solitude, or through participation in group chanting, prayer, meditation, yoga, etc. Many of these will come up again later in this module.

‘Religious Studies’ itself is not a single discipline, but a field of enquiry. It requires the contribution from many academic subject areas to do justice to the breadth of the areas covered by the field. The field is both interdisciplinary and polymethodic, with the freedom to draw (responsibly and critically) upon the theories and methodologies of various disciplines.

Religious experience is equally subject to various types of evaluation. As Sharpe (1983) states, this is because statements regarding such experiences ‘can neither be proved nor disproved by reference to any external authority, it is impossible to brand them “true” or “false”....’ On the other hand, there are numerous claims of and research into the veridicality of religious experiences.

An important methodological tool in the study of religion and religious experience is phenomenology, in which the researcher attempts to allow testimonies or texts to construct their own meanings as far as possible. That is, not to impose potentially alien individual or cultural preconceptions or concepts upon the material, which may lead to misunderstandings; but rather to suspend one’s beliefs and judgements in order to determine simply what is *apparent*. Phenomenology, when used in this context, is not in itself a theory, but rather a tool, or open-ended method of enquiry which can lead to the formulation of conclusions. It is particularly relevant to the study of religious experience in that it states that objective reality is informed by, and inseparable from, subjective experience.

Another aspect of phenomenology is to attempt to enter the viewpoint of the believers, or ‘insiders’ (see below), and to look at the material through their eyes as far as this is possible. It is the study of religious phenomena in terms that are acceptable to believers/belongers of the religious traditions being studied (or to the subject of a religious experience). Scholars should accept the insiders’ understandings of their own traditions and experiences. This should be done through a process of empathetic and in-depth knowledge and comprehension of the material, as well as of its cultural, social, and wider religious contexts. No expression of

religious belief or experience can be entirely separate from these contexts, even if we do allow for the possibility that it might contain a genuine metaphysical element.

Furthermore, the 'experiential' dimension of religion cannot be entirely divorced from the other six dimensions of religion, delineated by Ninian Smart (1998) as belief, ritual, myth, ethics, community, and art. These dimensions are not discrete, and do not operate in isolation from one another. For example, belief and myth are expressed in ritual action, while ritual action is a community event. Experience often inspires the creation of art and literature, and indeed may contribute to the formation of religions *per se* (for example, the experiences of Muhammad, the Buddha, St. Paul, and many others). Because of the latter point, the experiential dimension has a particularly important role in religion in general.

Another issue of which you need to be aware is the 'insider'/'outsider' problem: i.e. ways in which the outsider (the non-experient, scholar, and/or sceptic) can engage with the study of claims and testimonies of the insider (the experient, believer). To what degree can arguments made by outsiders be accepted if they are not endorsed by insiders? There is a fundamental conflict between the two positions, for the outsider is seeking to explain (often in naturalistic or otherwise reductionist terms) what to the insider is a genuinely spiritual and frequently ineffable experience. ('Reductionist' refers to theories which attempt to explain, or 'reduce', religious experience to ideas or customs which are rooted and have their sole reality in the human mind, emotions, and behaviour; and not in any external, higher reality).

A related issue is that of bias, which can be based either on reasons of faith or academic orientation. The insider is often not open to reductionist explanations for their experiences, while the outsider is often closed to the possibility of a genuine metaphysical reality. You should always be critically aware of potential biases in secondary sources, and it is therefore useful to know the scholar's academic and religious orientation. There is also an important distinction between being critical in an academic sense, and being judgemental in a personal sense, when evaluating accounts of religious experience or when engaging with traditions outside one's own faith or culture. (Also, be sure to use reliable, up to date academic sources when looking at unfamiliar religions).

Subconscious bias is also an issue, stemming from simply belonging to a particular culture. One example is the use of familiar religion-specific language to discuss concepts in a different or unfamiliar religion. The use of the Christian term

‘salvation’ to describe the Hindu concept of *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of rebirth) is one example. The use of ‘Holy’ as the key category in religion by Rudolph Otto is another example. Mircea Eliade instead used the term ‘Sacred.’ The religious studies scholar and student should use the technical terms that belong to the different religious traditions, and understand their place within those traditions (and demonstrate this understanding within your research), though when generalising cross-culturally this is clearly not practicable. In every case, particularly when making comparisons, great care should be taken not to use one religion as the normative example against which others are compared.

