

The role of religious experience: a review article

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Abstract

A review article of two contrasting books on the role of religious experience within New Testament studies and practical theology respectively.

Keywords

Galatians, Luke/Acts, practical theology, religious experience, transcendence

Mark Wreford, *Religious Experience and the Creation of Scripture: Examining Inspiration in Luke-Acts and Galatians* (London: T&T Clark, 2021); xiii + 208 pp.: 9780567696632, £90 (hbk); 9780567698698, £28.99 (pbk)

Sabrina Müller, *Religious Experience and Its Transformational Power: Qualitative and Hermeneutic Approaches to a Practical Theological Foundational Concept* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023); xiii + 243 pp.: 9783111000053, £87 (hbk); Open Access at <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110990461>>

Transcendent, sacred or religious experiences are often regarded as having had a fundamental role in the origin and development of religion. For many people today, similar experiences are of considerable significance for their spiritual lives. The number of studies into the nature of these experiences, their origin and effects, and their theological implications, has greatly increased over recent decades.

Both of the studies of religious experience reviewed here began life as doctoral theses. Mark Wreford, who is currently engaged in Anglican parish ministry, did

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his research for a PhD at Nottingham University and Sabrina Müller produced her 'habilitation' thesis (higher doctorate) for Zurich University, where she holds a post in practical theology. Their investigations represent two very different contexts of accounts of religious experience and, as a consequence, they employ distinct approaches and related research methods for exploring the phenomenon.

Religious Experience and the Creation of Scripture, published in T&T Clark's 'Library of Biblical Studies', provides what to British readers is likely to be the more familiar example of an academic study. It addresses the question of whether certain religious experiences (REs) – defined as 'felt impacts of trans-empirical realities within the culturally patterned life of an individual or group' (pp. 50, 171) – lie behind certain New Testament texts that were seen as 'special', in the sense that the experiences were understood as revelatory, and the texts were viewed by their writers as having the status of inspired scripture. Although his is not an original thesis (he cites N. T. Wright, Francis Watson and Roland Deines among its precursors), the author develops it in interesting ways and offers two instructive 'indicative examples' of this process, in Luke's creation of the narrative of Luke-Acts and Paul's autobiographical account of his own revelation as expressed in his letter to the Galatians.

Wreford particularly underscores the significance of the move away from naturalistic and constructivist explanations of REs that 'explain them away' as meaning constructs built on medically explicable phenomena, and of the embracing of a more neutral phenomenological focus on 'insider-perspectives' that is congruent with the 'retrieval' of REs in biblical studies, as illustrated by the work of other New Testament scholars, especially James Dunn, Larry Hurtado and Timothy Johnson, whose work he builds on and extends (p. 21). Wreford's study therefore remains open to the possibility both of God's existence and of the validity of claims to an experiential encounter with God.

In his study of Luke-Acts, Wreford reads Luke's own statement of purpose in light of the narratives of Pentecost and the Jerusalem convocation, suggesting that these texts are intended as 'inspired witness' to God's activity in Christ and through the Spirit 'that implicitly claims scriptural authority for its audience' (p. 6). In his account of Galatians, he argues that the initial religious experiences of Paul and the Galatians ground the Apostle's revelatory message, delivered here in his physical absence; and, further, that Paul thought of his own writing as analogous to that of the Old Testament prophets and that he intended his letter to function with scriptural authority.

Religious experiences, therefore, constitute the reason for the existence of these texts and appear to have shaped their content; and, because of this, both Luke and Paul understood themselves to be creating (new) scripture. Wreford's study insists that it is possible for the 'sensitive reader' to understand at least something of the experiences to which these texts bear witness. And, at the very least, the principle of 'hermeneutical charity' should allow these readers to resist their instinct to seek alternative, a priori, naturalistic explanations for REs.

In addition to his comprehensive analysis of the pertinent scholarly literature on Luke-Acts and Galatians, Wreford does a good job in section 1 of his text of succinctly reviewing the wider, more philosophical, methodological and social-scientific literature on REs. I would be happy to recommend the book for these 50 or so pages alone. Section 2, however, which deals with the New Testament evidence and arguments, is over twice as long and represents the heart of the thesis. Regrettably, the fact that the original Greek is here routinely neither translated nor even transliterated, although it will be no hindrance to those with a good grounding in NT studies, is likely to be off-putting to the more general reader and those scholars lacking these particular study skills. This is a pity, as there are many illuminating insights in this section of the book on matters such as theophanic imagery, tongues speech, the communal reception of revelation, Paul's theology (especially his pneumatology) and its literary expression, the origin of scripture and the effects of REs.

Religious Experience and Its Transformational Power, as I have already indicated, is a very different type of study. Its style, form and content are also likely to make it a more demanding investigation for many readers. The research here is grounded not in classical texts but in the understanding and interpretations of young urban adults. Its author intends the book as a contribution to 'a better understanding of everyday, individual and social religious reality construction, religious imprints, and the emergence of religious identity', including aspects of 'a narrative practical theology *from below*' (pp. 6, 218). For the more methodologically minded, this represents a piece of qualitative research operating under the paradigm of grounded theory. For the more linguistically challenged, however, many of the works cited were published in German and the researcher's coding system also uses German words and phrases, and when biblical texts are occasionally cited here, a key Hebrew word remains neither translated nor transliterated.

Chapter 2 contains a useful brief analysis of the concept of religious experience, viewed principally through phenomenological, sociological and theological lenses. I found the following chapter on 'human existence in late modernity' less helpful. Chapter 4 contains an account of the study's methodology and sampling, with details of the background and geographical location of the 20 individuals being studied. These are designated 'co-researchers' and are from the USA, Germany and Switzerland. The survey instruments utilized included a standardized questionnaire, and the research methods included subjects drawing their most crucial religious experiences, describing and explaining these drawings to others, and their involvement in group discussions prompted by questions about their REs, their religious practices and relationship with God, the role of the Church, and other factors. Chapter 5 presents the data concerning the content of these individuals' REs, including colour reproductions of their drawings, brief descriptions of the subjects' backgrounds and summaries of their reported experiences.

Chapter 6 begins the inductive analysis and critical evaluation of the REs, which are claimed to have been 'essential for many of the co-researchers' and 'milestones in their religious biography and identity' (p. 119). The author recognizes that

religious experience is a 'highly personal subject' (p. 122) which is anchored in people's life stories; that 'most religious moments are everyday experiences or have taken place in a familiar setting' (p. 125); and that such personal experience, though difficult to verbalize, 'brings both prior religious knowledge and family imprinting to *life*' (p. 126). Chapter 7 deals with the critical change of the 'personal frame of reference' in a 'religious reframing of the experience' (p. 137), often expressed in terms of an experience of God 'coming towards' the person or of God being already 'there'. These experiences are commonly brought to mind repeatedly and serve as 'coping strategies for the insufficiencies of life' (p. 153), by providing a new way of dealing with life's contingent moments. This often involves feelings of self-efficacy and hope, and experiences of healing, liberation and help; as well as of becoming a better person and the development of faith. As respondent 'John' puts it, a religious experience is 'meaningful because I really think about it, and it really changes how I view things' (p. 162).

Müller claims that her research shows that the after effects of these experiences for these young people can be most potent in the fundamental and lasting changes made to their images of themselves, the world and God. In this respect, she draws a parallel to Ingolf Dalferth's theory of religious knowing (pp. 186–7, 190; cf. pp. 193–6).

In the final two chapters of her discussion, Müller develops her own practical theological response to these data. At the outset, she rightly insists that the subject of religious experience is 'more complex, multi-layered, and ambiguous than it is often presented in theological discourses' (p. 176). It is a concept 'beyond dualisms' that portrays a 'liquid' phenomenon that 'transcends daily life'; yet it is rooted in and correlates with everyday life. It combines both human activity and passivity, as 'a direct, qualitatively dense experience' encounters 'a religiously receptive resonance space and interpretation of this event' (p. 183), which is related to the symbol of 'God' and to what Paul Tillich specified as our human 'ultimate concern'. In this sense, it is a moment of revelation (p. 197).

Nevertheless, while these particular religious experiences 'increase the readiness for change and trigger transformation processes' that heighten resilience and lead to 'astonishing changes in the structure of thought and action in the lives of individuals', they are not necessarily to be regarded as *conversions*, because they 'do not aim at and have not led to the adoption of a specific style of piety or the integration . . . into a particular church group' (pp. 198–9). Rather, they are to be characterized by 'a specifically individual hermeneutic' that strengthens a personal perspective of hope and a change in the subject's own religious identity (which remains, however, frequently fragmentary and lacking in coherence; p. 201).

In her concluding chapter, Müller develops her notion of the everyday 'lived theology' of the individualized person, understood as a 'practice phenomenon' (p. 211) that has a strong orientation towards the religious experience from which it emerges but also draws on Christian traditions. This form of contextual theology is 'individually constructed' and 'personally verified'. It is acknowledged to show many similarities to my own concept of 'ordinary theology', but the

author extends her conceptualization beyond my (deliberate) focus on explicit God *talk* to include more emotional and embodied, action-oriented expressions of faith (pp. 212–15). Unfortunately, she misinterprets my designation of ordinary theology as a ‘lay theology’ (meaning by this ‘not professionally qualified’ and ‘not expert’),¹ and does not address my concern that we should study what people actually say, rather than attempting to infer their theology from their practice.²

But I agree with Müller that practical theological teaching and learning must take the learners’ experience, not least their religious experiences, seriously; and that the core theological task of the minister is to promote people’s ‘hermeneutic (experiential) processes of everyday theology’, by supporting rather than seeking to destroy their own lived theology, while bringing it into a positive and transformative conversation with the rich resources of the Christian tradition (cf. pp. 221–3).

Notes

1. See Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: looking, listening and learning in theology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p. 64.
2. See Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis (eds), *Exploring Ordinary Theology: everyday Christian believing and the Church* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 5.

Author biography

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