

ELEMENTS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

By MICHAEL SIMPSON

WHAT I SEEK is not an *experience* but God himself. I believe that this remark by a former pupil expresses well the authentic attitude of a life of prayer. Christian experience leads precisely to the recognition that what is important is not our psychological experience but God himself. Faith is not founded on our experience but on the reality of what God has revealed and effected in the mystery of Christ. As we receive and appropriate that reality into our own life, then indeed our experience will gradually come to conform to and manifest the reality of Christ's presence, often through times of deep struggle; but the basis of faith is not our psychological states of consciousness but the life, death and resurrection of Christ and the consequent outpouring of his Spirit who dwells in our hearts.

This will hold in some measure of the relation between faith and experience in all genuine religions. While the cultivation of states of consciousness may be important in helping man to be receptive to the presence of the divine, under whatever name God is expressed, what is important is not the state of consciousness as such but the Reality of which or of whom he becomes aware. What differentiates religion from purely psychological techniques of awareness or meditation is precisely that the goal sought is communion with the divine or transcendent Reality, and not just a state of consciousness which might indeed be induced by drugs or other man-made methods. It is vital if one uses the term 'religious experience' to insist that one is speaking not simply of a psychological state but of communion with God.

Nevertheless it is also true that all religious affirmations of belief and worship are ultimately grounded in our living spiritual awareness or consciousness of God. Experience is not the aim of our worship, but it is the medium through which alone God can be found. In human love the aim is not one's own experience but the person loved; but it is only through personal awareness that the other can become present and affirmed. There can be no 'proof' of love ex-

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cept through the personal awareness of the one who loves and is loved. Similarly there can be no 'proof' of God other than through the personal awareness of the believer. The 'proofs' of classical natural theology and the doctrine of analogy all break down unless grounded in premises drawn from man's religious awareness. The 'problem' of God has never been a problem of logic; it has always been one of spiritual awareness and perception.

For this reason one cannot speak of God from a detached or uninvolved standpoint, but only from reflection upon personal consciousness. The religious believer is born, or through conversion enters, into a living community of faith with a complex language and symbolism of worship and belief. His personal faith develops and is sustained as this language and symbolism becomes alive for him: that is, expressive of what he begins to find real through his own consciousness. This consciousness can grow and be experienced at different levels, largely dependent upon a person's yielding to God, and self-discipline in sustaining an inner sensitivity to the deeper levels of consciousness.

At the same time, as a reflective person he will also enquire into the nature and authenticity of his religious awareness. For this awareness needs to be understood. In any area reaching to the heart of man's conscious and unconscious life there are real dangers of subjective misinterpretation and illusion. Sincerity alone is not a sufficient guard against these. There can be many needs, anxieties and other motivations at work, whether conscious or unconscious, which can affect a person's interpretation of his own experience. When man becomes more deeply conscious of the divine, powerful forces can be released and the dangers of lack of discernment are serious in their possible consequences. Sound understanding must go along with personal experience.

Man's awareness is always awareness of something. The self is aware of some reality. In the attempt to seek some partial understanding of man's religious awareness I shall first consider those elements which refer to the Reality of which the religious believer is aware. These, I suggest, without any claim to be exhaustive, may be expressed by (a) the transcendence of God, (b) the immanence of God, (c) the power of God, and (d) the personal nature of God as Love. I shall then consider the characteristics which refer to the human self in his awareness of God, and ask how that awareness engages the intellectual, volitional and emotional elements of human experience while rooted in the centre of consciousness which under-

lies these elements and cannot simply be identified with them. I shall then suggest that man's religious awareness is a direct but mediated awareness of God, and touch on the nature of states of mystical awareness. Finally I shall briefly discuss criteria of authenticity for man's religious experience.

(a) *The transcendence of God.* As the language and symbolism of faith come alive for the individual believer, he becomes aware of being in personal contact with Reality which is utterly 'beyond' the limits and finitude of his own life and world. He stands in relation to that which is irreducibly 'Mystery', 'Other', beyond the grasp of thought and comprehension. He is aware of the divine, the sacred, as totally distinct from the imperfection and contingency of his own life. God and the world cannot be brought together into a synthesis of thought. God does not exist alongside the world, whatever is in the world is in God; yet God is not the world, he is completely beyond its limitation and finitude. He is the true Being, the absolutely Holy, who can never be possessed or manipulated. 'I am who I am'. The transcendence of God has been expressed in all the world religions under symbols and images far more powerful than these conceptual terms. In the christian consciousness God is the creator, upon whom creation is utterly dependent, but who remains absolute, free, perfect in himself.

(b) *The immanence of God.* Yet as his life of prayer develops, the believer is aware that the transcendent and holy God is not remote, distant, unconcerned for man and his plight. 'But you were more interior to me than the innermost part of my soul, and superior to the highest part thereof', writes Augustine, expressing the experience of every man of prayer. God is present at each point of his creation, sustaining it in its being. The believer grows in the realization that not one part of his being, his body, mind, feelings, the deepest stirrings of his spirit could exist for one instant except that it is held in its being by God. 'In him we live and move and have our being' is revealed within the consciousness of each one. Though utterly distinct and holy, God is intimately present at the depth of each one's life and being. Union with God goes deeper than that achieved by any human love: an identity affirmed yet without loss of the distinctness of the self.

(c) *The power of God.* Religious man is aware of his total dependence upon God. The divine, in every religion, is recognized as the source of power and vitality. In Judaeo-Christianity, as in most other religions, this power is always exercised through an unlimited love.

'Our God is great, all-powerful, of infinite understanding', writes the psalmist (Ps 147). In Jesus this power is made manifest as a power to heal, to liberate, to free men from oppression and to raise the dead to life (Lk 4, 18). This power is promised to the believer himself if he yields to the life God offers him. 'Whoever believes in me will perform the same works as I do myself, he will perform even greater works, because I am going to the Father' (Jn 14, 12). And Christians today, like the first disciples, experience power through the Spirit to continue the works of Jesus, to heal, to liberate from oppression, to proclaim the gospel with power and authority. They know that this power is not their own, but is the manifestation of the presence of God himself who dwells in their hearts through faith.

(d) *The personal nature of God as Love.* As man's religious awareness deepens in a life of prayer, he comes to recognize the God who is intimately present to him as a God of love, of infinite concern and care for his creatures. 'The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us' (Rom 5,5). Jesus himself prays to the Father that 'the love with which you loved me may be in them' (Jn 17, 26). Love like truth and freedom is an ultimate datum of experience which cannot be defined in terms other than itself. If this is true of love in a human relationship, it is pre-eminently so of the mystic's awareness. Other words may be used to draw out different dimensions of love: presence, intimacy, acceptance, self-yielding, the total gift of self, but without personal experience, all these words remain empty. Knowledge of God's love can never be imposed or assented to on a purely intellectual level. It must always arise from the centre of consciousness (the 'heart'), where it will be perceived only by those who are receptive and yielding.

In a human relationship one first comes to know about another person, an intellectual knowledge of his dispositions, attitudes, feelings. Gradually, if there is a yielding to that person, this will reach into deeper levels of consciousness (a 'heart knowledge') where there will grow a more spontaneous sensitivity to the other, without the need for this always to be mediated through the mind. Through a discipline of self-yielding and a training of the heart to direct feelings towards a love which transcends without denying them, there will grow a communion of love between two persons, which is perhaps found quite rarely in any pure form. Only then can one truly know what it is to love and be loved. Similarly, growth in awareness of God's love can only come through a disciplined self-

yielding and directing of the heart towards God. It is not given to those who are unwilling to pass along this way. When we truly know God with a pure heart we can only know him as a God of love; for God is love, and love cannot reveal itself other than as what it is. The Christian comes to recognize that God's love is unconditional: it does not depend upon anything that we do. But that love can only be fully received by one who yields himself unconditionally to God. The demand for a total and unconditional response to the divine is a central element of religious experience.

Man's awareness of God cannot be simply identified with either his thoughts about God or those surface feelings which may arise in a religious situation. Thoughts and feelings may accompany his awareness of God, but they do not constitute that awareness. This holds true equally of our self-awareness and of our awareness of other human persons. It may be helpful briefly to consider these first.

In the case of my self-awareness, I can think about myself and I may have various feelings in regard to myself. But the centre of self-awareness underlies both thought and feeling. When I am thinking I am also aware of myself as thinking: otherwise I would not, on reflection, be able to recognize the thought as mine. Similarly, if I experience some feeling I am aware of myself as having that feeling: otherwise I could not recognize the feeling as mine. Equally my self-awareness cannot simply be identified with my acts of will: I may 'will' this or that action (expressed in my performing it) but my self-awareness must underlie this act of willing or I would not be able to recognize it as mine. Normally I am not aware of myself other than through my thinking, willing – both of which are expressed in my bodily self-expression and activity – and through the feelings evoked within me. I do not grasp or contemplate myself as a spiritual 'entity'. I am present to myself only through the mediation of my embodied acts of thinking, willing and accompanying feelings. But this self-awareness is also direct: I am not aware of myself as the result of an inference or argument. I am directly present to myself in and through my bodily expression and activity. This direct but mediated presence to self is a primary element of human consciousness and underlies all our particular acts of thinking, willing, doing.

By various techniques of meditation or awareness it is possible to dwell for a time in a pure, indeterminate self-awareness where the thinking, willing and feeling that so often crowd our conscious attention recede into the background. But even in these states of

consciousness we do not engage in self-contemplation. By detaching ourselves from the normally urgent activity of mind, will (desire) and feeling we can dwell in the inner stillness of the heart (centre of consciousness) but insofar as that awareness remains focussed upon the self (it may very often yield to an awareness of God), it remains limited by our stage of personal growth and in that sense is mediated by our past embodied acts of mind and will.

In our awareness of other human selves, I can think about a person I know and I may have feelings directed towards that person. But the centre of our awareness of another self in a loving relationship is to be found in the same root or primordial level of consciousness as in our self-awareness. The other self is directly present to my awareness (and is not the result of an inference or argument), but that presence is always mediated through bodily self-expression and communication. This direct but mediated presence of other selves is a further primary element of human consciousness, underlies all particular acts of thought, and will be directed towards another self and such feelings as may accompany the relationship. Again there may be moments of an ecstatic experience of love when the bodily expressions and communication which mediate the presence of the other recede into the background, and one may simply dwell in a pure indeterminate awareness of the other self. But such ecstatic states are still limited by the awareness of the other which has been mediated by bodily expression and communication. They do not release one into a purely spiritual state of consciousness.

Man's awareness of God does include intellectual, volitional and emotional elements. But it cannot be simply identified with either thought, will or feeling. We can think about God (though only, I believe, in the context of a personal awareness of God – without experience intellectual discussion remains empty). There can certainly be feelings, at times intense, that accompany an awareness of God. And this awareness can give rise to an urgent 'will' or desire for God. But God is present to our consciousness at the same root level which is the ground of self-awareness and awareness of other selves and which underlies all particular acts of thought, will and feeling. God is present to the 'heart' (to use the traditional symbol for what I have been referring to as the 'centre of consciousness').

This presence of God to the self is direct in that it is not the result of an argument or inference. (Without any awareness of the infinite, no argument or inference from the finite would ever be able to affirm an infinite.) It is a further primary element of human con-

sciousness, as is awareness of the self and of other human selves. Each is underivable from anything other than itself. But as in these other two cases, our awareness of God is a mediated awareness. We do not have a purely spiritual contemplation of God or intellectual vision of the divine Being, any more than we can have a spiritual contemplation of ourselves or of other human persons. Normally our awareness of God is mediated through the religious language and symbols of worship and belief that express the awareness of the community of faith to which one belongs, and which serve to direct and sustain our attention towards God. In principle, any finite reality can serve to mediate an awareness of the divine presence. For many, the experience of beauty in nature can awaken a religious awareness. For others, the experience of human love may direct the heart towards the Mystery who is the ground of all love (as Buber said, every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou). It is often very difficult to define clearly when our consciousness becomes religious, that is, directed towards God. There are no clear boundaries: often there will simply be a gentle opening up to the presence of Transcendent Reality at the heart of all, and which can inform our experience with a sense of Mystery and all-pervading love. At other times there may be a more urgent sense of the divine. In either case there will be a sense of the need to yield oneself unconditionally to the Reality present to one's consciousness. This may all happen without any intellectual reflection or articulation of the experience in religious terms.

The awareness of the divine may be sustained even when the mind is attentive towards other things, or when surface feelings are aroused by circumstances not always under one's own control. Because it is rooted in the centre of consciousness and not simply identified with thought or feeling, there can remain an inner directing of consciousness towards God even when mind and feelings are taken up in other ways. This is equally true of a human relationship. Communion of love with another person can remain throughout the demands of a busy life. The awareness of love does not compete with activities of the mind or surface feelings. A spirit of love can inform the whole of life in a way that does make a difference to one's experience, even though the mind may be attentive to the duties of the day. Similarly a sense of God's love can remain present at all times: it does not compete with thought or feeling. This is why it is possible to pray at all times. Awareness of God is not simply one mode of experience alongside others. If sustained and developed

by a disciplined life of prayer and an ever greater yielding of self to God, it will come to permeate and inform the whole of a person's life and activity. Prayer and life become one.

As in the case of self-awareness and awareness of other selves, it is possible for the mediating symbols to recede into the background of consciousness and for a person simply to be held in an indeterminate, but completely compelling, sense of the divine presence, the 'Cloud of Unknowing'. Such moments of 'mystical' awareness do not, I believe, allow one to escape from the bodily condition of our human being. Through disciplined ways of developing an inner stillness and attentiveness towards God, it is possible for particular acts of thought, will and feeling to be quietened and to allow the self simply to dwell in the centre of consciousness where God is present. In these moments the self is most 'divinized' – informed by the life of God inviting language of love, union, identity. The self does not cease to be finite and distinct from God, but one's whole attentiveness is directed towards God and away from the limiting, determinate features of the finite self. The presence of God is still mediated to our consciousness by the bodily and material symbols which constitute our life, but as those symbols are no longer held in the forefront of attention; the self can simply rest in God without an awareness of anything else.

While moments of mystical awareness may be prepared for by methods of developing an inner quiet and attentiveness, the goal of such awareness, communion of love with God, always remains a free gift and is never simply the result of one's own techniques. The mystic is aware that his own experience is one of receptivity to the free communication of God's love, and that he becomes more passive under the directing power of God's Spirit.

It is in this context that other more 'extraordinary' manifestations of God's Spirit in prayer must be understood. Visions, dreams, prophetic promptings, may all express the presence of God acting upon an individual person and can be ways through which God's will may be discerned. The christian community has always accepted the possibility of such incarnational manifestations of God's presence. Sensible manifestations are always SYMBOLS of divine presence, through which God can act upon man in a way that is proportionate to man's powers of receptivity and perception but without taking away the transcendence of God. God must never be identified with any finite manifestation. Care must always be taken in the interpretation of such religious phenomena: it is only in the context

of a living communion of love with God that their meaning and value may be discerned. The classical mystics, well aware of the dangers of becoming too taken up with such sensible manifestations rather than with God himself, may have undervalued their importance in mediating God's presence and word to man. Such incarnational manifestations of God's presence were all marks of the outpouring of God's Spirit in the post-pentecostal Church, and we may need to be more receptive to them again today if our christian awareness is to be a vital one. God does communicate himself to man in a way proportionate to our bodily nature. Of course the general warning of the mystics remains sound. We must not quench the 'extraordinary' (perhaps we should not regard them as 'extraordinary' at all but as normal elements of christian experience), but we must place them in the context of the living communion of each person with God. The value of such manifestations will lie in the fruits of love they bear in the Christian's life as he is drawn ever more deeply into communion of love with God.

I began by stressing that what the Christian seeks is not experience in itself, but God. The criterion for the authenticity of any religious experience a man may have does not lie in intensity of emotion or in the more extraordinary phenomena, however important these may be. The criterion for religious authenticity always lies in the fruit of God's love coming to expression in the person's life: peace, patience, kindness, joy, the willingness to bear others' burdens, to forgive, not to bear resentments, summed up finally in the readiness to lay down one's life for others. Communion of love with God, which is man's religious consciousness, can only manifest itself in the fruit of love, the fruit of the Spirit who is the Love between Father and Son, poured out upon each one of us and who dwells in our hearts. This love, incarnated in the life of each one, will make our humanity gifted with the life-giving presence of God for others, with a power to heal, to liberate and to proclaim the Good News of what God has effected for us in Christ. For our experience, finally, is not the ultimate basis of our christian faith. The basis of the christian life is the reality of God's love made present in the mystery of Christ. When we have that spirit of wisdom and perception of what is revealed (Eph 1, 17) and can yield our life to that reality, then our own experience will gradually be transformed and come to manifest in our own personal life the power and love of God in Jesus.