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WHAT DO WE EXPERIENCE IF WE HAVE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE?

PETER ANTES

Summary

The starting point of the paper is the historical fact that people who have special forms of religious experience such as seeing saints, angels, gods or goddesses can always say whom they saw. They never met anyone totally unknown to them. The question is why. The answer that the paper proposes and invites to discuss is that having experience means to identify what is happening with what is known as pattern of interpretation. The knowledge of those patterns is due either to socialisation or to further studies in favour of, or against, those patterns, yet, it is unlikely that something totally new will ever be discovered through those forms of religious experience.

Context related interpretation of mystical experience is well known in Psychology of Religion. In particular, secular and religious patterns of interpretation compete with each other. A significant case is the comparison between Madeleine Le Bouc of France who died in 1921 and the Indian great mystic Ramakrishna who died in 1886. While the former was described by her medical doctor Professor Pierre Janet as a specific example of madness, the latter was, in the collection of his life and teachings, presented by his disciples as a saint. Looking at both more closely it does not seem unlikely to state that they had similar types of experience which, according to their surrounding milieus, found very different explanations: a medical one in terms of mental illness in the secular context of France, and a religious one in the Indian context of Hindu spirituality.¹

The intention of this contribution, however, is to look at religious contexts only in emphasising two aspects, one empirical and the other

¹ Cf. Catherine Clément, *Sudhir Kakar: Der Heilige und die Verrückte. Religiöse Ekstase und psychische Grenzerfahrung*, München: Beck 1992.

one theoretical. The empirical first one is based on an observation which is objectively testified and therefore needs some explanation. The theoretical second one is the attempt to offer an explanation for the observation if true. Both are meant as an invitation to further discussion in the field of Psychology of Religion. Consequently, the first following section will ask what are the facts and the second will try to say how to explain them.

1. What are the facts?

In all religious traditions there are numerous examples of people who claim to have had specific religious experience like seeing god(s), goddesses, angels, devils or saints. The number of stories of this kind is such that the belief in these apparitions has been an empirical fact of most of the religious traditions over the centuries. The defender, therefore, would argue that some truth should be in that. Visions of normally invisible supernatural beings or of dead men and women are certain because of so many witnesses in the history of religions.

A review of all the material I have collected over the years led me to the conclusion that all the texts that have come to my knowledge gave precise names to the persons that were seen and that these names were, moreover, all known to those who saw them. In other words, it seems that no one ever saw a person who was totally unknown in the respective religious context where the apparition took place. Accordingly, in Hindu circles people use to see Kali or Durga, while in Christian contexts, if the vision is that of a woman, St. Mary is seen instead. The observation that is the starting point of this contribution is therefore that the ones who are seen are always known in the respective contexts of the seers. This is a fact.

The fact can be empirically tested: it can be either falsified or verified case by case. The challenge, consequently, is to ask all readers of relevant texts as well as the listeners to oral reports of this kind whether or not they have ever come across a single case that contradicts the observation on which this contribution is based. Cases that contradict this observation are welcome and will be discussed in detail in order to show whether the observation can still be defended as

a thesis or whether it should be given up because of undeniable facts that do not allow to maintain it any longer.

To indicate the possible discussion of facts in contradiction with the observation two examples may be given which seem to falsify the observation. Both are taken from the Christian Bible, from the Acts of the Apostles of the New Testament.

The first example is Paul's conversion to Christ. In Acts 9:1–22 Paul is described as a strict opponent to the first Christians' belief in Jesus. It is reported that while persecuting them Saul, who later became Paul, had an experience which he interpreted as Christ appearing to him in order to tell him that persecution should be stopped and Saul/Paul should become one of his followers instead of being among the opponents. Though Saul/Paul had not believed in Jesus Christ, he was not unknown to Saul/Paul when he identified the vision with him. On the contrary, the fact of persecuting his followers indicates an intensive, though negative, interest in Jesus and his claims. The light event, interpreted as the apparition of Jesus, suddenly changed Paul's mind and led to his conversion. This event is no argument against the main thesis of this section because what appeared was not culturally totally unknown to Paul before his conversion.

The second example, again taken from the Acts of the Apostles, concerns Paul's reference to the Unknown God to whom an altar was dedicated in Hellenistic Athens (cf. Acts 17:23). It shows the Greeks' open-mindedness and their readiness to cope with peoples of different religious cultures who needed to be integrated by offering them means to bring their gods into the polytheistic world of the Roman Empire. The Unknown God in this case was without any precise shape and thus open to interpretation and adaptation. It was not a result of religious experience through which an until then totally unknown God revealed himself as the one who appeared and was seen. Consequently, this example is not in contradiction either with the observation that is the main point of this section.

The main thesis of this section is the observation that all the different apparitions found in the history of religions are figures that are known

in the religious contexts in which they appear. This is an empirical fact that may be tested through case by case verification or falsification.

Starting from this observation as an empirical fact one will ask why this is so. The next section will therefore try to give an answer to that question in terms of a theory which follows Hjelmar Sundén's line of interpretation with some modifications.²

2. *How to explain the facts?*

If the observation is true that people seeing apparitions use to identify them with figures known in their own religious contexts, so that Hindus use to recognise Kali or Durga while Catholics usually see St. Mary, such forms of identification need to be explained. The proposal is to divide the identification process into three clearly distinguishable steps:

The first step is the vision of something hardly recognisable, often some rather imprecise ray of light that causes joy or fear and invites a closer look at what is going on. It is just "light" as St. Augustine (d. 430) said in his *Confessions* (VII, 10), or nothing but "fire" as expressed in Pascal's (d. 1662) *Mémorial*, or "great luminous waves were rising"³ as described by Ramakrishna in his vision of Kali, the divine mother.

The next step is an idea that comes to the mind of the seer. It is in the case of St. Augustine the idea that God is appearing here. In the case of Pascal again, it is the idea of God but more precisely not the God of philosophers but the one of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In the case of Ramakrishna it is this "ocean of the Spirit, boundless, dazzling," "an ocean of ineffable joy" that is "the presence of the Divine Mother."⁴

² For the following I mainly rely on what I already suggested in my lecture *How to study religious experience in the traditions: Second Annual BASR lecture* (British Association for the Study of Religions, Occasional Papers 5), The Open University in Wales, 24 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, CF1 9SA, UK., n.d. [1992].

³ Romain Rolland, *The Life of Ramakrishna*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama 1960⁶, 33.

⁴ *Ib.*

The third step is the identification of the idea with what is seen so that the hardly recognisable unclear vision of light takes concrete shape and shows more precise forms that correspond to traditional patterns of presentation of these figures in their purest forms.

It seems that the combination of steps II and III is the decisive moment to make the apparition meaningful because it is both well known and deeply experienced in a unique way of religious experience. If such an identification process does not take place, the vision remains uninterpreted and thus meaningless to the seer and will soon be without great relevance for the future. When, however, it finds its place in the seer's reference system, it will have an impact on all that follows.

The identification process seems to work in both directions: it helps to give more details regarding the apparition and it encourages the seer to look for certain elements that are typical of the specific vision of the holy or devilish figure according to the background knowledge of the reference system. As a result a great number of iconographical elements will be detected in the apparition and confirm that the presumption regarding the appearing figure is correct. If so, it means that the apparition is not yet completed from the beginning but it is itself in a construction process thanks to icononological and dogmatic teachings that have their influence on the seer. In other words, if this interpretation key is correct, it supposes an active participation on behalf of the seer in the apparition itself. The seer is thus not only a passive spectator who is overwhelmed by what is going on, but there is a considerable amount of constructive investigation based on what has been learnt from the traditions about what is appearing. The knowledge of those patterns is either due to socialisation in a religious setting or to studies in favour of, or against, those patterns, in any case it is learnt and not produced by the apparition itself.

The interpretation key that is proposed here is not reductive as are so many others. It does not express any concrete judgement on whether the first step of experience is purely due to inner developments of the seer or whether the initiative and inspiration come from the outside. The answer to this goes beyond what can be done in the study of religion and enters the domain of belief. What is needed for a neutral

description is only that no decision is taken in this respect and that all answers remain possible because the methods of our discipline do not allow us to decide this question and therefore we should not go further than we can.

Leaving room for possible interventions from the outside does not mean that we pay no attention to the empirical fact that those apparitions are described in context related terms of a tradition so that what has been learnt from the tradition seems to shape decisively what is experienced. Consequently the answer to what we do experience if we have religious experience is clear: we experience very deeply what we have learnt as the interpretation patterns of religious experience. If this is so, it is also obvious that people who have not learnt or accepted religious patterns of interpretation will consequently not have religious experience and will use secular keys of interpretation for what is experienced by themselves or by others, as is exemplified by the famous case mentioned above of Madeleine Le Bouc who was seen as being mad, while Ramakrishna, who had a similar experience, was considered in his context to be a Hindu saint.

Conclusion

The preceding two paragraphs emphasise two different aspects of interpretation concerning religious experience:

The first aspect is empirical, namely the fact that people who see apparitions recognise them as figures with whom they are familiar from their religious socialisation or studies. The implication of that is to say that never unknown gods, goddesses, angels, saints and so forth have been seen. What is seen is already known to the seer. That was the main thesis of that section. It must be tested empirically and calls for case by case verification or falsification.

The second aspect is theoretical. It takes the main thesis of the first section as a fact and tries to explain it by dividing the identification process of the apparition into three clearly distinguishable steps: a first impression of a hardly recognisable apparition, an idea of who it could be, according to the seer's knowledge about religious matters, and an attempt to identify the apparition with the idea by finding its

iconographical elements so that the vision takes concrete shape to justify the presumption. Consequently, what is seen is already known to the seer, anyone else has never been sighted in the history of religions. What is experienced is a specific deepening of knowledge gathered before the event thanks to religious socialisation or to relevant studies in favour of, or against, those patterns of interpretation. The explanation is not reductive, it leaves room for intervention from the outside and does not reduce what is happening to the seer's psyche alone. It claims, however, that experience is not independent from knowledge and thus combined with socialisation and studies. It therefore seems to be unlikely as well as empirically unattested that culturally totally unknown apparitions will be seen.

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