CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY

EDITED BY

R. DOUGLAS GEIVETT
Taylor University

BRENDAN SWEETMAN
Rockhurst College

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1992

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Explaining Religious Experience

Wayne Proudfoot

Reductionism has become a derogatory epithet in the history and philosophy of religion. Scholars whose work is in other respects quite diverse have concurred in advocating approaches to the study of religion which are oriented around campaigns against reductionism. These campaigns are often linked to a defense of the autonomy of the study of religion. The distinctive subject matter of that study, it is argued, requires a distinctive method. In particular, religious experience cannot properly be studied by a method that reduces it to a cluster of phenomena that can be explained in historical, psychological, or sociological terms. Although it is difficult to establish exactly what is meant by the term, the label "reductionist" is deemed sufficient to warrant dismissal of any account of religious phenomena.

Questions have been raised about this wholesale rejection of reductive accounts and about the theological motivations that sometimes underlie it, but the issues in the discussion have not been sufficiently clarified.[1] Penner and Yonan, for example, take the problem to be crucial for the study of religion, survey the meaning of *reduction* in empiricist philosophy of science, and deplore the negative connotations that have become attached to the term.[2] But they admit that they have found the issue difficult. They show no appreciation of why the attack on reductionism has such an appeal, and thus they are unable to elucidate the discussion. The warnings against reductionism derive from a genuine insight, but that insight is often misconstrued to serve an apologetic purpose. I shall try to clarify the confusion surrounding the term *reduction* as it is applied to accounts of religious experience and to distinguish between the insight and the misapplications that result in protective strategies. A recent essay in the philosophy of religion devoted to the exposure and critique of reductionism will serve to illustrate those misapplications and strategies.

The Problem

One of the most influential critics of reductionism in the study of religion has been Mircea Eliade. He has argued that the task of the historian of religion is a distinctive

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one and has contrasted it with what he takes to be the reductionist methods of the social sciences.[3] According to Eliade, a historical or sociological approach fails to grasp the meaning of religious phenomena. Like the literary critic interpreting a text, the historian of religion must attempt to understand religious data on [his or her] own plane of reference. He or she should adopt a hermeneutic method. Just as literary works cannot be reduced to their origins, religious phenomena ought not to be reduced to their social, psychological, or historical origins or functions. Eliade contends that "a religious datum reveals its deeper meaning when it is considered on its plane of reference, and not when it is reduced to one of its secondary aspects or its contexts."[4] He cites Durkheim and Freud as examples of those who have adopted reductionist methods for the study of religion.

Two points are worthy of note: (1) Eliade thinks that what is lost by reductive approaches is the *meaning* of religious phenomena. He praises van der Leeuw for respecting the peculiar intentionality of religious data and thus the irreducibility of religious representations[5]; (2) his examples of reductionist approaches are drawn almost exclusively from history and the social sciences. Theories that purport to account for religious phenomena in terms of their origins or the functions they serve in a particular social context are ipso facto reductionist.

Eliade holds further that religious data represent the expression of religious experiences. Religion is "first of all, an experience sui generis, incited by man's encounter with the sacred."[6] In order to understand religious data on their own plane of reference, the scholar must " 'relive' a multitude of existential situations."[7] Only through such a procedure can the meaning of the data be grasped. To reduce those data to their origins or social functions is to fail to understand them as expressions of religious experience. That understanding can come only from acquaintance. Since Eliade regards religious experience as experience of the sacred, he can summarize his antireductionist position by reference to "the irreducibility of the sacred."[8]

Religious experience is the experience of something. It is intentional in that it cannot be described without reference to a grammatical object. Just as fear is always fear of something, and a perceptual act can only be described by reference to its object, a religious experience must be identified under a certain description, and that description must include a reference to the object of the experience. Eliade employs the term *sacred* to characterize the object of all religious experience. The notorious obscurity of that term need not concern us here, nor need we accept the suggestion that all religious experiences have the same object. The point is that when Eliade refers to the irreducibility of the sacred, he is claiming that it is the intentional object of the religious experience which must not be reduced. To do so is to lose the experience, or to attend to something else altogether.

This point is well taken. If someone is afraid of a bear, his fear cannot be accurately described without mentioning the bear. This remains true regardless of whether or not the bear actually exists outside his mind. He may mistakenly perceive a fallen tree trunk on the trail ahead of him as a bear, but his fear is properly described as fear of a bear. To describe it as fear of a log would be to misidentify his emotion and reduce it to something other than it is. In identifying the experience, emotion, or practice of another, I must restrict myself to concepts and beliefs that have informed his experience. I cannot ascribe to him concepts he would not rec-

ognize or beliefs he would not acknowledge.[9] Though historical evidence might turn up to show that Socrates was dying of cancer, no evidence could show that he was afraid of dying of cancer. No such fear could be ascribed to him because he didn't possess the concept of cancer which is presupposed by that emotion.

Consider two examples cited by William James. The first is an experience reported by Stephen Bradley. . . .

> I thought I saw the Saviour, by faith, in human shape, for about one second in the room, with arms extended, appearing to say to me, Come. The next day I rejoiced with trembling; soon after my happiness was so great that I said that I wanted to die; this world had no place in my affections, as I knew of, and every day appeared to me as the Sabbath. I had an ardent desire that all mankind might feel as I did; I wanted to have them all love God supremely.[10]

The second is from Mrs. Jonathan Edwards.

> Part of the night I lay awake, sometimes asleep, and sometimes between sleeping and waking. But all night I continued in a constant, clear, and lively sense of the heavenly sweetness of Christ's excellent love, of his nearness to me, and of my dearness to him. I seemed to myself to perceive a glow of divine love come down from the heart of Christ in heaven into my heart in a constant stream, like a stream or pencil of sweet light. At the same time my heart and soul all flowed out in love to Christ, so that there seemed to be a constant flowing and reflowing of heavenly love, and I appeared to myself to float or swim, in these bright, sweet beams, like the motes swimming in the beams of the sun, or the streams of his light which come in at the window.[11]

Bradley tells of a vision in human shape, and Edwards reports a lively sense of Christ's love, which seemed to glow like a stream or pencil of light. Each of these experiences can only be properly described by reference to Christ and to Christian beliefs. One might try to separate the description of the core experience from its interpretation and to argue that only the interpretation is specifically Christian. But if the references to the Savior, the Sabbath, and God are eliminated from Bradley's report, we are left with something other than his experience. After deleting references to Christian concepts, we have a vision of a human shape with arms extended saying, "Come." Is this any less informed by Christian beliefs and doctrines than was the original experience? Surely the vision of a person with outstretched arms is not some universal archetype onto which Bradley has added an interpretation in Christian terms.[12] Nor can his experience of comfort and salvation be abstracted from his Christian beliefs. Sarah Edwards's experience is not a vision, but it would be inaccurate to describe it exclusively in general terms and to characterize it only as a lively sense of sweetness, accompanied by the sensation of floating in streams of bright light. Her report cannot be purged of references to Christ and Christian beliefs and still remain an accurate description of the experience.

An emotion, practice, or experience must be described in terms that can plausibly be attributed to the subject on the basis of the available evidence. The subject's self-ascription is normative for describing the experience. This is a kind of first-person privilege that has nothing at all to do with immediate intuitive access to mental

states versus mediated inferential reasoning. It is strictly a matter of intentionality. It is like the distinction between the words of a speaker and those of one who reports what he says. The speaker's meaning, and his choice of words to express that meaning, are normative for the reporter. The latter may choose to paraphrase or elaborate, but the words uttered by the speaker are authoritative for determining the message. Where it is the subject's experience which is the object of study, that experience must be identified under a description that can plausibly be attributed to him. In the cases cited above, the subject's own words constitute the description. If, however, an observer or analyst describes the experience of another, he must formulate it in terms that would be familiar to, incorporating beliefs that would be acknowledged by, the subject. If challenged, he must offer reasons in support of his ascription of those concepts and beliefs to the subject. He is not responsible for reasons offered in support of those beliefs.

The explanation the analyst offers of that same experience is another matter altogether. It need not be couched in terms familiar or acceptable to the subject. It must be an explanation of the experience as identified under the subject's description, but the subject's approval of the explanation is not required. Bradley's experience might be explained in terms of the conflicts of early adolescence and that of Sarah Edwards as a consequence of her life with Mr. Edwards. No reference need be made to God or Christ in the construction of these explanations. If the explanation is challenged, the one who proposed it is responsible for providing reasons to support it and for showing how it accounts for the evidence better than any of its rivals does. . . .

In the study of religion considerable confusion has resulted from the failure to distinguish the requisite conditions for the identification of an experience under a certain description from those for explaining the experience. The analyst must cite, but need not endorse, the concepts, beliefs, and judgments that enter into the subject's identification of his experience. He must be prepared to give reasons for his ascription of those beliefs and judgments to the subject, but he need not defend the beliefs and judgments themselves. If he proposes an explanatory hypothesis to account for the experience, he need not restrict himself to the subject's concepts and beliefs, but he must be prepared to give reasons in support of his explanation.

Descriptive and Explanatory Reduction

We are now in a position to distinguish two different kinds of reduction. *Descriptive reduction* is the failure to identify an emotion, practice, or experience under the description by which the subject identifies it. This is indeed unacceptable. To describe an experience in nonreligious terms when the subject himself describes it in religious terms is to misidentify the experience, or to attend to another experience altogether. To describe Bradley's experience as simply a vision of a human shape, and that of Mrs. Edwards as a lively warm sense that seemed to glow like a pencil of light, is to lose the identifying characteristics of those experiences. To describe the experience of a mystic by reference only to alpha waves, altered heart rate, and changes in bodily temperature is to misdescribe it. To characterize the

experience of a Hindu mystic in terms drawn from the Christian tradition is to misidentify it. In each of these instances, the subject's identifying experience has been reduced to something other than that experienced by the subject. This might properly be called reductionism. In any case, it precludes an accurate identification of the subject's experience.

Explanatory reduction consists in offering an explanation of an experience in terms that are not those of the subject and that might not meet with his approval. This is perfectly justifiable and is, in fact, normal procedure. The explanandum is set in a new context, whether that be one of covering laws and initial conditions, narrative structure, or some other explanatory model. The terms of the explanation need not be familiar or acceptable to the subject. Historians offer explanations of past events by employing such concepts as socialization, ideology, means of production, and feudal economy. Seldom can these concepts properly be ascribed to the people whose behavior is the object of the historian's study. But that poses no problem. The explanation stands or falls according to how well it can account for all the available evidence.

Failure to distinguish between these two kinds of reduction leads to the claim that any account of religious emotions, practices, or experience must be restricted to the perspective of the subject and must employ only terms, beliefs, and judgments that would meet with his approval. This claim derives its plausibility from examples of descriptive reduction but is then extended to preclude explanatory reduction. When so extended, it becomes a protective strategy. The subject's identifying description becomes normative for purposes of explanation, and inquiry is blocked to insure that the subject's own explanation of his experience is not contested. On this view, to entertain naturalistic explanations of the experiences of Bradley and Edwards is reductionist because these explanations conflict with the convictions of the subjects that their experiences were the result of divine activity in their lives.

Many of the warnings against reductionism in the study of religion conflate descriptive and explanatory reduction. Eliade exhorts the historian of religion to understand religious data on their own plane of reference and contrasts this understanding with the reductive accounts offered by social scientists.[13] Wilfred Cantwell Smith[14] contends that a necessary requirement of the validity of any statement about a religion is that it be acknowledged and accepted by adherents of that religious tradition. This is appropriate if addressed to the problem of providing identifying descriptions of experiences in different traditions, but it is inappropriate if extended to include all statements about religion. . . .

Protective Strategies

The neglect or refusal to distinguish between descriptive and explanatory reduction constitutes the core of an apologetic strategy. Recognition of the requirement that religious experience and belief must be identified under the description employed by the subject is used to argue that all accounts of religious experience must be acceptable to the subject. This accords with the assumption that in order to understand religious experience one must participate in that experience or reproduce it in oneself.

Smith explicitly formulates the rule that "no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers."[15] He contends that in order to understand the Qur'an as a religious document, one must approach it in the same spirit as a Muslim would.[16] One must read it as if he already believed it to be the word of God. We ought not to study Muslim, Buddhist, or Jewish beliefs and practices but must learn to see the world through Muslim, Buddhist, or Jewish eyes. Understanding requires the scholar to share in the experience or the way of life of a particular tradition and to elicit or reproduce the same in his readers. Eliade describes the task of understanding as a hermeneutic one and exhorts the historian of religion to "relive" the existential situation of those whom he studies.

This requirement gains its appeal from the consideration that a religious experience, belief, or practice must be identified under the description employed by the subject; but it exhibits confusion when it is extended to preclude explanatory hypotheses that differ from those of the subject. In order to understand Astor's experience of a miracle, I must ascribe to him the belief that the event cannot be exhaustively explained in naturalistic terms, but I need not endorse that belief. After accurately citing Astor's description of the event, including his explanation of what he saw, I may go on to propose a competing explanation both of the event and of Astor's perception. To require that any explanation of a religious experience be one that would be endorsed by the subject is to block inquiry into the character of that experience. . . .

Religious beliefs are always to be construed in such a way that they accord with the beliefs we hold to be true. This is clearly a protective strategy. Quine argues for what he calls "the principle of charity."[17] We ought so to assign meanings to the sentences of an alien language that we ascribe to the speakers of that language beliefs that, in the main, accord with our own. At some point it becomes more plausible to assume we have mistranslated than to ascribe to other speakers beliefs that seem widely off the mark. If our translation leads us to ascribe to the speaker such sentences as, "The sunlight is usually brighter at night than in the daytime," or "No one can throw a stone farther than the distance measured by ten paces," then we ought to consider revising the translation to accord with the beliefs that we know to be true and that we ascribe to the speaker. . . .

Force

In order to elucidate an experience, one must identify it under a description that can be ascribed to the subject of that experience. But when the analyst has given an identifying description of the experience, and has cited the relevant concepts and beliefs while withholding his endorsement of those beliefs, has he really captured the force of the experience? Some would argue that he has not, that to describe the experience of Astor, Bradley, or Edwards in such a way as to understand its force, one must have recourse to the kind of acquaintance or participation called for by Schleiermacher and Otto. A commitment by the analyst to a nonreligious expla-

nation is said to preclude appreciation of the authority of the experience for the subject.

In his remarks on Frazer's *The Golden Bough,* Wittgenstein suggests that the story Frazer tells about the King of the Wood at Nemi is impressive in a way that his proposed explanation of the practice of killing the king is not.[18] Wittgenstein concludes that the satisfaction we seek cannot come from any kind of explanation but only from a description that draws connections between our practices and those of the people whom we are trying to understand. The proper identifying description satisfies where the explanation does not. It is implausible to suggest that such gripping practices rest on mistaken perceptions or theories about the world.

> Even the idea of trying to explain the practice—say the killing of the priest-king—seems to me wrong-headed. All that Frazer does is to make this practice plausible to people who think as he does. It is very queer that all these practices are finally presented, so to speak, as stupid actions.
>
> But it never does become plausible that people do all this out of sheer stupidity. . . .
>
> I think one reason why the attempt to find an explanation is wrong is that we have only to put together in the right way what we *know,* without adding anything, and the satisfaction we are trying to get from the explanation comes of itself. . . .
>
> We can only *describe* and say, human life is like that. . . .
>
> Compared with the impression that what is described here makes on us, the explanation is too uncertain.[19]

The practices themselves are deeper and more gripping than any theories or explanations either we or the practitioners might associate with them.

This is an important point. An explanation must satisfy in that it must account for the force of the experience. It is not necessary for the analyst to share the experience, however, to understand its force. It is the account which must satisfy, and an account can satisfy if it makes clear why the experience has the power it has for the subject. Knowing that my partner takes the log on the trail ahead to be a bear is sufficient for me to understand why it has a dramatic effect on his emotions and behavior. I have elucidated his fear by identifying the object of that fear as he perceives it, and I can see how the fear was occasioned. I can understand his fear without sharing his perception.

The appeal to the force of the experience can be used to serve a protective strategy. D. Z. Phillips argues that religious beliefs are irreducible in the sense that they cannot be explained in nonreligious terms. The impressive character of any religious belief or practice eludes all attempts at explanation.

> One may be interested in investigating the consequences of various religious beliefs for other social movements and institutions, or the historical development of religious beliefs. Yet, such investigations would not be an investigation into the impressiveness of the beliefs. The impressiveness may be elucidated—we have seen how symbol may be placed alongside symbol—but it cannot be explained.[20]

Force or impressiveness is not defined independently but is said to be that which is lost whenever an attempt is made to explain religious phenomena. This remark suggests that what is really distinctive about religious phenomena is their resistance to explanation, or their anomalous status with respect to all natural explanations. No attempt to explain them can be permitted without losing their distinctively religious character. The impressiveness of religious phenomena is identified as that which is lost whenever explanations are proposed for those phenomena.

The rejection of any kind of explanation is presented by Phillips as a plea for neutrality with respect to the truth of religious beliefs and a rejection of reductionism of all kinds. In fact, however, it is not a neutral position at all but conceals a substantial commitment. The function of Phillips's remarks is similar to that of Otto's instructions to his readers. If the experience can be explained, it is not religious. Like *numinous* and *miracle,* the *impressiveness* of religious beliefs, as Phillips uses the term, includes in the rules for its proper application the condition that it will be anomalous with respect to any proposed explanation. . . .

Phillips recognizes that religious experience is constituted by concepts and beliefs, and he urges attention to the grammar of those concepts. He argues that the rules of that grammar must govern any account of the experience. If questions are raised about the validity of beliefs assumed by the subject in his identification of the experience, one has imported issues from outside the religious form of life and ipso facto shown that one does not understand that life. . . .

When the question of how to account for the force of the experience is not employed in a protective strategy, it is a legitimate one. It is likely that no general account can be given which is adequate to capture the force or impressiveness of different kinds of experience. Let us briefly consider two kinds of experience, ordinary perception and the power of a work of art. Both can be gripping and forceful, though in different ways. The authority of perception consists in what we have called, following James, its noetic quality. . . . [T]his quality is best accounted for by the assumption of a causal connection between the perceptual experience and that which is perceived. I will withdraw my claim to have seen a tree if I learn that my visual image of the tree can be traced to some irrelevant cause and that I would have had the same image even if the tree had not been there. The force of my experience of climbing Mount Rainier, as compared with merely imagining the climb, derives from the judgments I make about the connections between myself, the mountain, and the rest of the world. My judgment about how the image in my mind is caused affects the experience, making it more vivid and gripping than if I believe I am just entertaining the possibility of the climb.

Hume thought that belief in a proposition was to be distinguished from merely entertaining that proposition by the greater vivacity of the impression. He illustrates this by comparing the experiences of one who reads a book believing it to be true and another who takes it to be fiction.

> If one person sits down to read a book as a romance, and another as a true history, they plainly receive the same ideas, and in the same order; nor does the incredulity of the one, and the belief of the other hinder them from putting the very same sense upon their author. His words produce the same ideas in both; tho' his testimony has not the same influence on them. The latter has a more lively conception of the incidents. He enters deeper into the concerns of the persons: represents to himself their actions, and characters, and friendships, and enmities: He even goes so far as

> to form a notion of their features, and air, and person. While the former, who gives no credit to the testimony of the author, has a more faint and languid conception of all these particulars; and except on account of the style and ingenuity of the composition, can receive little entertainment from it.[21]

Hume is wrong on two counts. It is not a matter of common experience that what is taken to be true is more vivid and lively than what is thought to be fiction. Often novels, plays, and films move us more dramatically than do newspapers or history texts. We do experience something we take to be true in a manner that differs from our experience of something we consider fictional, but that difference is not accurately described by reference to the vivacity of the conception. It is a matter of the connections that we believe hold between what we are reading and the world in which we live. If I read in the paper that a portion of the west-side highway has been closed for repairs, I will alter my route when leaving the city. The murder in a mystery novel may be more vividly portrayed than the murder that took place last night on my block and about which I am now reading in the morning paper, but the latter may have a force and effect upon my emotions and behavior which the novel lacks.

The force of the experience is due to judgments and assumptions about the relation of this experience to the rest of my life and to the world in which I live. Those judgments and assumptions are constitutive of the experience. Wittgenstein and Phillips are correct in calling attention to the fact that the force of the experience is a matter of subtle connections between our concepts and the practices that inform our lives, but they are incorrect in claiming that these connections never involve explanations. The difference between my skiing down a slope and my entertaining the possibility of skiing down the slope is not only a matter of logical or conceptual connection. If I take it to be an accurate perception of what is happening to me now because it stands in a certain causal relation to the slope, the snow, and the terrain I am speeding past, the experience will differ considerably from one in which I am entertaining the possibility of that run, either eagerly or with some trepidation, as I ride up the chair lift. The relevant connections are conceptual, but they include conceptions of causes.

Despite Hume's claim to the contrary, novels, paintings, rites, and other works of art move us deeply even when we are aware that they are fictions. Many different theories have been proposed to account for the force of our experience of art, and it is not possible to examine them here. Wollheim has suggested that the power of a painting, a musical composition, or a ceremony derives from its having been constructed so as to invite the projection and externalization of complex mental states.[22] A work of art succeeds to the extent that it does not foster denial or romanticization but enables a person to experience his or her own inner states with honesty and precision, and so aids in the process of self-discovery. Wolterstorff has proposed that art is best understood as the creation of possible worlds other than the actual one. Fictional characters are denizens of those worlds, and the power of the work derives from the possibilities presented by those alternatives. In either case, a work of art shows something that is true of ourselves and opens up new possibilities, and it can achieve both functions while we recognize it to be a fiction.[23]

Of the two kinds of force we have considered, the noetic quality of religious experience in theistic traditions is closer to the force of ordinary perception than it is to the power of fiction. To experience God or his providential activity is not, from the subject's point of view, to entertain a possible world in which there is a God and he governs events in the world, nor is it to entertain a concept that permits one to externalize certain hopes and fears by projecting them onto another plane. One might suspect that the proper explanation of religious belief and experience would be found along these lines, but it is not the account that would be given by the believer. The experience has a noetic quality for the subject and is taken to reveal something about the world beyond the individual self. In this way, it is similar to the experience of actually skiing down the slope, as contrasted with that of thinking about skiing down the slope. . . .

The force of religious experience is best accounted for by the fact that the criteria for identifying an experience as religious include reference to an explanatory claim. The experience is perceived by the subject as eluding explanation solely in terms of his own mental states but as having been produced in such a way that it supports his beliefs about the world, beliefs that are distinctive of the tradition within which it is being characterized as religious. The experience provides support for and confirmation of those beliefs.

Evidence for the hypothesis that the identification of an experience as religious includes an embedded causal claim is of two kinds. First, the descriptions of religious experience which purport to be neutral with regard to beliefs and explanations include disguised explanatory commitments. Second, critics of reductionist approaches claim that the distinctive character of religious experience and belief is lost when the attempt is made to explain them. This shows that what is distinctive about religious belief and practice for these critics is that they are not amenable to nonreligious explanations. These criticisms provide support for the claim that the distinguishing mark of the religious is, after all, a matter of explanation.

Explaining Religious Experience

The term *experience* is ambiguous. When I inquire about what a person has experienced at a certain moment, my question is ambiguous between two meanings: (1) how it seemed to that person at that time; and (2) the best explanation that can be given of the experience. This ambiguity is present in our ordinary talk about perception. I may have been frightened by the bear that I saw up ahead on the trail. My friend points out to me that it is not a bear but a log, and my fear subsides. What did I really see up ahead? By one interpretation of the word *see*, I saw a bear. That is the way I apprehended it, and that apprehension accounts for my fear and behavioral response. By another interpretation, what I really saw was a log, and I took it for a bear. I was wrong about what I experienced, and now that I can explain what happened I can correct my mistake.

This distinction is similar to, but differs from, Chisholm's distinction between the comparative and epistemic uses of "appear" words. It differs because Chisholm

suggests that the comparative use, the description of how it appears to the subject, is a report of an immediate experience that is independent of interpretation or other beliefs. No such unmediated experience is possible. The distinction drawn here is between one interpretation, which presupposes a particular explanation of the experience, and another interpretation, also assuming an explanation, which is adopted by another person or by the same person at a later time. The perception of the object ahead as a bear was one explanation, and that was replaced by a better explanation when more information became available. That better explanation led to a reinterpretation of the experience.

It is important to note that both senses of *experience* assume explanations. It is not the case that explanation enters only into the second sense. The first, the description of his or her experience as assumed by the subject at the time of the experience, presupposes an explanation. If the distinguishing mark of the religious is that it is assumed to elude natural explanation, then the labeling of the experience as religious by the subject includes the belief that it cannot be exhaustively explained in naturalistic terms. The attempts of scholars as diverse as Eliade and Phillips to preclude issues of explanation from entering into accounts of religious experience and belief are undercut by the recognition that explanatory commitments are assumed in the identification of an experience as religious.

The distinction we have drawn between descriptive and explanatory reduction is tailored to meet this ambiguity. Descriptive reduction is inappropriate because the experience must be identified under a description that can be ascribed to the subject at the time of the experience. The experience must be described with reference to its intentional object. In the example given above, my fright was the result of noticing a bear ahead of me. The fact that the analyst must attempt to formulate a description of the experience which captures the way it was apprehended by the subject does not mean that no explanation is incorporated into the subject's description, nor does it mean that the analyst is not engaged in an inference toward the best explanation in his attempt to arrive at that formulation.

The identification of an experience under a description that can be ascribed to the subject is required before any explanation of the experience can be proposed. Every explanation assumes a description of that which is to be explained. One cannot explain phenomena as such but only phenomena under a description.[24] An event, action, emotion, or experience can be identified only under a certain description, and reference must be made to that description in any explanation that is offered. If the relevant description is not acknowledged, it will be tacitly assumed. The analyst's choice of the appropriate description of an experience or action is not entirely independent of the explanation he goes on to offer. If a practice is completely baffling to me under a certain description, and would be recognizable as a practice common to the culture in which it is ensconced if the description were altered slightly, then I will be tempted to alter it and to ascribe the discrepancy to defects in my observation or in the reports from which I am working. If the evidence for the original description is compelling, I must accept the anomaly and search further for an explanation; if it is weak, I may adjust the description in the interest of overall plausibility. This is the proper point at which to invoke Quine's principle of charity. I want my total account, with its descriptive and explanatory components, to be the most plausible of the available alternatives. I adjust each until I reach a reflective equilibrium.

The recognition that religious experience is constituted by concepts and beliefs permits an optimism with respect to the descriptive task which would not otherwise be possible. There is no reason, in principle, to despair about the possibility of understanding the experience of persons and communities that are historically and culturally remote from the interpreter. The difficulty is not posed by an unbridgeable gap between an experience that can only be known by acquaintance and the concepts in which that experience is expressed. Because the concepts and beliefs are constitutive of the experience, careful study of the concepts available in a particular culture, the rules that govern them, and the practices that are informed by them will provide access to the variety of experiences available to persons in that culture. Though it may be difficult to reconstruct, the evidence required for understanding the experience is public evidence about linguistic forms and practices. We attempt to formulate a description of the experience from the perspective of the subject, but the evidence is, in principle, accessible to us. . . .

If explanation is as central to the study of religious experience as this account suggests, then why has it not been recognized as such? Why is the explanatory component so often disguised or ignored in favor of appeals to a sense or a consciousness that is contrasted with belief? There are two motivations for this procedure: phenomenological accuracy and a protective strategy adopted for apologetic purposes. The first arises from the fact that those who report religious experiences typically take them to be independent of and more fundamental than beliefs or theories. The sense of the infinite or the consciousness of finitude is not apprehended as a theoretical commitment but as an inchoate sense that provides a practical orientation. It seems to the subject to be inaccurate to classify it with inference, inquiry, and hypothesis. Since an understanding of the experience requires that it be identified under a description that accords with that of the subject, it is tempting to assimilate it to the case of sensations, and to assume that sensations are independent of practices and beliefs. For these reasons, phenomenological accuracy appears to some to require that the experience be described so as to make it independent of beliefs.

The appeal to a sense or consciousness that is allegedly innocent of explanatory commitments has an apologetic advantage. If such an appeal could be made, it would be unaffected by any developments in science or other kinds of inquiry. It would, as Schleiermacher said, leave one's physics and psychology unaffected. Religious belief and practice could be seen as derived from this independent experience, and the difficult questions that have been raised for religion by changes in our other beliefs could be circumvented. Rather than seeing the experience as constituted by the beliefs, one could view the beliefs as expressive of the experience. The direction of derivation would be reversed, and that would serve the task of apologetics. If it did not provide a way of justifying religious beliefs and practices, it would at least protect them from the criticism that they conflict with ordinary and scientific beliefs.

As we have seen, the protective strategy used by those who argue that religious experience is independent of concepts and beliefs is parallel to that adopted by those who claim it is permeated by concepts but independent of referential or explanatory

commitments. In both cases, accounts of religious experience are restricted to those that would be endorsed by the person having the experience, and consequently the possibility of those accounts conflicting with the claims of the believer is precluded. Whether one describes an allegedly prelinguistic affective experience or confines oneself to elucidating the grammar of a particular religious practice or experience, the result cannot possibly come into conflict with any beliefs or explanations from outside the religious perspective.

A consequence of such strategies is that language that appears to be descriptive may be intended to evoke or reproduce the experience that is purportedly described. Schleiermacher is explicit about his assumption that direct acquaintance is required for understanding the sense of the infinite; thus he sees the need to elicit that sense in his readers. Rhetorical language is carefully constructed, and the speech or essay becomes an edifying discourse, of which Schleiermacher's *On Religion* is a prime example. He regards his evocative language as a catalyst that directs the reader's attention to a sense that is already present but has not been nurtured. In fact, however, the language may be not merely catalytic but constitutive of the experience. If the reader follows Schleiermacher's instruction to attend to the moment before the rise of consciousness and to recognize the unity intuited there, he or she may discover that unity. That discovery ought not, however, to be cited as evidence for the unity of the world or of the infinite. An experience that has been evoked by carefully chosen rhetoric and by assuming a cultural tradition informed by theism cannot be taken as evidence for a unity that is independent of our concepts and beliefs.

Descriptions of doubt, anxiety, or faith in existentialist literature are often employed in a similar way. Kierkegaard displays dazzling literary and analytic skills in the service of edification. His analyses are often designed to elicit experiences and affections in his reader. Just as the spiritual director and the skilled revivalist preacher know how to evoke certain emotions and attitudes, an author can employ rhetorical skills to elicit affections in a reader. That ability presupposes a considerable amount of analysis. Kierkegaard's writings contain very subtle analyses of despair, faith, and doubt. As Aristotle knew, one can often learn more about emotions and attitudes from the orator or poet than from anyone else. Unlike Aristotle's *Rhetoric,* however, Schleiermacher's *On Religion* and most of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works are written in a rhetorical style intended to elicit that which is being described. Much of the literature in the history and phenomenology of religion can also be viewed in this light. Such terms as *numinous, holy,* and *sacred* are presented as descriptive or analytical tools but in conjunction with warnings against reductionism, they function to preclude explanation and evoke a sense of mystery or awe. They are used to persuade the reader that the distinguishing mark of the religious is some quality that eludes description and analysis in nonreligious terms. Otto's use of *numinous* is an example of how one can employ the term to create a sense of mystery and present it as analysis. Such approaches to the study of religion are offered as neutral descriptions, but they assume not only a theory of religion but also religious theory.

We have distinguished the tasks of description and explanation and have argued that explanation is central both to religious experience and to its study. What kind of explanation, then, might we expect to construct for religious experience? An experience or an event can be explained only when it is identified under a description. And we have concluded that the distinguishing mark of religious experience is the subject's belief that the experience can only be accounted for in religious terms. It is this belief, and the subject's identification of his or her experience under a particular description, which makes it religious. If the concepts and beliefs under which the subject identifies his or her experience determine whether or not it is a religious experience, then we need to explain why the subject employs those particular concepts and beliefs. We must explain why the subject was confronted with this particular set of alternative ways of understanding his experience and why he employed the one he did. In general, what we want is a historical or cultural explanation.

This holds both for discrete, datable religious experiences, of the sort on which James concentrates, and for the identification of an underlying and pervasive religious moment in experience. Why did Stephen Bradley identify his accelerated heart rate as the work of the Holy Spirit? What caused Astor to regard what he saw as a miracle whereas Bingham remained skeptical? Why did Schleiermacher apprehend the moment that precedes thought as a sense of the infinite and discern a feeling of absolute dependence which accompanies all consciousness of the polarity of self and world? For Bradley, we would need to know something about Methodist revivalism in early nineteenth-century New England, about the particular meeting he attended earlier in the evening, and about the events in his life up to that moment. To explain Astor's beliefs about what he saw it would be necessary to acquaint oneself with Roman Catholic teachings on miracles, the significance of the shrine at Lourdes, and the details of Astor's background. To explain Schleiermacher's sense of the infinite, his feeling of absolute dependence, and his apprehension of all events as miracles, one would need to know more about his early years among the Moravians, his study of Spinoza, and the circle of friends in Berlin for whom he wrote *On Religion.* Each of these instances requires acquaintance with the Christian tradition and with the particular forms of that tradition which shaped the person and his experience.

For experiences sought in highly manipulative settings, as in meditative traditions where the training is carefully prescribed and a person is guided by a spiritual director in the interpretation of the states of mind and body achieved by the regimen, explanations of the sort suggested by Schachter's experiment seem clearly relevant. The novice learns to make attributions that accord with the tradition, and he engages self-consciously in manipulations to attain states that confirm those attributions. For seemingly more spontaneous but still relatively discrete and datable experiences in less contrived settings, one would still look to explain the experience by accounting for why the subject makes these particular attributions. . . . The phenomenologist of religion has often claimed that elaborately contrived ritualistic settings are expressions of the pervasive sense of the sacred or the infinite in human experience, but it seems more likely that the supposedly natural and spontaneous experiences are derived from beliefs and practices in much the same way that an experience is produced in the more disciplined traditions of meditative practice. How did Schleiermacher and others come to think that the sense of the

infinite or the sense of finitude was independent of and prior to the beliefs and practices of a culture shaped by theism? His identification of what he takes to be a universal moment in human experience seems clearly to reflect the concept of God as Creator and Governor derived from the Hebrew Bible and the traditions it formed. The consciousness Schleiermacher accurately describes may, upon investigation, turn out to be the product of prior religious beliefs and practices.

Inquiry may demonstrate that some sense or intuition that appears to be independent of beliefs and practices is actually an artifact that developed under particular historical circumstances. Elizabeth Anscombe calls attention to the fact that some of the central concepts of modern moral philosophy, including the distinctively moral uses of *ought* and *right*, have no parallel in Aristotle or in other classical authors. Contemporary moral philosophers debate Hume's claim that one cannot derive ought from is, or Moore's discussion of the naturalistic fallacy, as if they were trying to clarify concepts that are invariant across periods and cultures and that are crucial for moral experience everywhere. Why, then, does that sense of *ought* seem so alien to the moral reasoning we find in Aristotle? Anscombe points out that between Aristotle and Hume our language and practice was shaped by theism, particularly by Christianity. She suggests that the modern concept of moral obligation is not an intuition that is independent of culture and belief, but that it derives from a law conception of ethics, and that that conception assumes belief in a divine lawgiver.

> Naturally it is not possible to have such a conception unless you believe in God as a lawgiver; like Jews, Stoics, and Christians. But if such a conception is dominant for many centuries, and then is given up, it is a natural result that the concepts of "obligation," of being bound or required as by a law, should remain though they had lost their root; and if the word "ought" has become invested in certain contexts with the sense of "obligation," it too will remain to be spoken with special emphasis and a special feeling in these contexts.[25]

The concept of ought, and the related sense of obligation, have survived outside of the conceptual framework that produced them and made them intelligible. The moral sentiments Hume describes and maps so well are artifacts that were formed by earlier beliefs and practices.

It seems quite likely that the feeling of absolute dependence and Otto's sense of the numinous are legacies of belief in the God of the Hebrew Bible and Christian tradition and of the practices informed by that belief. These experiences now appear to be autonomous and independent of that belief and that tradition. At a time in which belief in a transcendent Creator and associated metaphysical doctrines have been rejected by many, the habits of interpretation informed by those beliefs remain firmly entrenched in cultural patterns of thought, action, and feeling. Belief in God as Creator once provided the justifying context for these affections and practices. Now the direction of justification is reversed, and attempts are made to defend the beliefs by appeal to the affective experiences and practices. The sense of finitude, the feeling of absolute dependence, the practice of worship, and the grammar that governs the use of the word *God* are appealed to in order to justify the traditional religious statements without which this sense, feeling, practice, and grammar would not be intelligible.

These are only some suggestions of the kind of explanation that might be offered of religious experience. While one might venture a hypothesis to account for Bradley's accelerated heart rate or the recovery that Astor witnessed, that approach will not yield an explanation of their experiences. What must be explained is why they understood what happened to them or what they witnessed in religious terms. This requires a mapping of the concepts and beliefs that were available to them, the commitments they brought to the experience, and the contextual conditions that might have supported their identification of their experiences in religious terms. Interest in explanations is not an alien element that is illegitimately introduced into the study of religious experience. Those who identify their experiences in religious terms are seeking the best explanations for what is happening to them. The analyst should work to understand those explanations and discover why they are adopted.

Notes

1. See John Y. Fenton, "Reduction in the Study of Religion," *Soundings* 53 (1970): 61–76; and Hans H. Penner and Edward Yonan, "Is a Science of Religion Possible?" *Journal of Religion* 52 (1972): 107–33.
2. Penner and Yonan, "Is a Science of Religion Possible?"
3. See Mircea Eliade, *The Quest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 1–53.
4. Eliade, *Quest*, p. 6.
5. See Eliade, *Quest*, p. 35.
6. Eliade, *Quest*, p. 25.
7. Eliade, *Quest*, p. 10.
8. See Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Sheed (New York: Meridian, 1966), p. xiii, "To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art, or any other study is false; it misses the unique and irreducible element in it—the element of the sacred."
9. The ascription of unconscious beliefs or desires presents special problems. For a good discussion, see Arthur W. Collins, "Unconscious Belief," *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969): 667–80. Even in these cases, the beliefs and desires must be described in terms that the subject would understand and that could plausibly be attributed to him or her.
10. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902), pp. 189–90.
11. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 276.
12. Eliade assumes the existence of archetypal patterns that are given different interpretations in different cultures. See Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. The identification of such patterns is highly arbitrary, however, and encourages the scholar to ignore the contextual details of religious experience.
13. Explanatory reduction is permissible, but descriptive reduction is not. Eliade, however, decries explanatory reduction, while his practice of treating symbols and rites as universal archetypes, abstracted from their social and cultural contexts, amounts to descriptive reduction. This is precisely the wrong combination.
14. See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Religious Diversity*, ed. W. G. Oxtoby (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 152, and *Faith and Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 97.
15. Smith, *Religious Diversity*, p. 146.
16. See Smith, *Religious Diversity*, p. 31.

17. Willard van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), p. 59.

18. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's* The Golden Bough, ed. R. Rhees, trans. A. C. Miles and R. Rhees (Retford, Engl.: Brynmill, 1979), pp. 1–9.

19. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's* The Golden Bough, pp. 1–3.

20. D. Z. Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation* (Oxford, Engl.: Basil Blackwell, 1976), p. 151. (Eds.: see the article by Phillips in Part II of this volume.)

21. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, Engl.: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 97–98.

22. See Richard Wollheim, *On Art and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 84–100; and *The Sheep and the Ceremony* (Cambridge, Engl.: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

23. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford, Engl.: Clarendon Press, 1980).

24. See Arthur Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge, Engl.: Cambridge University Press, 1965), pp. 218–32.

25. G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 6.

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