

TOPIC 2: INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS: SCHLEIERMACHER, JAMES, AND OTTO

This section concerns the early history of the study of religious experience, and the works and theories of key pioneering figures in the field. Religious experience, has, of course been occurring for at least as long as recorded history and very likely since the beginning humanity. However, the reflexive study of such phenomena is relatively modern (i.e. as opposed to faith-based reflections, and arguments regarding religious experience within one's own particular faith, as discussed in READING 1).

FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER (1768-1834)

The German theologian and philosopher Schleiermacher saw the true essence of religion as a revelation of the infinite in the finite, both of which are imbued with God. The self exists in an immediate consciousness with the divine, beyond intellectual comprehension or moral/ethical systems (e.g. church doctrine). In his introduction to his translation of Schleiermacher (1988: xxxiff), Richard Crouter identifies five issues in Schleiermacher, each of which has 'momentous implications for modern culture':

1. **The cognitive status of religion.**
2. **The relationship between art and religion.**
3. **The problem of religious pluralism.**
4. **The classic problem of liberalism: the free individual person in human communities.**
5. **The estimate of human nature as positive and progressive.**

For Schleiermacher, true religion is consciousness of the divine, which is present in all reality, including in action and thought. Religion cannot be based upon knowledge (cognition), but rather is rooted in *feeling* and awareness (i.e. *experience*). The self is in direct connection to that which is more than the self, and this relationship with the divine is characterised by a 'feeling of utter dependence'. In his own words:

In the relations of man to this world there are certain openings into the infinite, prospects past which all are led that their sense might find its way to the Whole.

Thus religion consists in man's becoming conscious of his own limitations, of the fortuitous nature of his life as his being runs its course and silently disappears in the Infinite. It is his giving up all audacious pride, and regarding all individual things,

himself included, as being necessarily what they are. It is to live in the endless nature of the whole, to perceive and divine with quiet reverence the place assigned to each and all. It is to have sense and taste for the Infinite, to live in the bosom of the universe and feel its boundless life and creative power within our own. It is to drink in the beauty of the world, and be drenched through and through with the beauty of its spirit. It is devoutly to overhear the All in its expressions and acts, to let oneself be swept away by its influence as we contemplate the wonders of its workings, to discover and love the spirit pervading the cosmic whole (p. 43).

He also argued that we are born with ‘religious capacity’, and that the development of this is our natural state. Indeed, children have an innate sense of the Infinite: ‘A secret, inexplicable presentiment urges them past the riches of this world.’

This apprehension of the divine is realised in the world’s religions, which express them in culture-specific ways. Religious doctrines are not divinely given, but expressions of religious experience. This is an early argument for the ‘common core’ theory, or perennial philosophy, and will be returned to later in the module.

The American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (1809-1882) also accepted the validity of religious experience cross-culturally, a belief consistent with his Unitarian background. Emerson believed that religious experience transcended the doctrines of religious institutions. He had his own religious experiences, and related them to philosophies of Plotinus, the 3rd century neo-Platonist philosopher, and to Hinduism.

WILLIAM JAMES (1842-1910)

The personal and intellectual life of William James is connected through his father (himself a Swedenborgian interested in religious experience) with Emerson and ideas of transcendentalism. James adopted an interdisciplinary approach to his work, drawing upon philosophy, psychology, biology, physiology, and literary studies. He considered himself to be a scientific pragmatist and empiricist, as is reflected in his theory of human knowledge. This theory states that we live by the practical faith that we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more ‘true’. For James, religious experience was not opposed to nature, not ‘supernatural’, but something that uses nature and is reflected within it.

Nevertheless, he wrote of himself: ‘I am neither a theologian, nor a scholar learned in the history of religions, nor an anthropologist. Psychology is the only branch of learning in which I am particularly versed’ (James 1902: 26). As a psychologist, James was primarily interested in religious *feelings*.

James also used phenomenology to look at accounts of religious experience, providing quotations from many experiencers and allowing their own voices to be heard rather than summarising and interpreting them. He also used examples from various religious traditions.

His intention was to collect specific observations to demonstrate the validity of general truths (again, the 'common core' idea). Like Schleiermacher, James (1902 :31) also saw religions as expressions/interpretations of religious experience, writing that founders of religions 'owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine'. James was aware that religious experience was part of a much wider religious world than the Christian, and was suspicious of received doctrines. He sought to give breadth to his writings through this awareness.

In a letter to a friend, James described what he intended to do in his lectures (which later became his most important work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*):

First to defend (against all the prejudices of my 'class') experience against philosophy as being the real backbone of the world's religious life – I mean prayer, guidance and all that sort of thing immediately and privately felt, as against high and noble general views of our destiny and the world's meaning; and second, to make the reader or hearer believe, what I myself invincibly do believe, that, although all the special manifestations of religion have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories) yet the life of it as a whole is mankind's most important function (1920: 127).

In one of these lectures, James suggested 'a uniform deliverance in which religions all appear.' He wrote:

All the phenomena are accurately describable in these very simple general terms. They allow for the divided self and the struggle, they involve the change of personal center and the surrender of the lower self; they express the appearance of exteriority of the helping power and yet account for our sense of union with it; and they fully justify our feelings of security and joy. There is probably no autobiographical document, among all those which I have quoted, to which the description will not apply (1902: 484-5).

Nevertheless, James' work also took account of the fact that religious experience is often *ineffable*. This was informed by his own religious experience, which occurred when he was alone in the Adirondack Mountains:

The streaming moonlight lit up things in a magical checkered play, and it seemed as if the Gods of all the nature mythologies were holding an indescribable meeting in my breast with the moral Gods of the inner life.... the intense significance of some sort, of the whole scene, if one could only *tell* the significance; the intense inhuman remoteness of its inner life, and yet the intense *appeal* of it;.... In point of fact, I can't find a single word for all that significance, and don't know what it was significant of, so there it remains, and mere boulder of *impression* (1920: 76-7).

The type of religious phenomena that most interested James was the *personal*: ‘The feelings, acts and experiences of men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine’ (ibid. 50). This personal religion he saw as more fundamental than either the theological or institutional aspects of religion, citing the personal religious experiences of key religious figures such as the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. Out of the innovations of such figures (often originally seen to have been heretical), new orthodoxies are born and new religious groups formed. These groups are then maintained through revalidation arising from further personal experiences of the groups’ members.

James stressed that ‘religion’ is a collective term, and that there is no *single* essence of religion (though this does not cancel out the argument that religions share essential elements cross-culturally, e.g. religious experience) but many characteristics which come to the fore at different times. Religious feelings are plural, and can include dependence, fear, love, awe and joy. Thus, there is no single type of religious expression or experience (hence the term *varieties* in his book title). The type of religious experience one might have is, in part, determined by the type of person one is.

He also acknowledged that such experiences often happen to extraordinary people, and even that neurotic people may be more likely to have them: ‘If there were such a thing as inspiration from the higher realm, it might well be that the neurotic temperament would furnish the chief condition of the requisite receptivity’ (ibid. 45).

One of the most important issues highlighted by James – and one which remains central to any discussion of religious experience – is the degree to which one’s existing beliefs and doctrinal knowledge moulds the experience and subsequent account of the experience. Particularly, he observed that in attempting to make sense of a confusing or ineffable experience, elements which were understandable and conforming to pre-existing beliefs are often highlighted and given special importance by the experient; while those which do not conform to the experient’s beliefs or mode of understanding are neglected and ultimately forgotten.

One of the best known aspects of James’ work is his assertion that the ‘fruits’ of religious experience might be considered as evidence of their genuineness (‘God is real because he has real effects’); i.e. that the experient becomes more spiritually/ morally aware following the experience (see Section VII, below). This argument was not new, and had been put forth by the American Calvinist, Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards (1709-1758) in his *Treatise on Religious Affections*, as James was well aware. James was more interested in this

idea than in searching for possible psychological or sociological roots of religion. In fact, 'moral fruits' is one of his factors (or 'spiritual judgements') he used in testing the 'truth' of the testimonies of those who report religious experience. The other two are immediate luminousness, and general philosophical reasonableness. (Incidentally, it is in this evaluation, or in his own words, 'judgement', that James strays from the conventions of phenomenology). The issue of 'fruits' will be returned to later in this module.

Some of James' ideas and approaches may be dated, and he is imprecise in his use of terms (e.g. 'mysticism' and 'religious'/'mystical' experience'). Some of this is due to the historical context of his writings, and reflects the state of other disciplines at the time (especially psychology). His examples are weighted heavily towards the Christian, and often prominent religious figures rather than ordinary people. His selection of sources, however, is largely due to the inaccessibility of writings from other traditions compared to today; as well as the lack of anything comparable to an archive of personal religious experience such as we have in the RERC (=Religious Experience Research Centre). While as with all scholars James should be read critically, the major themes he discussed (as well as his conclusions) are still key in the field today, and his works remain highly relevant.

RUDOLPH OTTO (1859-1937)

Otto was scholar of religions who, like James, was aware of religious experience in non-Christian tradition, and who brought interdisciplinary approaches to the forefront, using the phenomenological method to synthesize strands of enquiry and theory from philosophy, theology, and the history of religions. He was thus an important influence on religious studies scholars such as G. van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade, and Ninian Smart. Originally a systematic theologian, Otto himself was greatly influenced by Schleiermacher.

His work is sometimes characterised as being philosophical theology rather than religious studies, in that he does not shy away from discussing the possibility of a genuine metaphysical reality.

Otto wrote about religious ritual *as* religious experience, including the Sufi Mevlevi (Whirling Dervishes), the observation of silence in Quaker meetings, and the cantillation he heard in a synagogue in Morocco. In fact, attending such services inspired religious experience feelings in Otto himself. Referring to the use of terms for 'Holy' in different Jewish and Christian ritual and liturgy, he wrote in a letter, 'In whatever language they resound, these most exalted words that have ever come from human lips always grip one in

the depths of the soul, with a mighty shudder exciting and calling into play the mystery of the other world latent therein' (in Turner & Mackenzie n.d.: 4). It was, in fact, Otto's *experience* of Jewish and Christian liturgy, and his observation of the use of the term 'Holy' in those contexts that led to his key category of 'Holy' as a descriptive term for classifying religious phenomena.

In his *The Idea of the Holy* (1917) Otto is interested in the non-rational (which is *not* to say *irrational*) origins of religion: that which eludes conceptual analysis and apprehension by such analysis. In other words, experiences which are *ineffable*, characterised by 'hidden depth, inaccessible to our conceptual thought' (ibid. 57). His Chapter V engages with this issue, discussing the types of language required to discuss religion, and to express religious experience. He was also interested in the non-verbal and artistic expression of such experience, which will be returned to in the last Section of this module.

Otto also recognised problems with the term 'holy' – mainly that it is often associated with moral ideas of goodness. Therefore he suggested the alternate terms 'numen' and 'numinous', about which he wrote:

This mental state is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other; and therefore, like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined.... [it] cannot, strictly speaking, be taught, it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes 'of the spirit' must be awakened' (ibid. 7)

Religious, or numinous, experience is thus direct insight into the truth of general principles which are self-evident and independent of the experience itself. The Holy is awakened by experience, but neither dependent upon it nor derived from it.

Otto thus supported the idea of pure, unmediated religious experience, and at the beginning of chapter III even invited readers to think 'of a moment of deeply felt religious experience, as little as possible qualified by other forms of experience'. If the reader cannot do this, Otto suggests that there is little point in reading further!

It is often assumed that Otto is referring to a *single type* of experience (the numinous) in his writing, in distinction to William James who discusses the *Varieties of Religious Experience*. However, the numinous as described by Otto has two quite distinct aspects. One is *mysterium tremendum*, which is the daunting aspect associated with fear (e.g. of the unknown and/or overwhelming); and the other is *mysterium fascinans*, which is associated with love, mercy, pity, and comfort (these two aspects are discussed in Otto's chapters IV and V, respectively).

Note that for Otto (as for Schleiermacher, William James, Peter Berger, and many others) there is some continuity between ordinary human and religious experience, between the human and 'the other'.

In addition to Schleiermacher, some of Otto's ideas about the Holy have earlier precursors which are discussed Raphael (1997). Schleiermacher's emphasis on *feeling* was particularly endorsed by Otto and some of his predecessors. About feeling Otto wrote, '...the nature of the numinous can only be suggested by means of the special way in which it is reflected in the mind in terms of feeling.'

Otto also seems to have supported the 'common core' hypothesis: that the numinous is what is being expressed across religions (discussed later in the module).