

MYTH, RITUAL & THE SACRED

Religious Experience

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1 The Nature of Religious Experiences

In religious or sacred experience, the believer comes in contact with transcendental reality. Habel defines religious experience as the structured way in which a believer enters into a relationship with, or gains an awareness of, the sacred within the context of a particular religious tradition.¹

Religious experiences are by their very nature preternatural; experiences that are out of the ordinary, beyond the natural order of things. Not all preternatural experiences are considered to be religious experiences.

These experiences include psychopathological states such as psychoses, forms of altered awareness and religious experiences.² Following Habel's definition, psychopathological states or drug-induced states of awareness are however not considered to be religious experiences because they are mostly not performed within the context of a particular religious tradition.

2 Types of Religious Experience

Moore and Habel identify two classes of religious experiences: the immediate and the mediated religious experience.³ In the mediated experience the believer experiences the sacred through mediators such as rituals, special persons, religious

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¹Normal Habel, Michael O'Donoghue, and Marion Maddox, *Myth, ritual and the sacred. Introducing the phenomena of religion*, (Underdale: University of South Australia, 1993).

²Max Charlesworth, *Religious experience. Unit A. Study guide 2*, (Deakin University, 1988).

³B. Moore and N. Habel, *On religion related to education*, (Adelaide: SACAE, 1982).

groups, totemic objects or the natural world.⁴ The immediate experience comes to the believer without any intervening agency or mediator. The deity or divine is experienced directly.⁵

There are four classical forms of immediate religious experience, the numinous, ecstasy, enthusiasm and mystic experience.

2.1 The numinous

The German thinker Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) argues that there is one common factor to all religious experience, independent of the cultural background. He identifies this experience as the 'numinous' in his book *The idea of the holy*.⁶ The numinous can, according to Otto not be strictly defined since the numinous is that in which all religious experiences are defined. The numinous can only be evoked or awakened in the mind. The numinous is a realm or dimension of reality, which is mysterious, awe-inspiring and fascinating. Otto states that the best expression for the numinous is the Latin phrase *mysterium tremendum* — a magnificent mystery. The mystery is the 'Wholly Other' which is beyond apprehension and comprehension. It is expressed in the idea of 'the wrath of God' in the Old Testament and is connected with consciousness of the absolute superiority and supremacy of a power other than myself. Otto sees the numinous as the only possible religious experience. He states: "There is no religion in which it [the numinous] does not live as the real innermost core and without it no religion would be worthy of the name".⁷ Otto describes in his convoluted style one form of religious experience, but does not succeed in characterising the essence of all religious experience. Otto does not take any other kind of religious experience such as ecstasy and enthusiasm serious and is of the opinion that they belong to the 'vestibule of religion'.

2.2 Ecstasy

In ecstasy the believer is understood to have a soul or spirit which can leave the body. In ecstasy the focus is on the soul leaving the body and to experience transcendental realities. This type of religious experience is characteristic for the shaman which will be described in more detail in the next brief study.⁸

⁴Habel, O'Donoghue, and Maddox (1993).

⁵Ibid.

⁶Rudolf Otto, *The idea of the holy*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

⁷Ibid.

⁸See *Elements of shamanism*, <http://www.prevos.net/ola/shamanism.pdf>.

2.3 Enthusiasm

In enthusiasm — or possession — god is understood to be outside, other than or beyond the believer. A sacred power, being or will enters the body or mind of an individual and possesses it. A person capable of being possessed is sometimes called a medium. The deity, spirit or power uses such a person to communicate to the immanent world. Lewis argues that ecstasy and possession are basically one and the same experience, ecstasy is merely one form which possession may take. The outward manifestation of the phenomenon is the same in that shamans appear to be possessed by spirits, act as their mediums, and even though they claim to have mastery over them, can lose that mastery.⁹

2.4 Mystical Experiences

Mystical experiences are in many ways the opposite of numinous experiences. In the mystical experience, all otherness disappears and the believer becomes one with the transcendent. The believer discovers that he or she is not distinct from the cosmos, the deity or the other reality, but one with it. Zaehner has identified two distinctively different mystical experiences: natural and religious mystical experiences.¹⁰ Natural mystical experiences are for example experiences of the deeper self or experiences of oneness with nature. Zaehner argues that the experiences typical of natural mysticism are quite different from the experiences typical of religious mysticism.¹¹ Natural mystical experiences are not considered to be religious experiences because they are not linked to a particular tradition, but natural mystical experiences are spiritual experiences that can have a profound effect on the individual.

3 Discussion

Habel's differentiation between mediate and immediate religious experiences is based on the assumption that it is possible to have a direct experience of any given phenomenon. This assumption is a general epistemological statement about all experiences. In western philosophy it is more or less generally accepted that one

⁹Ioan M Lewis, *Religion in context: cults and charisma*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹⁰Charlesworth (1988).

¹¹Ibid.

can not have a direct experience of reality. This is also true for religious experiences and therefore the immediate religious experience as such is not possible.

The immediate religious experience is as it were caused by a mediated religious experience. The transcendent can not be perceived in a direct way; the believer needs mediators to be able to experience.

The Christian uses prayer and contemplation on the Bible to feel at awe with God, thus creating a numinous experience. The shaman cannot perform his ecstatic ritual without the use of mediating objects and rituals. He uses his special costume, the beating of the drum, the chanting, the dancing and so on to reach an altered state of consciousness which in term enables him to travel to the transcendental worlds.

Religion can be loosely defined as a way of dealing with the transcendent. Religion provides the vehicles for the believer to experience this transcendental reality. Religion is in itself thus the mediator for all religious experiences.

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