

The Dark Side of the Preternatural World. A Suggestion to the Theological Approach of the Religious Experience

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ABSTRACT: There is today an optimistic approach, on a widespread scale, to every issue of life, which in appearance seems good and commendable. This is a result of a general secular mindset that reinterprets love and empathy unsuccessfully, and that is the case even when dealing with the religious experience. But the Apostle Paul challenged the first century's Greek and Roman polytheism in a way that should challenge our twenty-first century's approach to religious experience. For him, the demons were real, and they were powerful and fearful. Augustine of Hippo, in *De civitate Dei contra paganos*, was thinking alike, and this was the general view during the most part of history. This paper aimed to reclaim into the taxonomy of the religious experience the place rightly owned by the actors of the dark side.

KEYWORDS: preternatural, demons, taxonomy, religious experience

Introductory notes. Terminology

Religious experience is an important part of the study of religions. The academic literature concerning this topic is abundant, being as wide as it is old. The sacred scriptures of the world's great nations all include stories that fit the description of a religious experience. During the last two millenniums, in the Western culture, dominated by the Christian faith, it is common knowledge that there was a great multitude of mystics who seem to have had authenticated religious experiences. But even in the pre-Christian era, humans were aware of the evil actors of the world. Ulysses and his companions were tempted by the sirens, in an attempt of the sirens to kill them. Circe was a witch that had the power to change people into swine. And the Greek 'gods' were also able to harm people as they wished.

In this paper, I will present several approaches to the taxonomy of religious experiences, bringing to attention that there are just a few mentions about non-benevolent entities in most of them. Afterward, I will show that the Bible and the Christian authors have a different approach, and it is on the opposite side of the spectrum, suggesting the existence of a preternatural world that is darker and more harmful (Laycock 2012, 100) than what most of the scholars believe.

It is important to draw attention right from the beginning to the fact that the term "religious experience" is full of ambiguity. Gelpi called it a "weasel" word, one that when the reader thinks he understood its meaning, it already changes into something else (Gelpi 1994, 2). This is the reason why in this paper I will define it according to what the German scholars would call *Erlebnis* (experiencing something), the "lived experience" (Hanich 2019, 14) the episodic, isolated phenomenon, that has no effect on the collective consciousness; contrary to *Erfahrung*, which is a long term experience, accumulated during a lengthy time. According to Gelpi, *Erfahrung* (although he never mentioned this word) represents the practical wisdom gained by the long exposure to a certain reality, procedure or problem (Gelpi 1994, 2).

It is also important to define some key terms that define the unseen realms, to avoid the confusions that could arise. The supernatural is meant only when dealing with God and His abode, the "aethereal" heaven (Augustine of Hippo), a place that the ancient and medieval poets have named the Empyrean Heaven, imagined to be the 10th one, according to Dante (Kay 2003, 37), or the heaven of heavens, as imagined by Milton (Gilbert 1923, 444). According to the Apostle Paul, the ultimate source on this matter, that would be the 3rd heaven (2 Corinthians

12:2). The demons and evil spirits belong to a world that is called preternatural. These definitions have been made by the Church Fathers, and I strongly believe that they are still actual and useful.

I will not give too many details about specific information, definitions, descriptions, because the only goal of this paper is to have a clear picture of the taxonomy of the religious experience, as presented by both secular and Christian scholars, emphasizing the rejection of the malignant actors. It suffices to say that, according to Gothoni, in an excellent article about the difference between superstition and religion (Gothoni 1994, 37-46), the latter is characteristic of the cultivated person, who invested his time in reading about the supernatural, and who adjusts his attitude according to God's will.

Secular taxonomies of the religious experience. A taxonomy according to Hardy, Rankin, Davis

There is rich scholarly literature debating this topic, going back far in history. The academics of all the times were interested in explaining magic, demon possessions, or other related issues and extracting out of them epistemological conclusions. But in the 20th and 21st centuries, renamed scholars had a slightly different approach because they had the chance to rely on an abundantly rich literature, and they were also freed from the danger of repercussions from the representatives of the Church. At the beginning of the 20th century, William James, followed by C. G. Jung or Alister Hardy, are just a few of the greatest names. Strangely enough, both William James and Alister Hardy have very little to say about a potentially dangerous dimension of the spiritual world. Another interesting aspect is the lack of interest in God as *per se*, which could be linked to the refusal to mention non-benevolent entities in the Western world: "God is not known, he is not understood; he is used – sometimes as meat-purveyor, sometimes as moral support, sometimes as friend, sometimes as an object of love. [...] Does God really exist? How does He exist? What is He? Are so many irrelevant questions. Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is in the last analysis, the end of religion." (Hardy 2006, 5).

The mainly positive reports about religious experiences build a deformed worldview in which the good is the main characteristic, and the evil is almost meaningless. This is not according to the experienced reality, and is not according to the Scriptures either. The authors of the Bible have emphasized the high frequency of experiences originated by evil forces, to show the importance they have in the spiritual battle against mankind.

As mentioned above, there is very rich literature dealing with the religious experience. I chose only a few of them, almost randomly, in order to prove my thesis that the scholarship doesn't really believe in evil forces, so most of the reported experiences are, in their view, uplifting and well-intended. Astley (Astley 2020, 30) believes that it is quite difficult to make a realistic taxonomy of the religious experience because they usually have a combined nature, so he suggests to list their properties instead.

Hardy, as a leader of the Religious Experience Research Center, received several thousand reports about religious experiences, and he classified them (Hardy 2006, 26-28) as follows: 1. Visual (visions, illuminations, lights, out of body, feeling of unity, déjà-vu, transformation of surroundings), 2. Auditory (calming voices, guiding voices, gift of tongues, music), 3. Touch (healing, comforting, warmth, shock, guiding), 4. Smell, 5. Supposed extra-sensory perceptions (telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance, supposed contact with the dead, apparitions), 6. Behavioral changes (comforting, guiding, exorcism, heroism), 7. Cognitive and affective elements (sense of security, sense of joy, sense of new strength in oneself, sense of guidance, awe, reverence, wonder, sense of certainty, clarity, enlightenment, exaltation, excitement, ecstasy, fear, horror, sense of prayer answered in events, sense of non-human presence).

Analyzing the dynamic patterns in experience (Hardy 2006, 28), their results show that: 1. There are positive or constructive ones, such as a. *grace*: the initiative felt to be beyond the self, coming "out of the blue" (an average of 124 respondents in every 1,000), or b. *prayers answered*: when initiative felt to lie within the self, but response from beyond (322 respondents in every 1,000); 2. Negative or destructive patterns: when there is a sense of external evil force as having

initiative (44 respondents in every 1,000). The sum of the first two groups of respondents, who reported positive patterns (446), is ten times larger than of those who experienced negative dynamic patterns.

As the results from Hardy's statistics prove, there are positive consequences of these experiences (Hardy 2006, 29), such as a. a sense of purpose or new meaning in life; b. changes in religious beliefs; c. changes in attitudes to others. The second one, the changes in religious belief, is reported by an average of 38 respondents out of 1,000, which shows how relatively small amount of people convert to new religious ideas due to the religious experiences. It is also important to emphasize the fact that out of these several thousand reports, only an average of 3 (!) out of 1,000 are presented by Hardy as having evil actors in what he is calling behavioral changes and enhanced or superhuman power displayed by the respondents. These small figures have been noticed by Hardy himself, who explained this as follows: "It seems likely that the proportion of people who have such experiences may be much greater than our figures would suggest, for our appeal was for records of religious or spiritual experience rather than those of an evil nature." (Hardy 2006, 78). This doesn't seem to explain the extremely low percentage of evil actors in the statistics prepared by Hardy's team.

Marianne Rankin (Rankin 2009, 91-146) has produced an equally long list of categories for the religious experiences, as follows: spiritual experiences in childhood, initiatory experiences, conversion, regenerative experiences, healing, miracles, guidance, solitary, communal, visions, light, love, voices, tongues, angels, dreams, shamanic journey, shamanic healing, drugs and trips, synchronicity, sense of presence, the numinous, the dark night of the soul. Only after listing these positive categories she mentions, at the end of her list we can find the dark side (negative spiritual experiences), dangerous aspects of spiritual movements and irreligious experiences or de-conversion. According to Rankin (Rankin 2009, 141), people are reluctant to admit that they had negative spiritual experiences, for the protection of others or because of a feeling of guilt. This is the reason why there is only a very small number of accounts archived in RERC (Religious Experience Research Center).

Caroline Davis (Davis 1999, 19-64) seems to have a slightly different approach than the above. The taxonomy she suggests classifies the experiences in interpretive, quasi-sensory, revelatory, regenerative, numinous, and mystical. During the mystical experiences the experiencer has a strong feeling of unity with the world and the divinity. Guiley (Guiley 1991, 384), by citing William James, lists four properties of the mystical experiences: ineffability – due to the strong physical sensations that are difficult to describe in words; noetical dimension – as they imply knowledge, revelation, consciousness, illumination; transience – limited in time; passivity – being overpowered by a superior being, without the possibility of being capable for self defence.

Interestingly enough, there are reported situations when the evil forces are kept away only by making the sign of the cross in their presence (Davis 1999, 51). This is contradictory to many episodes of the Bible where evil spirits or people inhabited by evil spirits display a superhuman strength. Relevant examples would be the episode of the sons of Sceva (Acts 19:11-20) or of the Gadarene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20). In this way the malignant powers seem to be presented as weaker than they really are, which is affecting the spiritual health of the human persons.

A Christian taxonomy of the religious experience

We turn now to the religious experiences of the Christian dimension. The Acts of the Apostles is a book that has many references to religious experiences. We can find many of those mentioned in the previous pages. I would like to bring into attention a few episodes that lay special emphasis on the existence and activities of the malignant spiritual beings. About Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24) the Scripture says that he "used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one". Despite his knowledge in these arts, he was marveled by Peter, John and Philips' miracles, done through the power of the Holy Spirit. Being involved in occult practices, even

after his baptism it was difficult for him to live in sincerity, and only the shocking speech of Peter made him able to repent genuinely. Witchcraft had a great success those days. The Ephesians who repented have burnt their witchcraft books, whose total value exceeded fifty thousand pieces of silver.

In the 13th chapter we meet Elymas, a sorcerer from Cyprus, who was described as a false prophet that withstood Paul and Barnabas in order to influence the governor. In a similar way like Simon Magus, he was strongly admonished, this time by Paul, and he lost his eyesight. Although witchcraft doesn't seem to belong to religious experience, there is a strong tie between the two, so much so, that Paul calls him "thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness" (Acts 13:10).

Further on, in Acts 16, Paul is disturbed for many days by a woman who had a spirit of divination. These women who were possessed by spirits, and were able to foretell the future, were generally known as Pythonesse. They were of high esteem because people could take decisions according to their divinations. The sons of Sceva, in Acts 19, face also a person who was possessed by a spirit. This time, though, the outcome of the story is different because the spirit has overcome these men. To conclude, the above examples prove that the actors from the dark side were well known and accepted as such by the population. Atheists of all ages have fought against the belief in the existence of evil, and they succeeded very well in modern times when there is so little mention about the powers (principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this world) mentioned by Paul in Ephesians 6:12. For Paul, it is obvious that there is a dark side that has a policy of turning aside people from the true God (Ephesians 4:22, 27), by deceit ("And no marvel, for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light", 2 Corinthians 11:14). According to him, even the sacrifices to idols are, in fact, sacrifices brought to demons (1 Corinthians 10:20). And Paul is just following on Jesus' steps, who mentioned several times the devil or demons (Matthew 11:18, 13:39, 25:41, Mark 7:29, John 6:70, 8:44).

Augustine of Hippo is only one of the many Christian authors that dealt extensively with the preternatural world. For him all the information regarding the Greek and Roman polytheism was still fresh. He had this information right from the source, and his knowledge about these gods was completed by the literature produced by Plato, Tacitus, Titus Livius, Varro, Apuleius, Plotin and the other scholars that lived before him. Strangely enough, it is common knowledge that the Latin and Greek cultures did not produce saints, but only heroes. It was the lack of God's Holy Spirit that made a fistful of the choicest of this people to know by intuition the virtues, without being able to practice them fully. He had first hand information about all the depravity that accompanied the cultic services of the Pagan world. For him (Augustine 1998, 157), the pagan gods, by not interfering against the immorality of the nations, proved their agreement for the nations' destruction. The Bishop of Hippo even mentioned a fight at Campania, where the preternatural powers have been seen fighting a few days before the human fight (Augustine 1998, 167). The main role of the pagan gods, according to Augustine, was to induce in the mortal's corruption, and transform them in their slaves, because they themselves exult everything that is sinful and deceitful, being enemies of the true faith (Augustine 1998, 325). He also recommends using the name "good angels" for all the good creatures, to those that serve God in faithfulness, and use the name "demons" or "unclean spirits" for all the invisible creatures that are fighting against God and His order.

Regarding the taxonomy of the religious experience, some of the Christian authors share the same attitude like the secular ones presented above. Stark has published the results of a survey realized from a sample of Protestant and roman Catholic church members from the San Francisco Bay Area. According to his study, the church members have reported the following categories of experiences: 1. The confirming experience (Stark 1999, 100) which provide a feeling or awareness of something true or sacred, with the following subtypes: a generalized sense of sacredness, or a specific awareness of the presence of divinity; 2. The responsive experience, which is mutual, and is salvational (the person feels that it belongs to a divine fellowship), miraculous (such as healing, rescues from danger, actions for the material benefit of the persons) or sanctioning; 3. The ecstatic experience; 4. The revelational experience, which brings to light divine wishes or confirms information already available. These ecstatic and

revelational experiences are dealt with in a very rich literature, and I will not detail it, for reasons I stated above.

As Stark acknowledges, he made this taxonomy of the experiences that constitute encounters with good divinity (Stark 1999, 112). Only afterwards he separates the religious experiences in two categories: the divine and the diabolic, as ‘diabolic contacts have played nearly as important a role as the divine in Western religious life, any attempt to provide a classificatory scheme for religious experiences should address both kinds of supernatural contacts’ (Stark 1999, 112). The author thinks that the same taxonomy applies to the dark side also: 1. Confirming experiences: a generalized sense of evil; 2. The responsive experiences: encounters with “supernatural powers”; 3. The terrorizing experiences, such as the personal involvement of the devils in the lives of people; 4. Possessional experiences, when people feel that they lose their responsibility for their own deeds.

I would suggest the following taxonomy of the Erlebnis type of religious experience, slightly different than the above: 1. Happening at God’s initiative, 2. As a result of human initiative, 3. Ecstasies initiated by humans under the Holy Spirit’s influence, 4. External factors that trigger ecstasy or visions, the last one called transcendental experience, as the experiencers use a certain personal mantra in order to attain the 4th stage of consciousness, the transcendental consciousness (Guiley 1991, 620); 5. Oniric experiences, 6. Experiences initiated by humans in order to manipulate benevolent or malignant forces, 7. Projections of the subconscious of a person who is in distress, 8. Experiences with malignant forces.

Conclusions

The small amount of reports about non-benevolent agents or the little attention given by scholars to the negative preternatural (malignant) actors is due to the humanistic, secularized mentality of both the lay people and of the scholarship. They view humans as naturally good, and the experiences they have preponderantly are invitations to improve even more. Other people’s experiences also improve their mental comfort, their well-being. There is a lot of talk about God, but there are just a very few mentions of God as He really is. Instead, the respondents feel that they experienced an all-loving divine being that highly appreciate them as they are. They do not realize that humans are not just *homo religious*, but also *homo teleologicus*, who have to attain a fundamental and important goal in life (Moser 2020, 18).

It is important also to use the right terminology. As noted with Stark, there is a confusion between the supernatural and what many of us would simply call preternatural, as defined in the introduction. It seems a general attitude to be considered childish or foolish when mentioning the evil spirits and their actions in everyday life. But not believing anymore in these creatures could be dangerous for people’s everyday Christian walk. The Apostle Paul, on the contrary, did think that it is crucial to name the powers that the believers are fighting against: “*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places*” (Ephesians 6:12). These creatures act out of their hatred towards mankind, and they lack love. This is what makes a difference between them and the authentic Christians: we show love to each other: “*The greatest of these is charity.*” (1 Corinthians 13:13b)

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