

NATURE OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

1. Understanding of Religious Experience

A religious experience is a situation or event in life where one feels closeness to God or God's presence in a special way. It could be labeled a "God moment".

2. Personal Religious Experiences

Experiences that would be religious include:

- a. Christian church service
- b. Church sacraments (e.g. baptism, Eucharist)
- c. Festivals in the Christian year (e.g. Christmas, Easter)
- d. Funeral
- e. Healing
- f. Protection
- g. Providence
- h. Spiritual disciplines: prayer, Scripture reading, meditation, fasting.
- i. Wedding

3. Characteristics of a Religious Experience

Qualities of a religious experience include:

- a. Cognizance of the presence of God
- b. Supernatural element

Two Approaches to Religious Experience: William A. Barry and Denis Edwards

William A. Barry:

1. Clarification of the concept “religious experience”: Not something strange, mystical, extraordinary, or purely subjective.
2. Dimensions of experience: Physical, biological, psychological, sociological, and religious.
3. Experience discloses God: The religious dimension is supplied by the believing person, and by the Mystery encountered. Faith and experience work together, reinforcing each other.
4. The religious dimension of experience: Experience involves two elements – (a) an encounter and (b) the interpretation of that encounter. Experience can also be understood as triadic in nature.
5. Mediation of the encounter with God: God’s disclosure occurs through an historical medium. Any human experience – therefore any medium – can disclose God. Two prayer traditions: (a) *kataphatic* (e.g. contemplation of nature, and Scripture.); (b) *apophatic* (imageless prayer). There is no experience of God that is not at the same time experience of something else – that is, every experience of God is mediated.
6. Focusing the theological question: From Jesus’ experience of God, two expressions are significant – “Abba” and “kingdom of God”.
7. Religious experience exemplified: Three pathways to understanding religious experience are as follows.
 - a. Examining one’s own experience as a believer.
 - b. Asking believing persons about their experiences.
 - c. Reading books about peoples’ religious experiences.

8. Role of the spiritual director: Discernment is a vital concept.
9. Focus for ministry: To ask people about their experiences of God in their lives is important, and then really listening to their answers.

Denis Edwards:

1. Experiences of “mystery” and “grace” in the light of the NT: “In the light of Christian revelation, then, our experiences of mystery and moments of grace in our lives can properly be seen for what they are – the experience of a God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (Edwards, 59).
2. Experience of God and explicit faith: An awareness of God’s presence is a gift of the Holy Spirit – through our union in love with God.
3. Characteristics of one’s experience of God:
 - a. God is always encountered as *transcendent*.
 - b. God is also encountered as an *immanent* God.
 - c. It is an experience of *creatureliness*.
 - d. Experience of God is *dependent upon* and in some way *derived from* Jesus’ own encounter with his Father.
 - e. It must be compatible with *Jesus’ preaching and praxis* of the *kingdom of God*.
 - f. It has a *Trinitarian* structure.
 - g. It will be an experience which directs the Christian to the community of Jesus, the *Church*.
 - h. It involves the path of *discipleship*.
 - i. It will have both a *mystical* and a *social* dimension.
 - j. It is a profoundly *personal* experience.
 - k. The experience of God has a *general* and *indistinct* character.

- l. It is always an *obscure* character.
- m. The experience is so *subtle* and *delicate* that it may not be recognized for what it is.
- n. The experience itself (the encounter with God) is always *pre-conceptual*.
- o. What we experience is *indefinable* and *ineffable*.
- p. The experience is one of *meditated immediacy*.
- q. In the encounter with God, the awareness we enjoy has been well described traditionally as *knowledge through love* or *loving knowledge*.
- r. The encounter with God is always the experience of *gift*.

Personal Reflections

Personal challenges on this topic include:

1. Any experience can have a religious dimension – in other words, religious experience is the total experience of a religious person (when he or she is intentionally religious).
2. Faith and experience mutually reinforce one another – for example, if I did not believe in God, I would not experience him.

Denis Edwards' article has been personally insightful in the connection he establishes between *moments of the unknown* (mystery) and *times of wonder and grace* (transcendence) on the one hand, and the God of the Christian gospel.

These two authors show not only the transcendence of God (which has been the focus in my Christian experience) but also the immanence of God. As Gerard W. Hughes writes in his book *God in All Things*, “the transcendent is in the immanent and the immanent is in the transcendent. The extraordinary is in the ordinary, the ordinary in the extraordinary” (page 58).

Experience is a personal, subjective encounter with an event. *Faith* reveals to us the presence of God in the universe and in our individual lives. The challenge, then, is how to educate people to recognize the divine context in which they live and to help them become more conscious of the religious dimension of their whole life.

This challenge could be met as follows:

The *first task* is to foster an appreciation of the whole of life as a gift from God – a gift in which God is present (God is in the gift). God’s presence, therefore, must be in “the concrete realities of everyday life” (Merton).

The *second task* is to explain that through that gift, humans are drawn into the life of God – which may be compared to an underlying current in life that is actively present behind the scenes.

The *final task* is to help people become aware of God’s presence. From personal testimonies, for example, daily encounters can be seen as “steeped in the spiritual” (Leckey 1987, 14), where God presents himself to us in our circumstances.

The transcendent God is in the immanent. Consequently, we need to appreciate the sacredness of our lives. Also, therefore, the sacred resides within the everyday realities of our existence (Barnes 1990, 38) – in the midst of our lives. As a result we can, as Pierre de Caussade reassures us, confidently abandon ourselves entirely into the hands of God. This understanding is essential to prevent one from complaining, or even becoming bitter toward God, when facing unexpected crosses in life.

Concluding Thoughts

1. Spirituality involves self-transcendence. (Insights for spiritual development can be gained from understanding the pattern of human development.)
2. Holiness involves one's relationship with God and can be viewed as a journey (rather than simply conforming to a set pattern of behavior).
3. It is important to understand the nature and characteristics of Christian religious experience in relation to the revelation given in Jesus Christ.
4. The religious dimension within daily life – the sacrament of the present – is an awareness that can be cultivated.
5. Contemporary spirituality is richly varied in its expression.

Sources:

William Barry, "The Religious Dimension of Experience: Theological Principles Useful in Pastoral Ministry", *Human Development* 7, no. 2 (1986).

William Barry, *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God: A Theological Enquiry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).

Denis Edwards, *Human Experience of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).