FAITH AND EXPERIENCE

By JUSTIN J. KELLY

AT FIRST sight, faith and religious experience seem to be opposites. For if faith is 'the assurance of things not seen',[1] the assent of the believing mind and heart to God and his Word, its object is by definition beyond all experience. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus continually praises those who, like the centurion, believe in him without demanding 'signs and wonders';[2] in John, the risen Christ proclaims blessed 'those who have not seen, and yet have believed'.[3] Although religious experience obviously embraces more than simple seeing, it too implies some kind of direct evidence of God's power and presence, some immediate encounter with divine reality, which seems contrary to the darkness of faith. The very word 'experience', moreover, denotes something that happens to someone, something more or less passively undergone. Faith, on the other hand, implies an active reaching-out to a reality that does not imprint itself on the senses or the mind, but which must be attained by a strenuous activity. It appears, then, that the more religious experience a person has, the less faith is needed; and conversely, that the greater one's faith, the less need or room there is for religious experience.

I believe that this opposition between faith and religious experience is merely apparent. This article will try to show that the two are, on the contrary, interdependent: that is, that religious experience is the source of the revelation known in faith, and that faith, as a spiritual attitude, is an inner moment of religious experience. This is so even though some kind of religious experience is possible in the absence of religious beliefs, and though faith can survive and grow strong even in the absence of any strong 'religious feelings'. These paradoxical conditions will be described in more detail below. I will begin with some contemporary 'experiences of God' and move from them to show how faith and religious experience imply and depend on each other.

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[1] Heb 11, 1.
[2] Lk 7, 9; Mt 8, 10.
[3] Jn 20, 29.

Religious experience

What is 'religious experience'? At times one is tempted to say of it what La Rochefoucauld said of falling in love: 'It is like seeing a ghost: all of us talk about it, but few have actually seen one'. Yet though religious experiences may be more talked about than sought, and more sought than had, they are more common and more widespread than this cynical view would suggest. Many people who would hesitate to lay claim to any mystic visions or special revelations from God will admit to having encountered the 'holy' in some form in their own lives, perhaps more than once. One of my students in an adult education course, after denying that God had ever 'hit her over the head' with any single overwhelming experience, went on to describe how, from time to time,

> . . . a situation will rather abruptly take on a dimension that most situations simply do not have for me. This dimension has some characteristics that seem almost definable: a physical sensation a bit like Wordsworth's 'My heart leaps up'; a sense of each fragment of the world being in its proper place and proportion; a complete trust in the fact that what I am feeling is true; a sense of expectancy; the feeling of being a vehicle in the power of 'good'; and all this related in some way or other to the life of another person.

Another student in the same course, a man in his early thirties, related a specific experience which had happened to him more than ten years earlier:

> The extraordinary quiet of the room combined with the still of the oncoming dusk to produce a surrealistic sense that everything had slipped still-poised into timelessness. Then came an awareness of an overwhelming presence, one which seemed to crowd every volume of space around me . . . then, startlingly, *in* me. Or rather in my body, leaving my mind in the role of a quietly awed and fascinated 'third person' observer. It was uncanny to experience my body exulting in that mysterious presence while my mind stood apart, wondering as it were how to join in without losing the vantage point of a spectator.

Drawing on these and similar accounts written by students of mine in recent years, I will describe some qualities typically found in these experiences. The main ones may be loosely grouped under five headings: gift, peace, meaning, timelessness, freedom.

1. Gift: fundamental to all these experiences is the sense of receiving a gift, something unmerited and sometimes unexpected. Often the experience came suddenly, involving a break with what

went before. Even when some conscious preparation preceded, as for instance when the individual was praying, there was the sense of something happening which did not proceed from his or her efforts alone. It was and remains an 'amazing grace', a gift that seems to descend from on high rather than a goal striven for and achieved.

2. Peace: many and varied as are the forms in which the experience comes, the most characteristic one involves a sense of peace. It includes reassurance and, sometimes, a quiet but deep joy. There is the feeling of being rooted in absolute reality, held gently but unshakeably in the grip of a being at once powerful and good. There is the sense of a fundamental harmony within and without the self, between the self and the universe; a feeling that, however troubled the surface of life may be, the depths are safe and tranquil; a deep conviction that things are 'all right'.

3. Meaning: flowing from the latter and inseparable from it, there is the sense of the meaningfulness of life and of oneself: a heightened awareness of life's worthwhileness, coupled at times with a new understanding about oneself and about one's relationship to the world, to others, and to God. There is the sense of actually 'being in the truth', not just of *feeling* happy or good. (As Mircea Eliade observes, 'Sacredness is, above all, real';[4] and the person who seeks the sacred is trying to increase his own reality, 'wedge himself into being', by means of a transforming encounter with the ground of all that is.)

4. Timelessness: a sense of being 'outside time' attaches to these as to many other so-called 'peak experiences'.[5] The person is often unable to say afterwards how long the experience lasted – whether a few seconds, minutes, or even longer. In the event itself, the consciousness of time and time's passage gives way to the experience of a 'now' which is full and which endures. It seems to be the experience of some kind of 'temporal eternity'. ('And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time', says T. S. Eliot in the *Four Quartets*, a poem which describes several such experiences.)

5. Freedom: a frequent if not invariable concomitant of these moments is the sense of liberation, of something which can only be described as a 'freed freedom'. The person feels less driven, more

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[4] Eliade, Mircea: *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans Rosemary Sheed (New York, 1958), p 459.

[5] Cf Maslow, Abraham H.: *Toward a Psychology of Being* (New Jersey, 1962), p 76.

able to be and to express his authentic self. He is not so much the victim of internal and external compulsions. The pressures of his life are not done away with, but they have less constraining and confining power. There is the sense of a new security which removes the need for many defences. The individual knows it is good to be himself or herself, good simply to be. In the light of that knowledge he or she feels able to transcend many things which before seemed overwhelming.

Many other qualities also occur in these accounts of religious experience, of course (nor does every religious experience necessarily involve all five of the above). Among the other qualities, the following were frequently mentioned: an impulse to praise; a longing to remain in the experience (cf Peter's 'Lord it is good for us to be here', Mk 9, 5) and to return to it afterwards; a consciousness of one's own sinful unworthiness, not as a degrading burden of guilt, but as a joyful and freeing recognition of God's overwhelming goodness; a new love for others, and also for oneself; and finally, a longing to serve, to be totally given over to the Being who is manifested as supreme value and absolute love. The list could be lengthened indefinitely to make room for individual variations of feeling and response.

Anyone familiar with William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* will note many similarities between the preceding classification and his description of what he calls 'mystic states'. For James, four traits characterize the latter: (1) ineffability (the words used describe the experience only inadequately, if at all); (2) noetic quality (there is a sense of new knowledge, or at least heightened awareness); (3) passivity (the experience is something which 'happens' outside the conscious control of the one having it); (4) transiency (the intensity of the vision quickly fades, as the individual descends to the plains of daily life).[6] The last quality, the passingness of the experience, was recognized by both of the persons quoted earlier, yet they insisted that a conviction of the reality of what had been revealed to them remained. The second in particular said:

> The experience passed quickly, leaving me in a state midway between pleasant exhaustion and profound peace. But this was only the short-

[6] James, William: *The Varieties of Religious Experience, A Study in Human Nature* (New York, 1961), pp 299–300.

> term effect . . . Since then I have felt an unshakeable confidence in the ongoing reality of the Presence I experienced that afternoon, and an equal confidence in the meaningfulness which that Presence confers on all matter, living and inanimate, past, present and future. And a happy sureness of participating in what that Presence is all about. Finally, I was left with a deep respect for the mystery of that Presence, not wanting to limit it with a name, a purpose, or any description more detailed than . . . a Presence.

The final point here is not only reminiscent of James's 'ineffability', but echoes that other classic account of religious experience, Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*. In a phrase that has become better known than anything else in his marvellously rich and suggestive book, Otto defines the God known in religious experience as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, 'the awesome and rapturous mystery'. The substantive, *mysterium*, for Otto, is something 'absolutely and intensely positive': it refers not to some deficiency in our minds which hinders us from comprehending God, but to God's own nature, his god-ness, which is forever beyond the possibility of all conceiving and defining.[7] This 'overaboundingness' of God given in religious experience is the principal theme of Otto's book: beyond all theological concepts, however true and valid in themselves, lies a domain inaccessible to conceptual thought, and there is the essence of divinity. The medieval author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* maintains that 'by love may he (God) be caught and held, but by thinking never';[8] Otto expresses the same point by saying that God may indeed be *known* (in experience) but not *understood* (by the thinking mind).[9] God truly dwells 'in light inaccessible': the words we use to speak of him are essentially 'pointers' to an experience that permanently surpasses the possibility of adequate expression. (In another place Otto specifically recommends the english word 'presence' because it avoids the limitations associated with the concept 'person': the God of religious experience is indeed personal, but he is more than *merely* personal, and the very indefiniteness of 'presence' helps to suggest both at once.)[10]

This leads to an important question which it is impossible even to begin to treat seriously here: the question of how it is possible to

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[7] Otto, Rudolf: *The Idea of the Holy*, trans John W. Harvey, 2nd edition (Oxford, 1958), p 13 and *passim*.

[8] *The Cloud of Unknowing*, trans Clifton Wolters (London, 1961), p 60.

[9] Otto, *op. cit.*, p 135. [10] *Ibid.*, p 198.

have any experience at all of the transcendent. The God who is beyond the grasp of the intellect is obviously also beyond the scope of all sensation, whether external or internal. In what sense, then, may one speak of an 'experience of God'? (Thus Eliade remarks that the mysterious thing is not that the sacred can be manifested in stones and trees, but that it can be manifested at all.)[11] However difficult it may be for the mind to conceive, the scriptures, as well as the whole christian tradition, repeatedly testify to the reality of such divine-human encounters. All that can be done here in lieu of an explanation is to note that the God found in the religious experience of the people of Israel is found there precisely *in* his transcendence. The One who reveals himself to Moses as Yahweh – 'I am that I am' – is encountered *as* the incomprehensible. In the very act of revealing himself he discloses his radical and unfathomable mystery: his self-naming is at the same time a declaration of absolute hiddenness. In allowing himself to be seen, he is seen as receding infinitely from human sight. The fact that the experience of God is ultimately an experience of mystery has important implications for the relationship between religious experience and faith, as will appear later on.

Religious experience without faith?

The example of Moses and the Israelites introduces a further question about the origin of religious experience. Must one believe in God in order to have an experience of him, or is experience of God itself the foundation of faith? In other words, which comes first: experience or belief?

Evidence drawn both from the biblical traditions and the history of religions points to the priority of experience over belief. The first encounters with God simply 'happen', most often unexpectedly, to the people involved: thus Moses meets Yahweh in a flaming bush, and Jacob wrestles with a mysterious 'someone' until the latter is revealed as God (or the angel of God). Men encounter the Lord in some perceptible – and often unlikely – form, and as a result come to believe. The content of their belief is in some way a formulation of the reality known in experience. Thus Van Der Leeuw declares on the opening page of his famous study in the phenomenology of religion: 'The most primitive religious belief is

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[11] Eliade, *op. cit.*, p 30.

absolutely empirical'.[12]

So too according to Otto, religion originates in the experience of something powerfully 'Other', prior to any clear notion of what this 'Other' is. It is recognized as real long before it is understood or conceptualized. Certain divinities of ancient Arabia are, he says, little more than 'wandering demonstrative pronouns'. They are '*numina*, not *nomina*': mysterious 'thats' or 'theres' rather than anything so definite as a god or a demon.[13]

Otto cites the words uttered by Jacob as he wakens from his dream in Genesis 17. 'Terrible is this place', as expressing 'primal numinous awe'. This is the core of primordial religious experience: the sense of something awesome, powerful, dangerously other. The second half of the verse, 'This is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven', is, Otto thinks, a reflective rationalization of the original experience. The elohist author accounts for the mysterious powerfulness of that place by relating it to a theology and a tradition. But the experience of numinosity or unearthly specialness was there before the theology, and is the ultimate basis of the tradition. This is not to say, Otto insists, that the rationalization is a distortion, or that the theology is false; it is simply to call attention to the pre-rational basis of the rational concept. There was religious experience before there was a set of beliefs to account for it; the experience of the holy is prior to the concept of God or even of gods.[14] 'To religion, "God" is a late-comer', as Van Der Leeuw puts it.[15]

A similar priority of religion to explicit belief is sometimes observable even today. Not long ago a newspaper article on religion in soviet Russia reported the case of a russian girl who, after attending a religious service, approached an orthodox priest and asked to be baptized. The priest found by asking her a few simple questions that she was ignorant of most of the articles of the creed and had virtually no formal belief even in God. 'Then why do you want to join the Church?' he asked. 'I want *that*', she said indicating the liturgy she had just come from. It was more than just the need to belong to something: she had experienced the worship of the christian community and wanted to be a part of it, even before

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[12] Van Der Leeuw, G.: *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, Vol 1, trans J. E. Turner (New York and Evanston, 1963), p 23.

[13] Otto, Rudolf: *op. cit.*, p 122.

[14] *Ibid.*, p 126–27.

[15] Van Der Leeuw, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p 48.

she knew what its doctrines were.

Even those who consciously reject religious belief sometimes feel the attraction of holy people – a Mother Theresa, for instance, or of sacred places. A frequently anthologized poem by Philip Larkin, 'Church Going' exquisitely renders the modern unbeliever's mixed feeling for holy places – a blend of flippancy and awkward reverence, scepticism and wistful attraction. The poem's speaker, a cyclist, pauses to investigate a church. After a few minutes of desultory exploring, he signs the register and leaves, deciding 'the place was not worth stopping for'. Yet stop he did, and often does: though he ends 'much at a loss like this, wondering what to look for'; he finds in the church 'a dense, musty' unignorable silence, brewed God knows how long'. The church seems to have held together for ages all that he, a modern, finds only in separation: marriage, birth, and death. And so he finds himself gravitating to this 'serious house on serious earth' as a place to grow wise in, 'if only that so many dead lie round'.[16]

If such awe is not in the fullest sense a religious experience, it is at any rate an experience of religion. It involves the awareness of the sacred as somehow different in quality from the rest of life: more serious and significant. For Larkin's cyclist, like the russian girl, the *power* flowing from religion is felt prior to any explicit belief in the reality behind it. The capacity to feel and to respond to this power is the condition of having 'religious experiences', and already contains the kernel of what is meant by 'faith'. It is a willingness to let oneself be awed, to feel impressed, to yield to the power of the mysterious 'other'. The lack of this willingness on the part of the Pharisees and Scribes drew from Jesus his ringing denunciation of their hardened hearts; the presence of this openness in people like the roman centurion caused Jesus himself to be amazed: 'Amen, amen, I tell you, I have not found such faith in Israel'.

Religious experience in faith

If faith (in the sense of belief) is in some way born of the experience of the holy, it also gives birth to such experiences. Few people, now or ever, have wholly original encounters with the naked 'Other'. It is as a member of a community that one encounters God, by participating in a tradition of belief and observance – just

[16] Larkin, Philip: 'Churhc Going', in *The less deceived* (London, 1955).

as one experiences aesthetic beauty in art, or the intellectual beauty of science, by participating in a community which cultivates the knowledge in question.[17] Such experiences, moreover, will necessarily be very different from the almost wordless shudders of awe attributed to Jacob at Beth-el. They will be affected, and perhaps largely determined, by the beliefs of the religious tradition in which the individual was raised (or which he consciously adopts as an adult). The accounts of religious experience given at the beginning of this article, for instance, were all given by christians, catholic and protestant. Their beliefs predisposed them to the possibility of encountering God in their lives, and offered an interpretation of those encounters when they occurred. In many cases the individual involved was actively seeking God or trying to pray. Similarly, the religious experience described in Book VIII of St Augustine's *Confessions* – *Tolle, lege* – comes as the climax of a life of restless searching, a quest whose essential terms were set by the faith of Augustine's mother and of the christian Church of his day.

The fact – of the influence of a faith-community and its tradition on the individual's religious experience – is not some regrettable limitation (unless one holds, contrary to christian teaching, that one goes to God entirely alone). It does not get in the way of a personal encounter with God; at least, it need not. Instead it makes such encounters more available and more frequent than they would be otherwise. It encourages the individual to seek God, by assuring him that God may indeed be found, and by giving him places and means to look. For most people, and perhaps for all to some degree, this is indispensable. If the wholly original creative genius is exceedingly rare in art, science, or technology, he is no less so in religion. And even in the former areas, the success of the creative mind is always at least partially dependent on the prior acceptance of a community and its tradition. 'Standing on the shoulders of giants' is a basic requirement for seeing beyond any horizon, and the individual's new vision confirms that of the community even while it extends it. As Marcel Legaut says of the saints: 'Their privileged experiences in a certain measure bear witness to the life contained in the doctrine, while the doctrine makes the experiences possible'.[18] And Jesus himself was raised in the tradition of Israel, a

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[17] Polanyi, Michael: *Personal Knowledge* (London, 1958), pp 206–22.

[18] Legaut, Marcel: *Meditations of a Believer*, trans O. Siegwalt and Suzanne Palleske (New York, 1955), p 82.

tradition which nourished and made possible the very experience of the Father, by which he transformed the faith of Moses and the prophets.

Faith without experience?

Earlier I called attention to the fact that religious experience may exist prior to explicit belief, and even to some degree in the absence of it. Is the opposite also true? That is, can there be real faith even in the absence of religious experience?

The gospels, as I noted at the outset, suggest that faith is most truly faith in the absence of 'signs and wonders', and that those who believe without seeing are especially 'blessed'. By a legitimate extension this may be taken to include any experiential support, internal or external. For the scriptures, Abraham becomes the model of faith because he put his trust in God, in contradiction to every earthly certainty. The mystical tradition of the Church referred to by Legaut continually encourages patient perseverance in faith and prayer despite 'spiritual aridity' and lack of warm feelings. The great mystics like St Teresa and St John of the Cross not only passed through a 'dark night of the soul' themselves, but taught the need of renunciation of 'sensible consolation' and spiritual favours on the part of the person wishing to make progress in spirit. For them it is essential that God himself be the object of the christian's love, and not merely the 'good feelings' (if any) aroused by the sense of his presence.

This teaching fits well with the experience of ordinary, non-mystical christians, whose faith frequently goes far beyond any actual experience of God's activity in their lives. 'It's when you really need God that he doesn't seem to be around', a young friend of mine complained after a series of bitter experiences had shattered her most cherished hopes. To go on believing in a God who 'doesn't seem to be around' seems very close to the heart of what christians call 'faith'.

Nevertheless, to emphasize this aspect of faith in isolation is to distort its total reality. If all faith were faith-in-spite-of, if faith were no more than a grimly-held intellectual conviction which the will attempted to enforce in one's behaviour, the meaningfulness and integrity of the life of faith would become highly questionable. The state of 'numbed faith' which sometimes follows a personal tragedy or a great emotional upheaval should not be taken as the defining or typical state. It belongs to the very *raison d'être* of faith

that it makes possible a transforming experience of God. 'I have come that they may have life', said Jesus, 'and have it more abundantly'.[19] And in fact for the believer life is changed, 'changed, not taken way' (as the old Preface to the Mass for the Dead used to say). For St Paul, being 'in Christ' dramatically alters one's relationship to the world; there is 'a new creation'. For St John, likewise, the grace of God which comes through faith in Jesus is not a mere object of notional assent; it is an *experience* of life and light. Life has a different 'feel' as a whole for the person who believes; what Paul called the 'aimlessness' of pagan existence is taken away, and in its place is a new sense of meaning and purpose. There is a new hope, together with the sense of a healing process at work below the surface of apparent calamity and even sin. For the believer, Christ is the one who 'takes away the sin of the world'; faith is a salvation, not deferred, but already begun. This transformation of the total 'feel' of experience may not involve any visions or sudden 'highs', but it is certainly 'a' and perhaps *the* religious experience.

Yet there is a deeper sense in which the opposition between faith and religious experience can be overcome. For at the core of what I have described as 'religious experience' is precisely the same abandonment of the self to Mystery which is the essence of faith. The experience of God – exemplified in Moses's encounter with Yahweh in the burning bush,[20] or in Jesus's ecstatic praise of the Father for revealing to 'mere children' what he has hidden from the learned and the clever [21] – is radically an experience of Mystery. It does not imply that God, formerly mysterious and remote, is now seen and clearly comprehended by the one who experiences him. Rather the latter is precisely gripped and mastered by the reality which God is. This 'letting oneself be gripped' is the heart of faith: a willingness to let God be God-for-me, a letting go of reason and certainty because a greater than either is here.

What makes 'religious experience' in the ordinary sense different from the kind of 'naked faith' described above, is that in the former case the self-surrender is, so to speak, easy and automatic; it is brought about from outside, it happens almost without the consent of the person undergoing it. In the latter, God is still more powerfully present, but his operation is 'hidden': the act of trusting self-

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[19] Jn 10, 10.
[20] Exod 3, 1–10.
[21] Mt 11, 25–30; Lk 10, 21–22.

surrender is felt as requiring the whole consent of the believing person and his freedom. Then man is asked to relinquish not only 'control' but his very self and his awareness. When in Gethsemane and on Calvary, this self-emptying faith achieves its climax, it becomes a pure revelation of the mystery of God. The death of Jesus is both the ultimate act of faith and the supreme instance of 'religious experience': in itself an experience of utter emptiness and desolation, which the Father's acceptance of Jesus's self-surrender transforms into the joyous fulness of Easter.

Thus faith becomes *experienced knowledge* without ceasing to be faith, that is, a surrender to Mystery. And faith exists, ultimately, to make precisely this experience – of God's victory over death – possible.