Experience and Interpretation
Reflections on the Problem of Conceptualizing Religious Experience

By Troels Nørager

1. Introduction

In the present article,¹ I take as my starting point and basic premise the claim that religious experience constitutes nothing less than the scientific 'object' of psychology of religion. I do this, knowing full well that this claim is by no means generally acknowledged by psychologists of religion. As a matter of fact, a brief survey of the field will demonstrate that 'religiosity' may be treated in (at least) four different ways: 1) as experience (phenomenological, psychodynamic, and humanistic psychology), 2) as behavior (behaviorism, parts of Freudianism, and some experimental studies), 3) as attitudes or orientations (correlation studies), or, finally 4) as a way of thinking or reasoning (developmental theories like Oser & Gmünder, 1984, or Fowler, 1981).²

As an objection against focusing on the individual's religious experience it is often argued that an emphasis of this kind leads to solipsism or to a dangerous neglect of the cultural and societal factors active in shaping religious experience. My answer to this objection is that today no one in his right mind will even for one moment consider forgetting the pervasive influence of 'culture' and 'language'. Neither do I overlook the fact that 'experience' is internally related to behavior, attitudes, and thinking. Nonetheless, I still claim that religious experience constitutes the primary task of psychology of religion.

One reason for this is that the focus on 'experience' is what connects modern psychology of religion with its pre-history, namely the 'psychology' inherent in religious traditions.³ Another reason is that what the general public rightly expects from us is nothing less than an ability to interpret and explain religious experience. In other words, we should avoid getting trapped in the dilemma so characteristic of academic psychology: when presenting 'theories' which the majority of its practitioners considers 'scientific', the interested public is bored stiff, whereas what the public recognizes as interesting 'psychology' (for instance psychoanalysis, not to mention the work of Jung) is regarded by 'real' psychologists as too 'speculative'.

¹ The following essay is a more elaborate and revised version of a paper presented at the “6th Symposium for the Psychology of Religion” in Lund, June 19-22, 1994.
² The so-called 'attribution theory' which was heavily debated some years ago would, according to this way of scanning our field, fall somewhere between options 3) and 4).
³ As demonstrated and analyzed in Nørager (1996a) this 'religious psychology' is primarily embedded in the references to 'the heart' which abound in the Christian tradition.
In this article I wish to reflect upon the difficult philosophical issue of the relation between experience and interpretation, which has plagued psychology of religion (particularly studies on mysticism) since its early beginnings. More specifically, I shall present a model which takes us beyond the all too common dichotomy between 'experience' and 'language', showing instead how both should be seen as internally related within a continuum spanning the issues of metapsychology and discourse (cf. Nørager, 1996b).

What are the problems connected with conceptualizing religious experience? Before trying to answer, perhaps we should begin by noting the surprising fact that after a century of psychological approaches to religion, this question can still be raised without an adequate answer ready to hand. This testifies to a fundamental lack of consensus regarding the object, analytical task and general self-understanding of our discipline. Normally, and perhaps especially on festive occasions like conferences, we adopt the attitude of celebrating the multitude of approaches being marketed under the label 'psychology of religion'. Without wishing to denounce this attitude of laissez-faire, I admit that I would prefer a situation where we could at least agree about the basic problems even if we disagree as to their solution. But we are all painfully aware that this is far from being the case. As Wulff (1992:36) has aptly put it, psychology of religion “is a pre-paradigmatic field, for it still lacks the consensus that constitutes ‘normal science’.”

After these introductory remarks, let me briefly summarize the issues that in my view are connected with the issue of how to conceptualize religious experience:

1. The inherent vagueness of the notion ‘religious experience’. There is a great need to clarify, theoretically, what we mean by ‘experience’.
2. The relation between experience (psychic inwardness) and language (linguistic expression).
3. The relation between the subject’s way of conceptualizing religious experience and that of the psychologist of religion. The problem of reductionism emerges within this context.
4. The relation between the psychology inherent in the texts of our religious tradition and modern psychology of religion. How can we adequately conceptualize both the connection and the difference between religious folk psychology (or a folk model of the mind) and a scientific psychology of religion?

As anyone will recognize, these are all difficult questions. Nonetheless, it is my ambition to sketch a meta-theoretical perspective for psychology of religion from which a new and more fruitful way of dealing with these problems will follow.

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4 This model and its relation to the history of psychology of religion is the subject of my post-doctoral thesis (Nørager, 1996a, forthcoming).