

INTRODUCTION

For the past two centuries, the issue of religious experience has been central in the work of religious thinkers and of those who have contributed to the development of the study of religion as an academic discipline. Religion has always been an experiential matter. It is not just a set of credal statements or a collection of rites. A religious life is one in which beliefs and practices cohere in a pattern that expresses a character or way of life that seems more deeply entrenched in the life of that person or community than any of the beliefs or practices. When new evidence about pagan and primitive religious traditions became available through historical research and the translation of crucial texts, nineteenth-century students of religion read the myths and narratives about the gods not as cosmological beliefs or history but as expressions of particular forms of religious experience. In this respect they were more sophisticated in the study of this material than their Enlightenment predecessors had been. They did not treat pagan, primitive, and oriental myths and practices as erroneous doctrine or immoral conduct. Instead they viewed them as expressive of particular forms of the religious life, each of which highlighted some aspect of religious experience that was, in principle, available to all. This way of viewing ancient and religious texts has been particularly influential in shaping the course of biblical study during the course of the last two centuries.

Although religious experience seemed to be ubiquitous, the idea of religious experience was novel. Members of the cultures whose myths and practices were now being interpreted as expressions of the religious dimension of human experience did not understand what was happening to them or what they were doing in these terms. Both *religious* and *experience* are relatively recent concepts, whose provenance is in the modern West. Though that need not detract from their usefulness in describing or analyzing the religious life of other cultures, it does mean that members of those cultures did not employ these terms in their own attempts to understand their experience and behavior.

This book is about that idea of religious experience which has been so influential in religious thought and the study of religion in the past two centuries. It is an examination of some of the most important theories of religious experience, an elucidation of the idea or concept as it is presupposed by discussions of such topics as mysticism and reductionism in the study of religion, and a consideration of the implications of these theories and this idea for contemporary issues in the philosophy of religion. Particular attention will be given to the way people come to understand or interpret their behavior and what is happening to them, and under what conditions they label certain bodily or mental states religious. Recent work in psychology and in the philosophy of mind will be employed to understand what must be assumed in order to account for particular religious emotions or for a sense of finitude or of unity with the whole.

The emergence of the concept of religious experience in the late eighteenth century, and its centrality for the liberal tradition of religious thought which stems largely from the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, can best be understood when set in historical context. Traditional appeals to metaphysical argument to justify religious belief were undercut by the criticisms set forth by a line of thinkers beginning with Descartes and

culminating with Immanuel Kant. Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* dismantled the argument from design which some empiricists wanted to substitute for the scholastic theistic arguments. Kant's critiques effectively blocked both the appeal to metaphysics and the weighing of probabilities based on empirical evidence as methods for addressing the question of the existence of God. Appeals to ecclesiastical authority or to scripture to justify religious belief were rendered more difficult by the study of the historical development of scripture and the early church.

The turn to religious experience was motivated in large measure by an interest in freeing religious doctrine and practice from dependence on metaphysical beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions and grounding it in human experience. This was the explicit aim of Schleiermacher's *On Religion*, the most influential statement and defense of the autonomy of religious experience. In *The Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher provided a more careful statement of the relation between religious doctrine and experience and a systematic reconstruction of Christian doctrine on the basis of that statement. Religion could now be appreciated as an autonomous moment in human experience which ought not to be reduced to science, metaphysics, or morality. Religion had its own integrity, and religious belief and practice were properly viewed as expressions of the religious dimension or moment.

With this idea of religion as an experiential moment irreducible to either science or morality, belief or conduct, Schleiermacher sought to free religious belief and practice from the requirement that they be justified by reference to nonreligious thought or action and to preclude the possibility of conflict between religious doctrine and any new knowledge that might emerge in the course of secular inquiry. Religion is grounded in a moment of experience that is intrinsically religious, so it need not be justified by metaphysical argument, by the kind of evidence considered by the proponents of the design argument,

or by appeals to its importance for the moral life. Moreover, because religion is autonomous, all possible conflict between religion and science or morality is precluded. Any attempt to assimilate religion to nonreligious phenomena is an attempt to reduce it to something other than it is. Reductionism is thus the chief error to be avoided in the study of religion.

Schleiermacher offered a careful description of the religious sense from the perspective of a member of the communities with which he was most familiar. He sought to convince his friends among the artists, poets, and critics of Berlin at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century that their sensibilities were more in tune with the genuine spirit of the religious life than much that went on in churches and synagogues. He set out to awaken this interest in his readers and to direct their attention to it. But the evocative language required for that task does not serve well as a theoretical account of religious experience. The sense of the infinite, or the feeling of absolute dependence, does not seem to those who experience it to be the result of inference or to presuppose concepts and beliefs. This moment seems unmediated by linguistic representation.

Accounts of religious experience in this tradition are constructed from the perspective of the subject. Any other perspective, or any attempt to explain the experience in terms other than those adopted by the subject, is regarded as reductive, and reductionism in any form is to be opposed. One result of this stance is that much contemporary philosophy of religion and theology takes the form of edifying discourses designed to elicit in the reader the experiences the author intends to communicate. Accounts of religious experience which are allegedly descriptive and theoretical actually serve to constitute or evoke the experience they purport to describe or analyze. This follows from the assumption that such moments of experience are immediate and thus can only be understood by direct acquaintance.

Schleiermacher's approach continues to inform much contemporary religious thought and philosophy of religion, even among those who think of themselves as having broken with that tradition. If they disagree with the claim for the autonomy of religious experience viewed as a sense of the infinite or the feeling of absolute dependence, they employ similar arguments to defend the irreducible character of religious experience construed as the experience of the sacred, or as limit experience, or of religious language, practice, or doctrine. In each of these cases, despite considerable differences, the autonomy of the religious life is defended in order to preclude inquiry and to stave off demands for justification from some perspective outside of that life. The result is a combination of genuine insights into the ways in which religion ought to be studied and protective strategies that serve apologetic purposes.

No topic is better suited for an examination of current issues in religious thought and the study of religion than religious experience. If we can understand how that experience has been variously described, and begin to distinguish between descriptive, analytical, explanatory, and evocative elements in the accounts of religious experience which have been most influential, we will be in a better position to assess the current state of the field.

Schleiermacher's program required that he show that religious experience is independent in the requisite sense. But concepts, beliefs, and practices are assumed by the descriptions he offers and the instructions he gives for identifying the religious moment in experience. Recent work in psychology and the philosophy of mind shows the extent to which our ascriptions of emotions to ourselves and to others and our identification of bodily and mental states depend on complex sets of beliefs and grammatical rules. These are not simple inner states identifiable by acquaintance, as Schleiermacher and others suggest. Such moments of experience are clearly dependent on the availability of particular concepts, beliefs,

and practices. When that is recognized, Schleiermacher's program cannot be carried through as he envisioned it.

Most philosophers of religion would concur in their criticism of claims that religious experience is prior to or independent of beliefs and practices. But that concurrence is often misleading. Some who criticize Schleiermacher for naiveté on this point and who emphasize the degree to which all emotions, actions, and mental states are embedded in and presuppose concepts and linguistic practices, go on to argue for the autonomy of religious language, action, or doctrine and to denounce reductionism in ways that show a marked similarity to Schleiermacher's program. In both cases an ambiguity between descriptive analysis and explanatory commitments is built into an allegedly neutral account of religious experience or of religious language or practice. Strictures against reductionism are invoked to preclude critical inquiry from outside the religious life. The result is a powerful protective strategy.

It is possible to turn that protective strategy around and to use the warnings against reductionism as indicators of tacit criteria for what an author takes to be distinctive about the religious. For example, if someone claims that any attempt to offer a natural explanation of religious phenomena is reductive, one can infer that for this person the distinctively religious characteristic of those phenomena is that they elude natural explanation. In this way it is possible to tease out the distinguishing marks of the religious operating in these protective strategies.

The insistence on describing religious experience from the subject's point of view, the stress on the reality of the object of an experience for the person who has that experience, the avoidance of reductionism, and the distinction between descriptive and explanatory tasks are all important for the study of religion. Each, however, can and has been used to block inquiry for apologetic purposes. In the following chapters we shall examine the accounts that have been given and the claims that

have been made for religious experience with a view toward distinguishing the genuine insights from erroneous theories and protective strategies.

The book proceeds by considering different topics in the analysis of religious experience, but special attention is given to two authors whose work has been particularly influential in shaping the development of the idea of religious experience during the past two centuries: Friedrich Schleiermacher and William James. Selected issues from Schleiermacher's *On Religion* and the introduction to *The Christian Faith* and from James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* are considered. The *Varieties* has been widely read and commented upon, but its significance for contemporary issues in the philosophy of religion has often been overlooked.

The opening chapter is an examination and criticism of Schleiermacher's theory of religious experience, with particular attention to his claim that it is independent of concepts and beliefs and to his account of the way that experience is expressed in language. I argue that his program requires the experience to be both immediate and intentional, and that these requirements are incompatible. According to Schleiermacher, the experience must be both independent of language and thought and identified only by reference to concepts and beliefs.

Chapter two focuses on two traditions of thought about the concept of interpretation and the interpretation of experience. The concept is ambiguous with respect to its use in the statement that there is no uninterpreted experience and its use in the hermeneutic tradition that has focused on the interpretation of texts and cultural products. Some theorists have traded on this ambiguity in order to justify a neglect of issues concerned with explanation.

Chapter three is an analysis of the ascription of emotions to oneself and to others, drawing on recent work in cognitive psychology and the philosophy of mind. Emotions cannot be

picked out without reference to rather sophisticated concepts, beliefs, and grammatical rules. These must be in place and certain conditions must be fulfilled in order for someone to identify what is happening to him or her as anger and thus to experience anger. The conditions under which people attribute certain emotional states to themselves and others are examined. These attributions typically include explanatory claims.

Chapter four is an analysis of mysticism. Mystical experience is often taken to be a paradigm of religious experience because it has seemed to many that evidence can be adduced for an experience that is invariant across cultures, even though the interpretation of that experience varies from one culture to another. I offer a new analysis of the two marks that James takes to be distinctive of mystical experience, its ineffability and its noetic quality. The latter mark again shows how deeply entrenched is the issue of the subject's explanation of his or her experience, despite attempts of theorists to disguise or deny it.

Chapter five is an explication of the concept of religious experience as it is employed in these accounts. By examining strictures against reductionism and the characterization of reductive accounts, one can tease out the implicit criteria of the religious which are at work. The most important ambiguity in the concept of religious experience emerges not from the term *religious* but from *experience*. An experience may be identified from the subject's point of view and regarded as neutral with respect to explanatory claims, or constraints on the proper explanation may be included in the criteria for identifying the experience. In this connection the parallels and dissimilarities between religious experience and sense perception are examined.

The final chapter is a consideration of different kinds of explanation of religious experience and the issue of reductionism. A distinction is proposed between descriptive and explanatory reduction, each of which has different implications for the

study of religious phenomena. The former is to be avoided, but the latter is not. Some recent attempts to deny the appropriateness of explanation of religious phenomena are examined and shown to conceal protective strategies not unlike those of the tradition of Schleiermacher, even though these philosophers would reject Schleiermacher's claim that it is possible to identify an experience that is independent of concepts and beliefs.

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