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The Uses of Experience in Recent Theology

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Experience has many uses in theology, depending on the circumstances in which the theological questions arise and on the way experience is perceived. David Kelsey's well-known book, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) makes a similar point regarding the relationship between theologians' conception of what scripture is and their various uses of scripture in the construction of theological proposals. Harold Ditmanson's *Grace in Theology and Experience* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) investigates the ways in which "theology is...an interplay of experience and interpretation" (p. 27). The doing of theology can be analyzed as a game played with scripture, doctrine, history and, eventually, experience. If the way in which a court game is played depends on how one agrees to construe the interplay between a racquet and ball in a given area of activity (squash? racquetball? tennis?), so it is in theology that how one perceives and then uses experience determines which theological game is being played.

According to Peter Berger there are only three ways to deal with experience in theology. He agrees that religion is grounded in experience but that the authority of all religious traditions has been undermined for reasons that are "readily visible to historical and social scientific observation." The three responses to the crisis are (1) to reaffirm the authority of tradition in defiance of challenges to it, (2) to secularize the tradition and (3) to try to "uncover and retrieve the experiences embodied in the tradition" (*The Heretical Imperative,* Garden City: Doubleday, 1979, p. xi). For Berger only this last of the three approaches to the crisis of religious authority is viable.

Religious pluralism, which of course is not new in the history of Christianity's encounter with human cultures, will usually have the effect of challenging the religious truth claims of any one of the traditions, but it is not so clear to me that the theological responses can be so neatly categorized as Berger makes it appear. For him there are only three ways of doing theology in a pluralistic context: the deductive way of Barth and neo-orthodoxy, the reductive way of Bultmann and de-mythologizing, and the inductive way of Schleiermacher and the argument from experience. In this article I propose a different roster of the theo-

logical players and I have organized them into representative samples of six different "teams." The labels which I have given them have been enclosed with marks in order to indicate that these tags are to be interpreted rather loosely as befits any typology.

I. THE "RATIONAL"

Diogenes Allen, *The Reasonableness of Faith,* Cleveland: Corpus, 1968.

Austin Farrer, *Reflective Faith,* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972.
Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for our Time,* Lasalle: Open Court, 1967.
Schubert Ogden, *The Reality of God,* New York: Harper and Row, 1965.
Robert H. King, *The Meaning of God,* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973.
Alvin Platinga, ed., *The Ontological Argument,* Garden City: Doubleday, 1965.
Karl Rahner, *The Foundations of Christian Faith,* New York: Seabury, 1978.

Twentieth-century theology has been plagued by assaults on the plausibility of faith to such an extent that the so-called secular person finds it impossible to believe. These assaults take the form of scientific descriptions of experience which render God superfluous as an explanatory factor, of moral objections to belief in God "after Auschwitz," and of philosophical arguments that religious statements make no sense when measured according to the canons of intelligible discourse. In short, human experience in the twentieth century, when viewed scientifically, historically, and philosophically, is the best argument the atheist has against belief in God.

One way to respond is to avoid arguments from the facts of experience altogether, and to argue, instead, primarily on the basis of certain concepts, principally the concept of God.

It is important to notice in this connection, that theological thinkers who take this approach are not dismissing experience as irrelevant. They might even agree that the experience of people in the twentieth century is indeed incompatible with the traditional concept of deity inherited from our intellectual past. But if there is a deep incompatibility between the facts of experience and belief in God, what response can the believer (the theologian) make to the challenge of unbelief? Surely no recourse to additional facts would suffice, nor would intellectual honesty permit the believer to misrepresent the facts or to insist that the unbeliever accept an alternative recital of facts. The difficulty is not with the facts of experience but with the way we think about God and faith. After all, it is implicit in faith that God is "a universal datum of experience" (Hartshorne, p. 2) and so is present in everything, everywhere. If our experience seems to contradict what is implied by faith, then only three options seem open: (1) deny experience in order to save faith, (2) deny the faith in order to save the facts, or (3) learn to think differently, which is to say, to alter one's conception of God such that neither (1) nor (2) is required.

The approach taken here, then, is a rational argument for the fundamental rightness of faith. This theological approach does not grub around in experience for something that will give factual support to the unbeliever. "Grubbing among the facts is neither here nor there. self-understanding is the issue: someone is

confused, either the theist or the nontheist. Which is it? This is the real question" (Hartshorne, p. 88).

Schubert Ogden is one theologian who has taken this position. Faith is unavoidable, given the universality of God's effective presence in human experience, so that if we think we have "a quarrel with God" based on some facts of experience, our quarrel is misdirected. Our argument is not with God but with "a supernaturalistic theism" with which our faith ought not to be identified in the first place. Faith is implied in all experience, but some beliefs or some conceptions are such that they drive a wedge between God and experience, at least in our thinking. The task of

theology is to show that unfaith is "not the absence of faith, but the presence of faith in a deficient or distorted mode" (p. 23). Reason can thus serve faith by constructing a "new theism" which will be appropriate to the implications of faith and adequate to the experience of persons in the secular world (pp. 44-70). For Ogden the conception of God elaborated in the work of Hartshorne and Whitehead can accomplish this task.

Other theologians in this first category would not necessarily follow Ogden into the camp of process metaphysics but would agree that faith is immune to empirical refutation or verification, that indeed faith is independent of arguments from experience or from "rationales" (Allen, pp. 115f.) and that as a "form of life" faith is a reasonable basis for living a life devoted to God. Faith contradicts neither experience nor reason although some "rationales" for faith and some belief systems inspired by faith may be incoherent and out of touch with experience. One is bound to have faith and will invest that faith either in God or in an idol. Whereas Luther could simply assume the same thing about the nature of faith in his explanation of the First Commandment, a theologian today, for instance Karl Rahner, must be at pains to show that something like faith is implied in the very existence of the experiencing self in terms of the "unthematic but ever-present" transcendental experience and of that universal but "unthematic knowledge of God" which is not "the kind of knowledge in which one grasps an object" (pp. 20ff.).

Thus, one distinct way to approach experience in theology is to press immediately to the question, "What does faith imply about God and experience?" Only a conception of God as present in all experience whatsoever is adequate to the God who is confessed by Christian faith. If, then, what seems to confront me in the facts of my experience contradicts what is implied by faith (namely that God is the universal datum of experience) there can only be one way to resolve the apparent contradiction. It is no resolution to subscribe to a fanatical faith in defiance of all the facts on the one hand, or to a reductionistic antagonism toward religion on the other. The resolution of the seeming contradiction can only be achieved by rethinking the definitions and reconsidering the concepts of God and faith.

II. THE "EMPIRICAL"

John Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology,* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965.
Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind,* New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969.
Bernard Meland, ed., *The Future of Empirical Theology,* University of Chicago, 1969.
John E. Smith, *Experience and God,* New York: Oxford, 1968.

Paul Sponheim, *Faith and Process,* Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979.
Henry Nelson Wieman, *Man's Ultimate Commitment,* Carbondale: So. Illinois University, 1958.
Daniel Day Williams, *God's Grace and Man's Hope,* New York: Harper and Row, 1949.
Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and the Forms of Love,* New York: Harper and Row, 1968.

Theologians in the first category tend to begin with the reality of faith and then ask the logical question, what does faith imply about divinity and humanity, the ultimate and the relative,

God and experience? Theologians of a second kind are inclined to begin with the realities of experience and then ask what it is in experience that gives rise to faith or gives support to faith. Such theologians do not blush to speak of themselves as empirical theologians. Theology is a rational enterprise, after all, and what theology seeks to do is to investigate belief and to illuminate its deepest connections with the most important human realities. Theology is faith in search of understanding, and if faith is to be spoken truthfully the words of faith must ring true to experience.

The sampling of theological writings above share, in the main, one common feature, namely "that we know God in the same fundamental manner that we know anything else: by interpreting our immediate experience to discover what realities are impinging upon us" (Williams, 1949, pp. 45f.). The fundamental resources for theology are not somewhere other than in experience, and so theology cannot do its work without a philosophy of experience that will be a convincing alternative to the "secular" or non-theistic interpretations of experience.

Langdon Gilkey, for instance, is one prominent theologian who has tried to take with utmost seriousness the challenge of secularity and to respond to it on its own terms. If religion is to be defended and reasserted as true and meaningful against the secularist's interpretation of experience, it can only be done by what is found in experience. Gilkey's approach is to show the secularists that they have missed something without insisting that the secularists must first accept an authority other than the authority of experience. The secularists have been looking for reality in the right place—in ordinary experience—but have ignored aspects of what is there. Gilkey offers a way to describe the shape of ordinary experience in order to find the "dimension of reality" which is there but which has been overlooked by dominant interpretations of experience in our century.

These theologians are similar to those of the first category in this respect: they, too, believe that the way we think about God or conceive of God in relation to experience must be re-evaluated. If, for example, one were to insist from the start that God can be defined as the one who is utterly absent from human experience, or that experience itself can only refer to that which is contingent, relative and transient, then empirical theology would be nonsensical and impossible. When these theologians urge that we attend to experience as the route to knowledge of God, they do not assume that the goal is to prove the existence of that which (who) exists in total isolation from human experience. "There is a vast difference between starting with a datum from which to infer the existence of something else and starting with an experience which contains within itself the presence of a reality not immediately known as such" (Smith, p. 151). Thus, when

Gilkey or Wieman or Cobb calls for a return to experience, each is bidding modern people to pay attention to dimensions that are there in experience but which are often overlooked, and then to entertain the possibility that the symbols of religion may be the most appropriate language for expressing those features of reality. In short, experience is not an obstacle to faith but a source for understanding faith. Only a "secularist" distortion of experience would blind a person to the realities of faith present in experience.

Whereas Gilkey and others have tried to argue for the empirical dimensions of faith in order to answer the challenge of the secular scoffers, my colleague Paul Sponheim has presented

a case for a Whiteheadian reading of experience that can also serve those Christian searchers who want to know how the realities discerned through common experiences can contribute to the tactical, ethical, conceptual and constitutive dimensions of the life of faith.

III. THE "DIALECTICAL"

Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith,* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963.
Gerhard Ebeling, *The Study of Theology,* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978.
John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology,* New York: Scribner's, 1966.
Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man,* New York: Scribner's, 1953.
Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. I,* University of Chicago, 1951.
Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross,* Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975.

The rediscovery and appropriation of Reformation theology earlier in this century continues to be one of the greatest influences in Protestant thought. One feature of that influence is the insistence on the absolute priority of faith and of theology's indissoluble distinctiveness as the intellectual discipline committed to rendering an account of that faith. That is, theology's special task is to make clear the peculiar certainty of faith. As Ebeling has said, theology is obliged to show that "the certainty of Christian faith has the character neither of objective, demonstrable knowledge, or subjective arbitrariness, but of one being grounded outside oneself" (1978, p. 164). Whereas philosophy or sociology will seek a unified understanding of reality, theology must seek the distinctive "understanding of reality appropriate to Christian faith" (p. 57) and therefore will always judge every philosophical understanding in that light.

The commitment shared by the theologians in the above sample listing of a third type is that whenever "experience" is described or defined or prescribed independently of faith it is then imposed on theology as a kind of norm and robs theology of its distinctiveness and integrity. But when viewed from the perspective of faith, which theology is obliged to defend and clarify, experience is at best ambiguous and at worst no proper source for theology. In writing of Luther's view on experience, von Loewenich offers such observations as these:

> Faith is something different than the innate ethical consciousness. It is in tension with every natural capacity for knowledge. It stands as the absolutely new over against all givens. It is precisely what consciousness is not. In Luther's sense it would be misleading to define faith as "unity of experience." Faith repeatedly bursts through the unity of experience, but it also creates a

> new unity....[Luther's] setting reason and faith in opposition has nothing to do with anti-intellectualism...[T]he same opposition also exists between faith and feeling, in fact between faith and experience in general (p. 77)....[T]he new life arises out of the experience of the old life. Faith does not begin with the elating experience of God's nearness but with terror because of God's remoteness. Hence faith is kindled by a contrary experience (p. 79).

Just as faith is not anti-intellectual neither is faith anti-empirical. Faith proves itself in

experience, faith is a power to be experienced, and faith is the point of unity for all experience.

In the case of this category of theologians, it is important to keep in mind a familiar point: faith is not contrasted with knowledge but with sin, sin as mistrust and rebellion against being a creature of God. Faith is not a term in epistemology (how do we know, through faith or reason?) but is a term centered in soteriology (how can we be saved from the brokenness and threat of the human condition, through the gift of faith in God or through human striving independently of God?). Apart from faith there is not even any ground for speaking of sin or of the freedom which sin presupposes, but when one speaks theologically, assuming the reality of faith, then the whole structure of human experience is read differently. Thus Niebuhr:

> The Christian doctrine of original sin with its seemingly contradictory assertions about the inevitability of sin and man's responsibility for sin is a dialectical truth which does justice to the fact that man's self-love and self-centeredness is inevitable, but not in such away as to fit into the category of natural necessity. It is within and by his freedom that man sins. The final paradox is that the discovery of the inevitability of sin is man's highest assertion of freedom. The fact that the discovery of sin invariably leads to the Pharisaic illusion that such a discovery guarantees sinlessness in subsequent actions is a revelation of the way in which freedom becomes an accomplice of sin (p. 263).

Although in Niebuhr, as well as in Tillich and Macquarrie, one can detect a readiness to examine human experience or existence in order to identify and name the polarities and paradoxes of freedom and necessity, dynamics and form, individualization and participation, etc., this third way of reading experience is not undertaken with a view to finding *in* experience the foundations of faith. Instead, faith enlightens the eyes to see human experience in this way. Apart from faith as trust in God the human mind's eye is inevitably going to read experience in self-serving and not in God-trusting ways. Faith is not a dimension of experience, but faith is a perspective on experience. Faith is not *something* to be discerned in experience but faith is a *way* of discerning experience. Unless we read experience with the eyes of faith, the content of the reading will be a distortion of what is there, and we will be prone to biblicistic, scientistic or other forms of extremism. Faith, writes Macquarrie, "is not assent to propositions, but an existential attitude of acceptance and commitment..." (p. 94). What, then, of experience as a source for theology? "Experience is not the source from which the contents of systematic theology are taken but the medium through which they are existentially received" (Tillich, p. 42). Since the peculiar object of theology is faith, and faith is transmitted from faith to faith, the means of transmission is experience, and what is transmitted is faith.

IV. THE "POLITICAL"

Reubem Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope,* New York: Corpus, 1969.
Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key,* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978.
Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation,* New York: Orbis, 1973.
Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests,* Boston: Beacon, 1973.
Jürgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope,* New York: Harper and Row, 1965.

Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution and the Future,* New York: Scribner's, 1968.
Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences of God,* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980.
Daniel Migliore, *Called to Freedom,* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980.
Rosemary Ruether, *Liberation Theology,* New York: Paulist, 1972.
Letty Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective,* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974.
Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* New York: Orbis, 1976.

We have heard much of the so-called "acids of modernity" which have eroded or dissolved all the traditional authorities. Every assumption which we are asked to take on faith or to accept on the authority of someone else is viewed skeptically so that "the only presupposition that modern skepticism will allow is the project of not accepting the thoughts of others on authority, but instead...examining everything oneself and autonomously following one's own convictions" (Habermas, p. 13). Where have these acids been manufactured? What is the source of the skepticism? It has been variously traced, of course, to post-Enlightenment historical consciousness, social awareness, the sense that every notion, idea, faith, claim to objectivity, or assertion of certain truth has a history, without exception. For Protestant Christianity the paradigm case is the historical view of scripture. More recently the dramatic and compelling instance has been the critique of religion with the help of Marxist thought. This critique of religious thought and practice cuts through all the theological and philosophical claims to finality (as in the three types of theology already reviewed) and presumably exposes the enslavement of theology and religion to social and cultural interests. European theologies especially have served the privileged status of those in power. Knowledge, whether scientific, philosophical, historical or theological, is all relative to the social conditions determined by human interests, power and politics.

Liberation theologies seek to free the church and theology from bondage to human interests which stifle the gospel. For these theologies the human experience of bondage, oppression, poverty and injustice in the forms of racism, sexism and systematic subjugation of people is the key to reading the scripture. In this sense these theologies seek to be inductive, "drawing the material for reflection from their life experience as it relates to the gospel message....The gospel is good news to people only when it speaks concretely to their particular needs of liberation" (Russell, p. 53). And Jesus is liberator "because he incarnates and clarifies true liberation" (Migliore, p. 45).

This is a different way of doing theology. It involves a political hermeneutic. "Instead of using only revelation and tradition as starting points, as classical theology has generally done, it must start with facts and questions derived from the world and from history" (Gutierrez, p. 12). And the perspective from which

one looks at the facts and asks the questions is the perspective of hope, the perspective of what is not yet. The problem is not to understand the world from the viewpoint of faith, but the problem is how to change the world, how to break the stranglehold which repressive and conservative social and political structures have on the churches (cf. Segundo, p. 44). And so "the new criterion for theology and of faith is to be found in praxis" (Moltmann, 1968, p. 138).

Praxis is a pivotal word in these theologies. It most definitely does *not* mean technique or know-how or "putting faith into practice" or "making Christianity practical." Rather praxis is a complexity of awareness, consciousness, intentionality, vision, imagination and purposefulness in all of one's action *and* reflection. Praxis is revolutionary in the sense that it is a consciousness that sets one apart and alienates one from the prevailing cultural expectations or ideology such that one perceives the "false consciousness" of the present age and acts in ways calculated to change the social conditions which contribute to and give an air of credibility to that false consciousness. Praxis might be thought of as a form of prophetic spirituality, if that were not misleading (cf. Ruether, pp. 175ff.). Its principal focus is not "up there" or "deep within" or "back there" in a golden age of the past. The focus is on the promised future which is not yet but which is still possible. Therefore, it is understandable that the aspect of human experience which is most central is the experience of expecting freedom in the context of bondage, of anticipating release in the midst of suffering, of living in hope in a situation of despair.

These theologies, in sum, assume that there is a reservoir of hope in all human beings and that it can be sprung loose to change history if people can first be liberated from the modes of consciousness which have been formed in them by false ideologies and by powerful human interests which insinuate themselves into the hearts and minds of the poor.

V. THE "INTEGRATIVE"

William Beardslee, *A House for Hope,* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972.

John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Structure of Christian Existence,* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967.

Tom F. Driver, *Patterns of Grace, Human Experience as Word of God,* New York: Harper and Row, 1977.

Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind,* New York: Seabury, 1976.

Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Human Nature, Election and History,* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977.

Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus, An Experiment in Christology,* New York: Seabury, 1979.

Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ, The Experience of Jesus as Lord,* New York: Seabury, 1980.

David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order,* New York: Seabury, 1975.

How does one ideally read and interpret the scripture? Lurking in that question is the deeper issue of the broad framework of presuppositions, conceptions of reality, assumptions about the world and the largely non-conscious self-understanding which we more or less share with others in our culture. Until the rise of a critical and secular interpretation of history, there was an intimate con-

nection between the interpretation of scripture and the generally assumed view of history. The history of the world and the history depicted in scripture were closely linked through the shared framework of presuppositions, conceptions of reality and the self-understanding of Christian faith. That link has been broken. Conservative interpreters of the Bible see no need to find any underlying connection between faith and experience: the Bible controls all interpretations of experience. Radical interpreters of scripture have tried to collapse the distance, demythologizing

the world-view of the Bible. The theologians whom I would locate in this fifth group are content neither to scuttle the world-view of the Bible nor to reject the common human experience of people today as a source for theology.

One such theologian, a former student of Tillich, has turned away from his mentor, who, he claims, "devalued finite experience in favor of the infinity of God....In the last analysis both Tillich and the more orthodox keep God pure by making history a grand mistake" (Driver, pp. 160f.). Another, who is noted for his scholarly work in utilizing the conceptual apparatus of Whitehead for the interpretation of the New Testament, has written that the biblical "emphasis on God's presence in the actual world of man and society is still to be affirmed. So is the insight that faith and culture are in constant interplay, so that the ultimate mystery is mediated not only by 'proclamation,' but by sex, creativeness, work, human interaction, and by the widest reaches of the imagination as well as by easily recognizable Christian channels....The church cannot think of itself as the exclusive place where the realities it knows are known" (Beardslee, p. 80).

Some have sought to find the solution to the problem presented by the secular view of history by reinterpreting the key concepts of history (cf. Pannenberg). Gilkey has recently argued at length that non-theistic and naturalistic views of history have to be challenged by another view which is not "supernaturalistic." In his analysis of human experience, he states that "we experience ultimacy not as the all-powerful, extrinsic and necessitating ordainer of what we are and do, but precisely as the condition and possibility, the ground, of our contingent existence, our creativity, our eros and meaning, our intellectual judgments, our free moral decisions and our intentional actions" (p. 247).

Still others would seek to rehabilitate the world-view of the Bible by means of a structural analysis of language and would find the link between the meaning of the scriptures and present day meanings found in experience through an analysis of the peculiarities of parabolic grammar (cf. Tracy, pp. 119-145 for an account of this method).

In my judgment one of the most insightful and helpful descriptions of the various ways in which human communities have organized the common features of experience into the distinguishable structures of religious and cultural patterns is John Cobb's small volume listed above.

Important in all these efforts is the single but variously executed goal of so defining common human experience through a re-examination of history, or language, or sexual expression, or cultural memories, or imagination, that the texts of the Bible and the contexts of present-day readers and hearers can be bridged. The authority of the Bible is that somehow the originative experiences which gave rise to the writing, editing, and preservation of those texts still ring true to the experience of people today, assuming that both the texts and the contexts are adequately interpreted in terms of an intelligible view of experience.

Perhaps the most ambitious attempt toward this goal is the two-volume study by Schillebeeckx. He, along with Beardslee and others, would insist that experience must be interpreted according to a social view of reality which binds every generation of people together, so that "the question, 'must we begin with scripture and tradition or with our own contemporary experiences?' is a false alternative. Present and past are not 'two things' in juxtaposition. In reality, the message of the New Testament and our present experiences do not stand over against

each other and alongside each other as two things. They already touch each other" (1980, p. 75).

VI. THE "RELIGIOUS"

Larry Christenson, *The Charismatic Renewal among Lutherans,* Minneapolis: Bethany, 1978.
Georgia Harkness, *Mysticism, Its Meaning and Message,* Nashville: Abingdon, 1973.
Bengt Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics,* Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976.
Richard Jensen, *Touched by the Spirit,* Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975.
William Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love,* New York: Harper and Row, 1978.
William Johnston, *The Still Point,* New York: Fordham, 1970.
Erling Jorstad, *Bold in the Spirit,* Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974.
Morton Kelsey, *Discernment,* New York: Paulist, 1978.
Morton Kelsey, *Encounter with God,* Minneapolis: Bethany, 1972.
John Koenig, *Charismata, God's Gifts for God's People,* Philadelphia: Westminister, 1978.
Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters,* New York: Farrer Strauss, 1967.
Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out,* Garden City: Doubleday, 1975.

Religious experience has not been a prominent feature in any of the theological options we have thus far surveyed. The sheer multiplicity of religions and of the types of religious experience makes it difficult to build a theological system on such foundations. Religious experience is scarcely uniform nor is it uniformly distributed among human beings. Many of us have never had a religious experience, let alone a series of them, although most believers could point to experiences in their lives which have had deep spiritual significance: a baptism, a marriage, a habit of worship and prayer, an important relationship, or times of profound existential struggle.

Personal religious experiences, described in terms of heightened emotion, ecstasy, intense social togetherness, speaking in tongues, psychic and physical healing, or mystical union with God, will all eventually appear for comment and interpretation in any systematic theology. Religious experience has to be put somewhere in a systematic treatment of Christian faith.

It probably should have come as no surprise to me, but I was startled even so by the seemingly unlimited number of titles one can find on spirituality, pentecostalism, spiritual life, spiritual health, religious experience, spiritual discipline, mystical religion, contemplation and varieties of regimens for spiritual growth. If one ventures outside a theological library the offerings for public consumption multiply even more. An emphasis on religious experience is popular fare in broadcasting and in publishing, and what the consumers seem to be buying is at a

far remove from academic theology. At the popular level the authority of experience is taken for granted and with apparently little criticism. After all, who can challenge the person who speaks "from experience"? Whether it is Robert Schuller or the Moral Majority, Norman Vincent Peale or Oral Roberts, Catholic charismatics or Eastern religious mystics, the attraction is the power of an experience that could become undeniably yours. Authors whose emphasis or attention is on religious experience approach that theme in a variety of ways, and so this group can be divided

into six subtypes.

(1) Some writers take up the topic of personal religious experience because they have been involved or grasped or set on fire and it is just there as an undeniable part of their own biography (Jensen and Christenson). In the case of these two Lutherans, one is at pains to *describe* his personal experience of tongue-speaking as a means of sanctification and the other is bent on *prescribing* pentecostal experiences as a means of church renewal. (2) Others, like Anglican Kelsey who is presumably himself a "charismatic," wish to argue for the defensibility and intelligibility of religious experience. It is clear to Kelsey, for instance, and to most of us, that there is a virtual forest fire of religious renewal in our culture. We should be able to see this outbreak of religious fervor in the context of our intellectual history so that we do not regard it as a freakish epidemic of anti-intellectualism but as an indirect testimony to spiritual depths of existence. Indeed, for Kelsey, it has been exactly the dogmatisms of our western intellectual tradition, epitomized in positivism, that have assumed direct religious experience to be impossible.

(3) Two of the writers in my sample are Catholics who have taken up the task of interpreting Eastern religions as a way of finding some points of contact between Christianity and the religions of the East (Johnston and Merton). (4) Other writers on mysticism would propose a revisionist view of the role and influence of mystical experience in the history of the church and in the lives of some of the principal moulders of theology (Harkness and Hoffman).

(5) Two other Lutherans have responded to the perplexity and the divisiveness in the churches over the so-called charismatic movement. The one has written a book to interpret the phenomenon in the perspective of the New Testament understanding of the *charismata* (Koenig), and the other has documented segments of the history of the movement within Lutheran circles and has set that movement into the context of the Lutheran confessional tradition (Jorstad). (6) Finally there are authors such as Henri Nouwen who place religious experience into the context of pastoral care. In very lucid and persuasive language Nouwen describes spiritual experience in three relationships: the self in relation to the self as a movement from loneliness to solitude, the self in relation to others as a movement from hostility to hospitality, and the self in relationship to God as a movement from illusion to prayer.

There have been theologians within recent memory who were candid about their own lack of religious experience and their own inability or unwillingness to pray. Theologians love to think, and perhaps some would rather love thinking than praying or worshipping. There seems now to be a movement back to a theology which finds its roots in the prayers and the worship of the church. The church is an historical movement whose whole community existence is in the

service of the gospel as a vision of God's will for the world. Worship is the one occasion where that vision is more sharply focussed or embodied by the community. "The theologian's thinking therefore properly draws on the worship of the Christian community The specific task of the theologian lies in the realm of *doctrine.* He is aiming at a coherent intellectual expression of the Christian vision." So writes Geoffrey Wainwright, the recently appointed professor of Systematic Theology at Union Seminary, New York (*Doxology*, *A Systematic Theology,* New York: Oxford, 1980, p. 3).

Karl Rahner, whose name appeared in the first group of theologians, and who is one of

the most prolific modern theologians, has also published a little volume of prayers (*Encounters with Silence*, Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1966) which are brief theological dialogues. Here again, in the work of a "rational" theologian, we are treated with an example best typified by the work of an earlier rational theologian, Anselm in his *Proslogium,* of how theology and experience can be joined in the prayerful expression of faith's search for understanding.