

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND THE SACRED
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The first question which arises is how do we distinguish “religious” folks from “non-religious” folks? I would do so in the following fashion:

- non-religious folks claim “what you see is what you get” or, in other words, that reality is encompassed by the world of human experience (the physical universe, time and history from “the big bang” until the end of the universe, our lives from birth to death, etc.). Life finds its meaning within life. See, for instance, the claims of [The Secular Humanist Declaration](#).
- religious folks claim that the above reality is not all there is but that there is another order of reality (let us call it “the Sacred”). This Sacred reality is of an order totally different from the ordinary reality of experience and is, therefore, ultimately inexpressible and unknowable.
- religious folks claim further that, despite its inexpressibility, this reality is accessible to human experience. Human communities can, somehow, “link up” with Sacred reality. The “how” of this link is the business of religious traditions. It can vary from the self-revelation of God (in the Christian, Islamic and Jewish traditions), the experience of a Sacred in and through the natural world, or to the results of meditative experience in Buddhism. The point is that Sacred reality is both “totally other” than ordinary reality and is accessible to human experience.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND ITS EXPRESSIONS

Joachim Wach defines religious experience as “the total response of the total being to Ultimate Reality.” Another way of expressing this is to say that religious experience involves all dimensions of human experience (the social, political, economic, psychological, etc.) in response to the encounter with the Sacred. This experience is not self contained but is always expressed. Religious folks don’t only experience the Sacred, they also do something as a result of this experience. I would summarize Wach’s discussion (with my own emendations) of the expressions of religious experience as follows:

1. Religious experience is always expressed in **THOUGHT**. Human beings think about what they experience when they experience the Sacred. This thought has taken two forms in the history of religions.
 - systematic thought: theology, religious philosophy, etc. Scholars or thinkers within a tradition reflect systematically on the meaning of the community’s experience of the Sacred. The results are manifest, for instance, in Christian theology, the Jewish Talmud, Buddhist abhidharma, Hindu speculation and so forth.
 - mythology (I would prefer to define this as “the truth about reality told in the form of *Story*”): Present in all religious traditions and dominant in non-literate traditions (many native traditions), this “telling of stories” is the way in which the community reflects on the meaning of Sacred reality and its significance for life, the world and the community. Examples can range from the Genesis account of the creation of the world and the biography of the Buddha to Native creation myths (the “dream time” of the Australian Aborigines, emergence myths of Native Americans, etc.).
2. Religious experience is always expressed in **ACTION**. Religious folks do something as a result of their encounter with the Sacred. This is manifest in two major ways in religious traditions.

- ethics: folks behave differently as a result of their religious experience (the Ten Commandments, the Christian law of charity, the Buddhist “Five Precepts,” Native customs and traditions, the Confucian code, etc.).
 - ritual (what I would prefer to call “religious symbolic action”): religious communities “act out” and “dramatize” their experience of the Sacred in highly complex and symbolically dense ritual activities. Some examples could include the Roman Catholic Mass, the Jewish Seder, Islamic Pilgrimage to Mecca, Buddhist recitations of Sutras and mantras, Native initiation rituals, universal rituals surrounding birth, marriage, puberty, and death. These actions are extremely dense since they involve the community’s response to the Sacred.
3. Religious experience is always expressed in **COMMUNITY**. When religious folks experience the Sacred they always gather into communities. The nature and form of these communities is determined by the nature and form of the experience of the Sacred. This has two major implications for the nature of community in human experience.
- Religious experience of the Sacred gives rise to various forms of religious communities. Examples include Christian churches or Church, the Buddhist sangha (the universal Buddhist community), the Jewish family, the Chinese extended family, the Hindu caste system, the “tribal” identity of Native Peoples, and so forth.
 - Religious experience always has a social dimension or, in other words, implications for the organization of the larger society. I often put this to my students in a theistic context by saying “if God is God, how should the world be?” Religious traditions have always seen the larger social community in light of their experience of the Sacred. Some examples from history include Christendom (the Middle Ages), Islamic societies today, India and the caste system, Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka and Thailand, tensions between Native societies and nations (tribal sovereignty in the US, First Nations in Canada, etc.), the state of Israel and so forth. Examples abound of the interactions of religious traditions and the societies which encompass them.
4. Religious experience is always expressed through **the religious imagination**, that is, imaginatively. Human beings gather together the various elements of their experience and imaginatively recombine them in order to express their experience of Sacred Reality. Often this takes the forms of what are called in Western culture “the Arts.” Thus painting, sculpture, music and, especially performance (in ritual, for example) can be profound expressions of a tradition’s experience of the Sacred. The religious imagination can also play a decisive role in the shaping of society and culture

THE CONTEXT FOR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The pathway between religious experience and the human historical and cultural situation goes both ways. Not only does religious experience have important shaping influences on human culture and history (for examples see the history of any civilization or society), but human economic, political, social, psychological, and cultural experience shapes religious experience. Religious experience always happens in a fully human context. What Christians think about Jesus (or, for that matter, Buddhists about the Buddha or the Dharma) is partially dependent on who they are, where they are, and when they are. To fully understand any religious experience demands an analysis of all of its contexts. This also accounts for the divergencies within any religious tradition and among the practitioners of these traditions.

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