Conclusion: Experience or Expression?
Preserving the Puzzle

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To arrive at a hermeneutics of religion, we argued in the introduction, experience and expression cannot be pitted against each other. Only if religion is explored through both its experiences and its expressions, is it extricated from the confining circumscriptions exemplified by William James on the one hand and by the critics of William James on the other. However, in order to explore religion through the categories of experience and expression, these categories need to be examined.

In what follows, we will return to the questions which were raised in the introduction. What constitutes a religious experience? What constitutes a religious expression? And, crucially, how are these concepts related? Considering James’s caution against the “pedantry” of “definitions” and “would-be definitions”, we have not stipulated conceptualizations of experience and expression in the introduction, because these conceptualizations are at stake throughout the compilation. Yet, predictably, we cannot escape from the task of defining our core concepts. The point of our “pedantry” is not to finally fix ‘experience’ and ‘expression’ in order to exorcize the dilemma of their entanglement which has haunted the study of religion since James. Rather, the point is to map the territories through which a hermeneutics of religion might have to navigate to take both religious experiences and religious expressions into consideration. Revisiting the concepts ‘experience’ and ‘expression’, then, offers us the occasion to survey the cumulative contribution which the contributions to our compilation make in response to the (Jamesian) puzzle.

Putting Expression Back into Experience

What constitutes a religious experience? James has had a significant impact on the conceptualizations of experience in the study of religion. His *The Varieties*
of Religious Experience has been so influential that the (Jamesian) puzzle of experience and expression casts a shadow over both disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. Taking extreme examples as the point of departure, James’s Gifford Lectures allocated the experience of religion to the extraordinary rather than the ordinary. But the contributions to our compilation call James’s confinement of ‘experience’ into question. Here, those contributions which put expression back into experience are crucial.

When Jörg Lauster explores the experience in the example of a dancing plastic bag in Sam Mendes’s film American Beauty (1999), he expands the horizon for experience. What he assesses as experience of transcendence can be found in everyday life. Johannes Kleine describes the close analogy between the mystical and the aesthetical, suggesting that transcendence might be experienced through literature. Similarly, Amber L. Griffioen’s account stresses the similarities between religious and non-religious experience by identifying the ways we relate to fictional characters. Graham Ward points to perception as a mode of experience which could be qualified as a root of religion because acts of perception involve transcendence. Accordingly, the distinction between religious and non-religious experience is relativized. Ward quasi-quarantines the terminology of religious and non-religious experience. Echoing Mircea Eliade, Werner G. Jeanrond affirms that any subject or any object might manifest a transcendence which needs to be approached indirectly rather than directly through the detour of its manifestations. Marijn de Jong employs Karl Rahner’s notion of the experience of “self-presence (Bei-Sich-Selber-Sein)”, including the ramifications such a notion has for our accounts of experience and expression. Correspondingly, Knut Wenzel advocates the Rahnerian category of transcendental experience, anchored as it is in the structure of subjectivity, which he conceives of as “supra-religious” because it can be filled religiously and non-religiously. Ulrich Schmiedel argues that relations to what he calls “the finite other” and relations to what he calls “the infinite other” are structured similarly. Hence, relations to any other involve moments of transcendence which is

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3 William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, 5, 40, 44.
4 See also Jörg Lauster, Religion als Lebensdeutung: Theologische Hermeneutik Heute (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005), 17–18.