

Chrtc 390 Module 11 Class Notes by Paul Flaman

Ordinary Religious Experience and Personhood

Discussion Questions

1. What are the characteristics of “ordinary” religious experiences? What does the evolution paradigm contribute to our understanding of these experiences? Does this affect our understanding of their character and “reality”? Do religions have any survival or pragmatic value for human beings? Do religions provide human beings with real answers or only illusions with regard to the human search for the ultimate meaning of life?

2. What are some of the main themes in Christian theology with regard to ordinary religious experiences? How do some neuroscientists understand ordinary religious experiences? Are the approaches of theology and neuroscience in conflict or complementary here? Is a phenomenology of religious experience helpful in mediating between these disciplines here? What are the contributions and limits of each of these approaches?

3. In what ways do you think the religious experiences of Christians and people of other religions (e.g., Buddhists) are similar and/or different? Do you think the *mystical experiences* of people of different religions are more similar than the *rituals and doctrines* of their respective religions?

4. Are religions a product of human brains or are our brains wired so that we can experience God? Are human persons created in the image of God or have we created God in our image?

5. Do you agree with the Apostle Paul that a person gains nothing if they have eloquence, knowledge (e.g., a vast knowledge of neuroscience and theology), power and so forth, but do not have agape love (see 1 Cor 13)? Discuss.

Neuroscience and Ordinary Religious Experience

In the previous chapter we considered Extraordinary Religious Experiences such as visions, allocutions, miracles and prophecies. These are relatively rare in the sense that many people do not experience these and those who do generally do not experience these regularly but only once or a few times in their lives. On the other hand, Ordinary Religious Experiences are common. They have been experienced by hundreds of millions of people in various religions and cultures.

The scientifically accessible dimension of religious experience is what empirical science can study and describe. This includes cognitive, social, behavioural and emotional aspects of religions and religious people as well as the effects of religious commitment and participation. The **cognitive** aspect of common religious experiences includes rational assent to beliefs including to doctrines and moral rules. These are found not only in Christianity but in other religions as well. Many people have been raised as children in a particular religion. Many of these later assent as adults in whole or in part to the religious teachings they were taught as children and adolescents. On the other hand, not everyone today is raised in a particular religion, and some people “convert” from one religion to another or from no religion to a particular religion.

The **social and behavioural** aspects of religion include people acting according to doctrines and moral rules, as well as participation in common practices such as in various traditions, sacraments, rituals, teaching and/or learning, and prayer and/or meditation. Religious

people often experience various **emotions** or feelings including peace, joy, warmth, conviction, awe, fear, disgust, shame and guilt. The latter emotions can help a person internalize the community's rules. Religions give many people a sense of connection and identity in community. Many religious people speak of experiencing a sense of the sacred or divine or the presence of God. This has been described as numinosity—it seems very special to the person. With regard to the **effects of religious commitment and participation** science cannot tell us if these religious practices actually connect people to a real God or are inspired by the Holy Spirit. These are beyond what empirical science can study.

Some specific examples of ordinary religious experiences include the following: Jewish families celebrate the Passover Meal. This was the occasion of Jesus' Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist. Muslims commonly practice ritual "purification" washings. At least once in their life they are to take a pilgrimage to Mecca. Many Catholics attend Mass on Sundays or more often, and pray the Rosary. Pentecostal Christians often raise their hands in prayer of praise to God. Buddhists commonly meditate. Some of them are celibate monks in some ways analogous to Catholic men and women in religious orders. North American aboriginal people's religious practices include smudging with smoke, sweat lodges and drumming. Some Christians use incense—the rising smoke symbolizes raising one's heart and mind to God in prayer.

Many forms of **music** are found in various religions. For example, chanting is common in Jewish worship. A Christian example is Gregorian chant. Drumming is common at North American aboriginal pow-wows. Singing accompanied by musical instruments such as an organ, violin, trumpet, guitar and so forth is common in many Christian churches, or singing a cappella,

that is, without musical instrumental accompaniment, is practiced in Orthodox and some other Eastern Christian churches.

Music can produce euphoria, peace, and a sense of connection with others. Good religious music can also foster a sense of connection with God. The lyrics of music can also contain information targeting rational processes. Some Christian songs or hymns, for example, are rich in theological content. Because we are embodied persons, we can expect individual and communal religious practices to be reflected in the body including the brain. Normal psychological and neural processes are involved including those involved with perception and emotions. Music affects various brain centres including the temporal lobe which is related to the auditory, memory and emotion; the limbic system which contains many structures and is related to emotional responses; the amygdala; the hypothalamus plays a mediating role in the brain and is related to autonomic arousal or quiescence; and the brain stem, the oldest part of the brain from an evolutionary perspective, which is involved with arousal. Endorphin release results in a feeling of well-being, pleasure and pain relief, which is produced by the pituitary gland and the hypothalamus. A feeling of well-being can also be produced by non-religious music as, for example, by attending a symphony or musical concert.

Are the effects of music *wrongly* viewed as the result of a genuine spiritual connection? Music creates responses regardless of the context. Consider attending a music concert—rock, folk, classic, or a symphony. The context, however, alters the interpretation of the response. Compare a “pagan” rock concert versus a Christian rock concert versus a Christian charismatic prayer meeting. Do religious persons *claim* that music’s effects come from a genuine spiritual connection? Yes: forms of chant such as Jewish, Gregorian or other Christian, are used to alter consciousness and to connect to God / the divine. They can be used as a tool or means to

connect to God and others. No: music is recognized as a human attempt which involves human deliberate choices and actions to give praise to the divine, to deliberately bond the community and to persuade or manipulate people into conviction and commitment. Regarding manipulation compare also scare tactics and so forth. “Manipulative” does not necessarily mean malicious. A deliberate meditation, not only Christian but also Buddhist, for example, or a Lenten retreat or the Stations of the Cross can also be used to stimulate or strengthen convictions.

Religious practices such as every Friday evening, the eve of the Sabbath, and the Passover, Jewish families doing the same thing; or Catholics in many parts of the world celebrating the same Mass although in different languages; or Muslims in many parts of the world praying five times a day and fasting during Ramadan; foster a sense of communal connection and identity.

Neuroscientist Andrew Newberg did SPECT (single photon emission computed tomography) studies on Buddhist monks and Franciscan nuns. He tracked certain “ordinary” religious experiences including meditation and prayer and concluded that the experience of community and the sense of the divine presence or a relationship with God lies on a continuum. Religious experience is associated with alterations in brain activity. For example, concentrating or focusing typically results in an increase of prefrontal cortex activity. When such experience results in a sense of oneness with “all” or with God and a loss of sense of “self,” there is a decrease in brain activity in the posterior superior parietal lobe which is important regarding one’s sense of self, body, location and boundaries in space.(Newberg and d’Aquili 2000, 259) Neuroscientist Mario Beauregard did a similar study with Carmelite nuns (see Beauregard et al. 2007).

The autonomic nervous system (ANS) maintains body functions and keeps us alive. This system includes sympathetic and parasympathetic branches. The sympathetic is associated with arousal, energy-releasing, and fight or flight. The parasympathetic is associated with relaxing and energy-conserving. The ANS shifts with worship experiences: high sympathetic with release, arousal, excitement, “soaring”; high parasympathetic with quiescence, deep relaxation and peace—compare, for example, Christian Prayer and Yoga meditation. High sympathetic with parasympathetic spill over is associated with orgasmic and rapturous feelings, a “rush” surging into trance-like states and a sense of flow according to researcher Csikszentmihalyi. This also happens with sexual orgasm. There is an interesting literature comparing sexual and religious “orgasm.” High parasympathetic with sympathetic spill over is associated with a sense of oceanic bliss within which one experiences a sense of deep power. When both sympathetic and parasympathetic are high, this may be related to extraordinary religious experience (Newberg and d’Aquili 2000, 254-6). Related to the above theories by Newberg (and Aquili), a colleague of mine, Professor Heather Looy thinks these are plausible but more research is needed to confirm these.

Glossolalia, speaking in tongues, is common in some groups. Compare the Oracle of Delphi, Shamanism and Voodoo, as well as Pentecostal Christian denominations, and since 1967 also Charismatic groups within mainline Christian denominations. Is speaking in tongues a foreign language or a “spiritual language”? In the New Testament Acts of the Apostles we read:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who

are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’(Acts 2:1-12 NRSV)

On the other hand, the Apostle Paul seems to speak of another kind of gift of the Holy Spirit or “speaking in tongues” in his first letter to the Corinthians:

Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy. For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, those who prophesy speak to other people for their building up and encouragement and consolation. Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church. Now I would like all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. One who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.(1 Cor 12:1-5 NRSV)

The “miracle of Pentecost” recorded in Acts 2 in which communication barriers between people of different languages is overcome (contrast the Tower of Babel story in Gen 11:1-9) seems to be a unique or at least very rare phenomenon. On the other hand, the kind of speaking or praying or singing in tongues described in 1 Cor 12 is quite common among Pentecostal Christians or “Charismatic” Christians in other denominations. We thus consider it a kind of “ordinary religious experience” even though in those groups not everyone has this spiritual gift.

Neuroscientist Andrew Newberg with a few other researchers did the first SPECT study of cerebral activity of people speaking in this kind of “tongues” or *glossolalia* which linguists describe as an un-patterned reorganization of phonemes, that is, it includes the basic sounds of language but is seemingly scrambled. Newberg et al. found that there were “significant decreases [in cerebral blood flow] in the prefrontal cortices, left caudate and left temporal pole while there were increases in the left superior parietal lobe ... and right amygdala” in those speaking in tongues as compared to the singing state. With glossolalia there is a decrease of

activity in the language regions of the brain and an increase of activity in the emotional centres. Studies have also found that “people who speak in tongues show no differences in personality traits from other population groups—no increases in depression, anxiety, mania, or psychosis.”(Newberg, Wintering, Morgan and Waldman 2006, 69)

With regard to interpreting “ordinary” religious experiences, we can say that they often have a strong emotional component. Connecting emotional response with rational thought is *essential* for good judgement and moral action. The large 4H youth organization speaks of the importance of balancing head, heart, hands and health. It is thus no surprise that following a religion involves emotion as well as cognition. But thoughts and emotions can be manipulated as we know. Sin, a theological concept, may distort the normal healthy interplay of thought and feeling. Relying solely on one or the other is inappropriate in judging the validity of a belief. What is the difference between inappropriate manipulation and the wise use of human nature? This and other such questions are not scientific but evaluative. Can empirical science help us answer these or do we need philosophy and theology too?

Religions are practised by embodied beings: practices utilise bodies and are reflected in their function. Did we evolve to develop religion(s)? If so, why? Are our bodies and brains designed by God to connect to spiritual reality? In the book, *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet*, James Ashbrook and Carol Albright understand the brain as a kind of “icon of God.” They claim that “the brain reflects the universe.” It “mirrors the universe that gave it birth.” Out of “brain evolution arises an increasing sense of oneness with the whole created order through every level of organization. It is out of this capacity that the ultimate context of sacred meaning and order develop. Thus we are able to bring to meaningful expression the context where God or the ultimate emerges.”(Nelson 1999, 46-7) For example,

Ashbrook and Albright “suggest affinities to the limbic system and the neocortex in understanding God as nurturing and purposeful respectively.”(Ashbrook and Albright 1997, 54)

Do religions functions to provide cohesion and stability in large communities? Religion is certainly adaptive. Is it merely this or more than this? Could it be both that our bodies and brains are designed by God to enable us to have a relationship with God and that religions provide adaptive, evolutionary advantages?

Christopher Hitchens says religious people are unhappy, that religion poisons everything (2007), but scientific studies show that on average he is wrong. People within religious communities are generally healthier, both physically and psychologically, happier, have more stable relationships, and less likely to engage in crime, than those outside such communities. Psychiatrist Dr. Harold Koenig, summarizing hundreds of scientific studies including several of his own research papers, points out that “there is clear evidence that religious practices like prayer, and attendance at worship services are clearly related to such benefits as: faster recovery from depression; a lower incidence of suicide; faster recovery from cardiac surgery; marital satisfaction and stability; and a life span that, on average, is seven years longer among believers.” He says, “The most powerful predictor of mental and physical health is whether you go to church. It works whatever your faith is.”(Harvey 2002, A11)

Is it *religion* that produces these effects or simply being in *community*? A colleague of mine, Dr. Heather Looy informed me that recent research shows that the relationships among religious commitment and practice, and well-being, is quite complex. To the benefits on average of religious practices noted in the previous paragraph, Dr. Koenig adds that: “It is not enough to attend worship services just in hopes of improving your health. If you did, you would

just get more anxious. You have to do it for the right reasons. The health effect is a natural consequence of following the religious life for religious reasons.”(Harvey 2002, A11)

Christian Experience and Theological Interpretation

In the First Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul points out that without *agape* love the charismatic gifts and extraordinary religious experiences are nothing. This love is the greatest gift of God and endures. It is patient, kind, and “is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” and “never ends.”(1 Cor 13:1-8) The First Letter of John in the New Testament states that such *agape* love “is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”(1 Jn 4:7-8 NRSV) The great theologian St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) considers such love to be the queen of all the other virtues (ST, II-II, 23).

St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-97), a French cloistered Carmelite nun, died of tuberculosis at the age of 24. She is known through her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, which she wrote under obedience. Upon reading the lives of the saints, she wanted to do many things including being a priest, a martyr and a missionary. When she read 1 Cor 13 (see the previous paragraph), she discovered her vocation in love, to be the “heart” of the Church. She describes her “little” way as doing small or ordinary things such as listening and being attentive to others with “extraordinary” love. Related to this, on a retreat I attended some years ago, Jean Vanier shared that none of us is called to do great things. We—consider also a pope or political leader in the grand scheme of things—are all called to do small things with a great love. One of the examples Thérèse gives is that she found the habits of one of the nuns she lived with to be very annoying,

so she chose to try to treat her with extra patience and love. That nun later shared that she believed she was Thérèse's favorite. By faith Thérèse appreciated God's love and presence in every detail of her life, whether she felt it or not. She compared God's presence to the sun which we know is always there, even when we do not sense its light and warmth on a cool cloudy day. Her mature spirituality has been appreciated by millions of people. The great Twentieth Century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar said she is not a "mystic."(1954) She was declared a doctor of the Church by Pope John Paul II in 1997.

St. John of the Cross (1542-91) was also a Carmelite. He was Spanish and is known as a great mystical theologian. One of the main points in his writings is that God often draws people from sin initially with stronger spiritual pleasures. The person may still be quite self-centered, just seeking different pleasures. God, however, does not want to leave the person in this immature state but wants to lead the person to a more mature love and union with God. God typically does this by letting the person experience alternate trials and dark nights, in which they do not experience God's presence and spiritual pleasures and through which they need to choose and make an effort to believe in and love God, with periods in which they experience God's presence and consolations so that they will not get discouraged. Compare Mt 5:48 which reports Jesus' call to us to love perfectly, everyone including our "enemies," just as our "heavenly Father" does who "is perfect"; and Jn 15:12-13 which reports Jesus as commanding his disciples to love one another as He has loved them, and that "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."(NRSV)

The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church (Vatican II) in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (1964), Chapter 5, teaches that we are all called to holiness, to the perfection of love. Consider, for example, when Mother Teresa of Calcutta was

living and when someone called her a saint, she replied that, Jesus is Holy and that we are all called to be saints. To be a saint is not just for the chosen few—it should not be considered "extraordinary."

Henri Nouwen (1932-96), was a Dutch Catholic priest and university professor who lived the last part of his life in L'Arche (founded by Jean Vanier) near Toronto with mentally disabled adults. He was and remains a very popular spiritual author not only with Catholics but also with many others. He wrote more than 40 books translated into more than 22 languages. In his book, *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective* (1986), he beautifully writes how *agape* (God's love) drives out fear in us and leads us into real intimacy with others in God, who is our true home (27-42).

There is much good writing today on Christian spirituality which is holistic and relational. It promotes having a personal relationship with God and loving relationships with other people (one's neighbor can be a means to God rather than an obstacle) and the rest of God's Creation, rather than an individualistic "me and God" approach. I have been teaching a course for about 20 years at St. Joseph's College in the heart of the University of Alberta in Edmonton called "Spirituality for Today's Christians." This course, rooted in the writings of various Catholic and non-Catholic Christian authors, includes topics on the Bible and prayer on Christian spirituality as one would expect, but also on other topics: personality differences and different traditional Christian spiritualities, work and spirituality, suffering and spirituality, marriage and family life and spirituality, justice and ecology and spirituality, food and hospitality and spirituality, heart and head and spirituality, the computer age and spirituality, and so forth.

In the 16th Century the Protestant Reformation began with leaders such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. This resulted in serious divisions with Rome and within Western Christianity.

In recent decades many Christian leaders and others have felt called to pray and work towards Christian unity. This widespread movement is called ecumenism. One concrete achievement of this is the “Joint Document on the Doctrine of Justification” in 1999 of the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, signed by representative of the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican. “Justification” was one of the main issues of division in the 16th Century between Protestants and Catholics. Section n. 15 of this document reads in part:

Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit [that is, we do not earn our salvation], who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works [compare Mt 25 through which Jesus calls us to respond to the real needs of people in love, which is a key aspect of genuine Christian spirituality and experience].

This passage combines the New Testament teaching of Gal 2:16 regarding being justified by faith in Jesus Christ and not by works of the law, a passage favored by many Protestants, and James 2:14-24 which points out that faith without works of love is dead and barren, a passage often referred to by Catholics. Section n. 16 of this document reads:

All people are called by God to salvation in Christ. Through Christ alone are we justified, when we receive this salvation in faith. Faith is itself God's gift through the Holy Spirit who works through word and sacrament in the community of believers and who, at the same time, leads believers into that renewal of life which God will bring to completion in eternal life.

This document is a fruit and sign of God working to bring about reconciliation and peace between groups of people who have been divided and at times even hostile toward each other (compare Eph 2:11-22). In the New Testament, our relationships with God, other people and the rest of God's Creation go together (consider, e.g., the great and second commandments of love—see Mt 22:37-40).

With regard to the Holy Spirit referred to in the above quote of the Joint Declaration, Gal 5:22-23 teaches that the "...fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,

faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control..." The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] teaches that, "The seven *gifts* of the Holy Spirit are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. They belong in their fullness to Christ, Son of David.(Cf. Isa 11:1-2) They complete and perfect the virtues of those who receive them. They make the faithful docile in readily obeying divine inspirations."(n. 1831) These fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit are meant to be part of the "ordinary religious experience" of all Christians, unlike the charisms of the Holy Spirit, gifts for building up the Christian community, the Church, which God distributes as He wills. Every Christian does not receive all of the charisms.

Non-Christian Religious Experiences

The Second Vatican Council's "Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" *Nostra Aetate* (Vatican II, 1965) sparked new dialogue between representatives of various religions. In 1986 Pope John Paul II invited representatives from the world's religions to come to Assisi to pray for peace. This was fitting since St. Francis of Assisi was an apostle of peace and the Peace Prayer is attributed to him which says in part: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; Where there is hatred, let me sow peace; Where there is injury, pardon; Where there is discord, unity; ... O Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek ... to be understood, as to understand; to be loved as to love..."

From October 25-28, 1999 an Interreligious Assembly organized by the Pontifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) met in Vatican City. In an interview Cardinal Francis Arinze, President of the PCID, said that there are good, true, even saintly elements in various religions. Interreligious dialogue is a two-way communication process which involves seeking to collaborate for the good of society, to work together to affirm human dignity as the source of human rights. Interreligious dialogue does not mean compromise or a betrayal of one's faith, but

fosters an appreciation of the richness in various religious traditions. Loving dialogue reduces suspicion, fears and barriers. Cardinal Arinze thought that the assembly was not lacking in God's help. A Buddhist who attended the assembly pointed out that without dialogue people can be filled with arrogance, a sense of superiority, and ignorance with regard to others who are different. A Muslim who attended the assembly spoke of our common Creator as a God of love.(Journeying Together) We note these examples here of ordinary religious experiences which promote reciprocal respect and peace, since they run counter to those who accuse religions of causing wars. In reality it is not true religion but a perversion of religions which is a factor in some wars. The world's religions can be a tremendous force for good and peace, especially when their members respect each other and engage in dialogue to work together for the good of all humanity.

In his *Man's Search for Meaning* (1985; original German 1946), Jewish psychiatrist Victor Frankl describes some of his observations while he was a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. In the brutal conditions he noticed that some prisoners gave up and died. Some became hard and were sometimes used by the Nazis to torture other prisoners and kill them. Some others, however, in spite of the inhumane situation, grew and became more caring of other people. Frankl came to understand that all of these people who became more caring had a sense of meaning in their life, a purpose or reason to live. Some of these found this sense of meaning and purpose in their religion. Some found it in their political ideals. Frankl himself believed that his wife was still alive and this gave him a reason to want to stay alive with the hope of being reunited with her in the future. This experience of Frankl led him to develop what he called logotherapy, which aims to help people find a sense of meaning or purpose in

their lives. Related to our topic we note that hundreds of millions of people in the past and today find meaning and purpose through their ordinary religious experiences.

The great Christian Apostle Paul, while firmly believing in the resurrection of Jesus and the power of his Gospel for the salvation of “everyone who has faith” (Rm 1:16), was also convinced that, “Ever since the creation of the world his [God’s] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made....”(Rm 1:20) Nevertheless, he also realized that many people do not honor God as God, but thinking themselves wise became fools and exchanged the glory of God for all kinds of idols. They were filled with various base desires and engaged in things that should not be done.(Rm 1:18-32 NRSV) The Apostle Paul was convinced as well that God’s moral law was not only revealed to the Jews, but is also written on people’s hearts to which their own consciences bear witness. Therefore, those who did not hear God’s revealed moral law could be pleasing to God since He “shows no partiality.”(Rm 2:11; see all of Rm 2)

Related to the above, consider a Christian theological interpretation of non-Christian religious experiences. Christians should be open to appreciating all that is true, good and beautiful among people of other religions and people of good will. Along these lines, the Second Vatican Council’s “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” *Lumen Gentium* (1964) points out that not only Catholics and other Christians, but all humankind is related to the People of God and “called by God’s grace to salvation.”(n. 13) While clearly affirming that Jesus Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation, and that the Church founded by him, with all the means of salvation given to the Church, is necessary, this document also notes that those people “who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways.”(nn. 14-16) It continues in part:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace strive to lead a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel, and given by him who enlightens all ... that they may at length have life (n. 16)

But since very often people fall into vain thinking and exchange the truth of God for a lie, the Church must continue to preach the Gospel to all as commanded by Jesus (see Mk 16:16). And, knowing that Jesus remains with them always, Jesus' disciples are called to communicate all of Jesus' teachings to people of all nations (Mt 28:18-20). "Each disciple of Christ has the obligation of spreading the faith to the best of his [her] ability" (*Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II, n. 17).

With regard to religious experience consider phenomenology, a modern philosophical approach that tries to be open to the richness of all human experience including human subjective and religious experiences, and not just to what can be empirically verified. Phenomenology, for example, tries to accurately describe our experiences of personal relationships, God, mystery, awe, love and values such as truth, justice, the sacredness of life, fidelity and self-giving love. These experiences are commonly part of many people's ordinary religious experiences.

Empirical sciences including neuroscience study the physical realm rather than subjective human experiences. In a sense this is "impersonal" and treats human persons as "objects," even though human persons may be studied by scientists who themselves are persons. Since we are embodied persons with physical bodies and brains, these very much condition our personal subjective experiences including religious experiences (see, e.g., the studies of certain religious experiences by neuroscientists Newberg et al. 2000, 2001 and 2006; and Beauregard 2007).

We will conclude this chapter with a question: are Buddhist and Christian religious experiences and mysticism basically the same and/or different in spite of their different origins and language? The Buddhist goal of Nirvana is sometimes described as a loss of the individual self, like a drop of water dispersed in the ocean. Although this may seem “impersonal,” some Eastern writers express something like “grace” and a super-personal experience (cf. Ashley and O’Rourke 1997, Ch. 1.3). The Christian view of Heaven is that the experience of it can already begin in a limited sense on earth, but it will be completed following bodily death and resurrection and God establishing a new heaven and earth. It will involve perfect intimate “I-Thou” relationships of mutual love and unity with God, who Himself is a perfect community of mutual love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with all the angels and people who have completely surrendered to God’s love, truth and goodness, that is, the saints. Since God’s grace does not destroy but perfects nature (cf. Aquinas ST, I,1,8), the unique personalities of all the saints will shine forth more than they ever did on earth.