

## Chapter 2

# Clarifications and Presuppositions

Before we go into the argument in detail, it might be useful to clarify some terms and notions. Aristotle stated that a complete definition is the *result* of a process of understanding, not the starting point. Nevertheless it is useful to make my usage of some of the notions that are the result of my own understanding so far transparent. These are the highly laden notions of “experience”, “spirituality” and “spiritual experience”, “religion”, “religious experience”, “religiosity”, “doctrine”, “faith” and “God”.

### 2.1 Experience

Experience is a holistic type of knowing including cognitive, affective, and motivational aspects. Cognitive aspects of an experience are those of an insight that can be translated into language, into a propositional structure of sentences. An affective component is the emotional tone of an experience. In contrast to a simply rational insight, for instance, that it is clever to stop when the traffic lights flash yellow, an experience contains an affective element as well. If you have ever been in the situation where you tried to cross a junction with the yellow light flashing and narrowly avoided an accident with a motorbike rider who started rapidly while you were about to drive into the junction and you just about avoided a collision by smashing your foot down on the brake, or the like, then the cognitive insight “one has to stop when the yellow lights start flashing if there is still enough distance to the junction” has been transformed into an experience. This is so because the affective-emotional component of the experience – the sudden flash of adrenaline that induces rapid arousal, the accompanying emotion of fear, and perhaps later anger at oneself, along with the quick changes in the hormonal transmission systems of our body and the neuronal excitation pattern in our brain – combined help to engrave the insight

much more deeply (Buchanan and Lovallo 2001).<sup>1</sup> This is extremely useful: a situation which we have experienced personally is much more deeply rooted in our memory if there is some affective-emotional overtone to it. We know all this from the research around memory and learning. We also know that positive emotions are, except for rare circumstances, much more effective as a memory enhancing tool. But every experience also contains a motivational element: anyone who has had an experience similar to the one described and had just about collided with someone else will normally be much more motivated to actually stick to the traffic rules. The driver in our example who knows now from his own experience how it is to not stop at the appropriate light with all its consequences, will in the future be more motivated to do so and will also be more effective in transmitting this experience to his children. Thus, when I say that experience is a holistic type of knowing, then I don't mean a soft wobbly undetermined holism. Rather I am referring to quite well known mechanisms in our memory, in our brain, and in our cognitive system. If more associative systems are being touched by an experience simultaneously, if affective processing and emotional memory are more strongly activated, and implicit networks in the brain that represent more the global feeling of a situation, then the situation will be represented in our memory more strongly and, moreover, will be represented in a particular relationship to ourselves as the one who has had the experience.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike an emotional arousal, experience always contains a cognitive element, the element of insight or understanding. One can, for instance, use Monteverdi, Schubert, Brahms, or soft pop-music to induce a certain sad mood. As long as this is not connected with a cognitive element, for instance, my own tendency to become sad, the impact a certain kind of music has on human emotions, or Monteverdi's power to redirect pain into art, it is not an experience.

The standard example for an experience is travelling, as Gadamer (1975) has shown in his philosophical hermeneutics. We experience something by literally making our way into unknown territory and exposing ourselves to what we do not already know. The stance necessary for this is radical openness. If we are unwilling to be open and simply transfer our kitchen and living room into another country,

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<sup>1</sup>If the emotion becomes too stressful, the memory trace is weakened, which seems to be a protecting mechanism, protecting us from traumatic experience; See Het et al. 2005.

<sup>2</sup>The German psychologist Julius Kuhl has collated a lot of findings and proven experimentally that there are two complementary systems in the brain that generate representations of our inner and outer environment and that can become conscious. One is explicit and propositional, i.e. is represented in sentence-like structures, and it is analytical. The other is rather widely distributed, and connects many different episodes of past memories to a felt and emotional sense of what it is to be "me". This is not necessarily explicit and ordered in logical-analytical or propositional structures, but rather visual-emotional or even visceral. The anatomical substrates are not completely clarified as yet, but in a broad approximation one can say that the self-system that operates more in a holistical-emotional way is correlated with right-hemispheric activity, and the analytical-propositional system is correlated with left-hemispheric activity (always in right handers; for left handers things are different). (Kuhl 1996; Baumann and Kuhl 2002). But there are also other developments that point into that direction (Anderson et al. 2004; Gray 1991; Rydell et al. 2006). A very interesting and competent overview of this research can be found in *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (McGilchrist 2009).

watching the same TV soaps and eating the same food, we won't have any relevant new experiences even if we are physically in a foreign country.

If we open ourselves up to new experiences, we are on our way and our horizon grows. This direct experience is completely different from reading a travel guide. Even though we might have read many travel books about India, in which we can read that the traffic is terrible, people are poor but friendly, food and weather are hot, air in cities bad, we will always implicitly use our own points of reference to understand this. These are present in our memory from our past experiences. If we hear that there is a lot of traffic in Mumbai, India, we may think about Rome, or Washington, DC, at rush hour. But we will be unable to really understand what that traffic is really like unless we have been there. Only if we go there and experience it for ourselves will we have that famous effect of recognition, when we match a propositional knowledge with the real experience of a reality. We might then say, "Oh yes, the travel guide said 'traffic unimaginable'. Now I know what it means." Only then a cognitive content or knowledge is filled with our own experience. And only the person who has had such an experience may justly say "Yes, I've been to India". We would not presume to say "Yes, I've been to India. I have read a guide book". If someone said this we would point out the incorrect usage of language. In the same sense we can distinguish knowledge from hearsay, or simply cognitive knowledge from having read or heard something, from experience. Cognitive knowledge is about knowing something, experience about having been there.

Let's use another example to make this clear. Most of us have enjoyed reading romances when we were young (or watching them on TV, for the younger generation). We have thought about love, heard others who had already had more "experience" speak about it. But only when we had fallen in love ourselves did we really understand what the term "falling in love" or "being mad about someone" means.

Let that suffice. We can now see: Experience is, in contrast to a purely rational knowledge, always a holistic type of knowing including affect and emotion, as well as motivation. Only experience transports real knowledge, in contrast to hearsay. The medieval theologian John Duns the Scot has coined the fitting phrase: "expertus infallibiliter novit – he who has had an experience, has flawless knowledge".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Johannes Duns Scotus, *Opera Omnia; Editio Nova Juxta Editionem Waddingi Xii Tomos Continentem a Patribus Franciscanis De Observantia Accurate Recognita; Reprint of the Original Edition*, ed. Lucas Wadding (Westmead; origin. Paris: Gregg International; orig. Vivés, 1969; orig. 1891). Vol 9, In librum primum Sententiarum, Dist. IIIa, Quaestio IV.9, p. 176: "De secundis (a) cognoscibilibus, scilicet de cognitis per experientiam, dico, quod licet experientia non habeatur de omnibus singularibus, sed de pluribus, nec quod semper, sed quod pluries, tamen expertus infallibiliter novit quod ita est, ... – Regarding what we can know in the second sense, i.e. what we can know through experience, I say that, even though we cannot have experience about all singular things, but only about many, and also not always, but only most of the time, so it is still true that who has made an experience has flawless knowledge, i.e. he knows that something is so..." To my knowledge this is a singular quote in the history of ideas after Aristotle, who is the exemplar. Duns Scotus produces, in this quaestio (translated "question"; this was the medieval form of a formal disputation in which arguments and counter-arguments were weighed and then a novel and often creative solutions produced), a veritable sketch of a phenomenological science. I am quite sure that Franz Brentano knew this text and started from there with his own program of a psychology based

## 2.2 Spirituality

Let us understand spirituality as being consciously related to a reality that transcends the ego and its goals. Depending on the kind of experience which supports such a spirituality, this relationship can be more or less all-encompassing and complete, radical or conservative, affecting more or less components in the way we live. Similar to experience, I suggest we only talk about spirituality if it is also holistic and affects knowledge, affect, emotion, motivation, and action similarly. A philosopher who has studied the whole philosophical tradition and has finally understood that there is no individual without connectedness – quite a spiritual-political insight –, but cannot emotionally relate to it let alone translate this insight into appropriate behavior, is not a spiritual person in this terminology. An upcountry farmer, to use a stereotype here, who is implicitly and instinctively linked to the delicate balance between nature, animals, and humans in the mountains, who keeps to the tradition of his family and hence won't increase his stock although it would increase his profit, who rather keeps his old highland breed instead of taking in lowland cattle that ruin the soil and are less effective in using the food, will probably have more understanding of spirituality. Postmodern yuppies who chase enlightenment from Yoga to Zen, from Zen to mindfulness, from mindfulness to shamanism and back again while their kids are waiting for them to come home, or the stern Christian who is emphasizing the rules of his faith and letting his family drift apart rather than compromising, those people would not be spiritual in the sense I am using the word. (You are of course free to employ your own meaning, I am just making mine transparent). Why not? Because they are not operating out of a connectedness with a whole that is larger than their own ego. If we look closely, it is still their own little ego that is foremost and before all – *my* enlightenment, *my* following the rules, *my* salvation, *my* being a good person. It should be clear that spiritual practice or activity can be motivated in subtle ways, sometimes quite obviously, by narcissism and egotism. Therefore, we can never take an action or a behavior for spirituality as such, but have to see it in the context of experience, action, and motivation. In the same vein, selflessness as such is neither a legitimate goal nor a guarantee of spirituality if it is not motivated by a holistic context of spirituality (although it can be highly desirable in general terms). In the Christian context in particular there is a common distortion of humility (Walach 2008). This is a way of always letting others come first, pathologically putting one's own needs last. Often this is a consequence of lacking self-structures, of not taking oneself seriously. This Christian way of self-sacrifice, if not motivated by a spiritual basis, can easily lead to self-destruction and is often the flip side of a coin that has "lack of self esteem" imprinted on it.<sup>4</sup> This does not negate the fact that sometimes and

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on experience. But I have not had time to verify this from biographical information. Be this as it may: This is the historical source for the phenomenological movement in Europe.

<sup>4</sup>Psychoanalytic object theorists, such as Kernberg or Kohut, following Bowlby and others have pointed out how important early attachment experiences and later mirroring of self-activities are

for some people it might be an immensely spiritual path to consciously put oneself last and others first, if this is done from a free and not pathological will, or out of trust in a good guide or teacher.

Being related to a larger reality transcending the ego might be evident in different ways. One person may put his family before motives to advance his career. Another might see giving up children and family in order to follow a calling or a profession as their spiritual way, or the other way round giving up prospects of a career in order to serve children and family. In that sense, women are likely more spiritual just by way of their biology and psychology. (But don't get me wrong: I am not advocating the stereotypical female career of cook, housewife, and cleaner. I am just saying that by biologically serving some purpose that transcends the ego, namely giving birth and caring for children, they are likely closer to spirituality by their biology and psychology.) Others may find their spirituality takes shape in political or ecological activism. Still others may embark on an intensive spiritual quest, and all sorts of mixed ways, of course. But there will always be one commonality according to my working definition: the holistic tendency of their intention beyond the immediate goals of the ego. This might also help to pragmatically discriminate between spiritual and non-spiritual practices. For instance, if someone starts composting because this saves on the cost of waste collection,<sup>5</sup> this is nice, but not spiritual, as the motivation is not from something that goes beyond motives of the ego. However, if someone starts composting because they firmly believe that something needs to be done to give expression to the interconnectedness they feel with others, they would also do this if there was no gratification or even if it could lead to conflict with the neighbors, then this might be a spiritual act.

All these descriptions of spirituality as being about connectedness with a reality beyond the ego are not meant to suggest that the ego or the self are unimportant in spirituality. Although in a very final sense transcending and annihilating the ego (in order to gain a larger self, sometimes) is part and parcel of most spiritual paths, even the Christian one as we shall see later, this really is not the starting point. In order to be able to translate spirituality effectively, to have spiritual experiences in the first place we need a healthy, stable ego, and often this will be the result of a spiritual path. Only a person that has an experience of self, appreciates and knows this self, only such a person can decide responsively and act effectively and be in fact oriented towards a goal of transcending this very self. The final transcending of self that is often mentioned in spiritual texts and traditions is probably only possible once this self has had its fill. We will return to this topic later.

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for children to build up stable structures of self that are again important for mental health. It is important to understand that any spiritual practice presupposes such functioning self-structures. See Kernberg 1985; Kohut 1977.

<sup>5</sup> as it does in Switzerland, where I was at the time of writing, or in some other countries in Europe.

## 2.3 Spiritual Experience

I call spiritual experience a direct, unmediated experience of an absolute reality that is beyond the experiencing self. This experience will not necessarily be expressed in previously known terminologies, and often can't be. This definition contains the implicit statement that there is such a thing as direct, unmediated experience of reality, and that this experience does not arise from outside through our senses, but from inside, as an inner experience, but still an experience. We are now touching upon the very difficult question of in what sense it is possible for our consciousness to have an experience of reality, even absolute reality, that does *not* come to us through our senses. I admit that this is the pivotal point in my whole model and we need to explore a potential solution in more detail later on. At this point I am only interested in the terminology. Let's mark the problem for later.

This definition rests on the tradition of mysticism and inner experience which was always part of the Western tradition, at the latest since the beginning of the Christian era but already in the Greek philosophical era. And, of course, all Eastern traditions would have no difficulties subscribing to it, since they have brought this element of inner experience in much earlier. In fact, any system or religious tradition that is not primarily rooted in doctrinal teaching can be integrated here, and hence it is also compatible with Jewish-mystical traditions such as the Kabbalah, I suspect with Muslim traditions such as Sufism, and of course with Buddhist and Hindu spiritual practices. Every single one of these traditions would of course name this "absolute reality" differently. The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) would call it "God", the Christian mystical tradition "Christ". The Buddhist tradition would call it "dharma" or "Buddha nature"; in the Yogic tradition we would find such notions as "Atman" and "Brahman", or divine nature.

I know we are treading on boggy ground here. Is the content of the spiritual experiences in these different traditions similar? Can we compare the experience of the Sufi Ibn Arabi with the one described by Hugh of Balma and Meister Eckhart, or by Teresa of Avila? Is the experience of the absolute made in a Jewish context by Jesus of Nazareth or the Kabbalist Abulafia comparable with the Kensho experiences of a Rinzai Zen-master such as Hakuin's, and again his experience with the one of a Soto master like Dogen? (To complicate matters: even Hakuin, being a Zen Buddhist teacher, scolded and scoffed everybody else, especially Soto monks, because he was quite convinced that most of what they had experienced did not match his own experience. So even within one tradition we have arguments.) Even modern day teachers, such as the Soto master Suzuki-Roshi or Roshi Tetsugen-Glassman: are they talking about the same thing? And is what they are talking about in any way comparable or related to what Ignatius of Loyola experienced? I won't be so presumptuous to suggest I could answer these difficult questions. I will come back to them later. Here is a very preliminary and patchy solution:

Spiritual experience will be, as long as it is an authentic experience and not only a cognitive fabrication, always and by definition experience of reality. For the one who has the experience there is no doubt that it is an experience of reality. What is

difficult to understand, at least from a scientific point of view, is the statement that an inner experience can actually be an experience of reality that is beyond the experiencing ego. We have two possibilities of understanding the situation: Either we suggest there are completely different realities, one for Christians, one for Buddhists, one for Muslims, and so on. Everyone would then experience something completely different in his or her own universe, which can't be translated or mediated to other universes. Or else we start from the basic intuition of unity of reality, which is also the scientific starting point. In that case every experience of reality, in as much as it is authentic, will be an experience of this one reality. Perhaps it might be more or less deep, more or less complete, more or less comprehensive, but always of the same reality.

The difference in formulating these doctrinal codes of religions might depend on two things: One is the cultural-historical dependence of all human cognitive activities and language. Every communication about such an experience would have to use the semantic options which a particular language has to offer at a certain time and within a certain culture. Another way these differences might be explained could be by referring to a different scope or depth of the experiences. Perhaps a mixture of both – a variety in depth of experience and different cultural conditions – comes closest to the true explanation.

To assume a multiplicity of underlying realities does not seem very plausible to me. Postmodern contextualism favors such an explanation.<sup>6</sup> However, this argument overlooks two important points. First of all, we have a lot of phenomenological material that shows that experiences through ages and cultures are remarkably similar.<sup>7</sup> William James (1985) pointed this out in his classical study on the “Varieties of Religious Experiences”. Secondly, spiritual experience is in essence not propositional, at least initially. I know many will say that this is not possible. They have simply not had such an experience; else they would not say it. It is a characteristic of all spiritual experiences that they don't come in propositional structures. Hence we cannot express them in a two-valued logic of “true” and “false” as is possible for propositional structures. This is, incidentally, the reason why all spiritual traditions use paradoxes, riddles, images, and deliberately contradictory propositions. Some modern critics of religion have used this as an argument against religions, by pointing out that they are self-contradictory (which is true if only the surface structure is touched), and hence wrong. If we want to express the experience in language because we want to communicate it, then we are forced to use sentence structures that follow the logic, although we instinctively know that this is not true or correct. That is the reason why mystical texts are full of paradoxical sentences. This is true

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<sup>6</sup>The standard argument was put forward by S.T. Katz (1978, 1983, 1992). An analogous postmodern critique of Transpersonal Psychology was launched by J.N. Ferrer (2002).

<sup>7</sup>Robert Forman has challenged this relativist argument powerfully by pointing out that there are phenomenological constants of spiritual experiences across ages and cultures. Such an experience is, however, pre-verbal. He calls it “pure conscious event”. I have not seen good arguments against Forman's position and if I am correct then the majority of religious scholars in the American Academy of Religion seems to accept this argument (Forman 1998, 1999).

for the Gospel, especially the sermon of the mount, or for Zen Koans. It is also true for mystical writers such as Eckhart, and can be found a lot in poetry, particularly spiritual poetry.

## 2.4 Religious Experience

Now, if we make and express our spiritual experience within an existing religious system which is known to us, then we would call it a “religious experience”. Thus I propose that spiritual and religious experiences are identical in nature. The difference is the religious context which makes a spiritual experience a religious one. This might happen through the fact that the experience happens within such a context, or that a religious context is used to interpret and understand a spiritual experience that would otherwise not make much sense. In a religious experience we use existing images, language, meaning to interpret and understand a spiritual experience.

Additionally, I suppose that every religion is based on the spiritual experience of one or, more often, many founding figures. For instance, we can understand the story about the burning bush that describes Moses’ initiation as a prophet as the chiffre of an experience. This, together with a series of other experiences, form the basis of Judaism, which was then further qualified and interpreted by the prophets, whose revelations might also be read as expressions of their own experience.

We can understand the baptism of Jesus reported by all three synoptic gospels<sup>8</sup> as another initiation experience. This can be gleaned from the language of the text which suggests that only “he” heard the voice and saw something, not those around him. Other experiences, such as the one described in the temptation in the desert, are at the base of what helped the historical rabbi Jeshua to understand his own mission in the first place. All those experiences happened and were interpreted by him, as far as we can tell, in the Jewish context of his days. Only the experience of his followers transformed these into the rise of a new religion. These were the experiences of Christ after the crucifixion, or the experience of Pentecost. All these texts would likely qualify as chiffres for certain experiences rather than historical accounts (although some might be both). Importantly also, the initiation experience that transformed the rabbi Saul into the apostle Paul plays an important role in the forming of the new religion. And thus, Christianity too rises out of a series of powerful initial spiritual experiences.

In Buddhism the experience of enlightenment, which here was an experience of the deep unity of all beings and events, was the seed factor for teaching, practice and

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<sup>8</sup>“synoptic gospels” are those gospels that share similar stories and structures. These are the gospels by Mark, Matthew, and Luke. They all use a similar source called “S”. The gospel by John is different. The gospels are called “synoptic” because they can be juxtaposed and looked at in parallel, the Greek term being “synopsis”. I found this interpretation of the baptism of Jesus in *Tantra Vidya. Wissenschaft des Tantra* (Hinze 1983).

later codification (Johnston 1972). Even Islam cannot be understood without the series of profound experiences of the prophet Muhammad.

It thus is at least plausible to say that spiritual experiences lay at the base of formal religions. The Abrahamic religions refer to this situation by the term “word of God”, meaning God himself has revealed himself in those experiences, and the holy texts containing descriptions, accounts or interpretations of these experiences represent this “word of God”.<sup>9</sup> This is what they are, if we take these texts seriously. This is something quite different from taking them literally. In fact the best way of not taking them seriously is to take them literally. Viewed in that way “the word of God” is the expression of a deep spiritual experience, crystallized into religious language, often interpreted by previously existing images, deepened through them and at the same time altering them, until they become finally codified.

If this is true, then religion is a recursive system, i.e. one that bends back on itself: it allows for spiritual experience, and offers the terminology and images that help interpret it. Sometimes experiences seemed to have been so powerful that they led to an imperative impulse to found a new religious system. This was certainly the case with the Mosaic experience, which almost certainly dates back to monotheistic impulses in Egypt. The same can be said for the Jesuanic experience of the historical Jesus who had and interpreted his experiences within the Jewish tradition of his days and first and foremost deepened the religious impulse of Judaism (Douglas-Klotz 1999). Only the joint experiences of the historical Jesus and his followers and the newly converted apostle Paul led to the founding of a new type of religion. This in turn was altered both in teaching and the experiences it supported by reformers who founded new orders or new strands of the religion. In that sense, the experience that is possible within a religious tradition will always, to some extent, also reshape it.

## 2.5 Religion

Thus, religion is the vessel for spiritual experience. It is condensed out of a complex mixture of spiritual experience and the cultural background against which this experience takes place, replication of this experience by others, and corresponding narratives. Every human experience needs a form for expressing and capturing it. Poetry is the form used by lovers or sensitive people to convey what they otherwise cannot say. The experience of love, sex, and parenthood has found the form of marriage in most societies to support and help the lovers and their children (this would be a somewhat romantic and benevolent interpretation). The experience of

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<sup>9</sup>It is of course extremely silly and in fact quite uneducated to assume that a good old man sat in his office writing and somehow despatching those writings to humankind using a kind of celestial courier service of angels and winged animals. That seems sometimes the way both fundamentalists and atheists likewise understand the meaning. Both are actually not only missing the true meaning of this word, but are also making a laughing stock of themselves.

threat and injustice has led to some forms of policing and institutionalized law in most countries and societies. In the same sense, spiritual experience condenses into religion. Don't mistake me here. I don't mean that in a negative sense, since, I repeat, each experience needs a form for expression and containment. Experience is somehow like the content of a poem, whereas religion is like its form.<sup>10</sup> It does not make sense to separate them: In some way they need each other. A well functioning religion is not only a vessel for experience but ideally also allows for it and makes it easier. It expresses the experience and its major thrust in its images, myths, metaphors and parables. It uses rites and rituals to allow experiential access to the reality it is meant to express.

Now, spiritual experience is always contributing new aspects and will always be interpreted anew depending on changed cultural and historical contexts in which it happens. Hence also the formal side, religion, will have to change accordingly and adapt to these new experiences. New religions, for instance, seem to develop from deep experiences that an existing religious form was unable to contain and to integrate.

The basic experience of the historical Jesus, for instance, could not be integrated sufficiently by the form of Judaism of his time, and the experience of his followers finally let the vessel burst. This is probably one of the reasons why Christianity was established as a new religion and not only as a new sect of Judaism. The historical Jesus very likely had not intended this. None of his original sayings point towards that direction. What seems to suggest in the gospels that he wanted a new religion was clearly inserted at a later time to justify the new developments by the authority of the Christ himself. The Acts of the Apostles are a lively example of the long process of establishing the new faith. The founding fathers of the large Christian monastic orders, Saint Benedict, Saint Bernard, Saint Bruno, Saint Francis, Saint Dominic, Saint Ignatius, or reformers such as Martin Luther were all driven by their own experiences. Sometimes, in the case of the founding fathers of the orders, this experience was integrated. In the case of the Franciscan order it was only by taming Saint Francis and his heritage posthumously. In other cases the experiences were not integrated. Sometimes this led to schisms, sometimes the relevant head of the movements was persecuted and nothing is left of their impulse, as in the case of the Waldensians,<sup>11</sup> and sometimes new churches were founded as in the reformed churches.

Most of the time, however, these experiences conveyed impulses that led to changes and renewals, sometimes of the religious form, sometimes of the dogma, sometimes of both. The way in which some churches persevere and hold fast onto

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<sup>10</sup>We explore this more deeply in our article *The Whole and its Parts: Are Complementarity and Non-locality Intrinsic to Closed Systems?* (von Stillfried and Walach 2006). The basic idea to apply complementarity also to religion can already be found in Bohr 1966.

<sup>11</sup>This was a medieval movement that emphasised poverty and mutual sharing of property. It was outlawed, because it also threatened current structures of power and domination, and challenged the bishopric in their sole right to interpret the gospel.

forms, doctrines, and teachings is a good example of the inertia of the form in the absence of content and experience.

If religion as a form for experience is increasingly devoid of this experience and retracts onto the safe terrain of rites, rituals, and teachings and thus abandons its main function to contain experience, we see it as increasingly irrelevant, untimely, and hollow. This seems to be the case with the Christian religions in many quarters nowadays.<sup>12</sup> Not everywhere, to be sure, but certainly in Europe and perhaps also other Western countries. As far as I can tell this is a consequence of the fact that the training of future clerics emphasizes doctrine, faith, cognitive skills and teaching, but not experience and individual spirituality. Thereby we forget that dogma and doctrine, ritual and rites are only vessels and expression of experience and have the task of allowing and helping experience. Else the self-destroying process and the implosion of a vessel containing only a vacuum is about to start.

Another point of importance: There is no single spiritual tradition that would not also impart some ethical norms of conduct and behavior, remarkably similar across traditions. This implication of ethics in spirituality is less an external than an internal one. One who has had a spiritual experience knows that he must not do certain things, not because they are forbidden in a general sense and by a higher authority, but because he is damaging himself. A spiritual experience often contains the element of interconnectedness. Hence doing something wrong to somebody else is also damaging oneself. There is no legal code necessary to establish this inner ethics. However, for those who do not have access to the experience, don't know it, or don't understand it, this is less obvious. Therefore an ethical code of conduct is always a kind of by-product of the experience. This can be seen in the simple linguistic fact that the original codex of the Ten Commandments in the Thora is initiated by the sentence<sup>13</sup>: "I am the God that has led you out of Egypt, the house of slavery" – recalling the experience of liberation –, and is followed, if linguistically understood correctly, by the phrase: "You *will* not...", clearly pointing out the behavior appropriately honoring such an experience of liberation.

The more a religion and its followers are alienated from the experiential core, the more ethical codes are focused upon as isolated principles and imperatives. While they may still be valid, the evidence for them is less obvious, certainly for those who

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<sup>12</sup>Two similar pieces of evidence support this: Smith and Orlinsky (2004) found in a representative survey of American psychotherapists that only 25 % call themselves spiritual and religious, i.e. they are able to fill religion with their own experience in the sense explained here. A little over 25 % call themselves neither spiritual nor religious, and less than 25 % religious, but not spiritual. The rest call themselves only spiritual. We have found a similar picture in a representative survey of German psychotherapists (Hofmann and Walach 2011). Psychotherapists are a good seismographic measure for cultural trends. They have received a complex scientific and practical training and are dealing with the mental problems of our current society. Although spirituality seems to be more favored by contemporaries than religion, and formal religion is on the retreat, this does not mean that the problems or questions are irrelevant, as data from large world-wide polls as collected in the so called "Religion Monitor" show (Huber 2007). This rather supports the contention made here: The topics that have been part of religion are crucial to people, because spirituality is an innate human condition that won't go away, even if formal religion is retreating.

<sup>13</sup>Ex 20.2.

do not share the same values. Often religions are then only handmaidens to the sheriff and have to guarantee morals, ethical conduct, and propriety. Being religious in such a sense then means not doing certain things and having to do other things. Very often this moral scaffold derived from religion is then used by political authorities who are also highly interested in morally righteous citizens and hate rebellious people. If we combine this amalgam of religious foundation of a certain kind of moral with a particular cultural and social background, then we have the perfect misalliance of religious and political forces that led to the collective suspicion of intellectuals against religion and the social conditions that bred the revolutions and fights of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This should not distract from the simple fact that ethical codes of conduct founded on religion are remarkably similar across all cultures and it is likely they are the result of similar spiritual experiences. For instance, every religion knows the theme of compassion and support for the poor, the ill, the outcast, or love and connectedness with others. Muhammad prohibited the casting out and killing of female babies. The Thora demands love and respect for the neighbor, but also for the foreigner. Jesus even topped this demand by asking his followers to also love their enemies. Shakyamuni Buddha preached limitless compassion with all living and suffering beings. But it would be a misunderstanding if we were to reduce religion and spirituality to ethics and morals. Ethical behavior is a natural result of spiritual experience, and from a certain point onwards it is also a precondition for further spiritual growth. Saint Augustine once broke this down to the simple formula: “*dilige et quod vis fac* – love and do whatever you like”.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.6 Religiosity

This notion should be comparatively easy to understand now. Religiosity is a spirituality that is lived and expressed within an existing religion. It is less about simply fulfilling doctrines and prescriptions as such or for their own sake. It is more about expressing one’s spirituality through them because the religion is quite natural. As far back as the 1960s, the psychologist Allport (1967) distinguished between extrinsic and intrinsic religion. Extrinsic religion refers to behaviors that in the terminology adopted here are motivated by doctrine, because they are the rules, and

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<sup>14</sup>This is often rendered in the simpler phrase “*ama et fac quod vis*” which has the same meaning, except that the Latin “*diligere*” has the connotation of spiritual-emotional love, while “*amare*” is more strongly linked with the sensual-sexual side of love. The whole phrase is from Augustine’s Commentary to the Letter of Saint John to the Parthians VII.8: “*Sive taceas, dilectione taceas; sive clames, dilectione clames; sive emendes, dilectione emendes; sive parcas, dilectione parcas: Radix sit intus dilectionis, non potest de ista radice nisi bonum existere* – if you are silent, be silent out of love; if you shout, shout out of love; if you chide, do it out of love; if you overlook something, overlook out of love: The root should be inward love, for out of this root only something good can come.” The phrase itself seems to be a later condensation and does not appear verbatim, to my knowledge (Augustinus 1961).

because one hopes to gain something through following those rules, or because some punishment will follow if the rules are broken, with benefits expected from religious behavior. Behind such a type of religiosity we normally find quite an immature and often psychologically damaging image of god. We have enough data and experience by now to know that such a type of external religiosity does more harm than good, for instance regarding physical or mental health.<sup>15</sup> Intrinsic religion refers to a more mature form of religiosity where religious acts and rituals are conducted for their own sake and out of our own impulse. This is identical to what I call religiosity.

## 2.7 Faith

The term faith is important particularly in the Christian context. It is a translation of the Greek term “*pistis*”, used in the gospels. As often, the Greek notion has a somewhat different meaning from the language we use (and again the Greek had already lost some of the original Aramaic Jesus and his disciples spoke). The Greek “*pistis*” has two meanings: “faith”, as in believing what we only know from hearsay, and “trust”, as in trusting somebody. Religion is often associated with faith, and faith is understood as lack of knowledge and hence something that is missing. This interpretation is often supported by the Christian iconography of the “doubting Thomas”.<sup>16</sup> This was the apostle called the “twin”, by the gospels, perhaps because he was very close to Jesus. Thomas was not present, according to the gospel of John, when Jesus appeared for the first time after his resurrection, and hence he had difficulties believing what his colleagues reported when he returned when they said they had seen Jesus alive and well. Thomas wanted proof and demanded to be able to lay his fingers in Jesus’ wounds and see with his own eyes. According to the gospel of John, Jesus actually fulfilled his demands, not, however, without slightly chiding him for lacking in faith. Jesus’ reply that those who cannot see and yet believe are blessed, very likely provided the general background for the appreciation of faith in the absence of proof within the Christian culture. It is quite likely that this story was inserted some time after the first congregations of believers had formed for didactical reasons, to allay the frustration of those followers who did not have a firsthand experience of the risen Christ, as the apostles, and later on Saint Paul in his conversion experience, have had. Such followers needed consolation, and this aspect we find in every religion. We will always have quite a few who will find the whole religion and all concepts plausible but who won’t have their own experiences, or perhaps who even don’t aspire to. A religion needs to be able to accommodate such followers too. And thus they are consoled by the word that those

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<sup>15</sup> Good and readable overviews can be found in Emmons and Paloutzian 2003, and in Fontana 2003. The differential influence of these two types of religious coping was worked out by Kenneth Pargament (1997, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> John 20, 24 ff.

who do not see but believe are (equally) blessed. It is quite right, I find, for we need to be conscious of the dangers of a spiritual chauvinism that disregards “normal” people and only respects insiders, enlightened and experienced in-groupers, as we sometimes find in esoteric sects.

But it is important to see that in the parable the risen Christ actually allows Thomas to have his own experience. He plays along and produces the relevant experience for Thomas, thereby, in fact, endorsing the attempt for a real experiential proof. We should not forget this.

Another aspect is worth noticing. The meaning of “pistis” as “trust” is, if I am not mistaken, at least as prominent as the meaning “faith”. The full understanding of the term is a faithful trust in the quiet activity or presence of an absolute reality. In a secular language this could mean trust in the process of life in general, no matter what happens. Such trust is both a precondition and result of a spiritual path at the same time.

This is the type of existential trust, I find, that is meant by the parables and stories of the New Testament, when we find repeatedly, for instance, the formula “your faith has healed thee”, or faith is able to move mountains. This trust, originally of course meaning existential trust in Jesus himself, is reshaped by theological reflection into the term “faith” as we know it today: faith in contents, teachings and doctrines for whose truth we cannot refer to any evidence of our own, but only the trustworthiness of others, of the whole tradition or institution. In the case of the Christian tradition these are mainly the original messengers of the Good News.

Thus the term “pistis”, in the sense of trust, is gradually changed to faith in teaching or in content. The existential notion of a trusting relationship with someone – the historical Jesus called this absolute reality and the relationship he had “Father/Mother”<sup>17</sup> – contains these three elements: (1) trust in this reality that is (2) derived from a direct experience, and is supported by (3) faith in a tradition when one’s own experience is not sufficient. Today we frequently have only the last meaning left, and it is this curtailed notion of faith that is mostly used. That this is insufficient for most people if the other two elements are missing is not very surprising.

This multifaceted notion of faith is very likely also important for other traditions. I know about the Zen tradition, which speaks of three preconditions for spiritual development:

The Great Doubt: if the teaching – the dharma in Buddhist terms – is correct and everything is good in principle, why all the suffering, the pain, and whence the injustice?

The Great Faith: something needs to be true in all those stories about the masters, patriarchs and Buddhas; it is highly unlikely that all experiences and sayings are lies.

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<sup>17</sup> See Neill Douglas-Klotz’ (1999) reconstruction of the original Aramaic meaning of Jesus’ notion of “Father” in *The Hidden Gospel. Decoding the Spiritual Message of the Aramaic Jesus*. See also other recent work by Douglas-Klotz (2002, 2003) in which he points out that, since the language used by Jesus and his followers was Aramaic, there was comparative closeness to similar Jewish groups of his time, and the experiential basis for the teaching becomes clear.

The Great Commitment: to be determined in walking the path, solving the riddle, not giving up until it is solved (Kapleau 1969; Hakuin 1994).

Here we have the notion “faith” again, in a rather similar meaning: faith in the trustworthiness and veridicality of the tradition, the received stories, and thus trust in the possibility of actually accessing this reality, somehow. This is like a kind of credit that someone is willing to give to historical persons and mythological accounts in the absence of their own direct experience.

## 2.8 Doctrine, Dogma<sup>18</sup>

My presupposition is that every religion has some core experience of a founder, protagonist or prophetic figure at its base. If this experience is to have any influence and power at all, it has to be communicated somehow and at some point in time. This usually happens in language, unless someone is unwilling to talk and uses only his or her actions to communicate the experience. One could for instance see the healing and miracles that have been told about the historical Jesus exactly in that way. This does not change the situation that somehow people want stories, notions and verbal communications, and hence force our silent prophet who prefers acting over speaking into saying something in the end. This can nicely be seen in the gospels, where the historical Jesus does not talk very much at the beginning, but rather acts. Only as the story unfolds is he challenged by critics and pressed by his followers to explain himself. These explanations initially come in the form of parables and metaphors – the parables about the kingdom of heaven for instance – or else they are quite paradoxical and incomprehensible, such as the Sermon on the Mount, or they are very provocative. This seems to be the same in all traditions: it is actions that testify to the immediate experience of reality, not words.

At some point, however, during the course of a lived tradition or even during the lifetime of someone who has had some experience, the immediacy of the experience fades out, and images, words, rules, and metaphors need to mediate the experience to those who have not had a chance to have it. As time goes by, these need to be translated and explained to others who are further distant in time and culture. These explanations and interpretations then are translated into doctrinal forms that are intended to keep the core of the experience and transmit it through history, without losing the complexity. Only in very rare cases do these doctrinal forms employ linear-propositional structures as in “John’s shirt is blue” or “Mary’s car has broken down”. On the contrary, the language structures employed are multi-valued, i.e. we can understand them in several ways. The classical example is the Christian doctrine

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<sup>18</sup>“dogma” is a Greek word meaning “teaching, doctrine”. This is how I use the term in this chapter in order to facilitate the understanding as to why dogmatism arises in the pejorative meaning implied by “non-dogmatic spirituality”. I do not mean to ridicule or denigrate “dogma”, I just want to point out the two different meanings, the technical one which I explain in that chapter and the general one that derives from a misunderstanding of this original technical meaning.

that the “Word has become Flesh”, or “Jesus is man and God at the same time, and in the same being”.<sup>19</sup> The function of such a doctrinal statement is not to be “believed”, “learned”, or “confessed” as a catechism, but to function as a container and chiffre for a complex reality that cannot be expressed in a simple linear form.

The same is true, by the way, for a scientific notion. Such a scientific notion rarely describes a simple fact. More often it is shorthand for a very complex mesh of relationships of facts, observations, experimental findings and actions that are defined by a particular theory, and their interpretations (Collins and Pinch 1993). In the case of physics, even a different language is used, namely that of advanced mathematics. For instance, if we use the notion “graviton” we are referring to an exchange particle for the gravitational force. This particle is completely virtual, i.e. not present in any material sense. Moreover, it has not even been found yet and scientifically proven as a fact. It exists within a network of a complex theory that predicts its existence and is necessary within that theory and for all other notions within it to function. Therefore we “believe” that gravitons exist. But this “belief” denotes an extremely complex array of facts and findings, theoretical structures and reasonable expectations, potential experimental tests, our normal everyday experience of gravity and our general belief in the applicability of reason. Whoever imagines a tiny little golf ball when he or she hears the word “graviton” is simply wrong.

We have to treat notions coming from religious doctrine and dogma similarly. They sum up hundreds of years of interpretation, discussion, theoretical-philosophical reflection and debate about age old experiences into statements of high rational density. They are at least as difficult to understand as the real notion of “graviton” or “quark”. The less one is aware of the whole history of the discussion, the less one can understand the term from one’s own experience, the less sense such a notion will make. Now, if some teachers of the dogma – and for some reason there are rather too many of that sort – misunderstand the sentences of such dogmatic formulations as propositional descriptions of reality then we get a serious mix-up of language and obvious silliness which a rational, educated person cannot subscribe to. Such an example is the often cited virgin birth of Jesus, when some people say it refers to a physical birth in which the physical hymen was untouched (and which did not follow previous sexual intercourse). Here dogma and doctrine that refers to a very complex reality is misunderstood quite severely as a propositional structure. Such a verbal interpretation overlooks completely the function of such dogmatic sentences and formulae of condensing and transporting experience.

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<sup>19</sup>This is the classical dogmatic formula that the Council of Chalcedon has arrived at in the year 451. K.H. Reich used it as an example of what he first called “complementarist thinking” and later on “relational-contextual reasoning”. Thereby he is referring to a mental operation that is beyond formal analytical reasoning in the sense of Jean Piaget, and for which he has provided evidence in the development of young adults. Some, but not all of them, arrive at such mental concepts that are able to integrate conflict and seemingly opposite and contradictory viewpoints. He assumes that such a form of thinking is necessary to solve complex problems and he sees dogmatic formulations like the one of Chalcedon as examples of such a type of thinking. Thereby, a complex spiritual reality is expressed. See Reich 1990a, b, 2003.

Take a more recent example to make it more obvious. We often say things in a metaphorical manner, for instance when we say, colloquially, “He has worked his butt off”. We mean “He has worked extremely hard”. If someone came and called the ambulance because he assumed someone has injured themselves working, losing their buttocks for some reason, we would find that quite silly. Now assume, with temporal distance in a few hundred years people don’t understand what this idiom means. And someone comes along saying in those days people were so devoted to work that they actually physically mutilated themselves losing their buttocks while working, it would simply be wrong (That some people ruin themselves physically while working and could be described by that idiom is quite another matter; certainly, while they may ruin themselves physically, it won’t be their buttocks that are ruined.).

Similarly, taking doctrinal or dogmatic formulations literally is quite silly. Now, if personal experience is lacking, or if collectively the experiential access has vanished, we feel unable to understand and fill such doctrinal statements. Then doctrine seems like an empty shell, and anybody suggesting we should take those formulations at verbal face value must be joking.

Dogma needs fresh re-interpretations every now and then. This is so because the metaphors and images used by dogmatic formulations are not historically and culturally stable. What was understandable 1,500 years ago is not necessarily understandable today. Translating experience into language means transporting the invariant core of spiritual experience into the realm of time, history, culture, and thereby relative truths. Therefore there won’t be any chance that any religious-dogmatic or doctrinal formulation, no matter of which religion and how clever, will ever capture the full depth of spiritual experience.

One of the major problems of established religions in the West, but likely also in the East, seems to be that they keep retreating into a castle of dogmatic formulations, fleeing the armies of postmodern and supposedly evil free thinking and liberal debate. Within their castles they can then celebrate together with those who are content with doctrine, negating their thirst for experience. Such a strategy leads, of course, to many intellectuals and academics turning away from organized forms of religions, and many cultivate their private religion or spirituality in their own back garden.

## 2.9 God

“God is dead”, Nietzsche pronounced, and thereby he coined one of the most potent slogans of modern times. This sentence presupposes that there is such an entity which we can name “god” and which has, as one of his possible states or properties, the state of being dead or being in a state of dying. This dying then actually happened, and this is the reason why we are entitled to ascribe to this entity “god” the property of “being dead”. This would be, at least approximately, an analytical philosophical account of this sentence. I have chosen this example quite deliberately to

demonstrate a couple of conundrums of a doctrinal way of speaking about spiritual realities and the potential scope for misunderstandings here. Nietzsche could only say this sentence and suppose his listeners or readers would understand it because he had himself a certain understanding and notion of the term “god” and could assume others shared this. The sentence is only meaningful if the notion “god” is understood as a doctrinal notion not doing justice at all to what has been a shorthand for the absolute reality through thousands of years of philosophical and theological reflection. If we now reduce the original meaning of the notion and curtail it in a doctrinal fashion, then the notion “god” becomes a proxy for a potentially punishing, unremitting, and enslaving entity. Moreover, this entity is of a rather fragile nature and purely hypothetical, as only stated by a doctrinal discourse demanding our blind faith. The original notion “god” is a notion that condenses a certain understanding of reality, absolute reality in the philosophical tradition. If that is reduced to an empty shell and taken as a doctrinal formula, then this notion is by necessity – and thank “God” – deconstructed and debunked as an empty threat and a tiger with no teeth.

The philosophical and theological tradition was always quite clear that the notion “god” needs translation. Even Saint Paul the apostle used the notion “the unknown god” as an empty vessel to talk to the Athenians about his own experience, as we are told in the Acts of the Apostles. However, he was not very successful, as we know. The Athenian intellectuals were quite aware that this notion was relatively generic and empty, and did not fancy believing someone’s story in the absence of proof, let alone something that sounded as absurd as Saint Paul’s story. During the centuries following the beginning of the Christian era, the notion “god” was re-interpreted ever anew. It was the achievement of the so called church fathers of the first centuries CE, with their speculative and philosophical strength, to blend the philosophical notion of God that had been handed down from the Greek philosophers with the Jesuanic-Jewish one of the Christian experience.

The notion itself, however, was condensed experience. Only the separation of experience from dogma, which seems to have reached a new peak in our days, made it possible, even necessary, to deconstruct the notion, as Nietzsche did, and to show how such a petrified empty cask of a notion of God has an untoward potential to enslave and discourage people, or to be used as a means to politically manipulate societies.

In order to prevent this, the Jewish and Muslim traditions know the many names of God, each of which points to a certain perspective only and means something different. The same function, namely to prevent crystallisation and petrification of the notion, is served by the commandment to not form an image of God. It seems to me that this is also the reason that the Buddhist tradition does not speak of any God at all and does not qualify the Final Reality. All those who have understood the potential for misunderstandings and combined their own inner experience of that reality with philosophical understanding used notions that were intended to prevent such a gridlock of meaning. Nicolaus Cusanus, the fifteenth century polymath and

cardinal, for instance, did this when he used an old adage referring to God with the metaphor of an infinite globe whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.<sup>20</sup> Meister Eckhart did this when he said – following his teacher Saint Thomas –: “Being is God”.<sup>21</sup>

Characterizing this final reality and the experience of it is the most important and at the same time most dangerous task of the dogma. Here misunderstandings abound, especially if those descriptions are not seen as doctrinal condensations of experience and metaphors, but as propositional descriptions of reality.

A specific feature of the Judeo-Christian (and perhaps also the Muslim) doctrine of the final reality is the notion that God is personal. This also distinguishes the interpretation of these traditions from others, as far as I see. It is very difficult to use this term properly these days, and it is probably easier to say what it does *not* mean: It has to be understood as having a philosophical meaning and does *not* mean a particular person such as John or Mary. It does *not* mean that this reality has personality traits such as being irascible or merciful or sometimes a bit awkward, such as Mary, or warm hearted and a bit stupid, such as John. It rather means that this final reality, called God by this tradition, is, by its very nature and necessarily so, in constant direct and loving relationship to the world and us humans. The letter of Saint John has coined the simple formula: “God is love”. This was already common knowledge in the Jewish teaching and can be seen in Jesus’ addressing of this final reality as “Father/Mother”, along with all the other characterizations of what it means to be personal, given by the prophets of the Old Testament. If we now forget that these images are doctrinal condensations of a particular experience and the attempts to describe it, then all that remains is the shallow and empty image of an old man in heaven called heavenly father, who sees and judges all and sends punishment and rewards according to what he sees (and because he is quite old and has a lot to do taking note of everything, he often gets it wrong, to be sure). At the same time such a misplaced understanding generates distance and duality which all spiritual traditions strive to overcome or expose as illusion.

Because of all that, because the notion of “God” is the most difficult and most misunderstood notion of all creating more misunderstandings as it is used, I will try to avoid using it wherever I can. Instead, I will use the term “final or absolute reality”.

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<sup>20</sup>The Latin original is “God est sphaera infinita cuius centrum ubique, circumferentia nullibi”. This is a sentence that stemmed originally from a collection of philosophers from antiquity (The so called Liber XXIV philosophorum) which was a source for many medieval writers. It was taken up and reported by many notable philosophers and scholars, such as Alanus ab Insulis (Alain of Lille), Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Bonaventure, and Meister Eckhart (in his commentary on ecclesiasticus) from where Cusanus, who owned a copy and studied it, likely took it. See van Velthoven 1977, p. 190, Note 252.

<sup>21</sup>In his general prologue in his (unfinished) Opus Tripartitum (Weiss 1964, p. 38). Saint Thomas had already anticipated this with his theory of Being in his “De ente et essentia – On Being and Essence” (Aquino 1988).

## 2.10 Spiritual Practice, Meditation/Contemplation, Prayer

Let me finally say a few words about how I use the terms “spiritual practice”, “meditation” or “contemplation” and “prayer”.

“Spiritual practice” is the widest of these concepts, like a master concept. It denotes all intentional human acts which we use to show, document, practice, or renew our connectedness to a reality that transcends us. This could be a regular meditation or contemplation that we use to center ourselves. It could be participation in worship or in another religious event. It could be a very conscious act of tendering, for instance a garden, an animal, or another person. In as much as someone uses such a practice to *consciously connect* to a reality transcending one’s immediate goals I would call it *spiritual practice*. What is important here is the intention or the inner posture out of which we act.

Automatically performing religious duties, for instance, because otherwise one would be anxious and fear receiving divine punishment or social ostracizing or simply out of habit, I would not call spiritual practice.

*Meditation* or *contemplation* is a particular form of spiritual practice. *Contemplation* is a term normally used for a Christian form of meditation. Central elements of all forms of meditation or contemplation are the following:

- (a) They are performed regularly, often daily, and are part of a kind of spiritual hygiene.
- (b) They prescribe certain kinds of practice that are normally taken from an older tradition.
- (c) One element of such a practice is a training of attention. This can be achieved by directing attention towards inner acts, such as thoughts, feelings, and sensations, as they come and go, such as in mindfulness meditation. Or attention is focused on the breath, as in many other techniques. Another way of directing attention is focusing on a syllable or sequence of words taken as holy, such as in the Jesus prayer of Christian orthodox monks, in Vedic mantra meditations, in certain kinds of Zen meditation, in some Sufi practices, or by focusing on an inner or outer images, such as in some forms of Tantric practice or in Christian forms of contemplation using imagery.
- (d) This normally leads to a change in physiological activation, which will normally be some sort of relaxation, followed by states of absorption or perhaps even agitation.
- (e) In all spiritual traditions I know of it is assumed that through regular practice and exercise the preconditions are established for the practicing individual to achieve experiential access to that realm of absolute reality which is the goal and core of the spiritual experience. To what extent we can actually “produce” this experience is hotly debated. The Christian tradition has always explicitly pointed out that this experience happens only out of grace, and that it is given not earned, not forced or justly received. Other traditions don’t see that differently in principle, but emphasize other aspects more, for instance the necessity of active practice or striving on part of the practitioner.

*Prayer* is a way of connecting to this absolute reality in an active way, normally asking for something. It is different to meditation in that it is more active. Often prayer is about events in the outside world that are beyond the influence of the individual; often it is also about giving thanks.

These clarifications of basic notions should be sufficient. Let us be clear: these definitions are preliminary and are intended to provide a good basis for communication. They also describe my own personal horizon of understanding and are in no way definite or final.

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