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UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE IN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

ABSTRACT

A spiritual experience for some means a mere fabrication of the mind. For others it is pathological and the consequence of psychiatric disturbances and psychological disorders. Others acknowledge that certain role-players are present when spiritual experiences occur. However, the identification of the involvement of these role-players by no means minimises the spiritual experience to a level of being non-significant. A spiritual experience in Christian spirituality assumes as its foundation that a personal relationship with Christ exists. It further signifies spiritual interaction as a result of the relationship. Taking different possibilities into account, this article contends that whatever scientists make of spiritual experience, it can never be reduced to mere fabrications of the mind, or psychological disorders. A spiritual experience in a Christian context signifies the interaction of God. Furthermore, spiritual experience is an important aspect of Christian spirituality that in essence indicates a relationship and interaction between the believer and God.

1. INTRODUCTION

Spiritual experience is not the sole property of the Christian faith. It is a phenomenon that is not only found in other religions but in all walks of life. A spiritual experience may include various forms of religiousness, but a spiritual experience is not necessarily the result of religiousness. For some a spiritual experience is an inward discovery of the inner "self", an opportunity to get in touch with the core of their existence. For others a spiritual experience means transcending the physical reality and contact between the self and divinity, ultimate reality or a supreme being.

This article will attempt to establish a clearer understanding of spiritual experience narrowed down to Christian spirituality. Firstly, the following questions must be answered: What is meant by a spiritual experience in the context of Christian spirituality? How can one differentiate between a spiritual and a religious experience? What is the relationship between the two? Thereafter, the possible role-players involved in the occurrence of spiritual experiences and their significance will be discussed. Also, the different viewpoints as to how a

spiritual experience is actually created will be addressed. Lastly, in the light of the answers to the aforementioned questions, the place, importance and purpose of spiritual experience in Christian spirituality will be indicated. In order to understand the term spiritual experience, it is necessary to ensure a clear understanding of what is meant by experience.

2. SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

The term “spiritual experience” can signify a religious experience but does not necessarily have a religious connection. It is a rather general term that covers a wide spectrum of spiritual experiences, even outside the boundaries of religion.

In order to define a spiritual experience in the Christian context it is important, firstly, to obtain a clear understanding of what is meant by a spiritual experience. Secondly, the relationship between a spiritual experience and a religious experience should be defined. Before the adjective “spiritual” or “religious” is added to the noun “experience”, it is wise to obtain clarity on the meaning of “experience”.

2.1 Experience

Experience is something other than action or behaviour. Experience is not merely thought or belief. It rather involves what we think and how we believe. Experience can also not be reduced to feelings or emotions, although these aspects are part of what is meant by experience. In some sense, experience is a total way of reacting or being (Spilka *et al.* 1985:154); it involves the whole of mental phenomena or of consciousness at any particular moment (Wolman 1989:122). Experience is a form of knowledge which arises from the direct reception of an impression from a reality (internal or external), which lies outside our free control. This knowledge is contrasted with the type of knowledge or aspect of knowledge in which humans are active agents, subjecting the object to their own viewpoints and methods and to critical investigation (Rahner & Vorgrimler 1965:162). In summary, and for the purpose of this article, “experience” in general terms can be defined as *a form of knowledge, accompanied by emotions and feelings, that is obtained as a result of direct reception of an impression of a reality (internal or external), which lies outside our control, that has an impact on our reaction or consciousness and being.*

2.2 Religious experience

When the adjective “religious” is added to the noun “experience” to form “religious experience,” it suggests a relation to a religion. A clear understanding of what religion is will add value in the search to define a religious experience. A religion

- “is a system of beliefs in a divine or superhuman power and practices of worship or other rituals directed towards such power” (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi 1975:1).
- “is a search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (Pargament 1997: 32).
- “in the strict sense is that which constitutes faith, and insofar it does so, embraces the metaphysical, moral and existential experience of being and existence, and the experience of God’s self-attestation in the occurrence of revelation” (Rahner & Vorgrimler 1965:162).
- “is about the person’s involvement with a religious tradition and institution” (Spilka *et al.* 2003:9).
- “is a bond between humanity and some greater-than-human-power” (Hill 2000:51).

From the above-mentioned definitions it is ascertained that a religious experience will have a definite relation to a person’s religious precepts that describe and uphold the belief in the existence and nature of a divine or superhuman power. It is measured and evaluated within the boundaries of the precepts of the particular religion. The sacred is approached and experienced through religious practices, rituals and symbols. The role of the experience is to bring a better understanding of oneself and a revelation of the sacred in order to establish, maintain and develop a relationship with the sacred.

The religious individual places emphasis on the existence of another, different order of reality, called the sacred, outside the realm of physical reality. This reality is described and upheld by the particular belief system. Although it is ultimately inexpressible, unknowable and unattainable through physical means, it is accessible to individuals through the practice of their religion. A religious experience seems to refer to an experience as a result of the participation in the rituals of the religion, such as worship, prayer and other rituals. A deeply felt acceptance of salvation, a sense of unity, solitude and peace, or a warm feeling while participating in the rituals, or a strong urge to commit to certain principles of one’s belief can be described as religious experience.

A religious experience is believed to be the result of adherence to the beliefs and practices of an organised church or religious institution (Shafranske & Malony 1990:72). What then is a spiritual experience?

2.3 Spiritual experience

The adoption of the term “spirituality” in recent decades by a wide spectrum of cultural societies and belief systems has altered the meaning of the term. “Spirituality” no longer refers exclusively or even primarily to prayer and spiritual exercises. Neither does it refer to an elite state nor a superior practice of Christianity. The term has been broadened to include the whole of faith life as well as the life of the person as a whole, including its bodily, psychological, social and political dimensions (Schneiders 1989:679). Spirituality can be approached from a theistic or a non-theistic perspective. In Western tradition spirituality mostly makes reference to something greater than us, such as God, or a Higher Power, or the Divine. On the other hand, some have divorced themselves from religious organisations and refer to spirituality in terms of Eastern traditions. Spirituality in these terms is referred to as visions, near death experiences, past life and out of body experiences (Hinterkopf 1998:2). Spirituality is thus a wider term that includes a variety of ways of approaching what is believed to be sacred, and in the process exceeds the set boundaries of institutionalised religion. From different definitions of spirituality a better understanding of the meaning of a spiritual experience can be obtained:

- It is a search *for the sacred* (Pargament 1999:12).
- It is a more *personal experience*, a focus on the transcendent that may or may not be rooted in an *organised church or creed* (Plante & Sherman 2001:6).
- It is an experience *related to a person’s beliefs, values and behaviours* (Spilka *et al.* 2003:9).
- It is seeking of truth, goodness and transcendence (Rayburn 2004:53).
- “... the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of *self-transcendence toward the ultimate values one perceives*” (Schneiders 1989:684).
- It is a unique, *personally meaningful experience* (Shafranske & Gorsuch 1984:231).
- It includes all the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to a *divine being or some other concept of transcendent reality* (Wuthrow 1999).

According to the above-mentioned definitions, a spiritual experience in general refers to a *personal, meaningful self-transcendence in a search for the sacred* or the “inner self.” It is not necessarily rooted in or motivated by a religious institution but does relate to personal beliefs and values. It is therefore not bound to evaluation set out by the precepts of religion. Transcendence of the physical reality in order to attain contact with the superhuman, the sacred or ultimate reality with the aim of transformation is central to a spiritual experience. Spirituality leads individuals to look beyond established religious institutions for spiritual answers (Grant *et al.* 2004:268).

A spiritual experience thus refers to a state of mind/being regarded by the subject as beyond ordinary explanation, caused by the presence of God or some other religious or ultimate factor (Thiselton 2002:224). A spiritual experience, even if related to a particular religion, will have the element of “personal application” that must be evaluated within a specific belief system. The “personal application” aspect of the experience refers to a higher level of contact and communication that has been established as a result of the belief system.

2.4 Relationship between a religious and a spiritual experience

What is the relationship between a religious and a spiritual experience? Different opinions exist. The most common view (Pargament *et al.* 1995; Zinnbauer *et al.* 1997) is that religion and spirituality are overlapping yet separate concepts. Others view spirituality as a broad concept that subsumes religion.

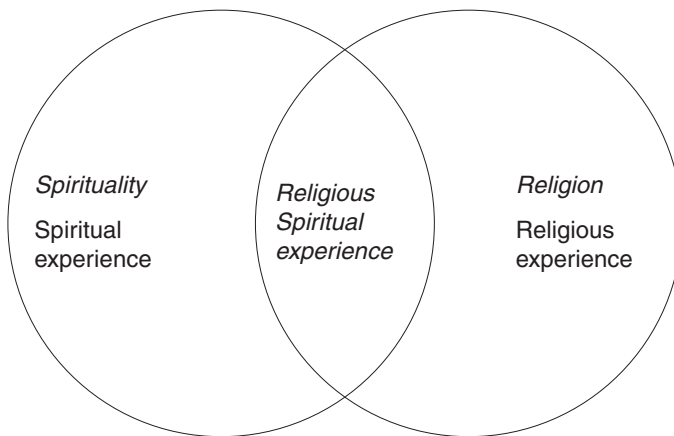
Another growing view amongst some psychologists and academics (Pargament 1999; Zinnbauer *et al.* 1999) is that religion and spirituality should be polarised. According to this viewpoint, spirituality is characterised as good, individualistic, liberating and mature. Religion, however, is portrayed as bad, institutionalised, constraining and immature. Such a polarisation not only creates the perception of the superiority of spirituality, but also distorts and oversimplifies religion and spirituality. Although some may claim that spirituality has no connection to religion because it is founded on a philosophy or belief or a combination thereof, such a claim does not ensure only noble human characteristics. Religion as well as spirituality has the potential to inspire the noblest human characteristics, such as selfless love and caring for others. At the same time it can inspire the basest human traits, such as bigotry, holy war and genocide.

A common characteristic of the religious and the spiritual experience is that it is related to the *belief* in another order of reality referred to as the sacred, the divine, ultimate reality, “inner self” or truth. Although this reality is defined and described differently, it is upheld by a particular belief system or philosophy.

Spiritual experiences, unlike religious experiences, could be non-theistic or theistic in nature. Theistic experiences include experiences such as contact with a deity or ultimate reality, and non-theistic experiences, visions, near death experiences, past life and out of body experiences where there is no perception of deity or ultimate reality present.

Spirituality and religion overlap. When a spiritual experience is related to a religion, such an experience can be referred to as a “religious spiritual experience” (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1



What, then, are the criteria within a religious setting for discerning between a religious and a spiritual experience? Although the two concepts are not well defined in literature, researchers agree that there is a difference between a religious and spiritual experience (Beck 1986, Legere 1984). A free interchange of the two terms may occur where not much thought is given to exact criteria. However, a spiritual experience seems to refer more specifically to a “personal application” or a “personal realisation” of the deity described by the precepts of the religion.

However, as a result of the belief system a personal “link” or “realisation” or “experience” occurs when the presence of God or a deity is realised. A spiritual experience within a religious tradition is founded on that belief system, but refers to a higher level of awareness when the individual and God meet personally. The religious rites and religious experiences are vehicles preparing awareness conducive for a “personal” experience of God or the deity. Such a spiritual experience can also be referred to as a religious spiritual experience,

denoting a spiritual experience with a definite relation to a religion. This can be distinguished from a spiritual experience not related to a particular religion or deity (see Fig.1).

Religion can also be further specified, for example as Christian, Muslim or Hindu, whereupon *Christian spiritual experience* or *Hindu spiritual experience* replaces the term *religious spiritual experience*, emphasising the particular frame of interpretation.

2.5 The substance of a spiritual experience

What does a spiritual experience comprise? Different scientific explanations of spiritual experiences can be seen in writings in the fields of psychology and sociology. James (1994:258) describes spiritual experiences as “up rushes” into ordinary consciousness of energies originating in the subliminal parts of the mind. He describes the most extreme manifestations as “nervous instability” (James 1994:276). Freud (1950:115) dismissed spiritual experiences as “projections of emotional impulses” and as pathologies involving the “ego boundary” (Freud 1961:13). Durkheim (1965:464) explained spiritual experiences as the release of energies superior to those which we ordinarily have at our command. Other explanations include the following:

- The emergence of a repressed superego (Edwards & Lowis 2001).
- Psycho-physiological processes such as endorphin responses (Prince 1982).
- Responses to rhythms (Rouget 1985).
- Various versions of temporal lobe discharge (Persinger 1993; Winkelman 1986; Philipchalk & Mueller 2000).
- Schizotypal personality disorder, a boundary condition of schizophrenia that includes “magical thinking” and “unusual perceptual experience” (Claridge 1997).

On the other hand, more positive scientific perspectives on the substance of spiritual experiences do exist. The neurophysiological perspective argues that spiritual experiences can be driven from the body up (bottom-up), meaning that they can be triggered by the physical behavioural results of ritual, or they can be set in motion by the mind, starting with nothing more substantial than a thought (top-down) (D’Aquila & Newberg 1993:5-6). Newberg *et al.* (2001:113) explain that humans are blessed with an inborn genius for effortless self-transcendence. This can be illustrated by experiences such as “losing yourself” in a piece of beautiful music, or feeling “swept away” by a rousing patriotic speech. Like all experiences, moods, and perceptions, unitary states are made possible by neurological functions.

An important aspect of spiritual experiences is that they are prime phenomena of altered states of consciousness. Scientists have long noticed two distinct regions of consciousness, namely “ordinary everyday consciousness”, also called “the normal construction of consciousness”, and an “altered state of consciousness”. Spiritual experiences arise in the altered state of consciousness. In such an altered state of consciousness, connections are made in the mind between disparate items, relating them in ways that defy normal logic. The “true” meaning and place of things seem clearer. By moving into an altered state of consciousness, awareness of the outside world is limited and attention is turned inward, away from ordinary communication and patterns of thought (Zahav 1988:23).

Whatever different opinions are held with regard to the nature or substance of spiritual experience, it remains the invisible, sometimes inexplicable substance of the contact and relationship with the sacred or other reality.

3. THE FORMATION OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

Could bodily conditions, culture and the nervous system play a role in these experiences and confirm the theory about a “God module”, proposed by some, that could be identified in the human brain? This would imply that experiencing God is only a creation of the human mind.

3.1 Different viewpoints on how spiritual experiences are formed

Theories explaining the occurrence of spiritual experiences abound. Some scientists acknowledge the involvement of role-players such as bodily conditions, psychological processes and cultural influences in the occurrence of experience. The involvement of these role-players is also not seen as an excluding factor for supernatural involvement. Others reduce the spiritual experience to being wholly explainable in terms of neurology and deny the existence of a meta-physical universe.

According to anthropological literature, a close connection exists between religious experience and the human body. Wulff (1997:49) points out the direct relation between the body and *spiritual discipline*: assuming certain postures, depriving oneself of food (i.e. fasting) or sleep, and submitting the body to certain discomforts or control of breathing. The two main ways are by means of physiological deprivation or physiological over-stimulation. Each of these techniques manipulates bodily processes toward the achievement of certain desired states of consciousness.

James (1994) insists that what all religious and spiritual experiences have in common is the resolution of a previously experienced uneasiness. Boisen (1936) noted earlier that what distinguished religious or spiritual experience from otherwise intense and indeed often pathological experiences are the victorious resolutions of what would otherwise be devastating defeats. He based this view on the psychological dynamic of inner conflict and inner resolution. Religious or spiritual experiences, like some pathological experiences, confront great personal disharmony. The difference between the two is the outcome. The spiritual experience marks a successful resolution to the inner conflict.

This viewpoint by no means attempts to minimise spiritual experiences to mere emotional occurrences or a resolution of uneasiness. James (1994:13) warns that perhaps the most short-sighted view of a spiritual experience is to assume that it is merely emotional. The presence of physiological processes in spiritual experiences cannot be denied. The identification of the involvement of physiological processes in the spiritual experience does not mean that it “reduces the religious/spiritual experience.” At the same time, a spiritual experience cannot be validated because it came from supernatural and not merely natural sources. The problem, of course, is that no firm conceptual or tentative scientific distinction can be made between the terms *natural* and *supernatural*. In the words of Meister Eckhart:

Never mind therefore what the nature of anybody's God-given knack may be Do not worry about whether it is natural or supernatural; for both nature and grace are his (Blackney 1941:41).

Bidstrup (2002) makes out a strong case that many aspects of spiritual experiences are a constant part of the everyday experience of the world by persons with certain brain dysfunctions. He bases his findings on the work of Persinger (1999) and other researchers such as Newberg, D'Aquili and Rause (2001). He uses the example of individuals that suffer from epileptic *foci* in the temporal lobes. They often have hallucinations that have a mystical component to them. When the *foci* are destroyed surgically, the seizures and the mystical experiences associated with them disappear. He points out that it was also observed that individuals, whose parietal lobes were damaged or destroyed, suffer an agonising disability in that they experience great difficulty in distinguishing between themselves and the rest of the world. A clear parallel is evident in mystical or spiritual experiences that also report “being one” with the universe.

Bidstrup (2002:1-5) explains how the experience of “god” can be induced through electrical signals. The experience can be created by merely inducing very small electrical signals with tiny magnetically induced mechanical vibrations in the brain cells of the temporal lobes and other areas of the brain located in the skull just above the ears. These lobes are the portions of the brain that produce the “forty hertz components” of the brainwaves detected in

electroencephalograms. The total function of the forty hertz component is not certain other than that it is always present during the experience of self. The self cannot be experienced without the forty hertz component being present. If the forty hertz component can somehow be suppressed, the sense of individuality would be suppressed with it. The sense of individuality that the brain uses to define "self" as opposed to "rest of the world" will be turned off as a result. When the brain is deprived of the self-stimulation and sensory input that is required for it to define itself as being distinct from the rest of world, the brain "defaults" to a sense of infinity. The sense of self expands to fill whatever the brain can sense, and what it senses is the world, so the experience of the self simply expands to fill the perception of the world itself. One experiences becoming "one with the universe".

The so-called "god experience" is further explained in the two temporal lobes in the brain. The lobe on the left-hand side in most people is dominant, and is responsible for language. It becomes dominant when we first learn language as a child. The non-dominant lobe on the right-hand side contributes to the sense of self through constant communication with its opposing brain lobe. Often, as a result of stress or disease, the communication between the two lobes is not synchronised. The result of this is that the normally silent sense of self (right lobe) is experienced as a separate presence by the active sense of self (left lobe). This overwhelming sense of presence and inescapable feeling that someone is there is known as the "god experience." Bidstrup also offers neurological explanations for other spiritual experiences such as "near death experiences", and the experience of "timelessness and spacelessness." He reaches the conclusion that the phenomena of spiritual experiences are easily explained in detail through neurological processes in the brain. According to him, the evidence widely regarded as proof of a spiritual world can thus straightforwardly be explained in terms of the material, the mundane. However, neuroscience cannot disprove the existence of God on the grounds that spiritual experiences are viewed only as electrochemical blips and flashes within the neural pathways of the brain. Tracing religious or spiritual experiences to neurological processes does not disprove their reality (Watts 2000:121). D'Aquili and Newberg (2000:146) explain as follows: "If you were to dismiss spiritual experience as 'mere' neurological activities, you would also have to distrust all of your own brain's perceptions of the material world."

An attempt to explain spiritual experiences by inducing similar experiences does not prove the non-existence of a metaphysical universe. Neither does it prove that these experiences are not the result of supernatural intervention.

Although different role-players may be present in the occurrence of a spiritual experience, and without denying the role they may play, the following cannot be proven:

- That the spiritual experience is merely a creation of the mind, with no spiritual relevance;
- That the spiritual experience is not supernatural as a result of the involvement of natural means.

3.2 Inauthentic spiritual experiences

Spiritual experiences assume interaction, self-transcendence, connecting with the supernatural in whatever sense, be it spectacular or in the normal way of life. It is possible, however, that mere emotional episodes brought on by different bodily conditions or over-stimulation can be mistaken for spiritual experiences.

Winkelman (1992:95) points out that in many religious traditions fasting is viewed as a means of seeking prophetic revelations, spiritual experiences or visions. Fasting practices result in nutritional deficits, which, whether actively sought or involuntarily encountered, can contribute to changes in the central nervous system that facilitate the induction of *altered states of consciousness*. Fasting often goes hand in hand with other ritual activities. Sleep deprivation can take on several forms in religious contexts, including vigils and solitary prayer. The effects of sleep loss are well documented as resulting in symptoms such as delusions or tactile hallucinations (Wulff 1997:75).

Restricted stimulation is the result of a variety of practices such as meditation or solitude. Well-documented examples exist of religious seekers who retreat to mountains, forests, deserts, mountain caves or the top of a pillar or pole. The drastic reduction of environmental input can within a matter of hours result in depersonalisation, disturbances of body image, auditory and visual hallucinations and the like (Wulff 1997:76).

Breath control by means of either rhythmic breathing or holding of breath both influence the intake of oxygen and its proportions with carbon dioxide in the bloodstream, which can also contribute to one's state of consciousness (Wulff 1997:85). Can all altered states of consciousness be viewed as a sign of connecting with the supernatural? The answer must be no. In the light of the above, auditory and visual hallucinations can occur as a result of certain altered states of consciousness induced by some conditions. It seems necessary that a distinction must be made between mere depersonalisation disturbance of body images and hallucinations, on the one hand, and a spiritual experience, on the other. No spiritual experience can be measured in its entirety. It is however important for the methodological study of spiritual experiences to know that different factors exist in creating or assisting in the formation of experiences, whether classified as religious, spiritual or in general terms. However, Rowe (1993:107) is of the opinion that discrimination and discernment are required in the realm of spirituality.

4. CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

The lack of evaluation of spiritual experiences in the Christian religion could be a reason for the limited understanding and interpretation thereof. Advice given by James (1994:24) seems appropriate in this regard: "By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots." It is, however, also necessary from time to time to look at the roots and evaluate the fruits. The need for a better understanding of spiritual experience is furthermore emphasised by La Barre (1972:261), who proposes that most knowledge of the supernatural derives *de facto* from the statements made by religious visionaries and ecstasies, while the priests only administer the ecclesia established on this supernatural basis.

4.1 Defining a Christian spiritual experience

The English word *spirituality* is derived from the Latin word *spiritualitas*, and like its cognates *spiritus* and *spiritualis*, it can be translated from the original Greek terms *pneuma* and *pneumatikos*. The adjective *spiritual* is a Christian neologism and is used by Paul to describe that which pertains to the Holy Spirit.

At the outset it is important to point out that Christian spirituality can be differentiated in itself. Therefore the definitions for a spiritual experience may also differ. Apart from the differences, a certain generic criterion is evident in defining a Christian spiritual experience. A clear relationship with Christ is envisaged. *Christian spirituality* concerns the living out of the encounter with Jesus Christ. It

... refers to the way in which the Christian life is understood and the explicitly devotional practices which have been developed to foster and sustain the relationship with Christ (McGrath 1999:3).

Christian spirituality can be understood as the way in which Christian individuals or groups experience or practise the presence of God. Dowd (1994:39) points out that spirituality is not merely an intimate encounter with the divine Other, but an intimate relationship with the personal God who is always and only faithful to his covenant love.

The experience referred to in Christian spirituality stems from a personal relationship with God. McBrien (1994:1058) elaborates on the experience and points out that it has to do with our experience of God and with the transformation of our consciousness and our lives as a result of that experience. This experience of God is personal (Dowd 1994:38); it is not an encounter with some impersonal life force, impulse towards creativity, or a kind of magnetic force. A workable definition of a Christian spiritual experience is that it will first and foremost have a relation with Christ and the Bible. The spiritual experience in Christian spirituality has as its origin the acceptance of Christ as saviour. Secondly, a spiritual experience will have a relation to similar experiences

portrayed in the Bible. Spiritual experience in a Christian context will have as its foundation the precepts, belief system and traditions of the Christian religion. The belief system and precepts of the Christian tradition uphold the existence and, although limited, understanding of God, and serve as guidelines to evaluate and understand such experiences.

A spiritual experience in the Christian tradition also includes a “personal” aspect. However, the personal aspect of the spiritual experience lies in the unique manner in which God through the Holy Spirit quickens the truth, communicates, guides and makes the Holy presence known to believers. A spiritual experience is an internalised awareness that involves an emotional response to the truth. This internalised awareness can also be the result of an external impression of God.

Earlier the view was established that spirituality overlaps with religion. What, then, is a spiritual experience in the context of the Christian religion? In what sense must a spiritual experience be understood in terms of the precepts and belief system of the Christian religion?

Spiritual experiences in the Christian tradition do not supersede the boundaries of Christianity, but must rather be viewed as a higher level of spiritual awareness made possible through the study of the Bible, devotion and the Holy Spirit. These experiences can at times take the form of a dream, vision or miracle. Although the content of these experiences cannot always be evaluated or measured in terms of the Christian belief system and precepts, such experiences can be verified by similar experiences in the Bible. God’s dealings with individuals may not always fit the natural way of things, but will always have a positive outcome, to the edification of the believer and others. A clear criterion should always be that the impact or result of such an experience should edify and develop the Christian character and advance the personal relationship with Christ. It seems clear that whenever God meets with an individual, he or she is left with a better understanding of God and God’s will.

It would be simplistic to endeavour to pin a Christian spiritual experience down to a particular form. A spiritual experience is neither created nor controlled by human beings. Rather, it signifies the intervention of the Holy Spirit in the spirit of an individual, which results in transcending the normal. A spiritual experience may be, but is not necessarily, characterised by the spectacular, but is always referred to as a supernatural intervention or contact.

4.2 Examples of Christian spiritual experiences

A general differentiation is made between what is called an “extravert” experience and an “introvert” experience. Christians thus encounter different types or categories of spiritual experiences.

The Bible is the basic source of spiritual experiences. In the Bible both extravert and introvert experiences are found in the likes of visionary stories, dream experiences and other similar mystical or spiritual experiences. What is important to note about these experiences is that they are always related to God or God's purpose.

According to Pilch (2001:2), the Bible is filled with spiritual experiences in the form of "altered states of consciousness", starting with Genesis, where God puts the first man into a deep sleep in order to create the first woman (Gen. 2:21), and ending with Revelation, where John mentions four times (Rev. 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10) that what he reports is the result of experiences whilst in a trance.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke reports more than twenty incidents of altered states of consciousness. The apostle Paul was drawn to the early Christian movement by means of a vision (Gal. 1:11; 2:1). Peter reportedly went into a trance (Acts 10:10). Some writers argue that spiritual experience plays an important role in Paul's letters, and that the crux of his letters is about union with God in Christ (Ashton 2000:113-142).

Many examples of spiritual experience exist in the Bible, but these are also found in the Christian tradition. One cannot view the examples in the Bible or Christianity as exhaustive. Neither can these examples serve as the only and ultimate guidelines for experiences.

Now that what is meant by spiritual experience has been made clear, it is also important to know what the purposes of these experiences are.

4.3 The role and purpose of a spiritual experience in Christian spirituality

Spiritual experiences are believed to have significance. In a non-theistic context, spiritual experiences contribute to obtaining the truth, ultimate reality or the self-improvement of an individual. In a Christian context, the purpose and role can be summarised as "Christ-likeness". The goal of Christian spiritual experience is Christ-likeness and a restoration of the image of God (2 Pet. 1:4), in which humans were originally created (Gen. 1:26), through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Christians have different opinions as to whether this Christ-likeness is to be anticipated in this life or in the life to come. All concur though that Christian spirituality refers to growth in grace and sanctity (Tyson 1999:2).

A spiritual experience in the Christian tradition is intended, firstly, for the individual to experience him/herself in relation to Jesus Christ and, secondly, for the image of Christ to become more visible in Christians (Gal. 4:19).

5. CONCLUSION

In the Christian tradition a spiritual experience is a phenomenon that in some sense remains controversial. On a continuum, to the left some believe that spiritual experience is a much-needed aspect of Christian spirituality. In the middle of the continuum, others believe in spiritual experiences, but hold the view that the time for supernatural occurrences has passed. Any such occurrence that takes place now will be ascribed to certain psychological techniques and rejected as inauthentic. These experiences belonged to the time of the Bible, and had had a particular purpose at that time. On the far right end of the continuum are researchers who believe that spiritual experiences are fabrications of the mind.

Christian spiritual experiences have the element of supernatural intervention by the Holy Spirit, although supernatural must not be confused with spectacular. It might be spectacular, as in the case of Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). A spiritual experience can however also occur in an everyday situation through a clear inner realisation of "the truth." Spiritual experiences cannot be pinned to a particular form. A spiritual experience in Christianity refers to the personalisation of the faith in Christ that transcends the normal.

Finally, although all the different role-players may contribute to the manifestation of spiritual experiences, adding a natural component, the essence of the experience cannot be reduced to a mundane experience. The supernatural intervention of God surpasses all natural means, and brings about a meaningful spiritual experience ensuring, firstly, God's presence in us and, secondly, interaction with God the Father through Christ manifested by the indwelling of the Spirit.

The interpretation of spiritual experiences also plays an important role in the evaluation of experiences. An experience can be viewed and evaluated in many ways. It can be the result of many things, which cannot be measured. A spiritual experience in the Christian tradition, however, is evaluated as a "contact" or "meeting" with the living God of the Bible.

Spiritual experiences also could be inauthentic or even dangerous. Firstly, the exposure of the body to certain bodily stimulations can result in symptoms such as delusions or tactile hallucinations. Secondly, there is a significant risk of becoming so absorbed by experiences that one's life revolves around experiences rather than around God. Lastly, some emotional episodes without any depth and lasting substance may be mistaken for spiritual experiences. It seems appropriate that discernment is required in the realm of spirituality. The church thus has an important role to play in discerning spirituality.

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