

Introduction

Exploring Religious Experiences

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A. MAPPING THE TERRITORY

The concept 'experience' is about as clear as a hairshirt is comfortable - according to Keith Yandell (1974: 173). One reason this is so is that the verb "to experience" means simply "to undergo personally; to feel, suffer, enjoy for oneself; hence to know something directly." This leaves wide open all questions as to the contents, durations, frequencies, qualities, subjects and objects of "experiencing".

Thus, "experiences" (the noun) denotes a class virtually unlimited in extension. It can be equally "an experience" to enjoy a Bach chorale or to eat a banana, to fall in love or to reflect on the ontological argument, to feel cold or to feel obligated to keep a promise, to become aware of the presence of God or attain Nirvana or watch a sunset.

Common usage paradoxically suggests that "*an experience*" is something that sticks out from all we are *experiencing* (just as "*a happening*" stands out from all that is routinely *happening*). "Experiences", in this sense, are special moments or occasions or periods which, from the viewpoint of those undergoing, enjoying or suffering through them, are attended to and perceived as contrasting with the ordinariness of everyday living, as interruptions of the mundane routine, as changes in our accustomed environment.

The moment we inquire into which experiences people like or dislike, value or disvalue, endless diversity again appears. Empiricists, notoriously, prize "sense-experience" and seem to want to make *that* the meaning of "experience". For rationalists, however, "seeing a necessary truth" is also unshakably an experience and one they prize

more highly than sense-experience. And the mystic - whom Josiah Royce called the true empiricist - prizes another kind of experience altogether! Shi'ite Muslims, Charismatic Christians, Solomon Islanders and Australian Rules fans, all have their special and valued experiences.

A final complication arises when we note that "experience" may also refer to "time spent" in any occupation or practice. We can speak, for example, of our experience as plumbers or physicians or Buddhists or Australians. And this leads to the sweeping use of the word to refer to vast collective "undergoings" in such phrases as "the Australian experience", "the Christian religious experience in its historical context" (Reynolds, 1977), and even "The Religious Experience of Mankind" (the title of Ninian Smart's 1971 book).

This latter title is ambitious but it does delimit in several ways. First, Smart is proposing a history of humankind's *religious* experience (and therefore not of its political, aesthetic, military, etc. experience). Secondly, he is dealing with religious *experience* (and therefore not with religious doctrines, institutions, etc.). And this means, thirdly, that he is exploring not the "externals", the outer manifestations of religion, but the inner life, the "hearts and minds" of religious persons, i.e., what they feel, suffer, undergo and enjoy.

To be sure, Smart's *The Religious Experience of Mankind* immediately breaks down into chapters on "the Chinese Religious Experience", "the Early Christian Experience", "the African Religious Experience", etc. And each of these traditions is itself composite or multiplex, partly because running variously through them all are transcultural kinds of religious experiences such as the ecstatic, prophetic, sacramental, mystical and Bhakti varieties. With the religious experience of the human race pluralism is endemic.

Religion, of course, is more than religious experience. Scholars have identified a variety of dimensions or areas or categories within religion - myths, symbols, beliefs, knowledge, stories, texts, behaviour, activities, ethics, social structure, etc. (See, for example, Stark [1965] and Strommen [1971] who specify four, or Smart [1971] six, or Moore and Habel [1980] eight.) None of the lists examined, however, omit religious experience nor, so long as religion lives, *could* it be legitimately excluded. Let us examine more closely how the term is used.

1. Which experiences are "religious"?

Some give the term "religious experiences" a restricted reference while others apply it to a wide range of phenomena.

On the one hand, many Christian writers continue to use the term exclusively of the worship of the supernatural deity of traditional Western Christianity. (See, for example, H. D. Lewis, *Our Experience of God*, 1959: 72, 106, 109ff). More narrowly still, but for millions in the West, the term evokes the idea of Conversion or, in current terminology, the Born-Again experience. (Gallup polls show [Wills, 1978:77]

that one American in three - and fully half the Protestant population of the United States - claims to have had a Born-Again experience.) Other circles within Christianity use the term of more esoteric experiences such as healings and glossolalia. Thus, and paradoxically, in the judgment of some religious circles many religious people, even life-long church- and temple-goers, have never had a religious experience!

On the other hand, the extensive Religion Studies literature uses the term "religious experiences" to refer to encounters with *any* of the world's gods and goddesses as well as with Bodhisattvas or spirits or ancestors or demons. In fact, it is applied to a startling diversity of world religious phenomena and even to a variety of contemporary secular experiences! Research for this volume showed "religious experience" being used to designate

vague glimmerings of something sacred
encounters with all manner of gods and goddesses
encounters with spirits, demons and ancestors
a sense of transcendence, absolute dependence, the
holy
simple piety, spirituality, rapturous mystical union
dreams, trance, ecstasies and possession states
meditations, revelations, insights, awakenings
conversions, confessions, transformations
feelings of peace, joy, fulfilment, anxiety, guilt
attainment of salvation or enlightenment
temptations and dark nights of the soul
encounters with demonic powers, feeling accursed
or damned
self-realization and self-renunciation
even awareness of "Nothingness" and realization
of "no-self"

2. How Can Religious Experiences Be Classified and Defined?

This extensive usage seems to make a good definition of "religious experience" impossible. Perhaps there *could* be no more consensus in this matter than there is in the business of defining "religion". As Strommen reports (1971: 552), "a wide divergence of definitions of what is and what is not 'religious' is found in the social and behavioural sciences as well as in the philosophical, humanistic and theological disciplines" and the issue is still not finally settled as to "which of a person's practices, beliefs, feelings, knowledge and consequential behaviour are 'religious'." (In one piece of purely Western research, for example, Shand (1953) interviewed 142 ministers, rabbis and priests and gleaned over 2,400 ideas of what it means to be 'religious'. These he had classified into 180 distinctly different conceptions which further grouped into five basically different orientations.)

It is understandable, then, that many researchers should "define" religious experience as "any experience to which people attach religious definitions," or "feelings you may have had which you think of as religious" (Stark, 1965: 98. Cf. James, 1958:42, and Glock, 1959: 26f) and then set about the task of response-gathering and classification. No doubt the assumption that people are religious if they think they are commends itself as neutral and empirical as well as appropriate in a culture with a penchant for opinion polling. Of course, the formulation of questionnaires as well as the results obtained reflect local linguistic conventions and thus tend to presuppose any definitions they produce. Nevertheless, attempts at classification-and-definition bring order into a chaotic field and a few examples follow.

(a) Clark's Typology of "Intense Religious Experiences".

Walter H. Clark (1971) restricts his interest to "intense" religious experiences. These "non-rational" experiences, he says, fall into three groups: Mysticism, Conversion and Esoteric, with the latter consisting of Faith Healing, Glossolalia and Possession. For Clark, the mystical experience - which he defines as "sensing the presence of the living God" - is religious experience *par excellence*, the most powerful, intense and captivating experience known. Though not the whole of religion, it is "the only aspect of religion that is unique" and the door through which people enter religion in a special way (522f). Clark writes as if the other experiences are ultimately important only because they can express or activate the latent mysticism within us (531-539). He defines religious experience as "*an immediate perception of the cosmic or transcendental accompanied by affect, the whole usually leading to changes in values and behaviour related to the experience*" (522).

Clark stands, however, in an older tradition. The study of religious experiences was a major concern of a number of eminent scholars at the turn of the century, e.g. E. D. Starbuck (1899), William James (1902/1958) and James Leuba (1925). Their attention, like Clark's, was restricted, Starbuck concentrating on conversion experiences among American Protestants and Leuba dealing primarily with extravagant instances of religious ecstasy. Stark (1965: 98f) notes that these early studies were not followed up significantly in subsequent decades and himself attempts a more expansive taxonomy.

(b) Stark's Taxonomy of Religious Experiences: an "interactor" paradigm.

For Rodney Stark (1965: 98-116) the essential feature of religious experience is "*some sense of contact with a supernatural agency.*" In this he follows earlier researchers (Cf. James, 1958: 42, 61; Leuba, 1925: 1; Strickland, 1924: 66; Glock, 1959: 26f). Stark quotes with approval Glock's definition: religious experiences are "*all those feelings, perceptions and sensations which are experienced by an actor or*

defined by a religious group or a society as involving some communication, however slight, with a divine essence, i.e. with God, with ultimate reality, with transcendental authority.” (p. 98)

From responses to 3,000 questionnaires, Stark isolates a relatively homogeneous collection of material, while excluding, as he admits, much which others might want to include. He treats religious experiences as “inter-personal” encounters, orders them in terms of the degree of intimacy involved, and sketches four possible configurations (p. 99):

- “1. the human actor simply notes (feels, senses, etc.) the existence or presence of the divine actor.
2. mutual presence is acknowledged. The divine actor is perceived as noting the presence of the human actor.
3. the awareness of mutual presence is replaced by an affective relationship akin to love or friendship.
4. the human actor perceives himself as a confidant of and/or a fellow participant in action with the divine actor.”

Using these simple inter-actor configurations, Stark identifies the following types and sub-types of religious experience, moving from the most frequent and most encouraged (by both religious and secular norms) to the least frequent and most discouraged. Thus, “Divine Religious Experiences” may be:

- A. Confirming: a sudden “feeling” or “knowing” that one’s beliefs are true, induced by an experience of the presence of sacred influence, either (i) a generalized sense of sacredness or (ii) a specific awareness of divine presence.
- B. Responsive: awareness of divine presence *and* a corresponding sense that the divine is aware of you. These may be (i) Salvational: being acknowledged as special or chosen by divinity (and here Stark places the vast body of literature on Christian Conversion). (ii) Miraculous: helpful divine intervention in one’s worldly affairs. (iii) Sanctioning: divine intervention to punish or prevent wrong-doing.
- C. Ecstatic: intimate and affective contact with divinity. One is not only chosen, one is embraced, “engulfed by divine love”, usually with extraordinary psychic states and manifestations (e.g. glossolalia).
- D. Revelational: becoming a confidant and/or agent of the divine. The revelation may (i) be orthodox or heterodox, (ii) enlighten or commission, etc.

Stark believes that, historically, encounters with “evil” supernatural powers have been about as frequent as encounters with “good” forces, so he produces a parallel taxonomy of “Diabolic Religious Experiences” to cover “Satanic” encounters: Confirming, Responsive, Terrorising and Possessional, with their sub-types.

(c) Moore and Habel: "six components"

Basil Moore and Norman Habel (1980) define religious experience as "*the structured way in which a believer enters into a relationship with (or awareness of) an other than mundane reality within the context of a particular religious tradition*". They suggest that any religious experience has at least the following six components (each of which may be sub-divided):

- i. the other than mundane reality experienced
- ii. the experiencing believer
- iii. the cosmological context
- iv. the presence and nature of mediators
- v. the effects of the experience
- vi. the traditional context and process of authenticating the experience.

It can be seen that Moore and Habel continue the tradition which sees religious experience as essentially an encounter with a supra-mundane reality although, like Stark, they feel scholars have overconcentrated on the more exotic or traumatic encounters and ignored the common religious experiences of the masses. For Moore and Habel "the vast majority of believers" experience the other-than-mundane realities through special persons, sacred texts, totemic symbols, etc. Hence they categorise religious experiences as either (i) mediated or (ii) immediate. Nevertheless, they conclude, "there is no single typical structure of the religious experience. Each religious experience has its own peculiar structure. The task of the typologist is to attempt to discern the pattern of relationships between the component elements of any given religious experience."

(d) Streng: "eight ways of being religious"

Streng's approach (1973) goes far beyond the typologies already discussed. Defining religion as "any means toward ultimate transformation", Streng can include all quests "for salvation, enlightenment, perfection, fulfilment or joy" (p. 7). Stark's 'inter-personal contact with a supernatural agency' becomes just one of Streng's "eight ways of being religious".

In terms of functional definitions such as Streng's, virtually any act or experience *can* be religious. Streng first identifies four traditional ways, viz., rebirth through personal encounter with the Holy; creation of community through myth and ritual; living harmoniously through conformity to the Cosmic Law; spiritual freedom through discipline (Mysticism). To these he adds four contemporary, humanistic, this-worldly "means toward ultimate transformation": attaining an integrated self through creative interaction; achievement of human rights through political and economic action; conquest of life's inadequacies through technology; enjoyment of full life through sensuous experience.

The four non-traditional ways of being religious appear to the experiencer, says Streng, as "processes of life transformation" which claim ultimacy *without also claiming or implying contact with some transcendent agency, order or state* (pp. 11-13). And all eight ways give shape to religious experience and behaviour, structuring the believer's journey toward ultimate transformation. For some, Streng's definition will be too wide altogether. For others, it is suggestive and liberating.

(e) A Summary List of Distinctions.

Numerous distinctions and contrasts have thus been drawn with respect to religious experiences. The essays in this volume reflect old ones and bring new ones to light. For example, mention is made of "theistic", "pantheistic" (Unterman), "atheistic" (Blacker), "non-theistic" (Stephen, Irwin) and "secular" (Habel) religious experiences. Any list of contrasts would include:

- sudden versus gradual
- organized versus spontaneous
- privately-generated versus communally-generated
- intense and dramatic versus mild and vague
- brief or momentary versus sustained
- once-in-a-lifetime versus oft-repeated or habitual
- democratic versus elitist or hierarchical
- exoteric versus esoteric
- authoritarian versus free
- theistic versus non-theistic
- mediated versus non-mediated
- hellish or demonic versus beatific or divine.

3. Is Religious Experience Determined by its Context?

There is general agreement that the religious life of any people is profoundly social, and that even private personal experiences are shaped by the traditions and expectations of the person's religious culture. Some writers, however, give this point a fairly extreme expression.

Gordon Kaufman (1975) is an articulate current spokesman for the view that all experience is a construct, heavily dependent for its form and qualities on the learned terms and concepts which give it its particular flavour and shape. For him, the pioneering work of Kant and Hegel, "who uncovered the dependency of all experience on language and thought", has been "largely confirmed by modern psychological studies" (p. 18). It follows then, that all religious experiences - whether "of" God or peace or transcendence or Shiva or an ancestor - are, for Kaufman, highly complex modes of consciousness which are "shaped, delimited and formed" by the linguistic symbols that name them. Without these symbols to guide our consciousness, we could not

have these "experiences" at all. No "raw pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic ground of religious experience" is available to us for direct exploration, description or interpretation. Thus, Kaufman concludes:

"What religious experience is in any particular case is itself *determined* by the images and the linguistic and conceptual categories available in the tradition of the experiencer. These shape and form and define the experience and interpret its meaning to him or her." (p. 7) (my italics)

Alongside this emphasis in Kaufman must be placed the view that at least some aspects and types of religious experience are transcultural and even universal in character. Bhakti forms of religious experience appear in various theistic religions (Cf. Comstock 1971: 160-179). Stace (1960) claimed to identify the universal core of mystical experience and offered a seven-fold characterisation of it. Clark (1971) suggested that therefore inherent forces more than social influences govern mystical experience (although he thought the reverse to be true with what ordinarily is recognized as Conversion). Sargant (1973) tried to show that "the same physiological processes" underlie a whole range of mystical, possession, faith-healing and other experiences found all around the world. And so on.

In this volume, the essay by Philip Almond specifically raises the question of the relation between experience and its auto-interpretation; and Max Charlesworth's contribution, while acknowledging the context-dependency of religious experience, offers two important arguments against the determinist view that all religious experience is *totally* dependent on context.

Of course, our whole preoccupation here may seem strangely irrelevant to the Zen adept who has arrived at *post-cognitive*, *post-linguistic*, *post-symbolic* awareness!

4. Auto-interpretation and Critical Interpretation of Religious Experience

The various forms of the religious life have an independence of their own, and religions can provide, out of their own resources, interpretation and justification of the experiences and behaviour of their devotees. If the student of religion takes seriously the reality of religious experiences to those undergoing them, he will also take seriously their auto-interpretations.

At the same time, he will take seriously "critical" interpretations of religious experience, i.e. those which stem from an alternative religious or ideological stance or from general empirical and rational criteria. These will not replace auto-interpretations but will "raise questions and problems of which we might be unaware under the spell of a believer or a sympathetic interpreter." (Ellwood, 1978: 20) It seems to be the case that there is no religious phenomenon for which reasonable non-religious or at least non-supernatural explanations that convince

many people cannot be adduced (e.g. that religious experiences are psychologically explicable projections) (Ellwood, 1978: 169).

Critical approaches, however, may reduce all of religious experience to psychological, biological or social terms and this may not be adequate for interpreting the data of religious experience and may miss the central reality or vision exposed in that experience. (Cf. Streng, 1973: 3) Hence, both Auto-interpretation and Critical interpretation play necessary roles in understanding religious people and their experiences. Rowan Ireland's essay reveals a field-worker/scholar nicely tuned in to this complexity: sensitive to the experiences and interpretations of ordinary folk, and aware of both the insights and limitations of any critical "packaging".

B. PREVIEWING THE ESSAYS

Our collection begins with **Max Charlesworth's** succinct analysis of the notion of "religious experience". Then, as the following synopsis shows, the essays are ordered in terms of their emphasis on one or other major category of religious experience in world religions.

1. Altered States of Consciousness (dreams, trance, possession, etc.) as Religious Experiences.

There has been much recent interest in the broad range of transcultural phenomena currently referred to as "Altered States of Consciousness" (ASC). It includes dreams, hypnagogic images, day-dreams, trance, visions, mediumistic possession, spirit-possession, drug-induced hallucinations and other psychic occurrences. When individuals or even whole communities drop out of ordinary states of consciousness and enter or tune-in-directly-to "alternative realities", they are having what many in both modern and traditional societies readily regard as "religious experiences".

Michele Stephen's article carefully documents the fact that in many Melanesian societies dreams, trance and possession states are regarded as highly important religious experiences. This is so because they provide direct communication with the realm of divine power, the realm of ancestors, deities and spirits. They represent ways of obtaining supra-human knowledge and power - knowledge of the past and future, of new techniques, skills, inventions. They are sources of help and healing, inspiration and (significantly) cultural innovation.

Dreams may be understood as "religious experiences" in Polynesia as well as Melanesia. As **James Irwin** reports, in the Polynesian worldview there are no rigid boundaries between the natural and the supernatural. A person's *wairua* (spirit) can travel from the body during sleep or be visited by the spirits of the dead. Hence in dreams come "things seen and revealed to the spirit", supernatural warnings, assaults

by a spirit, words of encouragement from the dead or dying, etc. Mr. Irwin, in his three case studies, tells how he ministered to individuals who had experienced dream/visions. Something of a "polysymbolic virtuoso", Jim Irwin is at home in the very different symbolic worlds of Christianity, Western psychology and Polynesian tradition. He shows how he can move freely between them and *use them as suits his humane purpose* in dealing with particular experiences of troubled people.

2. Ecstatic Religious Experience

Our word "ecstasy" derives from the Greek *ekstasis - ek*, "aside", *histanai*, "to make to stand". Thus, to be ecstatic is, as we say, "to be beside oneself", hence to belong to another or, religiously, to be possessed by a divine being. This age-old, universal, multiform religious phenomenon has gone by other names at times - "pentecostal" (Acts 2), "religious enthusiasm" (the 18th Century understood *en theos* literally) and, currently, "charismatic" - from the Greek *charismata*, free gifts of (divine) grace, one of which is "the gift of tongues" (glossolalia).

Christopher Bennie writes about the contemporary Christian movement of Charismatic Renewal, and does so as an insider, a "participant observer". He is concerned lest the charismatic experience be seen exclusively in terms of that one expression of ecstatic behaviour known as glossolalia. What is involved, he insists, is a whole transformation of outlook and life-style. To illustrate this, he has surveyed his own Catholic Charismatic prayer community in Melbourne and then (inspired by Weber) constructed an ideal type, "a composite charismatic", presenting us with a typical "experience profile" in terms of which many involved in charismatic renewal find meaning for life.

While Chris Bennie writes as an insider (almost as an advocate) looking around thoughtfully to interpret his fellow charismatics, Richard Hutch explores the critical stances of researchers who, from the outside, look at that very phenomenon - glossolalia - from which Bennie would like to divert exclusive attention. Hutch reviews examples of psychological (Kildahl), socio-cultural (Goodman) and linguistic (Samarin) attempts to understand the speaking-in-tongues phenomenon - approaches which see it as aberrant, neurotic, pathological, extraordinary or linguistically anomalous. In the end, all of them, in Hutch's view, "fail to come to grips directly with the experience of tongue-speaking as a patently personal religious phenomenon." He therefore presses the claims of an emerging paradigm of ritual behaviour, and presents glossolalia as *a personal ritual* which can bring about a deepening of the spiritual dimension of human existence.

3. Mystical Religious Experiences

Although dictionaries see Mysticism as fundamentally the effort

to attain direct and immediate communion with God, the literature of world religions demonstrates that the matter is not at all straightforward. Two of our essays touch on the question "How many Mysticismisms?" and discuss the interplay between mystical experience and interpretation.

Alan Unterman reminds us that any Creator-God-Theism, which posits a created world dependent on but quite separate from the deity, has the problem of how this ontologically distinct deity can be experienced. Orthodoxy, in this case exoteric Judaism, relates the world back to God through the notion of revelation, and experiences God primarily through the sacred word (Torah) or the prophet or the divinely ordained cultic channel. The Jewish mystic, however, has an ongoing and overpowering experience of the divine outside these exoteric channels. How is he to conceptualise his experience and at the same time remain within the restraints of traditional faith? Unterman's paper explores the complex medieval solution which expressed itself in a Panentheistic doctrine (or doctrines) of Emanation and divine self-withdrawal (*tzimtzum*). Clearly, a Panentheistic interpretation broadens the range of possible religious experiences, for God may be discovered not only in the sacred word, time or place, but in the world and in people themselves.

Variety in reports of mystical experiences raises the question of interpretation discussed by **Philip Almond**. As Dr. Almond notes, these reports differ as to the central focus of the experience (e.g. God, Brahman, Nirvana), the aim of the experience (e.g. union with God, attainment of *kaivalya*) or the nature of the experience (e.g. objectless, non-dual, an undifferentiated unity). Are there, then, as many kinds of mystical experiences as there are kinds of descriptions of them? Are pre-existing interpretations simply incorporated into the experience from the religious and cultural context? Is mystical experience really one and the same everywhere but accompanied with various modes of interpretation?

Dr. Almond's resolution of these issues is to suggest that while there *are* contentful mystical experiences, there is also a state "beyond" them in which there is no longer "incorporated" content or "reflexive" interpretation occurring, and this "pure" mystical state is the "limiting case" of mystical experience.

4. Self-generated Meditative Religious Experiences

The idea of an interior religious transformation deliberately self-generated may seem suspect to those for whom a religious experience is an act of grace not of nature. Nevertheless, privately pursued spiritual exercises, disciplines and meditations are found in all traditions and can be distinguished from congregational or communally-generated experiences (even while we concede that both types depend ultimately on the transmissions of the various religious communities).

Buddhism offers intriguing examples of self-generated experiences. The Buddha himself attained realization through profound, private, psychological self-analysis and self-control, and one of the central foci of the Buddhist family of religions remains deliberate practice for transformation of consciousness, e.g. through chanting, ritual and, especially, meditation. It is to aspects of Buddhist meditation experience that two of our essays direct themselves.

First, **Carmen Blacker** illustrates deliberate religious transformation in the Shingon sect. Three times a day, for a hundred days, through three kinds of symbolic imitation (mudras, mantras and visualizations), the disciple enacts a ritual drama in seclusion, constructing a model of the sacred world, inviting the Buddhas in to take their proper places, securely sealing them in, and then moving to make his own Buddha nature one with the Buddha he has summoned. Dr. Blacker then contrasts this with Rinzai Zen meditation where the aloneness of the meditator seems complete. He sits with his utterly unintelligible koan! There is no divine agency to help. There is not even an aura of numinousness clinging to the koan. There is "nothing that tempts us to bow our head as before a mysterium tremendum." And yet, as Dr. Blacker concludes, this insoluble riddle, rightly "penetrated", helps to produce the very state of enlightenment from which it was made.

The second paper is by **Peter Fenner**, himself no stranger to solitary contemplation. He, too, draws attention to non-theistic, deliberately self-generated religious experiences, namely, those meditations on egolessness which Buddhist monk-philosophers and yogins use in order to effect major transformations in their psyches and consequent world-views. He goes on, however, to outline a generally accessible meditation-experience "for ordinary people" - one which has, if not transformational potential, at least therapeutic application.

5. Polysymbolic Versatility in Religious Experiencing

One of the world's best-known virtuosi in the field of religious experiences is Sri Ramakrishna, Hindu saint, ecstatic and mystic, and it is interesting to be reminded in our time of this man's polysymbolic versatility! **Timothy Jensen's** paper describes Ramakrishna's early attempts to live according to a conventional dharma (as student, as priest); his childhood trances; his bhakti-experiences of several deities; and his experience of identity with Brahman, i.e. *moksha*, Advaita Vedānta's highest religious goal (sustained, astonishingly, for six months). Dr. Jensen then turns to the crucial "command of Kālī" that Ramakrishna return from moksha to live (with select disciples and in devotion to the god) a *dharma* delicately balanced at the edge of *moksha*, a life in *bhavamukha*, a life on "the summit of phenomenal existence."

6. Religious Experience as Everyday Lived Meaning

Since religion is a human activity, it is open to the observation and study of everyone, believer and non-believer alike. Naturally, the believer may insist that his activity can be properly understood only by reference to some agency, order or state of affairs not open to ordinary observation. But, as we noted above, critical observers - Freud and Marx are classic examples - dispute this claim. They argue, in effect, that believers have misinterpreted their experience, and failed to discover its "true" psychological or social function.

The Marxism-related concept of "alienated religion", for example, is frequently used in Latin America (in both academic and pastoral analyses of popular religion) to propose just such a critical interpretation of the religious experience of the poor. **Rowan Ireland's** paper examines this use. "Alienation", he writes, "seems to designate the state of failing to grasp the structural sources of suffering and the possibilities for social action directed against these sources." This concept of alienated religion, he acknowledges, enables deep insight into the patterns of popular piety.

Limitations in the concept, however, seem to have come home to Dr. Ireland as a result of his intensive field work in Brazil. His case materials focus on religion-as-lived in the flow of daily life. He does not wish to see the everyday experience of religion among the poor "prematurely packaged within the concept of alienation", for this would mean missing its richness, diversity and complexity. Hence in speaking of religious experience, Dr. Ireland is referring "not to the discrete religious moment located apart from the profane, but almost to the opposite: to religion as it is woven into the texture of daily life."

7. An Australian Folk Ritual as a Secular Religious Experience

"Carols by Candlelight" is an indigenous Australian Folk Ritual. It began in Melbourne in 1938 and is now an annual Christmas ritual around Australia with hundreds of thousands attending the ceremonies. This "public celebration of Christmas religion" interrupts the Christmas buying frenzy in dramatic manner. It momentarily reverses the rites of excess typical of the period, and "stands out" in almost pastoral contrast to garish commercialism.

It is instructive to learn that half the worshippers interviewed at Carols by Candlelight did not attend church or consider themselves conventionally "religious" persons, yet many said that in some undefined way Carols by Candlelight was "a religious experience" for them. It would seem that analyses of the phenomena of our various Australian folk rituals is overdue. Dr. **Norman Habel** is doing pioneering work in this Religion Studies area, and we are indebted to him for his

first-hand study of this Christmas ceremony. He sketches the major features of its ritual process (using familiar phenomenological categories), outlines the cosmology reflected in the underlying folk belief patterns, and discerns the event as a religious experience whose elements include communal praise and thanksgiving, heightened feelings of goodwill toward others, and a sense of wonder and mystery. Dr. Habel concludes:

“The experience of the folk community may not assume the form of a dramatic trance, a mystical flight or a numinous confrontation. Yet there seems to be a serious if unassuming contact with the roots of its faith, a Christmas faith common to many Australians.”

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