

Psychology and Phenomenology of Religious Experiences

Investigations into Religious Experiences and Arguments Against Epistemological Reductionism

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Why do people hold religious beliefs? 500 years ago, this question would not have been distinct from the question of why people have any other kind of belief or experience. For most people, God was a part of the real world. Yet today, in our post-enlightenment, post-Nietzschean society, there does not seem to be an obvious reason to believe in some sort of deity which determines what is good and bad, which promises salvation, which has a bigger plan for us. Holding religious beliefs has fallen out of fashion, which is apparent from the increasing popularity of anti-religious movements like *New Atheism*, most famously promoted by public intellectuals such as Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett. It is not only organized religion which is criticized by these “Four Horsemen” and their followers; it is also the private aspect of religion, the “naïve” wish of religious devotees for a saviour, a shepherd, an omnipotent father.

When I started studying philosophy, I distanced myself from my Catholic beliefs which I adopted uncritically during childhood. Encouraged by New Atheist type criticisms, I came to feel enraged and cynical about religion. Eventually however, I was confronted with a dilemma: either all religious people, including my own family, were defending stupid, complacent, and medieval beliefs, or I had to leave my rebellious phase behind and consider that the possibility that meaning of religious beliefs and experiences surpasses their epistemological implications. The dilemma I faced was not just a personal one. Is it possible for a person like me, a student visiting a western university, someone who believes in science and thinks critically, to hold religious beliefs without being a complete hypocrite? Are we forever going to feel like we are secretly frowning upon the naivety of religion when visiting church, and secretly detest the coldness of science when sitting in the lecture hall?

I would like to find a way to think about religion and religious experiences which is not in conflict with scientific education and rationalistic convictions. In my inquiry, I am not going to focus on religion in general, but on religious experiences. I do not want to make a distinction between different kinds of religious beliefs and with my discussions of pragmatism and phenomenology, I will concentrate exclusively on the first-person account of religion, which does not allow me to make any claims about institutionalized religion. What I believe lies at the root of the aforementioned conflict is epistemological reductionism, which is introduced in the first chapter. Then, I offer William James’ pragmatism as an alternative way to think about religious experiences and religious truth. Finally, I explore the possibility researching on religious experiences through phenomenology.

1. Epistemological Reductionism

The term New Atheism refers to a specific type of atheism in the 21st century (Wolf 2006). Four public figures, named ‘The Four Horsemen’ by their supporters, are famously at the centre of the movement: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. Points which all these public intellectuals hold in common are (1) that claims made by science and religion should be treated equally and that religious claims can be tested by means of the scientific method (Dawkins et al. 2019, 16). Moreover, (2) that claims of science and religion belong to the same realm, and that there is no context in which religion is more apt to answer questions than science (Harris 2010, 27-55).

Of course, some religious people and bodies *do* make epistemological and ontological claims, and thereby ‘step into the turf of science’ (Dawkins 1998, 2). The Catholic church, for instance, recognizes the existence of miracles, which are occurrences scientists cannot explain. Most miracles which are recognized by the Catholic church today are cures from disease or injury (Biema 1995). Naturally, it is possible to observe (and in science, we very often do!) phenomena which cannot be explained, without conceding to supernaturalism. If a theory cannot explain a phenomenon, the theory is simply not good enough and needs to be adjusted and tested. As Christopher Hitchens once said, it is necessary to “separate the numinous [the mysterious, and awe-inspiring] from the supernatural [the unexplainable]” (Dawkins et al. 2019, 70-80).

While this is a warranted critique, the question the New Atheists, as well as religious bodies and people come back to again and again, is whether religion is *true*. The New Atheists literally say that religion is *false*, their opponents that it is *true*. Daniel Dennett, *The Four Horsemen*, states “My concern is not so much with the evils of religion as with whether it is true” (Dawkins et al. 2019, 171). This goes for all religions, because all make false epistemological and ontological claims to an equal extent.

Approaching religious discussions in such a way creates a conflict between religion, and widely acknowledged scientific insights (such as evolution). Religion appears to threaten enlightenment values deeply ingrained in our western consciousness. What a dilemma for people like me. Once confronted with such an ultimatum, we are forced to pick a side. The only way to think about religion becomes in terms of truth and lie, ‘good’ and ‘bad’, rational and irrational. Because religion is not scientifically true, because its claims cannot be tested by means of the scientific method, it is deemed invaluable (Dawkins et al. 2019, 170-174). Luckily, it does not have to be this way.

I would like to offer a pragmatist and phenomenological perspective as an alternative to the rationalist stance of the New Atheists and their opponents. What matters in pragmatism is not the rational-scientific truth, but rather the first-person perspective, the real experience. Therefore, from a pragmatist perspective, it is possible to reasonably believe in God without dismissing scientific or rationalist truth and conceding to supernaturalism.

2. William James - Pragmatism and the Psychology of Religious Experiences

William James, often regarded to be the founding father of modern psychology, thinks that the essence of religion cannot be defined. His analyses of religion purposefully exclude its institutional aspects and solely focus on the personal experiences associated with religion. Those are: “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James 1902, 11-12). The divine then is defined as “the most primal, enveloping, and real; the primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest.” Whether religious experiences should rather be called “spiritual experiences” is left up to the reader. Some authors classify spirituality as distinct from religion for not assuming the existence of an

anthropomorphic, supernatural god. Since “religious” is the word used by James himself, it is also employed here. However, it cannot be stressed enough that religion here is discussed from the first-person account, as something independent from institutionalized religion.

According to James, pragmatism is a *mediating philosophy*, which finds room for faith while still being empirical and adhering to facts. He identifies multiple layers in the definition of *truth*, which brings to light important differences between rationalism and pragmatism: for a rationalist, truth is a static relation, while for a pragmatist, truth is an active process; something which previously was false *become* true (this is not a random process as we shall see). For a rationalist, truth and usefulness are independent, whereas for a pragmatist they are inseparable. As James stated it, “something is useful because it is true, and something is true because it is useful” (James 1907, 76-91).

At the surface level, both pragmatism and rationalism define truth as *agreement with reality* (James 1907, 76-91). On a deeper level, however, ‘agreement’ and ‘reality’ mean something entirely different to each position.

In rationalism, an idea being in agreement with reality means something like it being a copy of reality. Because ideas are imperfect copies of reality, agreement for a rationalist is proportional to how close an idea gets to reality, where perfect agreement can almost never be reached. For a pragmatist, on the other hand, agreement means something like *not standing in contradiction to any other (true) beliefs about reality*. In pragmatism, knowledge about the world is inseparable from action within it (Legg and Hookway 2021). An idea which is in agreement with our other beliefs gets us sufficiently close to reality to be able to act in a useful way. Besides thinking differently about what the term ‘agreement’ means, pragmatists and rationalists also have different conceptions of the word *reality*. While for a rationalist, reality might mean something like *everything there is*, a pragmatist would use the word to refer to *things of common sense* or *everything which is somehow sensibly present*.

The process of becoming true does not happen at random. Not anything can be true, but verification is necessary. Something is indirectly verified if it does not lead to contradiction and is in harmony with all our other (true) beliefs about reality. If a belief guides experience and helps us make *sense* of our surroundings, it is (indirectly) verified. For rationalist (in his position as a rationalist) only direct verification -testing if a prediction fulfils- is allowed, for a pragmatist both direct and indirect verification are permissible. Arguably, a rationalist, in their position as a *subject*, also validates indirectly, by generalizing. For instance, someone who is conducting an experiment according to the scientific method, and has observed that a stone and a feather fall at the same speed if they are in a vacuum, will generalize (and indirectly validate) their observation to all feathers and all stones (James 1907, 76-91).

The difference between the rationalist and the pragmatist conception of truth is the difference between the first and the third-person perspective. From the third-person perspective, if something is true, it is *always* true, no matter if anyone ever discovers that it is true. A pragmatist on the other hand, takes the first-person perspective. If something is *externally* the case - that is outside a person’s lifeworld- they would not accept it as part of their reality, which would mean that from their perspective, it would not be true.

The scientific method of acquiring knowledge through observation, questioning, hypothesising, testing, and analysing, can be classified as rationalist. It would allow us to test a hypothesis such as ‘God created earth’. The grounds on which we derived our implications and formed our answer would be common, and accessible to anyone; ‘yes, it seems that earth was indeed created by God,’ or ‘no, there is no convincing evidence that earth was created by God.’ In rationalism, truth is something to be discovered, to be *uncovered*. If we apply the pragmatic definition of truth to religious experiences and beliefs, their truth can be *created*. Something can be true because it feels meaningful, inspiring, true. We can ask whether God created earth

and find a thousand different answers, and they would all be true- true to the one answering: ‘yes, I believe that God is the beginning and the end of everything, I believe He somehow created this world, and every dead and living thing in it,’ or ‘no, I do not believe in anything I cannot touch, so I do not believe in God in the first place!’

2.1. “You will always be my brother.”- An Example

An example of something which is true from the first-person perspective, but not from the third-person perspective is this: imagine you had an older brother F. You were raised together, he taught you how to ride a bicycle, you fought each other like siblings, you loved each other like siblings. As you grew older, you relied on each other like siblings. Now you find out that after having their first son, your parents were unable to have more children and adopted a second one. You are that child, which means that you and F are not related by blood. When he finds out, F tells you that he does not care whether you are blood related. No matter what, you will always be part of his family, and he will always be your brother.

From a third-person perspective, this is not really true. Perhaps you could say that your belief was updated from ‘F is my biological brother’ to ‘F is my brother by choice,’ but since the objective scientific definition of brother includes having the same biological mother and the same biological father, you and F are not siblings. From a pragmatic perspective, however, the discovery that F is not your real brother has a completely different effect. You did not care about being genetically related to him before, and you do not care about it now. What makes F your brother is not that you are blood-related, but that he taught you how to ride a bike, that you fought like siblings, and that you loved each other like siblings. Now that you are older, you rely on each other like siblings. So, while from the third-person, rationalist perspective, the news that you are not blood-related to F has updated your belief system, it did not change anything from the first-person perspective, because blood-relatedness is not relevant to you. This, for James, is an argument against rationalism: the rationalist account of truth does not have anything to do with usefulness and is therefore meaningless.

2.2. Pragmatism in ‘The Varieties of Religious Experience’

How does this pragmatist conception of truth relate to religious experience? This becomes clear in William James’ two lectures published in *‘The Varieties of Religious Experience’: The Reality of the Unseen and Mysticism*. In his lectures, James discusses a broad range of topics, including mysticism (James 1902, 143-160), pragmatic perspectives on the truth-value of religious experiences (James 1902, 10-19), and whether religious experiences can justify the belief in God (James 1902, 10-19). As stated previously, James’ interest lies in the first-person account of religion, and he defines religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James 1902, 11-12).

2.3.1. Pragmatism in ‘The Reality of the Unseen’

The objects of religious beliefs only exist in idea (idea, is here meant as the unsensible). From the first-person perspective, however, no difference between inner and external reality is made. The religious devotee believes in their ideas as strongly as in sensible objects (James 1902, 20). In that sense, the objects of belief are quasi-sensible (they are treated by the person experiencing them nearly the same as sensible objects). For some people, a *religious belief* might be as vague as a belief that ‘there is a force of good in the world.’ Some

might secretly feel like they have a guardian angel which protects them against bad luck, and others might feel like God tells them that He has a plan for them when they connect with Him in prayer.

For James, rationalism is the philosophy which is opposed to mysticism (James 1902, 156). In rationalism, all our beliefs ought to find themselves on articulate grounds. These grounds can be (1) definitely statable abstract principles, (2) definite facts of sensation, (3) definite hypotheses based on these facts, (4) definite logically drawn inferences. James' argument against rationalism here is that, in the religious realm, the subconscious and non-rational holds primacy. When discussing non-scientific topics such as religion or metaphysics, articulate reasons for why a certain claim is true only make sense to us when they are aligned with our inarticulate beliefs about them: those things we believe to be true, but cannot prove. This does not mean that these "irrational" beliefs *should* hold primacy, or that the non-rational is *better* than the rational. It simply means that this is a more accurate description of the religious mind (James 1902, 28). Let us remind ourselves that the pragmatist definition of truth was that is in agreement with reality, as experienced from the first-person perspective.

2.2.2. Pragmatism in 'Mysticism'

What is a mystical experience? James lists two necessary and sufficient requirements, as well as several characteristics which sometimes occur. The necessary and sufficient attributes are *ineffability* and a *noetic quality*. If an experience is ineffable, it means that no adequate report of its content can be given in words. The noetic quality of an experience refers to someone feeling a profound state of knowledge. Attributes that not necessarily occur are *transiency* and *passivity*. Transiency means that the experience cannot be sustained for long (in James' lecture, a maximum of 2 hours is given). Passivity means that, one does not actively participate in the religious experience. Rather, it feels as if this state 'overcomes' you. Sometimes people experience being extremely passive during a religious experience and fall into trance. This often goes hand in hand with a poor ability to remember the experience. However, James states that some memory always remains even if not every detail can be remembered (James 1902, 144).

2.3. Is Mystical Truth Authoritative? A Compromise

So now we know that the truth of mystical states can be judged by their perceived usefulness for a particular person, and not by means of the scientific method. Let us remind ourselves that for a pragmatist, knowledge of the world is inseparable from agency within it. If a scientific truth is not helpful, if it cannot be *used to act*, it is not a pragmatic truth. Mystical beliefs are not necessarily useful, but from a pragmatist perspective, they can be regarded as true if they are useful (for example if they help a person deal with grief, or other forms of suffering). An objection which comes to mind here is that of beliefs which are not useful in a utilitarian way. If the usefulness to the beholder if a belief legitimizes it, does that mean that even beliefs which are harmful to others are legitimized? Saying that a young girl who believes that people who have pre-marital sex go to hell possesses a form of truth seems absurd and offensive. However, from a pragmatist perspective, the experience of the girl does not create a need for others to believe in the same thing, nor does it indicate any (political) action.

At the end of the lecture, William James answers the question 'is mystical truth authoritative?' Two different answers are given. The first answer is yes, mystical truth is authoritative for the person who experiences it. The second answer is no, mystical truth is not authoritative for anyone else. The dilemma one seems to face when trying to find truth in religion thus turns to be no dilemma at all. Pragmatic truth is a valid alternative type of truth, which breaks the authority of the rationalist truth, without invalidating it.

Returning to our previous example, the question ‘did God create earth?’ seems to put a religious person in the dilemma of having to prove their answer. This proof would have to be accessible to anyone, it would have to be made on common grounds (one way to do that would be to use the scientific method), which is impossible for this question. What we now see is that there is an alternative way of answering this question: you can answer it for yourself, and your answer can be unquestionably true *to you*, and you do not have to convince anyone of this truth in order to believe in it. However, you also could not reasonably convince anyone else of this truth. The fact that you feel that earth was created by God, does not compensate for the lack of proof, and the fact that there is no proof does not need to change how unshakably certain you are.

We now have an alternative way to think about religious experiences, one which is not in conflict with rationalism or the scientific method. Both science and religion are compromised in some way. The scientific answer to our question is not authoritative, nor is the religious one. Neither is the scientific perspective cold, nor is the religious one naïve. Neither will I need to continue terrorizing my family by proclaiming that I am an atheist, nor will I let go of my pursuit of a scientific career, nor will I remain part of the church, nor will I stop praying.

2.6. Recap

Let us recap. Simplified, the rationalist standpoint which was outlined here might be captured as

Religious experience is not true (no means of direct verification is possible). Therefore, it is not valuable.

while the pragmatist conception (also simplified) may be something like

Religious experience is true (by means of the principle of non-contradiction). Therefore, it is valuable.

We can see that from the pragmatic perspective accounts of religious experience are considered a lot more valuable. However, the New Atheist perspective is not captured fully, since at times a more moderate version of the argument is given. The more moderate version could be summarized such as:

Religious doctrines are not true, and therefore not valuable.

In this moderate version, it is the religious doctrine which is condemned because of it misses rationalist truth value, not religious experiences. As for religious experience, it is acknowledged that it is valuable, just not that it is true. This means that the religious experience can be valuable for a person, but they would not have the right to ‘impose’ whatever they take from it on others. Nobody is under any obligation to believe in it. On this point, a pragmatist would agree. Moreover, a rationalist thinks that in no case the experience could be described as supernatural (unexplainable). Here, the pragmatist would only agree hesitantly. It is true that from the scientific perspective, there cannot be anything supernatural because everything is part of

nature. A religious person, however, might not have the same definition of nature as a scientist, and within their lifeworld, supernatural phenomena may very well be possible.

In the next chapter, we will introduce a field which investigates religious experience based on the same subjective conception of truth as James' pragmatism: phenomenology (Baghramian and Marchetti 2017, 3-22).

3. Phenomenology of Religious Experiences

Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view (Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio 2019, 90-97). It is a form of qualitative research that focuses studies of an individual's lived experiences within their lifeworld. The central structure of an experience is its *intentionality*, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. It becomes the intuitional object, the *content* of my consciousness (Smith 2013). In scientific phenomenology, consciousness is 'sliced' in order to uncover horizons for systematic research. 'Horizons' refers to the context in which the most basic elements of experience are interpreted. In other words, by reducing an experience to its most basic aspects, a horizon of that experience is uncovered. This method, in which certain 'existence assumptions' are 'bracketed,' and the experienced phenomena are observed solely as they appear to the subject, is what Husserl, the founding father of phenomenology, called epoché (Beyer 2020).

A phenomenology of religious experience would be able to investigate religious experiences within the attitude attained by reductions (Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch 2017, 668-647). In phenomenological investigations, no difference is made between those objects that exist outside the subject and those that only appear to do so, simply because they are not experienced differently by the subject. So it does not matter if the subject is the only one having a certain experience, which, from a rationalist view, would make it an illusory or hallucinatory experiences. In Husserl's words:

“Every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, [and] everything originally (so to speak, in its “personal” actuality) offered to us in “intuition” is to be accepted simply as what it is presented in being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there” (Husserl 1982, 44).

Therefore, the existence of objects and the distinction between 'actual objects' and 'hallucinations' is one of the 'existence assumptions' which must be bracketed in phenomenological investigation (Beyer 2020). The goal of phenomenological research should be seen as distinct from theology. The goal is not to 'sneak God' into phenomenology (a criticism which was famously brought forth by Dominique Janicaud) (Janicaud 2000, 3-87), or to convince people that God exists. Rather, the aim is to establish subjectivity as a valid area of scientific inquiry and to uncover basic structures of the religious human experience (Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch 2017, 668- 657).

3.1. Phenomenology as a Method for Psychological Research

Psychology is a special kind of science because it is the only one in which introspection is still allowed as a method of inquiry. Of course, the nature of most phenomena under investigation is subjective, which is why the ambivalence between rationalist and subjective conceptions of truth is probably more evident in psychology than in any other field of inquiry. In contrast to the natural-scientific approach used in most

sciences, in which the scientific method is applied to test inferences about hypotheses, the human-scientific approach used in psychological research applies qualitative and phenomenological methods in order to draw meaningful conclusions (Psychology of Religion, 2021). For example, in mindset research, new mindsets, or patterns of thought, can be discovered by systematically interviewing a number of individuals, and finding common elements in their reports. The subject thus becomes part of the research team, as the sole investigator of their own mind. Their findings are reported to the other researchers, who must in this case adopt a pragmatic viewpoint, as anything that the subject feels they experienced is seen as a true piece of information.

When this subjective conception of truth is used as a starting point for psychological research, rather than the rationalistic conception, phenomenology of religion can be framed as a method of psychological (human-scientific) research to investigate religious experiences. Concerning the psychology of religion, the focus of natural-scientific psychological research into religion has mostly been the (evolutionary) origin of religion and the social function it serves, rather than the subjective aspect of religious experiences (Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch 2017, 668-674). Phenomenology allows us to answer questions about religious experiences, which natural-scientific research is not apt to answer: what is the difference between religious experiences and other types of experiences? How are religious experiences generated? Is it an event of interpretation? What are the modes of religious experiences? Do religious experiences have their own phenomenological core structure? How is the structure situated? Does the structure have a specific quality?

3.2. What are Religious Experiences?

The polymorphic nature of religious experiences makes it hard to formulate concrete criteria to identify them as such. So, even though James' conditions (ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, passivity) leave us with a rather vague idea of what religious experiences actually are, this vagueness is warranted. Already the title *Varieties of Religious Experience* already communicates the richness of (complementary) possibilities in consciousness, and implies that the essence of religious experience should be considered to be a sum of those possibilities (Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch 2017, 668-674). There is not one common form that one could point to in order to explain what religious experiences are. The essence of religious experiences cannot be captured in a rational definition with a list of all necessary and sufficient criteria, but rather with examples and more indirect means such as the use of a certain kind of language. The one seeking to understand what religious experiences are, must try to step into the shoes of the one who has had such an experience.

3.3. Examples of Religious Experiences

In his article *The Sound of a Small Whisper: Ordinary Religious Experience* Robert Kugelmann argues that any experience could potentially be religious and describes what he calls an ordinary *religious experience* (Kugelmann 2017, 246-256), in which there was no overwhelming sense of the divine, and which could easily be ignored or dismissed. Kugelmann reports a personal religious experience in which he gave a student feedback on her thesis the day before she unexpectedly passed away. This reassured her she would be able to graduate and allowed her to 'celebrate' her satisfactory work. Kugelmann had the feeling that his decision not to postpone the feedback was guided by God, and at the moment in which he realized this, the sky appeared to him like a dome.

A similarly modest account of a religious experience is given *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

“When I walk the fields, I am oppressed now and then with an innate feeling that everything I see has a meaning, if I could but understand it. And this feeling of being surrounded with truths which I cannot grasp amounts to indescribable awe sometimes. Have you not felt that your real soul was imperceptible to your mental vision, except in a few hallowed moments?” (James 1902, 145)

In contrast to these modest accounts, a more intense numinous experience was reported in *The Varieties*:

"I remember the night, [...] where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer. [...] I stood alone with Him who had made me, and all the beauty of the world, and love, and sorrow, and even temptation. I did not seek Him but felt the perfect union of my spirit with His. [...] The perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more solemn silence. The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not any more have doubted that He was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two. [...] My highest faith in God and truest idea of him were then born in me” (James 1902, 25).

3.4. Towards a Phenomenology of Religion

Many attempts have been made to describe aspects or examples of religious experiences using different phenomenological methods. As Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch argued in their paper, the versatile approaches which phenomenologists have taken is our only way to eventually make the concept of religious experiences less fuzzy, by slowly uncovering the varieties of religious experience, by unveiling the whole of that which at this point can only reveal itself in parts (Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch 2017, 671).

In the following, I will discuss three texts about religious experiences written by three different thinkers: Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Luc Marion, and Rudolf Otto. These texts are particularly well-suited to illustrate the achievements of the phenomenology of religion and give an idea of what a phenomenological analysis of religion may look like.

3.4.1 Jean-Louis Chrétien: The Wounded Word

The *Wounded Word* by Jean-Louis Chrétien is a phenomenological analysis of prayer (Chrétien 2000, 147-175). Chrétien describes prayer as an “act of presence to the invisible in which the person who prays becomes an active self-manifestation of God” (Chrétien 2000, 150). It is a kind of self-dialogue, and at the same time an interplay between the one who prays and God. During prayer, a word leaves the one who prays, addresses God, and then turns back upon the sender. Like a boomerang, the prayed word begins and ends with the praying person (Aspray 2018, 311-322).

Within this circle, from the praying person and back to them, two “woundings” occur. In other kinds of self-dialogue, everything is known to the subject, and they remain contained within the shell of their own being. As soon as someone else enters the dialogue, the subject needs to ‘open up’. Thus, the first wounding occurs to the one praying. The dialogue is broken by the presence of God, who enters the circuit of speech, leaving the subject broken and wounded, but also freed and reconfigured. Yet, because an omniscient being

is addressed, prayer “appears to be always surpassed and preceded by the one to whom it is addressed.” Prayer is not about transmitting information, “it does not begin, it responds” (Chrétien 2000, 158).

With the second wounding, not only the subject, but also the word itself is broken. In prayer, a word is addressed to a being which cannot be addressed. The meaning of the word becomes uncertain. “The radical alterity of Him to whom it speaks” therefore wounds the word of prayer (Chrétien 2000, 175).

Chrétien’s contribution is an important phenomenological achievement because it is one of the few existing detailed phenomenological analyses of the religious experience of prayer (Chrétien 2000, 162). Despite critics (some say that Chrétien’s analysis is not neutral because he does not bracket transcendence), Chrétien remains phenomenological because he analyses prayer as a speech act experienced from the perspective of the person who prays (Aspray 2018, 313).

How could you investigate prayer from a rationalist viewpoint? Perhaps by scanning the brains of the one praying? The insights derived from a rationalist investigation would be meek in comparison to Chrétien’s shattering account. From a rationalist stance, it would be worthless simply because it is an ‘anecdotal’ piece of evidence. It would ignore the depth of the lifeworld within a person, and everything valuable to be discovered within it.

3.4.2 Jean-Luc Marion: The Saturated Phenomenon

In *The Saturated Phenomenon*, Jean-Luc Marion presents a way in which divine revelation could be possible. Marion’s analysis does not assume that divine revelation actually exists but shows a way in which it might exist.

Accordingly, divine revelation might be a particular type of phenomenon, namely a saturated one, which overwhelms the subject in such a way that they are not shaped by existence assumptions. The saturated phenomenon is the possibility of the impossible, it is the possibility of divine revelation (Marion 2000, 214-216; Mason 2014, 25-37). Even if the observer held the assumption that a certain experience is impossible, their cognition would be saturated by such a phenomenon, override all their previous assumptions, and reveal itself with extraordinary clarity, in a perfect kind of givenness (Marion 2000, 214-216). If the four categories (quantity, quality, relation, and modality) are understood as rules structuring intuition, this saturation, or ‘overwhelming’ could go so far that it breaks the rules of intuition. Marion writes:

“In order to introduce the concept of the saturated phenomenon in phenomenology, we have just described it as invisible (unforeseeable) according to quantity, unbearable according to quality, but also unconditioned (absolved from any horizon) according to relation, and irreducible to the I (incapable of being looked at) according to modality” (Marion 2000, 211).

What is remarkable about Marion’s finding, is that besides identifying a case in which the Kantian classification of phenomena is reversed, it contradicts and exceeds Husserl (Marion 2000, 211). Husserl’s definition of the phenomenon presupposes two basic conditions: the I, and the horizon. Because the saturated phenomenon is both ‘irreducible to the I’, and ‘absolved from any horizon,’ it does not fulfil these two basic conditions formulated by Husserl and is thus an entirely new type of phenomenon (Marion 2000, 212; Husserl 1931, 43-45).

“Husserl [...] must himself be surpassed in order to reach the possibility of the saturated phenomenon” (Marion 2000, 212).

3.4.3 Rudolf Otto: *Das Heilige*

For the last part of my investigation, I will consider a work which is quite different from those of the French phenomenologists: Rudolf Otto’s book *Das Heilige*, or the English translation *The Idea of the Holy*. I concentrate on giving an impression of those parts of the book which are particularly apt to understand religious experiences.

The Idea of the Holy was exceptionally well-received and praised by phenomenologists such as Gerard van der Leeuw, author of *Phänomenologie der Religion*, as well as by Husserl himself. Otto aims to analyse the Numinous, the awe-inspiring and non-rational element of the holy. According to Otto, this aspect constitutes the core of all religions and is therefore crucial for understanding religion (Otto 1958, 6). It is that part of a religious experience which is unlike any other experience and therefore cannot be described. In William James’ terms, it is *ineffable* (Otto 1958, 5-6).

Otto uncovers two *modes* in which the numinous can be experienced: *Mysterium Tremendum* and *Mysterium Fascinosum*. A religious experience is directed at something called *Mysterium* (Otto 1958, 25). *Mysterium* refers to the ‘wholly otherness’ of the numinous, which makes it inexplicable and impossible to understand if not experienced. This ‘otherness’ is perhaps similar to the otherness described by Chrétien, the otherness of the addressee of the prayed word. *Mysterium Tremendum* is an aspect of numinous experiences which evokes feelings akin to fear, the *gottesfürchtig* fear-like awe for God. It also includes an impression of “might and overpoweringness” and forceful energy (Otto 1958, 12-23). *Mysterium Fascinosum* is the other aspect of numinous experience, which entails more positive emotions arising from the perceived benevolence, love, and holiness of the other (Otto 1958, 31).

Otto further explores the means by which religious experiences can be expressed. To be properly understood, indirect means (such as art and music) are more apt to express religious experiences than direct means (like giving definitions). Religious experiences cannot be taught. They can only truly be understood if ‘awakened’ in the one who is seeking to understand (Otto 1958, 60).

“More of the experience lives in reverent attitude and gesture, in tone and voice and demeanour, expressing its momentousness, and in the solemn devotional assembly of a congregation at prayer, than in all the phrases and negative nomenclature which we have found to designate it” (Otto 1958, 60).

What is remarkable about Otto’s work is that it highlights not only the difference fundamental between rational and subjective accounts of truth, but also the different ways in which an individual may arrive at such truths. While for the former strictly defined criteria and rules for classification may be necessary, they are merely complementary if at all helpful for the latter. The parallels which can be drawn between *The Idea of the Holy* and *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* highlight the importance of James’ contribution to the field of phenomenology of religion, and therefore also the adequacy of the connection I have drawn between phenomenology and psychology.

Conclusion

What are we to take away from this, us who feel conflicted between our scientific education and religious upbringing? I started this inquiry with a critique of ‘epistemological reductionism’ which is implied by those who see a conflict between science and religion. We saw that epistemological reductionism relies upon rationalism and found an alternative way to conceptualize truth, as pragmatic truth. After having opened this door to other accounts of truth, we looked at the phenomenology of religious experiences, a research field which bases itself on exactly this type of pragmatic truth in order to investigate religious experiences.

We looked at different kinds of phenomenological analyses of religious experiences. First, Chrétien’s phenomenological description of prayer, then Marion’s investigation into the possibility of divine revelation as a saturated phenomenon, and lastly Rudolf Otto’s work *The Idea of the Holy*, which not only provides an exceptionally well-received description of religious experiences, but also highlights that one cannot arrive at religious truth by rational means.

By acknowledging phenomenological research into religious experiences as a legitimate form of psychological investigation, as well as that the truths of rational-scientific insights and religious ones are not of the same nature, we have found a way to combine these two seemingly incommensurable fields. If I look closely, I find that I have never doubted the legitimacy of rational-scientific insights, nor dismissed the transcending experiences of myself or others as illusory. I find that I have been living in a world, my lifeworld, in which they have co-existed peacefully all along.

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