

Aspects of Religious Experience in the Thought of Norman L. Geisler and Friedrich Schleiermacher

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ABSTRACT: In contemporary thought, the philosophy of religion has risen again despite attempts to remove God from the sphere of philosophical concerns. This paper explores the concept of general religious experience, defined as the totality of consciousness underlying particular experiences that is accessible to most people, with the lowest level of general religious experience being called primary consciousness. Religious experience includes transcendence in the sense of the object of religious experience, without putting the equivalent sign between the Transcendent and the Christian idea of God. This paper aims to examine the characteristics of religious experience, its relationship with other forms of human experience, and its significance in human consciousness and behavior. By examining these aspects, this study intends to contribute to the ongoing dialogue between philosophy and religious studies, offering insights into the enduring relevance of religious experience.

KEYWORDS: Philosophy of religion, transcendent, religious experience, moral experience, human experience

Introduction

The philosophy of religion has re-emerged in contemporary thought as a subject of prime importance, despite attempts to eliminate God from the philosophical arena (Geisler 1999, 9). Scientific communication is an improved version in English of material previously published by the same author in his volume *Philosophical Reflections* (Ludusan 2024, 19-32).

Today a number of pressing questions are being asked, questions such as: I) Does religious experience have any basis in reality? II) Is there a real transcendent object, for example, God? III) Is there any rational basis for belief in God? IV) Is it possible to talk meaningfully about a transcendent Being? V) If it is claimed that there is a being full of goodness and power beyond this world, how does one explain the evil that is present in the world? VI) Why does God allow this malady of evil?

Experience - what is religious experience?

Experience is an individual's awareness of something; it is the state of consciousness of an individual when he realizes that something is something other than himself, whether or not it is really something else (Geisler 1999, 1). General religious experience is the totality of consciousness underlying particular experiences that is accessible to most people and more easily understood by most people, the lowest level of general religious experience being called primary consciousness (Geisler 1999, 14).

Transcendent in a religious sense

Religious experience includes transcendence in the sense of the object of religious experience, without equating the Transcendent with the Christian idea of God. The Transcendent is a broad rationale encompassed in pantheistic, theistic, personal and impersonal religious conceptions, and the ways of conceiving the Transcendent are Brahman in Hinduism, Nirvana in Buddhism; Dao in Daoism; *Everything* in Schleiermacher; *Numen* in Otto; *Existence beyond existence* in Tillich (Geisler 1999, 15). Something is transcendent in the religious sense if it is believed to be of an ultimate character, the object of a Fatal commitment, man being capable of making even the supreme sacrifice. Likewise, the transcendent in the religious sense is also the object of ultimate

concern, that "Maximum" before which man ceases to feel the need for "more", that "Beyond" behind which man no longer seeks "other Beyond", that "Ultimate" to which man is ultimately committed (Rotaru 2016, 29-43).

Religious experience and other types of experience - Religious experience and moral experience

Religion and morality comprise different experiences despite their kinship and apparent inseparability. While morality accepts the yoke of the universe, religion welcomes it; morality demands obedience while religion calls for voluntarism; morality is man's duty to the universe, while religion is man's dependence on the universe. Moral experience answers to the moral law, but religious experience answers to the Moral Law Giver himself. The moral law says, "thou shalt not kill" (Rotaru 2015, 318-322), but God told Abraham, "sacrifice your son Isaac" - in this case the religious is above the moral, Abraham being put in the position of overriding the moral imperative in order to fulfill the religious imperative.

Thus, Abraham, through a religious act of faith, completely transcended the ethical/moral. It follows that a religious experience differs from an ethical/moral one, since as far as religious experience is concerned: a) its engagement has a wider horizon; b) its engagement is of a different kind; c) its object is of a higher order; d) its object alone has the power to overcome and unify.

Moral experience comprises only the understanding of what man ought to do, whereas religious experience is characterized by what man wants to do; morality is a matter of duty, whereas religion is also a matter of desire. Moral experience is man's commitment to people, whereas religious experience is commitment to something beyond people, it is commitment to the Transcendent. Failure in morality may bring guilt, but only religious experience can give man the grace by which to overcome both failure and guilt; moral shortcomings demand a victory in religious experience (Rotaru 2012,5).

Religious experience and aesthetic experience

Religious experience and aesthetic experience are so similar that an aesthetic experience can be used to evoke a religious experience, and religious feeling can even appear in a painting that has no religious subject (Geisler 1999, 21). The esthetic level is the level of feeling while the religious level is the level of existence; the esthetic stage - represents the routine of life while the religious stage gives life a revelation; the esthetic stage focuses on the "self", while the religious level focuses on God. Aesthetics (Rotaru 2005, 38) is a life without choice whereas religion is God's choice; aesthetics is something man has; religion is something man is; aesthetics is impersonal, religion is personal; aesthetics is something we know; religion is something we experience.

According to Rudolf Otto, an aesthetic experience can be used to evoke a religious experience, the aesthetic experience is a sense of the sublime while the religious experience is an awareness of the sacred or an awareness of something holy, an experience of the numinous. The aesthetic involves a sense of awe or even awe, but religion includes a sense of worship and adoration.

The object of an aesthetic experience is not ultimate; the artist has an attitude of awe and admiration towards the Absolute; the artist is attracted by the Absolute and has an attitude of contemplation while remaining detached from the Ultimate Beautiful. The object of religious experience is ultimate; the attitude of the religious man towards the Absolute is one of worship and adoration; the religious man is devoted to that which represents the Absolute and has a strong sense of dependence on it and total commitment, conscious of his dependence on that which is ultimate.

Characteristics of religious experience

In Norman L. Geisler's view, religious experience has two major characteristics: 1) religious experience involves an awareness of the Transcendent, and 2) religious experience involves total commitment. Religious experience involves an awareness of the Transcendent. Although the dimension and definitions of the Transcendent differ, religious experience involves the Transcendent, (Geisler 1999, 31) it is unanimously accepted that in religious experience there is a transcendent dimension, considered to go beyond the individual person having the experience, and that transcendent Other is essential to a religious experience.

Religious experience must embrace something beyond, that is, something transcendent. Religious experience involves transcendence in two ways: first, as a human need to transcend the self, and second, as an awareness of the Transcendent toward which this transcendence is oriented. The first is a process and the second, the object or sphere in which transcendence operates (Geisler 1999, 34). Religious experience involves the need to transcend the unpleasantness of life, typically including some means by which man can move beyond his own limitations that dissatisfy him. Thus, in every religious experience there is a transcendent dimension of one kind or another towards which transcendence takes place, so that all definitions which use any form of the words "God" or "gods" clearly recognize that there is a transcendent realm closely akin to religious experience.

Norman L. Geisler concludes by pointing out that a religious experience is not only one that encompasses the transcendence of the self, but also one that involves a transcendent realm through which, or in which, transcendence becomes possible and/or toward which it is directed. That is, in order to pass beyond there must be a Beyond (real or imagined) towards which religious experience is directed or in which it develops.

Religious experience implies total commitment

Religious experience involves something beyond mere revelation, it involves something unconditional and ultimate, it involves something to which people are ready to commit themselves with absolute loyalty and devotion, it involves not only an awareness of the transcendent, but an awareness that it is ultimate and that it also demands ultimate commitment. (Geisler 1999, 39). Situations of commitment are those which demand of man, yet leave him free to exercise his free life. For example, a patriot's fight for his country, whether the war is just or not; a collector's passion which absorbs his whole being and to which he is devoted; a religious man who is totally committed to the whole universe (Rotaru 2023, 62-79).

The theologian Paul Tillich calls total commitment "ultimate concern" [Tillich, 2007, 30]. In his view, the fundamental concept of religion is the state of being taken up by an ultimate concern, a boundless interest, something that man takes unconditionally seriously and for which he is ready to suffer and even die. From a subjective point of view, ultimate concern shows that the subject or individual takes something unconditionally seriously. From an objective point of view, the ultimate concern, it refers to what Tillich reserves for it the name 'God'.

The total commitment/ultimate concern, which all men have, gives unity and depth to all other human concerns and, through them, to the whole of man's personality [Tillich, 2007, 30-40]. The experience is religious if it involves an ultimate commitment, but it is not properly religious unless the thing to which man is committed is truly ultimate, worship, seen as the attitude of awe and acceptance of the supreme value of the Transcendent, being at the very center of religious experience (Rotaru 2011, 5).

The reality of religious experience

Norman L. Geisler asks what is the basis in reality of religious experience/experiences, first trying to establish what is meant by "reality." In the thinker's view, reality is: 1) something more than a

subjective condition of human experience; II) more than a projection of the human imagination; III) more than an object of wish-fulfillment; IV) more than a subconscious force in human experience; V) reality means something that has independent existence; VI) to be real is to have an objective existence.

Reality means something that has independent existence. The Transcendent must be something that has an independent existence of its own if by the Transcendent is meant something more than mere subjective experience, more than mere imagination, more than what people long to be true, more than the realm of the human subconscious. Thus the Transcendent must mean something that exists outside the minds of the people who experience it, in other words, if the Transcendent depends on the consciousness of others for its reality, then it is not right to attribute to it an existence of its own.

To be **real** is to have an objective existence. For a better understanding we shall show that "objective" - usually means something that is "real in itself" and "subjective" - something that has no independent existence of its own. To hold that the Transcendent is objectively real is not to say that it is merely an object or an objectification of the mind, for, if it were so, it would have no independent existence of its own.

When analyzing the problem of the reality of the Transcendent, the following questions are asked as a matter of priority: a) does the Transcendent object of religious experience have an independent existence? b) does the Transcendent object of religious experience have an objective existence? c) does the Transcendent have an existence apart from the subjective and mental states of the religious persons who perceive it?

Kierkegaard attempts to demonstrate the reality of God. In the view of the Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard (1995, 80), man's need for proof of God shows that he has also rejected God, showing that all striving to verify God's presence is ridiculous.

We will briefly evoke the ideas of the Danish philosopher and theologian which can be stated as follows: (a) if God does not exist it will be impossible to prove; (b) if God does exist it would be foolhardy to try to prove; (c) when one begins an argument about God, it is already assumed that God exists, so that in reality the argument begins by virtue of faith in Him; (d) man cannot be led to God by reason; (e) only the leap of faith can lead man to God; (f) the need for proofs about God always reveals a lack of faith in God; g) God is present from the beginning to the believing man and He/God cannot be demonstrated to the unbeliever; h) it is offensive to God to believe in Him only because of the evidence; i) if there is an ultimate value in the universe, then it must be believed because of itself; j) it would be unworthy, however, for a creature endowed with reason not to examine the evidence that there is an ultimate value before making a commitment to it.

Need for the Transcendent

Humans feel a fundamental need for God, theists and atheists alike confess that there is a sense of absolute dependence, a sense of contingency. The major question is: is there really a God who can fulfill this need that people feel? We will analyze here three aspects: 1) *the feeling of absolute dependence*; 2) *man as a mortal being* and 3) *the existential need for God*.

1. The feeling of absolute dependence - nothing can change the fact that man is and feels dependent on the Universe, in Schleiermacher's view the feeling of cosmic dependence being the essence of religion. In religion, man surrenders his entire being to the Whole, the feeling of absolute dependence being a deeply religious feeling.

Although all people have the feeling of absolute dependence, not all describe it in the same way and not all refer to its object by the word "God", but both believers and non-believers recognize that they are dependent, contingent creations in need of that which transcends man, that is, a need for the Transcendent (Geisler 1999, 83). Humans feel a need for the Transcendent, whether or not it exists in reality.

2. *Man as a mortal being* - "Being in order to die" - this is how Heidegger characterized human life. We find ourselves "thrown into the world as if we were sliding down a toboggan that leads downwards towards death". So man asks himself questions such as: i) Why is there something instead of nothing? (ii) Why do I exist and why am I to cease to exist - these questions proving man's anthropological dependence and the need he feels to have a basis for his existence.

Paul Tillich states that at the basis of human existence there is a Ground of existence, beyond the immediate there is an Ultimate, this Ultimate is the object of man's ultimate concern, finite existence is groundless, finite existence needs a Ground in order to exist, humans need an Ultimate Ground for their ultimate concerns. The questions are: is this Ground real? Does the need for God as the ontological ground of human existence imply that this ground really exists? (Tillich 1947, 17).

3. *The existential need for God - J. Paul Sartre.* Jean Paul Sartre made several confessions in his autobiography (Leak 2006, 16-18), saying about religion and God: I needed God, He was given to me, I received Him without realizing that I had been searching for Him; I sought to reach religion, I longed for it, it was the cure; if it had been denied me I would have invented it myself; there is in man a fundamental, existential need for God; man is a nothing that desires Being; man's very existence cries out for God to give it definition and essence; man needs God and this need is more than psychological, it is a fundamentally existential need (Mészáros 2012, 16; Sartre 2004, 7).

Friedrich Schleiermacher tried to build a new kind of religion, based on experience and developed on rational principles (Schleiermacher 1999, 10). Thus, *religious experience* ceases to represent a "leap of faith" towards a mysterious transcendent register and becomes the cultivation of the natural experience of harmony with the whole, the experience of belonging to the whole, and religion will constitute a special domain of human experience, a domain constituted by a specific "experience"/"feeling".

Schleiermacher's theology is based on "living", in "feeling", it is not influenced by dogmatic revisions, the emphasis being placed on the emotional component, on immediate experience, on the preaching of feeling, living and experiencing the harmony of the Universe (Schleiermacher 1999, 14-15). The thinker considered the father of liberal theology, will emphasize the diversity and particular character of religious experience, a particularity that goes down to the level of the individual.

According to Schleiermacher, religious experience: I) is grounded in a natural human capacity; II) is an element of human nature that cannot escape any anthropological investigation; III) does not occur as the result of a supernatural revelation, but is a manifestation of its own nature, like any other human product; IV) it has an irreducible character, religious experience being dissociated from cognition and morality, since religion constitutes a separate register of experience; V) human beings have a natural predisposition towards religious experience, called "piety", which consists in the feeling, intuition, direct experience of the unity of all that exists, of the dependence of all finite nature on the totality; VI) religious experience starts from the intuition of the Universe, and man, like any other finite entity, saw himself as participating in the totality; VII) religious experience expresses the absolute dependence of man on the Universe; VIII) the natural character of religious experience makes the ultimate religious identity to be that of "man", confessional qualifications being subsequent and depending mainly on cultural considerations; IX) confessional belonging is not a condition for the existence of religious experience but, on the contrary, is the consequence of this experience; confessional religion is not the creator of religious experience, but is the reflection of that experience; XI) confessional religions are subsequent to natural religious experience, the primary religious condition being that of being "human"; XII) religious experience is never completely stifled in man, it always subsists in the form of a latent tendency, which, sporadically, when the context allows it, also manifests

itself in well-defined experiences; XIII) religious experience does not involve anything extraordinary and does not represent a "grace" conferred on man from above; XIV) religious confession merely systematizes and intensifies the expression of natural religious experience; XV) all human experience is religious, the spiritual not being the prerogative of the arrogant claims of confessional exclusivism; XVI) knowledge of the divine originates in man, in his religious experience; XVII) the divine appears to the human being directly in his religious experience, and intellectual concerns which have the divine as their object, such as metaphysics, are not rejected (Schleiermacher 1999, 18-40).

Conclusions

In the thought of Geisler and F. Schleiermacher, *religious experience* represents a specific type of human experience irreducible to knowledge or action, religious experience involving a non-intellectual relation of man with the Universe. Religious experience can exist even in the absence of any theoretically-proportional representation, it can exist in the absence of any conception of the Universe, the doctrine coming into being when discursive thought begins to reflect on experience. Thus, religious experience in itself, is only direct appearance, intuitive presentation, revelation, there being nothing problematic at this level, but only feeling and living.

In Schleiermacher's theology, religious experience leads to a certain doctrine and not the other way around, doctrine being unable to replace and ground religious experience. This is in contrast to traditional Christian theology, where religious experience was constituted on the basis of the reception and acceptance of a particular doctrinal message. The standard of religious experience is a certain type of experience, on the basis of which doctrine is then constituted as a secondary religious element (Rotaru 2021, 135-152).

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