Phenomenology of Religious Experience

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Modest Reflections on the Term 'Religious Experience'

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Abstract: The paper urges a reconsideration of the term "religious experience," as it is presently used in textbooks in the Philosophy of Religion (to which it first refers). The term needs to include not only what might be termed "extraordinary" religious experience (as used in those texts), but the "ordinary" experience of most who practice a religion, and it needs to assess such experience not so much as a "proof" of God (or a "Transcendent Reality"), but rather as a credible witness to what it affirms. The central portion of the paper then investigates how "experience" was used and understood—as a conscious term of analysis—by Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas. It then argues that this understanding of "experience" can be applied successfully to refer to "religious experience," whether "ordinary" or "extraordinary": it argues that such an understanding would fit well any phenomenological description of what most people mean by their "religious experience." It concludes that there is work to be done both to develop adequate criteria to discern how credible religious experience is, as a witness to its object, and to apply such criteria to major religions.

Keywords: experience, *praxis*, subjective, immediate, credible

1 Introduction

As will be clear from this paper, it makes no effort to offer a phenomenological description of religious experience, but seeks instead to think about what "experience" is, on the basis of the main line of Greek and Latin philosophy, one centered on figures such as Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas. Nevertheless, its reflection is meant to be placed in dialogue with reflections of those who would more properly claim to be phenomenologists. It seems to me that such a dialogue should exist and that there are good historical reasons for so holding.

One way of stating the thesis I am here arguing is that we need a wider, richer, and better definition of "religious experience" than is often found today in many philosophy of religion textbooks. Another way of stating the same point more radically is that there is something quite amiss with the way this idea is commonly used and we need seriously to rethink its right usage.

2 Contemporary philosophy of religion

Let me begin by offering a brief survey of some of the English-language textbooks currently in use. Textbooks in the philosophy of religion are of two basic types: a selection of readings, or a taking of positions (by one or several) on the same topics covered by a selection. Typical examples of the first are works edited by

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Kessler,[1] Peterson,[2] Pojman,[3] Stewart,[4], or Zagzebski[5]; typical examples of the second are works by authors such as Davies,[6] Pojman,[7] Rowe,[8] or Taliaferro.[9] "Religious Experience" is featured in both types of work, usually under its own section, and usually as one kind of argument for the existence of God.[10] Typical selections in anthologies feature people such as Teresa of Avila or Black Elk speaking of their special visions, Rudolf Otto on the "numinous," or William James on mysticism. When "experience" is featured as a category in the other works, it is typically stipulated to involve "a conscious state that is soteriologically essential,"[11] or an "immediate awareness of God" (i.e., of "supreme reality"),[12] or Schleiermacher's "feeling of absolute dependence" or Otto's immediate "awareness of another as holy."[13] Save for the possible exception of Merold Westphal,[14] authors confine themselves almost exclusively to what could be termed "extraordinary" religious experiences. The question then debated by all the authors is what we are to make of such extraordinary experiences (perhaps less special than mystical union, but that involve a "numinous presence"). In particular, they examine whether such special experiences can be the basis for an objective argument for the existence of God (or "the Absolute"), usually concluding that no certain argument can be based on them.

I would like to note at our very start the *peculiarity* of this whole approach. No doubt, most religious people, when questioned about their life, would be willingly to speak of how they "experience" their religion and its practice. They would no doubt speak of what they "got" from it, how it was meaningful to them personally, of how it affected their life. They might reference many things: rituals, worship, and fellowship; the importance of reading Sacred Scripture; their prayer life; or their ethics, works of charity, and so on. What they likely would not reference, at least not as usual to their religious practice and experience, would be some mystical experience. Nor are they likely to refer to their experience as proving God's existence; rather, they are likely to speak of it first in terms of the meaningfulness of their religious practice to their life as a whole. In other words, they would likely want to speak about matters that *precisely are not covered* by textbooks in the philosophy of religion: not extra-ordinary experiences (for most do not have such mystical experiences, and even "numinous" experiences are uncommon), but just their ordinary and common experiences; nor experiences that were only private, but also ones that were shared or had a communal dimension; and experiences that were important to them not for proving that God exists (say to a doubting mind), but in terms of the meaningful texture of their life as a whole. What is likely most important to them is just what is left out of account in the current textbooks.

It is not that we cannot ask about what religious experiences "prove," or the significance and importance of mystical ones; but, rather, we should begin by getting clearer on what "religious experience" rightly *is*, and discuss its meaningfulness before its "truth-value." There is something distinctly *odd* about limiting religious experience the way the textbooks choose to do.

In order to rectify what I take to be an evident shortcoming, it seems we should first try to define what we mean by "experience." Like "matter," this word is notorious for being used constantly while remaining constantly vague or ill-defined. In fact, whether it be Schleiermacher's appeal to religious "feeling,"[15]

1 Kessler, *Studying*.
2 Petersen, Hasker, Reichenbach, and Basinger, *Philosophy*.
3 Pojman and Rea, *Philosophy*.
4 Stewart, *Philosophy*.
5 Zagzebski and Miller, *Readings*.
6 Davies, *Introduction* and *Philosophy*.
7 Pojman, *Philosophy*.
8 Rowe, *Philosophy*.
9 Taliaferro, *Contemporary*, and Quinn and Taliaferro, *Companion*.
10 This holds for all the anthologies listed, save Stewart's (where it is part of a section on arguments for the existence of God), and for all the other works, save Davies' *Guide* (where again it is part of larger section).
11 Yandell, "Religious", 367.
12 Alston, "God", 65.
13 Rowe, *Philosophy*, 71.
14 See Westphal, "Phenomenological."
15 Schleiermacher, *Christian*.

James' "varieties of religious experience,"[16] or Smart's "religious experience of mankind,"[17] what is common and striking about all such accounts is that they do not begin by telling us first what "experience" is. Before discussing "religious" experience, then, it seems we should try to get clear on what we mean by "experience."

3 "Experience" in Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas

To try to do so, I think it is wise for us to go "back to the beginning." And, as in almost all such retrievals in Western philosophy, this means looking first at Plato.

Arguably one of the first, and seminal, uses of the concept is to be found in one of his earliest dialogues, the *Laches*.[18] Socrates is there seeking to define courage with two generals, both well-known and both experienced in the wars of Athens. That said, Plato clearly means to draw a contrast between them. The one who is questioned second, Nicias, is an "intellectual," familiar with, and articulate in, Socratic discussions and sophistic disputations. He is contrasted with the general who gives his name to the dialogue, Laches, who clearly is a "man of experience": one who favors and relies on it, rather than being an intellectual and articulate. Indeed, Laches describes himself as one who dislikes intellectual discussions unless a person's deeds are a match and vouch for his words (188d): then, he is completely delighted, because they are witnessed by concrete actions. Good discussion needs to be rooted in the truth of right action.

The generals are contrasted right from the beginning. Nicias advances many reasons for thinking it a good idea to learn to fight in armor. Laches is unpersuaded. All his arguments are practical and based on immediate evidence: the experts in fighting, the Spartans, entirely disregard this "art," no one has ever been renowned for fighting in armor (in fact, it has led to some who did being ridiculed), and his "own experience" confirms its absence of utility. He thinks that its more likely effect will be to make a fighter overconfident and rash, and not courageous (182e-184b).

They continue to manifest their characters in their discussions with Socrates. Nicias has learned enough to see that courage requires wisdom, but he simply identifies the two. Laches, more commonsensically, says he takes "wisdom to be quite a different thing from courage" (195a). We are surely meant to sympathize with him, since—as the dialogue hints at multiple times—courage does indeed involve a willingness to endure what is fearful (e.g., pain, suffering, death), and endurance is not wisdom. (Rather, we are meant to see that courage entails enduring wisely, i.e., for a good reason, one we have considered and rightly judged to be worthy of our "stand.")[19]

Aristotle, in his *Ethics*,[20] defends the importance of experience (εμπειρια) suggested by his teacher. We see this right from the start of his analysis. He famously asserts that the young are not fit students of ethics, because they lack "*experience* of the actions of life" (1095a2). Experience is needed for two reasons. First, to begin ethical reflection. For definitions (let us say of courage) are induced from true examples, and we recognize that these are such through experience; but a young person's lack of experience makes him less convinced of them, and thus he lacks the starting points for ethical reflection (1098b3). This is why Aristotle also argues we need to be raised with good habits (1095b8 and 1098b3): because these—just in giving us the conviction that "(x) is a good way to act" when this is indeed the case—give us the starting points for our reflection. Thus, the latter begins with "the fact that something is so" (1095b6), from which we can then go on to offer an explanation for why something is so; young people, however, lack sufficient experience just of "the facts of life." Second, experience is necessary at the end of ethical reasoning, for we need to apply

16 James, *Varieties*.

17 Smart, *Religious*.

18 Plato, *Laches*. References to it are then placed within the text, using its Stephanus numbers.

19 Thus, Socrates' point is not that virtue is wisdom but that it requires and is ever governed by wisdom (*Meno* 88d). We are meant to recall that courage must be managed by wisdom (88c) or else will be rashness, and the same holds for the other virtues there given (justice, etc.): see 88a. Thus, we are meant to recognize that virtue must be *in part* wisdom, not *wholly* wisdom (when these two alternatives are given to us, at 89a).

20 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean*. References to it are then placed within the text, using its Bekker numbers.

universal ethical principles to concrete situations, and recognizing that this act correctly does so requires experience. Thus, Aristotle later says we should pay attention to the undemonstrated "sayings and beliefs of the *experienced* and older people or practically wise ones," for these see the concrete action for what it is: "they have an eye formed from *experience* (1143b12)."

Aquinas, in discussing Aristotle's analysis of the practical syllogism, takes this last point one step further. In his own given example, the major premise of this syllogism will be a universal, such as "concupiscence [i.e., inordinate physical desire] should be curbed." The minor premise applies the principle to concrete action; for example, it might state that "fasting curbs concupiscence." The conclusion is that we should fast (and thus we do, since the conclusion of a practical syllogism terminates in the action it mandates). To reason in ethics one needs both a knowledge of universals and of particulars; however, Aquinas says, "if it is possible for him [the practically wise person] to have [but] one kind of knowledge, he ought rather to have the latter, i.e., the knowledge of particulars that are closer to operation."[21] If one were to contrast an *inexperienced* ethicist who was able to give an account of why a kind of action was universally wrong with a non-intellectual man of *experience* who knew from it that (x) was an example of that kind of action, then a practically wise man above all requires the experience of the latter; for, if raised well, the second man could have the right conviction about what kinds of action were good and bad without explaining why; but to act well requires knowing that the singular action he is deliberating about instances a certain kind of action. Experience that this is so is irreplaceable.[22]

Let me make this point more forcefully. A general principle is easier to see and agree to, even if we cannot see why it is the case. It is easy to think that terrorism is wrong. It is harder to recognize that airplanes targeting civilians (say in Coventry, Dresden, or Tokyo) is terror bombing. And it is even harder to recognize that dropping an A-bomb in the circumstances of a desperate fight remains terrorism and is ruled out if terrorism is wrong. People can agree easily enough about general principles. But the more we descend towards the particular, the harder it is to see where the truth lies, and the more we dispute, or the more we are inclined to try to make an exception to our original principle (or "describe it away"). The singular act lies in the domain of experience. It is thus what is most irreplaceable in seeking to live wisely and well. We may accept a general principle, without having an account of it; but, lacking experience, we may well lack the conviction that (x) is a good instance of that principle.[23] We thus will end up doing the wrong thing.

What these philosophers are arguing is well understood by many a parent of a teenage child. A son may rightly recognize that he should guard against driving too fast; but he fails to understand that the pressure of having a particular group of his male friends in his car will likely lead to him not to do this. He lacks

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21 Thomas Aquinas, *Ethics*, 379 (Book Six, #1194, commenting on 1141b 22). Again, he later says in *Ethics*, 649 (Book Ten, #2176, commenting on 1181a 9): "People who have *experience* with particulars make correct judgments about results and understand by what means and in what manner these results can be produced, and what kinds are suited to what persons or things. But the *inexperienced* are understandably ignorant whether a work is done well or badly on the basis of what they read in books, for they do not know how to put into practice what they read in books" (Ibid., page 649).

22 This is why practical wisdom cannot be taught (and neither can virtue): because it depends upon a person internalizing the wisdom of the one who is forming his character, but he will not do so with conviction unless this is borne out by his *experience*, which is uniquely his own, and singular: no abstract teaching will get the job done. The best a good educator can do is to ensure that a student has the opportunity to have experiences that will help him internalize wisdom; but the work of doing so is in the hands of the student. Thus, Socrates was right that virtue cannot fully be taught, but not for the reason he gave. It is indeed hard to give an account of why something is fearful or not (and it is being able to give that account that separates knowledge or wisdom from right belief, according to Socrates), but it seems possible to give such an account, or at least an account that meets the standard of practical certitude. But no teacher can experience something just the way his student will, and thus *there is no way of guaranteeing the right experiences*, and thus of leading someone successfully to virtue, which is a key reason why virtue can be so hard to inculcate.

23 Had Truman seriously faced the fact that there was no significant difference between what he was commanding and sending marines into cities with flame-throwers to blow-torch thousands of homes of unarmed women, older men, and children, he might have re-considered his command. Why? Because he already had some *experience* of that kind of military action. But, having no such experience of this bomb, it was far easier for him not to consider such comparisons and to make some simple "calculation" about lives ultimately being saved, as though there was no difference between unarmed civilians and soldiers. However, to go down that road is to undermine the distinction between strategic and terror bombing and it is also to countenance a form of terrorism. One thus wrongly gives up a principled objection to terrorism.

the experience to know how kids his age act under that kind of peer pressure and distraction. And so he ends up driving dangerously. A young daughter does not want to be sexually "fast" or to get herself into a compromising situation; but she fails to understand that, by first drinking as she and her date do, and then being alone together, she will likely end up just in that situation. Parents despair of their teenage children rejecting their sound advice because they realize that their children do not see or understand where their actions will lead them, and they do not see this because they are inexperienced in human actions and passions.

In their usage, then, "experience" entails several contrasts: (1) *praxis* is contrasted with *theoria*, (2) fact with explanation, (3) an everyday or commonsense approach to an intellectual one. A man of experience is a "man of action," someone who has knowledge of concrete, singular, things and events, someone "wise in the ways of the world," but who may not be intellectual: not good at defining what he knows or explaining why what he holds is correct. Such a person (as the *Meno* makes clear [97ff]) may indeed have correct beliefs and may indeed be able to lead others well on the basis of them, but he need not (and often cannot) give an account of why his beliefs are correct (and, because of this, he may end up by not being followed by those he leads).

Aristotle importantly references points made in his *Ethics* at the start of his *Metaphysics* (1, 1): experience is a relevant category not just for action but for *all* knowledge. If his points in the *Ethics* derived from an analysis of the different kinds of insights required for action, his argument in the *Metaphysics* derives from his theory of human knowledge in general: this begins with the singular datum of the senses, but ends in abstract universals. Experience is a "way to" that term and to the conceptual way of knowing distinctive to human beings, as intellectual animals.

It might be supposed that Aristotle would identify "experience" as the beginning of the process of knowing, as the datum of sense. That is not the way he uses the term. Rather, he uses it the way we do when we say someone is "experienced" about some matter, perhaps the way a practical "medicine man" in the field is experienced about what herbal remedy works against what symptoms. It takes time to acquire such experience. Thus, "experience" is *not of an initial datum*,[24] but comes about through associating instances of the same thing. At a certain point, remembering that we have "encountered" a similar thing on various occasions, we come to have what Aristotle terms "experience." This is to reach a *general idea* but just *as sensed*. His example is someone who might say "in my experience, this plant cures these symptoms." One sees the truth of this plant's curative power from seeing and remembering that an individual plant cured Callias when ill with these symptoms, another individual of the same plant cured Socrates with the same symptoms, and so on with others.[25] A "medicine man" of experience, encountering someone with the same physical symptoms, will know that *this* plant (whose look he remembers from past instances) cures *those* symptoms (their look again remembered). He thus prescribes the plant and cures his patient.

Aristotle notes that an absence of experience could lead to a truly scientific doctor not being as successful. Such a doctor can give an explanation of why this plant cures. We would say that he has isolated the "active ingredient" in the plant and he knows why that active ingredient successfully interacts with the exact condition in the diseased person that needs medical attention. The defect has been isolated, as has been what overcomes it, and thus he knows why this plant cures. Thus, a scientific account is a *universal* one: whenever there is this determinate biological deficit, then this active ingredient always helps cure it, *because* of the biochemistry involved. A person only of experience, by contrast, lacks the art or science of medicine and is unable to explain the cause of *why* something works; he only knows *that* it does. However,

24 One could of course *stipulate* that what I am here calling an "encounter" could also be called an "experience," and that is indeed the way the latter word seems to be used when referring to a "phenomenological description of *an* experience" (or of one experience). Yet such a stipulation is not consonant with Aristotle's way of speaking; for he is calling attention to the fact that every "experience" is set within a *presupposed context* and cannot be understood rightly apart from it. In his case, that context is importantly the *antecedents* of a sensed object and of *sensitive memory*. (Phenomenological description of course itself insists just that we be attentive to the lived context that makes any one experience meaningful.)

25 Aquinas endorses this argument: "Nothing hinders him [a healer] from curing a particular person without universal knowledge provided that from *experience* he can properly diagnose the symptoms of such a patient. Thus some people seem to be skillful in doctoring themselves because they know their own symptoms from *experience*, but they are not qualified to help others [i.e., with unlike symptoms]" *Ethics*, 645, (Book Ten, #2161, commenting on 1180a 10).

if the scientific doctor lacks experience of the way the disease manifests itself—being unfamiliar with the *look* of its first symptoms, say—or if he lacks experience of similar *looking* plants and thus cannot be sure which is the right plant that should be prescribed—his scientific learning will be of less immediate utility than what the experienced medicine man in the field knows: that *this* plant cures *those* symptoms.

Experience is a "way to" science because it involves a generalization, one built up of associating singular memories: a conclusion about a *type* of plant or one that looks the same. Yet this is still a conclusion very much tied to sensibility: the *look* of the plant, the look of the symptoms. It hasn't yet isolated elements or causes in the whole thing that is sensed, nor made a universal judgment. Our subjective experience remains limited, so we are unable to make an objective or universal claim. This is the kind of knowledge that even animals could possess. Aristotle's *History of Animals* is replete with stories of such animal intelligence: stags seeking to eat *crabs* to protect them from spider venom,[26] wild goats eating a *particular* plant to help eject arrows in them,[27] tortoises searching out *marjoram* to eat after ingesting vipers, and so on.[28] This is not instinctive but learned behavior, based on the animal's memory and experience.

There is no reason to suppose a tortoise *conceives* an instance of a plant as "marjoram." It *just* has the *look* of the other instances. *Human* experience, however, does rise to the level of a general idea: this *specific plant* in particular will provide a cure for these *human* symptoms. Nevertheless, this remain *on the border* of the sensible. For the man of experience remains confined to his *subjective* experience; whereas the man of science rises to the level of *objectivity*: he knows this plant will cure not because it conforms to his—admittedly limited and subjective—experience; rather, he knows that it will cure because it is the *kind of thing it is*, having the active ingredient in has, and because its biochemistry helps overcome the patient's *specific* biological *deficit*. A scientific account is based on the *nature* of the plant, not on the scientist's subjective experience.

In scholastic commentary, "experience" becomes a technical term: it is what Aquinas and others will call "passive reason" or "particular reason" or the "cogitative power."[29] By it, one grasps *abstract* truth in a *sensible* way. It is just the part of "reason," Aquinas argues, that Aristotle rightly holds is not immortal, since it is connected to sensibility and our embodiment.[30] Aristotle argues that animals have an *analogous* power,[31] which the scholastics call the "*estimative*" power.[32] Similarly, the emotional lives of animals and

26 See Aristotle's *History*, 953 (Book IX, Chapter 5, 611b 20).

27 Ibid., IX, 6, 612a 5.

28 Ibid., IX, 6, 612 a 25. In the same work (VIII, 1 588a 5), we read "nature proceeds little by little from things lifeless to animal life in such a way that it is impossible to determine the exact line of demarcation …. There is observed in plants a continuous scale of ascent towards the animal…. Throughout the entire animal scale there is a graduated differentiation in amount of vitality and in capacity for motion…. Some animals, like plants, simply procreate their own species at definite seasons; other animals busy themselves also in procuring food for their young, and after they are reared quit them and have no further dealings with them; other animals are more intelligent and endowed with memory, and they live with their offspring for a longer period and on a more social footing." And, in Book IX, 1, 608a 15, we further read that "some [animals] are capable of giving or receiving instruction—of receiving it from one another, or from man; those that have the faculty of hearing—not merely of hearing sounds but of distinguishing the difference of signs." It was passages such as these that Darwin found so striking in Aristotle. There is nothing in Aristotle that is opposed *per se* to the idea that species evolve; what he opposes is that natural explanation is reducible to a mechanistic one (see *Physics* II, 8, 198b 33ff. and all of *Parts of Animals*, I, 1). For any use of the idea of *desire* or *inclination* entails an *end* that is desired or a *term* towards which a thing inclines, which is its *good*. Likewise, the idea of "function" is necessary for explaining living things; but that idea entails a *teleological*, not a mechanistic explanation. To know of what matter a kidney is made (or its biochemistry) will help one know what medicines are best for it when diseased; but not to know the function of a kidney—what it is *for* or the *good* it accomplishes in the body—is to fail to be a good naturalist. (It is just because we do know this that we can construct artificial kidneys.) Likewise, to know the kinetics involved in an animal's motion, but not to know towards what end it is aimed, is not fully to understand the motion: to know wing morphology helps explain bird flight, but birds gather twigs *in order* to build nests.

29 See Aquinas, *Metaphysics*, 11 (Volume I, Section 15, commenting on 981a 1).

30 See Aquinas, *De Anima*, 432 (Book III, Chapter V, Lectio 10, #745, commenting on 429b 20ff.).

31 See *History of Animals*, VIII, 1 (588a 20ff.). He there holds the same is true of children (although clearly human children do possess rational powers, even if under the control of their emotions in the very young).

32 Aquinas, *Metaphysics*, 10: "Judgment about things to be done which is not a result of any rational deliberation but of some natural instinct is *called* prudence in other animals. Hence in other animals prudence is a *natural estimate* about the pursuit of what is fitting and the avoidance of what is harmful" (Volume I, Section 11, commenting on Book 1, Chapter 1, 980a 27).

human beings are only analogous; for our emotional life, as our sensibility, is inextricably intertwined with our human reason.[33] (A just appreciation of animal intelligence does not require succumbing to a false anthropomorphism.[34])

From this "retrieval," we can note several points about how to think of "experience." First, it is close to sensibility and to practical concerns. We could say that experience is the meeting place of our sensibility and reason: it grasps a universal, but it is still grasping it as tied to what is sensibly experienced and not yet as used for art or science.[35] Second, it is of facts, not "reasoned facts" or why something is the case. Third, it remains tied to our subjectivity and does not yet rise to the level of objectivity. Yet it also is not merely of one subjective instance or encounter. Rather, we acquire an experience of something through *repeated* instances; for it is based on making an association between multiple instances of one kind of thing. Or, put differently, to *see the look* of something requires an accurate *recognition*, and we get this through repeated events, occurrences, or individual encounters. Experience is reliable, and a good guide for our own action, because it is not based on only one event. And we thus have good reason—it "conforms to our experience"—to incline to its truths, even if we do not rise to objective truths or can articulate causes or explain why it is so. Absence of explanation is no bar to grasping the truth or the texture of singular events.

4 Religious experience

Let us now apply this understanding of experience to the category "religious experience." And let us begin by attending to a distinction argued for at the beginning, between two species of religious experience—ordinary and extraordinary—with it usually referring to the former. Not to lose sight of this conference's "point of view," I would hold that *this* is what a phenomenological *description* of what usually is *meant* by the term "religious experience" would readily uncover.

First, then, experience lies in the domain of the *sensible* particular. Ordinary religious experience will be enmeshed in things sensed. In the ritual liturgical act, one will sense the colors of stained glass or icons; the sound of a bell, organ, or song; the smell of incense; the taste of bread and wine; the touch of a hand extended in peace. Insofar as these are part of religious experience, they are imbued with meaning, and this meaning (or even, let us suppose, a "felt presence") is *mediated* by the sensed objects. The religious truth to which it points is experienced in them and thus subjectively, and not in the abstract objective way proper to an intellectual grasp of truth.[36]

Second, the domain of religious experience is primarily *practical*. It is centered on ritual action, prayer, and right *praxis*. It also of course is concerned with and includes right belief, but even here importantly as a creed affirmed or a life-*commitment* continually remade. At its heart, religious experience is about being in,

33 In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (I, 13), Aristotle argues that the irrational soul (in this case, sensible desire) can participate, or be guided by, reason. And sometimes (e.g., in the *De Anima* III, 3 428a 1), he will speak of imagination as a "thinking" part. Indeed, for him, animal "reason" and estimation always is *imaginative*. His discussion of *human* emotions in *Rhetoric* II indicates the degree to which these are enmeshed in *reason*.

34 It is perhaps worth noting that the *analogous* relation between a human cogitative sense and an animal estimative one, each being based on an *association* of sensitive memories yet one being the instrument of human reason and the other not, marks the difference between the careful empiricism of Aristotle and one too ready to think univocally and to minimize evident differences between animal and human intelligence.

35 This is most clear from Aristotle's account in the last pages of the *Posterior Analytics* (II, 19, 100b 1): see Aquinas's commentary on this passage, 237-40 (Lecture 20). Aristotle there speaks of a "primitive" universal grasped by sense and Aquinas speaks of experience attaining "one item," which is "somehow even a *sensing of the universal*," as an experienced person regarding a medicinal herb recognizes not only that it cures Callias and Socrates, but that these are *men*, and thus judges it will cure another *man*.

36 All religious experience, as here understood, is related to a Transcendent Reality (God) that cannot but be experienced (however obliquely or superficially) as "other" and "greater" and thus as One evoking gratitude for all the good of one's life. Yet such experience need not rise to the level of the "numinous." Religious experience is of an ever-deepening journey, and however "superficial" some experiences may be, they are part of this journey and deservedly need to be recognized and *called* "religious experience."

or deciding for, a *right relation* with the Absolute or God. A religious path or "way" rightly orders our mind and heart towards this goal.

Ordinary, as opposed to extraordinary, religious experience does not consist in a direct "facial" encounter with our end. The union it achieves in this life—save for extraordinary instances of mystical rapture—is found in our *will*, in our *loving* rightly and well. Socrates thus thinks of a holy person as one who serves God rightly. And Aquinas (following the gospel) teaches that it is found not merely in the relation of a servant, but in the more intimate one of a friend. Friendship is always between individuals. That its love is true is best seen by those who share it (as is also the case with spousal love); for love is found in a personal encounter and cannot be abstracted from it, and this holds even when this encounter, and this friendship, is with the Absolute. (I realize, of course, that the "ordinary" can in its own way be "extraordinary"! Aristotle, and with some reason, would have found it extraordinary that human beings could, even in this life, be friends of God! And Plato, and religions in general, thus underline that true religion reposes upon a divine gift.)

Third, it thus is primarily *subjective*, not objective.[37] It is "confessional," not "scientific." Indeed, religions repose just on the *fact*, not the reasoned fact: *that* a faith is meaningful and life-changing or an aid to staying on "the straight and narrow," rather than a claim to be "evidently true" or to be able to explain *why* it is what it claims to be. Religious experience is more an *invitation*—"come and see, experience for yourself"—than a ground for making claims about objective truth. As a popular song urges, we are invited to "taste and see" the goodness of the Lord.

Fourth, it is not a matter of an unusual event or occurrence, but is about a *regular practice*. Insofar as religious experience demands respect or attention—or a religious person does so—this derives from it being what it is in Aristotle's usage: something acquired over time and repeated practice. If a religion really is the good life-transfiguring opportunity attested for it, this becomes credible because of the way a lifelong practice bears witness to this transformative possibility.

All of these characteristics remain true of "extraordinary" religious experience. This might be mystic rapture, a momentary union with God (or "satori" or "enlightenment"). Or this might be something less than that, not a taste of bliss itself, but of what nevertheless transcends the ordinary: not of Moses seeing God "face to face" on the mountain, but Abraham talking with God or any number of other events, where the Transcendent remains still "unseen," to some degree. Just as *extraordinary*, these are even less susceptible to being a "proof," in the scientific sense. (Thus, Teresa of Avila was rightly first suspicious of her experiences and sought spiritual counsel.) Yet, just as *not* being an *isolated* event, they may have some claim to be taken seriously. The lives of mystics become matters of serious interest because of the fruit of their prayer in their everyday lives: their saintliness or sheer goodness. The domain of such experiences also remains something *analogous* to the *immediate encounter* of sensibility. And, again, it is primarily in the sphere of *praxis*, of a *relationship* with the Absolute, that it becomes significant. It is not in the domain of the *true* that such experiences are most notable, for they are often if not usually held to be ineffable. Rather, their chief interest and appeal lies in the domain of the *good*, of the holiness of life.

I realize that what I have here sketched is a portrait that has not been proven here: a thesis to be tested by research, rather than a conclusion. My claim is that, when examined, "religious experience" will fit what the classical philosophical tradition claims for "experience" in general.

(I also realize that a just concern for *the depth of meaning* to be found in religious experience—for nothing is as profound or as important to us as our right relation to the "Transcendent" or "Absolute," i.e., with God—is likely to lead someone [as seemed to be the case in the conference at which this paper was given] to imagine that what I have argued to some extent "trivializes" religious experience or distracts us from its true locus: our *encounter* with God. But this is to miss my point. The *term* of experience is no trivial thing whatsoever; nevertheless, it remains meshed in our sensibility and subjectivity and, ordinarily, in repeated practice. My principal concern is that the *ordinary* religious *praxis* of most people *be given its*

37 This is meant in Aristotle's sense, which does not mean to identify "subjective knowledge" as mere opinion. On the contrary, as we have seen, it is a knowledge sufficient for action and one that *does* grasp an objective truth, but not as yet abstracted from, or independent of, one's subjective experience.

due and that we pay proper attention to where religious "experience" is most commonly expressed and "owned.")

Were we to pursue phenomenological investigations of religious experience as I have sketched it here, what I believe we would see is that the proper category by which it should be judged is not whether it offers an argument that is clear and "probative," but whether it offers a *witness* that is *credible*. For example, a claim may be made that religious practice aids one to be a better person. Is such a claim credible? Does its ethic conform to what reason can see and is its "heroic ideal" a reasonable one? Is there reason to think that its practice helps produce holiness? The same standard of credibility will likewise pertain to its other claims, whether they be of the felt *presence* of God made manifest in and through religious practice or a claim to *truths* that either are in keeping with, or transcend, our natural reason. Certainly, some evidence *is* here being offered for a religion's *truth*, but not as what *must* be believed, but as what it is *credible* to believe.

5 Conclusion

If the analysis of experience, and its application to religious experience, that I have made here has merit, then the conclusion we should reach is that there is considerable work to be done in the philosophy of religion when it comes to this category. First, it needs to be recognized that religious experience is not usually extraordinary, and that this is perhaps not even what is most interesting in it from a philosophical point of view. Second, serious studies are mandated just of more ordinary types of religious experience. Or, rather, since these are available through phenomenological and comparative studies of religion, philosophers of religion should avail themselves of those studies and discuss what we have a right to conclude from them. Finally, and most importantly, there is an *entire field* of philosophical investigation that has yet to be undertaken seriously: first, a careful discussion of what standards are to be used and why in assessing the *credibility* of religious claims; and then an application to various majors religions to discover whether and to what degree they severally have a right to the credibility of a reasonable person.

I realize that the objection swiftly will be made that such a person is a "construct" and no standard of objectivity is available. Such a charge, however, seems patently false about claims that are made in other fields and there is no reason to think it is not also false about that of religion. If I were to claim that *I* am "The Enlightened One" or the "Capstone of the Prophets" or "God with us" (i.e., the "human face of God") such a claim is without merit and far more unreasonable than claiming the first of Siddartha, the second of Mohammed, or the third of Jesus. Or, again, someone might insist that any idea of "standing apart" from a religion to judge it is doomed from the start: a holy tradition can only be understood and judged from within. Yet, this too seems too extreme. People from different traditions will all plead with each other to "be reasonable!" (or will say "that just is unreasonable"). They do so because there is an implicit *human* standard of reasonability. Furthermore, however true it may be that no religious tradition—just insofar as its subject is the holy, and this *transcends* our human capacities and philosophy—can *finally* be understood or judged *fully* save from within, nevertheless religion involves *human* acts and claims and thus cannot escape a common human standard. Just insofar as some claims transgress such a standard can we speak truly of religious vices: of gullibility, superstition, and idolatry. My conclusion, then, remains a "call to action": what religious experience is and whether it has a right to be considered credible by a reasonable person is still very much a work fully to be engaged in and to be achieved.

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