

## Chapter 13

# Phenomenology of Religious Experience: A Christian Perspective

**Joseph Olufemi Asha**

*Baptist College of Theology, Lagos, Nigeria*

### **ABSTRACT**

*In the Christian tradition, a spiritual experience is a phenomenon that in some sense remains controversial. Nonetheless, spiritual experience in Christianity refers to the personalization of the faith in Christ that transcends the normal. This is, however, critically contested and regrettably unexplored. It lends credence to why contemporary research on religious experience reveals that Christian spiritual experiences have the element of supernatural intervention by the Holy Spirit, although supernatural must not be confused with spectacular. It might be spectacular, as in the case of Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). Drawing upon extensive contemporary research, content analysis, and literature on religious experience, this study adopts descriptive methodology as techniques. The study situates religious experience as occurrence in an everyday situation of Christians through which they derive a clear inner realization of “the truth.” Findings reveal a significant implication for collective research on religious and spiritual experiences for Christians.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In phenomenological investigations of religious experience, there is much contemporary interest in religion as a powerful force, whether for good or bad in the society (Louchakova-Schwartz, 2017). There is a growing interest in the

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experiences within different religious traditions, as the experiential aspect of religion is where the traditions seem to converge thus creating an awareness and response to the divine or absolute. Throughout history there have been accounts of religious experiences. Religion is so entrenched in human nature that anthropologists have yet to discover a civilisation or culture with no trace of religion (Louchakova-Schwartz, 2017). From the earliest times of the Vedas and nature worship, humans have expressed an instinct that they are part of something greater (Dahl, 2010). They have felt influenced by powers which they have sought to appease by rituals and religious practice. At times people have felt a particular contact with a divine power, which they have worshipped, and by which they have felt guided. These experiences may be collected under different headings for further study. Religious experiences, however they are interpreted, cannot simply be ignored. They are too widespread to be disregarded as the delusions of a few feeble-minded individuals. Their effects are however, too transformative for them to be dismissed as irrelevant. It is therefore, through these experiences, a spiritual or 'higher' realm seems to enter human consciousness (Marion, 2016).

The religious individual places emphasis on the existence of another, different order of reality, called the sacred, outside the realm of physical reality. This reality is described and upheld by the particular belief system. Although it is ultimately inexpressible, unknowable and unattainable through physical means, it is accessible to individuals through the practice of their religion (Roy, 2001). A religious experience seems to refer to an experience as a result of the participation in the rituals of the religion, such as worship, prayer and other rituals. A deeply felt acceptance of salvation, a sense of unity, solitude and peace, or a warm feeling while participating in the rituals, or a strong urge to commit to certain principles of one's belief can be described as religious experience (Roy, 2001).

Recent phenomenological discoveries of religious experience reveal that everyday contains the seeds of the sacred and the empirical distinctions between the everyday and the holy emerges through the properties of the life-world (Steinbock, 2016). Hence, in theory, one can think of religious experience as an aspect of the mind which can be researched within the attitude attained by the process of diminutions. However, when one is confronted with the empirical intensity and tangibility of religious experiences of contemporary times, one would discover that religious experience does not merely follow pre-existing religious beliefs but generates its own religious beliefs and its own self-interpretations (Iqbal, Radulescu & Aleem, 2017). This however explains why contemporary Pentecostal and Charismatic worshipping is today increasing, in all probability precisely because it brings religion alive for its followers in an uplifting and lively experience of the spirit. Thus, contemporary New Age spiritualities involve experiences of different kinds, such as meditation, chanting, dancing, singing and channelling. Those who favour this kind of spirituality

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