



A Sense of Presence: The Religious Experience of Jesus and of Christians

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Attempting to write on religious experience and its claims for “authenticity” is like making an effort to peer into a twilight zone where shadows and imagination dominate and where nothing is fully clear and precise. The “darkness” of it all can be annoying. But it would be an even more frustrating world if there were no shadows to stir up the religious imagination or, on the other hand, not enough light to help shape those shadows into images as life-like as the humanity of Jesus Christ. It is not my aim in this article, even were I able, to bring enough brightness into that twilight haze of our religious life that all the shades of what might be called the “sacred” or “holy” might fully be illuminated. My purpose is, rather, more modestly, to offer a personal analysis of religious experience, drawing particular inferences from the life of Jesus, and to suggest some ways in which one may discern the authenticity at least of that religious experience claimed to be Christian. However inadequate this may prove, I would hope that, in reflecting on the possible presence of the “divine” in life, we still affirm the “shadows” and the paradoxes even as we interpret the “shapes” of religious experience within the light of certain scriptural, theological and phenomenological clarifications.

If we suggest that the experience of Jesus can be paradigmatic for understanding the nature of Christian religious experience, then we must, at the same time, confront two major objections which, incidentally, were raised against Jesus even during his lifetime. First, who is to say that the claims made on behalf of Jesus’ experience are authentic? Secondly, why were Jesus’ experience of God and his teachings rejected by so many? An answer to the first question, we would argue, can emerge only out of that faith *of* Jesus which provokes, in turn, a strong faith *in* Jesus. If the teachings of Jesus make inspiring sense, then the circularity of this argument is only apparent. It should be clear from our own emphasis in this article that we are drawing deeply from the Gospels’ portrait of Jesus for our conclusions. This portrayal is itself an early example of a faith seeking to understand. What the Gospel writers say about Jesus becomes a veritable chorus of testimony to Jesus’ experience of his Father. It is this aspect, so foundational for Jesus’ own acceptance of his prophetic mission, which we choose to highlight as we attempt to cope with the complexity of religious experience in general.

SHARING IN THE VISION:

FRUSTRATIONS IN THE PROPHETIC EXPERIENCE OF GOD

The second question, given the manner in which prophets seemed so out of step with the ruling religious and political bureaucracy, should not surprise us. Rejection of their claims to

have experienced God and to have uttered the very “Word” of God is part of the pathos of the prophetic vocation. We have ourselves some taste of how difficult it is to communicate even mundane experiences on those occasions when we try to share with others some happening which has excited us or profoundly affected our customary equilibrium. And, just as we will look around us at moments of hilarity to see if others react the same way, so, in the case of any intense experience it is natural to desire to relate to others what has happened to us in hope that the lingering excitement of it all may be intensified or that some other person may come to appreciate or even relish that same experience. But with heightened personal or euphoric experiences, episodes which range from a brush with overwhelming beauty to an apparent life-shaking encounter with God himself, the difficulty of communication is compounded. This sensation becomes all the more intense in the case of the prophets because in their vivid experience of God they also know that they are impelled by this same God to convey to others, even the closed-minded, their experience and the insistent, often inconvenient, demands which God wishes to make on his people through the prophet. We see something of this in Jeremiah’s realization that, try though he might, he cannot repress the inner burning of God’s presence and command:

And if I say: “I will not make mention of Him,
Nor speak any more in His name,”
Then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
Shut up in my bones,
And I weary myself to hold it in,
But cannot (Jer. 20:9).

Such a desire is the spark which has ignited many a missionary endeavor on the part of prophetic figures like Jeremiah and, not incidentally, created its own frustration. How does a prophet, for example, communicate a sense of the ineffable to one who may see only the mundane? How does he, in the name of the ineffable God, sting the consciences of those who see in him only interference in their comfortable patterns of living?

It is for this reason that the prophets shocked people who lacked not only faith but also vision and imagination and who, because of their spiritual superficiality, could not appreciate fully what may have happened to the prophet because it hadn’t happened to them. Frustrations like these in his own mission would provoke Jeremiah’s complaint:

I am become a laughing stock all the day,
Every one makes fun of me (Jer. 20:7).

Though people like Jeremiah might with Gerard Manley Hopkins muse that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God,” to unpoetic philistines and self-serving religious hypocrites the same world may be only an arena of bloody plun-

der and quick profit. We would hardly expect the pharaohs of this world to be impressed with stories of a God who makes common cause with the slave class and who can declare woes unto

the rich. People need an intense faith to appreciate the prophets, and that type of openness described by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her poetic observation:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes
(*Aurora Leigh*, Seventh Book, 820).

It is as difficult to claim Pharaoh could have accepted the religious vision of Moses as to assert that Caiaphas and Pilate believed that, in sending Jesus to his death, they were fulfilling their role in Jesus' eventually becoming savior. Truth may, in fact, be set in the heart and mind of the visionary, but convincing others of that truth can be a mission nearly impossible. It is this very disparity of attitude which may explain why sharing in the religious experience of Jesus was foredoomed to be rejected by many and, as a consequence, his life destined to end in apparent tragedy.

With this *caveat* in mind, James Parkes entitled his Montefiore Memorial Lecture of 1972, "Religious Experience and the Perils of Its Interpretation."¹ History does, indeed, tell us, according to Parkes, of the hazards for the prophet in attempting to interpret his experience of and message from God to the masses whose moral standards were hardly consonant with prophetic insight and outrage. The immense gap between the sensitivity of the prophet and the opportunistic, self-serving attitudes of politicians backed up by the arid legalism of religious leaders made for a violent conflict of interpretation. It is an understatement to declare that the prophets, who accused their fellow religionists of idolatry and injustice, were without honor in their own country.

But if communication of a religious experience with immense socioeconomic consequences is interstitched with the peril of rejection, so too, paradoxically, the "full" acceptance of that experience (often only after the death of the prophet) for the purpose of a restructuring of religious aims and ideals has its own danger: the possibility of a new religious opportunism and legalism. Churches have often unwittingly given permanent "divine authority" to an interpretation of an experience highly conditioned by time. Interpretations are then preserved in a deep freeze of declared immutability, and so-called religious leaders cling to their new "absolutes" with a "divinely guaranteed" kind of tenacity inimical to the prophets of a new age. There is today, for example, a creeping fundamentalism in both Catholic and Protestant confessions which looks upon itself as a divinely commissioned religious watchdog over orthodoxy. Armed with the naively inverted logic that, because they are a "majority," they have *eo ipso* God's blessing and approbation, these church people often have little regard for any so-called religious experience which goes counter to the well-functioning status quo. The deeper human issues of social justice are then shoved aside in favor of the more enticing—because so "objective"—struggle over doctrinal con-

¹James W. Parkes, *Religious Experience and the Perils of Its Interpretation*. The Ninth Montefiore Memorial Lecture (The University of Southampton, 1972).

formism and confessional "purity." Opponents of this rigid mis-ordering of Gospel priorities,

modern figures in recent internal church conflicts, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Camillo Torres, or even Hans Küng, have been an embarrassment to their fellow churchmen.

If we may judge by these examples and the lives of prophets like Jesus, there is a definite risk once the process of interpreting personal religious experience for the sake of inspiring others has begun. What has moved the prophet may appear more than he can adequately communicate to his contemporaries despite his powerful words, his ever-deepening conviction, or even the eye-catching symbolic actions which accompany his preaching to the masses. The inability to win acceptance of their insights and to have others share in their vision of things may have been a failure in communication, or even the result of that spurious self-righteous reaction of would-be leaders whose pride has been wounded, or the result of a combination of motives, not all of which can be labeled perverse. The disciples who abandoned Jesus, shaking their heads in disbelief at the difficulty of his teachings (Jn. 6:60), were not all influenced by evil motives.

Whether from motives confused or downright self-serving, the fact remains that the prophetic experience of God was not always welcomed by the people. Yet it is from reflection on the experiences and words of prophets like Jesus that we are able to identify one important dimension of religious experience: that which happens in the life of the prophet to provoke a new awareness of God's presence in people's lives and to communicate a "divine message" either to a particular generation of believers or to believers of all eras. How one interprets and shares in that experience is an important related question especially since, for most people, such interpretation and "sharing" provide foundational support for their own religious attitudes. If, in this connection, we have chosen to consider important dimensions of the "religious experience" of Jesus, it is with the hope that we may thereby understand better and come to appreciate that communion with his Father which for Jesus, as for Christians, is to be the source of faith and of that peace and joy which makes the human encounter with God so intense and intimate.

JESUS' EXPERIENCE OF GOD:

MISSION OF THE UNEXPECTED, A SCANDAL TO RELIGIONISTS

For Christian communities to be "alive" in their faith today, the example of and faith in Jesus must be, as it was for the earliest community of Jesus' followers, the source of any experience of God expressed in their fellowship. Jesus' spiritual legacy was peace, not in the self-serving notions of the world, but in terms of that attractive humility and courage which was his followers' experience of him and inspiration behind their later apostolic fearlessness. Peace with oneself through a trust in God would necessarily radiate to others that peace which the world could not give. Jesus could challenge believers to learn of him because he had, through the paradoxical religious experience of his Father, conjoined in his own person prophetic daring and peaceful trust, action and contemplation, raw courage and tender compassion. Jesus came, as he said so often, to bring people together in peace, love, and community, ideals whose attainment would demand the difficult death to all selfishness and apostolic pusillanimity. Jesus was, in short, a

compelling figure as he went about doing the good which led him even to his death. In this, he became an inspiring example for countless Christians who find themselves intrigued by his personal experiences and words.

If we attempt to trace those experiences which were foundational for Jesus' sense of intimacy with his Father, we are led by all the evangelists to the scene of his baptism. That which we could call a "religious experience" on the part of Jesus is conveyed best in the Lukan account. There are two elements Luke introduces at the baptismal scene which are maintained as a theme of his entire gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles. I refer to Luke's stress on the prayer of Jesus at his baptism and the fact that this prayer sets the stage for the coming of the Spirit to him (Lk. 3:21-22).² This tableau is characteristic of Luke's Gospel. Jesus' ministry begins with the coming of the Spirit. Likewise, at significant moments in Jesus' life, Luke portrays him as withdrawing from the crowds in order to pray. In the Acts of the Apostles the mission of the church begins in exactly the same way. The community prays, the Spirit comes to them and the apostles then undertake with full courage their ministry to the world. Luke sets the story of Jesus and the story of the early church in close parallel (Acts 2:1-4).

At the baptismal scene, Jesus hears himself addressed as the beloved Son of his Father. "You are my dearly-loved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Lk. 3:22). Matthew has instead: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Mt.3:17). Luke's use of the second person in direct address is an expression of his understanding of prayer as a real dialogue between the believer and God himself. The answer of Jesus' Father to his prayer is for Jesus an experience of the unconditional love of his Father and of the call to preach and to heal. Because of the strength of his faith and the experience of his Father's love, Jesus is able to resist the temptation to use his power and influence with the Father for his own pride and personal gain; the famous temptations of Christ (Lk. 4:1-13), which follow the baptism, amount to the one principal temptation to abandon his mission.

The effects of this experience, which are strongly reminiscent of the prophets' encounter with God in the process of accepting their call to be God's spokesmen, are immediately apparent. Jesus undertook a mission similar to that of John the Baptist. He preached conversion and repentance, a change of attitude in which one's innate selfishness would yield to a courageous acceptance of God's call to believe in him and to be a lover of people. He would ask his followers to work to bring people together in peace, love, and community, ideals whose attainment would demand a fearsome renunciation of any lingering selfishness. He promised only that peace which came from obedience to his Father's will, not the peace of compromise with evil, promised by the world. Following this, a great turning point in his life occurred when, in the face of John's imprisonment and the increasing opposition to his preaching, Jesus radicalized his message, preaching a gospel of love over the rigid observance of law, counseling non-violence and even forgiveness of enemies. He became that teacher who amazed the crowds be-

²See my article, "Thoughts on a Theology of Mission," *Brothers Newsletter*, 17, 2 (Summer 1975), pp. 11-14. For the suggestion of stages and even crises in Jesus' understanding of himself and his ministry, I am indebted to that provocative section, "The Quest of the Earthly Jesus," in John S. Dunne, *A Search for God in Time and Memory* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967), pp. 8-14.

cause he taught with warmth and authority, and not like their Pharisees and scribes.

It is quite possible to see at this stage of Jesus' life the effects of his encounter with his Father and their Spirit. He had accepted his vocation to preach of his Father's love and of the true nature of holiness. Conscious of his prophetic mission and of his unparalleled intimacy with God

his Father, he could even sense that he was the Messiah. Hence he was able to answer John's disciples affirmatively when they were sent to ask Jesus if he was the one who was to come or should they look for another. Was he, in other words, the hope of their nation? Jesus' reply tells of his compassion for the poor and suffering of the world. The wonders worked by him attested not only the Father's special love but also the essence of his messianic ministry, which was not at all what the people of his time had been led to expect. "The blind receive their sight, the crippled walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have the Gospel preached them" (Mt. 11:5).

This clear application of the prophecy of Isaiah to his own mission was a further sign to Jesus' followers that they had to pay attention to the so-called underprivileged, lower classes or outcasts of society. Jesus' attitude towards these unfortunates was to be his most alluring and puzzling trait, even as it was a sign of contradiction to his more sophisticated co-religionists. Jesus' predilection for the poor and suffering was a way of telling the world of his time that it had waited for the wrong Messiah. Not a sword-wielding, slogan-mouthing, nationalistic liberator, but one who, after having successfully resisted the temptations of power, ambition, and doubt, could urge people to repent of their selfishness and to be converted wholly to the God he had so obviously experienced as compassionate and so different from the stereotypes of those without his vision. This was a God who had now drawn humanly near to them, more humanly near than even Jesus himself could adequately express in his Palestinian lifetime. The signs of the change of attitude he preached were to be the healing of physical and mental wounds and the bringing into a fraternal unity those who had been separated from one another.

Jesus' answer to John was a stark statement not only of the nature of Jesus' messiahship but also of the social mission to be undertaken by those who might claim to have participated in the religious experience of Jesus to the point of wanting to follow him. Jesus added a challenge to his words: "Blessed is he whosoever shall not be scandalized in me" (Mt. 11:6). They are indeed blessed who are not ashamed or embarrassed to assume the same difficult apostolate and have the courage to risk everything in this mission. Here a Christian community must ask itself if what its members experience in God and do in their personal lives constitutes good news to the disadvantaged of contemporary society. The reconciliation of people to his Father and to each other was to be Jesus' great achievement, first within the small band of his followers and then subsequently through their ministry which was aimed at spreading the good news of what God had accomplished in Jesus and in them. Against the attitude of relating to people under the paralyzing aegis of law or under the influence of class-conscious stereotypes, the early Christian community proposed the example of Jesus for whom the sinner, the diseased, the outcast, and the poor were the object of his special concern. Unfortunately, these are also types of the very people many Christians of later cen-

tures were inclined to avoid or write off, pious prayers for them and continued claims to have "experienced" Jesus to the contrary notwithstanding.

The ideal which Jesus proposed and to which all his followers must be dedicated is the ministry of creating a fully reconciled brotherhood and sisterhood in him. Jesus' experience of his Father God led him not just into the deserts and onto the mountaintops to pray but to treat people with the same compassionate concern as his Father. They were his brothers and sisters in

ways as deep as the mysterious, irresistible Spirit of God's love. Jesus' days and dreams were filled with that intense personal experience of his Father which left him restless. He was a man driven by such a hunger and thirst for justice that he was considered mad by his friends and relations (Mk. 3:20). The stories he told are, in a powerful way, the words which flowed naturally from that communion with his Father which was the taproot of his sense of sonship. At times this burst into expression in such intimate terms that many called it blasphemy. If not blasphemous, then at least it was to them outrageous, especially the way in which Jesus addressed his Father as "Abba" and the very confident manner in which he would speak on behalf of his God.³ The "Reign of God" is Jesus' metaphor for the human-divine potential unleashed when people experience his Father in the same manner as he. The God of the coming Kingdom is a God of almost unbelievable tenderness and love, a God quite novel to the people of Jesus' era, though made more credible because of Jesus' own compassion and the ways in which his words could hold the people spellbound. His God was the broken-hearted Father who waits at the road for the return of his prodigal son and who doesn't even allow the son to get out the words asking for forgiveness but clasps him in a tearful embrace and covers him with kisses. It goes without saying that most Christians today would share more in the indignation of the older son than in Jesus' admiration for a God-Father who lacks a "proper" sense of justice. But, then, Jesus adds to his description of his Father the baffling note that he is excessive in his generosity and quite willing to disregard principles of strict justice in order to grant the late-comer on the job everything he has given to those who have labored all day long (Mt. 20:1-16). Jesus' Father will enrich even those who seem most undeserving of such generosity. If this is offensive to one's sense of getting ahead in the business world, then Jesus can follow with a portrayal of his Father recklessly abandoning ninety-nine sheep to go looking for the one lost (Lk. 15:4-7). This could hardly be considered prudent by any audience of shepherders, yet it is a mind-capturing metaphor of the way his Father simply cannot give up on any of his children who might have strayed away from his providential care.

Jesus' Father-God is, in a word, one who does not conform to the typical patterns of behavior decreed for him by pious religionists. He seems to do the unexpected and to have a predilection for those of his children most in need of his mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. The prostitutes and publicans, Jesus declares, are nearer to the Kingdom of God than the professionally religious (Mt. 21:31-32; Lk. 18:9-14). The hated Samaritan, not the respectable priest or Levite, rushes to the aid of the man assaulted by brigands (Lk. 10:29-37). And if Jesus could also do the scandalous deed of inviting to table fellowship even so-called

³See especially, Donald Senior, *Jesus. A Gospel Portrait* (Dayton: Pflaum Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 93-98.

disreputable people (Mk. 2:15), it is because of that personal freedom which derives from his sense of oneness with and confidence in his Father. These people, too, were created in his Father's likeness. Jesus' followers are those beckoned to adopt his attitude toward people which acknowledges, in turn, the presence of God in all his creation. As James Mackey has observed:

Jesus, instead of talking about air, or order, or virtue, or even love perhaps, depicted by means of the most ordinary situations of life how we can discover the

treasure really hidden under the trodden paths of all our busy travelling, in the bric-a-brac of the pawn-shops of our lives, the invitation that is always given, how we can discover it and discover it in all, how decisive we must be in possessing and accepting with great joy, in scattering our riches as prodigally as they were showered on us....And by so doing he weaves a complex pattern of experience which can evoke a similar pattern down to any depth we care to plumb. By the same method he let his hearers feel that such unrestricted discovery and possession and sharing would offend, not only against their anxious, grasping, excluding and hostile instincts, but against the most insistently rationalized and the most solemnly institutionalized prejudices and presuppositions of their culture.⁴

The portrait of God which the Gospels set in the human face and words of Jesus is, to many, an outrageous affront to the propriety they had expected. That Jesus spoke in this way derived from his personal religious experience of God and inevitably sealed his doom with the politicians and synagogue leaders threatened by his teachings.

JESUS' COMMUNION WITH GOD: A SENSE OF PRESENCE

The source of this amazing ability of Jesus to stir the religious sensibilities of the people lies at the deepest possible level of an experience of intercommunion with his Father. If we may assert that the humanity of Jesus is the most perfect concrescence of God's manifestation to the world, then this "incarnation" symbolizes the highest possible experience of union between God and humanity. Rarely, however, do we find in the Christian theological tradition an affirmation that the ultimate experience of God took place in Jesus' experience of his own personhood. Assertions about Jesus' hypostatic union with the person of the Word of God and the beatific, all-knowing effect this had on his human consciousness have made it nearly impossible to speak either of Jesus' struggle as a person of faith or of the possibility of his ever having had a human experience of God. Yet the Gospels depict him as one who can be surprised and moved to tears, as one who could experience nescience and the joy of discovery, as one who could feel he had been forsaken by his Father but who could, nonetheless, trust in that Father to his dying breath. We can hardly argue that Jesus enjoyed a direct vision of God, *pace* Alexandrian dogmatics, without distorting the Gospel portrait of his humanity. If, on the other hand, we can affirm that Jesus was present to himself in every act of his knowledge, reflection, and love, a presence to self which any phenomemo-

⁴James P. Mackey, *Jesus, The Man and The Myth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 140-141.

logy of the self would confirm, then we can understand better why he was so attuned to God's presence in his life. This was a divine awareness never fully objectified either in Jesus' self-consciousness or in his words. But it was, at the same time, an awareness of divine sonship in a manner similar to those sub-conscious intimations about the self and yearnings for personal fulfillment which at important or even unpredictable moments burst into explicit expression. It is this intrinsic subjective aspect of Jesus' union with the divine which inspires his intense experience of God and enables him to call his God "*Abba*" in a way no one else could and to

relate to people in ways so unique yet with confidence that this was the very outlook of God himself. God's presence and self-communication to Jesus became the tacit dimension in Jesus' human-divine subjectivity. Jesus' life tells us, in effect, that the heart of religious experience pulsates within one's direct presence to God. As Karl Rahner has noted, "a direct presence to God belongs to the nature of a spiritual person, in the sense of an unsystematic attunement and an unreflected horizon which determines everything else and within which the whole spiritual life of this spirit is lived. This direct presence to God belongs to the nature of a spiritual person as the ground which, though not allowing us to grasp it completely in a reflex manner, is nevertheless the permanent basis for all other spiritual activities..."⁵

To claim, therefore, that Jesus received the full revelation of God in his human religious experience is to assert that Christ was present immediately to himself, the Word of God, and so became progressively more aware of his self-identity, advancing, as St. Luke has put it, "in wisdom and stature, and grace before God and man" (Lk. 2:52). Because Christ is fully human there is also growth in his gradual ability to articulate who he is, who God is, and what, accordingly, God's relationship to himself and to all people must be. This increased, ever-deepening knowledge of himself depended in turn on what God was communicating to him ontologically and through him to all people. Christ was conscious of the nature of his Father's love because he was progressively more aware of his identity with the Father in a communion which permeated his whole being. He was also sensitive to his identity with humankind, particularly those most in need of compassion. He experienced ignorance and suffering, along with his extraordinary knowledge and intense joys, the satisfaction of achievement and the tragedy of rejection in his prophetic calling, and, finally, the death demanded by his total obedience to the Father. In other words, Christ experienced the fullness of his human situation as a religious experience of the God-man in the world of fellow humans. His words and his life were the outcome of his experience as God's Son eager to make known to other persons the goodness of their Father and their calling to the same kind of relationship with the divine he himself was then experiencing. As the "Word" in full communion with his Father God, the man Jesus was, at the same time, the compassionate humanity of God himself. He is also the model of that childlike awe at the beauty of his Father's creation and of that fearless innocence which inspired him to see his Father's love

⁵Karl Rahner, "Dogmatic Reflections on the Knowledge and Self-Consciousness of Christ," *Theological Investigations*, V (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 209. Rahner's essay, which serves as partial basis for my own reflections in this section of the article, is to date the best theological analysis of Jesus' consciousness of his own divinity.

where others would notice only the scars of physical or moral leprosy. In short, Christ is the archetype of a "faith-experience" because of that fiducial attitude which moved him to accept the will of his Father and to trust in the vindication of his mission despite the agony of being rejected by the very religious leadership which could have helped him so much in bringing people to acknowledge God's reign in their hearts.

DEATH AND RESURRECTION : RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF THE ULTIMATE

If we affirm that Jesus' religious experience is interrelated to his human awareness of

God's self-manifestation in this unique way, then we might likewise see in Jesus' death and resurrection the climactic moment of the revelation of God's love for the world in the person of his Son. This was the "hour" to which Christ's whole life was directed. Jesus' human experience of his Father's love would reach its climax in the instant of his death and reception into glory.

But before this could take place, Jesus had to pass through the most intense crisis of his life, his own violent passion and execution. In the life of the believing Jew, as indeed in all of human life, the ultimate religious experience can only occur at that raw edge of life when one hands over his life and spirit to the living God. The prelude for this final moment in the life of Jesus was the execution of John the Baptist in whose death Jesus saw his own impending doom. To continue to preach, especially if he carried his message to the religious leadership of Jerusalem, could only lead, as Jesus himself was well aware, to his arrest and the end of his followers' dreams for him and for themselves. Hence his family, friends, and even Peter attempt to talk him out of his resolve. But Peter is told in the coldest possible terms: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, because you think according to human ways and not according to the ways of God!" (Mt. 16:23). The whole final part of the Gospels tells of Jesus' relentless journey to Jerusalem. Jesus loved life and, therefore, dreaded this step. As he himself put it, he came eating and drinking, unlike his more ascetic precursor. His was an asceticism which lay more in the extreme rigors of his mission and in his complete willingness to be "for others" in his experience of God and people. Because such was so clearly the will of his Father God, he could submit to the inevitability of his conflict and final confrontation with those resentful and fearful authority figures who would conspire for his arrest and execution.

In these days when we sometimes read literature rhapsodically praising the experience of death and dying as the ultimate religious euphoria, we should keep in mind that Jesus was frightened at the thought of the violent death awaiting him. Mark has expressed this most graphically as he describes Jesus beginning "to be horror-stricken and desperately depressed" (Mk. 14:33). He prayed that his death might not be necessary: "Let this chalice pass from me!" His sufferings took him to the brink of despair when, experiencing the painful loneliness of the prophet surrounded by hatred and seemingly abandoned to a dreadful fate by his Father God, he cried from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt. 27:46). Yet Jesus died with that prayer of trust on his lips: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk. 23:46), which summed up his whole life of

faith. He died continuing to love and trust his Father, confident that his death was the hidden accomplishment of his mission, as the martyrdom of the prophets and the sufferings of the Just Ones of Israel eventually vindicated their message and the example of their lives to future generations.

In that moment, however, the full cognitive and reflexive experience of his Father's love was perfected in his own consciousness. This final action of his life was, indeed, a "dark night of his soul," but it was also that ultimate experience of his Father and of his own identity as Son. What those who had gathered about the cross saw as a brutal death was, in his Father's arms, resurrection and Jesus' fullest ecstatic experience of his own communion with the Father. In that instant in which Jesus handed over his body and soul the in-rushing Spirit filled him with the glory that had been his from the foundation of the world (Jn. 17:24).⁶ The religious experiences

of humankind are but pallid shadows of this experience of Jesus in the “hour” of his glorification. “At that moment the redemption of the world was accomplished in his flesh and revelation as the cognitive expression of redemption was brought to perfection in the consciousness of Christ: he beheld the glory that was his. Though in a sense Christ had already possessed all, there was yet genuine novelty in his exaltation in glory.”⁷ This is that religious experience in which Christians claim to share through their baptism and through those special moments of life patterned after the death and resurrection of Jesus which may, in fact, be revelatory of the divine in our lives.

A SENSE OF PRESENCE: THE CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

In all of the foregoing reflections on the religious experience of Jesus, our recurring reference has been to Jesus’ communion with and sense of presence to his Father. Jesus’ experience of his Father is the driving force behind his mission to the world, source of whatever attraction he had for people, and sustenance of his unfailing faith. While no direct effort was made to have the Gospel portrait of Jesus’ sense of the divine presence in all of reality, including the humanity he shares with us, dovetail with existing analyses of religious experience, the effects on Jesus of his intense union with God, as reported in the Gospels, are remarkably similar to the broad characteristics of religious life discerned by William James in his monumental study, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.⁸ James describes religious experience in the widest possible meaning of the expression.

⁶Gabriel Moran, *Theology of Revelation* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), pp. 72-74.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁸William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Collier Books, 1971), p. 377. James writes: “Summing up in the broadest possible way the characteristics of the religious life, as we have found them, it includes the following beliefs:—1. That the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance; 2. That union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end; 3. That prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof—be that spirit ‘God’ or ‘law’—is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world.”

Though it should be obvious that our own focus has been narrow,⁹ there is such a richness to the religious experience of Jesus that he has become the exemplar for all ages of the most intimate human encounter with God as Father. His experience defies adequate categorization, yet it is of great help in evaluating reports of religious experience and in attempting to discern whether the divine or transcendent is really manifesting itself in the event described by the subject.

To pursue this question further, I spent part of my sabbatical year, 1978-79, in the Religious Experience Research Unit at Oxford University. There we examined the first-hand testimony of those who claimed to have encountered in some way the “transcendent” in their lives. In the beginning of its work the Religious Experience Research Unit (R.E.R.U.) thought it would be dealing with two principal kinds of “religious experience:” those of people who felt a general sense of spiritual awareness, and those of the more ecstatic and mystical variety. It was believed that these in turn could be grouped after the manner of a biological taxonomy into genera and families, etc. However, the testimonies sent in showed that many experiences combined a variety of elements. If we exclude the antecedent elements which might “trigger” a religious experience and the lived consequences of an encounter with the transcendent in a person’s life, the provisional classification acknowledges ten different kinds of experience with

some eighty-three subdivisions.¹⁰ Yet if there is anyone primary theme in all these accounts, it would have to be that of a “sense of presence” in which the transcendent “Other” is experienced as near to or even indwelling the subject. This has been already noted in Timothy Beardsworth’s own phenomenological study of the first thousand accounts received at the R.E.R.U. After reminding us that “this response is not necessarily tied to a full-blown sensory image of the Other,” Beardsworth remarks:

Whether we “realize” the (e.g.) comforting Other visually, through hearing, or through touch, or simply as an intangible “presence,” the essential thing is the *effect* it is felt to have on us, the change in our feelings from despair to joy and love. This effect is our response. We do not even need a sense of the Other’s actual “presence” in order to feel it, as can be seen from the everyday phenomena of faith and prayer....St. Teresa writes, “It as *as if*, when we are on the point of praying, we seem to find Him whom we are about to address,

⁹I say little, for example, of the conversion and the mystical experience *per se*, which are important aspects of James’s lectures. What I do affirm about the experience of Jesus, though, does partake in some way of the conversion experience (Jesus’ baptism) and the mystical element (Jesus’ sense of presence of the divine), provided we enlarge the usual understanding of these terms and, at the same time, reawaken to the potential of Jesus’ humanity for such experiences.

¹⁰Alister Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 25ff. Sir Alister Hardy is the founder of the R.E.R.U. and its first Director from 1969 to 1976. This book analyzes and classifies the first one thousand accounts. His provisional classification is as follows: 1. Sensory or quasi-sensory experience: visual; 2. Sensory etc.: auditory; 3. Sensory etc.: touch; 4. Sensory etc.: smell; 5. Supposed extra-sensory perception; 6. Behavioural changes: enhanced or “superhuman” power displayed; 7. Cognitive and affective elements; 8. Development of experience; 9. Dynamic patterns in experience; 10. Dream experiences. To these he adds twenty-one “antecedents” of religious experience and three “consequences” of religious experience.

and we seem to know that He is bearing us by the spiritual feeling and *effects* of great love and faith of which we become conscious.”¹¹

As I began to examine more at length the documentation on religious experience at Oxford, time and again I was forced to confront the question of what kind of God or “Transcendent Reality” has indeed touched the lives of people like St. Teresa and those “ordinary” subjects whose religious experience constitute the basic data of the R.E.R.U.

This was certainly not the so-called God of classical theism, nor the authoritarian, sin-tabulating God of the fulsome preaching of churches of a by-gone age, nor, to borrow an expression from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the “God of the gaps.” If anything, these records accentuate the often puzzling, unexpected way in which God becomes involved in human experience. They tend to confirm the paradoxical in any divine-human relationship rather than support any definitive philosophical doctrine on the nature of God. But, then, it has always been difficult to discern in records of encounters with a “Transcendent Reality” any set pattern of “divine self-revelation” which could be pieced together, mosaic-like, to unveil something resembling the “true face” of God. It is my contention, nonetheless, that the deity who has most warmly touched the hearts of these people most closely resembles the Father made lovingly known in the life and

preaching of Jesus. That many of the accounts of religious experience collected at Oxford are themselves influenced by a certain prayerful relationship with the Jesus of the Gospels should not blind us to the possibility that the origin of this sense of God is, in fact, God himself.¹² It is for this reason that I have focused my analysis in this article on what the Gospels tell us of the religious experience of Jesus. If Jesus could speak with such confidence about his Father God—in terms so intimate his shocked adversaries declared him to be blasphemous—this had to emanate, it would seem, from his personal sensitivity to God’s presence at the heart of all worthwhile human experience. It is this “sense of presence” to the person of God himself which runs like a unifying thread through the wide variety of ways in which people claim to have encountered their God.

Further, I have stressed the death-resurrection experience of Jesus as the high point of his encounter with God. Often analyses of religious experience concentrate on some one kind of experience which is so obviously related to that edge of human existence where one is drawn to a heightened awareness of either the precariousness or the richness of one’s humanity that the religious dimension is either obvious or at least implied. Abraham Maslow speaks, for example, of

¹¹Timothy Beardsworth, *A Sense of Presence* (Manchester College, Oxford: The Religious Experience Research Unit, 1977), p. 133. From my own research into the theology of God and revelation which emerges from these first hand accounts, I was able to concur with Beardsworth’s conclusion, though Alister Hardy lists “a sense of presence” as only a sub-division of category seven (see *supra*). The title of this article is drawn from my independent research which confirmed Beardsworth’s analysis.

¹²In this connection, John Bowker has written: “What has made us more cautious in defining with absolute certainty, the origin of the sense of God, is the realization that *a priori*, in behavioral terms alone, the possibility cannot be excluded that God is the origin of the sense of God—a possibility which to Taylor, Durkheim and Freud was simply inadmissible.” *The Sense of God* (Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 41.

“peak experiences;” Karl Jaspers of “boundary situations;” Ian Ramsey of “disclosure situations;” Friedrich Schleiermacher, of “the feeling of absolute dependence;” and Paul Tillich of the experience of “unconditional acceptance,” to cite but a few. In this connection, we have singled out not only Jesus’ growing awareness of his own identity with the Father as Son and as Word but also that climactic experience of Jesus’ awareness of God’s presence in his life, the awesome moment of his death and reception into glory. This, we argued, is the never-to-be-surpassed fullness in the intercommunion of God with us. Jesus’ final breath was also the ultimate experience of his Father’s paradoxical nearness in the midst of the sufferings of the Just and the martyrdom of the prophet. The pouring out of his life in the final act of his faith was the instant when the Father filled him with the glory of being raised to experience eternal life in their Spirit of love. Whatever “peak experience” or “limit situation” we may choose to highlight in any stream of human consciousness or whatever “disclosure situation” might seem most revelatory of the divine in the human, it is incontestable that for Jesus *the* peak experience was that of his return to his Father. If in Christian faith we claim that death has lost its “sting,” this can only be, as St. Paul has observed, because Jesus has conquered even death itself (1 Cor. 15:55-57). Religious experience, considered as an encounter and intercommunion with God himself, has to reach its culmination in that ultimate moment when one’s personal existence is shattered apart and one beholds oneself fully in the presence with the living God. This is that *kairos* of human

life in which one's hope and love finally converge in him whom we have acknowledged in faith as Father and lover, as brother, judge and savior, as Spirit and life.

Finally, my emphasis in the first sections of this article has been on the religious experience of Jesus seen in the manner in which he lived and taught. In the final analysis, what must carry authority in evaluating religious experience is not the more sensational extravagances of God's possible self-manifestation, the levitations, trances, divinations, and ecstatic wonders, but the quiet, unspectacular persistence of God's presence in his creation which cannot forever be denied or resisted. Jesus' ability to touch the leper, to heal the brokenhearted, to comfort the sorrowful, and to encourage love even of enemies stands as the most convincing testimony to that continual experience of God which so transformed the hearts and minds of those who could believe in him. The ultimate judgment on religious experience must arise from the effects on the lives and attitudes of those who claim to have encountered or been singularly blessed by God. This is why the life of Jesus and the faith of Christians is so different from the Jim Joneses of this world and their cults.

It is no surprise, therefore, that, when Paul addresses himself to the "giftedness" of his community in Corinth, he makes it clear that, despite the presence of exceptional charisms, such as speaking in tongues, all the members of the Christian community can contribute their individual giftedness to the well-being of others. In fact, Paul himself shows an unabashed preference for the ordinary gifts, especially as they are linked to service. Not that he mistrusts the exceptional or sensational gifts. Rather, it is more important to serve the needs of the community than to be carried away in a wave of ecstatic mysticism. People can be misled by the miraculous, Hellenistic *pneumatika*, he is quick to point out. But, "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7). Paul ex-

tends these "gifts" beyond the exceptional to include acts of kindness, the words of wisdom, discernment, helping one another, prudent administration, and, of course, teaching, for which he had the greatest esteem. Paul recognizes, in this regard, that all gifts are important if the community is to reflect in any way the multi-graced body of Christ. If teaching ranks right with apostleship and prophecy as among the most esteemed of the Spirit's gifts, it is likewise clear that in Paul's theology the most everyday phenomenon becomes the greatest gift of all and the most excellent way, namely, love. Without communal love all giftedness is reduced to nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3). Individual Christians are to be like Jesus, directed by the Spirit in this imperfect time to radiate their gifts of love and trust for one another and thus to bring a joyful peace within their community.

That the religious experience of such love within the brotherly-sisterly faith community has not been fully achieved is why God has been at the source of the creative unrest in people's lives until they realize their calling to become the persons they are capable of being. God continually jogs people out of their complacency by the "novel" presence of the prophets and, in a certain final sense, through his own Son's becoming flesh. Jesus symbolizes in his person the very qualities of God's concrete actuality which act as impulse toward the fulfillment of creaturely possibilities of growth in love, in service of others, and in creative self-sacrifice. In his Christ, to cite the Apocalypse, God can say, "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5). The special impact of Jesus lies, further, in his challenge to transcend oneself through openness to his

Father's love and to his neighbor's need. This alone can bring about the concrescence of that "peace which the world cannot give" (Jn. 14:27). Those preoccupied with themselves, on the other hand, resist this possibility and become, thereby, almost impervious to the overtures of God through his prophets. Only the person willing to die to himself daily can be a follower of Jesus to the experience of his Father. In Christ, then, there is symbolized and made present in a human lifetime the love of God moving an individual to continue the process of growth in self-transcendence. In Christ, there is also made vividly present the effects on God of the failure to grow in one's humanity. The man of sorrows rejected to die on the cross is the image of God's own sorrowing in the evil choices of his children. The crucifixion of Christ symbolizes God's own involvement in the problem of human suffering. In effect, he offers no simple answer to this problem; he suffers with us and promises resurrection. God's communion with the human Jesus is the supreme immanence in the process of his relationship with the world and, for this reason, it is paradigmatic of the Christian religious experience. In a word, Jesus embodied in a preeminent way the life of God in fatherly-brotherly-spiritual relationship with his people, thus making more meaningful and possible the attainment of the ideal of all human existence, the experience of union with his Father.