

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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In A. D. 627 the monk Paulinus visited King Edwin in northern England to persuade him to accept Christianity. He hesitated and decided to summon his advisers. At the meeting one of them stood up and said: “Your majesty, when you sit at table with your lords and vassals, in the winter when the fire burns warm and bright on the hearth and the storm is howling out side, bringing the snow and the rain, it happens all of a sudden that a little bird flies into the hall. It comes in at one door and flies out through the other. For the few moments that it is inside the hall, it does not feel the cold, but as soon as it leaves your sight, it returns to the dark of winter. It seems to me that the life of human being is much the same. We do not know what went before and we do not know what follows. If the new doctrine can speak to us surely of these things, it is well for us to follow it.” They found the answer they sought in the message of Jesus.¹

Philosophy and Religion

Every generation and every person must ask questions about the meaning of existence. It is natural for a person to question the meaning of life. The growing child puts question after question. For the moment, it seems satisfied with the answers given it. But the grown person still keeps on asking questions until he/she comes to the deepest questions that he/she can ask of him/herself: the question which is always greater than any answer a person can find of himself or herself: Who am I? What is human being? What is this creature that comes into the brightness and warmth of the human day, hurrying on his way from the mystery of his origin to the mystery of his end? What is the meaning of life? What is the point of this world? The question can be posed in various terms but it remains the same question. At the beginning of the third millennium it is still the same enigma which man is always asked to solve, not a game which one can stand aside from, but the question of each man’s happiness

and of his aim in life. It is the question whether life itself has a goal. Or is the question academic, something to occupy a leisure hour, more a reverie than a serious challenge?

Both philosophy and religion began with a person's or a people's quest for answers to ultimate realities: the source of life, the why of life, the how of life, and the whither of life. This quest for ultimate meanings in life, led eventually to a God-experience and the knowledge that there is an Ultimate Reality in a Sacred Cosmos which is integrally related with the human cosmos and which is somehow the source and cause of all that is and all that happens in the human cosmos. Whether this Ultimate Reality is to be found within creation or outside of creation, it is experienced as the power behind the fragile structures of everyday life and understood to be the ground and source of all life. As such, this Ultimate Reality is understood to be perfect, unlimited and all-powerful. Together with this experience of God is the awareness that human well-being requires that one should establish a relationship with the God so experienced. Since God is the ground and source of all life and the power behind all that happens in the world, any relationship with God includes a relationship with the world that belongs to God.

Every experience of God comes to a particular people in a particular time and place. Using the power of imagination, and what is known in their own cultural worldview, (namely, values, attitudes, images, language and artifacts) they create an ordered system or framework of symbols (words, institutions, artifacts, actions) that express what the community understands about God and the proper way to relate with God, and with the world that belongs to God. This symbol system can be said to represent a religion's ideological system. "A religion, as a cumulative tradition, is made up of the expressions of faith of people in the past. It can include scriptures and theology, ethical teachings and prayers, architecture, music, and art, and patterns of teaching and preaching. Religion, in this sense, gives forms and patterns for the shaping of the faith of present and future persons. Religions are the cumulative traditions that we inherit in all of their varieties of forms. Religious faith, on the other hand, is the personal appropriation of a relationship to God through and by means of a religious tradition."² In time this system of symbols is thematized and encoded in rituals, codes of behavior and

intellectual representations such as scriptures, creeds, and doctrines. These religious texts are then institutionalized; that is, officially established as the orthodox (straight, right, true) expression of a people's religious ideology. As the religion moves forward in time and geography, its scholars and pastors will continually reflect on ways to explain the meaning of the original God-experience to the present generation of believers. This becomes a religion's theology, which is handed on in the tradition.³

Christian Theology

The English word "theology" is a composite of two Greek words: *Theos* and *logia*. *Theos* translates as divinity or God; it refers to the universal idea of God as the Absolute Reality or Absolute Other, or Absolute Transcendent Being and not to any particular God. *Logos* means word; *logia* has the meaning of saying words about something. So, "theology" means to say words about God and all things in the light of God. If one will speak about something, that is, "say words" about it, this implies that there has been some thinking, reflecting, understanding that is orderly, rational and logical within a culture's understanding of rational and logical talk. Therefore, the word "theology" carries the deeper meaning of "reasoned-talk about God."

Christian theology is the product of a critical dialogue between two poles: the pole of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the pole of present-day experiences. The word "tradition" comes from the Latin word *traditio* that means "the action of handing over" or "the action of handing down information, beliefs, customs, by word of mouth, example, or signs (words, artifacts, gestures, and rituals)." "Tradition" in the theological context, therefore, means handing over or handing on to others what our ancestors have said about God and all things in the light of this God. For Christians, their ancestors in faith are those who belonged to the Jewish and Christian religions, those who believed and lived the Judeo-Christian understanding of God. They attain their "religious" identity only in and through a tradition. And, they express their relationships with God in the context of a religious tradition. A study of theology calls Christians to know, understand, and be able to critique the tradition of their ancestors in religion so as to have a clearer understanding of their religious identity

in the present day. But the contents of their tradition were written in other times and by other peoples. So, before they can know and understand the meaning of the content of the tradition, they need to examine the particular historical, social, and cultural context within which it was written. If we push this subject a little further, Christians are led to ask: “Where did our ancestors get their knowledge of God; where did they get this tradition that they handed on to us?” The answer to this question is: a founding God-experience which is re-interpreted and re-interpreted through the ages as the religion spreads in time and place.

Christianity’s Founding God-Experience

At the heart of religion is a people’s experience of and response to someone or something perceived to be the Ultimate Reality who/which is Wholly Other than human reality. This Ultimate Reality has been called by an infinite number of names. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Ultimate Reality is called “Yahweh, God” in the Old Testament; “Abba, Father” in the New Testament; and “Triune God or Trinity” in Christianity. Moreover, the social, cultural and political context within which God is experienced will determine the way the experience is interpreted. This, in turn, determines the way theology is done.

Christianity’s founding God-experience is the whole life of the human and historical person, Jesus of Nazareth: his ministry, passion, death and resurrection. In other words, it is in and through the whole of Jesus that Christians experience God, know God, know about God, and know how to live in relation with the whole world because of their relation with God. When the early disciples reflected on their experiences with Jesus, they realized that with him and because of him, they received the life-giving power of Yahweh. This power of life was available for all, but especially for those who were the outcasts in Jewish society; for those who had been cut off from the religious life of the Jewish people because they had some kind of “unforgivable” sin. Jesus reached out to these people, forgave their sins, and created a community of disciples commissioned to do as he had done: forgive one another, love those who hate you, wash each other’s feet. In such a life was life. Living his words and following his example, within a community of disciples, they

were more alive. This knowledge was then interpreted primarily, but not only, from the perspective of the Old Testament understanding of God.

Yahweh is a God who creates; a God who has the will and capacity to call forth and sustain life. God created the world and all that is in it, and continues to create a life-world of order, vitality, and fruitfulness that makes life possible and that, in the end, is judged by God to be ‘very good’. God’s creating activity is most dramatically visible in his creation of a people, the people of Israel. “I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King.” (Is 43:15) Yahweh intends not only to create a world, but to create a certain kind of world, a world characterized by justice, righteousness and steadfast love, that is aimed at giving life to the needy: the stranger, the widow and the orphan. Yahweh’s power of life is a power of generous life for all, no matter their position in society. But, Yahweh’s power of life is especially generous to the needy. Yahweh’s power of life overthrows the power of chaos: a society whose sociopolitical structures rob the weak of a chance for life. Thus, God’s gift of the power of life has a strong ethical dimension. The vocation of Israel is to be the community that testifies, by life and word, that the generosity of God is more powerful than the ideology of greed, which diminishes creation and makes human life yet more desperate.

The life-giving activities of Jesus were the same as the life-giving activities of Yahweh in the history of Israel. The ethical teachings of Jesus were the same as those given by Yahweh to Israel. And, when followed, the results were the same. Since God alone is the source of this life, the life-energy (Spirit) at work in Jesus and which flowed from Jesus to others, must be from God. Therefore, God must be present and actively at work in and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth. At the death of Jesus, people would say “Truly this man was God’s Son” (Mt. 27:54; Mk 15:39). At Pentecost, the small community of disciples experienced themselves receiving the Spirit (Life-energy) of Jesus and now knew themselves able to preach in word and action, the same life-giving “good news” that Jesus preached. The resurrection was a sign that God had forgiven them of their sin of crucifying His Son and now they were to preach a life-giving message of forgiveness and reconciliation.

A careful study of the New Testament makes it clear that the early Church’s understanding of Jesus was definitely theological, God-

centered. The events in the history of the people of Israel told the Jewish people what God was “like.” Now the events in the life of Jesus told the same story about God. Thus, from their knowledge of God in the Old Testament, they concluded that it was one and the same God who was acting in and through Jesus. Yahweh, God is the “Abba, Father” of Jesus. And, Jesus is the “anointed” of Yahweh, the Christ of Yahweh. John’s Gospel, for instance, recognizes this by having Jesus say “The Son can do nothing by himself; he does only what he sees the Father doing; what the Father does, the Son does, too.” (Jn 5:19) More general is the insight shared by all the traditions that the empowerment of Jesus to function as prophet and healer comes from God’s own healing and life-giving Spirit.

The mystery of God’s creative Spirit pervades the whole history of God’s loving self-gift. Jesus’ ministry takes its meaning from this broader context of God’s activity in the whole of creation and history. While there was a unique and normative inspiring of Jesus, the mission of God’s Spirit is not limited to Jesus alone. Jesus’ own existing and identity as the risen Christ involves a relatedness to all other humans; he is the first-born of the “new creation.” In and through his risen life, he is related to all human persons and he shares with them that Spirit by which he lives. While the manifestation of God’s creative Spirit working in Jesus was very limited during Jesus’ earthly lifetime by the bounds of space and time, that limitation no longer held after Jesus’ death. For the Christian, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God, is the way and the means to God because God “speaks” in and through Jesus and by sharing in the Spirit of Jesus, we are able to “speak” to God. Jesus is the “word” God speaks to us and Jesus is the “word” we speak to God.

Revelation and Faith

Christians recognize that this knowledge lies beyond the normal reach of human inquiry. It is a revelation, i.e. a free manifestation by God, the initial action by which God emerges from his hiddenness, calls man, and invites him to a covenant-existence. The concept of revelation is of constitutive importance for the whole Christian life. Vatican Council II states that “It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will (cf. Eph 1:9). His will

was that men should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature (cf. Eph 2:18; 2 Pt 1:4).”⁴ God, who ‘dwells in unapproachable light’ (1 Tm 6:16), wants to communicate his own divine life to the human persons he freely created, in order to adopt them as his sons and daughters in his only-begotten Son. By revealing himself God wishes to make them capable of responding to him, and of knowing him and of loving him far beyond their own natural capacity.

The act of faith, which is a person’s positive response to revelation, is a personal adherence of one’s whole being to God who reveals himself. It involves an assent of the intellect and will to the self-revelation God has made through his deeds and words. “To believe” has thus a twofold reference: to the person and to the truth; to the truth, by trust in the person who bears witness to it. Faith is a gift from God. In order to believe a person needs the interior help of the Holy Spirit. But it is no less true that believing is an authentically human act, conscious and free. “Trusting in God and cleaving to the truths he has revealed is contrary neither to human freedom nor to human reason. Even in human relations it is not contrary to our dignity to believe what other persons tell us about themselves and their intentions, or to trust their promises (for example, when a man and a woman marry) to share a communion of life with one another. If this is so, still less is it contrary to our dignity to yield by faith the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals, and to share in an interior communion with him.”⁵

Faith is the knowledge born of God’s love flooding our hearts. Pascal remarked that the heart has reasons which reason does not know. Here by **reason** Bernard Lonergan would understand the compound of the activities on the first three levels of cognitional activity, namely, of experiencing, of understanding, and of judging. By the heart’s reasons, then, Lonergan would understand feelings that are intentional responses to values. The two aspects of such responses are: the absolute aspect, that is a recognition of value, and the relative aspect, that is a preference of one value over another. Finally, by the heart he would understand the subject on the existential level of intentional consciousness and in the dynamic state of being in love. “The meaning, then, of Pascal’s remark would be that, besides the factual knowledge reached by experiencing,

understanding, and verifying, there is another kind of knowledge reached through the discernment of value and the judgments of value of a person in love.”⁶

The Rational Basis of Faith

It is a postulate of Christian faith that one called by God is always likewise called to love others and share his faith with them. Faith is meant for all, because “God wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4). The love that is required by faith and that belongs to its innermost nature does not exclude the other’s need for truth. If it did, it would refuse to respond to his most urgent need. The faith that reaches out to the other reaches out of necessity to his questioning as well, to his need for truth; it enters into this need, shares in it, for it is only by sharing in the question that word becomes answer. The rationality of faith develops of necessity from the love that is intrinsic to it: the love that comes from faith must be a prudent love that is not content with providing the other with bread but also teaches him to see. A love that gives less or that is unwilling on principle to extend itself to the other’s need for truth fails to attain a genuinely human level and is consequently not love in the full sense of the word. But when love gives the ability to see, as it is so beautifully portrayed in the story of the healing of the man born blind (Jn 9), faith is not just a blind gesture, an empty confidence, an adherence to a secret doctrine or the like. On the contrary, it wants to open people’s eyes, to open their eyes to truth. Faith, as the New Testament understands it, is more than a fundamental trust; it is my Yes to a content that compels my belief. The existence of this content is a structural constituent of Christian faith, because he whom Christians believe is not just any human person but the Logos, the Word of God, in whom is contained the meaning of the world - its truth.

For the Christian, however, the learned person is not the one who knows and can do the most, but the one who has become most human. One can neither become nor be that without letting oneself be touched by him who is the ground and measure of human being and of all being. That is why a very simple person who bears within himself a sense of values and, thus, a sensitivity toward others, toward what is right and

beautiful and true, is immeasurably more learned than the most experienced technocrat with his computer brain. Augustine experienced this in the case of his mother Monica: while he, with his friends, all of whom came from the academic world, struggled helplessly with the basic problems of humanity, he was struck again and again by the interior certainty of this simple woman. With astonishment and emotion, he wrote of her: “She stands at the pinnacle of philosophy.”⁷

“Faith seeks understanding”⁸: it is intrinsic to faith that a believer desires to know better the One in whom he has put his faith, and to understand better what He has revealed; a more penetrating knowledge will in turn call forth a greater faith, increasingly set afire by love. In the words of St. Augustine, “I believe, in order to understand; and I understand, the better to believe.”⁹ Theology has been well defined as “faith seeking understanding”. The theologian cannot be content to analyze and present abstract concepts of revelation in isolation from the rest of reality. He must confront revelation in the concrete shape and circumstances in which it comes to the human person, and reflect on its relationship to the totality of what one knows, or thinks to know. Beside the knowledge coming from revelation as expressed by the Judeo-Christian tradition, the other dialogue partner in the theological process is the knowledge gained from critical reflection on present-day experiences. This knowledge is called “experiential knowledge” to distinguish it from knowledge we get from learning what others have said about a subject.

Faith and Experience

Faith, accordingly, is the knowledge born of God’s love flooding our hearts. Being in love with God, as experienced, is being in love in an unrestricted fashion. All love is self-surrender, but being in love with God is being in love without qualifications. As Lonergan puts it, “To be in love is to be in love with someone. To be in love without qualifications or conditions or reservations or limits is to be in love with someone transcendent. When someone transcendent is my beloved, he is in my heart, real to me from within me. When that love is the fulfilment of my

unrestricted thrust to self-transcendence through intelligence and truth and responsibility, the one that fulfils that thrust must be supreme in intelligence, truth and goodness. Since he chooses to come to me by a gift of love for him, he himself must be love. Since loving him is my transcending myself, it is also the denial of the self to be transcended. Since loving him means loving attention to him, it is prayer, meditation, contemplation. Since love of him is fruitful, it overflows into love of all those that he loves or might love. Finally, from an experience of love focused on mystery there wells forth a longing for knowledge, while love itself is a longing for union; so for the lover of the unknown beloved the concept of bliss is knowledge of him and union with him, however they may be achieved.”¹⁰

The question of experience and faith has acquired more and more urgency in the theological dialogue of recent years; a number of studies have touched upon it and produced important insights, but many problems have, of necessity, been left unsolved. The purpose of this paper is not to offer something new or even to give a more or less comprehensive survey of the discussion to date but simply to clarify some of the basic concepts that suggest themselves. Above all, it will not attempt a clear definition of what has still not been satisfactorily explained - namely, the concept of “experience” itself, which Gadamer has numbered among “those concepts that have yet to be elucidated.”¹¹

Experience is the encounter by a conscious human subject of any reality in a way that leads the subject to respond to that reality and to critically appropriate that encounter as an event in his or her personal history. Understood in this way, an experience entails at least three elements: encounter with a reality, response to that reality and appropriation of that encounter into one’s personal history. Religious experience then may be described broadly as any depth experience, which brings the subject into an immediate contact or a relationship with the sustaining ground of life, i.e. with God. The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for. Vatican Council II states: “The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. This invitation to converse with God is addressed

to man as soon as he comes into being. For, if man exists it is because God created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence. He cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and entrusts himself to his creator”¹²

Although a person can forget God or reject him, God never ceases to call every person to seek him, so as to find life and happiness. But this search for God demands of the human person every effort of intellect, a sound will, ‘an upright heart’, as well as the witness of others who teach him to seek God. St. Augustine, reflecting on his experience, prayed: “You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised: great is your power and your wisdom is without measure. And man, so small a part our creation, wants to praise you: this man, though clothed with mortality and bearing the evidence of sin and the proof that you withstand the proud. Despite everything, man, though but a small part of your creation, wants to praise you. You yourself encourage him to delight in your praise, for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you”¹³ I should like to present and expound upon four basic themes in which are expressed the main aspects of the relationship between experience and faith.¹⁴

1. Experience as the Basis of All Knowledge

We begin with an Aristotelian axiom that Thomas Aquinas reduced to the formula: “There is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses” - sensory perception is the indispensable gateway to all knowledge as such. This basic concept of the doctrine of cognition was so significant for Thomas that he applied only to the realm of cognition the basic anthropological formula that defines human being as a spirit contained in a body in such a way that the two are inseparably intertwined. His formula “The soul is the form of the body” regards body and soul as so fused that together they form but one existential entity. If this is so - if, on the one hand, it pertains to the nature of the human spirit to be able to exist only as the form of the body, and if, on the other hand, it pertains to the nature of human corporality to be the expression of spirit - then it follows that the way of human cognition always requires the combination of corporal instrument and spiritual appropriation. Of necessity, then, all human knowledge must have a sensory structure; it

must have its beginning in experience, in the perception of the senses. Thomas extended this view (which was shocking from the point of view of the then reigning Augustinian-Platonic tradition) to the knowledge of God as well. In fact, he had no choice but to do so. For if it is correct to say that in a human person spirit exists only as incarnate, then this epistemological theory cannot be limited to a particular realm of thought: it is valid for every kind of human knowledge.

Thus it was clear to Thomas that we cannot know God except through the senses and that even our way of thinking about God is dependent on, and mediated by, sense perception. What we have discovered first from a philosophical view of mankind is confirmed when we examine the pedagogical method of Holy Scripture and especially of Jesus himself. Jesus taught consistently in the form of parables - and the parable was obviously not, in this case, just a pedagogical trick that could be eliminated without loss. In his farewell words, Jesus states explicitly that the parable is the way in which knowledge of the faith is to be realized in this world (Jn 16:25); in the Synoptics, too, the parable appears as the structure by which access is to be had to the mystery of the Kingdom of God (Mk 4:10-11).

If we look more closely, we see that the parable has a twofold structure: the content of faith is made transparent in the reality of the senses, and this knowledge of the faith has, in its turn, a reciprocal effect on the world of the senses, making it comprehensible as a movement that transcends itself. There is no question here of a grafting onto a content that is in itself neutral with respect to God of a religious application that, in the last analysis, is alien to the earthly content and remains exterior to it; rather, there appears in the parable precisely that which is essential to sensory reality itself. The parable does not approach our experience of the world from without; on the contrary, it is the parable that gives this experience its proper depth and reveals what is hidden in things themselves. Reality is self-transcendence, and when human being is led to transcend it, he not only comprehends God but, for the first time, also understands reality and enables himself and creation to be what they were meant to be. Only because creation is parable can it become the word of parable. That is why the material of daily living can always lead

beyond itself; that is why a history can take place in it that both transcends it and is profoundly conformable to it.

2. Limits of Experience

Whatever is discovered to exist, God always transcends it, “God is always greater.” In other words, precisely when we are most aware of the potentiality of the sensory world for revealing God, we must, at the same time, hold fast to the knowledge that God alone is divine; that he can be seen only when I do not stand still, but regard experience as a road and set out upon it. R. Brague offers the following trenchant formulation of this concept: “God alone is divine. Anyone who makes the experience of God his final goal is interested only in his own psychology. Left to itself, experience is satisfied with too little.”¹⁵ The answer that comes from faith brings about a permanent widening of his inquiry. The reality of God is greater than all our experiences, even our experience of God. That is why faith cannot be transmitted simply as a matter of supply and demand, and why it cannot be satisfied with what human being is content to ask. So limited, it would no longer be able to let its own radiance shine forth but would constrict human being and dull his sensibilities. For human being asks too little of his own accord and even that little he does not ask rightly.

From this perspective, we can now broaden and deepen our earlier insights. Faith starts with experience, but it cannot be limited by any experience that happens to present itself. On the contrary, faith gives rise to a whole dynamics of new experiences. The always greater God can be known only in the transcendence of the always “more”, in the constant revision of our experiences. Thus faith and experience form the continuum of a road that must go farther and farther. Only by keeping step with the always new transcendence of faith can we come at last to the true “experience of faith”.

3. Stages of Experience

Having considered the relationship between faith and experience, we are ready now to examine and differentiate more precisely the various stages in the concept of experience itself. Experience is a multi-dimensional concept. Throughout this section, I adhere closely to the

ideas presented by Jean Mouroux, which were adopted and developed further by W. Beinert.¹⁶

3.1. Mouroux calls the first stage **empirical experience**. Empirical experience is the immediate and uncritical perception by the senses that is common to all of us. We see the sun rise; we see it set. We see a train pass. We see colors; and so forth. This manner of experience is, certainly, the beginning of all knowledge, but it is always superficial and inexact. And therein lies its danger. Because of its immediate certainty, it can be an obstacle to deeper knowledge; because of the superficial empiricism of what it seems to have perceived without ambiguity, it leads to falsity if the impression is accepted as final and definitive. There is no need to confine these observations to the region of faith alone, for the insight into the possibility and the necessity of criticizing “empirical experience” is the starting point of the natural sciences. In fact, the natural sciences came into existence precisely because human being had learned to criticize and exceed the impressions received by his senses. The dispute that centered round Galileo was, in part, also a dispute about the meaning and limitation of sensory experience, about the relationship between perception and understanding. The real substance of the dispute was actually something quite different from what we usually imagine it to have been.

Galileo’s opponents were Aristotelian empiricists, whereas Galileo himself was a Platonist who, therefore, put more emphasis on understanding than on sensory experience. As empiricists, his Aristotelian opponents defended sensory perception, which clearly saw the sun rise and set and, therefore, encircle the earth. In his thesis, Galileo rejected what everyone can see. The same is true of the laws of gravity, which never actually occur in reality as Galileo formulated them, but are a mathematical abstraction and, for that reason, also contrary to our immediate experience. Modern natural science is built on the rejection of pure empiricism, on the superiority of thinking over seeing. In his fundamental exposition of the theory of evolution, Jacques Monod has offered a most stimulating proof that modern natural science is ultimately Platonism, that it is based on the superiority of thought over experience, of the ideal over the empirical, and that it has its source in the fundamental notion that reality is composed of intellectual structures and can,

consequently, be known more exactly by thought than by mere perception.¹⁷ Hence this notion is valid not only in the realm of faith; we can quite generally say that, while “empirical experience” is the necessary starting point of all human knowledge, it becomes false if it does not let itself be criticized in terms of knowledge already acquired, and if it does not open the door to new experiences.

3.2. With this we come to the second stage of experience, which Jean Mouroux calls “**experimental**”, as opposed to **empirical experience**. We can safely say that this second stage, to which belong all the modern natural sciences, is based on the juxtaposition of the Aristotelian axiom: “There is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses” and the Platonic corrective: “There is nothing in the senses without the prior action of the intellect”. The senses experience nothing if no question has been raised, if there is no preceding command from the intellect without which sensory experience cannot take place. Experimentation is possible only if natural science has elaborated an intellectual presupposition in terms of which it controls nature and on the basis of which it can bring about new experiences. In other words, it is only when the intellect sheds light on sensory experience that this sensory experience has any value as knowledge and that experiences thus become possible.

The progress of modern science is produced by a history of experiences that is made possible by the repeated critical interaction and reciprocal prolongation of these experiences and by the inner bond of the whole. The question that raised the possibility of constructing, let us say, a computer could not even have been asked in the beginning, but became possible only in the continuum of an experiential history of experiences newly generated by thought. Up to this point, the structure of the experience of faith is completely analogous to that of the natural sciences; both have their source in the dynamic link between intellect and senses from which there is constructed a path to deeper knowledge. But we must point, here, also to a crucial difference. In a scientific experiment, the object of experience is not free. The experiment depends, rather, on the fact that nature is controlled (which is why Heidegger labeled the technique *Ge-stell*: a “set-up”). R. Bague expresses it this way: “Because we have removed from it everything that might be a freedom (vagueness,

contingency, etc.), it can become the object of science.”¹⁸ It is, of course, also possible to experiment with a person. One attempts to control the person in terms of what is tangible, of what does not depend on his freedom. We know from the modern human sciences how much we can actually learn about human being in this way. It is, in fact, possible to learn so much that it is easy to imagine there is nothing more to be learned; that one has “controlled” the whole person by this “set-up”. “However, what is personal” in human being cannot be controlled in this way, but “reveals itself voluntarily through speech”.¹⁹

3.3. We have arrived now at the third type of experience, which Mouroux calls “**experiential**” and Beinert translates as “**existential**” **experience**.²⁰ It is an experience that accepts the intellectual principle we have discussed above but, at the same time, permits the freedom which is its own specific characteristic. It has its source in the already described bond between intellectual assimilation and a constantly renewed influx of experience. Moreover, it gives free play to the experience itself and lets itself be led “where it would rather not go” (cf. Jn 21: 18). The decisive factor is not control but letting oneself be controlled. An integral part of this latter process is acceptance of the experience of non-experience, which is the only way one can reach a higher level. Let us quote Hans Urs von Balthasar on this subject: “It can be said with certainty that there is no Christian experience that is not the fruit of the overcoming of one’s own self-will or, at least, the determination to overcome it. And with this self-will we must include also all our willful efforts to evoke religious experiences on the basis of our own initiative and by our own methods and techniques.”²¹ “It is only when we renounce all partial experiences that the wholeness of being will be bestowed upon us. God requires unselfish vessels into which to pour his own essential unselfishness.”²²

This last point is essential. To say that God is Trinitarian means, in fact, to confess that he is self-transcendence, “unselfishness”, and, consequently, that he can be known only in what reflects his own nature. From this there follows an important conclusion: the being-led to a religious experience, which must start in the place where human being finds himself, can yield no fruit if it is not, from the beginning, directed to the acquisition of a readiness for renunciation. The moral training that, in a

certain sense, belongs to the natural sciences, as does the asceticism of transcendence, becomes more radical here because of the meeting of the two freedoms. In any event, it is inseparable from training in the acquisition of religious knowledge. From this perspective, we can understand why the Fathers of the Church regarded the basic formulation of religious knowledge as such this teaching from the Sermon on the Mount: “Happy are the pure in heart: they shall see God” (Mt 5:8). Here it is a question of “seeing”. The possibility of “seeing” God, that is, of knowing him at all, de-pends on one’s purity of heart, which means a comprehensive process in which human being becomes transparent, in which he does not remain locked in upon himself, in which he learns to give himself and, in doing so, becomes able to see. From the perspective of Christian faith, we might say that religious experience in its most exalted Christian form bears the mark of the Cross. It embraces the basic model of human existence, the transcendence of self. The Cross redeems, it enables us to see. And now we discover that the structure of which we are speaking is not just structure; it reveals content as well.

4. Christian Experience

After this general analysis of experience, I propose, by way of conclusion, to present the specific nature of Christian experience. Christian experience begins in the ordinary course of communal experience, but it relies, for its future course, on the extent and richness of the experiences already accumulated throughout history by the world of faith. We are made capable of this transcendence of the place where we find ourselves and of the things we would ask of our own accord, because we see before us the transcendence that has already occurred in the world of faith, which, as it were, lets itself be contemplated there and invites our participation. The community of believers, the Church is the place of accumulated experience, and encourages participation in the experience she has to offer. We might say, in fact, that the Church, as a place of experience, is, in a threefold way, the source of new personal experience:

4.1. The communal life of faith and liturgical worship in the Church offers what might be called experiential support. In mutual faith, in praying, celebrating, rejoicing, suffering and living together, the Church

becomes a “community” and thus a genuine living space for human being where faith can be experienced as a force that sustains him or her, both in his daily routine and in the crises of his existence.

4.2. One who truly believes, who lets himself or herself be matured by faith, begins to become a light for others; he becomes a source of support to whom others can turn for help. It is quite normal in the early stages of faith for one who has not yet mastered the logic of faith to say to oneself: this or that person is better informed and has more experience than I; if he believes, then there must be something in this faith, and I want to believe as he does. It is at first, as it were, a kind of borrowed faith in which one does not yet comprehend the content of what one believes, but has confidence in a convincing living embodiment of it, and thus opens the way to one’s own growth. It is at first a secondhand faith, which is, at the same time, an access to faith “at firsthand”, to a personal encounter with the Lord. For all that, we shall always experience faith to some extent “at second hand”, for it is our human destiny to need one another, even where there is question of ultimate realities.

4.3. A higher form of this daily phenomenon that is one of the essential functions of the Church may be found in the person of the saint. The saints, as the living personifications of a faith actually experienced and tested, of a transcendence actually experienced and confirmed, are themselves, we might say, places into which one can enter, in which faith as experience has been, as it were, stored, anthropologically seasoned and brought near to our own lives. In the last analysis, it is by the gradually ripening and deepening participation in these experiences that there grows in us that experience which is called in the Psalms and in the New Testament “the tasting of God” (Ps 34:8; 1 Pet 2:3; Heb 6:4). Here one rests in reality itself; one no longer believes “at secondhand”. Certainly, we must say with Bernard of Clairvaux and the great mystical teachers of all times that such an experience can be but a “brief moment.” In this life, it can be no more than an initial foretaste that must not become an end in itself. For, if it did, faith would become self-satisfaction instead of self-transcendence, and would thus betray its own nature. Such moments are governed by the law that governed the experiences of the apostles on Mt. Tabor: they are not places where we can linger but are intended to encourage and strengthen us to go out, with the word of Jesus, into the

routine of daily living, and to know that the radiance of the divine nearness is always present wherever anyone goes in the strength of that word.

We can thus identify **four stages**²³ or levels of religious experience from a Christian point of view:

1. The experience of creation and history offers itself to human being not only in the range of possibilities that are open to him for transcending the superficial, but also as a road leading him or her to a meeting with the ground of being. Our experience of the high and low points of human life constitutes most of what leads us to seek out, or to persevere in, a religious way of life. Were it not for joy and hope, pain and distress and the fear of death, mingled as they are in our daily lives, we might well not bother to find a religion to guide us in a confusing world. Secular human experience thus prompts us to turn to religion for insight and illumination and for final redemption. We expect our faith to make sense of our experience. Whether we think of our experience of one another, or our experience of nature, or our experience of the events of history, or our experience of such internal states as love, desire, pain, anxiety - in all of these we are engaged in a commerce with being, and so with the source of being, God, mediated through our experience. By reflecting on our secular experience, either directly or with the help of novels, poetry, drama, film, the visual arts, and the like, or again through conversation with other people, we come to discern more fully the reality that is offering itself to us in our personal depths. And this reality, just because it is reality, must inevitably say something about God who is "Creator of all things, visible and invisible".

2. The experience of conversion is the experience of the self-revealing God made possible by faith. Revelation has the structure of experience. Jesus Christ surely experienced his own relationships, one of essential sonship, with the Father, and through that experience came to an understanding of his own person and destiny. The apostles of Jesus Christ experienced their Lord and Master, living, teaching, dying, and rising again, and through that experience came to see what his role in human history was, and what theirs should be on the model of his. In conversion, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ are experienced as

throwing light on my life. The Son of God's involvement in this world is used to interpret my own life and death, triumphs and failures, moral achievements, collapses, and recoveries from moral collapses. Here the Christian gospel intersects with my ordinary human experience. Whenever and whatever we read of Christ in the Gospels, we are also reading our own self-portrait, for Christ is what we are called to become. "God became man" as one early Christian writer put it, "so that man might become God". Christ is not simply, nor primarily, a model of good behavior we must imitate. He is the source of our life and the sense for it.

3. The experience of the Christian community and of Christian individuals, in which the ways of transcending creation and history are opened to human being, that is, in which the first type of experience is made ready, intensified and cast in a Christian mold. We cannot live as human beings unless we can find some kind of unity and meaning in our lives. To find meaning in our lives we have to question, criticize, systematize and theorize about our experience. The Church must answer this deep human need by evolving hypotheses and theories to show the coherence not only of its teaching, but the coherence of its teaching with life as we experience it. A Church which concentrates simply on the coherence of its own teaching without relating it to everyday experience is behaving like the paranoid. A Church isolated from our human experience can only survive as long as it can succeed in forbidding its adherents to ask questions and think for themselves. A mark of true Christianity is its vigor and its search for meaning in every aspect of life.

4. From a combination of the above-mentioned types, there develops, then, a very personal experience with God in Christ and, finally, the genuinely supernatural experience that we have just described as mystical experience. The characteristic of adulthood is a growing awareness of inner consciousness, of the complexity of feeling and emotion within us, revealed to us through our activity, our encounters and relationships with others, our work, what we read, hear and see, and of the inner activity which results from this, our hopes and despairs, sadness and joy, fears and expectations, certainties and doubts. As we become more conscious of this inner world, we are coming closer to ourselves and to God. This inner world is unique to each one of us, incommunicable and mysterious even to ourselves in its complexity.

Although we cannot understand this hidden world, we know that it holds the key to our happiness and to our personality, and that the way we perceive, think, and therefore act, has its explanation in this inner world.

Religion explains this phenomenon to us and shows us that this is the most important stage in our journey towards God, whom we are invited to meet in this hidden, and often very frightening, recesses of our minds and memories. We will experience God as the one whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts, the God of surprises, who is now encountered rather than thought about, who communicates himself through these mysterious inner experiences rather than through the articulate phrases of set prayers, who is now being experienced from within rather than being presented from without, who is loved and lived rather than theorized about. Training in prayer will foster this inner awareness, because it is in these inner experiences that we encounter the God of surprises, whose Spirit is at work in our spirit in a manner unique to each individual.

A Biblical Example²⁴

Following the insightful comments of Ratzinger, I should like to exemplify what has been said by means of a biblical text - the account of Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in the Gospel of John (Jn 4:4-30):

(Jesus) had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well. It was about noon. A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" (For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." (The woman) said to him, "Sir, you do not even have a bucket and the cistern is deep; where then can you get this

living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this cistern and drank from it himself with his children and his flocks?” Jesus answered and said to her, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Jesus said to her, “Go call your husband and come back.” The woman answered and said to him, “I do not have a husband.” Jesus answered her, “You are right in saying, ‘I do not have a husband.’ For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true.” The woman said to him, “Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You people worship what you do not understand; we worship what we understand, because salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that the Messiah is coming, the one called the Anointed; when he comes, he will tell us everything.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking with you.”

At that moment his disciples returned, and were amazed that he was talking with a woman, but still no one said, “What are you looking for?” or “Why are you talking with her?” The woman left her water jar and went into the town and said to the people, “Come see a man who told me everything I have done. Could he possibly be the Messiah?” They went out of the town and came to him.

This pericope seems to me to be a beautiful and concrete illustration of what we have just been saying. It opens with the meeting of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in the context of a normal, human, everyday experience - the experience of thirst, which is surely one of a person's most primordial experiences. In the course of the conversation, the subject shifts to that thirst that is a thirst for life, and the point is made that one must drink again and again, must come again and again to the source. In this way, the woman is made aware of what in actuality she, like every human being, has always known but to which she has not always adverted: that she thirsts for life itself and that all the assuaging that she seeks and finds cannot slake this living, elemental thirst. The superficial "empirical" experience has been transcended.

But what has been revealed is still of this world. It is succeeded, therefore, by one of those conversations on two levels that are so characteristic of John's technique of recording dialogue, the Johannine "misunderstanding", as it is called by the exegetes. From the fact that Jesus and the Samaritan woman, though they use the same words, have in mind two very different levels of meaning and, separated thus by the ambiguity of human speech, are speaking at cross-purposes, there is manifested the lasting incommensurability of faith and human experience however extensive that experience may be. For the woman understands by "water" that of which the fairy tales speak: the elixir of life by virtue of which a person will not die and his thirst for life will be entirely satisfied. She remains in the sphere of *bios*, of the empirical life that is familiar to her, whereas Jesus wants to reveal to her the true life, the *zoe*.

In the next stage, the woman's full attention has been attracted to the subject of a thirst for life. She no longer asks for *something*, for water or for any other single thing, but for life, for herself. This explains the apparently totally unmotivated interpolation by Jesus: "Go and call your husband!" It is both intentional and necessary, for her life as a whole, with all its thirst, is the true subject here. As a result, there comes to light the real dilemma, the deep-seated waywardness, of her existence: she is brought face to face with herself. In general, we can reduce what is happening to the formula: one must know oneself as one really is, if one is to know God. The real medium, the primordial experience of all experiences, is that a person himself is the place in which and through

which he experiences God. Admittedly, the circle could also be closed in the opposite direction: it could be said that it is only by first knowing God that one can properly know oneself.

As we have said, the woman must come first to the knowledge of herself, to the acknowledgment of herself. For what she makes now is a kind of confession: a confession in which, at last, she reveals herself unsparingly. Thus a new transition has occurred - to preserve our earlier terminology, a transition from empirical and experimental to "experiential" experience, to "existential experience". The woman stands face to face with herself. It is no longer a question now of *something* but of the depths of the "I" itself and, consequently, of the radical poverty that *is* a person's I-myself, the place where this *I* is ultimately revealed behind the superficiality of the *something*. From this perspective, we might regard the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman as the prototype of teaching. It must lead from the *something* to the *I*. Beyond every *something* it must ensure the involvement of the person, of *this* particular person. It must produce self-knowledge and self-acknowledgment so that the indigence and need of a person's being will be evident.

The Samaritan woman has achieved this radical confrontation with her own self. In the moment in which this occurs the question of all questions arises always and of necessity: the question about oneself becomes a question about God. It is only apparently without motivation but in reality inevitable that the woman should ask now: How do things stand with regard to adoration, that is, with regard to God and my relationship to him? The question about foundation and goal makes itself heard. Only at this point does the offering of Jesus' true gift become possible. For, the "gift of God" is God himself, God precisely as gift - that is, the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of the conversation, there seemed no likelihood that this woman, with her obviously superficial way of life, would have any interest in the Holy Spirit. But once she was led to the depths of her own being, the question arose that must always arise if one is to ask the question that burns in one's soul. Now the woman is aware of the real thirst by which she is driven. Hence she can at last learn what it is for which this thirst thirsts.

It is the purpose and meaning of all religious teaching to lead to this thirst. For one who knows neither that there is a Holy Spirit nor that one can thirst for him, it cannot begin otherwise than with sensory perception. Teaching must lead to self-knowledge, to the exposing of the *I*, so that it lets the masks fall and moves out of the realm of *something* into that of being. Its goal is *conversion*, that conversion of a person that results in his standing face to face with himself. Conversion is identical with self-knowledge, and self-knowledge is the nucleus of all knowledge. Conversion is the way in which human being finds himself and thus knows the question of all questions: How can I worship God? It is the question about his salvation. In the New Testament the word that is invariably used for conversion is “*metanoia*”, which also means a “change of heart”, i.e. a change in the way of seeing things, of judging and living reality; in brief, a “*trans-evaluation*”, a word created by Nietzsche to express the change of paradigm.

Conclusion

All this discussion on religious experience was intended to show that seeking God’s presence in our world and in our lives involves theological reflection, the artful discipline of putting our experience into conversation with the heritage of our religious tradition. In this conversation we can be surprised and transformed by new angles of vision on our experience and acquire a deepened understanding and appreciation of our tradition. In this conversation we can find ourselves called to act in new, courageous, and compassionate ways. We are all called to transformation.

I conclude with a true story, told by Robert Fulghum about a seminar he once attended in Greece. On the last day of the conference, the discussion leader walked over to the bright light of an opened window and looked out. Then he asked if there were any questions. Fulghum laughingly asked him what the meaning of life was. Everyone laughed and stirred to leave. However, the leader held up his hand to ask for silence and then responded “I will answer your question”. He took his wallet out of his pocket and removed a small round mirror about the size of a ten baht coin.

Then he explained: “When I was a small child during World War II, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept the largest piece: This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun could never shine. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible place that I could find. I kept the mirror, and as I grew up, I would take it out at idle moments and continue the challenge of the game.

As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game, but a metaphor of what I could do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light - be it truth or understanding or knowledge - is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it. I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark place of this world - into the dark places of human hearts - and change some things in some people. Perhaps others seeing it happen will do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.”

May also our lives find meaning in reflecting the light of our religious experiences into our society and in sharing with other people the knowledge we acquire from these same experiences.

ENDNOTES

¹Cf. *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults* (New York, 1967), p.3.

²James Fowler, "Stages in Faith Consciousness", *New Directions for Child Development* (1991:52), p.31.

³For the first part of this paper I am indebted to Loretta Harriman, M.M., "Foundations for Theology: Establishing Perspectives for Understanding the Nature of Theology," *The East Asian Pastoral Review*, 36 (1999): 3.

⁴Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, no. 2.

⁵*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), p.38.

⁶Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London 1972), p. 115.

⁷St. Augustine, *De ordine*, I, 11, 32 in PL 32:994.

⁸St. Anselm, *Proslogion: Proemium* in PL 153 225A

⁹St. Augustine, *Sermo* 43, 7, 9 in PL 38: 257-258.

¹⁰Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 109.

¹¹Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tuebingen, 1965), p. 329.

¹²Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 19.

¹³St. Augustine, *Confessiones* 1,1,1 in PL 32:659-661.

¹⁴For this part of the paper I am indebted to Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco, 1987), pp. 343-355.

¹⁵R. Brague, "Was heisst christliche Erfahrung?" in IKZ 5 (1976): 481-482; quoted by Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, pp. 346.

¹⁶Jean Mouroux, *The Christian Experience: An Introduction to a Theology* (London, 1955). W. Beinert, "Die Erfahrbarkeit der Glaubenswirklichkeit", in *Mysterium der Gnade* (Regensburg:, 1975), 134-45, quoted by Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, pp. 346.

¹⁷J. Monod, *Zufall und Notwendigkeit: Philosophische Fragen der modernen Biologie* (Munich, 1973), esp. 127ff. and 139.

¹⁸Brague, p. 492.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Beinert, p. 137.

²¹Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Gotteserfahrung biblisch und patristisch", in IKZ 5 (1976): 497- 509; quotation is on 500.

²²Ibid., p. 508.

²³For this section I am also indebted to Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology*, (Collegeville, Indiana: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 238-245.

²⁴See Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, pp. 353-355.

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