

What are the current trends in thinking on 'religious experience?' Are certain disciplines more relevant to understanding the issue than others?

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Introduction

The extraordinary experiences of important religious figures are widely documented in the spiritual works and oral histories of the world religions (Lambek, 2008, p.1). Despite this, the study of religious experience did not rise to prominence in Western academia until the nineteenth century (ibid).

This paper has been divided into three main sections. The first section will discuss the definition and understanding of religious experience with a focus on Islam, more specifically Sufism. The second section will highlight two current trends within the study of religious experience, namely the distinguishment of the various types of experiences in the psychology of religion and religious diversity. The final section is an insight to the more relevant discipline to explain religious experience, arguing that relevancy will be in relation to the person making the enquiry.

1.0 Understanding Religious Experience

This section will explore the understanding and definition of religious experience and its application in the Islamic religious experience.

1.1 Religious Experience

Spiritual experience is a term which has been preferred, according to Rankin (2008, p.13), for describing inexplicable experiences due to their broadness. Spiritual experiences are not necessarily reflective of any particular religious belief and often pave the path to an all-embracing understanding of spirituality (ibid). Such experiences may lead a person to look into religious traditions or may simply become a part and parcel of their life, acknowledging

the existence of this otherworldly life (ibid). Moreover, spiritual experiences can transpire without any religious practice (ibid, p.5), thus including the religious and non-religious.

Before delving into the more specific topic of 'religious experience,' it will be helpful to understand the etymological definition of the English word 'experience.' In the English language, the word 'experience' contains a threefold meaning (Müller, 2023, p.15). Experience, derived from the Latin *experientia*, firstly suggests that knowledge or skills are created by seeing, feeling, or doing specific things (ibid). The second meaning is about life experience which is primarily based on previous occurrences, knowledge, and feelings, and is essential for character development (ibid). The final meaning portrays an occasion or experience that affects feelings (ibid). It can, therefore, be assumed that the definition of religious experience will relate to one of the three meanings mentioned here.

Speaking about religious or spiritual experiences, Rankin (2008, p.11) has posited that 'experience' may be seen as a modification of consciousness. There remains a variety of experiences, from its intensity to the scope of its interpretation as demonstrated by the many terms given to them (ibid). Such experiences can be placed on a spectrum, ranging from a momentary awareness of 'something beyond' to the most intense experience, a mystical experience (ibid).

Schmidt (2017, p.104) has described the topic of religious experience within the academic study of religion to be an "ambivalent area." In addition to its restricted application from a Western perspective, religious experience lacks an explicit definition (ibid). Since religious experience is an internal and personal experience, it becomes impossible to empirically prove or record its existence (ibid). This can also be seen as an indicator of its subjective nature, accessible only to the person experiencing it.

The advocates of religious experience frequently submit to the pressure of providing a concise and succinct definition for it (Davis, 1999, p.29). Providing such definitions which, in the opinion of Caroline Davis (ibid), may cause more harm than good. This, of course, is not to say that scholars have not attempted to formulate definitions for 'religious experience.' If the definition of 'religious experience' were to be limited to the doctrines of any one tradition, then any argument based on such religious experiences for that tradition would be a circular argument (ibid) as it would assume the conclusion to be true from the very beginning. Thus, making it an invalid argument. For example, if it is assumed that religious experiences only conform to Christian (or any other religion) doctrines, then to use those experiences to claim the doctrines of Christianity to be true would be logically flawed.

Likewise, Davis (ibid) argues, that to broaden the scope to accommodate any experience which is considered to be religious, would be nonsensical. Terminologies such as 'religious' and/or 'mystical' are frequently used figuratively to describe overwhelming, unusual, inspiring, or uplifting experiences (ibid). However, due to the subjective and personal nature of such experiences, such distinction may not be practical or even possible. Furthermore, any definition which includes the notion of God can also be deemed problematic as it holds the possibility of many interpretations (ibid). It also excludes the religious experiences of theists which may not include God, as well as experiences from atheistic mystical tradition and Buddhism (ibid).

Due to the large number of religious traditions and the vast types of experiences within each tradition, Davis (ibid) deems the effort to formulate a universal definition for religious experience to be fruitless. Moreover, people are generally understood to have a working knowledge of what constitutes a religious experience (ibid), almost making it unnecessary to

have a single definition. Despite Davis's disapproval, scholars, past and present, have attempted to define what is a 'religious experience.'

According to Ninian Smart (d.2001) (Smart, 1984, p.15), religious experience is the perception that something or someone visible is a manifestation of the invisible world, or that a person perceives the invisible world. Rankin (2008, p.12) has referenced Peggy Morgan, the former Director of the RERC, as offering an alternative perspective to the understanding of religious experience. This viewpoint expresses the finding of a deeper meaning in ordinary, everyday experiences of life (ibid). Likewise, the Harvard psychologist William James (d.1910), as pointed out by Taves (2009, p.4), has defined the word 'religion' to mean 'religious experience.' James (2002, p.29) has defined religion as, "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."

Yet, another understanding of religious experience is that it is distinguished from regular experiences (Peterson et al., 2013, p.34). The person considers the experience to be some kind of "supernatural being or presence (God either in Himself or as manifest in some action), a being related to God (a manifestation of God or personage such as the Virgin Mary), or some indescribable Ultimate Reality (such as the non-dual Absolute [Brahman] or Nirvana)" (ibid).

This is by no means a comprehensive list of understanding. It is, nevertheless, clear that there is no one unified definition for what constitutes a religious experience. The difficulty of formulating a precise definition is further evident when Otto (d.1937) (Otto, 1958, p.8) requests the reader of his book *'The Idea of the Holy'* to stop reading if they have not gone through a religious experience themselves due to the difficulty of the discussion. This kind of theological approach is, of course, very highly opposed from an academic standpoint

(Schmidt, 2017, p.105). Moreover, each definition has its merits as well as its limitations, which are beyond the scope of this paper.

It is, as discussed by Schmidt (ibid), quite clear that the field of religious experience has struggled with its Western bias since its inception. Due to its intimate connection to Schleiermacher's (d.1834) (Christian, and more specifically Protestant) understanding of religion, the definition of religious experience has been typically linked with a Western ideological structure (ibid). In turn, religious experience is largely associated with Christianity and 'Christian experiences,' whilst nearly all other experiences are disregarded (ibid). Perhaps, this was further promoted by the early twentieth-century Christian theologians, like Otto, Söderblom (d.1931), and Heiler (d.1967) who positioned the experience of the numinous, sacred, or holy at the core of Christianity and, consequently, at the centre of all other religions (Taves, 2009, p.4).

Subsequently, there appears to be little to no engagement with Islamic religious experience in the early twentieth-century academic discussions of religious experience. Nonetheless, there is a gradual shift, moving away from the initial Eurocentric Christian approach to the religious experience, embracing the experiences of other religions including that of Indigenous religions, new religious movements, etc. (Schmidt, 2017, p.105)

1.2 The Case Study of Islamic Religious Experience

From the offset, it is worth noting that the concept of Islamic religious experience for Muslims and academics alike is relatively new (Yaran, 2004, p.4). Nonetheless, God (Allah) is the central focus of the discussion of Islamic religious experience (al Faruqi, 1973, p.192). God centrality begins with the Muslim testimony of faith: 'There is no God but God,' to all Muslim places,

actions, and thoughts (ibid, pp.192-193). For Muslims, God is the ultimate goal and the aim of all desires (ibid, p.194).

Keeping the above in mind, Islamic religious experiences can be divided into two categories (Yaran, 2004, p.5). Firstly, the everyday normal religious experience, known to be shallow and weaker, experienced by the majority of Muslims (ibid). The second is the mystical religious experience, described to be an in-depth and intense, only experienced by a minority of Muslims (ibid), namely the Sufis.

This would include regular people, educated or uneducated, and/or scholars who have no affiliation to the Islamic mystical traditions (ibid, p.6).

1.2.1 Religious Experiences of Ordinary (non-Sufi) Muslims

Yaran (ibid) has classified this type of ordinary religious experience into a further three categories. The first category is the experience of God through the observation of His creation (ibid). The Quran has instructed Muslims to ponder over God's signs in an attempt to experience His face in all locations, both in their minds and hearts (ibid).

The second category is the experiencing of God's presence at all times, especially when offering worship to Him known as *Ihsan* (ibid, p.7). The Muslim is required to offer worship as though they are in the presence of God, or at the very least acknowledge that God not only sees their actions but is also aware of their intentions as instructed by the Prophet Muhammad (ibid). This category has been thought of by some Muslims to be a deepened intellectual understanding, whereas others have considered it to be a strong religious experience, the seeing of God (ibid, p.8).

The final category is the experiencing of God's assistance by the good or needy person in a miraculous way (ibid, p.8). These miraculous types of experiences have been recorded in historical and contemporary books (ibid). A historical example is that of Al-Ghazali (d.1111) in his autobiography entitled *Deliverance from Error*. Al-Ghazali (2005, p.63) speaks of the disease of uncertainty/scepticism which he suffered for two months and was eventually alleviated by God. He describes the cure to be a light, cast into his breast by God and to think of it to be other than that would be restricting the mercy of God (ibid). Other forms of this experience may include dreams, intuitions, near-death experiences, etc. (Yaran, 2004, pp.8-9).

It can be observed here that this group of experiences may not meet the expected deep-seated or intense understanding of religious experience whereby the experiencer is directly touched by the divine or the supernatural. Yet, for some Muslims, this will be the extent of their religious experience, which is, nevertheless, a form of religious experience.

1.2.2 Religious Experiences of Sufi Muslims

Islamic mystics, the Sufis, are usually referred to as those who endeavour to make God's presence a central focus (Esposito, 2003). For the Sufis "contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism, and cultivation of the soul over social interaction" (ibid) remains a priority. Furthermore, Sufism is believed to be the inner dimension of Islam (Yaran, 2004, p.11). Sufis strive to achieve the recognition of *tawhid* (the oneness of God), the love and gnosis of God (ibid). Yet again, the Sufi journey towards God can be classified into three major categories (ibid).

The first category is the experience of States and Stations (ibid). It is understood that the effort and worship of a novice Sufi should lead to a 'state' which can be thought of as a type of divine

worship (ibid). This 'state' is then developed by the novice to become a 'station' (ibid). There does not appear to be any set number of states or stations before a Sufi can reach the recognition of *tawhid* or gnosis of God, the height of happiness (ibid, pp.11-12) and therefore would be required to continue developing state to station until this is achieved.

The second category is the experience of removal of the Veil of sensual perception (ibid, p.13). When the veils of sensual perceptions are lifted following mystical exertion, the Sufi can observe the divine worlds which are not accessible to those restricted by senses (ibid). The soul can realise its own existence and is ready to receive the holy gifts of God (ibid). Additionally, al-Ghazali has stated that it is impossible to know God through the senses, rather, "He can only be known through His self-unveiling (*khasf*) in the wake of an arduous and personal process of constant observation (*mushahadah*); that is, through the effulgence of the divine light" (Fakhry, 2003, p.78).

The final category is the experiencing of direct miracles by Sufi saints (Yaran, 2004, p.14), as opposed to the final category of the non-Sufi experience of God's help. This can range from anything between walking on water to talking to animals (ibid).

There has always remained a timeless debate about the position of Sufism in Islam and the acceptability of such experiences. That said, it is apparent that there is a spectrum when discussing Islamic religious experience, ranging from shallow to intense experience. This, of course, will make the formulation of an all-inclusive definition of religious experience difficult, if not impossible. Perhaps, each religion/tradition can be assigned its own definition, which will come with its own challenges.

2.0 Current Trends in the Thinking of the Study of Religious Experiences

This section will explore some of the current thoughts regarding religious experience.

2.1 Religious, Spiritual, and Mystical Experiences in the Psychology of Religion

During the last few decades, psychologists have continually written overviews for graduate and undergraduate-level textbooks into the field of religious experience in psychology (Taves, 2020, p.27). These textbooks, as observed by Taves (ibid), now have consistently begun to distinguish between the different types of experiences, the religious, mystical and spiritual (ibid). Whereas previously religious experience was considered to be an umbrella term, including both mystical and spiritual experiences (ibid).

Much like the difficulty of formulating a unified definition of religious experience, this distinguishment also comes with the same challenge. James (1983, p.248) has included in the definition of mysticism “divinations, inspirations, demoniacal possessions, apparitions, trances, ecstasies, miraculous healings and productions of disease, and occult powers.” This appears to be a very comprehensive set of intense experiences captured in one word. On the other hand, Stace’s (d.1967) understanding of mystic experience in his book *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Stace, 1973) is that of an undifferentiated unity. Some have understood mystical experience to be sufficient proof for belief in an ultimate reality or God (Hood et al., 2009, pp.331-332). Others have understood it to be the polar opposite. They do not view it to “support a belief that one has united with God or experienced ultimate reality” (ibid). Furthermore, Hood, who is considered to be the leading expert on the topic of religious and mystical experiences has stated that it is easier to define mystical experiences than religious experiences (Taves, 2020, p.30).

As for spiritual experiences, from the nineteenth hundreds until the mid-twentieth century, the terms religion and spirituality were used synonymously (Paloutzian, 2017, p.12). A devout religious person and a spiritual person were considered one and the same (ibid). However, this is no longer the case. Each has taken on its own meaning. In the last few decades, people have begun to look for their spiritual needs outside the confines of established religions. This often led to nonreligious forms of spirituality (ibid).

In the discussion of the scientific definition of both religion and spirituality, the scholars agree that they “must include a sense of, a belief in, or a search for the transcendent” (Hood, 2005, p.348). Nonetheless, a key distinction between the two is that spirituality is now generally observed to be associated with mystical experiences and a distaste for established religion, with an emphasis on personal growth and existential concerns (Paloutzian, 2017, p.12). In other words, while religiousness suggests a person's affiliation with a religion, spirituality encompasses a person's beliefs, values, and behaviour (Hood et al., 2009, p.9). Moreover, such distinction has led people to describe their commitment to spirituality and/or religiosity in many ways (Paloutzian, 2017, p.13). For example, people claim that they are “both religious and spiritual, neither religious nor spiritual, spiritual but not religious, religious but not spiritual” (ibid), etc.

The diversity in distinguishment of the multiple forms of experiences will allow for a more accurate measurement of religious, mystical, and spiritual experiences, one of the premises of the psychology of religion (Taves, 2020, pp.29-30). Additionally, it will prevent all ‘non-ordinary experiences’ (to borrow Schmidt’s (2017, p.106) phrase) from being painted with the same brush.

For example, in the USA, Sufism has become popular due to it being “therapeutic and soothing to the traumatized American society” (Acim, 2018, p.63), more so after the Civil War. Its modest teachings, universal values, and consistency with human ethics have attracted the attention of a diverse group of people, including non-Muslims (ibid). Non-Muslims such as people of Jewish ancestry have adopted Sufi practice (ibid). To be at peace with the world and themselves, they would frequently share food, whirl like the dervishes, practice the mystic Sufi dances, and seek spiritual fulfilment (ibid, p.64).

In Vermont, the Catholic-born, Muslim convert and Sufi Sheikh of the Mevlevi Order, Kabir Helminski facilitates American Muslim converts gatherings for the practice of Sufi rituals (ibid, p.66). These gatherings include the chanting of Sufi hymns (*Sama'*), mystical whirling, and meditation (ibid). Helminski's gatherings have attracted followers from among the Protestants, Catholics, and Jews (ibid). Helminski has further stated that they have created a Sufi culture in North America with two goals in mind, firstly, to teach the people about the good values of Islam and secondly, about modern spirituality (ibid).

There are many more examples of Sufism being practised in a non-Islamic context. Hence, the question may be raised regarding the nature of the experiences that non-Muslim Sufis have. Sufism, which is primarily rooted in Islam, when practised by non-Muslims whereby they also have non-ordinary experiences, will this be considered a religious experience due to its affiliation to Islam, or will it be other than that? Coming back to the earlier discussion, the diversity in the forms of experience will allow us to paint a better picture of such experiences. More so if one wishes not to identify or affiliate themselves with Islam.

Conversely, the majority of the psychologists of religion are usually only trained in psychology, whereas in other disciplines such as the cognitive science of religion, the researchers would

be trained in multiple disciplines such as anthropology, philosophy, and religious studies (Taves, 2020, p.25). As such, the varying nuances in the multiple forms of experiences would require additional training for the psychologists of religion to ensure accuracy in their research.

2.2 Religious Diversity in 'Theology and Religious Experience' and 'Comparative Theology'

Theology is generally understood as examining divine revelation, scripture, and religious traditions in an attempt to formulate doctrine and dogma (Griffith-Dickson, 2020, p.76). In this light, theology would be limited by orthodoxy and a particular faith tradition (ibid). Regarding the subject of religious experience, there are several theological perspectives on how to address such experiences (ibid). However, it must be made clear that theology is not the study of religion *per se*, rather it is a method which formulates meaning and understanding for the faith that it is being used to examine (ibid, p.79). Therefore, naturally, faith/tradition-specific theology does not aim to be religiously neutral (ibid). For example, the subject matter of Islamic theology will be Islam and not religion.

On that note, more recently, a number of methods have been put together to discuss the issue of religious diversity in relation to religious experience (ibid, p.76). Given that faith-specific theology does not assert that it functions objectively, the question "whose religious experience?" (ibid, p.79) seeks to define boundaries for the object of study. In other words, if Islamic theology is an explication of Islam, should Islamic theology, then, only investigate Islamic religious experiences or should it take into consideration the experiences of other religions/traditions? (ibid)

There is a growing acceptance of diverse Christian experiences amongst theologians, based on race, gender, ability, etc. (ibid, p.84). However, according to Griffith-Dickson (ibid), if theologians were to only study the experience of their own religion, they would come to the realisation that in the current age the everyday experience involves the experience of other religious traditions (ibid). Hence, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the influence and reality of religious diversity (ibid). This concept has, as opposed to in the West, been more observable in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia (ibid). Likewise, it is more obvious for those who live as a religious minority in any location (ibid).

Consequently, theology as a discipline has looked to other academic efforts to respond to the phenomenon of religious diversity (ibid, p.88). One such recent response (of many) to this phenomenon is the academic venture called 'Comparative Theology' (ibid, p.89). Clooney (2010, p.10) has described comparative theology to be an amalgamation of tradition-based theological matters with a detailed study of another tradition. The study is primarily rooted in a specific faith tradition, venturing from it into the study of one or more other faiths (ibid). The purpose of such an undertaking is to gain added theological insights, that are a result of the newly examined faith/s in addition to the primary faith (ibid). In essence, the practitioner of comparative theology will attempt to understand/study the other faith/s as an insider.

Comparative theology is not meant to compare one religion with another (ibid). Rather, it is a theological and necessarily spiritually reflective practice which will allow one to see the other in light of their own faith and vis-a-versa (ibid, pp.10-11). Bringing the discussion back to religious experience, as Griffith-Dickson (2020, p.91) has highlighted, the application of the comparative theology practice will make it possible to place the religious experiences of other

faiths in addition to one's own faith side-by-side, especially experiences embodied in religious text, to draw further insights/understandings of such experiences.

In an ever-changing world where religious experience is perceived by some to be an experience of religious diversity, such a multi-faceted approach will allow for a more holistic understanding of the experience (ibid, p.95). Ayelet Lugassi, a Jewish lady who has taken up the practice of Sufism, said, "When I turn, I really feel an excitement... It is a practice that makes me feel more in touch with my heart. Yes, I am a Jew, and this practice comes from Islam" (Acim, 2018, p.64). The above-mentioned approach will allow for a more wholesome enquiry into the mystical experiences of Ayelet and others like her. On the other hand, the issue of objectivity can be a challenge for the practitioner. The question arises, will they be able to, or to what extent can they subside their preconceived bias?

3.0 Are certain disciplines more relevant to understanding the issue than others?

Many of the disciplines within the academic study of religion and/or religious experience appear to either overlap or require working with other disciplines to investigate or provide accurate answers. Moreover, each discipline has its strengths and limitations.

For example, according to Taves (2020, p.20), in the recent growing interest in the cognitive science of religion, there has been some overlap with the psychology of religion. Likewise, Paloutzian (2017, p.7) has stated that comprehending religion from a psychological perspective is necessary for incorporating insights from related fields such as religious studies, history, anthropology, evolution, biology, sociology, neuroscience, and cognitive science, into a cohesive structure.

In the philosophy of religion, philosophers regularly assert that they enjoy the freedom from any restrictions, be it institutionalised religion or other than that, with the only commitment to following where reason and the evidence take them (Griffith-Dickson, 2020, p.76). However, this too has its limitation. A philosopher may face limitations due to their “cultural background, family upbringing, religious convictions, capacity for abstract thought, motivation, etc. (Peterson et al., 2013, 368).

The previous sections have discussed some of the strengths and limitations of the psychology of religion, theology of religions and comparative theology. One final example is that of anthropology. Schmidt (2017, p.105) has pointed out that academics in the study of religion shy away from the study of experiences, and it is the anthropologists and the psychologists who are happy to take up the challenge. In addition, Lambek (2008, pp.4-5) has stated appealingly, “The anthropological tradition understands religious worlds as neither fully objective nor fully subjective phenomena, but as poised in the mediating space of culture or the social and as participating in a dialectic that both objectifies and subjectifies.”

It is evident that each discipline plays a role in the phenomena of religion and religious experience, highlighting different perspectives. Although a multi-disciplinary approach may be seen, in hindsight, as the most comprehensive method of understanding religious experience, it appears that it would be relative to the person enquiring. If the person is a someone of faith, then perhaps, a theology approach will be most relevant to them. For a scientist, the psychology or neuroscience of religion will be more relevant and so on. For this reason, it will be difficult to narrow it down to one specific discipline.

Conclusion

The academic study of religious experience is not an easy subject to study. From the first step of defining what a 'religious experience' is, to keeping up with the developing nature of the topic, one will be overwhelmed with it. Each discipline which has taken on the challenge to analyse this topic is very nuanced and vast in its scope with altering opinions. A multi-disciplinary approach to the study of religious experience will not be an easy task.

It is worth noting that many of the discussions are grounded in the contributions of the early scholars of the field, such as William James and Rudolf Otto. As such, there is a greater emphasis on Christianity than any other religion. Although this is changing, there remains a significant gap concerning other religions.

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