



Psychology and Phenomenology of Religious Experiences
- Investigations Into Religious Experiences and Arguments
Against Epistemological Reductionism

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Abstract

Starting from a defense against New Atheist critiques of Religion, this thesis explores religious experiences from the perspectives of both psychological as well as phenomenological scholars. First, I criticize the *epistemological reductionism* which is implied by both the New Atheists as well as some of their opponents. I then move on to presenting subjective accounts of truth used in Pragmatism and Phenomenology, as an alternative to rationalist, third-person accounts of truth. Several writings of William James are discussed, including parts of his infamous book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. I present an argument for framing Phenomenology as a method of psychological research. What follows is the presentation of three phenomenological analyses of religious experiences, which are supposed to highlight their polymorphic nature: Chrétien's *The Wounded Word*, Marion's *The Saturated Phenomenon*, as well as Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*. The ultimate aim of this investigation is to find a way to combine Science and Religion into a worldview in which they can coexist.

Table of contents

Introduction	3
Chapter 1: New Atheism and Epistemological Reductionism	4
Chapter 2: Opening the Door to Other Accounts of Truth	7
Chapter 3: William James - Pragmatism and the Psychology of Religious Experience	10
3.1. “You will always be my brother.”- An Example	12
3.2. Retrospective Judgements	13
3.3. Pragmatism in ‘The Reality of the Unseen’	15
3.4. Pragmatism in ‘Mysticism’	16
3.5. Is Mystical Truth Authoritative? A Compromise	16
3.6. Recap	17
Chapter 4: Phenomenology of Religious Experience	18
4.1. Phenomenology as a Method for Psychological Research	20
4.2. What are Religious Experiences?	21
4.3. Examples of Religious Experiences	21
4.4. Towards a Phenomenology of Religion	22
4.5. Jean-Louis Chrétien: The Wounded Word	23
4.6. Jean- Luc Marion: The Saturated Phenomenon	24
4.7. Rudolf Otto: Dad Heilige	25
Conclusion	27
Bibliography	29

Introduction

Why do people hold religious beliefs? 500 years ago, this question would not have been distinct from the question why people have any other kind of belief or experience. For most people, God was part of the real world. Yet today, in our post-enlightenment, post-Nietzschean society, there does not seem to be an obvious reason to believe in some sort of deity which determines what is good and bad, which promises salvation, which has a bigger plan for us. With the rise of so-called “New Atheism”, most famously promoted by public intellectuals such as Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett, it seems that holding religious beliefs fell out of fashion. It is not only organized Religion which is criticized by these “Four Horsemen” and their followers; It is also the seemingly naïve wish that religious devotees seem to have, for a saviour, a shepherd, an omnipotent father, which is frowned upon.

When I started studying Philosophy, I distanced myself from my catholic beliefs which I adopted somewhat naively during childhood. Encouraged by New Atheist type criticisms, I came to feel enraged and cynical about Religion. Eventually however, I was confronted with a dilemma: either all religious people, including my own family, are stupid, complacent, and medieval, or I had to leave my rebellious phase and consider that religious beliefs have a greater meaning than their epistemological implications. The dilemma I am facing is more than just a personal one. It reflects the cultural divide in western societies between progress and tradition, Science and Religion, Mysticism and Rationalism. Is it possible for a person like me, a student visiting a western university, someone who believes in Science, someone who thinks critically, to hold religious beliefs without being a complete hypocrite? Are we forever going to feel like we are secretly frowning upon the naivety of Religion when we visit church, and secretly detest the coldness of Science when we sit in the lecture hall?

Through my thesis, I want to understand Religion better. I would like to find a way to think about Religion and religious experiences which does not force me to ignore or dismiss my scientific education and rationalistic convictions. In my inquiry, I am not going to focus on Religion in general, but on religious experience. I do not want to make a distinction between different kinds of religious beliefs and would like to avoid tapping into the discussion of legitimizing institutionalized Religion. With my discussions of Pragmatism and Phenomenology, I will be solely concentrating on the first-person account of Religion, which, in fact, does not allow me to make any claims about institutional Religion. After introducing the position of the New Atheists, I will first move on to William James, the founding father

of the Psychology of Religion and Pragmatism, and then explore the possibility of a phenomenological research on religious experiences.

Chapter 1: New Atheism and Epistemological Reductionism

The term ‘New Atheism’ refers to a specific type of Atheism in the 21st century.¹ The New Atheists critique Religion so vehemently, that I feel like I cannot *not* respond to them in some way when discussing Religion. Four public figures, titled ‘The Four Horsemen’ by their fan community, are famously in the centre of the movement: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. While all of these public intellectuals have different nuanced views on Religion, they agree on some central points in their critique, which temporarily received a lot of media attention, especially in the US² : (1) irrationality, superstition, and Religion should not be tolerated in any way, and should be battled whenever encountered in positions of public influence.³ (2) Claims made by Science and Religion should be treated equally and religious claims can be tested by means of the scientific method.⁴ (3) Claims of Science and Religion belong to the same realm,⁵ and there is no context in which Religion is more apt to answer questions than Science.⁶ (4) In terms of the relation between Religion and politics, church and state should be segregated because Religion threatens liberal democratic values.⁷ Moreover, a plea is made for more acceptance towards Atheists, who constitute a sometimes disadvantaged minority,⁸ and (5) the idea of a world without Religion is generally seen as a good thing.⁹

¹ Gary Wolf, “The Church of the Non-Believers,” *Wired*, published November 1, 2006, https://www.wired.com/2006/11/atheism/?pg=1&topic=atheism&topic_set=.

² Wolf, “The Church of the Non-Believers.”

³ Christopher Hitchens, *Letters to a Young Contrarian* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 128-129; Richard Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen: The Conversation That Sparked an Atheist Revolution* (New York: Random House, 2019), 58,158.

⁴ Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*, 16.

⁵ Richard Dawkins, “When Religion steps into Science’s Turf: The Alleged Separation Between the Two Is Not So Tidy,” *Free Inquiry Magazine* 18, no. 2 (1998): 2.; Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 92. The theory of non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA) proposed by S.J. Gould is also rejected. According to Gould, Science and Religion hold authority over different areas of inquiry: Science belongs to empirical inquiry, while Religion belongs to search for meaning and morality. Richard Dawkins however vehemently argued that Religion continually ‘steps into Science’s turf’

⁶ Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 27-55. For instance, in his book *The Moral Landscape*, Sam Harris, argues that Science is more apt to determine moral values than Religion.

⁷ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 10-48. This point is made by Sam Harris in *The End of Faith*, but also by Christopher Hitchens, in various public debates.

⁸ Wolf, “The Church of the Non-Believers.”

⁹ Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*, 125-135. An exception here is Daniel Dennett, who does see a value in certain aspects of Religion.

All these points were discussed in the book *The Four Horsemen: The Conversation That Sparked an Atheist Revolution*. The book is a transcript of a recorded conversation, which was uploaded on YouTube and went viral.

The New Atheist movement has been criticized in various ways. I will leave accusations of not understanding (sophisticated, reflective) Religion and theology properly, and constructing strawman arguments aside because these sorts of refutations do not allow for a fruitful discussion and I think to be taken seriously, one should be charitable with their opponents. Another common critique of New Atheism is that of *scientism*, which refers to the tendency of extending the definition of Science beyond the realm which it belongs to. A popular version of this criticism was brought forward by S.J. Gould with his theory of non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA). According to Gould, Science and Religion hold authority over different areas of inquiry: Science belongs to empirical inquiry (e.g.: What *is* and what *is true?*), while Religion belongs to search for meaning and morality. The New Atheist critique on Religion is therefore misplaced because it sets scientific ideals for something which is not trying to meet those ideals.¹⁰

This refutation of Religion however is also not really accurate, since some religious persons and bodies obviously do tend to make epistemological and ontological claims. The catholic church, for instance, recognizes the existence of miracles, defined as occurrences which scientists cannot explain (most miracles which are recognized by the catholic church today are cures from disease or injury).¹¹ In this sense, Religion *is* in fact about epistemological and ontological truth.

Another common criticism of the New Atheists is that, in supporting Science, they are somehow intellectually arrogant because Science claims to know everything about the world and that there is nothing but the ‘hard facts’ of Science. This is megalomaniacal because it depicts the human intellect to be able to understand everything about the world- a world which is obviously so much bigger than we. While I do not think that such an assertion would be megalomaniacal (at least not if it was made by a single person), a good scientist would never claim such a thing. While they would agree that there are things which Science cannot (yet) explain, and that there could very well be something *beyond* what we can perceive, the

¹⁰ Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, 92,93.; Adrian Moore, “What the New Atheists miss about the meaning of God,” *New Statesman*, published March 29, 2021, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/Religion/2021/03/what-new-atheists-miss-about-meaning-god>

¹¹ David van Biema, “Modern Miracles Have Strict Rules,” *Time*, published April 10, 1995, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070713212401/http://jcgi.pathfinder.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,982807,00.html>. The catholic church has a whole miracle- validating body. In order to be recognized as a saint, for instance, a person must perform two miracles in their lives.

religious devotee is *convinced* that there is something beyond that which Science can explain. In that sense, New Atheism, with its vigorous belief in Science is much humbler than Religion. An important difference between scientists and religious persons is that scientists do not think that they could understand everything. A scientist could (and almost by definition of his profession very often does!) observe phenomena which he or she cannot explain without conceding to supernaturalism. The scientist simply does not believe that there is anything *beyond nature*.¹² If a theory cannot explain a phenomenon, the theory is simply not good enough and needs to be adjusted (and tested). Christopher Hitchens phrased it quite nicely in saying that we need to “separate the numinous from the supernatural.”¹³

“Separate the numinous from the supernatural.” I find this sentence very interesting. Is all Religion necessarily directed at the supernatural? Does Religion not make claims about the numinous? We will come back to this later. For now, we see that sometimes, Religion actually does ‘step into the turf of Science’,¹⁴ and that it makes epistemological and ontological claims. While this should be criticized for various reasons, there is more to Religion than that. Religion cannot be *reduced* to its epistemological and ontological claims. And this is what the New Atheists do. As pointed out in Gary Wolf’s article in *Wired*, the New Atheists mainly care about correct belief.¹⁵ The so called ‘War of Ideas’, which they are fighting,¹⁶ is one between naturalists and supernaturalists, and you can only be on one side or the other. ‘Moderates’, a term which the New Atheists use to refer to people who believe in a compromise between Science and Religion (and think for example, that the bible should be interpreted metaphorically), are really on the side of the supernaturalists. They moreover pave the way for religious fundamentalists and are thus not only tolerant of their (the fundamentalist’s) wrongdoings, but actively support it.

My critique of New Atheism is directed against a part of it which I call *epistemological reductionism*. Although I was first hesitant about using this expression (firstly, because Religion is reduced to both epistemological and ontological claims, and secondly because ‘epistemological’ syntactically relates to the word ‘reductionism’ rather than to that which is reduced), I do believe it to be fitting because this is the one question the New Atheists, especially Richard Dawkins, come back to again and again; Whether Religion

¹² The word “supernatural” comes from Latin *super*, “above” and *natura*, “nature”.

¹³ Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*, 70-80.

¹⁴ Dawkins “When Religion Steps into Science’s Turf”.

¹⁵ Wolf, “The Church of the Non-Believers.”

¹⁶ Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*, 115- 119.

is *true*. In that sense, I think the kind of reductionism which is apparent in New Atheism is epistemological. They literally say that Religion is *false*.¹⁷ In *The Four Horsemen* for instance, Dennett states: “My concern is not so much with the evils of Religion as with whether it is true”.¹⁸ This is why, in his view, he can talk about Religion ‘in general’, and no distinction needs to be made between different religions, because all religions equally make false epistemological and ontological claims.

What a dilemma for people like me. Once confronted with such an ultimatum, we are forced to pick a side. The only way to think about Religion becomes one in terms of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, rational or irrational. When I started writing this thesis, I found myself constantly arguing *for* or *against* the New Atheists, sometimes feeling enraged, sometimes defensive. Luckily, it doesn’t have to be this way. An alternative way to think about Religion is offered from the field of Psychology. William James, the founding father of modern Psychology, thinks that the essence of Religion cannot be defined. His analyses of Religion purposefully exclude its institutional aspects. What is important, according to him, is to analyse the experiences which are usually classified as religious. Those are: “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine”.¹⁹ The divine then is defined as “the most primal, enveloping, and real; the primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest”.

Chapter 2: Opening the Door to Other Accounts of Truth

How do the New Atheists define Religion? Remarkably, in “The Four Horsemen”, no clear definition is given. Several times in the book, ‘features of Religion’, and especially ‘the worst features of Religion’²⁰ are described, and it is stated that “the worst aspects of Religion, [...] cannot be separated from the nature of Religion”, but no definition of this nature follows. Perhaps, an implicit definition is given by repeatedly contrasting Religion with Science: Scientists accept the burden of proof, religious persons don’t.²¹ Scientists continually test their beliefs, Religious persons don’t, and so on.²²

¹⁷ Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*, 170-174.

¹⁸ Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*, 171.

¹⁹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Berkeley: Longmans, Green & Co, 1902), 11-12.

²⁰ Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*, 58.

²¹ Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*, 57.

²² Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*, 57.

In the foreword of ‘The Four Horsemen’, Stephen Fry states that the New Atheists agree that there are ‘numinous’ attributes of the world. The use of this word is quite interesting. The term is derived from the Latin word ‘numen’, meaning ‘arousing spiritual or religious emotion; mysterious or awe-inspiring’. Acknowledging the numinous attributes of this world, Fry states, does not mean one has to also acknowledge the existence of a divinity.²³ This is where we can see the epistemological reductionism very clearly: The New Atheists would say that this is why they are not like religious people; They leave space for the numinous experiences, but *not* for supernatural ones, *not* for Religion. Religion is defined as that which refers to *supernatural* phenomena and experiences (which isolates epistemological and ontological claims), not ‘numinous’ ones (for which no such claims are necessary).

Obviously, it is similarly problematic that the New Atheists are attacked for being ‘just like a Religion’.²⁴ Besides being very unconvincing if used to argue in favour of Religion, if no clear definition of Religion follows, this criticism shows that some defenders are equally reductionistic about Religion as the New Atheists themselves. This is also partly why I do not direct my criticism against New Atheism in general. I do agree with some aspects of it, and the part which I do not agree with, epistemological reductionism, is practiced not only by the New Atheists, but also by religious people and bodies.

When considering the less apodictic individual works of the New Atheists, it becomes clear that things are more complicated than what was said in the single conversation captured in *The Four Horsemen*. While no straightforward definition of Religion is given in this book, some of the authors give one in other, individually published works. Christopher Hitchens, for instance, states that totalitarianism is innate in all Religion, because it demands “absolute, unchangeable, eternal authority”.²⁵ To him, Religion is that which defines truth as the word of God.

Daniel Dennett’s definition in his book *Breaking the Spell* on the other hand, is much more nuanced. He sees Religion as a natural phenomenon. “Tentatively, I propose to define religions as social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought.”²⁶ God is fundamental to this definition. “Religion without

²³ Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*, 18.

²⁴ Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*, 14.

²⁵ Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*, 142.

²⁶ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the spell* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2006), 36.

God is like a vertebrate without a backbone.²⁷ This is a working definition. Dennett argues that Religion should be defined as closely to common-sense intuition as possible.²⁸ In his book *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett also discusses William James' account (mentioned in Section 1). He does not disagree with this definition but rather classifies it as a definition of *spirituality*. Accordingly, spirituality differs from Religion in two important respects. It can involve only one person (it is not a social system), and it does not necessarily involve a belief in an anthropomorphic, supernatural God.

Also, Sam Harris is more nuanced in his independently published works than Hitchens. He thinks that at the core of Religion lies the belief that extraordinary experiences are possible, but it is blended with unreason.²⁹ Harris does think that there are self-transcending experiences. These experiences are predominantly talked about in a religious context which then, for him, is the reason why Religion is such a sensitive topic; because it is somehow conflated with these significant experiences people have. When you criticize Religion, you ultimately invalidate their religious experiences. Harris contrasts Religion with Mysticism: "Mysticism has an empirical basis. Religion does not. Mysticism is rational, Religion is not."³⁰ In an article in *Wired*, Sam Harris talked about the possibility of a completely rational Religion.

"We would be able to invoke the power of poetry and ritual and silent contemplation and all the variables of happiness so that we could exploit them. Call it prayer, but we would have prayer without bullshit."³¹

In *The Four Horsemen*, the topic of religious experiences, here referred to as 'numinous experiences', is briefly addressed. While they are also not sufficiently defined, the reader can somewhat intuitively understand what they mean. Experiences in which one is filled with awe, wonder, the feeling that everything 'makes sense' has meaning, or other overwhelming emotions. The significance of these experiences is acknowledged by the New Atheists,³² but

²⁷ Dennett, *Breaking the spell*, 38.

²⁸ Dennett, *Breaking the spell*, 35- 45.

²⁹ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 75.

³⁰ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 328.

³¹ Wolf, "The Church of the Non-Believers."

³² Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*, 63.

they ask to take God out of the equation, to take Religion out of the equation. As Daniel Dennett says, numinous experiences do not ‘prove Religion’.³³

Of course, these experiences *are* often used by religious devotees to ‘prove Religion’. I remember when I was in school, my teacher asked us whether we believed in God, and what evidence there was for there being a God. One of my classmates described how she was lying awake one night, and strongly felt a certain ‘mysterious presence’. “Yes, this is what we call a religious experience”, our teacher replied, “this is when you feel that God is especially close to you”. And this is again where we see the reductionism, both on the side of the New Atheists, as on the side of the religious devotee, who defends his Religion by reporting these experiences. Religion is identified with epistemological and ontological claims.

The New Atheist -type criticisms of Religion are only applicable to the epistemological and ontological claims made in various religions, and in that sense can only be used against these aspects of Religion. Of course, it can also help to argue against groups which put very strong emphasis on these aspects, for instance, creationists, who believe that the bible is to be interpreted literally. Yet, these New Atheist- type criticisms do tend to be applied without nuance to the entirety of Religion (i.e.: Christopher Hitchens claimed that ‘Religion poisons everything’³⁴). When Sam Harris speaks of his ‘Religion without bullshit’, we again have an argument which works against epistemological and ontological claims, not against other aspects of Religion. Yet, Harris is part of a movement which outwardly goes against Religion in general.

I would now like to offer a pragmatist and phenomenological perspective as an alternative to the rationalist standpoint taken by the New Atheists. On the one hand, we see that the New Atheists acknowledge the existence and significance of religious experiences. On the other hand, the fact that they acknowledge these experiences, does not 'let them off the hook' for their epistemological reductionism. The New Atheists think that you cannot reasonably believe in God. This is where they depart from James' pragmatic account, which will be introduced in the following section. From a pragmatist view, you *can* reasonably believe in God. Comparing William James' definition of Religion brought forth by the New Atheists, we immediately see the difference: James, as a pragmatist, is not concerned with scientific truth. What matters is the first-person perspective, the real *experience*.

³³ Dawkins et al., *The Four Horsemen*, 80.

³⁴ Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Books, 2007).

Chapter 3: William James- Pragmatism and the Psychology of Religious Experiences

The *Varieties of Religious Experience* is heavily impacted by Pragmatism. According to James, Pragmatism is a ‘mediating Philosophy’ and finds room for faith while still being empiricist and adhering to facts. In his lecture ‘Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth’,³⁵ James identifies multiple layers of the definition of truth. On the surface level, truth means ‘agreement with reality’. On this level, pragmatists and rationalists could agree. On a deeper level however, they would disagree.

For the rationalist, an idea being in agreement with reality means something like it being a copy of reality. However, an obvious problem here is that our ideas are always imperfect copies of reality. Agreement for the rationalist then is proportional to how close an idea gets to reality, where perfect agreement can almost never be reached. For the pragmatist on the other hand, agreement means something like not standing in contradiction to any other (true) beliefs about reality. An idea which is in agreement with reality gets us sufficiently close to it to be able to act upon a belief in a useful way. For the pragmatist, knowledge about the world is inseparable from action within it.³⁶

Take the example of a clock hanging in a lecture hall. Based on the time it indicates, everyone sitting in the lecture hall can see that the lecture has been going on for one hour. From the rationalist standpoint (agreement = copy of reality), none of the people possess real knowledge about the object being a real clock and therefore do not know for sure what time it is. The image of the clock in everyone’s mind might come close to what the clock actually looks like, but no one could know if perhaps the real clock was replaced by a fake clock as a practical joke. In that sense, the mental image of the clock would be rather imperfect because it depicts a real clock, while the one on the wall is fake. Because of this possibility of the clock being fake (of course it seems unlikely to everyone, but what matters here is only that it *could* be possible), the rationalist could thus not say that they possess true knowledge of the object being a clock, because there is a chance that the object is fake. The pragmatist on the other hand would be able to say that they possess true knowledge. The belief that the object on the wall is actually a clock is in perfect agreement with all their other (true) beliefs about reality. Moreover, in all likelihood, looking at the clock enables them to be on time for their next appointment.

³⁵ William James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” in *Pragmatism: A new name for old ways of thinking*. (New York: Longman Green and Co, 1907), 76-91.

³⁶ Catherine Legg and Christopher Hookway, “Pragmatism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified April 6, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pragmatism/>.

Next to thinking differently about what the term ‘agreement’ means, the pragmatist and the rationalist also have different conceptions of the word ‘reality’. While for the rationalist, reality might mean something like ‘everything there is’, the pragmatist would use the word to refer to ‘things of common sense’ or ‘everything which is somehow sensibly present’. It then becomes clear that, on a deeper level, the pragmatist and the rationalist have quite different conceptions of truth (remember that on the surface level, they agreed that truth = agreement with reality). For the rationalist, truth is a static relation, while for the pragmatist, truth is an active process; something *becomes* true. This is not to say that the pragmatist can just randomly label all sorts of silly ideas as true. The process of becoming true happens by means of validation, corroboration, and verification. We will come back to this in a short while. For the rationalist, truth and usefulness are independent, whereas for the pragmatist they are inseparable. As James stated it, “something is useful because it is true, and something is true because it is useful!”.³⁷

The difference between the rationalist and the pragmatist conception of truth is the difference between the first and the third person perspective. From the third-person perspective, it does not make sense that something is only true when it is useful. Whether a belief is true, is independent from whether anyone decides to do something with it. If it is true, it is *always* true, no matter if anyone ever discovers that it is true. The pragmatist on the other hand, takes the first-person perspective. If something is *externally* the case, but it is completely irrelevant for a person’s life, they would not accept it as part of their reality. From the first-person perspective, it would not be *true*.

3.1. “You will always be my brother.”- An Example

An example of something which is true from the first-person perspective, but not from the third-person perspective is this: Imagine you had an older brother F. You were raised together, he taught you how to ride a bicycle, you fought each other like siblings, you loved each other like siblings. As you grew older, you relied on each other like siblings. Now you find out that after having their first son, your parents were unable to have more children and adopted a child. You are that child, which means that you and F are not blood related. When he finds out, F tells you that he does not care whether you are blood-related. No matter what, you will always be part of his family, and he will always be your brother. From a third person perspective, this is not really true. Perhaps you could say that your belief was updated from

³⁷ William James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” 76-91.

‘F is my biological brother’ to ‘F is my brother by choice’, but since the objective scientific definition of brother includes having the same biological mother and the same biological father, you and F are not siblings. From a pragmatic perspective however, the discovery that F is not your real brother has a completely different effect. You did not care about being genetically related to him before, and you do not care about it now. What makes F your brother is not that you are blood-related, but that he taught you how to ride a bike, that you fought like siblings, and that you loved each other like siblings. Now that you are older, you rely on each other like siblings. So, while from the third-person, rationalist perspective the news that you are not blood-related to F has updated your belief system, it did not change anything from the first-person perspective, because blood-relatedness is not relevant to you. This, for James, is an argument against Rationalism: The rationalist account of truth does not have anything to do with usefulness. It is meaningless.

3.2. Retrospective Judgements

What about retrospective judgements? The rationalist can clearly invalidate beliefs which they held at some point in the past if they gathered evidence against this belief in the present. The old belief is then falsified, and a new belief is established. For the pragmatist, this is different. Take the following example: A catholic woman in the 13th century goes to church every Sunday and takes other preventative measures to avoid eternal punishment in hell. She firmly believes in hell, as does everyone she knows. Hell is a normal part of her reality, and she is convinced that it is a physical place beneath her feet. Many of her behaviours, and of the people around her, would make little sense if they did not believe in hell. In her lifeworld, the world that she carries, hell exists. Today, we can say with confidence that hell does not exist- or at least that it does not exist as a physical place beneath our feet. However, from a pragmatist perspective, this does not falsify the belief of our 13th century catholic woman. From the first-person perspective, there is no distinction between belief and fact. So, while we can very well say that hell does not exist *today* because it is not in agreement with our reality, we can say that it *was* true for a person of catholic faith in the 13th century.

Note that James does think that abstract truth should be recognized unconditionally. Particular truths however are conditional to their usefulness. Ideas *become* true through validation, corroboration, and verifiability. At first glance of course, the rationalist would agree. Yet, they would disagree on the kinds of verification which are permissible. While for the rationalist, only direct verification is possible, which means going to check if a prediction fulfils, for the pragmatist both direct and indirect verification are permissible. Something is

indirectly verified if it does not lead to contradiction and is in harmony with all our other (true) beliefs about reality. If a belief guides experience and makes it regular, if it helps us to *make sense* of our surroundings, it is (indirectly) verified. Coming back to our clock-example, the belief that it is a real clock and not a fake one is indirectly verified if we ‘live by it’, for instance, if we leave the lecture hall when it indicates that an hour has passed. We think that it is a real clock because it is hanging on a wall, and because the duration of the lecture corresponds to other indications of time.

Until now we saw that the rationalist adopts a third- person perspective on truth, while the pragmatist adopts a first-person perspective. It seems hard to combine these two perspectives because the first-person perspective is inescapable for the individual person. Even the rationalist, (now referring to an actual person) also validates indirectly, by *generalizing*. The scientist who conducted an experiment in their laboratory and has observed that a stone and a feather fall at the same speed if they are in a vacuum, will generalize (and validate indirectly) their observation to all feathers and all stones.³⁸

How does this pragmatist conception of truth relate to religious experience? This becomes clear in two lectures published in James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience, A Study in Human Nature*,³⁹ which is a collection of lectures which were held at the University of Edinburgh between 1901 and 1902. In his lectures, James discusses a broad range of topics such as Religion and Neurology,⁴⁰ Mysticism,⁴¹ pragmatic perspectives on the truth-value of religious experiences,⁴² how different religious attitudes deal with the problem of evil,⁴³ and whether religious experiences can justify the belief in God.⁴⁴ It is James’ aim to study what he considers to be the religious part of human nature.⁴⁵ His interest is mainly in

³⁸ William James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” 76-91. Again, from a pragmatist perspective, the existence of absolute truth is acknowledged but from the first-person perspective, the only way in which absolute truth can be *experienced* is as a belief which will not be altered by further experience.

³⁹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

⁴⁰ William James, “Lecture 1. Religion and Neurology,” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Longman Green and Co, 1907), 1- 9.

⁴¹ William James, “Lectures 16 and 17. Mysticism,” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Longman Green and Co, 1907), 143-160.

⁴² William James, “Lectures 2. Circumscription of the Topic.,” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Longman Green and Co, 1907), 10-19.; William James, “Lectures 3. The Reality of the Unseen.,” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Longman Green and Co, 1907), 20-29.

⁴³ William James, “Lectures 4 and 5. The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness.,” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Longman Green and Co, 1907), 30- 48; William James, “Lectures 6 and 7. The Sick Soul.,” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Longman Green and Co, 1907), 10-19.

⁴⁴ William James, “Lectures 12. Philosophy.,” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Longman Green and Co, 1907), 10-19.

⁴⁵ Russel Goodman, “William James,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last modified October 20, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/james/>.

the first-person account of Religion. As stated previously, he defines Religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine”.⁴⁶ We will specifically discuss two of the lectures which are included in that book: *The Reality of the Unseen*, and *Mysticism*.

3.3. Pragmatism in ‘The Reality of the Unseen’

The objects of religious beliefs only exist in idea (idea, is here meant as that it cannot be proven, not in the platonic sense).⁴⁷ From the first-person perspective however, no difference between idea and external reality is made. The religious devotee believes in them as strongly as they do in sensible objects.⁴⁸ In that sense, the objects of belief are quasi-sensible (they are treated by the person experiencing them nearly the same as sensible objects). An example given in William James’ lecture *The Reality of the Unseen*, is that of a man who when he was younger, felt like he could make a connection to ‘a benign being’, some force of good which gave him a sense of security and optimism. Even though he describes that as he got older, this ability left him entirely, I think this is an experience many people can relate to. For some people, it might be as abstract as feeling like having a destiny. Some might be convinced that ‘there is a force of good in the world’. Others might secretly feel like they have a guardian angel which protects them against bad luck, and still others might feel like God tells them that he has a plan for them when they connect with him in prayer.

For James, Rationalism is the philosophy which is opposed to Mysticism.⁴⁹ Accordingly, all our beliefs ought to find themselves on articulate grounds. These grounds can be (1) definitely statable abstract principles, (2) definite facts of sensation, (3) definite hypotheses based on these facts, (4) definite logically drawn inferences. James’ argument against Rationalism here is that, in the religious realm, the subconscious and non-rational holds primacy. This does not mean that it *should* hold primacy, or that the non-rational is *better* than the rational. It simply means that this is a more accurate description of the religious mind.⁵⁰ In the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate reasons only make sense when inarticulate feelings of reality are already aligned. Let’s remind ourselves that the

⁴⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 11-12.

⁴⁷ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 20.

⁴⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 20.

⁴⁹ William James, “Mysticism”, 156.

⁵⁰ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 28.

pragmatist definition of truth was that it does not contradict (is in agreement) with reality, as experienced from the first-person perspective.

3.4. Pragmatism in 'Mysticism'

What is a mystical experience? ⁵¹ James lists two necessary and sufficient requirements, as well as several characteristics, which sometimes occur, but not always. The necessary and sufficient attributes are *ineffability*, and a *noetic quality*. If an experience is ineffable, it means that no adequate report of its content can be given in words. Noetic quality of an experience refers to the fact that the person experiencing feels like they are in a profound state of knowledge. Attributes that might occur as well but not necessarily are *transiency* and *passivity*. Transiency means that the experience cannot be sustained for long (in the lecture, a maximum of 2 hours is given). Passivity means something like that, when you have a religious experience, it feels as if this state 'overcomes' you, being in this state is not an active process. Sometimes, people experience being extremely passive during a religious experience, and fall into trance. In those cases, they sometimes have little recollection of the event afterwards. However, James states that some memory always remains even if not every detail can be remembered.⁵²

3.5. Is Mystical Truth Authoritative? A Compromise

So now we know that mystical states should be judged depending on their usefulness and from the first-person perspective and not by means of scientific investigation. Let's remind ourselves that for the pragmatist, knowledge of the world is inseparable from agency within it. This is where usefulness comes in. If a scientific truth is not helpful, if it cannot be *used to act*, it is not a pragmatic truth.

An objection which immediately comes to mind here is that of beliefs which are not useful in the utilitarian sense. If the usefulness legitimizes a belief, does that mean that even beliefs which are harmful to others are legitimized? However, we need to keep in mind that the discussion we are having here is not an ethical one. We are merely inquiring into the nature of truth and knowledge and contrasting the perspective of the pragmatist and the rationalist. For the pragmatist, if a belief helps you to act, you possess knowledge, and it is

⁵¹ Note that in the literature, mystical and religious experiences are often distinguished from each other. For the purposes of the present discussion however, they will be treated as the same. But keep in mind that the religious experience is always a mystical one, but the mystical experience is not always religious.

⁵² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 144.

true. ‘Useful’ must be understood radically from the first-person perspective. Of course, considering truth of beliefs that could potentially be harmful (from an objective, third person perspective), makes the whole discussion appear as a lot more relativistic than if we talk about non-harmful beliefs. Saying that a young girl who believes that people who have pre-marital sex go to hell possesses a form of truth, seems absurd and offensive. However, the psychologist, who investigates the lifeworld of this girl would take on a pragmatic perspective. From this standpoint, the experience of the girl would not create a need for others to believe in the same thing. It also would not dictate any (political) action. In the political realm, pursuing the scientific/rationalist ideal is to be upheld for obvious reasons; From the first-person perspective, agreement is not really possible, which is why being hyper-aware of our inability to step into another’s shoes would leave us in a nihilistic, sad, and lonely rabbit-hole in which cooperation and progress are neither possible nor desirable.

At the end of the lecture, William James answers the question “Is mystical truth authoritative?”. Two different answers are given. The first answer is Yes. Mystical truth is authoritative for the person who experiences it. The second answer is No. Mystical truth is not authoritative for anyone else. So here we have our compromise between Science and Religion (Rationalism and Pragmatism). What is this realization good for? Rationalistic authority is broken, and the possibility of other orders of truth is opened. We now have an alternative way to think about religious experiences, one which allows us to believe in Science *and* Religion. Both are compromised in some way. Science is not authoritative, nor is Religion. Neither is the scientific worldview cold, nor is the religious one naïve. Neither will I need to continue terrorizing my family by proclaiming that I am an Atheist, nor will I let go of my pursuit of a scientific career, nor will I remain part of the church, nor will I stop praying.

3.6. Recap

Let us recap. The rationalist conception might be captured as

Religious experience is not true (no means of direct verification are possible).

Therefore, it is not valuable.

while the pragmatist conception may be something like

Religious experience is true (by means of the principle of noncontradiction).

Therefore, it is valuable.

We can see that from the pragmatic perspective, accounts of religious experience seem a lot more valuable. However, the New Atheist perspective is not captured fully, since at times a more moderate version of the argument is given. The more moderate version could be summarized as this:

Religious doctrines are not true, and therefore not valuable (or even unethical).

In this moderate version, it is the religious doctrine which is condemned because of its missing rationalist truth value, not religious experiences. As for religious experience, it is acknowledged that it is valuable, just not that it is *true*. This means that the religious experience can be valuable for a person, but they would not have the right to ‘impose’ whatever they take from it on others. Nobody is under any obligation to believe in it. On this point, the pragmatist would agree. Moreover, the rationalist thinks that in no case the experience could be described as supernatural. In that sense the pragmatist would only agree hesitantly. It is true that from the scientific perspective, there can be nothing supernatural, because everything is part of nature. A religious person however, might not have the same definition of nature as the scientist, and within their world, supernatural phenomena might very well be possible.

In the next chapter, we will introduce a field which investigates religious experience based on the same, subjective conception of truth as James’ pragmatism: Phenomenology.⁵³ I will briefly explain what the aim of this field is, why it should be considered a legitimate form of psychological research, and then go on to map out the field.

Chapter 4: Phenomenology of Religious Experiences

Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view.⁵⁴ It is a form of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an

⁵³ Maria Baghramian and Sarin Marchetti, “Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: The Mingled Story of Three Revolutions”, in *Pragmatism and The European Traditions. Encounters with Analytic Philosophy and Phenomenology Before the Great Divide* (Routledge, 2017), 3-22. In their work, Baghramian and Marchetti point out the often-forgotten affinities between Pragmatism and Phenomenology.

⁵⁴ Brian E. Neubauer, Catherine T. Witkop, and Lara Varpio, “How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others,” *Perspectives of Medical Education* 8, no. 2 (2019): 90-97.

individual's lived experiences within the world (their lifeworld). The central structure of an experience is its *intentionality*, its *being directed toward* something, as it is an experience of or about some object. It becomes the intuitional object, the *content* of my consciousness.⁵⁵ In scientific phenomenology, consciousness is 'sliced' in order to uncover horizons for systematic research. 'Horizons' refers to the context in which the most basic elements of experience are interpreted. In other words, by reducing an experience to its most basic aspects, a *horizon* of that experience is uncovered. This method, in which certain 'existence assumptions' are 'bracketed', and the experienced phenomena are observed solely as they appear to the subject is what Husserl, the founding father of Phenomenology, called *epoché*.⁵⁶

A Phenomenology of religious experience would then be to do exactly that with religious phenomena. Religious experiences are investigated within the attitude attained by reductions.⁵⁷ Of course the subject cannot decide whether these experiences are actually true (in the rationalist sense), and the overwhelming evidence about religious experience might therefore simply stem from illusory or hallucinatory experiences. As a solution to this problem, Husserl, in his *ideas* states that

“every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, [and] everything originally (so to speak, in its “personal” actuality) offered to us in “intuition” is to be accepted simply as what it is presented in being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there.”⁵⁸

In phenomenological investigation, no difference is made between those objects which exist outside the subject and those which only *appear* to do so, simply because they are not experienced differently by the subject. Therefore, the existence of objects and the distinction between 'actual objects' and 'hallucinations' is one of the 'existence assumptions' which must be bracketed in phenomenological investigation.⁵⁹ The goal of phenomenological research should be seen distinct from theology. The goal is not to 'sneak God' into

⁵⁵ David Woodruff Smith, "Phenomenology," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last modified December 16, 2013, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>.

⁵⁶ Christian Beyer, "Edmund Husserl," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last modified November 18, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/husserl/#SinHorInt>.

⁵⁷ Olga Louchakova-Schwartz, Courtenay Crouch, "Religious Experience, Adumbrated: Towards a Phenomenological Ontology of Religion," *Open Theology* 3, no. 1 (2017): 668-674, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0053>.

⁵⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining To a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, (The Hague: Marinus Nihoff Publishers bv, 1982), 44.

⁵⁹ Beyer, "Edmund Husserl."

Phenomenology (a criticism which was famously brought forth by Dominique Janicaud⁶⁰), or to convince people that God exists. Rather, the aim is to establish subjectivity as a valid area of scientific inquiry and to uncover basic structures of the religious human experience.⁶¹

4.1. Phenomenology as a Method for Psychological Research

Broadly, two rough frameworks of psychological inquiry can be distinguished. The first one is a natural-scientific approach, in which the scientific method is applied to make inferences about hypotheses. This framework is based on an objective, rationalistic kind of truth. The second kind of psychological inquiry is the human-scientific one, in which qualitative, and phenomenological methods are applied in order to find meaningful connections among the events investigated.⁶²

Concerning the Psychology of Religion, William James is widely considered to be the founder of the field, and his works are still very influential. We already established James' subjective conception of truth as a legitimate alternative to rationalist conceptions. What is so interesting about the field of Psychology is that the nature of most phenomena under investigation is subjective. Therefore, the ambivalence between rationalist and subjective conceptions of truth is probably more evident than in any other field of inquiry. The focus of natural-scientific psychological research into Religion has mostly been the (evolutionary) origin of Religion and the social function it serves, rather than the subjective aspect of religious experiences.⁶³ Quantitative research into the subjective aspect of religious experiences is (at this point) not really possible for multiple reasons, one of them being that quantitative research is incompatible with subjective conceptions of truth. However, when this subjective conception of truth is used as a starting point for psychological research, rather than the rationalistic conception, Phenomenology of Religion can be framed as a method of psychological (human-scientific) research to investigate religious experiences.

Questions addressed by this research field are the following: In what mode do religious experiences exist? What is the difference between religious experiences and other ones? How are religious experiences generated? Is it an event of interpretation? Do religious

⁶⁰ Dominique Janicaud, "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology," in *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate*, ed. Bernard G. Prusak (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 3-87.

⁶¹ Louchakova Schwartz and Crouch, "Religious Experience, Adumbrated," 668-674.

⁶² "Psychology of Religion," Wikipedia, accessed June 14, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychology_of_Religion.

⁶³ Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch, "Religious Experience, Adumbrated," 668-674.

experiences have their own phenomenological core structure? How is the structure situated? Does the structure have a specific quality? ⁶⁴

4.2. *What are Religious Experiences?*

The polymorphic nature of religious experiences makes it hard to formulate concrete criteria to identify them as such. William James' conditions (ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, passivity) are very broad, and therefore leave us with a rather vague idea of what religious experiences actually are. The title *Varieties of Religious Experience* captures the richness of (complementary) possibilities in consciousness. The essence of religious experience should be considered a sum of those possibilities.⁶⁵ To ensure a proper understanding, it is absolutely necessary to complement every attempt to define religious experiences with examples.

4.3. *Examples of Religious Experiences*

To get a better idea of what religious experiences are, let us look at a few examples. In his article "The Sound of a Small Whisper: Ordinary Religious Experience", Robert Kugelman (2017) describes what he calls an *ordinary religious experience*.⁶⁶ What makes this experience 'ordinary', according to him, is that there is no overwhelming sense of the divine, and that it is an experience which could be easily ignored or dismissed. He describes a personal experience in which he gave a student feedback to her thesis only a day before she unexpectedly passed away, which allowed her to 'celebrate' her satisfactory work and reassurance that she would graduate. Kugelman had the feeling that his decision to not postpone the feedback was guided by God, and at the moment in which he realized this, he experienced the sky appearing to him like a dome.⁶⁷ Kugelman thinks that any experience could potentially be religious and pleads for an inclusion of ordinary experiences in our definition of religious experience.

A similarly modest account of a religious experience is given in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

⁶⁴ Louchakova Schwartz and Crouch, "Religious Experience, Adumbrated," 668-674.

⁶⁵ Louchakova Schwartz and Crouch, "Religious Experience, Adumbrated," 668-674.

⁶⁶ Robert Kugelman, "The Sound of a Small Whisper: Ordinary Religious Experience," *Open Theology* 3, no. 1 (2017): 246-256, <https://doi.org/10.1515/oph-2017-0020>

⁶⁷ Kugelman emphasizes the difference between the actual object and the experienced object. During the experience, he was aware that the sky was not actually a dome, but that it only appeared to him as if it was.

“When I walk the fields, I am oppressed now and then with an innate feeling that everything I see has a meaning, if I could but understand it. And this feeling of being surrounded with truths which I cannot grasp amounts to indescribable awe sometimes. Have you not felt that your real soul was imperceptible to your mental vision, except in a few hallowed moments?”⁶⁸

An example of a more intense numinous experience is the following account which is mentioned in *The Varieties*:

"I remember the night, [...] where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer. It was deep calling unto deep, —the deep that my own struggle had opened up within being answered by the unfathomable deep without, reaching beyond the stars. I stood alone with Him who had made me, and all the beauty of the world, and love, and sorrow, and even temptation. I did not seek Him but felt the perfect union of my spirit with His. The ordinary sense of things around me faded. For the moment nothing but an ineffable joy and exaltation remained. [...] It was like the effect of some great orchestra when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony that leaves the listener conscious of nothing save that his soul is being wafted upwards, and almost bursting with its own emotion. The perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more solemn silence. The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not any more have doubted that He was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two. [...] My highest faith in God and truest idea of him were then born in me.”⁶⁹

4.4. *Towards a Phenomenology of Religion*

Many attempts have been made to describe aspects or examples of religious experiences using different phenomenological methods. As Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch⁷⁰ argued in their paper, religious experiences may have their own lifeworld, which can be partly uncovered using different methods. The versatile approaches which phenomenologists have

⁶⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 145.

⁶⁹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 25.

⁷⁰ Louchakova Schwartz and Crouch, “Religious Experience, Adumbrated,” 668-674.

taken is our only way to eventually make the concept of religious experiences less fuzzy, by slowly uncovering the varieties of religious experience, by unveiling the whole of it, which at this moment can only reveal itself in parts.⁷¹

In the following, I will discuss three texts about religious experiences written by three different thinkers: Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Luc Marion, and Rudolf Otto. This is not an exhaustive list of phenomenological analyses of religious experiences, but I chose to discuss them here because they are particularly well suited to illustrate the achievements of Phenomenology of Religion and can give the reader an idea of what phenomenological analysis of Religion might look like.⁷²

4.5. Jean-Louis Chrétien: *The Wounded Word*

‘The Wounded Word’ by Jean-Louis Chrétien, is a phenomenological analysis of prayer.⁷³ Chrétien describes prayer as an “act of presence to the invisible in which the person who prays becomes an active self-manifestation of God”⁷⁴. It is a kind of self-dialogue, and at the same time an interplay between the one who prays and God. During prayer, a word leaves the one who prays, addresses God, and then turns back upon the sender.⁷⁵ Aspray (2018) illustrates Chrétien’s analysis with the metaphor of a boomerang because the prayed word begins and ends with the praying person.

Within this circle, from the praying person and back to them, two “woundings” occur. First, the sender is wounded due to the special nature of the self-dialogue. In other kinds of self-dialogue, everything is known to the subject, and they remain contained within the shell of their own being. As soon as someone else enters the dialogue, the subject needs to ‘open up’. The dialogue is broken by the presence of God. Another party enters the circuit of speech, leaving the subject broken, wounded. It is a disrupting as well as a freeing process because it opens and reconfigures the subject. Yet, because God is omniscient, prayer does not reveal anything to God, it is not about the transmission of information. Prayer “appears to

⁷¹ Louchakova Schwartz and Crouch, “Religious Experience, Adumbrated,” 671.

⁷² For further reading, I recommend writings by Jean-François Courtine, Michel Henry, Paul Ricoer, as well as Dominique Janicaud’s critique of the ‘theological turn’ of French Phenomenology, which are nicely combined in *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

⁷³ Jean-Louis Chrétien, “The Wounded Word: Phenomenology of Prayer,” in *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 147- 175.

⁷⁴ Chrétien “The Wounded Word,” 150.

⁷⁵ Silvianna Aspray, “An Augustinian response to Jean-Louis Chrétien’s phenomenology of prayer,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 79, no. 3 (July 2018): 311-322, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2018.1433549>.

be always surpassed and preceded by the one to whom it is addressed. It does not begin, it responds”⁷⁶.

The second wounding occurs to the word itself. In prayer, a word is addressed to a being which is so different from the one who is praying that it cannot be addressed. The meaning of the word becomes uncertain. “The radical alterity of him to whom it speaks” therefore wounds the word of prayer.⁷⁷

Chrétien’s contribution is an important phenomenological achievement because it is one of the few existing detailed phenomenological analyses of the religious experience of prayer.⁷⁸ Despite critics (some say that Chrétien’s analysis is not neutral because he does not bracket transcendence), Chrétien remains phenomenological because he analyses prayer as an act of speech experienced from the perspective of the person who prays.⁷⁹

4.6. Jean-Luc Marion: *The Saturated Phenomenon*

In ‘The Saturated Phenomenon’, Jean-Luc Marion presents a way in which divine revelation could be possible. Marion’s analysis does not assume that divine revelation actually exists but shows a way in which it might exist.

Accordingly, divine revelation might be a particular kind of phenomenon called the *saturated phenomenon* which overwhelms the subject in such a way that they are not shaped by existence assumptions. Even if such phenomena would be regarded as impossible, the structure of these phenomena saturate the cognition of the observer, override all their previous assumptions, and reveal themselves with an extraordinary kind of clarity, in a perfect kind of givenness. Marion classifies different kinds of saturated phenomena, divine revelation being one of them.⁸⁰ Due to the immense amount of intuition, revelation, as a saturated phenomenon, would ‘overwhelm’ all Kantian categories with quantity, quality, relation, and modality. Marion writes:

“In order to introduce the concept of the saturated phenomenon in Phenomenology, we have just described it as invisible (unforeseeable) according to quantity,

⁷⁶ Chrétien “The Wounded Word,” 158.

⁷⁷ Chrétien “The Wounded Word,” 175.

⁷⁸ Chrétien “The Wounded Word,” 162. Chrétien notes that other approaches have for instance been made by Gerardus van der Leeuw in his work *Phänomenologie der Religion*. However, he implies that his analysis is more elaborate and detailed.

⁷⁹ Aspray, “An Augustinian response to Jean-Louis Chrétien’s phenomenology of prayer,” 313.

⁸⁰ Jean-Luc Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon,” in *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 214- 216.

unbearable according to quality, but also unconditioned (absolved from any horizon) according to relation, and irreducible to the I (incapable of being looked at) according to modality.”⁸¹

This saturation, or ‘overwhelming’ could go so far that, if the four categories are understood as rules which structure intuition, those rules would potentially be broken. The saturated phenomenon is the possibility of the impossible, it is the possibility of, for example, divine revelation.⁸²

What is remarkable about Marion’s finding, is that he discovers a case in which the Kantian classification of phenomena is reversed.⁸³ It moreover “contradicts and exceeds” Husserl’s, the founding father of Phenomenology. Husserl’s definition of the phenomenon presupposes two basic conditions: the *I*, and the horizon. Because the saturated phenomenon is both “irreducible to the I”, and “absolved from any horizon”, it does not fulfil these two basic conditions formulated by Husserl and is thus an entirely new type of phenomenon.⁸⁴

“Husserl [...] must himself be surpassed in order to reach the possibility of the saturated phenomenon.”⁸⁵

4.7. Rudolf Otto: *Das Heilige*

For the last part of my investigation, I will consider a work which is quite different from those of the French phenomenologists: Rudolf Otto’s book *Das Heilige* or the English translation *The Idea of the Holy*. As stated before, my aim here is not to give a complete account of the Phenomenology of religious experiences, but rather to show the possibility for such a Phenomenology by highlighting its achievements. Just as I have not given a complete overview of all works on the Phenomenology of Religion, I do not give a full summary of Otto’s work in this section and rather concentrate on giving an impression of those parts of the book which are particularly apt to understand religious experiences. I chose to discuss *The Idea of the Holy* on the one hand because it was exceptionally well received and praised

⁸¹ Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon,” 211.

⁸² Brook Mason, “Saturated Phenomena, the Icon, and Revelation: A Critique of Marion’s Account of Revelation and the “Redoubling” of Saturation” *Aporia*: 24, no 1 (2014): 25-37; Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon,” 212.

⁸³ Marion “The Saturated Phenomenon,” 212.

⁸⁴ Marion “The Saturated Phenomenon,” 212; Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining To a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, 43-45.

⁸⁵ Marion “The Saturated Phenomenon,” 212.

by phenomenologists such as Gerard van der Leeuw, author of “Phänomenologie der Religion”, as well as Edmund Husserl, who is considered the founding father of Phenomenology.⁸⁶ On the other hand, I chose to discuss it because the parallels which can be drawn between *The Idea of the Holy* and *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* highlight the importance of James’ contribution to the field of Phenomenology of Religion, and therefore also the adequacy of the connection I have drawn between Phenomenology and Psychology. Supposedly, Otto was familiar and fascinated with William James’ *Varieties*, but deemed an empirical method as inappropriate for the interpretation of religious phenomena.⁸⁷

In the book, Otto aims to analyse the *Numinous*, the awe-inspiring and non-rational element of the holy, which is often neglected in religious discourse (another element which is discussed more frequently being for instance moral perfection).⁸⁸ It is that part of a religious experience which is unlike any other experience and therefore cannot be described. In William James’ terms, it is *ineffable*.⁸⁹ According to Otto, this aspect constitutes the core of all religions and therefore crucial for understanding Religion.⁹⁰

Otto describes how the numinous may be experienced. Accordingly, a religious experience is directed at something he calls *Mysterium*.⁹¹ *Mysterium* refers to the ‘wholly otherness’ of the numinous, which makes it inexplicable and impossible to understand if not experienced. This ‘otherness’ is perhaps similar to the otherness described by Chrétien, the otherness of the addressee of the prayed word. *Mysterium Tremendum* is an aspect of numinous experiences which evokes feelings akin to fear, which could be described as ‘gottesfürchtig’, a fear-like awe for God. It also includes an impression of ‘might and overpoweringness’, as well as urgency or forceful energy.⁹² *Mysterium Fascinosum* is the other aspect of numinous experience, which entails more positive emotions arising from the perceived benevolence, love, and holiness of the other.⁹³

⁸⁶ John D. Dadosky, *The structure of religious knowing: Encountering the sacred in Eliade and Lonergan* (SUNY Press: 2004), 13.

⁸⁷ Bernard E. Meland, “Rudolf Otto,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, last modified March 2, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rudolf-Otto>.

⁸⁸ Note that ‘Das Heilige’ can be translated as both ‘the holy’ and ‘the sacred’. I chose to use ‘holy’ as it is the more common translation of the work.

⁸⁹ Rudolf Otto, “‘Numen’ and ‘Numinous,’” in *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford University Press: 1958), 5-6.

⁹⁰ Rudolf Otto, “‘Numen’ and ‘Numinous,’” 6.

⁹¹ Rudolf Otto, “The Analysis of Tremendum,” in *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford University Press: 1958), 25.

⁹² Rudolf Otto, “The Analysis of Tremendum,” 12 - 23.

⁹³ Rudolf Otto, “The Analysis of Mysterium,” in *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford University Press: 1958), 31.

Next to uncovering these two ‘modes’, in which the numinous can be experienced, Otto further explores the means by which religious experiences can be expressed. To be properly understood, indirect means (such as art and music) are more apt to express religious experiences than direct means. Religious experiences cannot be taught. They can only truly be understood by others if ‘awakened in them’.⁹⁴ This is why the ‘fuzzy definition’ provided in *The Varieties*, which is complemented with a large number of examples, is absolutely appropriate. As I mentioned before, it is necessary for any definition of religious experiences to be accompanied by examples. A structured, rational definition with an exhaustive list of all necessary and sufficient criteria would not be appropriate to capture the essence of religious experiences. Rather, examples and more indirect means such as the use of a certain kind of language are more apt to help those who wish to understand religious experiences better.

“More of the experience lives in reverent attitude and gesture, in tone and voice and demeanour, expressing its momentousness, and in the solemn devotional assembly of a congregation at prayer, than in all the phrases and negative nomenclature which we have found to designate it.”⁹⁵

What I think is remarkable about Otto’s work is that it highlights not only the difference in nature between rational and subjective accounts of truth, but also the different ways in which an individual may arrive at such truths. While for the former one, strictly defined criteria and rules for classification may be necessary, they are merely complementary if at all helpful for the latter one.

Conclusion

We started this inquiry into religious experience by examining the New Atheist critique on Religion. We then criticized this critique based on the ‘epistemological reductionism’ which it implies. This reductionism can be found in New Atheist criticism of Religion, as well as in defenses of Religion (for example brought forth by representatives of the catholic church). We saw that epistemological reductionism relies upon Rationalism and found an alternative way to conceptualize truth: Pragmatic truth. After having opened this door to other accounts of truth, we looked at the Phenomenology of religious experiences, a (research) field, which

⁹⁴ Rudolf Otto, “Means of Expression of the Numinous,” in *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford University Press: 1958), 60.

⁹⁵ Otto, “Means of Expression of the Numinous”, 60.

bases itself on exactly this type of pragmatic truth in order to investigate religious experiences. We have shown that phenomenological research into religious experiences is a legitimate form of psychological investigation. Lastly, we looked at three very different kinds of phenomenological analyses of religious experiences. First, Chrétien's phenomenological description of prayer, then Marion's investigation into the possibility of divine revelation as a saturated phenomenon, and lastly Rudolf Otto's work *The Idea of the Holy* which not only provides an exceptionally well received description of religious experiences, but also highlights that one cannot arrive at religious truth by rational means. By summarizing these three achievements in the *Phenomenology of Religion*, I hope to have highlighted the polymorphic nature of religious experiences. They are a special kind of experience, the true nature of which remains to be uncovered fully.

What are we to take away from this, us who feel conflicted between our scientific education and religious upbringing? It means that we have found a way to combine these two seemingly incommensurable fields. If I look closely, I find that I have been living in a world, my lifeworld, in which they have coexisted peacefully all along.

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