

## Transcendence and Contemporary Religious Experience

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### Abstract:

*The article explores the concept of religious experience. Experience possesses a variety of meanings and arises in very different contexts; therefore, it is very difficult to analyze or define. Nevertheless, experience is a solid foundation for contemporary theology. In order to understand this experience and its characteristics, the Enlightenment, with its presuppositions, offers various formulations. The Enlightenment was an age that emphasized immediate experience and human autonomy, and a consequent conviction that whatever is meaningful, real, and of value must be in continuity with ordinary experience and with human powers. Every object seemed susceptible to the control of the human mind. As such, the Enlightenment progressively militated against traditional authorities or untested positions as basic for religious convictions. Consequently, the traditional theistic idea of God need to be reformulated in the sense to show that the experience can also be transcendental. Scholars from the Middle Ages proposed that God was separate from ordinary experience,*

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*being the one who appeared only in miracles. Such a God proved untenable for the scientific mind since that being was unknowable or unreal.*

**Key words:** Experience, Religious Experience, Enlightenment, Contemporary Theology.

## 1. Introduction

With the dawn of Enlightenment, there was a new starting point. Theology today, at least the last fifty years, returns to the subject, because all knowing and religious experience occurs within the human subject. We are active in the process of knowing, because reality is known by us. Our praxis has transformed and shaped the world, and it has given rise to cultures.

In this paper, real human experience is perceived as transcendental within the whole range of acts toward God. We exercise in our subjective experience as subjects who have the capacity for the eternal; human beings are graced. Religious experience in the deep sense takes place in the historical existence of men and women, in what they are and do, and in what they experience in their lives.

## 2. Religious Experience and the Transcendent

Experience is always presented in a “personal dimension” and lived directly by the subject. In the strict sense, no subject can take part in the experience of someone else. The experience of suffering, joy, migration to another culture, conversion, and so forth are necessarily confined to the subject. However, the subject shares historical experience from his or her culture, historicity, language, and social reality. Those superstructures, as Karl Marx called them, were already there before we were born.

We cannot escape because cultures surround us. Karl

Rahner points out that “we are spirit in the world,” and to be human is to have these cultural characteristics that make us understand “reality” in certain way. “Cultural, religious, and sociological influences of all kinds shape the way our interpretations will go . . . memories, ideas, and sensibility will affect both the experience itself and subsequent reflections.” (Collins 1990).

As such, religious experience in the deep sense takes place in the historical existence of men and women, in what we are or do, or in what we experience in our lives. Religious experience is the relationship between cultures and the transcendent that is already present, but at the same time, it is our last goal, the absolute horizon (God) that creates the possibility for any experience. The transcendental experience of God is available to all human beings. It is an activity that is not just inside the framework of the religious because the experience is “a priori.” “In all knowing, willing, and acting, we experience the reality of God and ourselves. Primordial divine self-communications take places.” (Collins 1990) To be human is to be engaged with God, even when we are not thematically aware of this engagement. As Karl Rahner (1982) observes:

This unthematic and ever-present experience, this knowledge of God which we always have even when we are thinking of and concerned with anything but God is the permanent ground from out of which that thematic knowledge of God emerges which we have in explicitly religious activity and in philosophical reflection.

Faith is a universal phenomenon that is brought to bear on our many experiences with a variety of symbols, but religious experience is not an individual matter. It was brought to us, Christians, from our tradition. On the other hand, our religious experience is unique because of our cultural situation. Dermot Lane (1981) notes:

This tendency has a solid foundation because we do not experience God in se apart from our neighbor and the world.

Rather we co-experience and co-know God in our experience and knowledge of the neighbor and the world.

God has acted on our behalf from the very beginning. Some scholars, like Karl Rahner, began to universalize the experience of the transcendent. Obviously, he acknowledges that any experience of God receives its coherence in the context of the subject, thus religious experience can be limited by our ordinary experience. The infinite horizon is there as we seek to understand within finite horizons of understandings.

But “the context of reality and of explanation – the horizon given with every limited object – is ultimately something radically different from limited objects or the set of limited objects.” (Buckley 1981) We are always connected with the world through our spatio-temporal and actual circumstances (in Karl Rahner’s terminology, the “categorical.”) But our experience of God is “a priori” because the nature of being in the world involves being open to the self-revelation of God: each person has an experience of grace from within. Everything that comes after is conditioned by this transcendental that makes us move forward to experience God more and more and, at the same time, to experience ourselves as transcendental subjects. Those experiences are not identical, but they are part of one unity that makes it possible to receive God’s self-communication. Nevertheless, the human transcendental experience of the infinite always is mediated by “every day” history. As such, we are between transcendental (spirit) and historicity (matter). But there is no dualism here because spirit and matter have a common goal. They are not totally opposed: they may be different, yet they are neither separated nor radically other.

In Karl Rahner’s view, God in fact becomes the center of human experience. We are searching for our infinite goal, God. However, he is a mystery that we have tasted and experienced in our humanity, but never grasped in totality. Michael Buckley (Buckley 1981) notes:

Whenever we ask a question, we begin a series of questions which can take us to this horizon of all reality and to an infinitude which is utterly different from the finite things we directly and immediately experience. Ultimately, the coherence or explanation of the finite is not finite.

Our concerns and questions disclose our fundamental openness to mystery, and this brings a sense of anxiety. This occurs because God, as mystery, has already grasped our consciousness. He knows us before we know ourselves. As Psalm 139 observes:

The word is not even on my tongue, Yahweh, before you know all about it; close behind and close in front, you fence me round, shielding me with your hand. Such knowledge is beyond my understanding, a height to which my mind cannot attain.

Karl Rahner wants to show that our human experience is not intelligible apart from the “holy mystery” that we call God. But the experience of God is not an encounter with a “particular object alongside others” because God is not just another entity. In Rahner’s thought, God remains absolutely beyond our thematic experience because God is more than just one moment, such as crucifixion, miracles, etc. We cannot exhaust the mystery of God, because it is “endlessly intelligible.” Therefore, God is always new because he actualizes himself in our history (becomes known) and any moment can be a revelatory moment, because our experience of the divine is within us. God is with us from the very beginning and God is and will be with us until the end. As such, the category of mystery helps us to see God who has always-new things to do because God hears the cry of his people in different circumstances of our history. God is mystery, not because of the abyss between us, but because of his profound love and gratitude toward us. He is not like the God of Greek thought who is removed from time and history. For Karl Rahner, history

is where salvation takes place.

The sense of mystery seems to be absent today. Mystery means not something that “blinds us” but fascinates and “shocks” us (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*). Therefore, the first step in theology has to be what Karl Rahner has called, “mystagogy.” This term basically means, “pedagogy” into mystery. We, in our pastoral experience, should help people to see that they are already open to mystery, apart from any explicit sense of special historical revelation, even the sacraments. The reality is sacred for itself, and we, in our official rituals, such as confession, baptism, and so on, should call to mind that God is already there. God is the one who forgives the sins and baptizes us: nobody else performs these deeds. All theological reflection should begin and end with the mystery. Religious experience should not be dismissed as “cognitively empty,” as Enlightenment thinkers conjectured

### **3. Culture and Religious Experience**

Obviously, any experience of God receives its coherence in the context of the subject, thus religious experience can be limited by our ordinary experience. Human beings are always connected with the world spatiotemporally and in their actual circumstances. Pastoral work reveals that the variety of experience that people have in their contexts is part of one unity. The unity is that faith is a universal phenomenon that is brought to bear on our many experiences in the ordinary life. Pastors should help people to see that they are already open to God, apart from any explicit sense of special historical revelation, even the sacraments.

Human reality is sacred for itself, and pastors, in their evangelization, should recall that God is the one who forgives sins and baptizes: nobody else performs these deeds. The God of all people is apprehended in our finite and limited world, but God called us because we are human beings, that is, God’s

children. To be truly human means to live in response to God's call in every culture. As such, evangelization never can be an imposition because human beings experience God in culture, in ordinary lives with human subjectivity. Experiences such as joy, anxiety, faithfulness, love, trust, and so on, find support in our culture. The relationship between faith and cultures, however, finds support in God, who is not separated from human nature. Nevertheless, the immanent God remains transcendent, but with effort, pastors should make God knowable in history.

All confessions and cultures need to have a dialogue with the contemporary world employing theology, sociology, psychology, linguistic, and other disciplines. To think of the common good is to make the process of inculturation of the Good News visible. This dialogue might be a tool that can show that God operates in the world to bring about a better future. This fact recommends a new kind of theology for the future.

#### **4. Freedom and Religious Experience**

Rahner claims that the real human experience of freedom is also transcendental, that is, it is co-present within the whole range of one's limited acts, but freedom is certainly not to be understood as the mere ability of choosing this or that between some options; it is the fundamental power to actualize ourselves (with a goal) in history. Freedom is expressed in our acts of love or hate; hope or despair; courage or cowardice. Yet it is not just an act of the will; our freedom is an activity of our whole self that we exercise in our subjective experience as subjects who have the capacity for the eternal; human beings are graced. As Rahner (1982) suggests:

Freedom is willed and established by God, and if in this way subjectivity exists without limiting the sovereignty of God, then this entails the possibility and the necessity of a free decision vis-à-vis God because this is what constitutes the essence of freedom.

In our acts of freedom, we have the capacity to transcend and move forward to the ultimate reality, that is, God. Nevertheless, it is God who empowers us with his grace (the supernatural existence). He is the one who takes the first step in our self-realization in freedom because he guarantees us with the freedom of accepting the absolute mystery that is God. In other words, we “know” God first; then, we know everything else. Such transcendental knowledge is greater than our mental reflections. Our freedom is beyond every finite experience; we have the ability for something more fundamental, the search for God.

The infinite mystery is apprehended in our finite and limited world. The experience of freedom is not a particular experience we have alongside others, but it is the experience to be called by God just because we are human beings, that is, God’s children. We as truly persons insofar as we live in response to this infinite transcendental call of God who provides the ground for all our knowing and freedom. This means that in our human subjectivity and experience of “reality,” there is the pre-apprehension of holy mystery: pre-apprehension because God is not fully yet; he has more to show us. As such, our words became limited (like my words now) before of the mystery of God. The closest we may come is to see that it is a mystical experience that is never satisfied; only God can be the realization of our freedom. But we are without boundaries; we can actualize ourselves in our personhood in our subjective experience of ourselves as matter and spirit.

Rahner points out that the experience of God is, at the same time, an experience of self in our human subjectivity; this experience points in the direction of God who is met in our experience of ongoing freedom. Moreover, God is always encountered as holy mystery. Elizabeth Johnson points out that, “God as God, ground, support, and goal of all, is illimitable mystery who, while immanently present, cannot be measured, manipulated, or controlled.” (Johnson 1982).



With regard to the experience of ourselves as free human beings, we always know more about ourselves than we are able to say. Conceptual knowledge can never totally grasp and fully communicate the deepest levels of our experience of self. However, we can never avoid experiencing ourselves, even though our conceptual interpretation might be inaccurate or distorted. Concrete experiences in our lives in some way indicate our searching for the “Holy Mystery.” Experiences such joy, anxiety, faithfulness, love, trust, and so on, come before we analyze them. In such experiences, we experience freedom and ourselves as the subject of such actions, even though we cannot realize thematically that our original freedom is present in all those free actions. Karl Rahner (1982) elaborates this insight:

With regard to individual free actions in his life, the subject never has an absolute certainty about the subjective and therefore moral quality of these individual actions because, as real and as objectified in knowledge, these actions are always a synthesis of original freedom and imposed necessity, a synthesis which cannot be resolved completely in reflection.

All creatures are integrated into the sovereign freedom of God. This means that all creatures depend permanently on God. In the case of a human being, this means that we depend on God in our understanding of ourselves, something that is characteristic of our humanity. It belongs to human beings’ creatureliness: that we experience and affirm the mystery of God and his freedom. Thus freedom is always called not to an arbitrary and contradictory (saying “no” to God) choice because this freedom finds support in our final goal (God). Even though we contradict God’s purpose with our sins, we only understand our sinfulness in the light of God’s presence. Every time human beings say “no” to God in their freedom, they realize that God is not judgmental but offers loving forgiveness. We are thus invited to say “yes” to God. At the same time, the “yes” is contained within each “no” in the sense that the “yes” is the basis for the possibility for the “no.” Rahner (1982) observes:

For every “no” always derives the life which it has from a “yes” because the “no” always becomes intelligible only in light of the “yes,” and not vice versa. Even the transcendental possibility of freedom’s “no” lives by that necessary “yes.” All knowledge and every free act lives by the term and the source of transcendence. But we have to allow for such a real impossibility and self-contradiction in this “no”: the contradiction, namely, that this “no” really closes itself and says “no” to the transcendental horizon of our freedom, and at the same times lives by a “yes” to this God.

True freedom is free self-realization towards achieving finality and is mediated by our world and our neighbors. Creaturely freedom is conditioned by the situation, for it does not simply possess itself, but it must first become concrete in history, and this it can do only in the encounter with others’ freedom, in the common life in the world. “Freedom is freedom in and through history and in time and space, and precisely there and precisely in this way is it the freedom of the subject in relation to himself.” (Rahner 1982).

For example, revelation has become concrete in an authentic and pure way in the special history of the Old Testament and the New Testament. But there is no absolute reality because we are in constant transformation or evolution. Our freedom is so self-collect that we can move beyond our partial realization and look for God. “Freedom therefore is not the capacity to do something which is always able to be revised, but the capacity to do something final and definitive ... in this sense and for this reason freedom is the capacity for the eternal.” (Rahner 1982) Everyone has this “restless heart” that look for the eternal. At the same time, God embraces creation in a covenant relationship, in order to give Godself to us; we experience this God in our subjective concerns and questions. “We have already experienced that we are free and what freedom really means when we begin to ask reflexively about it.” (Rahner 1982, 96)

Freedom does not downplay our intersubjectivity, because it is part of human existence. In our human subjectivity, we have the opportunity to grow in self-awareness and fullness of life because we have been touched by God in our ordinary lives. For Karl Rahner, our human subjectivity is inclined toward the Divine. The experience of God also finds support in the ground of our human nature, and God is not separated from human nature. God is the necessary condition of human subjectivity, both as freedom and as the capacity to “transcend.” Such an immanent God remains transcendent but makes Godself knowable in “transcendental revelation” and “categorical revelation.”

## 5 - Final Consideration

The authenticity and validity of the religious experiences do not result from empirical facts but from the faith of people who were not eyewitnesses to what they believe. God is always mysterious beyond the Enlightenment understanding.

Religious experience is the relationship between cultures and the transcendent that is already present but at the same time is the goal of humanity. History is moving toward its absolute “horizon,” that is, it moves toward God. God is the one who empowers human beings to understand his message through the richness and complexity of human cultures. This transcendental experience, as Rahner calls it, is available to all human beings of all times, from beginning of human consciousness to our own days. It is an activity that is not just inside the framework of religion, because the experience of God is *a priori*.

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