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What is Meant By Religious Experience?

H. Dermot McDonald

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It seems to be fairly generally agreed that religion is in some specific sense a matter of experience. 'The core of religion is a religious experience', states H. D. Lewis categorically.¹ There are many who would be ready to assert that it is enough for faith to be able to say, 'Whereas I was blind, now I see'. Such certainty is the language of experience; and experience, it is claimed, is all that is necessary. To testify that one has had an experience is to maintain the one thing needful.

Yet with all the emphasis upon experience and with all the declarations that religion is essentially a matter of experience, there goes a certain vagueness as to what is meant by the term. Indeed, the loose usage of the word experience is one of the root causes for much of our theological and philosophical confusion. The many different meanings given to the expression is condemned by E. S. Brightman as a philosophical scandal. Brightman, however, in spite of this, cannot accept the suggestion of Theodore de Laguma that the word should be driven from our discussions because of this ambiguity. Such a veto would merely leave an awkward hiatus in the history of thought.² Some evidence for the variety of meanings attaching to the term can be seen by reference to Merrington's *Problems of Personality*. In discussing the subject of experience he specifies eight different ideas conveyed by the concept, but not one of them would suit what is intended when we talk of a religious, or more personally, of a Christian, experience.

These difficulties of definition, however, must not be taken as an excuse for refusing to speak of experience in connection with religion.³ It does mean that we will need to be more precise in our account of what is meant when we talk like this. The question is, What exactly, then, is to be understood by speaking of a 'religious experience'? In seeking an answer to this question, we will find ourselves involved in a rebuttal of the views of those who deny the reality, or who suspect the validity, or who reject the authority, of such a religious claim.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AS A SUBJECT-OBJECT RELATIONSHIP

It would seem proper to begin by making the point that the centre of any experience is a subject-object relationship. Aristotle began his philosophy from the objective standpoint. The problem he left was the task of getting from the objective to the subjective. Scholastic theology followed Aristotle by putting all the emphasis on the objective and signally failed to make it inward and personal. Descartes, in contrast, started from his own subjectivity and his problem was to arise out of it and to assure the reality of the objective. Schleiermacher's theology, taking its cue from Descartes, sought to interpret religion as a mere subjective feeling and showed little regard for any objective reality. But genuine religious experience

¹ H. D. Lewis, 'Worship and Idolatry', in *Contemporary British Philosophy* (Third Series, 1956), 266, cf. his *Our Experience of God*, 1958, 112.

² E. S. Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion*, n.d., 227, 8.

³ cf. H. A. Hodges, 'What is to become of Philosophical Theology?', in *Contemporary British Philosophy* (Third series 1956), 230.

must combine what is positive in these two alternative views. There can, in fact, be no valid experience at all, as James

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Ward contends, without the duality of subject and object. To speak of knowing by experience is consequently at one with saying that there is an objective factor in our knowing. Religious experience, therefore, cannot be accounted for solely in terms of the agent. It is no mere subjective feeling. Nor yet can it be understood in terms of the agent's social or sociological relations to his fellow men. The core of a religious experience is the living awareness of a relationship with God. Put simply, it may be stated, that the Object of religious experience is God.

Right here, however, an objection is raised. The tacit assumption that experience is all of the subject-object type, we are told, has played havoc with much European philosophy; and it is the perpetuation of this notion which is the source of the various fallacies that are at the bottom of every error in religious thinking and life.⁴ It is against the implication of religious experience that God is a mere Object, an 'It' to be grasped, or a 'Something' to be investigated, that much recent theology, having its origin in the teaching of Kierkegaard, has raised its voice. Kierkegaard reacted against the notion of God as an objective 'Somewhat' whose existence could be certainly proved. Instead, he emphasised the idea of God an infinite Subjectivity. Thus has come about the characteristic note of modern theological thought that God is improperly spoken of as Object. Martin Buber has made fruitful the idea of God as the Eternal Thou who in His very nature cannot become an It.⁵ The Barthian theologians have stressed this point and contended that it is virtual idolatry to regard God as an Object. He is not a possible It to be inferred from other Its. He is always a Thou who is known as and when He makes Himself known. Taking the word experience to signify a relation between a subject and object, these writers deny that God can be experienced. To experience, it is argued, is *to use*, and God cannot be *used*. We experience objects; we enter into relation with other subjects. And God is Subject par excellence. He is the Thou ever addressing us and demanding our response. Our knowledge of God is not, therefore, derived from experience, but is born of a relation to God. I do not experience the one to whom I can say Thou: I know myself to be in relation with Him.

While we may have every sympathy with the reasons for this rejection of religious experience, the conclusion need not be admitted.⁶ Kierkegaard did a great service in emphasizing the infinite subjectivity of God, or, as John Baillie prefers to speak of it, the infinite '*subjecthood* of God'.⁷ To contend, however, that religion is essentially a personal relationship is no sufficient reason for rejecting the usage of the concept *experience*. It may be admitted that experience is not a very natural word to apply to one's relationship with God, and should be avoided. But if it is rejected in reference to God then it should be discontinued also as expressive of man's relation with his fellows. And if it be thought that the concept experience should not be associated with man's knowledge of God for the sake of verbal accuracy, it will still have to be underlined that all that the word is intended to connote remains as an essential to a genuine religious faith. 'And we must remember also that what

⁴ A. A. Bowman, *Studies in the Philosophy of Religion*, 1938, vol. ii., 239, cf. 319.

⁵ M. Buber, *I and Thou*, (ET), 89 ff.

⁶ cf. John Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God*, 1962, 65.

⁷ John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God*, 1939, 220.

takes the place of such experience is something not less but more direct and face-to-face, namely personal encounter.⁸

Few writers have emphasised the personal relationship in religion more than

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Lindsay Dewar and H. H. Farmer, and neither of these sees any incongruity in admitting the cogency of the term experience. Dewar, for example, speaks of the 'immediate apprehension of God' as the 'character of religious experience'⁹. H. H. Farmer sees 'the living awareness of God as personal' as the dynamic centre of religious experience.¹⁰ Farmer is satisfied that while this immediate apprehension is unique in reference to its Object, it is not unique as to its form. Its form is one with that intuitive knowledge employed in various other aspects of experience. The nature of the religious experience is, then, an immediate and intuitive awareness of a relationship with One who is personal. 'At the point', continues Farmer, 'where an entity is grasped in a living immediacy of direct personal relationship the word "thou" is inevitably sooner or later used, and only at that point is it used. Probably everybody has experienced, sometime with surprise, the difference between thinking about, and passing judgment upon, a person whom he has never met, and then encountering and speaking with him face to face. Up to the moment of encounter he has been merely a "he", a mere symbol for the convergence of certain relationships.... But now when we meet him and speak with him, and our purposes meet and interact in the direct *rapport* of speech, he becomes a "thou" to us, and instantly the relationship is different, so different that all our previous theoretical ideas about "him" may be swept on one side'.¹¹

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AS A MIDDLE POSITION

From one point of view a religious experience does possess a sense of adequacy and completeness. Yet when it is compared with that totality which is the end and aim of philosophy it reveals a certain partiality. Religious experience is falsely viewed as individual moments. It is only when these are, so to say, woven into a tissue which can be spoken of as a whole that we can properly speak of religious experience.

Rightly understood, religious experience occupies, what R. S. Franks calls, a sort of 'middle position'. It is, on the one hand, more than individual subjective states, and, on the other hand, it is not finally unified and co-ordinated either with itself or with the rest of our knowledge.¹² In this sense Aristotle's remark is true when applied to religious experience: 'The experienced know the fact, but not the wherefore'.¹³

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND BELIEF

The idea that religious experience arises apart from any belief was, not long ago, accepted virtually as a truism in theology.¹⁴ This understanding of religious experience can be traced

⁸ *ibid.*, 224.

⁹ Lindsay Dewar, *Man and God*, 1935, 15.

¹⁰ H. H. Farmer, *The World and God*,² 1935, 1943, 13.

¹¹ *op. cit.*, 14, 15.

¹² cf. R. S. Franks, *The Metaphysical Justification of Religion*, 1929, 10 ff.

¹³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1, i, 2.

¹⁴ cf. John Baillie, *The Interpretation of Religion*, 1929, 230 f.

directly to Schleiermacher although the actual phrase itself never occurs in his writings. It was his camp-followers who took it up to do service for Schleiermacher's notion of religion as a feeling of absolute dependence. Through writers such as Herrmann the expression 'The Theology of Experience' came to be used for the thesis that the final source and immediate norm of religion must be found in, and founded upon, the inner feeling of religion in the soul and not upon any external authority.¹⁵

It was the view of Schleiermacher that convictions have no place in religious experience. He was sure that religious experience, or, as he puts it, the religious 'self-consciousness', or, 'consciousness', arises prior to any theoretical knowledge

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or belief. This thesis was proposed in open opposition to a type of orthodox scholasticism which contended that the beginning of religion in the life is consequent upon the acceptance of certain doctrines. These doctrines were assumed to exist ready-made and external to the consciousness and were supplied to it, either by the Church—in the case of the common man—or, as a result of his own metaphysical studies—in the case of the learned. 'Our thesis' declares Schleiermacher, 'is intended to oppose the view that this feeling of dependence is itself conditioned by some previous knowledge about God'.¹⁶

All this means, when put precisely, that the experience-theology arose as a protest against the rational-theology. Thus, whereas, in the latter it was contended that belief must precede the experience, the advocates of the former maintained that experience is prior and belief is founded thereon.

The antithesis is however a false one; for, as John Baillie in his recent Gifford Lectures states, 'The reason why we must not say that faith is based on religious experience is that religious experience, if it is authentic, already *contains* faith.'¹⁷ There can be no valid religious experience without faith. 'For how' asks Donald Baillie in an early, important essay, 'can one have experience of religion, or of the objects of religion, except *through* belief, or through faith which includes belief?'¹⁸ There is no such thing as, so to speak, a naked experience; an experience, that is to say, which is just 'given' and does not involve a judgement. It is, therefore, inaccurate to say with 'The Theology of Experience' that religious experience is previous to religious belief; nor is it accurate to regard with rationalism the prior assent to specific dogma as the essential preliminary to religious experience.¹⁹

The experience of being forgiven, for example, cannot be ours without the belief in a God who forgives. In truth, the experience of being forgiven is itself a heart-felt conviction that God does forgive those who come to Him in humble trust. This means that 'the inner religious experience is faith. It is indeed an experience of God. But it is by faith that man experiences God. It is by believing in God, in the inner intimate personal sense, that man experiences God.

¹⁵ cf. H. Höffding, *The Philosophy of Religion*, (Second edition, 1914), 100. W. Herrmann, *Communion with God*, (Tr. R. W. Stewart, second edition, 1906), 217 f.

¹⁶ *The Christian Faith* (ET), i. 4.

¹⁷ John Baillie. *The Sense of the Presence of God*, 1962, 65.

¹⁸ Donald M. Baillie, 'What is the "Theology of Experience"?' *Exp.* (Eighth series), 1921, 69.

¹⁹ cf. John Baillie, *The Interpretation of Religion*, 232.

The belief does not preclude the experience, nor the experience the belief, but belief and experience are one.²⁰

Because religious experience involved the whole man there must be included from the first the intellectual aspect of his psychological nature. It is most necessary to emphasize that there is in religious experience an immediate apprehension of God, but this must not be regarded as a mere intuition or a mere mystic awareness. The most immediate apprehension is not without some inference. And as a matter of fact, those who lay greatest stress upon intuition, the Mystics, are not able to escape from the necessity of judging. The mystic experience comes 'penetrated with doctrine'.²¹ William James has drawn the now familiar distinction between 'knowledge of acquaintance' and 'knowledge about'. The first of these is immediate and direct: the other is abstract, descriptive and conceptual. With this distinction in mind J. B. Pratt comments, 'Now while each of these kinds of knowledge implies and requires to some extent the other, the mystic experience, so far as it is noetic at all, is characterized by the immediate kind of knowledge, and has relatively little to do with knowledge about; and the mystic, so far as he comes to theorize about the nature of knowledge glorifies the former kind and depreciates the latter'.²² It is perhaps as well not so to

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accentuate his words that the mystic has relatively little to do with knowledge about. In a 'later passage Pratt qualifies with the statement that 'the mystic intuition is seldom mere immediacy; it is seldom unaccompanied by some degree of "knowledge about"'.²³

It may well be, as J. R. Lucas contends, that 'Philosophers, who are for the most part haggard by the belief that all intellectual operations of repute must be either deductive or inductive inferences, have tended to neglect the phenomenon of intuitive thought'.²⁴ But it must still be insisted that intuition is more than feeling and emotion. Because intuition involves cognition it must in some sense contain a judgment. Basil Mitchell refers to the sharp distinction drawn by Buber between the I-Thou and the I-It relationship. While the significance of the dichotomy is recognized, Mitchell denies ultimate validity to this sharp divorce. He concludes, 'It is true that a man cannot talk about the mysteries of religion and at all understand what he is saying without a sense of creatureliness which is akin to humility and worship; and this is the beginning of an "encounter" with God. But emphasis upon the personal nature of this relationship must admit its cognitive side too'.²⁵

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND HISTORY

From one point of view the idea 'encounter' may be regarded as the most valuable emphasis of modern theology. It is a very helpful and healthy corrective of the traditional Thomistic thesis of the knowledge of God, as built up on analogy with the things of the sense. It is this conception of religious knowledge which is the special characteristic of Roman Catholicism and all forms of orthodox scholasticism. This doctrine of the *analogia entis* is anathema to

²⁰ Donald M. Baillie, *ibid.* 71.

²¹ cf. G. Galloway, *The Philosophy of Religion*, 1914, 159 ff.

²² J. B. Pratt, *The Religious Consciousness*, 1930, 400, 1.

²³ *ibid.*, 405.

²⁴ J. R. Lucas, 'The Soul' in *Faith and Logic*, edited B. Mitchell, n.d., 143.

²⁵ Basil Mitchell, 'The Grace of God', *ibid.* 157.

Barth.²⁶ In his repudiation of the scholastic idea of religious knowledge as a mere *knowledge about* God, Barth articulated a revolt against all methods and systems which centred in experience and history. The question which Kierkegaard had flashed was thundered by Barth: 'How can a man's experience prove or even enunciate the reality of God?'. Barth was sure that experience could not. 'Only revelation can do that. Only man broken of his pride can receive the high and holy self-impartment of God in Christ as the basis from beyond this world of biblical revelation. Barth's cry for the rendering of the veil of man-made systems found electric response throughout the world. Storms of neo-orthodoxy, as many called the revolt, uprooted the theologies of experience, leaving them withered, if not dead. The atmosphere and assumptions of a new age were both hostile and haughty with regard to any reliance on Christian experience'.²⁷

But notice must be made of the danger to which the theology of 'encounter' has exposed itself. The latter has been exaggerated to the point where the necessity of a 'mediation' is denied and we are left with the suggestion that man has direct and naked contact with the very being of God. Barth has not succeeded in disguising the conclusion that the galvanizing Word of God comes perpendicularly from above upon the lifeless soul of man. There, it seems, God reveals Himself in the immediate act apart from any mediation of a documented revelation. And Martin Buber, too, if it be allowed that his teaching is genuinely theistic, locates man's experience of God in the bare structure of the I-Thou relation.

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The result of all this is carried through to its logical conclusion by Bultmann who, under Heidegger's influence, puts such stress upon the immediate and present confrontation of man by God that he can admit the most radical demythologizing treatment of the New Testament. He is thus, for example, able to contend for the immediate subjective 'truth' of Christ's resurrection as presented in the proclamation of the 'Word of God' *hic et nunc*, while at the same time denying its value as an actual historical event.

For a genuine Christian experience, however, it should be most strongly insisted, that there must be a necessary foundation in the facts of history. If it be cut loose from them it becomes a series of subjective phenomena in which the individual may find contentment in the enjoyment of his own feelings but which can have no secure basis in fact. It is in and through the strength of assured facts that we are able to believe in God as revealed in Christ. Christian experience comes at the moment when the great historic facts of Christ are illumined by the Spirit of God.

The supreme characteristic of Christian experience is not probability but assurance. And in the end full and final certitude can only be secured on the basis of a certain historical revelation. It is an arresting fact that in his 'encounter' with Christ on the Damascus road when Paul exclaimed 'Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?', he was immediately brought down to the solid fact of 'Jesus'; 'I am Jesus whom thou persecutest'. The truth is, as Sdderblom maintains, that if we take Jesus we must take history with Him.²⁸

²⁶ cf. E. L. Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, 1949; Erich Przywara, *Polarity*, n.d.; John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God*, Ch. iii; *The Sense of the Presence of God*, ch. vi; Nels F. S. Ferré, *Searchlights on Contemporary Theology*, 1961; Ch. 2; Jerome Hamer, *Karl Barth*, ET 1962, xiii-xxi; 69-71.

²⁷ Nels F. S. Ferré, *Searchlights on Contemporary Theology*, 1961, 185.

²⁸ cf. Gustaf Aulén in *Revelation*, edited John Baillie and Hugh Martin, 1937, 288 f.

At the same time it is quite clear throughout the New Testament that Christian faith is no mere assent to an historical fact. The formal apprehension of the historical Jesus is of no saving significance if it is not accompanied by a spiritual vision. Faith is never the acceptance of a bare fact: but a total response to the spiritual interpretation of that fact. Even then, however, it is important to add, Christian experience cannot be fully understood as the most spiritual apprehension of the Jesus of history. It was against this notion presented so persuasively by the Ritschlians that Barth uttered his thunderbolt. He sought to break loose from the trammels of history. Herrmann had made the astonishing assertion that communion with the exalted Christ is not spoken of anywhere in the New Testament. Barth retorts that only is this not so, but that everywhere this is what is taught. It is the living Word of God who breaks in upon man ἄνωθεν. Thus while the Ritschlians saw Christian faith as the spiritual apprehension of the historical Jesus—a Jesus of history, the Barthians see Christian faith as man's being apprehended by a supra-historical Being, the Christ of faith—a Christ apart from history.

But neither view appears to us to be correct without the other. As far as the New Testament is concerned the Jesus of history is the Christ of faith. There can be no serious doubt but that for the Apostle Paul the overwhelming apprehension of the risen Christ was no mere passing phase in his religious experience. It was the starting point of a union which deepened by communion. And the consciousness of this communion was for Paul, as it is for all who have it, more than a subjective feeling, or a figment of a pious imagination: it is based upon the historical fact of Jesus. Thus Christian experience is no bare intellectual assent to certain dogmas or historical facts. It is a living fellowship with God in Christ stemming from the conviction of His historical reality. Christian faith

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is not belief in history nor yet is it belief apart from history. It is experience through history. And the history of which we speak is a documented revelation. Nels Ferre asks the question: 'Is there any way that we can find a distinctive Christian experience sufficiently valid to allow us to return to the power of the classical Christian faith without landing in the pitfalls of irrelevance and arbitrariness?'²⁹ The answer is that a genuine Christian faith itself arises out of 'the power of the classical Christian faith'. If it does not, then it is not authentic New Testament Christian experience.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND EMOTION

In the interesting debate concerning the truth of Christianity between the late C. E. M. Joad in his agnostic days and Arnold Lunn, an adherent of the Roman Church, both took occasion to repudiate the validity of religious experience. Religious experience, according to Joad, has no apologetic value since it 'is as private and personal a thing as a toothache'. Joad seems to have been unaware of the Roman Catholic understanding of faith as 'assent' because he appeared surprised when his opponent replied that he owed 'nothing to religious experience, for I never had a religious experience'.³⁰ Lunn, like Joad, regarded religious experience as private and dumb. And he wrote it off as 'FIF', which was his acrostic symbol for 'Funny Internal Feeling'.

²⁹ Nels F. S. Ferre, *op. cit.*, 186.

³⁰ C. E. M. Joad and Arnold Lunn, *Is Christianity True?*, 118.

The fundamental error made by both these controversialists was that they identified religious experience with 'emotion'. Now it may be admitted that there is a good deal of ambiguity in the use of the concept, 'feeling'.³¹ And we may have a certain sympathy with Lindsay Dewar who regards it as one of the necessary tasks of the philosophy of religion to banish the word from its borders.³² But to get rid of the word would not make any the less real the fact that there must be a feeling element in religious experience consonant with the reality which gives it birth. Feeling-tones differ according to the object. Thus, where the Object is the living and loving God, there will be, in the awareness of Him, an emotion in harmony with this stupendous fact. There is a uniqueness about it because it is produced by the presence of One who is unique. Religious experience, we have seen, comes in the form of truth claims, and 'there is always an emotional background for making such truth claims, and a particularly intense *emotional background* for declarations of faith'.³³

At the same time Lunn's witticism misses the point because it presupposes a false identification of religious experience and emotion. Exception may be taken to Lunn's use of the word 'funny'. If by 'funny' is meant 'strange' then the answer is: and so it is. If by 'funny' Lunn means 'amusing' then the reply is: religious experience has always seemed this to those who have not known it. The Apostles at Pentecost appeared 'funny' to those who had no experience of the Spirit. But the experience is not 'funny' to those to whom it has come. It is more often born out of a sense of guilt while it may issue in the feeling of joyous release. 'FIF' it may be, though not a 'funny internal feeling,' but a Felt Internal Freedom.

Religious experience always comes within a certain doctrinal context. Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost was a proclamation of 'facts' about Christ. It was on the basis of these facts that his hearers were 'pricked in their hearts'.

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We are rightly reminded therefore by William Temple: 'In any individual the type of religious experience will depend upon the religious tradition prevalent in his environment'.³⁴ The significance of this is important. On the one hand, where that tradition is corrupt, as at the time of the Reformation, a vital experience, such as was Luther's, may well come to birth in rebellion against that tradition. On the other hand, just because the nature and quality of religious experiences do depend upon the religious tradition, it is of the greatest importance that the Church should maintain 'sound doctrine'. Barren orthodoxy, to be sure, is not enough. The Epistle of James is a standing witness against the notion that Christian faith is a matter of correct opinions. At the same time it is dangerous for personal religion when the Church drifts into heterodoxy, or even a hesitant orthodoxy. Correctness of belief is not only of vital concern for the individual, but 'it is very much more important to the community, because whatever is the prevalent belief of the community will be accepted uncritically by great numbers of individuals and will predispose them towards forms of religious experience, and of its issue in religious and moral practice, corresponding to that belief. Heresy may be compatible in the individual with deep religion which is on the whole sound; but the Church

³¹ cf. *Psychological Principles* (second edition 1920), 243 ff.

³² *Man and God*, 9.

³³ Raziell Abelson 'The Logic of Faith and Belief' in *Religious Experience and Truth*, edited Sidney Hook 1962, 123.

³⁴ *Nature, Man and God*, 1935, 335.

is bound to regard heresy as for its purpose a more serious evil than some aberrations which in the individual would be more pernicious'.³⁵

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND LANGUAGE

This heading opens up before us one of the most discussed problems of recent days. The question concerns the epistemological status of theological concepts. To ventilate the issues involved requires much more space than is permitted, but it would, however, be altogether wrong to ignore the subject.

The question to be answered may be put like this: How are the theological assertions contained in religious faith to be verified? It is well known that the modern logical empiricists argue that nothing can be accepted as true but that which terminates in an operation. It is sense-experience only which can establish actual factuality. Only sentences which can be *scientifically* verified have significance. The assertions of theology are not of this nature, and consequently cannot be so validated. They therefore have but an emotional-motivational appeal only. They are not grounded in certainty: they are strictly neither true nor false.

There is much that might be urged in reply to all this. It will, however, be sufficient for us to observe that the contention that only assertions which can be tested in sense-perception are true does not itself belong to the region with which natural theories deal. The whole thesis is a flagrant *petitio principii*. The truth of the matter is, as Reinhold Niebuhr remarks, that the judgments of religious experience are only 'verifiable on their own level.'³⁶ This means precisely that sense-experience is not the way to the verification of religious experience. It is a case of each in its own order.

But there is something further to be stressed. It is one of the gains of recent discussion to have learned that theoretical judgments of all kinds can only be verified by being related to the realm of their primary apprehension or experience. This means that the theological judgments of religious experience will

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find their truth-significance only when they are brought back into the living awareness of God in which they were implied. For the religious man, therefore, as Ian Ramsey observes, 'God' is a key word, an irreducible 'posit', an ultimate of explanation expressive of the kind of commitment he professes.³⁷ Faith is essentially trust in a personal Redeemer and it is in this context that the theological language of religious experience has its verification. 'Therefore, unless the autonomous validity of religious experience is accepted in its own field and the theoretic reflection thereon is carried in the context of this basic acceptance, all that goes on in any discussion about religion will appear completely irrelevant to those who are actually practising religion'.³⁸

The language of religious experience certainly intends to state something factual. The testimony of faith proves that at least there are qualities of character, which the Scriptures

³⁵ William Temple, *op. cit.*, 336.

³⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, 1956, 111.

³⁷ Ian Ramsey, *Religious Language*, 1957, 47.

³⁸ Daya Krishna, 'Religious Experience, Language and Truth', in *Religious Experience and Truth*, ed. Sidney Hook, 1962, 240.

refer to as 'the fruit of the Spirit', which the 'natural' man was unable to produce. It was only when life became God-related that these results began to show. In such cases it was the awareness of an utter dependence upon God which brought about this significant difference. And it is a fact that the more 'spiritual' a man becomes the more confident is he that it is 'not I' but the 'grace of God'. Unless all those who make this testimony are demented or deluded just account must be taken of their assertions. These people insist that but for their experience of God they would not be what they now are, and that qualities of character which they concurrently display have their source in that present attitude of redemptive awareness which is the very centre of their experience of God. It is in the light of this ultimate perception which is theirs by grace that the theological assertions of religious experience find their verification.

It is, of course, to be stressed that it is difficult to present a convincing account of religious experience to those who are without it, just as it is virtually impossible to convey what is involved in the experience of seeing to a blind man. It is, however, quite beyond reason to ask that the theological judgments of religious experience be established by the application of the scientific method. Belief in God is essentially trustful assurance of Him as Creator and Redeemer: and it is in this context that the theoretical implicates of that belief find their significance. At the same time some reinforcing evidence of that faith will be seen in the life and outlook of religious people. While this 'evidence' is not of such a nature as, so to speak, to compel acceptance of its reality as a scientific fact, yet it is of such a nature as to show that where there is a personal 'encounter' with God, there will be its own type of 'operational' evidence.

It cannot, however, be too strongly insisted that religious experience is essentially a personal 'encounter'. It is this quality of personal relationship which gives it its depth and sense of satisfaction. First and foremost, religious experience is the apprehension of ultimate Divine reality through faith: and, faith makes the unhesitating claim to possess a real knowledge of its Object. Religious experience to be both vital and valid must be immediate and individual. At the same time it is right to emphasize, as A. D. Lindsay has wisely done, that 'Immediate and individual as it is, there is a long way between the first experience of assurance and the state of mind expressed in "I know whom I have believed."' The first immediate conviction is to be tested by its applicability to life, by its coherence with the rest of what we learn, by its rendering

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reality intelligible as much as are those intuitions which are the beginnings of great scientific discoveries'.³⁹ It will be understood, however, that the most convincing and contagious assurance comes 'in, with, and by' the religious experience itself and is not given by intellectual arguments advanced either prior to, or subsequent to, that experience, yet 'faithfulness to intellectual standards when they are relevant heightens and enhances the quality of religious experience, and unfaithfulness lowers and perverts it. This is a truth we are apt to forget with fatal consequences. We think that because science cannot give us religious truth, we may be as unscientific as we please when our thinking has to do with religion'.⁴⁰

³⁹ A. D. Lindsay *The Nature of Religious Truth*, 1927, 206, 7.

⁴⁰ *op. cit.*, 207.

In the experience of religion, however, faith discovers its own certainties and utters its own convictions. Thus the knowledge of that experience is conditioned in a religious way. It is not of the scientific sort; neither indeed can be. The religious man may have no sense of inadequacy concerning his faith on the score that the knowledge therein is not of the scientific kind. He should know how irrelevant to those deep realities of his faith is the application of the scientific method. It is not by science he has discovered God: it is not in any scientific way has he been apprehended by Divine love in which he has become certain of a holy forgiveness and assured of life for evermore. The knowledge of the religious person is a knowledge which is valid in the context of and according to its own canons. It is, of course, true that the general epistemological methods will not be repudiated but will be seen to have a certain validity when applied to the knowledge of faith. The religious person need not, for example, hesitate to apply the test of practice. He will be aware of the 'workability' of faith within his own experience: and he will be equally ready to bring the knowledge of religious faith into a coherent system, and discover and discuss its relation to other truth.

Deeper, however, than all this, the man of faith well knows that his religious experience was not of his own creating, or his own discovering. The sacred convictions which are the very essence of religious faith 'are not postulates, because they are generated in the mind and heart by the self-revelation of God. His self-disclosure, His awakening and arresting Word, has been the producing cause of these convictions; it is because God has shown us that in character He is such and such that we are sure of this and that. The Christian faith in immortality, for instance, is not merely the passionate human cry for another life; it has been evoked, rather, by God's unveiling Himself to men as faithfully and unchangeably Redeemer, and thereby conveying to them the assurance that He will not leave them in the dust or permit death to make a difference to the bond which unites them to Him'⁴¹. The inferential value of this living awareness can be allowed the strongest emphasis, as can the deep desires of the human heart out of which it springs. But in the final issue Christian experience arises out of the fact that God has come personally seeking us and that in Christ we have embraced the offer of communion with Himself.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AS AUTHORITY

Taking, then, religious experience as a genuine reality and, as such, something distinctive and unique, it is still necessarily immediate and individual. The

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question which then arises is, What account are we to give of its authority? The appeal to it has been vigorously stressed to sustain almost opposite conclusions. 'Modernists have used the appeal to experience against fundamentalists; and fundamentalists have taken their experience as a complete and final proof of their theology'.⁴²

As far as the individual is concerned, religious experience is the basis of a firm assurance. It is in the direct awareness of God that the believer finds his deepest certainty. Where this personal apprehension of God is, the most convincing arguments of the sceptic are helpless to destroy it: and, where it is not, the most elaborate proofs cannot create it. There will, of course, be many things about his relationship with God which the believer will not be able to

⁴¹ H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Apprehension of God*, 1929, 57, 58.

⁴² E. S. Brightman, *op. cit.*, 227.

state clearly. There will, too, be many questions put to him that he will not be able to answer. But he will not hesitate to declare that in his 'encounter' with God his blindness has passed. He will testify with the man in the ninth chapter of John's gospel, 'now I see'. And to many of the objections of his critics he will have to answer, 'I know not'. His critic may say it is a subjective feeling or an illusion: but he will reply, 'Whether you call it the one or the other, I care not: one thing I do know that whereas I was blind, now I see'. It is only those who have religion in this direct way have ultimate assurance.

No 'faith', scaffolded by 'Five Ways' or by five thousand, can bring this final personal certainty. As long as religion is similar to 'knowledge about' it will remain open to doubt. Arguments are as the scaffolding to the building, they are not the building itself. All strictly rational theology, be it scholastic or deistic, which lacks the intimacy born of personal immediate apprehension, cannot but have a certain residue of uncertainty. It is precisely this lack of certainty which, in the one case, has brought about the claim for a papal infallibility and, in the other, to a personal one. We must, however, be careful to guard against the danger of laying too much stress upon the idea of religious experience as 'isolated moments'. This is a tendency which can possibly be traced to the influence of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. That there are such definite 'occurrences' in the experience of individuals is a fact which is a presupposition of what we have been arguing. Indeed, we have claimed that such 'moments' are essential and fundamental. Yet it must be remembered that such 'moments' are of value and validity only as they relate to and condition the whole round of living. In the individual, religious experience must be related to experience as a whole. It is not merely in the first moments of intense awareness of God, or those special occasions, when in prayer, there is a certainty of a divine glory, or in those seasons of worship when one touches and tastes things unseen, but in the daily round of life, in which every act and attitude is conditioned by the individual relationship to God that religious experience is actual.

To stress, therefore, the view that a certain finality belongs to religious experience does not mean that we allow the authenticity of every whim and fancy which may be claimed as from God. This would be to give scope for the most lurid and ludicrous. And it would mean that certainty could be claimed for contradictory 'experiences' with the result that there would be complete anarchy and chaos. The religious experience to which confident appeal can be made will be that which has been investigated and interrogated. It must at least show

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some credence and pass muster at the bar of intellectual enquiry. While it is important to stress that reasoned arguments do not make religious experience, it is also right to insist that there is no genuine experience which will not stand the test of intellectual scrutiny. We do not, therefore, give either liberty to the 'enthusiast', or licence to the 'rationalist'.

Regard will be taken of the fact that others, too, lay claim to an experience of God: and this unity of experience will serve not only as an encouragement but also as a corrective for the individual. 'The fact that no single religious experience can stand by itself as authoritative is not to be taken as a discrediting of religious experience'.⁴³

⁴³ *ibid.* 240.

Above all, the Christian believer will find in the Scriptures, which are for him the creative source of his experience, the objective norm and test of the validity of that experience which he claims.

What, then, is religious experience, or more significantly, what is Christian experience? It is this. Christian experience is the direct apprehension by faith of God's saving action in Christ, as this is immediately mediated to the responding individual through the declared facts of the Gospel, which produces a warmth and assurance of soul, and a commitment to a life of thanksgiving in service and worship.

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