REFLECTIONS ON TWO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

DONALD HANKS

It is sometimes suggested that there is no such thing as a religious experience, and that the person who claims to have one is unwittingly taking some other kind of experience, for instance an aesthetic thrill, and misidentifying it. I do not accept this view. Religious experiences are natural and normal aspects of our lives, though exquisitely rare. Perhaps not everyone has them. But they do happen, and when they occur our lives are transformed in subtle ways so that we are never quite the same as we were before.

I submit that, for our present purposes, the form of religious experience may be operationally defined in a uniquely differentiating way, so that such experiences may be distinguished from other subsets of the larger domain of human awareness. Experiences of a distinctively religious sort are characterized by (1) a sense of the *transcendent*, specifically the violation of the law of non-contradiction, by (2) a corresponding sense of *astonishment* or suprise, and by (3) the *numinous* awareness of standing in the presence of the holy.

This definition is a description of the general form of religious experience. It is not to be confused with the question of content, which can be understood in a preliminary way (I shall expand this concept later in the essay) as the specific object or datum upon which the experience is centered.

In each of the experiences I shall recount, the form is the same while the content varies widely. In the first case the content is an object of traditional Christian veneration, the cathedral at Cologne, while in the second the content is a secular datum, namely the rocket carrying the first men to the moon. One conclusion I shall seek to draw is that the formal validity of a religious experience is not compromised by a secular datum; another is that religious and aesthetic experiences are different in kind.

THE FIRST EXPERIENCE: COLOGNE

The afternoon train from Amsterdam was running on time, predictably, but my spirits were tempered by the cold February rain which spattered against the windows of the coach. The canals and lowlands with their rustic windmills gave way gradually to the cities and factories of the Rheinland, and the industrial haze merged with the leaden skies to hold out the promise of a chill, wet night. A recent bout with influenza had weakened me, and I could think of nothing more redeeming than to settle under an eiderdown comforter with a warming glass of brandy. The train inched at last across the Rhein bridge, and from my window I caught a first glimpse of the cathedral, or Dom, as the residents call it; in the gathering dusk the famous twin spires were nearly

DONALD HANKS is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of New Orleans.

swallowed in gloom. Later that night, standing at the hotel window, the rain by this time having turned to snow, the spires were barely visible through the swirling mists.

"Kŏln lebt nicht bei: Dom allein," a store window placard had announced. I wondered. For it was the Dom alone which had lured me to this city. One of my early childhood memories is of a newspaper photo of that cathedral, standing alone in a sea of rubble, the tip of one spire knocked off, the account said, by a crashing Allied bomber. The cathedral continued to stand while the city crumbled around it. Some years thereafter, under the inspiration of Ray C. Petry, I had become interested in the heritage of gothic architecture, this edifice in particular. So my only purpose in stopping at Cologne was to visit this monument to Christian history.

The following morning was bleak and windy; I woke up coughing and wheezing and feeling generally miserable. My general mood was anything but ecstatic as I walked around the corner of the Hauptbahnhof to stand in front of the Dom. The weather accentuated the shadows, and the building appeared rather dark and somber. And massive. I was impressed by its mammoth size. My thoughts began to drift, to William of Moerbeke and Albert the Great, to the Thomistic synthesis, to the cumulative weight of centuries of Christian hope and tradition, to the genius of architecture itself; to the nameless workers and artisans, some of whom, in a project of this magnitude, must have fallen from the scaffolds to their deaths below.

The little patches of sky which could be seen through the apertures of the towers lent a strangely aerated effect to the top of the structure. Some children came racing across the plaza, whooping and laughing because of the weather, and disappeared inside the cavernous door at the front of the Dom.

I moved around a bit looking for other perspectives when, curiously, the cathedral's massiveness seemed to intensify. I was seized by the most distinct impression that it could fly. Something in the design, I am not sure what, gave wings to the thing. The aspiring gables, the tapering effect of the pinnacles, and the patches of light shining through the twin towers—all conspired to reach for the sky. And then the massiveness dissolved. That which had seemed so wedded to the ground now appeared to be flowing upward from the earth. A form which moments before was geometrically static had now assumed the guise of organic fluidity and was, to my total surprise, soaring in flight. A rush of feeling overwhelmed me, and I felt I was standing in the presence of the holy.

THE SECOND EXPERIENCE: CAPE CANAVERAL

Late one July evening in 1969 a carload of my students pulled into the driveway. They were heading for Florida to see the liftoff of the rocket carrying the first men to the moon, and invited me to accompany them. Rather impulsively, and against my wife's better judgment, I agreed to go, and we took

off into the night.

Before dawn on the day of the launch we made our way to the beach. The flashes of lightning from an offshore thunderstorm occasionally illuminated our faces. The launch site was to the north of us and we decided to walk up the beach as far as we could to get as close to the scene as possible. After a time our chatter subsided, and the sound of thunder rolling across the waves merged with the pounding of the gentle surf to put us in a mood of thoughtful reverie.

It was as glorious a dawn as I have ever seen, the storm clouds blowing out to sea and the sun shining through. We were where we wanted to be. Then came the launch itself. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the rocket surged skyward. Even at our distance it seemed enormous. The exhaust gave no sustained roar, but an intermittent blatting noise which contributed a new dimension of power. Gathering momentum, the machine climbed higher, leaving a single contrail of white vapor against the azure backdrop of the sky. With the naked eye one could see the patterned flash of the second stage igniting. Then the rocket was no more than a receding pinpoint of light, and soon there was nothing left to see, although the noise of the engine could be heard for many minutes thereafter, a distant rumbling to which I felt transparent. The men were on their way to the moon.

I have absolutely no conscious recollection of the next half hour or so. Gradually my awareness returned and, to my numb surprise, I found I had walked nearly a mile back down the beach. One member of our group was walking beside me, staring down vacantly at the surf washing back and forth across our feet. Two more were far ahead; another could be seen behind us, walking round and round in tight little circles. The beach was crowded. I tried to focus my attention on other people. Many seemed to be drifting about aimlessly, eyes glazed. It was the most intense narcosis I have ever experienced.

My central nervous system was completely swamped, inundated by a depth of feeling I simply could not fathom: a rush of boundaries transcended, of universals overflowing, of being suspended between dimensions. Every prior human act, without exception, had been confined within the limitations of this earth. But the event we had just experienced—the beginning of the exploration of another heavenly body—was the origin of a new type of human act, breaking through the molds of past restriction. Standing by the ocean, mother of life, and looking at that point of light disappearing in the sky, I could sense, in one realization, the full evolutionary continuum from the slime to the stars. I felt I was standing in the presence of the holy.

REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCES

In traditional Western philosophy, at least from Aristotle onward, the highest principle of critical speculation has been the postulate of noncontradiction. Ingrained in us as a cultural legacy is the firmly rooted convic-

tion that no single thing can, at one and the same time, and in the same respects, both be and not be.

Non-contradiction functions as a regulative principle in our conceptual scheme. It can be likened to a rule in a game or to a meaning rule in language. Such rules, once adopted, determine in advance the relational moves which will subsequently be possible in that game, or the intelligible patterns of inter-subjective communication which will be allowed in that language. They exist prior to, and confer intelligibility upon, any given maneuver in a game or in a language.

Non-contradiction is the ultimate arbiter so far as the logical ordering of experience is concerned. So extensive is the application of this principle, that the axiom is violated even if contraries are predicted of a given subject at one and the same time. The difficulty is, the depth of religious experience transcends the limits imposed by logic. In deeper levels of the human mind even the axioms (identity and excluded middle as well as non-contradiction) fail to have the same application they enjoy in our conscious, waking states. They are constructs of our own design, conventions we impose upon experience, recognizing all the while that our deepest subjective reality is something other than what we conceive it to be at the cognitive level. Within religious experience apparent opposites, whether contradictories or merely contraries, can and do coalesce.

It is at this interface of apparent opposites telescoping that the experience of transcendence is encountered. This element was present in both the episodes I have recalled. It is understood rationally that certain properties, since they are contraries, cannot be predicted of a given object at one and the same time or even at separate times. The cathedral cannot be massive in weight and yet light. Nor can it self-consistently be grounded to the earth and yet soaring in flight. Likewise the postulate is violated if the Dom is geometrically static but also possesses an organic fluidity of form. Similarly in the case of the rocket, and the slime and the stars do not integrate comfortably within one and the same realization. Reason founders and, precisely at the point of fusion of contraries, transcendence is experienced. The boundaries of our finitude are dissolved and the unifying presence of the Divine is felt.

The explains in part why religious experiences invariably defy easy description. The aura of ineffability attending such experiences is due in large measure to the limitations inherent in the very language we use to describe them. As an historical accident the Greeks evolved a subject/predicate mode of language, and with it a corresponding mode of concept formation. Western culture followed suit. It is an idiosyncrasy of Western thought to try to require all experiences to conform to subject/predicate limitations as well as to the principle of non-contradiction. These standards successfully permit us to organize many domains of human awareness. But religious experiences do not conform to such molds, and since there is no literal description available to us for describing such states we must resign ourselves to non-literal accounts. The

language we use in communicating about the inner dimensions of the religious life is inherently and inescapably metaphorical.

Awareness of transcendence is one of the defining characteristics of religious experience. Another is astonishment, or vivid surprise. Alan Watts once remarked that the religious quest originates from a sense of astonishment. This is a useful insight since, when we pause for a moment to reflect, it occurs to us that the universe simply need not be. The bare fact that something exists at all is sufficient warrant for astonishment. It would make perfectly good sense that there should be nothingness, an empty silence; but when we open our eyes in the morning to discover around us a world pulsing with myriad rhythms, it fails to compute, and the sensitive observer is irresistably drawn toward those religious questions which inquire into the ultimate purpose and meaning of existence.

Philosophy springs from a cognate source, which was understood by the ancient Greeks as the gift of wonder. But whereas philosophy, at least in its traditional Western expressions, has sought to analyze existence in terms of cognitive relations and formal proofs, religion has more typically concentrated on the concept of God and has advised the faithful on ways of appreciating the Divine within the realm of personal experience, not only as a cognitive quest but also at the deeper levels of feeling or emotion. Broadly speaking, therefore, philosophy has characteristically restricted itself to our intellectual faculty while religion has been more concerned with the situation of the affective person, specifically with the difficulties that person faces in his or her attempts to adapt and readapt to a hostile and ever changing universe which, from any merely cognitive appraisal, seems ultimately meaningless as regards the preservation of human values.

There is a level at which philosophy and religion intertwine, the level at which our intuitions are immersed in wonder, where the vectors of our deepest feelings and values take on new directions and acquire added momentum. It is here that our inner rhythms of purpose and autonomy are energized. When intuition, feelings and values have assumed their directions, the philosopher seeks rationally to formalize those vectors, to sort out, to systematize, to organize that which has already occurred. Reason enters, as it were, after the fact in an effort to render clear what had been deeply felt but only dimly seen.

Despite the fact that philosophy and religion both emanate from a similar source, one would not want to confuse the two. The episodes I have recounted were religious experiences, not philosophical exercises. Each was accompanied by a strong feeling of astonishment, of vivid surprise. In each case I was expecting to have a memorable experience, but found to my amazement that I was unprepared for the *kind*, let alone the intensity, of the experience that actually transpired.

The fact is we have no veridical way of anticipating when a religious experience is about to happen, and we are therefore never quite emotionally prepared when one occurs. Our rational circuits quickly sustain an overload,

opposites are experienced as coalescing, and astonishment immediately results as a by-product of this experience of transcendence.

Religious experience is uniquely differentiated by yet a third characteristic, awareness of the holy. In *The Idea of the Holy* Rudolph Otto painted what has become a classical portrait of the holy as the *mysterium tremendum* which compels and unnerves us at the very core of our being. Otto understood the *tremendum* to be the *content* of the religious experience, the awe inspiring wrath of Yahweh filling us with a "numinous dread" which transcends Schleiermacher's mere "feeling" of dependence on the Divine. The *tremendum* is, in a word, "fascinating." We find ourselves transported.

The *form* of religious experience was conceived by Otto to be our experience of the *mysterium*, the "wholly other" which goes beyond mere cognitive analysis and which inspires in us the intoxicating reaction of astonishment bordering on stupor. This is the unfathomed "known unknown" to which Lonergan alludes in *Insight.*

Otto further proposed that Kantian type arguments do succeed in demonstrating that, deeply rooted within us, we must presuppose a hidden pure source of religious consciousness not to be confused either with pure theoretical or pure practical reason. He understood "divination" to be the faculty which makes possible our comprehension of appearances of the holy.

I submit that Otto is on solid philosophical ground here. Religious experiences do constitute a demarcated domain of human awareness, and the pure preconditions rendering experience possible in that domain must therefore be posited. Of course preconditions of experience cannot themselves be experienced, and hence the term *mysterium* is aptly chosen.

It is not my present hope to improve upon Otto's account of the holy. I simply wish to point out that his conception of the *mysterium* anticipates all of the formal components I have identified as the defining characteristics of religious experience. The *mysterium* transcends reason, fills us with deepest astonishment, and inspires us with a numinous awareness of the sacred. The two religious experiences I have recounted do answer to this description of the holy.

SOME CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The form of religious experience is common to all members of this unique domain of human awareness. The content includes not only the *tremendum*, but also, as I indicated in a preliminary way, some triggering datum such as a cathedral or a rocket. Such a datum functions, so to speak, as a catalyst through which the *tremendum* numinously shines.

One of the interesting aspects of religious experiences is that they do not require the presence of an accredited religious datum in order to occur. Often enough, as in the case of the ecstatic transport of one who has been contemplating an icon, the catalyst does in fact possess an evident religious im-

port, and the person having the experience is clearly responding to an object which has traditionally elicited similar reactions in people.

It is not a genuine paradox to say that the profane is really the sacred in disguise, if we were but open to the numinous *tremendum* which strives to express itself through everything that is? Our religious challenge is, in a sense, to become more open to the numinous, more transparent to the Divine. This attitude does not necessitate an altar. The burning bush had never been institutionally consecrated. Neither have rockets. Both, however, can function as vehicles to a deeper awareness of the holy.

This brings me to one last question. How can one know that he is having a distinctively religious, as opposed to a merely aesthetic, experience? I want to say that an aesthetic experience can adumbrate or even trigger a religious experience, but need never be confused with one.

Aesthetic experience falls into two broad types. First, as in the case of a natural phenomenon such as a sunset, there is a sense of the beautiful, of harmonic proportion, of the mandala of disparate parts intertwining, according to a finite conception of beauty. Second, as in the case of an artifact (i.e., a created work fashioned by an artist), there is also a sense of the beautiful, of the symmetry of constituent parts cohering to form an integrated whole. But in this latter case our appreciation is conditioned by our finite judgment (1) as to whether the finished work gratifies our sense of taste, and (2) whether the artist lived up to the ideal that was contemplated. Did the artist fulfill the set of expectations he or she envisioned at the outset? If so, the finished work might well be judged to be beautiful even though it may offend our personal requirements of taste.

A work of art can function as the catalyst for a religious awareness, but the two types of experience are specifically different. The differential separating aesthetic from religious experience is that, in the latter, there is an awareness, not of the beautiful, but of the holy. The sensual pleasure which beauty yields is replaced by awe. We have the experience of standing in the presence of the sacred, and this is an experience which transcends finite criteria of taste and form, and which is not conditioned by a limited conception of symmetry or harmonic proportion. It is precisely this capacity for awareness of appearances of the holy that defines our human nature uniquely. We are religious beings essentially and not accidentally. Aesthetic experience shapes an important part of our lives while religious experience has a transforming effect on the totality, and it is for this reason that our experience of the holy gives highest definition and deepest intensity to the direction and the momentum our lives assume.

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