

**THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES  
AND THE REST OF LIFE EXPERIENCE.  
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STUDY.<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this article is to describe how the religious experiences are related to the rest of the life experience. Its subject matter is the fact that religious experiences are normally studied as single selected events whereas this study states as its main thesis that religious experiences may be best analyzed in the lifelong perspective. On the basis of thirteen different religious autobiographies, the way one's religious experiences are linked with one's past, present and future is described. The past-related religious experiences may appear as learning from what happened in previous times, understanding or feeling that one's life has been in God's hands, religious illumination after intellectual struggles, or a religious solution after emotional tension. The present-related experiences describe particular life episodes in which the divine presence was felt or understood. Religious experiences may also change one's attitudes or actions in the future.

**Introduction**

This article is about relationships between religious experiences and everyday life. It is an attempt to answer the question of how religious experiences influence an individual's psychology and behavior. Investigators' opinions differ in their understanding of relationships between religious experiences and the rest of the life experience.

Some authors emphasize the extraordinary, short-time, episodic nature of these experiences. They claim that religious experience is something special and unexpected, occurring rarely over the span of one's life. An example here is Hardy (1979:29) who described these experiences as follows: "At certain times in their

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lives many people have had specific, deeply felt, transcendental experiences which have made them all aware of the presence of this power..." Although Hardy concentrated on an analysis of particular experiences shared by the respondents, his study provides evidence that there is a close relationship between life before and after the experience.

Other authors who have analyzed specific aspects of particular religious experiences also report evidence of the impact of religious experience on the rest of one's life. Their analysis, however, has been confined to a particular issue, such as the structure of religious experience (Girgensohn 1921, Gruehn 1926), the essence of the experience (Otto, 1950), similarities between and generalizations about different experiences (Hay & Morisy, 1978), or a chemical ecstasy (Clark 1969, Huxley 1954, Smith 2000).

Karl Girgensohn (1921) might be mentioned as one example of a researcher studying episodic religious experiences. Girgensohn and his co-workers analyzed reports of religious experiences the subjects had had during and after reading different religious texts. His goal was to find out and explain the functions of the emotional, rational and sensational components of a religious experience. Although Girgensohn acknowledged the impact of religious experiences on human psychology and behavior in everyday life, he primarily studied particular religious experiences manifested in an experimental situation.

Other authors relate religious experiences to the larger psychological context. This means that religious experience is not studied as a separate phenomenon but as part of one's lifelong experience. One good example of this is the study of Spilka, Brown and Cassidy (1992) on the structure of religious experience in relation to one's lifestyle before and after the experience. Their general conclusion was that "it is evident that reported mystical experiences, as theorized, relate to remembered pre-experience life circumstances and present perceptions of one's thinking and behavior".

Hjalmar Sundén (1966, 1969) understood religious experience to be a process of learning in which there is a need for preparation by getting to know the roles of man and God described in a religious narrative. Sundén relates religious experiences directly to the rest of the experiences during one's life. First, learning the description of the roles through religious narratives is a long process lasting from childhood to death. Second, religious experiences may appear and will appear in ordinary life situations. Third, personal motivation is needed to experience the role of God in certain situations. Therefore, according to Sundén, religious experience is very much a part of one's total life experience.

Paul Pruyser's (1976) criteria of pastoral diagnostics have affected later investigations of religious experiences from a lifelong perspective. He described seven dimensions of Christian faith that are most closely related to everyday life: awareness of the holy, acceptance of God's grace, being repentant and responsible, knowing God's leadership and guidance, involvement in organized religion, experiencing fellowship, and a sense of vocation. These dimensions, which have personal meaning, will determine the portrait of one's religious life. Pruyser's

categories were later used to make religious diagnoses, assess religious maturity, and describe optimal religious functioning (Malony, 1988, 1993). The main emphasis in all of these cases is to view religious experience from a lifelong rather than an episodic perspective.

James Fowler's (1981) faith development theory is another influential attempt to explain religious experience as a lifelong phenomenon. Fowler viewed faith as a way of seeing and understanding oneself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose. From his perspective it is possible to interpret religious experience as a giving of religious meaning to life events.

Although religious experiences may be studied as episodic, it is evident that they are related to each other and to the rest of one's life experience. According to Malony (1995) it is possible to interpret a religious experience on three different levels. First, a religious experience may be considered as a trait referring to common everyday routine religiosity. The trait ebbs and flows over extended periods of time in many persons. Second, religious experience may be thought of as a state existing for a time but not persisting over time. Such experiences are always very personal. Third, religious experience can be seen as a compound event. In this case religious experience is not defined "either as a set of behaviors over time, as in the trait of religiosity, or as a momentary event of intense feeling and insight" but these two meanings are joined together. Thus the event involves both a particular experience and its larger behavioral context.

Both perspectives, the episodic and the lifelong, have their own advantages. Concentrating on a single experience allows one to analyze deeply and describe the structure and functions of the experience. It provides a way of understanding what the religious experience is. The lifelong perspective relates religiosity to everyday life. To be religious is not merely having religious experiences but living religiously. The two above perspectives are not exclusive. It is possible to study a particular religious experience in relation to the larger psychological, sociological and religious contexts. In general it may be maintained that most studies on the subject have dealt with episodic religious experiences.

Although religious experiences can be studied separately, it is evident that they are related to each other and to the rest of the life experience. Therefore the lifespan perspective is followed. The goal of this study is to answer the research question: how are the religious experiences related to the rest of the life experience? Answering this question should explain the relationships between religious experiences and the psyche in lifespan perspective in more detail. Consequently, the relationship of a person's religious experiences to his or her past, present and future are investigated. To do this, two assumptions are considered.

First, we know about religious experiences mainly because they either have been verbalized or written down. This principle is valid for all kinds of religious experiences, including the "most mystical" ones. This research challenges the idea that religious experience can never be put into words (James 1902:371, Otto 1950, Riley 1988:10–11). As Katz (1992:4) asserts: "No one has any privileged access here to the original mystic's experience outside its textual incorporation." Despite the fact

that religious experience may be, and usually is, difficult to put into words, the way in which it is explained and known to others is through language.

The question may arise whether or not there are still religious experiences which cannot be or have not been verbalized. Perhaps there are, but we know very little or nothing about those experiences, so it is impossible to investigate, analyze or interpret them. This does not exclude the possibility of private, intimate experiences known only to the person who had them. However, even the statement “I felt something that had to do with my God I cannot explain” is a verbalization indicating that one has had a religious experience. For the purposes of this research, only verbalized (autobiographical), explicit religious experiences will be investigated.

Secondly it is assumed that autobiographical descriptions of religious experiences are valid and reliable. The authenticity of the religious experiences presented in the autobiographies is not questioned. There is no serious reason to think the authors were dishonest reporting them.

These assumptions thus form the basis of the following study. The method used will be described, the analysis of particular autobiographical religious experiences and their relatedness to the life experience will be described.

### **Method**

Sommer and Sommer (1997:179–191) describe the use of personal documents in social research. The first-person narrative offers an insight into experiences that is very difficult to obtain through any method apart from autobiography. In this research the method of the qualitative study of autobiographies was used. The method is of an inductive nature, that is, based on particular religious experiences of concrete persons. From these, generalizations about religious experiences were made. The procedure went through the following steps:

Selecting the autobiographies to be analyzed.

Defining the category of analysis.

Identifying religious experiences in autobiographies.

Identifying the relationships between religious experiences and life experiences.

Selecting the autobiographies to be analyzed. Firstly, the question of how the autobiographies should be selected needs to be answered. The selection of autobiographies was based on an attempt to find people who had an essential impact on Western (Christian) thought and/or spirituality. The use of the autobiographies of well-known people who had had intense religious experiences supplied the research with vivid material, as was noted by James in his Gifford lectures (James, 1902).

The autobiographies of the following persons were used: Karl Barth (1966), Anton Boisen (1960), Charles Darwin (E. Darwin, 1959), Charles Finney (1977), Harry E. Fosdick (1956), Karl Girgensohn (1926), E. Stanley Jones (1968), William D. Murray (1929), Wayne E. Oates (1983), Oral Roberts (1972), Albert Schweitzer (1949), Charles H. Spurgeon (1946) and Hudson J. Taylor (1976).

Defining the category of analysis. The category of analysis was religious experience, defined as any kind of life episode in which the divine, or God's, presence was experienced and/or understood. This definition was chosen for two reasons: 1) The category of the divine presence has been an essential characteristic of the definitions of religious experience since the legacy of William James. It is applicable to several theories of religious experience. 2) This category serves as a "key" for identifying religious experiences in one's autobiography.

This category also implies that if it is possible to identify life episodes where when the divine presence has been verbalized, under the categories of feeling or knowing, these episodes may be used as sources for further analysis. Both the emotional and rational explanations for the divine, or God's, presence were accepted as criteria for a religious experience. Statements like "I had a sweet sense of God's hand directing my life" and "I know that it was God who protected me" are both considered to be indicators of a religious experience. Thus, after having defined the category of analysis, it was possible to start working with the autobiographies.

Identifying religious experiences in autobiographies. The reading and analysis of autobiographies were done by the author. Every autobiography was read carefully and expressions that described the feeling or understanding of God's presence were marked. Then the marked expressions were analyzed in more detail and the entire life episode in which the divine presence was mentioned was identified. A list of religious experiences with their short descriptions was made.

A total of 121 religious experiences were identified in the thirteen autobiographies. In two autobiographies (Girgensohn and Darwin) only one religious experience was found. The largest number of religious experiences (twenty three) was found in Stanley Jones' autobiography. It must be said that the number of religious experiences identified in an autobiography does not indicate how many religious experiences the person really had. It is likely that none of the authors presented all of the religious experiences he had had during his lifetime in his autobiography. The objective of this study was not to analyze one particular author in detail, but to create a general theoretical model. The collected and analyzed material is a substantial source for that.

Identifying the relationships between religious experiences and life experiences. From this stage on the study starts to give a substantive answer to the research question. All 121 religious experiences identified in different autobiographies were taken into account. To answer the question concerning the relationships between people's religious experiences and the rest of their life experiences, the dimension of time was introduced. This means that an attempt was made to find out how a particular religious experience was related to the person's past, present or future situation. After identifying the temporal relationship, more concrete relationship categories were described. The discovery of relationships between religious experiences and the rest of life experiences went through the following steps.

1. Each religious experience identified was carefully read again. In each case it was noted whether the religious experience related to the person's past, present, or

future. Each religious experience was considered in its entirety. The life episode in which the divine presence was experienced or understood was placed into at least one of the three categories. First, the past-related experiences – the events preceding the person’s coming to feel the divine presence were described. Second, the present-related experiences – the religious experience was described as being limited to a concrete situation, without any reference to the past or the future. Third, the future-related experiences – the ways in which a religious experience influences the future were described.

As a result of the procedure, 70 past-related experiences, 24 present related experiences and 34 future-related experiences were identified. The total of 128 is due to the fact that in seven cases the analyzed experiences might be identified as being related both to the past and the future. The previous history of a religious experience and its impact on one’s future life were both explicitly described.

2. The identification of the religious experiences as being related to the past, present, or future led to the following question: “What kind of relationship exists between religious experience and the rest of life experience from the perspective of these three different aspects of time?” The answer to the question involved an attempt to describe more concretely how a religious experience is related to the overall experience regarding the three time perspectives. The religious experiences were read again and seven categories (ways) of relationship were identified: four relating to the past, one to the present and two to the future. Hence, every category described how a religious experience might be related to the life experience in the past, present or future.

3. Each religious experience was then placed into one of the seven categories. In the process the definitions of categories were developed and a list of experiences belonging to each category was created.

## Results

There now follows a presentation of the definitions of categories, the number of experiences in them, a short description of each category, and the respective autobiographical examples.

Relationships with the past. 1. Learning – the period of time and/or certain events that caused one to learn something religious<sup>2</sup> (9 cases).

In religious experiences belonging to this category, a particular period of life is described or identified as a learning process. Several life events are described as “tools”, or aids, of learning. The things that a person has learned are explicitly mentioned. These are, for example, a new knowledge, understanding God’s will, a principle of life, or a deeper understanding of a doctrine.

I will give some examples to illustrate this category. Karl Barth (1966:43) describes his coming to a new understanding of Christian doctrine in the following

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<sup>2</sup> In all the categories the word “religious” means something that is related to God, or the divine, in whatever way.

way: "... in these years I had to learn that Christian doctrine, if it is to merit its name and if it is to build up the Christian church in the world as she must need to be built up, has to be exclusively and conclusively the doctrine of Jesus Christ – of Jesus Christ as the living word of God spoken to us men." Finney (1977:72) describes the development of his style of preaching as follows: "... I was confirmed that God had led me, had taught me, and had given me right conceptions in regard to the best manner of winning souls."

2. Retrospective – a certain period of life is interpreted and experienced in relationship with God (9 cases).

To this category belongs the life retrospection, in which some segment of life or even the whole of life is experienced as God's work, something in God's hands, God's way of working, or God's miracle. Looking back on one's life and experiencing or understanding it as a journey with God was the case in nine autobiographies out of thirteen.

One example concerning a certain period of time is Barth's (1966:60) remembrance of a period of hard work in his life. "Today I myself am astonished that it was possible for me to carry on this work ... And I have reason to be thankful that it could be so ... I experience the most important of the "changes" that have taken place in me in these years." The other example concerns life as a whole. Schweitzer (1949:282) writes, "But I have had blessings too: that I am allowed to work in the service of mercy... That circumstances of my life provide in such varied ways favorable conditions for my work, I accept as something of which I would fain prove myself worthy."

3. Illumination – the achievement of a new religious understanding through intellectual struggles (19 cases).

In this type of experience a mainly intellectual or rational concern is described. As a result of this struggle that sometimes lasts for a long time, a new understanding is reached. It may concern a doctrine, a life principle, or a general understanding of religious issues.

Fosdick's (1956:268–269) struggle with the essence of Christianity may serve as an example here. "For me the essence of Christianity is incarnate in the personality of the Master, and it means basic faith in God, ... and in the fundamental principles of life's conduct which Jesus of Nazareth exhibited." The other example is Roberts' (1972:39) statement following his study of the role of Jesus in the Gospels and Acts: "It became clear to me that there was a great difference between being a Christian and being a follower of Jesus..."

4. Solution – an emotional tension or conflict finds a religious solution (33 cases).

In this type of religious experience the emotional and/or interpersonal tension or conflict is described. The struggle may concern everyday problems, religious issues, interpersonal conflicts, or emotional problems. Essential to this category is the fact that the "inner burning" is described in emotional categories. The solution may be described in emotional, rational, or behavioral terms. It should be pointed out that this category was present in the majority of the autobiographical cases analyzed.

Among the several examples two are worth mentioning here. Boisen (1960: 46–47) describes his religious struggling as follows: “The tension reached the breaking point on Easter morning 1891... I came back to my room and threw myself on my knees with an agonized call for help. And help came! Something seemed to say to me almost in words, “Don’t be afraid to tell...”“ Another example is Taylor (1976:41–42). He was concerned about his health and future plans. “... I lay very exhausted on the sofa, I just told the Lord all about it... The assurance was brought vividly home to me that whatever I asked of God in the name of Christ would be done...”

Relationship with the present. Situational experiences – a person feels or understands the divine presence in relation to a particular situation without reference to the past or future (24 cases).

In these cases an ordinary life situation is described, including the circumstances concerning when, where and how it happened. In addition, the role of God or the feeling of the divine presence is explained. The descriptions of such experiences are like episodes or examples in the autobiographies. It does not necessarily mean that they do not have any previous or subsequent history. However, the analysis of the text revealed no explicit evidence of that.

Two examples might be given here. Jones (1968:75–76) describes his traveling by boat to his mission field. “I was having my hour of evening prayer in my cabin... My inner voice peremptorily said to me: “Get up quickly and go to the deck.” ... I obeyed, and just as I got on deck, I saw my trunk go over the side of the vessel into a lighter as the baggage of another Jones. I rescued it, went back to my prayers, and said: “Father, you are not only sending me to India: You are looking after the baggage as well.” Another example might be Fosdick’s (1956:43) story about looking at a painting. “I still remember that awestruck hour when Munkacsy’s painting, “Christ before Pilate”, was exhibited in Buffalo and my father and I went to see it. Something indescribable and unforgettable happened inside of me that day.”

Relationships with the future. 1. A change of attitude – the acquisition of a new attitude or understanding of the world or self with a reference to the future (19 cases).

In these cases a new attitude toward the self or the world is acquired. The perspective changes. The impact of the experience on the future may concern a particular area of life (such as family, studies, or relationships with friends) or life as a whole. In the latter case the whole of one’s future is described from a new perspective (that is, God’s call).

An example of this kind of experience is Jones’ (1968:37) description of how God brought him “... into the freedom of being myself and not an absurd copy of Robert J. Bateman ... It fixed the pattern for the future: I would glance at men and gaze at Jesus”. The other example might be Roberts, (1972:32) who described his change of attitude and his becoming aware of Jesus as follows: “Then one day something happened that changed my attitude. My sister, Jewell, who lived seventeen miles away had an urge to come to our house. She came into my bedroom and said, ‘Oral, God is going to heal you’.”



2. Action – a concrete plan or activity triggered by a religious experience is described (15 cases).

In such experiences a concrete plan or vision for the future is discovered. In some cases the realization of the plan is also described. It means that sometimes people act in a very particular way because of the ideas, impulses, illuminations, or assurances they “receive” during a religious experience.

Stanley Jones, who is known as a missionary to India, describes how he became aware of his destination (Jones 1968:73), “I thought I was to go to Africa... Dear Father... Tell me and I’ll obey. What is it? Very clearly the voice spoke: ‘It is India’.” In other cases more concrete issues are involved like Oates’ (1983:38) distinct knowledge about his next step in life. “One Sunday evening during the early winter I slipped into a Methodist church service and prayed quietly during the worship service as to the direction of my life. This distinct impression and sense of resolve came to me that I should return to my home in Greenville and finish high school with my class.”

To summarize, an analysis of autobiographical religious experiences shows that they may be related to one’s past, present, and future. The past-related religious experiences may appear as learning from what happened in previous times, understanding or feeling that one’s life has been in God’s hands, religious illumination after intellectual struggles, or religious solution after emotional tension. The present related experiences describe particular life episodes in which the divine presence was felt or understood. Religious experiences may also change one’s attitudes or actions in the future. All this is an indication of how religious experience is related to the rest of the life experience.

## **Discussion**

In discussing the main result of this study, three issues of critical importance should be stressed. They are the reliability of the method, the number of autobiographies analyzed, and the religiosity of the people studied.

The reliability of the method has been a concern in all autobiographical studies (Allport 1942, Hammersley & Atkinson 1995) I personally identified, analyzed, and categorized all the religious experiences. On the one hand, this makes the study subjective. On the other, the procedure and the findings were presented step by step. The qualitative method cannot fully eliminate subjectivity. The criteria for evaluating the whole study might be the validity and the explanatory power of the categories of the described relationships.

The second concern is about the number of autobiographies analyzed. Are thirteen autobiographies too few or too many? Is it possible to make relatively comprehensive generalizations on the basis of this number? Thirteen autobiographies cannot describe all the possible varieties of (Christian) religious experiences. If the number of autobiographies analyzed were larger, some of the categories of relationships between religious experiences and the rest of life

experiences would probably be different. For example, learning and illumination were the main categories in Barth's case. Boisen served as the primary source of the category of solution. Jones' autobiography was full of future-related religious experiences. At the same time it may be assumed that categories of relationships are universal enough to incorporate other possible autobiographical examples as well.

The third concern is about the religiosity of the people analyzed. The majority of autobiographies depicted the lives of very dedicated, conservative, evangelical male Christians. They have provided valuable and useful material, but what may, and probably would, happen if additional autobiographies were analyzed is that the list of subcategories would be different. For example, adding female representatives of other denominations may give a different perspective.

In the introduction to the article, two perspectives on the study of religious experiences, as evidenced by different authors, were mentioned. Some authors focus on the transitory and extraordinary nature of these experiences. Others study religious experiences against the broader background of life experiences. As earlier studies have shown, these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. The research in question incorporated both of the two perspectives. First, a person's particular religious experiences were identified. Second, their relationship to the person's life experiences was described.

The list of relationships is my main answer to the question of how a person's religious experiences are related to the rest of their life experiences. Within the constraints I have identified, I believe I have given an adequate response to the question posed. However, the relatively small number of cited examples and the qualitative nature of the research mean that the results presented need further investigation as well as testing by other methods of research. If the results presented above give some new insights into the lifelong nature of religion this article will have fulfilled its purpose.

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