The public, the private and the personal

Dimensions of religious experience

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MY BRIEF IS TO DISCUSS THE connotations of the word 'experience'. A daunting prospect which reminds me of the first time I was invited to write for *The Way*. The issue was on various forms of religious experience and my topic was Buddhism. Fresh from writing a thesis on yoga practice I eagerly converted my newly acquired insights into the required overview. Almost by return of post I got a response from the editor. He thanked me for my efforts but, admitting a degree of bafflement, asked for elucidation on a multitude of points. Non-Buddhists, he inferred, might find the density and detail of my analysis difficult to understand, let alone integrate intellectually with their own faith and religious practice.

Reading that article some twenty years later I suspect many Buddhists, let alone Christians, would have found it fairly impenetrable. There is more to Buddhism than meditation, and meditation itself only makes sense against the broader background of the religious life of a community. To lay out the essential practice and belief-structure of a religious tradition is one thing, to penetrate to its very core and express something of its ethos, its aesthetic appeal, its power to move and form attitudes and values, is quite another. It might, on reflection, have been better if I had described life in a Buddhist monastery, or the day-to-day devotions of a Buddhist family, but at that stage I had precious little personal experience of either.

Something of the same problem presents itself as I approach this article on religious experience and spirituality. In giving even a rudimentary account of the complex conceptual issues which attend so ill-defined a term as 'experience' there is a risk that we end up reducing the practice of faith to theory and intellectual abstraction. That some distinctions are necessary is clear: there is more to spirituality than the experience alone. My main concern, however, lies with another potential difficulty – that by concentrating on the

specialist techniques of the few we ignore the breadth and richness of the experience of the many. In this article I will not be looking at inter-religious issues, except by way of illustration, nor will I attempt to summarize a complex area of philosophical and theological debate. Both would be beyond the scope of a single essay. My aims are more modest: to set the various dimensions of 'experience' within the wider context of a community's practice of religious faith.

The experience of religion in a fragmented world

It is easy to understand the attraction of 'religious experience', especially in a secularized world which has lost confidence in traditional religious institutions. People need not just to belong, but to *feel* that they belong, that belonging makes an observable difference. If in what follows I appear to emphasize the problematic areas of the thirst for personal involvement and assurance, it is not in order to play down the significance or the enormous value of this shift. That people should want, and indeed expect, to find more personal satisfaction in liturgy and personal prayer should be a source of inspiration. In the broadest sense, religious practice and spirituality must be thoroughly rooted in the experiential, in what touches people at the deepest level of their being. In so far as a more personally satisfying experience of faith enhances our sense of God and self and involves us more deeply in God's world, it is much to be welcomed.

It is, however, easy to make experience central to religious practice in a way which subtly marginalizes the more formal aspects of creed and tradition. This raises an important question. Once religious practice becomes dominated by the perennial search for certainty, it can assume an anti-intellectualist quality. Experience gets set against reason; feelings are opposed to thought. More worryingly, if our first priority is to shore up the fragility of our ever-vulnerable identities by recourse to the private world of interiority, we risk dehumanizing the more public world in which those identities are formed and flourish – the world of everyday social relations. How do we ensure that the desire for a personally satisfying practice does not become an escape for the battered ego, a more or less deliberate separation from that more public world of wider society, where God is also to be found – albeit in a darker and more confused practice of faith?

Living out the reality of faith

In putting it like that I may be accused of a rather polemical juxtaposition of private and public. In reality, of course, nothing is ever so simple. In order, therefore, both to explain my fundamental point – that the concept of a personal 'religious experience' only ever makes sense against the wider background of the particularity of religious practice – and to allow for proper consideration of the 'grey areas', let me begin with two illustrations.

Both are drawn, with appropriate licence, from recent acquaintances. One is a 'western' Buddhist, a man with an impressive commitment to social justice; the other a 'cradle' Catholic, very much involved in the day-to-day life of her parish. Both are admirable in their sincere pursuit of a personally fulfilling religious life; both have struggled with the implications for them and for their respective religious traditions of the 'public/private' dilemma. In this sketch I do not set them against each other, as if in some mutual critique. Their stories and the issues which their respective commitments raise will, I hope, enable us to draw out the more conceptual issues which that enigmatic and awkward term 'experience' raises for anyone seriously committed to the practice of faith.

Gareth came to Buddhism from local politics. Like many converts he was not searching for anything 'religious', still less a creed or way of life. He started with an interest in meditation techniques, something which would help him to relax and find a bit of personal space amidst the chaos of his busy life and fairly crazy personal relationships. Eventually he found his way to a monastery, set away in the remote countryside, where a traditional school of Buddhism flourished and taught the ancient wisdom of Soto Zen. He still returns there occasionally for what he calls his 'spiritual top-up', but has now settled to a traditional practice which seeks to integrate the great Buddhist values of wisdom and compassion by meditating not on abstract principles but on flesh and blood persons, his friends and, as the Buddha would put it, fellow 'sentient beings'. He styles himself a 'Buddhist activist', and his energetic pursuit of ecological issues makes him a very positive counter to the popular stereotype of the dispassionate meditator withdrawn from suffering humanity.

Liz spent some time as a novice in a not very post-Vatican II convent, but dates her religious conversion to a period spent wandering in the high Himalayas. An extraordinary encounter with a wise Hindu *sannyasi* and a more long-lasting relationship with an enlightened spiritual director have given her real personal stability

back in the mainstream of Roman Catholicism. She is a regular supporter of the local inter-faith group, organizes visits and meetings with everyone from the local Baptist minister to neighbouring Zoroastrians, and somehow manages to front the parish Justice and Peace group and write endless letters on behalf of prisoners of conscience. What is most remarkable about her, however, is that she lives her baptismal commitment quite consciously from regular attendance at the eucharist *and* from a Tibetan Buddhist *sadhana*, a 'purposive quest', originally taken up in support of her younger brother. She is one of those remarkable people who remind me that the word 'catholic' means not 'universal', but, literally and more subtly, 'all in each'. To be Catholic in the very best sense is not to force 'the others' into a church-centred totality but to mediate the one to the all.

Experience of the ordinary: the particularity of experience

Now these are, of course, 'success stories' and I do not doubt that there are plenty of people whose spiritual journeys have been less positive. My question, however, is not concerned to chart success or failure in prayer and religious practice – a dubious enterprise at the best of times. Still less do I want to set up some sort of postmodern typology of mysticism. Although they are both fairly extraordinary people, it is the very ordinariness of their journeys that I want to stress. Far from taking them into the realm of the esoteric and religiously bizarre, their experience has anchored them in a deep commitment to their own communities and to the welfare of others.

For neither has there been anything like a 'Damascus experience' – the classic example of devastating conversion which is usually, and misleadingly, trotted out in philosophical discussion of religious experience. There have undoubtedly been high points of intense feeling, even determining moments, for both; but no lights from heaven, no dramatic voices. On the other hand, it is impossible to deny that in some sense both are stories of conversion and the conscientious living out of the experience of faith. This must raise serious questions not just about where we are to place 'religious experience' in the lives of committed persons of faith but also about how such experience is to be interpreted.

But even the briefest description of individuals who, in many ways, have followed parallel paths shows that it is impossible to discern the same pattern. Liz's way has been a return, Gareth's a new departure; Liz's contact with Indian religion has taught her to inten-

sify a devotional current deep in Catholicism, Gareth's form of Buddhism is quite non-theistic; if Liz is content exploring the community she has rediscovered through the Church, Gareth's sense of community spreads up the valley where he lives and throughout his beloved Wales – and even, he says, on good days over the border to the perfidious Anglo-Saxons. If these two examples are anything to go by – and many more could be chosen – it is clear there is no such thing as generic religious experience, a common pool from which the various traditions of faith draw. The only really substantive similarity between Liz and Gareth lies in the different ways they both go through a process, tell a story, or practise a form of life.

In other words, the point of comparison lies not in what they have *felt*, which will always be particular and beyond recall, but rather in what they have *achieved*, what has made them experienced, changed, or even in some sense 'expert' people. Now these two words give us two meanings, distinct but connected, of the term experience: what I shall call, somewhat loosely, 'experience-as-feeling' and 'experience-as-achievement'. There is, however, a third meaning which needs to be brought into consideration – experience as experiment, as trial. Both my friends, in their different ways, can be said to have *tried* something. How are these three meanings related? In what follows I want to suggest that any account of religious experience needs somehow to distinguish the three. My aim is to show that what is often described as if it is a discrete moment within human experience, and is therefore often turned into a 'thing', actually has a complex passive-yet-active quality which is only properly understood as a dimension which permeates human life as a whole.

The search for peculiarly religious data of experience

The preoccupation with experience-as-feeling, which is considered to be the raw material of knowledge, is a comparatively recent development. This is what we find in William James's classic study, *The varieties of religious experience*, originally published at the beginning of this century. *Varieties* is deliberately intended to describe what James called elsewhere the 'entire process of phenomena, of present data considered in their *raw immediacy* before reflective thought has analysed them into subjective and objective aspects or ingredients'.[1]

There remains something extraordinarily attractive about James's attempt to ground the rich diversity of religious phenomena in the experience of religious conversion. The modern interest in religious experience can be said to have begun with Schleiermacher's anti-Enlightenment pietism. Like Schleiermacher, it was important for James to search for peculiarly religious data, to show that religion had its own integrity and did not need to seek its justification in any other sphere of enquiry. For both of them the warmth of conviction found in an autonomous religious experience was part of a wider programme intended to free religion from dependence on metaphysics and ecclesiastical authority.

James's systematic contrast of 'experience' with 'thought' has been enormously influential. But it is also thoroughly élitist; he is only interested in the intense experiences of certain creative figures, while the rest of us seem condemned either to the realm of 'pure reason', religious dogma and authority, or to an empty reductionist scientism. Such dichotomies, however, are inevitable if the primary concern is for a 'space' in which the 'religious' is to be grounded. My two illustrations are intended to question this assumption.

The difference between 'experiencing' and 'experiencing as'

In the modern discipline of Religious Studies religious experience in the Jamesian sense assumes a central significance in describing the phenomenon of religion. Ninian Smart, for instance, calls the 'experiential and emotional dimension' the 'food on which the other dimensions feed'.[2] Smart brings together Paul's conversion, Arjuna's vision in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the theophany through which God appeared to Job and the prophetic experiences of Isaiah and Jeremiah, as examples of what Rudolf Otto described as the 'numinous'. But his analysis of religion only points to the ambiguity of the language of 'religious experience'. Are we talking about the subjective states of someone who entertains certain beliefs about religion, or particular privileged perceptions which are different in kind from 'ordinary experience' because they depend on some contact with a divine or transcendent reality?

John Hick seeks to mediate between the two by speaking of an experience as a 'modification of the content of consciousness'.[3] His words are nothing if not a reminder that all experience is in some sense theory-laden; as human beings we are culturally and historically constituted in particular ways. Thus any account of religious experience which concentrates on its discrete, personal or particular

nature – such as I attempted in my Buddhism article – risks losing sight of context. To speak of privileged or unique interruptions of the everyday 'content of consciousness' begs the question as to how such an experience is to be recognized, and how distinguished from other possible forms which experience can take – moral or aesthetic, for example.

Moreover, the history of religions shows people interpreting events and processes as full of religious significance. Hick's example is the people of Israel celebrating their historical experience as the record of God's loving care for his people. Particular experiences of the first or 'discrete' variety tend to collapse, as Hick puts it, into the second. The particular only becomes possible, let alone makes sense, when interpreted against the background of the general experience, the whole religious tradition or way of life of a community of faith.

The distinction implicit here, between 'experiencing' and 'experiencing *as*', is not dissimilar to what I referred to above with my distinction between experience as the 'felt' and experience in the sense of 'achieved'. Some version of this distinction is necessary if we are to explain how any 'experience' is recognized. On the one hand, there is experience in a restricted sense, referring to the *basis* of knowledge in the sensations – seeing, hearing, touching etc. On the other, there is a broader sense which refers to whatever we have come to know about the world through direct observation or personal contact. In this latter, more 'objective' sense, experience is equivalent to *knowledge as a whole*. An example may help.

Learning how to interpret experience: the role of tradition

On my way home, in the half-light of the evening, I see a dangerous-looking mugger loitering with evil intent. I quickly cross the road and hurry on. Then, looking back, I notice that I was mistaken. I now know on closer inspection that what I took to be the shape of a man is really nothing more than the shadow cast on a wall by a pile of miscellaneous building material. But in that first moment of observation I certainly experienced *something*, even if, subsequently, that experience was subjected to an appropriate act of judgement and duly 'corrected'. To return to the Hick definition: on the one hand, experience refers to the actual *modification* of consciousness; on the other, it refers to the act of *recognition* that consciousness has indeed been modified.

Now Hick develops the distinction as part of his pluralist hypothesis in the philosophy of religion which is consciously orientated towards accounting for the whole of humankind's religious experience. The none too hidden assumption is that all religions are equally effective for salvation. It is important to note, therefore, that on Hick's terms there can be no way of discriminating between the value or authenticity of religious experiences of whatever kind. He makes Smart's phenomenology more philosophically nuanced but leaves open the question about how sensations can give rise to knowledge about what is true or false, what can be expressed in terms of propositions. There will always remain an awkward question about how the gap between 'experiencing' and 'experiencing as' is to be bridged.

This is crucially important where 'religious experience' is concerned. How do we *know* that particular experiences – sensations of peace or harmony, for example, or even voices and visions – are to be interpreted as an experience of God? The answer, of course, is that we do not know. Which is not to say that our use of religious language is only the more or less consistent expression of an arbitrary decision to follow a particular tradition of interpretation. There can be plenty of good reasons to speak about God in a certain way. In continuing so to speak we are affirming that such and such an experience has an authoritative or reliable status by appealing to certain canons or criteria of judgement vested in a religious tradition which therefore 'authorizes' an individual's experience as inexplicable in any other way.

Nevertheless, however necessary discernment and the drawing of distinctions may be, there is always some continuity between what we can call two 'stages' of experience. I did experience something in the half-light, even if it took time to realize what it 'really' was. Similarly in calling an experience religious I do not mean that I have experienced a sensation which turns out on closer inspection to be readily explicable in more familiar terms, but that what I experienced cannot be explained away or reduced to something else. Feeling a sense of wonder at the beauty of the night sky, or finding myself high on drugs, may induce reactions akin to religious experiences. But they can be explained in non-religious terms. There will also, however, be those experiences which retain that mysterious dimension which speaks of the divine and which resists all attempts at explanation in 'other' terms. In Hick's terms, I experience them

as religious, setting them within the culture and community of faith in which I have been formed.

But does this mean that to 'experience as' is merely to fit all our experience into a prepared 'religious' category? So far we have spoken of the continuity between experience-as-feeling and experience-as-achievement. What of those occasions when what we experience is a marked discontinuity, where the 'gap' remains?

On experiencing what is new and expecting something more

The Jamesian emphasis on discrete experiences has led to a certain neglect of what is, even in the briefest account, essential to an understanding of the place of the experiential in spirituality and religious practice. It is instructive, I think, to note that in pre-Enlightenment times the term experience was used not as a synonym for feeling or sensation, the 'raw material' of knowledge, but to express the *action* of testing and proving. In other words, 'experience' – a verb rather than a noun – refers to a responsible process of setting this particular moment within the broadest possible context of life as a whole.

What my two friends 'tried' or tested was not the dramatic, a crass search for spiritual 'highs', but the different, the strange, the unknown. Of course, I do not doubt that there can be a type of obsession with 'other' religious experiences of the discrete variety which is only concerned for a sort of private self-cultivation. But this is very different from the responsible *personal* integration I have attempted to describe.

The point I want to make is this. Both Gareth and Liz experienced something new, yet they also knew it to be harmonious with what, in some mysterious way, they *already* knew. In other words, they expected to find a certain continuity even in the middle of doubt and upheaval. The assurance that personal experience provides is important for them but this is very far from being an obsession with feelings and emotion. It is a matter of testing the new against the old. And for both it has been important to take time to discern the patterns of their experience and, where necessary, to wait upon a resolution. Such a testing, and the faithful waiting it demands, is the key to understanding 'religious experience'.

Testing the subversive edges

In this article I have tried to resist two extremes which represent something of the religious pathology of our age. The first is the

tendency to isolate certain religious phenomena as privileged moments which are then set apart from the mainstream of a tradition. Voices, miracles, apparitions, mystic messages, can become a counter-tradition which it becomes almost impossible to separate from the wilder fringes of the psychic.

On the other hand, I am also conscious of the danger of the concept 'religious experience' becoming tautological. If everything that religious people experience is religious, then nothing is. It is a short step from the flattening out of individual experience in favour of the coherence of the tradition as a whole to a sort of reductionism which rewrites religion in terms of projections, human needs, cultural demands, turning beliefs and creeds into socially constructed, and ultimately illusory, realities. After a while we cease to expect anything from faith beyond the passing consolations which come from a replay of memories. That surely is the death of faith – especially of a prophetic tradition like Christianity. There is, in other words, something appropriately subversive about responsible experiment, allowing ourselves to enter into the novel, the strange, even the threatening edges of our world, in order to open up the mystery and beauty of God's creation and question the all too human tendency to presume to 'know' everything.

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NOTES

1 From a dictionary entry published in *The works of William James: essays in philosophy*, ed Burkhardt, Bowers and Skrupskelis (Cambridge Mass, 1978), p 95; quoted in Nicholas Lash, *Easter in ordinary* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p 16 (emphasis added).
2 Ninian Smart, *The world's religions* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), pp 13–14. Smart lists seven dimensions altogether, the others being the practical and ritual, the narrative or mythic, the doctrinal and philosophical, the ethical and legal, the social and institutional, and the material.
3 John Hick, *An interpretation of religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p 153.