

The Equivalent of Religious Experience for the “None”

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What is religious experience? Is it *sui generis*? Or is it an aspect of other kinds of experience? In order to answer this question, it is first necessary to accept some facts. The meaning of the word “religion” and its associated lexicon are immoderately subject to interpretation and influenced by perspective and bias. It is an English phrase of Latin origin and, when translated across languages and through the agency of multiple cultures results in significant semantic variances. The manifestations and forms of and catalysts for what is understood by many as “religious experience” are varied and possibly infinite. The Western concept of “religious experience” is subjective, unique to the individual experiencing it. What is considered “religious” is widely understood, in my experience, as inextricably connected to a belief in the supernatural as elucidated through a doctrinal lens. This definition would not apply to nonbelievers, those who are not disciples or adherents to any denomination or creed.<sup>1</sup>

Given these facts among others, an attempt to narrow in on a common denominator or all-encompassing definition of “religious experience” likely results in something partisan, Eurocentric and ecclesiastical and, can reasonably be called out as being more than somewhat of an hubristic and even redundant undertaking. So, why is it important to investigate?

Religion exists, will continue to exist and, arguably, should exist in its many forms and iterations for the foreseeable future. I turn to the Pulitzer Prize-winning polymath Edward O. Wilson who explains this reality as he sees it. “The brain was made for religion and religion for the brain. In every second of the believer’s conscious life religious belief plays multiple, mostly

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<sup>1</sup> Although nonbelievers can be said to have a set of beliefs based in that which can be proved or has sufficient supporting evidence, and many people “of-faith” don’t actually believe that spiritual experience is dependent upon traditional belief, the terminology as used herein refers to belief and faith embodied by epistemological “blindness” and “fear” of the supernatural divine within orthodox or fundamental organized religions.

nurturing roles.”<sup>2</sup> Wilson also explains that religion is flawed in that it presents as spiritual but is much more about tribalism; it can cause much suffering and; it often impedes a grasp of reality.<sup>3</sup>

Whether good or bad, humans will continue to be religious and have self-identified “religious experiences” that are meaningful to them. Theological vocations deal with that which gives life meaning and so necessitate, in the least, a recognition that religious experience is lived truth for many and, if possible, a comprehension of what “religious experience” entails in order to serve effectively. Assuming all humans, including those who have become known in the Western vernacular of the 21st century as “nones,”<sup>4</sup> can have this experience, it is incumbent upon the spiritual caregiver, minister, or other theological professional to understand what this experience can be comprised of, if and how it might be brought about, and what to be wary of, if anything.

This topic is especially interesting to me for two reasons. First, the desire to fathom and explain the presently unfathomable and inexplicable seem *a posteriori* deeply rooted in human nature. Although that is not something I will attempt to prove or disprove, I will consider it a reasonable assumption and use it as a jumping-off point. In order to attempt an answer herein with acknowledgment and acceptance of the understandings advanced above, I have narrowed the focus of the question and applied specific parameters. These specifics are embodied in the second reason I am interested in this subject. It is because, as a humanist, an atheist, yet also a person seeking to become a spiritual caregiver, I believe it is important to analyze what “religious experience” could be to someone who does not subscribe to any church doctrine, any

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<sup>2</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *The Meaning of Human Existence* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014), 149.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>4</sup> “So Kosmin began calling this group the ‘nones,’ a shortened version for ‘none of the above’ — which is what people often said when asked to name their religion.” (Russell n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> The term “none” can also refer simply to the state of being without a formal religious affiliation rather than a complete rejection of religious beliefs and denial of inclinations. This is not the population I am addressing.

theistic system of belief or practice; someone who, as I do, rejects the supernatural and considers faith beyond evidence, untenable.

As the 20th century began, influenced by antecedent mystics and reformers, a formal study of religious experience as personal experience began in force. It was taken up by researchers in numerous disciplines including philosophy, phenomenology, history, psychology, sociology and most everything in between. They produced a continuum of deductions, most with personal experience as their fulcrum, including rational and mystical apologetics from Kant and Schleiermacher, the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Process Thought of Alfred North Whitehead and on into the unrelenting Logical Positivism associated with Vienna and Berlin, to name a few standouts.

Experience too underwent a revolution of analysis, from Hume to Kant, it became understood as more active than passive. Eventually philosophers like William James steered experience into a much broader realm, encompassing multiple dimensions including the religious. One of James' contemporaries, known as pragmatists, was John Dewey, an American Philosopher. It is with Dewey's account of religious experience that I will begin my limited analysis.

Dewey straddled the line between heathenism and piety. He rejected the supernatural, embracing religious experience as *sui juris*.<sup>6</sup> Dewey recognized this position was a compromise unacceptable by the polar stances taken by the traditionally religious on one side and the absolute rationalist on the other. That recognition is why Dewey is a good starting point in understanding "religious experience" from the perspective of the "nones" I am addressing. Separating "religion,

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<sup>6</sup> As contrasted with the term *sui generis*, unique in and of itself; by *sui juris*, I mean specifically something independent of the supernatural or supernatural judgement.

a religion, and the religious,”<sup>7</sup> he posits a religious experience that is “free from all historical encumbrances.”<sup>8</sup> He proposes “the emancipation of elements and outlooks that may be called religious.”<sup>9</sup> I would argue similarly that not just experiences, but universal truths that can be and often are elucidated and disseminated by religion, are independent of the same and can be understood on their own, demoting religion from the position of sole arbiter of existential truth.

Dewey didn’t pin down religious experience as something specific, but rather something that belonged to numerous experiences collectively, scientific, political, aesthetic, sociological, anthropological,... Indeed, it cannot exist by itself according to Dewey. It is not, according to him, *sui generis*. What it is, is encompassed not entirely in the experience itself, rather defined by the effect it might produce. When an experience produces “a better, deeper, and enduring adjustment in life,”<sup>10</sup> it can be called religious in nature. Dewey also clarified that it is not a religion that brings this about; it is not religion that introduces genuine perspective. I would contest that and say that it can be but is not necessarily a religion and does not need to be. Where Dewey and I also break is with his assertion that “release of these values is so important, their identification with the creeds and cults of religions must be dissolved.”<sup>11</sup> Being an atheist, it is not that I disagree with this statement *prima facie*. It is that I seriously doubt its potentiality given human nature and the persistence and resilience of religious orthodoxy in our world.

My historical analysis of explanations of religious experience continues with its 21st Century manifestation via constructive theology. We can’t reasonably or responsibly seek to understand “religious experience” without considering perspective in a broader sense. How it manifests is determined by the lived experience of all humans. To give my analysis somewhat

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<sup>7</sup> John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

more validity, I will delve into a feminist perspective, with the understanding that a complete analysis would necessitate consideration of all perspectives.

Whereas Dewey classified religious experience by what it might produce in broad terms, the 21st Century theologian, Dr. Sharon Welch is much more specific about how to actively actualize such experiences, what they entail mindfully *in actu*. Welch speaks of our participation in divinity, action that is spiritual, and what demarcates the presence of grace in earthly existence. It is not specific religious experiences that are holy, but rather comprehensive experience, what manner of active participation in life, that can be holy. Further, this participation can and must be self-induced but also exist within community, “The beloved community.”

The components of this holiness are not obvious at the outset given they can be proximately negative. Inasmuch as victories must be celebrated, failure and disappointment are inescapable. There are explicit obstacles and dangers such as complacency, settling for too little, lack of clarity of direction, inability to effectively predict outcome, and disconnection with the ordinary and with other people. Welch brings the religious down to earth by suggesting it entails reveling in “the irony of knowing that what funds our morality is itself amoral, and morality—far from being the demand or gift of the divine—is the perilous and at times beautiful human response to the energy and wonder of life.”<sup>12</sup> Acceptance of this state of “grace” is to Welch, “profoundly spiritual” and ultimately positive.

She outlines all four aspects of this “theology of immanence,” which, I am taking the liberty of claiming is a synonym for religious experience. They are: “The ability to see clearly the complexity of life; ...The human community can celebrate the wonder and beauty of life;

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<sup>12</sup> Sharon D Welch, *After Empire: The Art and Ethos of Enduring Peace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 32.

...Transcending of conditions of oppression through loving life, self, and others despite social forces that deny the values of all of these; and ...Movement of social transformation.”<sup>13</sup>

All of this involves risk, emotional, existential and otherwise. But, Welch makes clear this “ethic of risk” is not self-sacrifice but, contrarily, it is necessary to achieve true love of self, of others, and of life. Welch uses the word love throughout her work to describe this ethic; love that is “erotic, *jouissance*...as a form of power that challenges the very core of capitalism;”<sup>14</sup> love that is illuminating.

Integrating Welch’s holy process of imperfect erotic love for the natural world with Dewey’s classification of a resultant transformative experience, both of which are not only neutral with regards to traditional religious faith, but actually render belief in the supernatural essentially irrelevant, I can begin to formulate a definition. I will contribute an ingredient from many liberal theological recipes for religious experience that truly enhances the flavors and adds an elusive but essential metaphysical umami. It must also include awe. With that, a secular definition of religious experience begins to coalesce.

To avoid confusion, I will describe a secular equivalent to “religious experience” by using the term spiritual experience, “spiritual,” as understood fairly universally to refer to that which is awe-inspiring. In fact, as more and more people become less and less religious, it has become *de rigueur* to say, “I am not religious, but I am spiritual.” This is likely, more often than not, out of apprehension of repercussions for coming out unapologetically as an atheist but I also believe it is equally as often the result of a genuine struggle with identification in a world where religious affiliation is very nearly a prerequisite to membership in acceptable society. In his book, *The Spirituality of Awe*, the psychologist Dr. Kirk J. Schneider calls this “post-secular

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>14</sup> Sharon D. Welch, “Sharon Welch: The Beloved Community.” <https://opcentral.org/resources/2015/01/19/sharon-welch-the-beloved-community/>.

humanism.” It “embraces *both* the riches of religiosity, such as the awe for existence, *along with* the scientific spirit of inquiry.”<sup>15</sup>

Since I am transposing “religious” with “spiritual” for my definition as it relates to the experience of these “nones,” I need to further clarify and, to the extent possible, calcify what I mean by spiritual. The philosopher Robert C. Solomon wrote “...if spirituality means anything it means *thoughtfulness*.”<sup>16</sup> It encompasses “thoughts about the meaning of life and the profound feelings that such thoughts engender.”<sup>17</sup> What’s more, inspired by Hegel, Solomon defines spirituality as a process. To sum up, spirituality does not refer to any sort of theistic enlightenment but simply put, refers to a search for meaning and recognition of life that is ongoing and, with regard to humanity as it exists now, unending.

One of the most important elements of the spiritual experience as I have attempted to define it, is awe. Awe is an experience that can be positive or negative. It is one that utilizes the human imagination and capacity for creativity and wonder. It can incorporate fear, ecstasy, anger, love, or any number of emotions that alter the human spirit from apathy to faith. In concord with my suggestion to refrain from using religious language, I prefer Tillich’s neologism for faith, as a suitable description of awe, “ultimate concern.” The theologian Henry Nelson Wieman speaks to something I think must also occur if we are to have a spiritual experience, which is the recognition of awe, as awe, ...“the undefined awareness of the total passage of nature...when the bounds of awareness are widened. When one becomes aware of a far larger portion of that totality of immediate experience that constantly flows over one.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kirk J. Schneider, *The Spirituality of Awe: Challenges to the Robotic Revolution* (Middletown: Self-published, 2017), 36.

<sup>16</sup> Robert C. Solomon, *Spirituality for the Skeptic: The Thoughtful Love of Life* (New York: Oxford, 2002), 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> H.N. Wieman, *Religious Experience and Scientific Method* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971)



Given everything put forth herein, what is spiritual experience: religious experience for the none?

Religious experience, experience of awe, is not something that is ever strictly experienced by physical sense alone. Each experience does not exist at all if not also a manifestation of the human mind. Further, it is not just the experience of awe, but the recognition of awesomeness, that is key. What I mean by this is that we recognize the transformative power of the moment, and that and how it has changed our state of mind, either *in actu* or afterward. I propose that “religious experience” can be defined as a sometimes negative but ultimately positive and transformative experience of awe, active or passive, which can be, but is not necessarily, effectuated.

Humanity has harnessed this recognition of awesome lived moments by employing blind-faith and also within non-theistic religions like Buddhism but, practically, can it be harnessed outside of the domain of the church, synagogue, mosque, or other temple? I propose that it can and it has.

The first time I stepped onto the island of Manhattan, for instance. I had dreamed of living in New York for years so, when that dream finally became a reality, it was magical. The energy of the city flooded my spirit and overcame me. I was acutely aware of my place in the universe in that moment, my size relative to humanity, and the awesomeness of existence. And, this was all relative. The same moment was undoubtedly experienced by countless others in my sphere, from business people to cabbies, as mundane. A moment like this of unexpected hyper-consciousness is what I would call a spiritual experience.

I will now attempt something the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher considered possible, which is, based on an analysis of what religious experience is, put in place

conditions that induce religious experience in others. I will provide an example of what I believe is a genre of expression that, although purely secular in nature, can, and likely does effectuate something equivalent to religious experience. I am not speaking first-hand but deferentially as an interested party. Afrofuturism presents as spiritual on many levels.

Afrofuturism is “a way of re-contextualizing and assessing history and imagining the future of the African Diaspora via science, science fiction, technology, sound, architecture, the visual and culinary arts and other more nimble and interpretive modes of research and understanding”<sup>19</sup>. Afrofuturism encompasses the concept of Astro-Blackness “in which a person’s black state of consciousness, released from the confining and crippling slave or colonial mentality, becomes aware of the multitude and varied possibilities and probabilities within the universe”<sup>20</sup>.

Traditional religion works in many ways. It can redirect the mind into a place of stillness or contentedness. It can be reassuring and consoling. It provides perspective that we are one with all and, at the same time, we are unique, while uncovering the absolute enormity of what is all. Given the history of colonialism and the extant state of oppression of people of color, it seems Afrofuturism works in a similar way to religion. The humanist scholar Anthony Pinn defines religious experience in the context of black America as “the recognition of and response to the elemental feeling for complex subjectivity and the accompanying transformation of consciousness that allows for the historically manifest battle against the terror of fixed identity.”<sup>21</sup> His work includes the creation of a systematic nontheistic African American theology in response to the fact that traditional Christianity relies on the oppression of black

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<sup>19</sup> Sanford Biggers quoted in Gaskins 2016, 30.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Rollins quoted in Anderson and Jones, vii.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, “Crawling Backward: Toward a Theory of Black Religion’s Center.” In *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 175.

bodies. Pinn is a valuable resource for this work. However, with regards specifically to Afrofuturism as a spiritual experience, there isn't yet a wealth of examination by black theologians or philosophers.

I point to this genre as a possible example of a secular form of spiritual inspiration first because it is not connected directly or formally in any way with a single religious identity. Further, whereas traditional religion mostly posits the purely fantastic, the stories of Afrofuturism consider a fantastic reality that, although it contains elements of science fiction that are as of yet unrealized, is not founded in delusion or *ignis fatuus*, but pure imagination bolstered by a lucid and very real grasp of reality, a reality that is made even more real by its nature as harming.

This idea of Afrofuturism as a secularly spiritual genre is nascent and cannot be explored further within the scope of this paper or necessarily by me. However, I put it forth as an example of a possibility outside of the church or orthodox religion, that conceivably could, and likely does, move people to religious experience as I have defined it. To speak to this directly, I conclude with the words of the poet and musician, arguable the father of Afrofuturism, Sun Ra.

***Another Fate***<sup>22</sup>

*To rise above all the cultures of the land  
Is to appreciate all.  
Yet be apart and a part.  
Above the scene of many lands  
The ills of man are seen  
And simultaneously  
The potentials of greater intent:  
Another fate  
Better than anything they have  
Ever known  
Hovers quietly ever just within reach.*

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<sup>22</sup> Sun Ra, *The Immeasurable Equation: The Collected Poetry and Prose compiled and edited by James L. Wolf and Hartmut Geerken* (Norderstedt: WAITAWHILE, 2005), 70.

*The greater intent  
Of being beyond  
The intermingled scheme of good and evil.  
Beyond good and evil  
Beyond life and death  
Is beyond the cycle, the O of earth.  
The circle is the earth  
The full degree of the circle  
Is the measure of the [O of] earth[.]<sup>23</sup>  
And thereby the oath  
The measure of the oath  
Is the measure of the way  
Which is the abstract path or code.*

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<sup>23</sup> Words and punctuation in brackets appear in the 1980 version but not in the 1972 version.

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