



Experience in a New Key

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Religious Experience: Experience of Transparency and Resonance

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Abstract: At a time in which religion is breaking away from the normative power of its traditions and new forms of spiritual experience are emerging, religious philosophy must find criteria for what a religious experience is and how to judge its truth. In their empirical critique of religion L. Wittgenstein and R. Carnap accepted two forms of religious experience, which they described with an optical and acoustic metaphor. They denied their cognitive truth value, but not their value for life. However, an extended concept of truth, which encompasses every correspondence between experience and reality, can also find truth in religious experiences of “transparency” and “resonance”. They differ from aesthetic experience not only by the depth of transparency and resonance, but also by their cognitive interpretation. What is experienced is cognitively referred to a final reality: either to a “*summum ens*” in this world, or to the whole of this world or something unknown beyond of this world. This final point of reference is a unity of “being” and “value”. Religion makes experiences of the everyday transparent for both aspects of an ultimate reality und motivates to a life full of resonance with this reality.

Keywords: Philosophy of religion, empiristic criticism of religion, optic metaphors in religion, acoustic metaphors, truth value, life value

What is religious experience? And why is it so difficult to determine the truth of this experience? These are central questions to any philosophy of religion. Clarification is important for three reasons. Firstly, the more the power of religious traditions of the past diminishes, the more important present religious experiences become. Though experience has always played an important role in all religions, it was more important in some religions (e.g. in Buddhism) than in other religions, it was more relevant in Catholicism with its monastic spirituality than in Protestantism. However, also the protestant reformers said, the *verbum externum* of the Bible must be confirmed by the *verbum internum* of the Holy Spirit, thus by personal religious experiences.¹ However, what are the specific characteristics of religious experience? Religions identify and classify experiences as religious by the categories of their traditions. This has changed in one regard: There is in the present a multiplicity of experiences, and among them many very intensive experiences that interrupt our everyday life. However, we are uncertain which we can identify as a “religious” experience - among all these experiences. Some therefore speak of “spiritual experiences” as opposed to “religious” experiences that take place within the framework of institutionalized religions. Aesthetic and religious experiences flow nowadays into each other. Some of our contemporaries experience music as a “revelation” or visit churches as museums and art museums as “churches”. Thus, we must expect overlaps between

¹ Cp. Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, 1.7.4, says on the testimony of the Holy Spirit, that Godself is the only valid witness of God in his word. This word will not find faith in the human heart, until the inner witness of the Holy Spirit has sealed it. In modern times, one of the most impressive analysis of religious experience are the Gifford Lectures of W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1901/2. James comes from a reformed tradition, but he is dealing with a broad range of religious and mystical experiences in all religions. His ideas are evidence for the emancipation of religious experience from traditional religion.

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aesthetic and religious experience.² If religions want to preserve their *proprium* and remain recognizable, we must define what religious experience is.

A second reason for dealing with religious experience is that recourse to experience is important for judging the truth value of religion. Modern people think empirically. Truth is for them above all what we can confirm empirically. Academic people know: Experience embraces passive and constructive elements. We receive information *a posteriori* “from outside” and shape it “from within” with *a priori* categories. The belief that something exists relies within an empirical consciousness always on the fact that we were “informed” by its effects on us. We only know about the sun through rays that affect us. Almost all theologians think about God in the same way: Godself must inform us so that we are convinced of his existence. According to this theological position, faith is based on a self-revelation of God. “Religious experience” would then be the subjective side of what is objectively “revelation”. Only a theology of revelation in the narrow sense concentrates revelation exclusively on a certain mediator figure like Christ. Even then, representatives of such a theology must ask themselves: What are the criteria for the fact that just here an experience of God happens?

Finally, there is a third reason: All contemporary religions face the great challenge of changing and renewing themselves in the modern world. New interpretations of tradition are an important impulse for such changes – think for instance of the discussion about the demythologization of the New Testament³ – but such interpretations remain bound to a past that nobody can change retroactively; they are bound to the sacred texts of a religion. On the other hand, experiences in the present can open up new areas and thereby give impulses for the renewal of a religion. A hermeneutics of contemporary experience must therefore complement the hermeneutics of tradition in order to make religion productive and creative in a changing world. Otherwise, religion risks a retreat into small anti-modernist islands that isolate themselves from the modern world.

A theory of religious experiences is therefore necessary for three reasons. Such experiences bring the past to life, create plausibility in the present and enable changes in order to cope with the challenges of the future. From this follows the task of describing and justifying religious experiences. To this end, we may ask two questions: how can one identify religious experience? And what is the truth of these experiences? A comprehensive answer is impossible, but we can perhaps clarify two partial questions: what is the difference between religious and aesthetic experience, although both are deeply related? A second partial question is: Why is it so difficult to judge the truth value of religious experience? Are we faced with a similar problem here as with aesthetic experience? That there exists convincing art is undeniable. Nevertheless, it is difficult to say what makes it convincing. Why is for some the music of J.S. Bach a “revelation” and for others only an acoustic phenomenon?

² I owe many insights to Dorthe Jørgensen. Her book *Den skønne tænkning* is a comprehensive investigation of the relationship between aesthetic and religious experience, particularly discussing A.G. Baumgarten, I. Kant, W. Benjamin and M. Heidegger. The book is written in Danish, but contains a German and an English summary (pp. 917-946 and 947-965). Jørgensen rightly states that modern aesthetics has concentrated far too much on the aesthetic experience of works of art. The aesthetic experience of nature, the world, and God(s) presence) was neglected, but it is precisely such aesthetic experience that overlaps with religious experience. The premodern approach to aesthetic phenomena is therefore more open for a religious interpretation than are most modern approaches, because the former includes an experience of reality. In our time, we must also be aware of a second differentiation, namely the difference between the traditional aesthetic conviction of a unity of beauty and morality and a modern aestheticism according to which aesthetic experience is without moral relevance. – I should add we find also in religion sometimes a differentiation between religion and morality. The central message of the New Testament and of some Christian reform movements was that God accepts the sinner, i.e. those who have a moral deficit. According to these movements, true life commences beyond morality. Among the protestant reformers, Nikolaus of Amsdorff (1483-1565) claimed that good works were harmful to salvation because the believer tended to rely on his works rather than on God’s grace alone. Cp. Rogge, *Amsdorff*, 494. On the other side, there is in my eyes no doubt that aesthetic experience has an ethical relevance: we understand other people with strange convictions and habits much better by novels or in theatre, even if we do not agree with them. Empathy is trained by fiction. However, it is precisely the aesthetic relativization of moral judgments, which makes such empathy possible.

³ In 1941 Rudolf Bultmann proposed a new interpretation of the New Testament message in which statements about heaven and hell, incarnation and ascension, miracles and atonement were regarded as mythical images that modern people can no longer believe literally. We have to interpret these images existentially. For they contain a message that aims to change life. See Bultmann, *New Testament und Mythologie*.

1 Religious experience from a sceptical empiricist point of view

Modern empirical philosophy is often said to deny that religious experience is justified. Their representatives, however, often only think that religious experience is of a different kind than scientific experience. We can cite two representatives of empiricist philosophy as witnesses: the young Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970)⁴. Both wanted to limit our scientific knowledge to empirically discovered findings. Nevertheless, they can appreciate and accept religious experiences, provided we misunderstand them not as quasi-scientific statements. Neither of them spoke of religion, Wittgenstein spoke but of the “mystical” and Carnap of the “metaphysical”. Both of them had an existential relationship to religion: L. Wittgenstein dealt with it throughout his life; R. Carnap had religious but tolerant parents, from whose faith he had broken away.

1.1 The “mystical” of the early Ludwig Wittgenstein

Towards the end of his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, written in 1918, Wittgenstein speaks of the “mystical” and defines it in this way⁵

6.44 The mystical is not what the world is, but the fact that it is.

6.45 There is, however, something unspeakable. This shows itself, it is the mystical.

6.522 There is, however, something unspeakable. This shows itself, it is the mystical.

7. What one cannot speak of, one must be silent about.

For us it is important to note: When he says that the mystical “shows” itself, that he uses an optical metaphor. Something that is difficult to grasp becomes visible in the world. He also uses an optical metaphor when he speaks of a “view of the world”. This view of the world does not lead to a knowledge, but to a “feeling”. However, this feeling is not a mood without an object, or a non-objective state, but reacts to the “world as a limited whole”, which is not an object like other objects. One can therefore distinguish two layers in this experience, a “perceivable pole” or “point of reference” from which it takes its point of departure, and a “transcendent pole” to which it intentionally refers (W. Leidhold)⁶. Religious experience is transparent experience, in which something appears in the perceivable pole and makes visible a point of reference that as a transcendent pole is not perceivable. Such a transcendent pole is the “limited whole of the world” that is beyond our sensory perception. Nevertheless, we sense this whole as the point of reference and background of what we perceive. Criteria for the religious experience of the “mystical” would thus be

1. a transparency of the perceivable;
2. the appearance of a totality (the “world as a limited whole”);
3. the not perceivable pole of this experience;
4. its comprehension by feeling;
5. the impotence of language.

A proximity to aesthetic experience is unmistakable. We may now work through the characteristics of Wittgenstein in order to compare and distinguish aesthetic and religious experience. The following distinction is above all true when we compare religious experience with the modern and reductive concept of the aesthetic that is widespread in our day. According to this concept, beauty is a human construction

⁴ Mormann, Rudolf Carnap.

⁵ Wittgenstein, “*Tractatus logico-philosophicus*”, 7-83. The German original is: “6.44 Nicht *wie* die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern *daß* sie ist.” “6.45 Die Anschauung der Welt sub specie aeterni ist ihre Anschauung als begrenztes Ganzes. Das Gefühl der Welt als begrenztes Ganzes ist das mystische.” “6.522 Es gibt allerdings Unausprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische.” “7. Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen.”

⁶ Leidhold, *Gottes Gegenwart*, 30, distinguishes between an objective and a transcendent pole of religious experience.

not far away from a fascinating “illusion”. In pre-modern times, on the contrary, the experience of beauty was an access to metaphysical realities. Beauty, truth and the good belonged together and mediated the presence of the divine.⁷ In this case, the experience of beauty is in itself religious.

1. Characteristic for aesthetic experience is at all events the fact that more appears in the perceptible reality than we can perceive sensually. In aesthetic experience, N. Hartmann⁸ distinguished the perceptible physical reality of colours, designed materials, musical sound waves as its reality layer. A hierarchy of different “layers” then appears in it. We recognize a biological layer, for example, when we see the movement in the statue of a runner even though the statue stands still; a psychological layer, when we perceive the effort of the runner; furthermore, a cognitive layer, when we recognize the classical ideal of a harmonious human being in this runner figure. The foreground is a physical reality, but the background is layered in itself. So what could be the difference between religious and aesthetic experience within such a model? Does religious experience perhaps surpass aesthetic experience in its depth? Is the last layer in it an indication of something “completely different” (a *totaliter aliter*)? For according to Wittgenstein, what appears in it is almost unattainable. “6. 432 How the world is, is indifferent to the higher reality. God does not reveal Himself in the world.”⁹ Yet the mystical must show itself in some way. According to Wittgenstein it does not show itself in the essence of the world, how the world is, but in the fact of its existence that it exists. Let us note that the special thing about the mystical is the depth of appearances, which allows us to experience something that goes beyond everything that is visible.
2. The second characteristic of religious experience is that it shows the “world as a limited whole”. The whole is more than its parts. The speech of the “world as limited whole” presupposes the imagination of a space beyond the border of the whole. For Wittgenstein, this whole is a reality. In the experience of the “mystical”, appears something real in contrast to the fictitious realities that we perceive in the aesthetic works of art. Through poetry, fictitious figures that have never existed come to life in us. Paintings represent images of a happiness that we will never experience. We experience in this way what it means: “Beauty is nothing other than the promise of happiness.” (Stendhal).¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is a promise and not a reality. In religious experience, on the other hand, the miracle of existence is the most real thing one can think: “The mystical is not what the world is like, but the fact that it is” (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.44). This existential experience includes “everything” that exists – from the most distant galaxies to the smallest particles.
3. Religious experience therefore has two poles: the visible pole is a part of this world, which is present in our consciousness; the transcendent pole eludes our consciousness, even if we intentionally direct our thoughts towards this pole. W. Leidhold has therefore recognized the following structure in religious experiences: it is “present absence” or “absent presence”.¹¹ In something present, something absent

7 The so-called “Kunstreligion” represents a modern aesthetics that is very different from the aforementioned modern approach to the aesthetic. It replaces religion in a secular society. An example of an aesthetics that uses religious categories like “Realpräsenz” is Steiner, *Von realer Gegenwart. Hat unser Sprechen Inhalt?* Cp. Theissen, “Moderne religiöse Kunst. Theologische Ästhetik zwischen theologia gloriae und theologia crucis”. In this text, I differentiate between “sakraler Kunst” (religious art) and “Kunstreligion” (art religion). Art religion is the concept of art regarded as an opening up of an ultimate reality and meaning of life. Art is thus comparable to a revelation. In poetry, we know such a “claim to revelation” from poets such as Rainer Maria Rilke, in music from Richard Wagner. Such an art religion is compatible with a post-metaphysical naturalism in the worldview of Rilke.

8 According to German idealism (F.W. Hegel), the beautiful is not the idea itself, as Platonism said, but the “sensual appearance of the idea”. If one detaches this aesthetics from the framework of idealism, then a quite formal “appearance relationship” is the essential characteristic of the aesthetic, independent of what becomes visible through such an “appearance”. So Hartmann, *Ästhetik*; cp. the summary in Hartmann, *Einführung in die Philosophie*, 183-206.

9 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 6.432: “Wie die Welt ist, ist für das Höhere vollkommen gleichgültig. Gott offenbart sich nicht in der Welt.”

10 Stendhal, *Über die Liebe*, Chapter 1, Paragraph 16.

11 Leidhold, *Gottes Gegenwart*, 28-31. Leidhold’s analysis of religious experience is comparable to what Walter Benjamin says on the experience of aura, i.e. the experience of beauty. Cp. Jørgensen, *Den skønne tænkning*, 177-255, on Walter Benjamin, especially pp. 215-233 on the “aura”.

becomes accessible and withdraws itself at the same time. This creates that characteristic transparency in which a foreground points to a background that does not become accessible in the same way as the foreground. However, how can we establish the connection between the “present” and the “absent”? This happens by our thoughts. These thoughts and ideas emanate from the perceptible, but aim at something that we can only reach by thoughts. In modern aesthetic experience, these are generally not metaphysical ideas, in religious experience they are necessarily metaphysical ideas or imaginations. However, we must add, there exists also an alternative and pre-modern approach to the aesthetic, which sees in the aesthetic experience the revelation of a metaphysical reality. Wittgenstein, of course, as an inhabitant of modernity, did not think of metaphysical ideas that are accessible in the experience of the “mysterious”, but of emotions that react to the mystery.

4. The fact that human beings react emotionally to such transparent experiences of an “absent presence” also applies to aesthetic experience; their formal structure is comparable. However, there is one peculiarity of religious feeling: aesthetic experience does not give rise to any binding imperative. Rather, the aesthetic experience consists precisely in a freedom from binding obligations. That is why we can aesthetically perceive and “enjoy” even the immoral that we detest. Nobody obliges us to do so. On the other hand, we connect religious “feeling” with an obligation to fulfil ethical norms; above all, religion unites people in a community by common rituals. Later, Wittgenstein described the experience of the “mystical” in more detail.¹² He described this experience with words, which expressed amazement at the existence of the world. He felt, how strange it is that anything exists at all. He thought, ‘this is what people used to refer to when they said that God created the world.’ In addition, when they say that they feel safe in God’s hand they think of the experience of an absolute security. A third religious experience is, according to Wittgenstein, that of guilt, which is described with the phrase that God disapproves of our behaviour. Therefore, in ethical and religious language we use parables all the time. That is how Wittgenstein described some basic religious experiences. There is only one thing I want to correct: presupposition for the feeling of guilt is an obligation that we do not fulfil. Therefore, I prefer to define the third aspect of religious experience as experience of an obligation.

Let’s now summarize the four ways in which we can distinguish religious experience from aesthetic experience: (1) Depth of appearance, (2) existential experience, (3) absent presence, (4) sense of commitment. We can therefore characterize religious experience as an “experience of transparency”. In the perceptible world, the whole becomes transparent as the mystical “fact” that something exists at all and not nothing. However, what is about the fifth characteristic of religious experience, the (5) impotence of language? Can one only react to the mystical with silence, as the young Wittgenstein said? Already in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, he speaks about it in brief sentences. Moreover, in the course of his life he said much more about the “mystical” than just that one could only remain silent about it.

1.2 The metaphysical with Rudolf Carnap

Rudolf Carnap’s statements on metaphysics show another possibility.¹³ Carnap speaks neither of religion nor of the mystical, but of metaphysics, whereby he assumes that religion includes metaphysical statements. He wanted to demonstrate that it is meaningless to speak of God. As cognitive statements about an objective reality, he considers all metaphysical statements as meaningless. We can neither confirm nor refute them. However, as statements in which we express an attitude to life, they make sense. Metaphysicians are comparable to artists who process their experiences of the world and life in works of art. If metaphysicians form sentences, we can compare them with poets who mistakenly consider their sentences to be statements about facts. Since poets and metaphysicians use the same medium of language, the confusion is obvious here. Carnap therefore considers music to be “the purest means of expression for the feeling of life”. Music is

¹² Wittgenstein, “Vortrag über Ethik”, 14-19.

¹³ Carnap, “Überwindung der Metaphysik”, 81-109.

a “language” that does not pretend to convey knowledge. Music does not refer to anything that it represents like painting and poetry. That is why he comes to his conclusion:

Metaphysicians are musicians without musical ability. But they have a strong tendency to work in the medium of theories, to link concepts and ideas. Instead of confirming this tendency in the field of knowledge on the one hand and satisfying the need for expression in art on the other hand, the metaphysician blends both of them and creates an entity that does not enrich our knowledge nor expresses our attitude to life in an adequate way.¹⁴

A comparison between Wittgenstein and Carnap in their statements about the mystical and the metaphysical shows differences in three points and allows us to extend our description of religious experience.

1. Wittgenstein says that the mystical is unspeakable; it appears or reveals itself in a way, but one can only remain silent about the mystical. Carnap opposes this by saying that the metaphysical finds an adequate expression in art, be it in images, in poetic language or in music. Above all, music is an expression of feelings in pure form and does not claim to be knowledge. It is therefore the best metaphysical substitute because music – apart from operas, programme music or the songs of music poetry – is non-representational.
2. Wittgenstein does not refer religious experience to the “how” of the world (to its essence and structure), but only to its “that” (to its pure existence). However, when Carnap speaks of harmony and dualism in the world, which find their echo in metaphysics and music, he correlates not only the pure existence of reality with metaphysics and religion, but also its essence and structure.
3. Wittgenstein uses an optical metaphor. For him, religious experience reveals the existence of “reality as a limited whole”. Religious experience is transparent experience. Carnap, on the other hand, uses acoustic metaphors: a harmony or tension perceptible in the world corresponds to harmonic or dissonant music.

In order to understand Carnap, it is worth taking into account the fact that he comes from a pious but tolerant family home, which probably had an influence upon how he depicted religious experience. His ideas on metaphysics are probably also an attempt to appreciate the faith of his parents. After he had broken away from their faith, he first advocated an emotional pantheism before he turned to a consistent naturalism. He was able to accept metaphysics and religion not as insight of facts, but as an expression of an attitude to life. When another representative of his generation, R. Bultmann (1884-1976), interpreted the mythology of the New Testament as an expression of human self-understanding, this was a comparable attempt.¹⁵ Both do not want to understand mythological or metaphysical statements as theories of reality, but as expressions of human life. However, according to Bultmann, religion is capable of truth. It articulates in mythical pictures true insights about human beings and their situation in the world. Carnap, on the other hand, denies religion the capacity for truth – whereby truth for him is only scientifically recognized truth, while Bultmann seeks an existential truth that is more comprehensive than the objective truth of knowledge.

Of course, one can question Carnap’s distinction between metaphysical expressions and scientific statements on the reality. Is metaphysics completely unrelated to the objective world? Here one can correct Carnap with his own statements. According to him, music does not offer knowledge about the world, but corresponds to the world in another way. Mozart’s harmonic music says about the world something that a metaphysician with a monistic system wants to say, whereas Beethoven’s dramatic music corresponds to a dualistic design of the world. Such a correspondence between music and world would not be knowledge in the strict sense that aims at a correspondence between logical sentences and objective facts. However, it

¹⁴ Carnap, “Überwindung der Metaphysik”, 107: The German original text is: “Metaphysiker sind Musiker ohne musikalische Fähigkeit. Dafür besitzen sie eine starke Neigung zum Arbeiten im Medium des Theoretischen, zum Verknüpfen von Begriffen und Gedanken. Anstatt nun einerseits diese Neigung im Gebiet der Wissenschaft zu bestätigen und andererseits das Ausdrucksbedürfnis in der Kunst zu befriedigen, vermengt der Metaphysiker beides und schafft ein Gebilde, das für die Erkenntnis gar nichts und für das Lebensgefühl etwas Unzulängliches leistet.”

¹⁵ Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie*.

would be “knowledge” in a broader sense, since it refers to a cognitively comprehensible correspondence between world and music. The structure of music refers to the structure of the world. It is “sensitive cognition” (A. Baumgarten).¹⁶ I have proposed to label such a correspondence with the acoustic metaphor of “resonance”.¹⁷ The world finds resonance in human metaphysics and art.

The differences between L. Wittgenstein and R. Carnap definitely show that religious experience is complex. The following Table 1 summarizes these differences.

	L. Wittgenstein about the "mystical"	R. Carnap about the "metaphysical"
Metaphoric	Optical metaphor: something "shows itself" and is present in consciousness by seeing it.	Acoustic metaphor: comparison with music as expression of an attitude to life
Poles of experience	The existence of the world as a whole	The essence of the world as harmony or disharmony
Reaction	Perceptible by feelings that react to the experience of the "mystical"	Expression in feelings, that intensively and actively are uttered
Language	The mystical corresponds silence. The language is overburdened.	Poetry or music corresponds to the metaphysical. Religious language is meaningless, but as poetry justifiable.
Role of human being	The mystic person reacts passively to the experiences of the sacred	The metaphysically thinking person is an active artist
Summary characterization	Perception of the world happens as TRANSPARENT EXPERIENCE	Reaction to the world happens as EXPERIENCE OF RESONANCE

Table 1. Wittgenstein and Carnap on the mystical and the metaphysical

The two descriptions of mystical experience and metaphysical activity complement each other: religion has both sides. It combines passive experience and an activity corresponding to that experience. The optical and acoustic metaphors open up various aspects of religious experience. TRANSPARENCY points to its objective pole of reference. This experience makes something transparent in perception that goes beyond all perceptible parts. It differs from aesthetic experience in depth transparency by pointing to a transcendent “pole” that eludes our cognition. This pole is the “whole”, the “depth” or the “centre” of the world. Where aesthetic experience shows such depth transparency (for instance in Rembrandt’s paintings or J.S. Bach’s cantatas), it may be transformed into religious experience. RESONANCE, on the other hand, points more to the subjective side of religious experience. It sets deep layers of the human being in motion. Resonance is an experience with strong intensity. Here the accent is not on the fact that the whole of the world shows itself in this experience, but on the fact that it grasps the “whole person”. We find a comparable intensity also in the experience of art. Such experience clearly becomes religious as soon as its intensity is so great that someone thinks that he or she has to start his life anew. Conversion and rebirth are religious categories. For both forms of religious experience, the correspondence to an extra-subjective reality is constitutive: “resonance” is the echo of a movement that seizes human beings that does not emanate from them, but seizes them from outside and makes them vibrate. Transparency brings something to the fore that is outside of the human person beyond the perceptible. In the following part, we show that already the biblical tradition expressed religious experience with optical and acoustic metaphors. Reading these biblical texts, we can further expand our description of religious experience.

¹⁶ Cp. Jørgensen, *Den skønne tænkning*, 83-158, on Baumgarten’s aesthetics and his idea of sensitive cognition.

¹⁷ Theissen, *Argumente für einen kritischen Glauben*.

2 Religious experience in both optical and acoustic metaphors in the biblical tradition

The Bible speaks of religious experiences in both optical and acoustic metaphors. The images usually have two sides and effects: a deterring and an attracting effect. This ambivalence has not been included in the “empirical” descriptions of religious experience by Wittgenstein and Carnap. R. Otto has discovered this ambivalence. He defined the sacred as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*.¹⁸ We encounter this ambivalence in both metaphor traditions.

2.1 Optical metaphor in the Bible

A *mysterium tremendum* is God in the medium of optical language when the Letter to the Hebrews says: God is a “consuming fire” (Heb 12:29). This deterrent side of the sacred is linked to the fact that any direct vision of God is impossible. In the Old Testament, God says to Moses, “You cannot see my face, for no man will save his life who sees me” (Ex 33:20). Isaiah reacts to the vision of God within the narrative of his vocation with the exclamation: “Woe to me. I pass away! For I have unclean lips and dwell among a people of unclean lips, for I have seen the king the Lord Zebaoth with my eyes” (Is 6:5). God “dwells in a light to which no one can come, whom no man has seen nor can see” (1 Tim 6:16). At the same time, however, God is a saving light appearing as a “pillar of fire” that leads the Israelites through the desert (Ex 13:21f). Another text defines God as “light” in which life becomes bright: “God is light and in God there is no darkness. When we say that we have fellowship with God and walk in darkness, we lie and do not do the truth” (1 John 1:5f). We see everything only in the light of God: “For with you is the source of life, and in your light we see the light” (Ps 36:10). This source remains inaccessible to men. Nevertheless, there persists a longing to see God. In 1 Cor 13 Paul speaks of seeing as in a mirror, what he soon will surpass: “We now see a dark image through a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” (1 Cor 13:12). The longing for seeing God is living above all in mysticism. The mystical goal of human beings is the vision of God, transformation through this vision and finally the *unio mystica*.

2.2 Acoustic metaphor in the Bible

Within the framework of acoustic metaphor, we encounter also the ambivalence of *tremendum et fascinosum*: God can make himself heard in powerful phenomena. Thunder and lightning become the medium of his epiphany (Ex 19:15). However, his epiphany changes in an impressive text in 1 Kg 19:11-13. Elijah is waiting on Mount Horeb that the Lord will pass.

And a great, strong wind that tore the mountains apart and broke the rocks,
came before the Lord,
but the Lord was not in the wind.
But after the wind came an earthquake,
but the Lord was not in the earthquake.
And after the earthquake came a fire,
but the Lord was not in the fire.
And after the fire came a quiet, gentle breeze.
When Elijah heard, he covered his face with his cloak.
and went out and stepped into the entrance of the cave.
And, behold, a voice came to him, and said:
What have you to do here, Elijah?

¹⁸ Otto, *Das Heilige*.

God makes himself heard one after the other as storm, earthquake and fire, until Godself reveals himself as voice and word. The “word” becomes the central medium of revelation in the Bible. It has two sides as *tremendum et fascinosum*. On the one hand, it is a destructive power: “Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that throws rocks to pieces?” (Jer 23:29). On the other hand, it is a declaration of love: “Fear not, for I have redeemed thee; I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine! ...because I love you.” (Isa 43:1.4). Later theology systematized this ambivalence. The divine Word is law and gospel, it is the law that kills and the Spirit that gives life (2 Cor 3:6). The transmission of the word is also the topic of the acoustic metaphor: We hear the word, but where it comes from, we do not perceive. The Gospel of John forms this structure of religious experience like a generally valid sentence:

The wind (*pneûma* = spirit) blows wherever it wants,
and you'll hear his voice,
but you don't know where he comes from.
and where he's going.
So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit (*pneûma*). (Jn 3:8)

While the optical religious metaphor finds its climax in mystical movements in the show of God, prophetic movements developed the acoustic metaphor into a theology of the word. Optical and acoustic metaphors remain connected everywhere. The Christological symbolism of the New Testament connects both metaphors: Christ is in optical metaphor the “image” of God (the *eikôn tou theou*; 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15) in which the invisible God is visible. At the same time, he is in acoustic metaphor the “word” (the *lógos*; Joh 1:1). He is the child in the crib and the dying man on the cross, at the same time *a mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*.

The above-mentioned witnesses for the ambivalence of religious experience usually comes from premodern times, but this ambivalence has by no means disappeared in modern times. Karl Barth's interpretation of the Roman letter of 1919 confronts his readers with a powerful expressionist rhetoric with God's judgment and grace as a *tremendum et fascinosum*.¹⁹ Barth did by no means want to build his theology on a phenomenological analysis of faith as an answer to the sacred. However, it was not by chance that Otto published his phenomenological analysis of the sacred as *tremendum et fascinosum* in the same time 1917.

The timelessness of the ambivalence of *tremendum et fascinosum* in religious experience we can discover also in aesthetic experience – not in the experience of the beautiful, but of the sublime.²⁰ According to a broad tradition in aesthetic reflection, the harmonious delights us as beauty, whereas the disharmonic impresses us as the sublime. The sight of the infinite celestial sky makes the human being appear as dust on a small planet. The infinity of the perceived space contrasts with the vanishing existence of human life. The sublime overwhelms as a *tremendum*. Aesthetic design transforms it into a *fascinosum*.

We can compile some typical characteristics of religious experience, which we will develop in the following parts.

1. Religious experiences are ambivalent: human beings feel attracted and repulsed at the same time; they experience both their value and their worthlessness. Here the formula coined by R. Otto applies, that it is an encounter with the sacred as *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*.
2. Religious experiences start in perceptible impressions and inner imaginations in which something becomes visible whose ultimate source is not accessible. Their structure is “present absence” and “absent presence”.²¹

¹⁹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief*.

²⁰ The concept of the “sublime” derives from Pseudo-Longinus, *Vom Erhabenen (Peri Hýpsous)*. The sublime is in antiquity a term of rhetoric, not of aesthetics. First since the 18th century, aesthetic theories differentiated the sublime from the beautiful.

²¹ Leidhold, *Gottes Gegenwart*, 28-31. Leidhold shows that in the present times people perceive either only what is present in the perception. Then it comes to an idolatrous exaltation of the world, the nation or other ideas. People absolutize the present pole of religious experience. Alternatively, they deny the absent pole of this experience. Then atheism is the result. Only when both are seen together, does religious experience occur as “absent presence” and “present absence”.

3. Religious experience uses optical metaphors as language. Visible experience becomes transparent to something “quite different” that is invisible. It is “transparent perception” or “experience of transparency”.
4. Religious experience expresses itself with help of acoustic metaphors. People react intensively to the transcendent origin of this experience. We can sum up this in the formula: religious experience is “reactive resonance experience”.

3 Four analyses of religious experience

We begin with R. Otto’s analysis of religious experience as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* and try to interpret this ambivalence anthropologically in a way transcending a mere phenomenological description of religion. Our analysis reaches as far back as the emergence of religious experience in the past. In the second section, we turn to some testimonies of religious experience in the present to test whether we find in them the characteristics of religious experience that have been determined so far. Finally, we ask the question of the truth of religious experience, which is crucial for the future of religion in a scientific world. This happens in two trains of thoughts. The first is based on the optical metaphor of the “transparent experience”, the second on the acoustic metaphor of the “reactive resonance”.

3.1 Religious experience as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. On the origin of religious experience

We have documented the ambivalence of religious experience above all through testimonies of the Bible, i.e. with texts from pre-modern times. The ambivalence of the sacred indeed points to the prehistory of the religions known to us.

Religious experience has always tended to perceive reality anthropomorphically, discovering a deity in clouds, faces, mountains, stones and trees.²² The ability to perceive reality in a physiognomic way has survival value. Those of our ancestors who considered a tiger to be a stone had no chance to become our ancestors, those who confused a stone with a tiger, survived. The anthropomorphic perception of reality enables us to react quickly to dangerous situations. The motto is here “better safe than sorry”. In a hostile environment, a “strategy of distrust” is appropriate, even if this distrust leads to unrealistic fears of hostile spirits.

In a friendly environment, on the other hand, a “trust strategy” has survival value: we react positively to loving physiognomies. The faces of mother and father trigger feelings of security in the child. Conversely, the child’s smile rewards the parents’ care and reinforces their attention, without which the child has no chance of survival. In a familiar environment, the motto is not: “better safe than sorry”, but “keep smiling”! The trust that the good “spirits” are more powerful than the evil ones is also vital. Without this “trust strategy”, we would only perceive hostile intentions in our environment and never get out of an inner state of alarm. Both the physiognomic perception of enemies and of friends therefore have an evolutionary adaptive value.

Human beings can balance both forms of experience – the experience of threatening and of protecting physiognomies. We can also interpret this in terms of evolution theory.²³ In all living beings, a limited number of life-specific signals activate their behaviour. These signals have the property of being very precise and unlikely so that they attract attention. They include both signals that move people to flee, i.e. the anthropomorphic perception of enemies, and signals that create a sense of security. A first difference between all living beings and human beings is that human beings are sensitive to everything that attracts

²² Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*; “Animal Animism”, 38–67.

²³ For the following reflections, see Theissen, *Argumente*, 23–29. The ambivalence of the sacred in biblical texts I have described more precisely in: Theissen, *Erleben und Verhalten der ersten Christen*, 164–188.

attention in their environment, including that which has no life-specific purpose. They marvel at stones, mountains, trees, moon and stars. Moreover, they can worship everything as the appearance of numinous beings.²⁴ In addition, there is a second difference. In other living beings, certain signals only trigger certain aggressive or evasive behaviours. They flee or attack, react with fear or attraction, disgust or lust. In humans, on the other hand, a “hiatus” occurs between environmental signals and the behavioural response. They react simultaneously with aversive and positive impulses, without a necessity to convert them immediately into action.

R. Otto described the experience of the sacred in a comparable way: as the ambivalence of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.²⁵ The mystery of the numinous experience attracts human beings and simultaneously pushes them back; it lets them experience their worthlessness and gives them infinite value. Where repulsion and attraction maintain balance, human beings can react without purpose. They do so, among other things, through religious rituals. Thus, human beings take a step beyond the previous evolution. Religion would then not be an atavistic remnant from times in which people acted subjected to the impulses of their environment, but also a step to emancipate themselves from this dependence.

Where we experience something by an emotional balance of repulsion and attraction as a fascinating reality, we experience something as having value in itself. We encounter something that we must not use instrumentally, something that is not to be appropriated, not to be possessed, something as having so much value in itself, that it should be venerated as sacred. The reaction to numinous aspects of reality is therefore – relieved of all instrumental purposes – also open to deeper symbolic interpretations, enables communication and can bring people together and connect them. Rituals are reactions to such experiences. Such non-instrumental rituals that react to such a sacred reality and have no function for direct survival send a social message to other participants. The community has an intrinsic value in itself to which the participants in the ritual submit.²⁶

Instead of assuming fixed trigger signals, we assume only a physiognomic experience of the reality. Here, too, an archaic heritage has survived that we culturally shape in religion. The physiognomic perceived reality that we call the “sacred” stimulates two contradictory impulses which are instinctively rooted and have both their place in the limbic system: flight and attraction. Human beings balance them so that they do not automatically translate these impulses into behaviour. Religious experience is therefore a new and special perception of reality and according to this “theory” a prerequisite for human freedom. Its value lies in a freer relationship to the environment. It contains in addition another value: all testimonies of the cult worship of striking figures in reality, of stones, mountains, sun and stars say that they are only the sensually

²⁴ Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*; Eliade, *Die Religionen und das Heilige*.

²⁵ Otto, *Das Heilige*.

²⁶ These considerations further develop ideas of A. Gehlen (1904-1976), *Urmensch und Spätkultur*, about the “world openness of man” (his “Weltoffenheit”). A. Gehlen presupposed the instinct theory of K. Lorenz and N. Tinbergen, which today many regard as outdated in some points. Ethology today doubts the fixed classification of “key stimuli” and “innate trigger mechanisms”. Therefore, my interpretation begins with the phenomenon of physiognomic perception. This does not devalue Gehlen’s reflections on religion. He saw the origin of religious experience in an indefinite response to the trigger qualities of the environment. “It is precisely the primordial trigger qualities of the improbable that can be proven in zoologically low and very distant forms, which in man over the entire field of perception are spread and now lend the value of urgency to all things equipped with them, but now with the loss of any specific biological significance.” (“Es sind genau die urtümlichen bis in zoologisch niedere und sehr fernstehende Formen nachweisbaren Auslöserqualitäten des Unwahrscheinlichen, die sich beim Menschen über die ganze Breite des Wahrnehmungsfeldes hin öffnen und nun allen damit ausgestatteten Dingen den Wert der Eindringlichkeit verleihen, nun aber mit Verlust jeder spezifisch biologischen Bedeutung”. Gehlen, *Urmensch und Spätkultur*, 136). These trigger qualities cause in human beings the feeling of an “indefinite obligation” (eine “unbestimmte Verpflichtung”: Gehlen, *Urmensch und Spätkultur*, 137). “If therefore an impressive natural event ... originally appears as ‘power’, namely as enigmatic power, this does not only mean the impression of the overwhelming or threatening. Much deeper is the impression of an obligation that is not defined and which proves to be the other side of a strong affective, compulsive need for action, for which there are no natural paths” Gehlen, *Urmensch und Spätkultur*, 138: “Wenn also ein eindrucksvolles Naturereignis ... ursprünglich als, Macht’ erscheint, und zwar als rätselhafte Macht, so bedeutet das nicht nur den Eindruck des Überwältigenden oder Gefahrdrohenden. Viel tiefer greift darin der Eindruck eines Verpflichtenden, das doch nicht definiert ist, und das sich als die Kehrseite eines affektstarken, zwangshaften Handlungsbedürfnisses ausweist, für das es keine selbstverständliche Bahnen gibt.”

perceived medium in which a “higher reality” reveals. The whole of reality does appear here indirectly. Said in the language of religion: they are places of the epiphany of a deity. One can rightly ask, whether this experience has not since long faded in our present time? Is not this the “disenchantment of the world” (“Entzauberung der Welt”) that characterises modernity? Therefore, in the following we proceed from two testimonies of contemporary religious experience, which show that there are such religious experiences also living in the present.

3.2 Religious experience as present absence and absent presence. On present religious experience

The novelist and writer Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt reports, how he had climbed alone from a high mountain in the Sahara on February 4, 1989 and got lost. He buried himself in the sand at night to protect himself from the cold: “Although I should have been afraid, this lonely night under the starry sky was quite extraordinary. I experienced the feeling of the Absolute and with it the certainty that an order, an intelligence watches over us and that I am created and wanted in this order. Again and again my thoughts were preoccupied with the same sentence: ‘Everything is justified’”. E.E. Schmidt starts from very concrete sensual perceptions, from the nocturnal starry sky in the Sahara, which becomes transparent for “the whole”. The step to the experience of this totality happens in “thoughts”. He expressly says that he is preoccupied with the idea that “everything is justified”.²⁷ This “everything” or the “absolute” that he thinks he can feel transcends the sensually perceptible world. It encompasses him as an order in which he feels secure. In addition, we encounter there a characteristic trait of religious experience that we have not yet considered: an intentionality directed at him, i.e. the consciousness, I am intended in this universe. In the order that has become transparent, a will appears that is directed at the human being. This testimony confirms that the aesthetics of everyday perception can be the starting point of an aesthetic of religious perception. In both, a foreground becomes transparent to a background. It depends on the interpretation whether we “only” classify such experience aesthetically or interpret it religiously.²⁸

Let us add another testimony. The physicist Werner Heisenberg talks about the understanding of God with another physicist, Wolfgang Pauli, on the Langelinie quay in Copenhagen.

We now walked side by side in silence for a while and soon reached the northern end of the Long Line. ... We could see the contours of the buildings in the harbour basin in all sharpness. When we had stood at the end of the mole for a while, Wolfgang asked me rather abruptly: ‘Do you believe in a personal God? I know, of course, that it is difficult to give a clear meaning to such a question, but the direction of the question is clearly recognizable.’ ‘May I formulate the question differently?’ I replied: ‘Then it would say: ‘Can you or can one face the central order of things or events, which undoubtedly exists, so directly and contact it so immediately as the soul of another human being? Here I expressly use the word ‘soul’, which is so difficult to interpret, in order to avoid misunderstanding. If you ask me that way, I would answer yes.’²⁹

Both testimonies complement each other: Religious experience in the present day proceeds both from the sensually experienced world, which becomes transparent to something else, and from interpretations

27 « Alors que j’aurai dû avoir peur, cette nuit de solitude sous la voûte étoilée a été extraordinaire. J’ai éprouvé le sentiment de l’Absolu et, avec certitude qu’un ordre, une intelligence, veille sur nous, et que, dans cet ordre, j’ai été créé, voulu. Et puis la même phrase occupait mes pensées: ‘Tout est justifié’. » Quoted from the epilogue to: Schmitt, *Oscar et la dame rose*, 105f.

28 Jørgensen, *Den skønne tænkning*.

29 Heisenberg, *Der Teil und das Ganze*, 253: “Wir gingen nun eine Zeitlang schweigend nebeneinander her und hatten bald das nördliche Ende der Langen Linie erreicht. ... Die Konturen der Bauten im Hafenbecken waren in aller Schärfe zu erkennen. Als wir eine Weile am Ende der Mole gestanden hatten, fragte Wolfgang mich ziemlich unvermittelt: ‚Glaubst du eigentlich an einen persönlichen Gott? Ich weiß natürlich, dass es schwer ist, einer solchen Frage einen klaren Sinn zu geben, aber die Richtung der Frage ist doch wohl erkennbar.‘ ‚Darf ich die Frage auch anders formulieren?‘ erwiderte ich: ‚Dann würde sie lauten: Kannst du oder kann man der zentralen Ordnung der Dinge oder des Geschehens, an der ja nicht zu zweifeln ist, so unmittelbar gegenüberreten, mit ihr so unmittelbar in Verbindung treten, wie dies bei der Seele eines anderen Menschen möglich ist? Ich verwende hier ausdrücklich das so schwer deutbare Wort ‚Seele‘, um nicht missverstanden zu werden. Wenn du so fragst, würde ich mit Ja antworten.“

of the world in abstract theories. In both aesthetic and religious experience, what we perceive sensually becomes transparent to a reality that is once more stratified in itself. This basic idea of N. Hartmann's aesthetics we can adopt even if we do not share his ontology of a stratified reality. Sensual perception becomes transparent for laws of nature. These laws in turn can become transparent for a comprehensive order, a hidden rationality of the world that corresponds to our mind. Here, too, such an experience can remain an aesthetic experience. The periodic system of elements is undoubtedly full of "poetry". It impresses anyone who looks at this order of smallest elements in our microcosm. Many will stop their meditation with this impression of beauty and aesthetics. For some, however, such structures of nature become traces of God. Through the "accessible pole" of these structures, they establish a relationship to a "transcendent pole", of which they speak metaphorically as of a person. They say, for instance, laws of nature are "God's thoughts" to which we find a correspondence in our thoughts. Exactly this is the point where aesthetic experience turns into religious experience. This religious experience does not make the transcendent pole of experience "present", but it remains "absent". Nevertheless, a relationship with this pole becomes possible in the same way as with "the soul of another human being" or with a "will", that has created this order. Both Schmitt and Heisenberg presuppose in such a speech "intentionality". A characteristic of the "soul" and the "will" is undoubtedly the intentionality that is directed towards something. The legitimate question is, of course, whether this does not project a psychomorphic model into the world. Doesn't the projection suspicion say that such projections of images into reality speak against the truth value of religion? Therefore, in two further steps we question religious experience with regard to its truth value. First, we deal with the optical metaphor, whether the mental conclusion from present perceptions and imaginations to an absent origin can be justified. We then ask within the framework of an acoustic metaphoric whether we can ascribe a truth value to subjectively experienced resonance experiences too. In other words, we ask, whether a "metaphysics of experience" is possible that makes accessible the whole of reality and its origin in concrete experiences.

3.3 Religious experiences as a transparent view. Experiential metaphysics as truth of religious interpretations?

Our considerations follow a concept of truth which many consider outdated, but which we can further develop critically: Truth is *adaequatio intellectus ad rem*, correspondence of our thoughts with reality. It is true, the criticism of this concept of truth is correct: we will never achieve truth in this sense – and if we should ever achieve it, we would not be able to have any certainty that we had achieved it. For we cannot leave our consciousness and compare objective reality with our subjective correspondences from a neutral third point of view. However, since we undoubtedly can sometimes correct false knowledge by confrontation with reality, we have a chance to approach objective reality. A priori categories guide us as search programs that select and shape what we perceive. Therefore, variants within our subjective correspondence to objective reality are possible. In the sense of such a critical realism, truth is therefore not a one to one correspondence with objective reality, but rather an approximate and variation-tolerant correspondence to reality. It is already a progress if we can limit possible interpretations to a few alternatives. Truth is a correctable and variable correspondence to reality.

I summarize our previous results on the structure of religious experience in the following optic "parable". Suppose we were two-dimensional beings and we were living as living beings drawn on paper. A lamp illuminates the paper. Since we as two-dimensional beings can only see to the left and to the right, up and down, i.e. only in two dimensions, but not in the three-dimensional space, we feel the light of the lamp as intense heat, but we cannot identify and perceive its origin. We experience warmth as intense "present absence" and an "absent presence" when we ask for the origin of this warmth.

We can make two distinctions based on this parable. The first says that the effect of light can take two forms. The paper becomes warm, but remains intact, but it can also go up in flames. Accordingly, religious experience has two forms. First, the everyday world becomes transparent to something "completely different". We experience a beautiful sunrise and feel the grace of God in this sunrise. Everything remains

within the framework of normal experience. However, sometimes this everyday world will be torn up. Death confronts us with a “nothing” that breaks into our everyday world.³⁰ This ambivalence is contained in every religious experience. Its warmth can always become a destructive flame. Religious experience is a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

To this ambivalence comes the second distinction of experience and interpretation. Two-dimensional living beings will initially only interpret the warmth they feel as an event in two dimensions. But if there is an “Einstein” among them who convincingly postulates a third dimension without being able to visualize it, they will be able to think of heat as the effect of an unknown factor. Only mental interpretations make this possible. Experiences are of course always experiences that we form by our interpretations. We only see what we know, but we always see more through our knowledge than we see directly by our eyes. Thus, we grasp in our model the structure of religious experience as “absent presence” and “present absence”.

Thoughts with which we in religious experiences infer from an objective pole to an inaccessible transcendent pole are metaphysical thoughts. For metaphysics consists of mental constructions beyond empirical reality in order to be able to make comprehensive statements about reality as such and as a whole. We activate categories that a priori determine our thinking, categories such as causality and totality. We ask after causes and after the whole. According to J. Halfwassen, the combination of the categories “totality” and “causality” yields three possible answers to a last cause.³¹

1. A part of the whole is the cause of the whole. Then God is the highest reality (*summum ens*). This is the answer of theism, for which God is the highest instance of being.
2. The whole is the cause of all things. Then God points to the whole of reality as horizon of all parts of being. It is pantheism, which gives this answer and says as panentheism more precisely, the whole is more than its parts.
3. The cause of the whole lies beyond the whole. This answer gives a *theologia negativa* that can only think of God in negations – beyond everything we can say about the whole and its parts, about being and non-being.

We come to three possibilities to think of the origin of religious experience. What is important here is that the religious experience in its sensual concreteness remains unaffected. The controversy here is about its interpretation, about what appears in it “transparently” and encounters us as absent presence or present absence. It is about “experiential metaphysics”, i.e. sensual experiences that receive an additional value through cognitive interpretation.³²

The outlined metaphysical interpretation of religious experience is still one-sided. Religious experience is not only experience of what is, but also of what should be. Wittgenstein sees the “mystical” not only in the fact that the world exists. His amazement about it is at the same time a positive evaluation of this “fact”. It is “wonderful” for him that something exists. Value and meaning transcend all facts. We can this question of value and meaning also assign to the three possibilities of metaphysical thinking that we have just shown. We must only modify the question for a final cause into a question for a final value and a comprehensive sense and meaning. Also then, there are three possible ways.

1. Part of the whole is the origin of meaning and value. In theism, God is the highest being (the *summum ens*) as origin of good and evil, value and worthlessness.
2. The whole is the origin of meaning and value. It is more than all parts. In Panentheism, this additional value consists in the fact that the whole is transcending all parts.

³⁰ I have distinguished both forms of experience as moderate and extreme religious experiences and behaviours: Theissen, *Erleben und Verhalten der ersten Christen*, 66-68 and 564-573. In the New Testament, we find both forms next to each other. We find the normal prayer in the Lord’s Prayer and the extreme religious prayer in the glossolalia. We find the everyday vision of the sun rising over evil and good, and the mysterious visions of the Risen Christ. We encounter the conservative family ethos and an itinerant radicalism of Jesus’ followers; the everyday wisdom of the world and the sermon of the cross as a provocation of the wisdom of the world; the table community of Jesus and the mysterious sacrament in which the participants consume Jesus’ body and blood.

³¹ Halfwassen, “Gott im Denken”, 187-196.

³² Jørgensen, *Den skønne tænkning*, coined the term “metaphysics of experience”. The basic idea is that in sensual experience an “added value” of meaning appears.

3. The origin of meaning lies beyond the whole. This answer gives a *theologia negativa*. It insists that sense and value transcend everything factual.

The fact that we repeatedly come across three modes of interpreting experience is no coincidence. Every thinking in reasons and causes necessarily leads to a “trilemma”. Either the chain of reasons breaks off arbitrarily at one point or it extends into infinity in a *regressus ad infinitum* or it runs in a circle in infinite repetitions.³³ Applied to our metaphysical questions this means the following.

1. When the chain of reasons and causes is arbitrarily broken off, we seek in a particularly excellent part of reality the cause of existence of the whole or the origin of all value and meaning.
2. If the chain of reasons and causes runs in a circle, we can only find a “final conclusion” when it has passed through all parts of the whole. Then we are searching in the whole for the cause and origin of being and value.
3. If an unlimited chain of reasons and causes disappears in the infinite, in a *regressus ad infinitum*, the ultimate cause and origin of being and value lie beyond our finite reality and we can only grasp them in negations.

Metaphysical thinking must be open to all three possibilities. It does not need to arrive at unambiguous conclusions. Its task is rather to open us to a dimension that we otherwise overlook – just as living beings in a two-dimensional world overlook and have a tendency to deny a third dimension. The trilemma of reasoning can make us aware of what we are actually looking for when we turn on our “search program” for causes and meaning. We could overcome the trilemma of reasoning if we came across a reason, which is the reason that there are reasons at all or if we find a causality, which is the cause that there is causality at all. This reality would be a *causa sui*, would be “cause of itself”: a self-referential ultimate reason. It would be a reality, which allows us to stop our search for further reasons and causes.

We encounter such an ultimate reason indeed in the miracle of being: in the contingency of reality. This is more than an abstract idea. The mystery of being meets us in the simple fact that we exist and that something exists and not nothing. This reveals itself anew every day when the “matter of course”, the fact that we are living becomes something that is not at all self-evident. What we encounter in this experience is the “reason for existence” of our being.

What applies to the search for an ultimate reason for existence also applies to the search for meaning and value. We would have reached our goal if we had come across a reality that is valuable in itself and makes sense in itself. Everything serves to achieve a purpose. However, this reality must be an “end in itself”: a self-referential ultimate sense. One would fail this reality if one wanted to exploit it instrumentally. Through its simple existence, it is an appeal to people to correspond to it and to align life with its reality. It is the “reason of meaning” for our being.

Thus, we have found two criteria that distinguish religious experiences. Wherever we come across something that we experience as the reason for our existence and the meaning of itself, we have come across the traces of God. We encounter this reason for existence and reason for meaning in very concrete manifestations, but always only temporarily. Nothing concrete is identical with this ultimate meaning, but it can appear in everything concrete. Everything can be a temporary appearance of the basis of our existence and meaning.

In the experience of love, all questions about the meaning and value of life fade away. The presence of the loved one is a worth in itself. In him or her, the meaning of life appears temporarily – temporarily, because love transforms itself in everyday life into an alliance to cope with life, in which one also needs each other instrumentally. Nevertheless, repeatedly the relationship may renew itself as a value in itself. In such moments, we simultaneously experience the reason for our existence, when another person intensively affirms our life and says: “It is good that you exist.”

Likewise, the confrontation with death provokes such an awareness of the basis of existence and meaning of our existence. In the face of death and nothing, the mystery of one’s own being becomes even

³³ Albert, *Traktat über kritische Vernunft*. With reference to the Münchhausen trilemma, Albert denied the possibility of any metaphysics.

more conscious. It was always present in the background. However, when we must say farewell to this life, the experience that we exist comes to the fore. Then we experience sometimes a sense and meaning, which no transience of life can destroy, but sometimes a senselessness that devours everything.

Between love and death are many experiences that are marked by the appearance of a self-worth and a reason for existence: the experience of the laws of nature, of life, of community. They are all full of possibilities to discover “traces of God” in them. Because all concrete experiences in which a reason for meaning and existence shines temporarily are “signatures” of God in this world. God appears everywhere where we experience something temporarily as meaningful in itself and reminds us of the miracle of our existence. Nevertheless, one question remains: people have always interpreted what they experienced here as expression of an intention. They have the impression to encounter a “will”, a “you”, a “personal” other.³⁴ Do we project categories of the person from human experience here into reality? Doesn't this interpretation collapse in the trap of criticism of religion?

3.4 Religious experience as reactive resonance experience. Is resonance the truth in religious experience?

The critique of religion asks, are religious ideas projections into the reality surrounding us? We ask in return, when can we justify such projections? They would be justified if there were a correspondence between reality and man, which we can experience intensively, so that we receive certainty about this correspondence. Religious resonance experiences give such certainty.³⁵ With the help of the acoustic image of resonance, one can therefore define in my opinion the truth value of religion.³⁶

The term “resonance” comes from physics. The Dutch mathematician and physicist Christiaan Huygens discovered in 1665 that two pendulum clocks placed side by side had both pendulums swinging in harmony after a time – and that they re-established this harmony even when he interrupted this swinging. “Resonance” refers to the resonance of two systems whose frequency is close to each other. If the stimulation frequency of one system coincides with the natural frequency of the other, the system sometimes reacts with excessively large swings. If a troop increases the natural frequency of its steps while marching over a bridge, the bridge can collapse and a “resonance catastrophe” occurs.³⁷

The term “resonance” is so valuable for the discussion with the criticism of religion because resonance does not presuppose intentionality. We can imagine a system, which by its own frequency makes another system vibrate, without any intention that it wishes to create such a vibration. If we transfer this model to our religious experience of reality, we can think of a subjective experience going into depth, without necessarily assuming that this experience reacts to an objective intentionality directed towards us. In poetic

³⁴ In the original Buddhism, we find a religion that conceptualizes the encounter with the sacred reality, the *nirvana*, not in personal categories. Nevertheless, on the way to the *nirvana* Bodhisattvas help other people to reach the last goal. They represent the “will” and the “personal other” that open the way to salvation.

³⁵ Theissen, *Argumente*, 42-92; Theissen, *Biblischer Glaube*, 40-43; Theissen, *Zur Bibel motivieren*, 193-188; Theissen, “Religionsphilosophische Gedanken”, 88-110 = “Spuren Gottes”, 459-487; Theissen, “Biblischer Glaube und Evolution”, 197f; Theissen, *Glaubenssätze*, 27, 45, 62, 53, 58, 60, 235. The idea of resonance had no resonance, but cp. Döring, “Christologie und Erfahrung”, 31-33, and Schütze, “Paradigmen theologischen Denkens”.

³⁶ Hartmut Rosa (*Resonanz*, 435-453) has interpreted not only religion but also the whole world relationship of human beings as “resonance”. He finds resonance in every world reference that is determined by the intrinsic value of things. Rosa does not refer to my reflections on religion as resonance experiences. He even asks himself whether his view of religion “does not correspond more to a Catholic than to a Protestant view of religion” (p. 435). However, for his analysis of religion, he mainly refers to the protestant authors D.F. Schleiermacher, P. Gerhardt and G. Tersteegen. Just like me, he contrasts the idea of resonance with A. Camus' experience of the absurd. Other authors have also made the term “resonance” a key concept in their ideas. Friedrich Cramer (1923-2003), Director at the Max Planck Institute for Experimental Medicine in Göttingen, wrote the book *Symphonie des Lebendigen*. In the tradition of C.G. Jung's analytical psychology, the term resonance also plays an important role. See Leibig, “Der Archetyp der Resonanz”.

³⁷ Such resonance catastrophes also exist in religion: people reinforce each other in relatively closed groups and motivate each other to fanaticism and the use of violence.

language, one can of course speak of it in such a way saying that a superior personal power has seized man. This poetic language seizes an undeniable truth. One must not forget, however, that such a model of resonance does not necessarily presuppose intentionality, but does not exclude it either!

Since 1978 I have therefore been proposing to make this physical fact fruitful as a metaphor for the understanding of religion.³⁸ The experience of reality is “resonance” when we feel a deep relationship with reality. Reality is full of excitation frequencies that make something vibrate in us. There are three forms of such experiences, which in the recent history of religion and theology have successively moved to the centre of theological attention.

First and foremost, it is the amazement at the order in nature. In the theological deism of the 18th century, it was at the centre of the enlightened religion.

In second place, it was the experience of life in all living beings. That was the core of Albert Schweitzer’s theological vitalism in the early 20th century. “Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben” is a resonance experience.

In the late 20th century, the relation between human beings took centre stage in theological humanism – for example with Dorothee Sölle and many other authors. Love between people is the most intense resonance experience that ever befalls a person.

In addition, as an all-encompassing experience, there is the amazement that something exists at all and that we ourselves exist in the midst of all things. This is the most extensive resonance experience, which encompasses everything.

In all areas, religiously sensitive people have intensive experiences of correspondence – so intense that one can ask whether here impressions stir up only subjective emotions without an objective basis. My consideration is this: if religious images and narratives make us experience reality as resonance, they cannot be exclusively projections into reality. They respond to something in this reality. Because we can make sure, based on modern natural science, that the correspondences experienced as resonance are not illusions.

Physics and chemistry have opened up the laws of inorganic nature to us over the last five hundred years in a way that we previously considered impossible. Nature follows mathematical rules, some of which we have constructed independently of our knowledge of these laws in nature.

In the field of life, we have discovered the language of molecular DNA structures. Since the deciphering of the genome around 2000, we have been able to decipher the deep relationship of all living beings because of a common code.

The fact that we humans are related is something we experience every day in everyday life, but neuroscience supports it with a lot of information about our brain. They show that it is a relational organ.

Sober scientific research confirms that subjective resonance experience has an objective reason. No matter how much people project into reality in “religious” enthusiasm, the inspiration for this religious experience came from real existing correspondences. The most comprehensive of these correspondences leads beyond everything that scientific language can ever grasp. It is the fact that the whole reality exists and could not exist – and that we exist just as contingent. It is what L. Wittgenstein called the “mystical”. The miracle of our small existence corresponds to the miracle that something exists at all. This most comprehensive of all resonance experiences captures religious language in the image of creation from nothing. In my opinion, resonance is what we can ascribe to religion argumentatively as a truth value. It encompasses the pure existence of reality as the most extensive resonance experience (what L. Wittgenstein called the “mystical”), but also its essence and structure in various areas as the correspondence of rational, vital and human structures (what R. Carnap regarded as object of metaphysics). Here we can experience an increasingly intensifying resonance. Love is its fulfilment.

However, why do these resonance experiences have a religious character? We point out two characteristics. Religious resonance experiences are reactive experiences. In them, it seems as if reality “demands” something from us. We feel addressed. This we can grasp very well with our metaphor of “resonance”. In principle, resonance can start from two poles. From our own vibration, which stimulates the surrounding reality – then we yearn that the environment corresponds to our expectations. Religious

³⁸ Theissen, *Argumente für einen kritischen Glauben*.

conversion, however, consists in the experience that it is not decisive whether the reality corresponds to our expectations, but whether we correspond to their call and their requirements. Resonance experience requires a conversion in this respect that overcomes our egocentricity. All religions testify to the need for such a conversion, enlightenment and rebirth.

Secondly, religious experience is contrary to the experience of the absurd. Where we no longer experience the world as resonant, it becomes a temptation. Every resonance experience is limited. Often the world remains silent, rejecting and indifferent. Albert Camus (1913-1960) called this absence of a resonant answer the experience of the absurd in the face of the irrationality of the world: “The absurd arises from this juxtaposition of the human being who asks questions and the world which is unreasonably silent.”³⁹ Absurdity is disappointed expectation of resonance. Absurdity is suffering, illness and death, but is also located in the centre of human beings themselves. They experience themselves as incapable of responding to a “call” and an obligation. Religion is a constant struggle to overcome absurdity in the world and in ourselves. All religions describe this conflict between the good and the absurd, often in a poetic drama of a struggle between God and Satan, angels and demons. All deal with the *mysterium tremendum* of reality in experiences of absurdity.

Why does religion as a resonance experience have a chance, even in a scientifically shaped society, not only to survive in regressed form in anti-modernist groups, but also to motivate educated people? We can use especially science as an argument for this. We trust in a correspondence between our knowledge and reality when we do research and acquire knowledge. We trust that there is a connection between subject and object, so that with cognitive constructs that we develop, we grasp reality as if reality itself has informed us. It is true, we cannot even prove the reality of the outside world, but against all scepticism, the outside world corrects many of our knowledge and prevails in our thoughts obstinately in the form of a critical realism when we are acting. What we recognize cannot be a subjective dream if it extra-subjectively confirms itself from the outside (often by correction of our expectations and desires), and if it is accepted inter-subjectively by other people (despite the great diversity of people and convictions). We cannot deny a possible correspondence between subjective thoughts and objective reality even if we justify it in different ways. Here are just a few possibilities, which might explain this connectedness.

Firstly, we can assume that our environment and our organism belong to the same reality. Therefore, there will be original similarities between them, which have not only evolved during evolution, but have only become conscious in the course of human history. They apply to all possible worlds. These similarities could include categories such as diversity and unity, causality and substance.

Secondly, we encounter correspondences that have arisen from the evolutionary adaptation of our organism to the world and are part of our genetic heritage, but only apply to this factually existing world. In this world they are universal, but not in all possible worlds. Such adaptation structures include our perceptual structures or our (general) ability to speak.

Thirdly, there are culturally acquired adaptation structures, which we, as inhabitants of a certain culture, experience as something self-evident as a second nature, even if we can become quite aware of their contingency. This includes the concrete mother tongue, in which a general ability to speak is expressed, or the concrete religion, in which a general religiosity is concretized. We know very well that we could just as well have had another language or another religion.

Our knowledge presupposes trust in an agreement with reality, which can have various causes. We experience this correspondence with reality in a resonance experience that transcends our knowledge, but at the same time is a prerequisite of our knowledge, that is often unconscious, but can become conscious. This may be the core of a religion, which will survive also in the future.

If today one sometimes differentiates between “spiritual experiences” in the broader sense and “religious experiences” in the narrower sense, it is a sign that the traditional religions no longer effectively interpret and communicate the experience of resonance and absurdity for many contemporaries. “Religion” brings people together because of comparable religious experiences and gives them a language in which they communicate with each other and reinforce each other.

³⁹ Camus, *Der Mythos von Sisyphos*, 29.

The religious experience that “emigrated” from religious traditions, we often re-interpret in a new way as “aesthetic experience” in a secular society. Indeed, these types of experience merge, even if we can distinguish them. Many characteristics are contained only in different quantities in these two types of experiences. This is shown in the following Table 2.

Characteristics of aesthetic experience	Characteristics of religious experience
Transparency: a real foreground becomes transparent, - for life, - for psychic intentions, - for spiritual realities.	Depth transparency makes a - ultimate and - transcendent reality appear.
Aesthetic experience interrupts everyday perception and action - with a return afterwards to everyday life.	Depth Resonance interrupts life and questions human beings fundamentally: You must change your life. ⁴⁰
The reality that appears visibly is - unreal in art, - fictional in poetry, - open in the beauty of nature. The beautiful is a <i>fata morgana</i> in the desert of life.	The reality that appears visibly is the miracle of existence, that anything exists at all with resonance in - the miracle of existence of human beings - and the contingency of their actions.
The experience of the sublime, the grotesque, the ugly corresponds to the <i>mysterium tremendum</i> , but art transforms it into a source for the affirmation of life.	Absurdity is a <i>mysterium tremendum</i> Experiences of resonance and transparency are the <i>mysterium fascinosum</i> . Absurdity is fought against, we do not enjoy it aesthetically.
Aesthetically experience allows freedom and is without obligation. For this very reason it expands life and understanding beyond our milieu.	Religious experience obligates personally to conversion, socially to group loyalty.

Table 2. Comparison between aesthetic and religious experience

In this comparison between aesthetic and religious experience,⁴¹ we have only marginally considered an important difference within aesthetic experiences, the distinction between nature and art, the beautiful and the sublime in nature and in the work of art. Art are man-made works. Nature is not made by us. It is true, modern aesthetics hardly reflect on the beauty of nature. But when we experience nature aesthetically, nature gains for us a transparency for the idea that an artist has made it. Within religious interpretation, the aesthetically experienced nature becomes “creation”. For a religious person, a forest illuminated by sunlight can become transparent to the divine light that shines through the whole world. However, such transparency does not only change the directly perceived world. Such transparency can also transform the experience of nature in the encounter with its laws and structures in science. Nature is mathematically composed. We grasp nature with mathematical formulas that we have designed independently of nature (sometimes even before its application to natural processes). To make us aware of this miracle, let us sketch a parable once again. The rules of chess are human constructs. We have invented them and can change them. It would be a miracle if we discovered processes in the universe that follow our chess game rules – as if someone were playing chess with us, adhering to rules that we have established and invented. The success of science is no less wonderful. It is as if we discover, the whole universe runs according to mathematic

⁴⁰ Rilke, “Archaischer Torso Apollos,” 557. Rilke speaks of the experience of beauty, but the torso of the God Apollo triggers this experience. Such a blending of poetry and religion is typical for his modern “art religion” in the framework of a naturalistic worldview.

⁴¹ This table compares modern aesthetic experience with religious experience. These two types of experience merge in “sacral art” within traditional religions, in “religious art” within the framework of a metaphysical interpretation of the world, and seeks to replace religion in a modern “art religion”.

formulas that we have constructed. Of course, it is poetic language if you look at nature as a work of art that has created by a superior intelligence. However, such poetry can reveal truth.

Of course, we must immediately ask the question: why do not all people agree that the concrete experiences described above are the starting point for religious interpretations? That the laws of nature are ideas of God is plausible only for a few. There are many who know the laws of nature, but do not conclude on God. Nature is ambiguous. One can compare nature with a tilting picture in which one can interpret a figure in a meaningful twofold way – either as a trophy or as two faces, either as an old woman or as a young girl. Both interpretations are correct. Both are based on empirical observations. It is the same with nature. On the one hand, we can relate nature to a “transcendent pole”, of which one can speak as if of a person. On the other hand, we can experience nature also as a web of factual structures without reference to such a pole. Do we therefore have to leave the question open? In addition, I add a metareflexion: if nature is ambiguous, then in my opinion there is more sense in it than if it were unambiguous. In art or poetry, the multitude of possible interpretations is an indication of the aesthetic quality of the work of art. An ambiguous world has more meaning than a world with only one possibility of interpretation. If, in a metaphorical language, we trace the meaning invested in the world back to an artist, then the ambiguity of the world speaks much more for the interpretation that a superior artist is behind this reality. When this artist leaves the decision to human beings to see the world in one way or another – this shows a greater respect for the freedom of human beings than if everything were unambiguous. However, also this is metaphorical speech.

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