

## Prologue

This Element explores various dimensions of the historical and contemporary philosophical discourse surrounding religious experience. While no text of this length can cover all the material on this topic, my aim here is to present, contextualize, and critique just a few of the central discussions in analytic philosophy of religion as well as to gesture at some new directions a philosophy of religious experience might take that could help correct old biases. Section 1 provides some historical context to the contemporary discourse surrounding religious experience in the Anglo-American and European contexts. Section 2 then looks at one central discussion that came to prominence in the twentieth century, namely whether there is some “common core” to all religious experience and whether such experience can be considered independently of its religious interpretation. In sections 3 and 4, I explore in more detail the epistemology of religious experience, with a particular focus on the analogy drawn by some analytic philosophers between the purported experience of God and sense perception. Finally, Section 5 explores some alternative epistemological approaches to religious experience and concludes with a discussion of the ways the philosophical scholarship on the subject can be fruitfully expanded.

### 1 Religious and Mystical Experience in Historical Context

The spiritual literature and oral histories of the various world religions are full of reports of the remarkable experiences of noteworthy religious individuals. However, much like the modern concept of religion itself, religious experience did not really become a prominent object of Western academic discourse until the nineteenth century. Indeed, rather like comic book superheroes, discourses surrounding religious experience in philosophy of religion have a (not uncomplicated) “origin story.” And just as comic book origin stories help us better understand the motivations, powers, and vulnerabilities of the superheroes we know and love, knowing a bit more about the history of the discourse concerning religious experience can give us important insights into the ways the scholarship is framed today and help us to evaluate both its advantages and its shortcomings.

#### 1.1 A Brief Genealogy of the Discourse

As noted, religious experience itself did not become a topic of philosophical investigation until the modern era. However, *appeals* to religious experience have historically played a significant role in philosophical-theological contexts. (Consider, for example, the centrality of Augustine’s conversion experience in

the *Confessions*, or Ghazali's being cured of his epistemological paralysis through divine illumination in *Deliverance from Error*.) Further, although many philosophers today tend to associate the high to late Middle Ages in Western Europe with the rise of scholasticism and natural theology, reports of religious experience also became prominent in religious writing during this time as part of a surge in what we today call *religious mysticism*. Many mystical and contemplative texts appeal to instances of divine or saintly encounters to confer legitimacy on the work or its author, and they also often speak of particular kinds of experiential "union" with God as a marker or goal on the individual's spiritual journey (Griffioen and Zahedi 2018). However, the discourse surrounding mysticism has its own complicated history, one which has deeply influenced the philosophical treatment of religious experience down to the present day and which therefore merits a brief discussion here. (For a more detailed analysis, see Jantzen [1995] and Schmidt [2003].)

In Christian antiquity, and persisting through much of the early to high Middle Ages, so-called "mystical theology" had less to do with the experiential aspect of religion and more to do with the *hermeneutical act* of uncovering the "hidden" or "secret" meanings of Scripture and the sacraments (Jantzen 1995). It thus implied having special access to sacred texts and religious secrets, a domain generally reserved for those who enjoyed both literacy and ecclesial power (i.e., *men*). Women were thereby largely excluded from such activity. At the same time, Christianity also had the tools at its disposal to allow religious experience to play a central role in theological reflection. Not only was the Bible full of stories of passive religious encounters such as Moses and the burning bush, the annunciation of Gabriel to Mary, or Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, medieval Christianity had also developed a long-standing tradition of confessional and meditative theological literature in the first-person voice. Together with the Church's strong veneration of the Virgin Mary as the blessed "handmaid of the Lord" and the dominant Aristotelian view of women as "passive receptacles" largely tied to the body, this paved the way for some later medieval women to lay claim to a certain degree of spiritual authority by appealing to their own passive, ecstatic, and remarkable experiences of the divine to frame and legitimate their theological insights (Van Dyke 2022). Indeed, an upsurge in literacy and the production of devotional literature for the masses during this period allowed both women and laypersons to explicitly enter into theological discourses previously reserved for male scholars by embedding their theological ideas within the context of accounts of their experiential encounters with Christ, Mary, and other holy figures. These forms of contemplative writing allowed the language of personal religious experience to begin to play a greater role in theological and philosophical reflection as a whole.

However, as religious experience gained a more prominent foothold in medieval theological and devotional writing, it also became more heavily policed by the Church – especially when those reporting such experiences were women or members of other socially marginalized groups. Thus, although the term “mystic” came to be more closely associated with religious experience during the late medieval and early modern periods, this terminological shift largely occurred in the context of identifying so-called “false mystics,” witches, or heretics (Schmidt 2003). In this way, the earlier hermeneutical sense of mysticism, which was positively connoted yet coded as masculine, gave way to a more gender-inclusive, experiential sense of the term, but one which was negatively associated with unorthodoxy and religious enthusiasm (Jantzen 1994). This shift was accompanied by an increasing *suspicion of somatic and sensory experiences* associated with women, such as religious visions, auditions, stigmata, erotic spiritual encounters, and the like – a suspicion whose vestiges are still visible in the philosophical literature today.

It therefore became all the more important for those worried about being identified as “false mystics” to set out criteria for identifying religious experiences as authentic and to show how their experiences met those criteria, especially given the immensely popular treatises on spiritual discernment by late medieval theologians like Henry of Langenstein and Jean Gerson, who were particularly suspicious of the claims of women and of lay religious sects to authoritative religious experience (Sluhovsky 2007). It was in this context that the sixteenth-century philosopher and Doctor of the Church Teresa of Avila provided strict guidelines for distinguishing divine from hallucinatory, delusional, or demonic experiences in her writings. Cautionary reflections like hers introduced the significance of *evidential considerations* into theological appeals to experience and hence represent a very important chapter in the history of the epistemology of religious experience. And although the epistemological concerns of today’s philosophers are far removed from those of Teresa and her contemporaries, we may consider some of the contemporary models of religious experience as having inherited the legacy of these late medieval discourses.

The early modern period in Europe saw a shift in focus to the idea of “rational” or “natural” religion, with the further development of theistic proofs and theodicies by figures like Descartes, Leibniz, Boyle, Clarke, and Paley, as well as discussions of cosmology and the relationship of God to nature by thinkers as diverse as Spinoza, Conway, Malebranche, and the Cambridge Platonists. However, another strand of thought came to prominence with Thomas Reid and Scottish “common sense” philosophy. Reid shifted the discussion from proofs for God’s existence to an exploration of the *rationality* of religious belief – and from questions *de facto* to questions *de jure* – a move that would be taken up again by

Reformed epistemologists in the twentieth century and, as we will see, would have a profound impact on the philosophy of religious experience (Nichols 2014).

It also seems to be around this time that mysticism became more solidly linked to claims of direct, ecstatic, ineffable experience of the kind that William James would later point to in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Still, at this point in time the use of the term “mysticism” remained largely pejorative. Indeed, the association of mysticism and religious experience with quietism and heretical religious enthusiasm only increased during the Enlightenment, as manifestations of religious fervor came to be seen as antithetical to any acceptable, “rational” form of religion. However, in the eighteenth century, reactionary counter-Enlightenment critics began to speak out against religious rationalism, rebranding those labeled “mystics,” not as religious threats, but rather as the guardians of “true religion” (Schmidt 2003: 281). Religion, they maintained, belonged most properly to the experiential realm of *affect*, not intellect, and was most fundamentally a matter of *inner piety*, not the outward actions of individuals, the public activities of the Church, or even the rational defensibility of theological doctrine. These critical responses to the Enlightenment suspicion of mystical experience laid the groundwork for the “invention of mysticism as the fountainhead of all genuine spirituality” that would gain prominence in nineteenth-century German Romanticism and American Transcendentalism (281). In this latter context, the term “mysticism” began to come into its own, bringing religious experience as a subject of scholarly interest along with it.

The shift to viewing feeling and experience as central to the religious enterprise also represented a response to a growing awareness of global religious diversity, one stoked by European missionary and colonialist ventures. On the one hand, this created conceptual space for a more universal(ist) sense of religion that promoted a degree of religious tolerance and would set the stage for modern scholarly approaches to religion. On the other hand, it often ended up binding disparate traditions together under a particular *essentialist* conceptual umbrella – one driven largely by European theological and imperialist norms (Asad 1993). Still, this “experiential turn” in the scholarship of religion gave rise to the thought of those figures most commonly referenced today in the philosophical literature on religious experience.

## 1.2 The Experiential Turn: Schleiermacher, Otto, and James

Three names occur again and again in the contemporary literature, namely Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), and William James (1842–1910). Schleiermacher and Otto, both Protestant German theologians, tend to be named in the same breath – especially in debates

over perennialism, which we shall take up below – whereas James, the philosophical pragmatist and pioneer of religious psychology, remains a major touchstone for both empirical and philosophical approaches to religious experience. As we shall see, despite their different approaches to religious experience, the literature’s combined reliance on these three figures has led to the philosophical discourse on religious experience being largely framed in a particular way.

### 1.2.1 Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834): Religion as Feeling

Schleiermacher’s thoughts on religious experience and feeling evolved over his lifetime, but the passages most commonly cited refer, first, to his claim in the *Speeches on Religion* (1st ed. 1799) that “religion is the sensibility and taste for the infinite” (1996: 23) and, second, to his much later discussion in §4 of *The Christian Faith* (1821/1822), in which he claims that “the common element in all howsoever diverse expressions of [religious] piety, by which these are conjointly distinguished from all other feelings [. . .] is this: the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God” (2016: 12).

Consonant with the emerging resistance to the attempts of modernity to reduce religion to either doctrine or morality, Schleiermacher thus claimed that religious piety was a deliverance of neither intellect nor will but rather something direct and immediate, not framed by conceptual thought, which can only be understood by acquaintance (Proudfoot 1985: 10–11). This grounding of religion in a particular form of feeling (*Gefühl*) is decidedly experiential. The emphasis here is not on what a particular subject thinks or does, but rather something they *feel*, something that is *given* to them in experience, whether or not they can articulate it. In one sense, this emphatic centering of affect should come as no surprise, given the blossoming of German Romanticism taking place at this time in Schleiermacher’s own intellectual circle. Nevertheless, this idea turned the Lutheran theology of his day “on its head,” insofar as he maintained that religious feeling represented the very *basis* for religious belief and theological doctrine, as opposed to the other way around – so much so that Jacqueline Mariña goes so far as to call Schleiermacher’s insistence that feeling lies at the core of all religion a “Copernican revolution in theology” (2008: 461).

### 1.2.2 Rudolf Otto: Religion, Experience, and the Numinous

Although his most influential work, *Das Heilige* (1917), translated as *The Idea of the Holy* (1923), was written nearly a century after Schleiermacher’s *Glaubenslehre*, Rudolf Otto explicitly acknowledged his indebtedness to

Schleiermacher's approach, even while taking him to task for what he claimed to be an inadequate account of the genuinely religious "moment" in human experience. Like Schleiermacher, Otto took the religious impulse to properly belong to the realm of feeling, and he placed the category of value expressed in that feeling outside the realm of the theoretical and moral. This element of "more profound" religion, when stripped of all its "rational[ized]" aspects, Otto famously called the *Numinous*. It represents, he thought, a "completely sui generis" category that is not, strictly speaking, definable or teachable, but rather only capable of being "evoked" or "awakened" in consciousness (Otto 2004: 7ff.). "Numinous," then, is a label for both the *object* and the *quality* of the religious *Ur-moment*.

The core numinous experience, which stands at the heart of the so-called "nonrational" aspects of lived religion, Otto claims, takes as its object something purportedly "not explicable in concepts [and] only specifiable through the special reaction in feeling that it elicits" (2004: 13). More specifically, the subject experiences the Numinous as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. As *mysterium tremendum*, the Numinous is met with feelings of awe and dread at that which is apprehended as "the Wholly Other" (*das Ganz Andere*), whose utter transcendence pushes the subject away or evokes feelings of radical distance. At the same time, as *fascinans*, the Numinous fascinates, attracts, and draws the subject to it. Otto takes this ineffable, paradoxical experience of awful dread and fascination – like the "irrational" object that elicits it – to be sui generis and irreducible to other forms of feeling, even if related "analogously" to other, more easily recognizable emotions. (He seems to think that the uniqueness of the numinous object demands this.) And since this experience stands genealogically at the core of all religion, it is also that which serves to transform empirical, historical religion into a more or less universal, sui generis phenomenon.

### 1.2.3 William James: An Empirical Approach

When it was published in 1902, William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was one of the lengthiest and most detailed scholarly treatments of religious experience produced up to that time. In line (though not exactly in step) with Schleiermacher and Otto, James was concerned with countering overly rationalistic, intellectualist, and institutionalist narratives about religion, hence his focus on what he calls "personal religion" and its association with experience, feeling, and emotion. He was nevertheless careful to note the relative arbitrariness of his own definition of religion as "*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual[s] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend*

*themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*" (James 2002: 29–30, emphasis original).

However, despite making feeling and experience central to religion, James did *not* subscribe to the view that there is a common phenomenological core to all religious experiences. He noted that there "seems to be no one elementary religious emotion, but only a common storehouse of emotions upon which religious objects may draw." Moreover, *pace* Otto, "there might conceivably also prove to be no one specific and essential kind of religious object" that would elicit some *sui generis* religious experience (James 2002: 27). In this spirit, James presents the reader with a multitude of cases taken from various world religions and historical epochs, and although he did tend to focus on their commonalities over their differences, he was careful to maintain a sense of pluralism throughout. Still, the examples James gives his readers are nonetheless filtered through an admittedly Western, Protestant lens and are often taken largely out of their social and historical contexts. He was also most concerned with the experiences of those he calls religious "geniuses," as opposed to "ordinary" believers who only live "second-hand" religious lives (11).

James' normative individualism in the *Varieties* had no small effect on a wide range of later philosophical and psychological texts regarding religious experience up to the present day (Jantzen 1995; Bush 2014), and this has further served to universalize and genericize certain kinds of religious experience while marginalizing others. Indeed, it is somewhat ironic that James' attempt to particularize and pluralize religious experience has been used again and again to reinforce a particular kind of subjective, individual experience as paradigm, while eschewing others as "suspect," "superstitious," or simply not worth investigating.

More than any other discussion in the *Varieties*, it is the chapter on mysticism that has garnered the most attention from scholars of religion. Although, as with his definition of religion above, he admits his criteria are relatively arbitrary, James proposed four "marks" of mystical experience – namely, *ineffability*, *noetic quality*, *transiency*, and *passivity* (2002: 295). That is, such experiences seem to those who have them as incapable of straightforward expression, as states of knowledge or as knowledge-conferring, as episodic and temporally unsustainable, and as something with regard to which one is wholly passive. While James intended this rubric to pick out only one cluster of experiences "for the purposes of the present lectures," these characteristics have been taken up by philosophers, theologians, and religious scholars in the generations that followed, and it has often been implied, especially in philosophy of religion, that experiences of this kind are pretty much the only kinds of religious experiences worth discussing.

*1.2.4 Schleiermacher, Otto, and James in Conversation*

Certainly there is much that unites these three thinkers. For example, their analyses all largely eschew approaches that center the institutional or the doctrinal, as well as those that attempt to reduce religion to either metaphysics or morals. Instead, they focus on the passivity with respect to some higher reality as given to the subject in experience, and they orient their discussions of religion around religious feeling. They all also focus, in one way or another, on individual religious “virtuosi” or “geniuses,” where what is seen to lie at the heart of religion comes most prominently to expression in intense moments of profound episodic experience (Joas 2011: 157).

However, there are also important differences between Schleiermacher, Otto, and James that tend to be ignored or elided in the religious experience literature. For example, Schleiermacher and Otto are also often clustered together as proponents of a “*sui generis*” account of religious feeling. Yet this ignores the fundamentally *transcendental* character of Schleiermacher’s account of the feeling of absolute dependence and may actually have more to do with Otto’s self-styling as Schleiermacher’s intellectual heir than with an actual continuity in thought (Mariña 2008; Dole 2016). Moreover, Otto was a vehement non-naturalist, whereas Schleiermacher was perhaps much more sympathetic to a form of tempered naturalism (Dole 2004, 2016), placing the latter closer in this respect to James, who insisted that our ability to provide a naturalistic explanation for religious experiences precluded neither their psychological import nor their veridicality.

In contrast to both Schleiermacher and Otto, James emerges from a distinctly American experiential tradition, one that included the American Transcendentalists as well as figures like Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards (Joas 2011). He also pursues an explicitly empirical agenda and is an avowed pluralist about religious experience. Still, as Ann Taves has rightly pointed out, although James did not advocate for a *sui generis* account of religion or religious experience, by privileging the extreme experience of the religious “genius” over that of the everyday believer, he nevertheless “introduced a bias toward sudden, individual experience that [...] shaped the contemporary Western idea of religious experience” (Taves 2009: 6). Especially when paired with Otto’s detailed phenomenological analysis of the “sudden, individual experience” of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, James’ approach would have an impact on philosophers and theologians for generations to come.

Indeed, the discussion over whether the essence of Jamesian-style religious experiences is cross-cultural and irreducible would give rise to one of the central conceptual debates that would dominate much of the discussion on religious



experience in the century to come, namely the discourse on the relationship between *experience* and *interpretation* and its bearing on the question of whether we can really speak of there being a “common core” to the wide variety of religious experiences of the kind explored by James and others. We will turn our attention more closely to these questions in Section 2, keeping in mind the tendencies of the discourse to privilege certain sorts of experience over others.

## 2 Experience, Interpretation, and the Question of Perennialism

In the twentieth century, psychology, neuroscience, and the social sciences began to emerge more fully as distinct disciplines, bringing new methods and approaches to the growing Western fascination with world religions (itself due in no small part to the spread of colonialism). In the context of this increasingly “global” outlook, new debates also began to emerge regarding the nature of religion. Given the various ways the essence or significance of religion had come to be associated with religious feeling, this raised new questions regarding the nature of religious experience.

### 2.1 Experience, Essentialism, and Perennialism

One of the central discussions in this arena of discourse revolved around (a) whether or not there is some common experiential “core” fundamental to all religion, and (b) whether religious experiences across time, culture, and place have some common (usually phenomenal) element that unites them. Importantly, these two questions are not the same. The first asks whether the core of religion itself can be located in some particular type of experience and concerns what we might call the question of *experiential essentialism* about religion. The second asks whether there is some universal feature of religious experience common to all traditions, regardless of its centrality to any particular tradition. This we can call the question of *experiential perennialism*. In many cases, those who answer the latter question in the affirmative will also answer the former affirmatively, and vice versa. But these views can and do come apart. Unfortunately, some scholars in these debates have failed to distinguish between these questions, which has sometimes led to confusion. For the sake of space, I will focus predominantly on views addressing the second question, though in some cases the affirmative perennialist answer to this question is driven by a motivation to establish essentialism concerning religion in general (McCutcheon 1997).

On the perennialist side of the debate, various answers have been proposed. We have already seen Rudolf Otto’s proposal that religious experience involves the sui generis feeling of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. For Otto, what

makes this experience specifically *religious* has to do with its having a singular, properly religious *object* (i.e., the Numinous). Any experience of this religious object will, by virtue of the object's singular nature, have a particular phenomenology that will distinguish it from all nonreligious experience. So unlike other emotion-types, whose appropriateness is measured according to how well the affective response "fits" the nature of the target, on Otto's view there is only *one* target that can be the object of the religious feeling and one feeling that can represent the response to that target. Any other target would result, not in an inappropriate religious feeling, but in a *nonreligious* feeling. On this view, then, it would seem that there could be no such thing as an "inappropriate" token of religious emotion, in which the experiential response fails to fit the target.

Many perennialists have found inspiration in Otto – often in the spirit of a kind of religious inclusivity or theological universalism. If it could be shown, for example, that there is some common religious experience that lies at the core of all world religions (i.e., that both experiential perennialism and experiential essentialism about religion are true), then this might be one way of showing that they are ultimately more in agreement than in substantial conflict. Moreover, if one proceeds on the assumption that these common religious experiences also share a common *object*, as Otto proposes, this might open the door for the idea that subjects outside one's own religious tradition could also have experiential knowledge of a kind relevant for salvation, or that all religions have an at least partial glimpse of some greater redemptive or transformative "Truth."

Another influential proponent of experiential perennialism is Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), whose work has been extremely important for the phenomenology of religion. Like Otto, he was also a proponent of experiential essentialism about religion. (The subtitle of Eliade's most famous work, *The Sacred and the Profane* [1959], is *The Nature of Religion*.) Although Eliade thought that various types of experiences could represent instances of "hierophany," or the "showing" of something sacred to the human individual (1987: 10–11), the view remains perennialist insofar as the religious "mode" of experiencing across geography and history involves a qualitatively different *way* of being oriented toward and experiencing reality, namely *as manifesting the sacred* in some way or other. Eliade's work draws on a plethora of examples from various cultures and historical periods, but ultimately he was concerned with showing that "in the course of history, religious man has given differing valorizations to the *same fundamental experience*" (62, my emphasis). And although he admits that historical and cultural context does matter, he nevertheless emphasizes that the experiential structure of hierophanies "remains the same in spite of this and it is precisely this permanence of structure that makes it possible to know them" (Eliade 1958: 462).