

Discussion

Religious Experience: A Roman Catholic Perspective

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I have heard many good things going on in this institution, and I have been wondering how it would feel to talk in such prestigious academic milieu. Therefore I am grateful for this invitation and honor. Yet, I have to apologize. In only a bit more than two weeks, I have not been able to prepare a complete paper expected by the committee. I can only present here some highlights (or rather, rumbling thoughts) which I hope can resonate well with the topic of our discussion today.

Still, there is another apology necessary. I am an ordained priest in the Roman Catholic tradition. For the general audience, it usually simply means: male and celibate. I am sure that my presentation is limited only in the context within the Roman Catholic Church. There are many other Christian traditions that have completely escaped my attention, about which I can say nothing.

For better or for worse, one of the first characteristics that will come to mind when people hear the word “Catholic” is the notion of “hierarchy” (literally, in Greek “hieros” means “sacred,” and “arche” can be understood as principle or ruling; more popularly, we can speak about “holy government” or “holy governing”). Positively, we, Roman Catholics, can boast about our unity that has largely been due to this strict hierarchy. Negatively, however, we also have to admit that in some cases, this is an element that has actually slowed down some necessary changes.

In this framework, the notion of religious experience needs to be placed. With the triad of “Scripture – Tradition – Magisterium (or, the Teaching Authority),” we can say that every single religious experience needs to be open to be interpreted by the Church’s legitimate authority. One can talk

about the need to confront the religious experience with someone who is good, balanced, and mostly loyal to Church (i.e., loves and strives to maintain the Church's unity).

The current Pope is well aware of this unity, while at the same time warns the Church's authority not to confound "unity" with "uniformity." So, I think, this is the first rule of thumb when the Roman Catholic Church has to deal with any given religious experience. The leading question would be: "How can we deal with this religious experience without neither jeopardizing the unity, nor forcing the uniformity?"

For us, it is obvious, that there is no authentic religious experience that can claim to be independent of any interpretation whatsoever. Any subjective religious experience, once it is presented outside the inner realm of the individual, will need to be objectified, since this might affect the Church in a larger context. Stories about personal visions, revelations, and miracles abound. The distinguishing aspect is clear: it will flourish healthily when it is judged "healthy" and "authentic" by the Church authority; the opposite is obvious.

Let us look at some examples: 1) A nun has a religious experience that convinces her to start a new religious community; 2) A priest has been convinced by a ground breaking religious experience that he should fight for the removal of the discipline of celibacy for all priests; 3) A married woman thinks that Mother Mary has appeared to her and asked her to live as a celibate woman; 4) A married man strongly believes that Jesus has asked him to sell everything and to go for a mission in a remote islands. No matter how complex the issue is, I believe, none of these four people has the right to claim subjectively the authenticity of the religious experience. It has to deal with the Church law, with the tradition and unity, with the psychological health, with social responsibility.

In some popular parlance we often hear a saying that goes: "Love is not a feeling; love is a decision." We can apply the same notions like this: "Faith is not a feeling; faith is a decision." Among the youth there is a wise advice to help them in relationship: "Don't look for the intensity of love; look for the authenticity of love." Similarly in religious experience we can say: "Don't look for the intensity of religious experience; look for the authenticity of religious experience." In a Roman Catholic setting, the hierarchy with all its instruments is believed to play the crucial role in delineating "decision" from "feeling," and "authenticity" from "intensity."

Realistically speaking, of course, a significant religious experience has to start with feeling and intensity. Otherwise, how can the person notice it? If it is just cold, lifeless, no excitement, the person will not really pay attention. Sooner or later, the feeling needs to give way to the decision, and the intensity needs to give way to the authenticity. Once the person arrives at that later stage, the feeling and the intensity don't really matter anymore. Yet, my deepest concern is that a good number of good people are simply not capable to see the difference.

More examples: 1) A young Catholic man has a great faith that the host he receives at the communion during the Eucharistic celebration (or, Mass) is really Jesus. He had been diagnosed with terminal cancer at a late stage, yet he was healed miraculously simply when he received the host; 2) Another young Catholic man has a deep conversion to a point that he can immediately develop a personal relationship with Jesus as his own Lord and savior. He eventually believes that Jesus doesn't want him to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation (or, Confession), since Jesus has become his close buddy and he doesn't need priest in between.

The point is that in the Roman Catholic tradition, faith life moves around Sacraments. Any religious experience will be evaluated whether it enhances the devotion to the Sacraments, or it derails the person from the Sacraments. The authenticity will be judged based on the inner direction that flows out as a result of the religious experience.

In order to be authentic, what characteristics does the Church authority want to see? Several aspects: honesty, balance, maturity, humility, in line with the Sacraments and Church laws, obedience, and of course, no hidden agenda (sadly, in many cases it's all about money!). Lastly, to make it simple: when you think that you are the only person in the world that has the most authentic and original religious experience and hence you are the only one who can fully understand it, you may consider seriously going to a good and professional psychiatrist. Just leave God alone.