# When experience leads us to different beliefs

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EVEN AFTER ALMOST TEN YEARS I have not forgotten the strong sense of fellow-feeling I experienced once in the old city of Lahore with a young Muslim who had just returned from the pilgrimage to Mecca. A clerk in a government office, he had won the trip in a ballot conducted by a corrupt and oppressive regime trying to disguise itself in the mantle of true religion. He came back a changed man. I had just come from a week's retreat at Taizé and was still savouring the consolation of having prayed long hours in song and silence with thousands of fellow Christians. The depth of his joy at having performed that all-enfolding ancient rite in company with over a million of his fellow believers, his sense of having been transformed by it, resonated with my own. In the moments before his infant brother bouncing on my knee broke the spell of the moment by unceremoniously drenching me, there seemed a complete mutual understanding.

Moments like that lead many to wonder whether the 'dialogue of religious experience' might not prove the most fruitful way forward in interfaith relations. They propose that we can reach a level deeper than doctrine and dogma, Scripture and apologetic, where believers recognize that they share a simple experience of the one God who calls to each of us in the depths of our hearts. If we cleave to these experiences, we are told, we will arrive at the unity for which all believers hope.

Yet at the same time, nothing quite calls into question our assumptions about religious experience as sharply as does the phenomenon of religious pluralism. The sheer variety of human religious commitments and styles must surely alert us to the possibility that what we are accustomed to calling 'experiences of God' are something at once more mundane and more complex than the simple direct contact with the divine we take them to be. If my friend and I had both had a direct 'experience of God', then why did each of us sense himself confirmed and deepened in his own faith commitment? Why was one or other of us not drawn to convert? Were we

not both encountering and so deepening our faith in the same God? I had come away from the prayer around the cross – a Friday night ritual at Taizé – profoundly convinced that believing in the crucified one is the sure way to the very heart of God. How, then, could my friend have come away from Mecca confirmed in his belief that God's final and only reliable word on the death of Jesus was that it emphatically did not take place (Qur'ān 4:157)? Perhaps we are forced to concede that the experience each of us has had was not simply a direct touch of the divine but something mediated for us by a community and situated firmly within that community's tradition of belief.

This raises a further question. In recent centuries Christians, especially in the West, have been appealing to individual religious experience to ground and to corroborate the claims of religion. If we were to recognize that 'experiences of God' are not quite the unmediated, direct encounters that we have presumed, then what is to become of our apologetic? This article will examine these two interrelated issues, first questioning the assumption that religious experiences are direct encounters with God, then exploring how such experiences might play a role in interfaith dialogue.

***Religious experience: direct or mediated?***

In the last two decades, claims to religious experience have come under increasing scrutiny from philosophers of religion and psychologists. Although these might not take too kindly to the idea that their approach is akin to that of the Inquisition, the comparison is tantalizingly apt. Their allegiances obviously differ widely and it is to be hoped that their methods of enquiry do also; but they share a common assumption that a religious experience has no inherent proof-value with regard to the reality it claims to have encountered.

When the Spanish Inquisition probed the substance of alleged visions of the Virgin or of some saint, they asked about such things as the clothing, the age, the attitude of the figure in the vision.[1] All these were examined to see whether they reflect the community's iconography, i.e. did our Lady look like her statue or her pictures in the church? The resulting emotional and practical effects of the vision were sifted to determine whether the visionary had become a more faithful and charitable member of the believing community. The presupposition of the inquisitor is always that genuine religious experience will *reflect* orthodoxy rather than *dictate* it, that visions somehow emerge from *within* the community rather than entering it

from outside. Therefore, any experiences that fail to conform to and confirm the prevailing system of creed and cult are to be denounced and even punished as the product either of demonic intervention or of personal impiety. As Joan of Arc's interrogator says to her in Shaw's play, 'All the voices that come to you are the echoes of your own wilfulness'.

Their questioning of the veracity of the visions did not at all imply that these guardians of orthodoxy did not accept the reality of the divine and believe in God's ability to act in the world. But there was no need to seek proof of these things from private experience, since any proof that may have been called for could be provided by the rational discourse of the Schools, or the authority of Scripture and the magisterium. It is only later, when those metaphysical certainties and assumptions were challenged, that some considered it necessary to look to experience to buttress what could no longer be satisfactorily defended by reason or authority.

To an Enlightenment Europe sceptical of clerical authority, of scriptural inerrancy, of the possibility of knowing the transcendent, thinkers like Friedrich Schleiermacher (d. 1834) proposed to found the claims of religion on the experience of the individual. In seeking to defend religion before what he referred to as its 'cultured despisers', Schleiermacher drew the strongest possible contrast between religion as the 'immediate consciousness of the Deity'[2] and religion as 'accept[ing] what another has said or done, or wish[ing] to think and feel as another has thought and felt'.[3] He saw true religion as emerging from within the experience of the individual and only from there taking on the determinate forms of particular religion. In responding in this way to the Enlightenment critique, Schleiermacher introduced what has until relatively recently been the dominant approach to religious experience: the notion that it is an empirically valid experience of God, and that such experience is not the product of religion but forms the basis of it. His foundation was further built on by the psychologist and philosopher William James in his work *The varieties of religious experience* (1902), and by other students of religious phenomena like Rudolf Otto in *The idea of the holy* (1958).

Like Schleiermacher, James presumed that personal religious experience is *the* primordial event, and therefore the origin of actual religion. In refusing to consider as of primary relevance anything other than what takes place in the solitude of the 'single private man', James created the impression that he had reached the deepest

layer of human religiosity – unaffected by doctrine, ecclesiasticism or other cognitive influences.[4]

However, if these kinds of experiences are empirically valid, then the variety of human religious experience must surely count against a monotheist faith. If my friend and I were both having direct experience of God, then there must be more than one God, because our experiences were at odds with one another. James accepted the logic of his position in acknowledging that, if human religious experience revealed anything about the divine, it was probably that there were in fact many gods.[5] However, most of those who have followed him have preferred by various means to reduce this variety to a fundamental unity – one that they alone can discern, a kind of religion-above-religions. They sometimes resort to the 'three blind people trying to describe an elephant' style of explanation: each can only perceive a small part, but the incomplete perceptions actually fit together to make a coherent whole.

Both in presuming that religious experiences are direct and unmediated, and in basing the truth-claims of religious faith upon those experiences, such scholars place upon them a burden they cannot possibly bear, a burden which they had not been asked to bear before the time of Schleiermacher. Since that time, defenders of religion have tried to protect it against the depredations of 'science' by claiming that it has its origins in a realm that can only be known from experience, and that such an experience is immune to analysis or explanation. Yet in many ways they have made it all the more vulnerable because they have put, as it were, all their eggs in one basket. Religious faith had backed itself into a corner and could become an easy target for those who sought to discredit it.

### *The critique of religious experience*

Steven Katz and Wayne Proudfoot have made a strong case against those who posit or, rather, take for granted the immediacy of experience, and who rest the truth claims of religion on that.[6] Developing the work of Katz, Proudfoot attempts to breach the wall that scholars of religion have constructed to protect religious experience from too close a scientific scrutiny. He argues that attempts at explaining religious experiences are not merely to be dismissed as reductionist. Proudfoot claims that within the very experience that some consider so primal, so immune to explanation or analysis, there in fact lies an explanation. My explanation to myself of what is taking place in me is an integral part of the experience, not just a

later reflection on it. If I see a certain dark shape right beside the window at night and feel afraid, it is because I have in that split-second come up with an explanation of the shape – it is an intruder! I may find out that it is in fact the pinnacle of the stone arch over the door below, but my experience of fear was based on another explanation I had given myself. The explanation was part of the experience. So too with the people who see the face of Mary in the mirrored windows of a Florida office building. The explanation they give themselves for the strange shape is part of the experience itself.

To return for a moment to Taizé, Proudfoot would argue that my experience there – and my friend's in Mecca – included a religious explanation. It is not as though we had some formless, experience and only later thought of it as religious and therefore in a class of its own. My experience there was profoundly communal and was shared, even in my solitary moments, not only by the ambience of faith in that hilltop village and tent-city, but by the generations before me who had prayed those psalms and taken on their lips the name of the man of Nazareth. Neither of us could establish the ultimate validity of our faith commitments on the basis of those experiences, because our prior faith commitments were an inextricable part of the experience.

If all religion stands or falls on individual religious experience, then it stands on very shaky ground indeed. Moreover, this approach to experience raises more problems than it solves for the unity and mutual understanding of religions.

### *The Spiritual Exercises and religious experience*

The critique adduced by Proudfoot and Katz sends us back to examine more closely that pre-Schleiermacher, pre-James era when a claim to solitary religious experience might result not in one's becoming a celebrated defender of faith against unbelief but in one's being whipped through the streets. It was a time before spiritual experience was pressed into the service of apologetics and so writers were much more candid about their expectations.

Ignatius of Loyola, who thrice knew the prisons of the Inquisition from the inside, provides an instructive study in the matter of individual religious experience. In his annotations to the *Exercises*, he explains the term further:[7]

> By the term 'Spiritual Exercises' is meant every method of examination of conscience, of meditation, of contemplation, of vocal and

> mental prayer, and of other spiritual activities, that will be mentioned later. For just as taking a walk, journeying on foot, and running are bodily exercises, so we call Spiritual Exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our souls. (Exx 1)

The important point to note for our purposes is that Ignatius does not propose mystical union or ineffable, direct experience of God as the aim of his regimen. The experiential element of the Exercises is always closely allied with the work of the intellect in imagining, pondering, reasoning and searching and the will in deciding, affirming and resolving. All the experiential fruit sought has an explicit contextual element: for example, 'glowing and intense sorrow and tears for my sins' (Exx 55), 'to ask for what I desire . . . an intimate knowledge of our Lord who became man for me' (Exx 104), 'knowledge of the true life exemplified in the sovereign and true Commander and the grace to imitate Him' (Exx 139), 'it is proper to ask for sorrow with Christ in sorrow, anguish with Christ in anguish, tears and deep grief' (Exx 203). The explanation is explicitly part of the experience, because I explicitly seek it.

In discussing the pivotal concept of consolation, Ignatius makes it clear that the explanation of the cause of the phenomenon is not separate from the experience:

> It is likewise consolation when one sheds tears that move to the love of God, whether it be *because of* sorrow for sins, or *because of* the sufferings of Christ our Lord, or *for any other reason* that is immediately *directed to* the praise and service of God. (Exx 316, my italics)

Ignatius is far from believing that even positive spiritual experiences are a proof of the existence or action of God. He insists that they need to be tested as to their content and the direction they lead us. His talk of 'good and evil spirits' reminds us that he believes that there may be other explanations for a particular 'religious' experience than that the subject has had an encounter with God.

Ignatius does, of course, accept that there can be moments of spiritual consolation without prior cause and these he attributes to divine action alone.[8] However, it is clear that the bulk of the experi-

ence he expects to observe is not of this kind; nor does he suggest that such an experience has none of the contextual and cognitive content which characterizes most spiritual experience as he understands it. What sets this experience apart is not that it is more highly charged or has less content but that it seems to have no immediate cause in the circumstances of mind and heart. However, Ignatius warns that, even when there is a moment of such experience, it must be distinguished from that time immediately after it when one's own 'reasoning on the relations of our concepts and on the consequences of our judgements' may give rise to opinions and resolutions which, not being of God, need to be tested like any others before being given credence (Exx 336).

***Community, obedience and the divine will***

If it is true that Ignatius considered all religious experience as somehow mediated by the community's faith, that might explain how he could hold his very strong view of obedience. The discovery of the 'divine will' is only in exceptional cases conceived of as the kind of immediate experience by which Schleiermacher and James place such store – Paul on the road to Damascus, Matthew the tax-collector (Exx 175). For others, the divine will becomes clear from the sifting and discernment of the movements of consolation and desolation, a process which we have already seen includes cognition and context (Exx 176). For many, if not most, the discovery of God's will is arrived at through normal rational processes, undertaken with good will and the intention of serving God (Exx 177–188). We know well how Ignatius expected Jesuits to accept the decisions of their superiors as expressions of the divine will. From this it is clear how far he is from considering individual experience and private spiritual insight to be primary.

However, this should not merely be understood as a preference for institutional authority over individual freedom. Rather it is an indication of the extent to which Ignatius understood spiritual experience to be communally mediated. Precisely because he envisaged the individual's experience of prayer and discernment as taking place within the community of the Society of Jesus, which is itself part of the broader community of the Church, Ignatius understood that what a person discerns to be the will of God will be mediated by the community. As a result it will conform to that community's discernment as enunciated by those whose role it is to do so. To a generation more used to the Jamesian presupposition that individual

experience is primary and ecclesiastical structure is a later and rather suspect development, this is often nothing less than incomprehensible authoritarianism.

The whole structure of the *Spiritual Exercises* is built around consideration of the life of Jesus, using as much imaginative detail as possible to fill out the gospel accounts. This points up a foundational belief of the whole Christian tradition: that all knowledge of God is somehow mediated through the life of the Word-made flesh.[9] Those making the Exercises are invited to immerse themselves in the communal memory of Jesus in Scripture and tradition, in order to become more closely identified with him. There is no claim in the Ignatian tradition to a primal experience of the kind that Schleiermacher and others have seen as the foundation and bulwark of religion.

***Religious experience in other traditions***

Christianity was not alone in understanding the role of tradition and community in the shaping of religious experience. If we take for example a spiritual manual from the Muslim tradition, *A rule for novices* by the medieval Sufi scholar al-Suhrawardī,[10] we find the author much more concerned with ethics and the outer life of the Sufi than with the kind of interior movements with which many other spiritual writers concern themselves. It is clear that for al-Suhrawardī the living out the code of life and belief of the Sufi is the foundation of religious experience, not vice versa as we might expect given Schleiermacher's analysis of religion. 'The science of the inner aspect of religion is derived from the science of the external aspect' (#58).

The central Sufi practice of *samā`* (repetition of the names of God or fragments of prayer) has a structure, a content and an expected range of results – the *ahwāl* (ecstatic states, #50). The resultant ecstasy is clearly seen as a result of the way the content acts upon the hearer. Al-Suhrawardī quotes a story that would not be out of place in Proudfoot's discussion of the role of explanation as part of the experience:

> A Sufi once heard a peddler calling out, '*Yā sa `tar barrī!*' (Wild thyme!), and he fainted. When he was later asked about this, he answered, 'I thought that he was calling out, '*Is `a tarā birrī*' (Exert yourself and you will see my goodness).' (#147)

In Islam, the experience of God is always mediated by the Qur'ān, by the 'most beautiful names' of God found there, by the figure of the Prophet or of `Alī, and even by the *sharī`ah* (law). It is true that there are elements within Sufism that play down the importance of ethics, preferring to give pride of place to the internal states even to the point of embracing a quite shocking libertinism. It is this facet of Sufism that has long made mainstream Islam look on it with a mixture of distrust and fascination. In both Christianity and Islam (and, indeed, in other traditions) the experience that is sought and valued is clearly accepted as being mediated for us by the tradition itself, that is to say by the community.

***Communal visions of reality***

If we accept, then, that all religious experience is mediated and shaped by the tradition in which it takes place, we are left with the question of whether religious experience is anything more than a prophecy self-fulfilled. Is there anything more to religion than an endless circularity between beliefs that shape experience and experiences that in turn reinforce the beliefs?

A careful examination will reveal that such a circularity is only produced if, with Schleiermacher and James, we insist that belief has its foundation in religious experience alone. Should we not rather see religious experience as in the first place an experience of oneself – not in the sense of navel-gazing, but as an experience of oneself assenting to or achieving insight into and finally giving oneself over to a vision of reality proffered by a community that lives by that vision?

The faith vision to which we find ourselves given is a community's hypothesis about the whole of reality. It is built up not merely from previous identical experiences of this kind but from a constantly developing common reflection on the experience of living, a reflection to which each individual makes a contribution. It is acted out in the rituals and enshrined in the myths of human societies. In assenting to it, one is, as Durkheim clearly saw, expressing a relationship to society.[11] However, one is not believing in society as the ultimate reality; rather one is taking up a stance toward a perceived reality *along with* and *from within* our society.

This living according to a particular vision of reality is not restricted to religious communities. All humanity is in a constant state of living *as if* certain things are true: *as if* for example, physical 'laws' will continue to operate even though we cannot prove it; *as if* the

people whom I encounter are not just figments of my imagination. We all have working hypotheses about reality: some live *as if* all persons have an absolute value; some live *as if* only I have value. We commit ourselves to ways of perceiving reality, and live by them while also restlessly seeking new and better paradigms by which to make sense of our life in the universe. Different religious traditions offer us various *as if*'s to live by – *as if* there is no self; or *as if* there is no duality; or *as if* there is a loving creator etc., etc. – and they invite us to commit ourselves completely to those visions. That experience of being drawn into a conviction about and a commitment to a community's vision is what we call religious experience. It is not so much a direct experience of God as an experience of believing.

***Religious experience and dialogue***

If religious experience appears to be a phenomenon common to all traditions, we cannot claim that it is because a single absolute or ultimate is clearly at work in them all. What gives these diverse experiences a tantalizing commonality amid all their real differences is the fact that they are all instances of human persons being drawn into communal vision of or hypothesis about reality. My friend in Lahore, fired with piety and enthusiasm for the *hajj*, had allowed himself to be fully drawn into a community that offered him a complete vision for his world, for our world. I too knew what it was to give myself over to the vision of the Christian life fleshed out for me at that moment on the hill of Taizé. That vision of life and of God had been nurtured and developed by a community that had passed it on through the generations from the time of Jesus. Now I was being drawn into it anew. We two believers, fresh from our respective pilgrimages, had in common not the content of our vision – though surely there are some common elements – but the giving of ourselves to it.

It is in this sense that there may be a way forward in interfaith relations through the 'dialogue of religious experience'. It lies not so much in talking to each other about our religious experiences, but in recognizing in each other fellow human beings longing for richer life, searching with all our hearts for a truth to which we can entrust ourselves. With good will we can always find elements of that truth in other traditions and so will be able to enter into some expressions of that truth by sharing in ritual or in contemplation, in their 'spiritual exercises'. I can allow another tradition to put words into my

mouth, and some of those words will have the familiar savour of my own tradition. Others might add a piquancy that my own has lost. I can allow another tradition to mould me into particular postures and gestures in face of the divine, and some of those positions will feel natural and express my own belief. Others might open me to a relationship I had not yet known; I will feel in my bones a truth I had not yet glimpsed.

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NOTES

1 The fascinating documentation of the inquisitions into Spanish visions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is given in William A. Christian Jr, *Apparitions in late medieval and Renaissance Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).
2 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On religion: speeches to its cultured despisers*, translated by John Oman with an introduction by Rudolf Otto (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p 101.
3 *Ibid.*, p 90.
4 William James, *The varieties of religious experience* (New York: Collier, 1961), p 42.
5 *Ibid.*, p 407.
6 Steven T. Katz, 'Language, epistemology and mysticism' in S. T. Katz (ed), *Mysticism and philosophical analysis* (New York: Oxford, 1978); Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
7 Extracts are from Louis J. Puhl, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius: a new translation based on studies of the language of the autograph* (Allahabad, 1977).
8 Exx 330: 'I say without cause: without any previous sense or knowledge of any object through which such conclusion would come, through one's acts of understanding and will'.
9 Here, perhaps, lies the significance of the controversial '*filioque*': even those apparently direct experiences of the divine which Christians call experiences of the Holy Spirit do not bypass, at least in the western understanding of things, the mediation of the Son who became human.
10 Reference numbers refer to *A sufi rule for novices*: kitāb ādāb al-murīdīn *of Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī*, an abridged translation and introduction by Menahem Milson (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).
11 Emile Durkheim, *The elementary forms of the religious life* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p 465.