Stepping Back and Looking Ahead: Twelve Years of Studying Religious Contact at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg Bochum

Dynamics in the History of Religions

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Stepping Back and Looking Ahead: Twelve Years of Studying Religious Contact at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg Bochum

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CHAPTER 5

Religious Experience: A Genealogy of the Concept and Future Prospects of Its Scholarly Use

Jens Schlieter

Abstract

The contribution discusses the genealogy of the concept of "religious experience" and its transformation into a category for the systematic study of religion/s from a historical perspective. As experience is necessarily subjective, the problem arises for the experiencing individual of how to know that a certain experience is "religious" – an encounter with the "divine," or the "real." Individuals, I argue, solve the problem by referring to similar experiences that they had earlier in life. Moreover, they emphasize that the experience can be termed religious by its post-experiential transformative effects. Accordingly, a scholarly reconstruction of "religious experience" should pay attention to these autobiographical frames.

Keywords

religious experience – religious autobiography – subjective experience – conceptual history

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> It is needless to remind you once more of the admirable congruity of Protestant theology with the structure of the mind as shown in such experiences.
>
> (T)he best fruits of religious experience are the best things that history has to show.
>
> WILLIAM JAMES

• •
•

1 Introduction

"Religious experience" has often been declared to be simple, universal, and unmediated. Religious experience has been said to be essential for every religion. And, as a concept, religious experience can be defined as experiences that turn out to be "religious" – especially due to their specific effects on the individual. Interestingly, very few studies so far were concerned with the conceptual history of this compound – "religious experience" – and the question of how it became the central, although still often disputed, category it is now. In this contribution, I will try to achieve two goals: First, I will aim to show that the concept "religious experience" became a central category for the study of religion by fusing two different meanings, namely, religious experience (1) as a kind of *sense perception* (*of a sacred object or a numinous situation*) and (2) as an *extremely meaningful, often life-changing event* (*conversion, epiphany, rupture, etc.*). Secondly, I will argue that to uncover both meanings one must necessarily refer to accounts from a first-person perspective. Experiences are accessible through narratives of experiences, or by way of one's own experiences. Thus, experiences viewed as religious (especially in the meaning of 2 above) are always part of a personal biography and can only be fully understood in their given context of the individual's autobiographical narrative. Religious experience does not appear out of nowhere. I will argue that to include the full biography of a person, and especially religious socialization in childhood and youth, is key. Dealing with "religious experience," I hold, one must correlate the experiencer's report and the experiencer's biography, because the latter is the indispensable background for resolving shortcomings of the first-person perspective. It is a methodological necessity. Secondly, I will try to show how from the second half the nineteenth century onwards, various scholars declared emphatically "religious experience" to be the core and essence of religion, and thus also of all religions that may with full legitimacy be called a "religion." In consequence, respective scholars were of the opinion that in order to grasp the full meaning of a certain religious tradition or individual religiosity, respectively, one had to direct one's attention to exactly this "religious experience" forming the original root of all other expressions of religion/s (teachings, dogmas, texts, rituals, communities, and even architecture).

In sum: How could the concept of "religious experience" emerge in such a way that it is primarily seen as a distinct event, either a kind of *sense perception of the sacred* or a distinct experience of *personal and/or epistemic transformation* becoming the guiding model? And secondly, which semantic background of "religious," "religion," and "religions" enabled this use of religious experience as a category? As a first step, I will discuss how semantic shifts in both

elements, "religious" (religion/s) and "experience," made it possible to speak of "religious experience" in this new meaning. How could that happen? The most important historical factors, I will argue with extant studies, were (a) the emergence of confessional *autobiographies*, (b) the Protestant emphasis of a second spiritual *conversion*, (c) *empiricist philosophies* and *scientific experimentalism*, and, in combination with the factors mentioned, the all-pervasive, (d) emerging culture of the *individualist self*.

2 Part One: Towards A Genealogy of the Concept "Religious Experience"

The concept of "religious experience," an integral part of the academic study of religion for more than 150 years, can be considered as one of the discipline's most disputed terms. Combining two epistemically challenging concepts – religion and experience – it has most often been discussed in its (often disputed) value to describe the origin, core, or the authentic practice of more complex religions and their historical founders. As is well known, a prominent tradition of philosophers and scholars of religion considers an unmediated, simple, deep, true, but ineffable "mystical experience" as the "Perennial core" in authentic religious experiences. This uniform experience, however, shines through a variety of culturally clouded expressions or articulates itself in conceptual "symbols," adherents hold, so that they call for intensive efforts to uncover the experience in the flower bucket of very heterogeneous witness reports. Against this claim by "Perennialists" (for example, William James, Mircea Eliade, W.T. Stace, or Robert K. Forman), Constructivists (as, for example, Wayne Proudfoot, Steven Katz, or Robert H. Sharf) argued that experiences are culturally framed and expressed in a certain language.[1] Thus, such experiences can only be studied through their reports.

One of the most prominent critics of the scholarly use of the concept "religious experience," Robert H. Sharf, identifies as the backbone of James's, Otto's, Huxley's, or Stace's conceptualization exactly this assumption that "mystical experience," the more enthusiastic and less denominational twin concept of "religious experience," consists of an unmediated and direct encounter of the absolute or divine. Thus, mystical experience forms the transcultural core of

1 William James, Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature (London: Routledge, 2004 [1902]); Wayne Proudfoot, Religious Experience (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), Robert H. Sharf, "Experience," in Religious Experience: A Reader, eds. L. Durrough Smith, C. Martin and R. McCutcheon (Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing, 2012).

"religious experiences" more broadly. In other words, *authentic* religious experiences are mystical in their core, and they will be articulated according to their specific backgrounds – Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, etc. Regarding this Perennialist view, Robert Sharf, Burkhard Gladigow, and others critically remark that scholars advocating a mystical "core experience" often simply take their *own* experiences and their resulting *normative* views of such experiences as a valid criterion for identifying the intersubjective and transhistorical core. Steven M. Wasserstrom correctly observes that such "claims for a 'deep' understanding of 'religious experience'" are "simply circular." They "appoint a psychic event familiar to the scholar to serve as exalted object of inquiry; this object is recognizable when encountered because it looks like what the scholar already recognizes: his own original 'experience.'"[2] More radical, Sharf even opted to entirely dismiss the concept of religious experience. Referring to Katz and his view that mystical experience is not "unmediated," Sharf concludes that "mystical experience" is "wholly shaped by a mystic's cultural environment, personal history, doctrinal commitments, religious training, expectations, aspirations, and so on."[3] One should remark that "personal history" is mentioned here; however, as said, the individual's own biography as indispensable factor *for them* to identify experiences as religious is rarely discussed. Certainly, there are some studies on religious virtuosi, mystics, or religious practitioners in which biographical circumstances, socialization, family, friends, or existential turns, sufferings, etc., figure as elements for understanding (or even "explaining") religious experiences. One can consult a mass of literature trying to explain "visionary" or "mystical experiences" with reference to neurological disorders, or childhood traumata. Yet, there is more to the individual autobiographical frame than simply offering an "etiology" or psychological-medical "explanation" for certain religious experiences. It is the autobiographical first-person view on one's own life in its entirety which allows a person to speak of any meaningful "experiences" as specifically "*religious*," and it is this fact that I would like to acknowledge and emphasize from a third-person view, too.

In regard to the concept itself, Sharf identifies two distinct usages, as he says, of (religious) "experience": (1) as "participate in," "live through," and (2) as "directly perceive," "observe," "be aware of," "be conscious of."[4] Sharf argues, that the latter is problematic if conceptualized as immaterial substance, given

2 Steven M. Wasserstrom, "The Medium of the Divine," in Experientia. 1. Inquiry into Religious Experience in Early Judaism and Early Christianity, eds. Frances, Flannery, et al. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 76.

3 Sharf, "Experience," 98.

4 See Robert H. Sharf, "Experience," in Critical Terms for Religious Studies, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94–116, 104.

in an immediate, non-mediated way. Sharf argues in a Wittgensteinian way that in this case it cannot be construed as denoting a referent, and thus, it cannot be related "to determinative phenomenal events at all" to be studied by scholars – instead, legitimate objects of study are "texts, narratives, performances."[5]

However, while Perennialists and Constructivists come to very different results regarding the nature, status and function of religious experience, and the respective methodology, they nevertheless seem to agree in one central respect: Religious experience is predominantly seen as a *distinct*, *autonomous*, and mostly *extremely meaningful momentary event*.[6] Such a conceptualization follows the experiencer's retrospective account that "the experience" and its cognitive or emotional content has had a clear beginning and end. It allows to speak of an experience of "something" that is observed or perceived, even if this something is "not a sensory object."[7]

Many studies aimed to offer a complete account of elements that belong to a generalized model of such a distinct and autonomous *religious* experience. Yet, they often leave a crucial question unconsidered – or declare it to be unanswerable –, namely: What do specific individuals in certain cultural contexts intend to say or convey when they say that an *experience* of a certain kind has *happened to them* – an experience they consider to be *religious*? What is it exactly what they want to evoke in others by choosing these terms, "religious" and "experience"? In their attempt to establish a generalized model of "religious experience," Perennialists and most Constructivists do not engage with particularities of individual cases. Isolating the reported experiences, studies of religious experience skip over factors such as the idiosyncratic language use, socialization into a religious worldview and other biographical specifics. Usually, scholars only mention in passing the full autobiographical narrative that the individual offer themselves to convey why a certain singular religious experience was meaningful. Instead, scholars of religious experience follow by default emic discourse of *virtuosi* who identify isolated and extremely meaningful experiential events as their central "religious" or "mystical experience": such as a conversion, a naked and unmediated encounter with the real, or a disclosure of the sacred, of God – or any other form of enlightenment, awakening, and so forth. In line with the points just mentioned, few studies so far were

5 Sharf, "Experience," 110–111.

6 In their introduction to the recent Cambridge Companion to Religious Experience, Paul K. Moser and Chad Meister define "religious experience" as involving "overarching meaning for a person's life." (Paul K. Moser, Chad Meister, The Cambridge Companion to Religious Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020)), 2.

7 Moser and Meister, Companion to Religious Experience, 1.

interested in the genealogy of the term "religious experience" itself, which is why I will proceed with this task first.

2.1 *A Short Genealogy of the Concept "Religious Experience"*

A more elaborate genealogy of the terms "religious experience," and of the somewhat older "experience of religion" should include the semantic field on alternative attributes of "experience" (e.g., "visionary," or "mystical," or "inward," instead of religious), and alternative objects in the position of "religion" (e.g., "God") – see Fig. 5.1. Here, however, I will only outline the basic conceptual history of "religious experience."

Actually, the concept of "religious experience" possesses an inbuild, or inherent, *comparative* perspective. By declaring experience to be "religious," one articulates a quality that is assumed to be characteristic for "religion," and, thus, essential for (at least certain adherents) of religious traditions. This, of course, depends on how the qualifying adjective "religious" is used. I will return to this question below. Reviewing the history of the use of the concept "religious experience," one might not be wrong in assuming that co-evolving with its use, the scholarly interest in such experiences as characteristic for "religion" was raised, too. From the beginning, in the initial use of the concept,

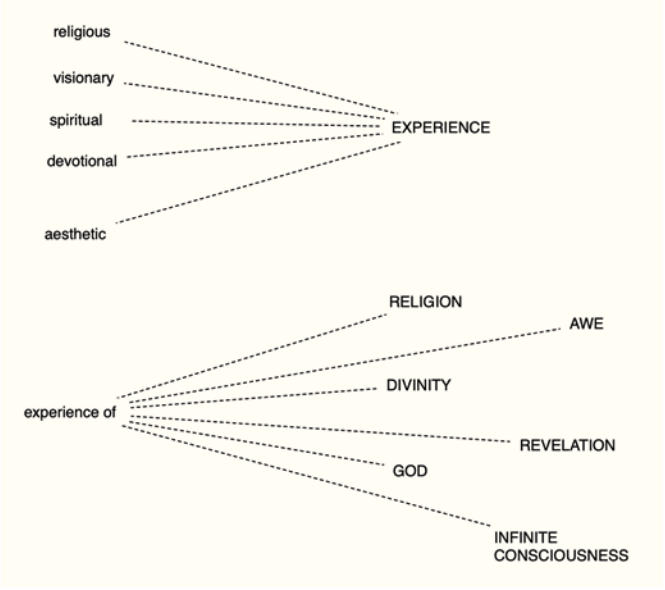

FIGURE 5.1 Elements of the semantic field of "religious experience" and "experience of religion" (characteristic examples)
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religionists and theologians were part of the process to declare "experience" to be a source of authentic religion, and a criterion of religious truth – a relationship that was later adopted by scholars of religion, too.

2.2 *Building Blocks of "Religious Experience": Historical Changes of Conceptualizing "Experience"*

In her impressive study on the modern usage of the English key term "experience," Anna Wierzbicka presented the following field of meaning, distinguishing the following forms: ***experience$_1$***: which is the model of **past experience**, as **accumulated knowledge** by either a doer or an undergoer (both forms of Shakespearean use), or an observer. It usually requires that such knowledge has been gathered with difficulties, laborious repetition, and over years, that is, it requires that one has lived long (*un homme d'expérience*). Moreover, it is positive to have such experience – it is knowledge, if not wisdom.[8] This form is contrasted with an ***experience$_{1A}$***: still connected to knowledge, but now as a "doer's specialized skill," or deliberate practice. While many elements are the same (e.g., this experience can be observed and judged by outsiders), two new meanings emerge: Now, there is a subject, or "doer," who is conscious of the experience. And second, experience is no longer positive, but more or less neutral. Next, an ***experience$_2$*** combines the earlier meaning of "accumulated knowledge" with an "undergoer," and so does an ***experience$_3$***, with an "observer."[9] These latter meanings seem to emerge during the 17th century. In these meanings, the word makes its appearance also as a plural (experiences). Another transformation – ***experience$_4$*** – took place with the newly established trait of an "experiencer's current, subjective awareness-cum-feeling": "The experiencers know, above all, how they felt."[10] Experience can now be an episodic event, and the experiencer knows that something is happening to her now, subjectively. A prominent point here is the fact that the person's knowledge only emerges from this experience – there is no accumulation, but a specific memory for the same,

8 This form can be found in English language use increasingly from the 16th century onwards till today. Shakespeare's use of "experience," Wierzbicka argues, shows exactly these meanings, so that one may call it for the matter of simplicity "Shakespearean experience" – see Anna Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense: The Hidden Cultural Legacy of English (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 36. As such, it is an objectively accessible and verifiable, accumulated knowledge, gained by age, travel, and so forth. I may add here that the same shift can be demonstrated for German "Erfahrung."

9 Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 37–38. One can add that this concept, experience3, is also to be found in Montaigne, with a focus on inner observation – see Martin Jay, Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 78.

10 Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 40.

reoccurring experience. "Since the person is taking notice of what is happening, that person knows what it is like. As a result, this person can subsequently remember what it was like and thus has certain qualitative (experiential) knowledge."[11] In this use, one can speak of one's "own experience" not relying on others (cf. Robert Boyle in his *Christian Virtuoso*[12]). Finally, she identifies an ***experience***$_5$ which evolved with the "empiricist individualism" (Shapin) of the 17th century. In this use, a strong link to "natural/experimental philosophy" and its new view of empirical knowledge, perception, and experimentalism is prominent. Now, experience appears in the meaning of "an observer's repeated and replicable current perception."[13]

This latter meaning, Wierzbicka argues, is present in the work of John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, first published in 1690. In strong contrast to accumulative, objective Shakespearean experience, Lockean experience is sensory based (especially, to see and to feel), subjective but replicable by others, and repeatable as single events or perceptions. Significantly, Locke almost exchangeably uses "experiment," as in this example, where "experience" is explained with 'testing/experimenting': "*Experience here must teach me*, what reason cannot: and 'tis by trying alone, that I can certainly know, what other qualities co-exist with those of my complex idea, v.g. whether that *yellow* [...] body I call *gold*, be *malleable*, or no."[14] While "experience" used as mass noun is still the default use by Locke, referring to an identical, repeated observation, one can witness an increase of the use of "experience" as a count noun. In this sense, individual, often unusual episodes can be termed "experience(s)," for example, a "weird experience," a "mystical" or "frightening experience." Indeed, at the turn to the 17th century, to speak of "experiences" in the plural becomes common, which is, most important for our context, also the case with the increasing use of religion as a count noun (*x as a religion*; *religions*), reflecting the post-1700 century positive connotation of religious tolerance and the acceptance of a religious plurality.[15]

In sum, according to Wierzbicka's review, the dominant pre-seventeenth century meaning did comprise especially the accumulation of knowledge over a longer period, and experience(s) as objective facts about persons ("being

11 Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 41.

12 Quoted in Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 50.

13 Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 51.

14 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. (London: Penguin, 1997), 569.

15 Henri Krop, "From Religion in the Singular to Religions in the Plural: 1700, a Faultline in the Conceptual History of Religion," in *Enlightened Religion: From Confessional Churches to Polite Piety in the Dutch Republic*, eds. Joke Spaans and Jetze Touber (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2019), 21–59.

experienced"). But then major changes emerged. While the older meanings were still in use, "experience" became identifiable as "an experience" – that is, *countable*, and no longer only *accumulative*. Moreover, it became *introspective*, subjective, and therefore connected to an awareness not to "be gleaned from the outside."[16] Experiences, now in the plural, can be marvelous, frightening, and are registered by the "experiencer." Often conceptualized as "empirical," it can be remembered in its unique value. This group of usages can be defined in which experience is **current experience**, and **sensory-like**, which is either a perception, or a series of perceptions, or record of perception, and may refer to an experiencer's "limited but reliable knowledge of a place and time."[17] Significantly, it came along with the rise of the verb "to experience." In addition, the form "x had a y experience" became common, in which "y" can mean, for example, alarming, distressing, disturbing, exciting, horrifying, painful, or upsetting. Exactly this change in use of experience as subjective awareness, provides, I hold, the essential background of the new term "religious *experience*." It may not be wrong to even think that the use in religious contexts was paramount for the new use of the term "experience" as such. Probably, it was primarily the meaning in which Protestants speak of the "experience of conversion," or one's own and individual experience of God's grace, and the like, which effectuated the semantic change. Before I can reflect on the emergence of "religious experience" as a scholarly category, however, it is necessary to review also the changes in the term "religious" that happened at the same time.

2.3 *Historical Changes of Conceptualizing "Religious/Religion"*

In the 17th and 18th century, the term "religious experience" more properly occurs to be rare. Almost always, it denotes "Christian experience," or "experience of Christ," and this often in a Protestant confessional perspective. Typical contexts are, for example, the following: "[… H]ow can a suitable practice be supported, or even exist, without experience? And what sort of religious experience must that be, which is not founded on a gracious knowledge of divine truth?"[18] The story of the English language concept of religious experience "from Fox and Bunyan through Jonathan Edwards and Wesley to William James and then to the present day," Wierzbicka says, deserves a detailed study.[19] Such a work would certainly be enlightening.

16 Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 39.
17 Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 31.
18 T. Chapman, "Self-Religion Dangerous," The Evangelical Magazine 3 (1795): 329–332, 331.
19 Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 67.

An even more complex situation, however, arises if one includes "spiritual experiences" as part of the conceptual history of "religious experience." Although emerging already in medieval sources, "spiritual experience" becomes a prominent concept in Protestant conversion narratives, combining "an intense moment of spiritual awareness, a recitation of promises taken from scripture, followed by a list of proofs of conversion."[20] As such, Protestant conversion narratives follow influential literary narratives such as John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), or *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). "Spiritual experiences" were disseminated in anthologies such as Vavasor Powel's *Spirituall Experiences of Sundry Beleevers* (1653), collected by nonconformist English preachers and publishers. Such testimonies of battles against doubt and sin were seen as evidence for God's grace.[21] While these Christian "experiences" ("spiritual," i.e., workings of the Holy Spirit) were of utmost importance to preachers and believers, the modern use of "religious experience," which denotes one and the same experience in a variety of *religions* could not yet become prominent. Christianity being the dominant and often exclusively *true religion*, other religions were not yet seen as expressing similar (or the same) "experience." Thus, next to an underlying religious tolerance, a semantic shift had to be made that combined mass noun and count noun aspects of religion. Certainly, the plural "religions" (Latin *religiones*) has been in use for long time.[22] Yet, it appears plausible to assume that the reflected use of "religions," as a more neutral category referring to a collective category of similar phenomena with doctrinal, ethical, historical, cultural, and social aspects, started only in the seventeenth century.[23] An essential fundament for this new use had been the idea of a positive tolerance, in which Christianity became disentangled from being the exclusive expression of God, truth, or the normative socio-political order. The colonial encounter with non-European cultures, and the Enlightenment thinkers' newly developed extra-religious, or even non-religious, point of view on religion and religions were essential to

20 Abigail Shinn, Conversion Narratives in Early Modern England: Tales of Turning (Cham: Springer/Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 11.

21 D. Bruce Hindmarsh, The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 45; Sarah Rivett, The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

22 See the studies by Ernst Feil, 1986–2001; cf. Guy G. Stroumsa, A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 27.

23 "Religions" in the plural made it already in 1614 in the title of Edward Brerewood's work Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages and Religions through the Chief Parts of the World, classifying religions as those four: idolatry, "mahumetanism," Judaism, and Christianity. (Stroumsa, A New Science, 31.)

this achievement. It did not only spread the plural use – actually, "religions" were discovered as objects of comparative scholarly study.[24] Alexander Ross's work *Pansebeia, or, A View of all Religions in the World* (1653) treated the known "religions" quite exhaustively, yet not with respective "experiences," but rites, sacrifices, ceremonies, etc. With the Enlightenment ideas of a unity in humankind, tolerance, and of the desirable social functions of civil religion, it became increasingly plausible to ask for an essence in religions that might be true in all, even if present in different degrees.

But how can the general shift in the seventeenth century, that undoubtedly occurred, be explained? Wierzbicka points to philosophers such as Locke, emphasizing the moment of sense experience and introspection. Only occasionally, she mentions the correlated concept of "(to) experiment." It offers, I will argue, an important clue for understanding the new shift in meaning.[25] Obviously, the intentional search for testing experiences as sense perceptions has a lot in common with the scientific spirit that developed experimentation as a research strategy. One may only reflect on these lines in a theological work around 1700: "*Inward Experimental Religion* is perceived by the Sense of them that have it, and cannot be so clearly demonstrated by Words. Who can see a Taste? […]. And Doctrinal Professors, who owe their Religion to Tradition and Education […] cannot understand and believe what the Saints really enjoy. […] Because many are deceived with a false Light, and pleased with a Delusion, does it follow that those who have vital *Experience of Religion*, are deceived?"[26] (Italics mine). Indeed, already Kathleen Lynch pointed out how the evidential quality of "experience" in scientific experimentalism has been invoked in

24 Krop, "Religion in the Singular"; Stroumsa, A New Science.

25 Cf. Wierzbicka, Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 44–5, 53, 60. She observes, for example, that the retrospective perspective on experience did not correspond well with the new view that emphasized current (sense) experience as a source of knowledge, established by Francis Bacon and adepts of "experimental philosophy," that is, with the emergence of the scientific culture of experimentation: "Indeed, from the point of view of the seventeenth-century experimental science, this is what matters most: a particular sense of experience, replicable and repeated by others." In John Locke or Robert Boyle, too, she finds examples in which the authors present mental and bodily experiments with experience. In other words, they "did certain things to find out what happens under such circumstances" (49) – a famous example is the status of afterimages that appear after staring in the sun, discussed by Locke, Newton and others. (Wierzbicka Experience, Evidence, and Sense, 45, cf. 46, 49).

26 Preface, unnumbered, by a friend of the author, in Sir David Hamilton, The private Christian's witness for Christianity to the notional and erroneous apprehensions of the Arminian, Socinian, and Deist of the age (…). (Printed for Thomas Cockerill, 1697).

Protestant autobiographies of the seventeenth century.[27] Rivett, too, emphasized the verification of spiritual experiences by witnessing visible changes, e.g., as a criterion in Thomas Shepard's collection of conversion testimonies (1641, 1649).[28] A more encompassing review would therefore also be in need to include the history of the concept "experimental religion." I may only finally point to Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) here, who uses in *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746) the terms "religious affections," and "Christian experience(s)" thereof.[29] The latter is obviously again understood as a kind of "experimental philosophy," namely, to *test* Christian beliefs as experience: "This is properly Christian experience, wherein the saints have opportunity to see, by actual experience and trial, whether they have a heart to do the will of God […]. As this called experimental philosophy, which brings opinions and notions to test of the fact, so it is properly called experimental religion, which brings religious affections and intentions to the test of fact."[30]

There would be much to say on the paradigm shift in the understanding of experimentation that evolved between the 16th and 18th century and strongly affected the discourse on "religious experiences." The historian of science Peter Dear points out that in earlier neo-Aristotelian "natural philosophy," experiments served the purpose to illustrate a common experience of nature.[31] In the 17th century, however, a new understanding of experimentation emerged. Now, specific propositions were in the center of experimentation, conveyed and justified by the experimenters through specific reports of "event experiments."[32] The unique *ordo* of nature was no longer taken for granted but irritated by anomalies of some single and crucial experiments. Therefore, it is no longer "experience" – as a summative account, or in the meaning of a mass noun – that serves as the unshaken foundation of experimental science, but

27 Cf. Kathleen Lynch, Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 173–178.

28 Rivett, The Science of the Soul, 104.

29 See Jonathan Edwards, A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections, in Three Parts (Philadelphia: James Crissy, 1746 [1821]), 106, 287.

30 Edwards, Treatise Concerning Religious Affections, 421.

31 He notes: "An 'experience' in the Aristotelian sense was a statement of how things happen in nature, rather than a statement of how something had happened on a particular occasion" (Peter Dear, Discipline & Experience: The Mathematical Way in the Scientific Revolution (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), cf. 125). Experiments, for the neo-Aristotelian tradition, had their role in illustrating or "manifesting" nature. Thus, "experiments" could demonstrate a general "experience" of how things happen in nature, and this experience could be transformed in universal statements or propositions ("heavy bodies fall").

32 Dear, Discipline & Experience, 15.

"experimental experience" in form of situational, specific reports of observable historical "events," such as: 'On this day with a certain humidity, a prism broke up white light into these spectral colors.' Although there was still some way to go from the 17th century to the modern hypothetico-deductive view of experimentation, "experience" in the latter took a different position within the whole experimental procedure, as has been aptly summarized by Dear: Moderns "place experience, at least as regards its formal justificatory role, at the *end* of a logical structure of deduction from an initial hypothesis: the hypothesis yields conclusions regarding observable behavior in the world, and experiment or observation then steps in to confirm or falsify these prediction."[33] In the 17th century, the focus slowly shifted towards novelty of experimental experiences, even if deduction from principles remained central. The emerging idea of novelty, combined with scientific curiosity as a self-sufficient goal, broadened the focus to now include the extraordinary, the unusual, the anomalous. This, in turn, was of central importance to self-experimentation as becoming prominent in romanticism. Romanticism, finally, is an important background for the emergence of the concept of a "religious experience of nature."

So, what to deduce from Wierzbicka's apt observations on "experience" in regard to the configurative phase of the use of "religious experience"? I will review her genealogy of "experience" and will combine it with the denominator "religious" to distinguish certain *possible* uses as a preliminary for our analysis of *real* uses. Thus, we get, first, religious ***experience***$_{1}$ – in the sense of positive, objective-observable *accumulated* (*past*) *knowledge*. I did not encounter examples of such a use, but texts speak of an "***experience*** of religion," meaning the specific "experience" of Christianity. The same holds true for ***religious experience***$_{2/3}$, which seems absent, too. Moving on to a hypothetical ***religious experience***$_{4}$ – the experiencer's subjective awareness-cum-feeling, including "experiencing" current episodic events as religious. It is in this 17th century meaning that the term "religious experience" emerged. If I am not mistaken, it is predominantly the meaning of an 'experience of Christ in one's own heart' which is of relevance here. Finally, ***religious experience***$_{5}$ – Lockean experience of an observer's repeated and replicable current perception. It seems that, for example, Asprem and Taves's concept of a religious experience as "event cognition," or Tanya Luhrmann's "inner sense cultivation," reflect a use of the term that builds both on ***experience***$_{4}$ and ***experience***$_{5}$. It is this use that was popularized by William James, whose title *The Varieties of Religious Experience* reflects both the mass noun and count noun perspective.

33 Dear, Discipline & Experience, 45.

2.4 *The Final Emergence of "Religious Experience" as Concept and Category*

The idea of one, singular "religion" (mass noun) *experienced* in almost all "religions" (count noun) seems to be the achievement of Friedrich D. Schleiermacher. Indeed, many follow Wayne Proudfoot and other scholars in tracing the roots of the modern meaning of the concept of "religious experience" to Schleiermacher's *Reden über die Religion*.[34] Proudfoot argues that for Schleiermacher, it formed part of his attempt to justify religious belief beyond metaphysics disenchanted by Kant, Hume, and Descartes.[35] The "turn to religious experience," Proudfoot says, "was motivated in large measure by an interest in freeing religious doctrine [...] from dependence on metaphysical beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions." According to this interpretation, it was Schleiermacher who first emphasized religious experience, pitting it against devalued metaphysics, morality, belief, or ritual practice. Interestingly, however, Schleiermacher himself did not use the concept "religious experience" (religiöse Erfahrung) but qualifies "experience" with other terms (e.g., internal and unmediated experience, "innere/unmittelbare Erfahrung," *Reden*, 2).[36] Nevertheless, instead of "experiences," he depicts religion as "Gefühl" (feeling), "sinnliche Anschauung" (sense perception), and even as "Geschmack" (taste). Religion, in sum, appears as a feeling of the infinite, a sense, a taste, a consciousness, etc.[37] The adjective "religious," in contrast, modifies for example the nouns "feelings, meaning/sense, views" (Gefühl/e, Anschauung/en, Sinn, Ansichten). Significantly, Schleiermacher also used the plural "religions," as well as "positive religions" ("positive Religionen") – obviously, it is the idea of the mass noun *religion* that governs his approach to *religions*. You should discover, he says, "(the) religion in the religions" ("in den Religionen sollt Ihr die Religion entdecken,"[38]). But still, Christianity hovers as *the* true religion in a kind of higher potency above all other "religions." "Religion," as essence, is understood by Schleiermacher as a kind of self-manifesting substance, a living

34 Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher, Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, [1799] 1958).

35 Jay, Songs of Experience, 78–130; Proudfoot, Religious Experience, xiii.

36 "Da hat der eine Anschauungen der Welt und Formeln [...], und der andere hat Gefühle und innere Erfahrungen, wodurch er sie dokumentiert. Jener flicht seine Formeln übereinander, und dieser webt eine Heilsordnung aus seinen Erfahrungen," says Schleiermacher: "So die Religion; bei den unmittelbaren Erfahrungen vom Dasein und Handeln des Universums, bei den einzelnen Anschauungen und Gefühlen bleibt sie stehen." (Schleiermacher, Über die Religion, 41–2, 32).

37 See Proudfoot, Religious Experience, 2–3; 10–26.

38 Schleiermacher, Über die Religion, 131, cf. 134.

spirit, in all "positive religions."[39] Christianity enlightens with the "sacred torch of one's own experience" the "bedeviled heart" of "bad religion." Schleiermacher directed his apology of religion as feeling, emotion, and visionary apperception primarily against dogmatic metaphysics, against the identification of religion and ethics, and against secular criticism. Interestingly, however, his emphasis of religion as perceived by senses, as a taste for the infinite reflects to a certain extent the seventeenth-eighteenth century shift to "experiences" as testable, observable, repeatable events. While Schleiermacher does not speak of "religious experience" *strictu sensu*, he is indeed probably the most decisive protagonist preparing the ground for the later establishment of "religious experience" ("religiöse Erfahrung") as a technical category.

As mentioned, to our disadvantage, no study so far covers the development of the concept "religious experience" from 1800 to the present. In the English language, William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is certainly the work which made the term "religious experience" famous. But where did it become the technical category, to be applied to various different religions? James and others at the end of the 19th century, e.g., the psychologist of religion Edwin Starbuck used it still as a term for the "experience" of Protestant conversion, but also as a category applying to all religion/s.[40] Conversion, however, was the blueprint for James's use of "religious experience," yet, slowly opening up to other "mystical states of consciousness."[41] One can easily see that most accounts of the beginning of the 19th century speak of religious experience as Christian experience, even if they refer to "religious experiences" in their title.[42] Almost always the word remains undefined. Rare are comments such as by Edward Goulburn, who defines "religious experience" as naming "religious impressions made by various means upon our souls, the sentiments and reflections to which circumstances give

39 Schleiermacher, Über die Religion, 162.

40 In the years from 1897 onwards, cf. Christopher White, "A Measured Faith: Edwin Starbuck, William James, and the Scientific Reform of Religious Experience," Harvard Theological Review 101, no. 3–4 (2008): 431–45.

41 "One may say truly […] that personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness; so for us, who in these lectures are treating personal experience as the exclusive subject of our study, such states of consciousness ought to form the vital chapter from which the other chapters get their light" (James, Varieties, 294).

42 To name just few examples here: James Gough, "Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experiences, and Labours in the Gospel," ed. John Gough (High Wycombe, London: Orger, 1802); Andrew Preston Peabody, Religious Experience (Concord: NH: Head and Butters Monitor Press, 1834), or Thomas Cogswell Upham, The Life and Religious Experiences of Madame de la Mothe Guyon. In two Volumes (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1847, quoted in James, Varieties).

rise within us, the personal dealings which we conceive Almighty God to have had with us in Providence or in Grace."[43]

More important steps represent scholars sympathizing with Unitarian views such as the American preacher and writer Samuel Johnson (1822–1882). In a series of books under the title *Oriental Religions* he speaks, for example, of "religious experience" (in *India*, 1873, 697) but also of the "Buddhist experience," the "Chinese" and the "oriental experience," or the "human experience" as expressed in various religions. Still, Johnson implicitly reflects on the earlier exclusive meaning of "Christian experience" by saying: "The special origin and connection of these various forms of personal worship are of less importance to universal religion than the fact that they combine in Buddhism to cover all those great demands of popular religious experience which Christianity has claimed exclusive power and authority to meet" (Johnson 1877, 823). In German works, it seems that Wilhelm Dilthey is one of the first to use "religiöse Erfahrung/en" (religious experience/s) as a category applied to Christian, Islamic, and "Heathen" ("Heidentum") religions.[44] Nevertheless, in the 19th century, the dominant paradigm for "religious experience" is still the feature of Protestant conversion. For characterizing this core within the 19th century concept "religious experience," I will now turn to a necessary corollary of "conversion," namely, the emergence of conversion narratives, which are indispensable to describe "conversion," and thus, to grasp a key meaning of the concept of "religious experience."

2.5 *Conversion and the Dominant Focus on "Religious Experience" as Distinct Event*

Michael Mascuch has advanced the thesis that the capacity to produce a retrospective autobiographical narrative has been a model for and model of the modern individualist self. In conclusion, Mascuch says, that even though unintentionally, the "nonconformist biography veered sharply towards the precipice of modernity by constituting the voice of an individual authoritative subject."[45] It was the early Protestant authors who first criticized the implausibility and artificialness of the lives of the saints spelled out in hagiographies. Writing the emerging genre of spiritual autobiography, they made themselves liable to this new criterion of truth: namely, to attest of an "experience" of an

43 Edward Meyrick Goulburn, The Idle Word: Short Religious Essays upon the Gift of Speech and its Employment in Conversation, 2nd ed. (London: Rivingtons, 1864), 118.

44 Wilhelm Dilthey, Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften: Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte (Göttingen: V & R, [1883] 1990), 274–279.

45 Michael Mascuch, Origins of the Individualist Self: Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591–1791 (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1997), 116.

"awakening." This conversion is now narrated with the claim to give testimony for the inner process of transformation. Surely, it is still the grace of God and providence in the first place that makes it happen.[46] This is the primary agency. However, the "radicals" introduced new forms of testimony, of witnessing the actions of "the Truth," the inner "Light of Christ," and multiplied their message in an increasing production of printed books. Mascuch holds that in England, this capacity to produce autobiographies of "the experience" was achieved in the final decade of the 18th century. It is indeed a well-established fact that the practice of writing modern autobiographies was popularized in protestant cultures, even if the underlying question of how to define "autobiography" is far from being settled. The individualist self, Mascuch argues, considers himself and other persons as autonomous units, which lead to persons as producer and consumer "of stories about himself and other selves which place the self at the center of the system of relations, discursive or otherwise." Experience, moreover, is the word that radical circles use to "denote the personal sense of the '*Call* to *Christ*' or 'the *work* of *grace* upon [the] *heart*'."[47] However, the narratives of these experiences were not yet fully individual life stories but followed the narrative necessities of being identifiable testimonies, although the direction towards individuality was clear. John Newton (1725–1807), captain of a slave-trade ship who converted and became the famous author of the song "amazing grace," explained in regard to his conversion experience in his autobiography (1764): "We must not therefore make the experience of others, in all respects, a rule to ourselves, nor our own a rule to others […]. As to myself, every part of my case has been extraordinary."[48] In the 17th century collection by John Rogers, the autobiographical intention of attesting this central experience was classified (by side-notes in the text) in a threefold manner, answering

(1) when and where the person received "the Call,"
(2) how it happened, and
(3) which were the aftereffects of that call.[49]

Instead of the complex list of topoi in medieval hagiographic accounts of Saints – beginning with the parents, miraculous signs surrounding their birth and youth; the vocation, renunciation, peregrination, temptation, visions, etc. – this threefold scheme simplifies a complex life story to a point where it conforms to the most basic pattern of a conversion: the Call, the life before,

46 Cf. Burton's Certaine Qvestions and Answeres includes a chapter dealing with 'Experimental Evidences' (that is, experiences) for 'the work of Grace,' (cf. Shinn, Conversion Narratives, 81).

47 Mascuch, Origins, 21, 117.

48 Quoted in Hindmarsh, Evangelical Conversion Narrative, 269.

49 Cf. Mascuch, Origins, 118.

and its aftereffects. This is the basic pattern that will replace the summative account of experiences with the narration of "*The Experience*." In contrast, in earlier Christian hagiography one could see that in a line with the divine order of the world "the protagonist of a *vita* is already predestined to be a saint"[50] with various elements of sainthood, while in Anglican or Pietist biography, there is an increasing focus on this central experience of "grace." I would also like to stress the importance of the element (3) above, the "aftereffects" of the central experience of the "Call." This element – the effects by which this experience becomes a life-changing experience in the first place – forms a most central part of "the experience," even if it is usually argued to be a distinct observation of the experience and later changes in life. But this is not the case, as I will aim to show below.

Sarah Rivett has shown how also the Puritan testimony of faith called for narratives in which the biographers of their own conversion reports "struggled to respond to the central question of the Protestant Reformation: 'How do I know if I am saved?'"[51] The necessity to give an authentic report of the witnesses' awareness came along with something that may be called a pressure on creativity: "Repeating what had already been said risked producing a form with a deeply suspect content; a replicable experience was a dangerous one, for it meant that conversion could be faked or imagined without divine sanction."[52] The emergence of a genre of collections of individual narratives evidencing this central experience of grace, or, as one occasionally read, of an "experience of religion," or "spiritual experiences," helped to popularize these expectations on most intense "experiences" of conversion. Examples are the above mentioned *Spirituall Experiences, of Sundry Beleevers* (1653), or John Eliot and Thomas Mayhew's *Tears of Repentance* (1653). Rivett, who uses the term "religious experience" as a technical term here – even if the word does not yet show up in the more recent (19th century) meaning in 17th century sources – adds an interesting comment pertaining to the role of the evidential role of experimental: "No less than scientific experiment or empirical observation, the experience of grace had to be intelligible and recognizable to witnessing audiences."[53]

In sum: In this latest meaning the term "religious experiences," as a count noun, disguises the inseparable relation to the individual's own life lived – a

50 Ineke Van'T Spijker, "Impressed by Their Stamp: Hagiography and the Cultivation of the Self," in *Hagiography and the History of Latin Christendom, 500–1500*, ed. Samantha Kahn Herrick, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019), 194.

51 Rivett, The Science of the Soul, 4.

52 Rivett, The Science of the Soul, 31.

53 Rivett, The Science of the Soul, 31.

relation that was, though stylized, still present in the earlier centuries of conversion narratives. However, this dimension of presupposing a whole life lived for conceptualizing the religious experience of conversion has lost momentum over time. Instead, religious experiences are distinct, and repeatable. They are as natural as experiencing tastes, and as emotionally intense as "frightening experiences." Individuals argue that they have immediate access to their "experience," which was, in the Protestant configuration phase, guaranteed by a relating to God.

Although religious conversion and conversion narratives are comparatively well researched, the biographical and autobiographical setting of reports of religious experience/s are rarely objects of scholarly studies. Lacking is also a complete discursive history of the concept of religious experience. Both are noteworthy *lacunae*, given that "religious experience" holds such a central role in the discourse of, and on, religion. Obviously, the concept is used to legitimize insights, doctrines, emotions, and behavior from a religious point of view. Yet, as said, it is particularly central to claims that depart and end with such experience – for example, if religious experience is declared from William James and Joachim Wach onwards to be the transhistorical core of religions. The same function may serve the cognate experience declared to be "unmediated," "mystical," or "pure."

As has been highlighted, Methodism, Puritanism, Pietism, and various Protestant strands referred to conversions as "experiences." Thus, "religious experience" and a "religious (auto-)biography" should be seen as mutually supporting concepts. Given the shift towards ***experience***$_4$ and ***experience***$_5$, which allows to identify an "experience" as an isolated event of an "awareness-cum-feeling" that will have a lasting effect on the "post-experiential" life, a problem arises for the "experiencer" *themselves*. They will need criteria to identify this experience as being "religious." But with the inaccessibility of "experience," these criteria can only be formulated in respect to their own lives lived. As has been argued for in sociological contributions on conversion, conversion stories were taken as evidencing a substantial change in the "universe of discourse" (George H. Mead). Conversion, in this way, consists of a change in the "socially constructed frame of reference of self-evident assumptions about mankind and the world in which individuals structure their actions and *experience* them as purposeful"[54] (italics mine). There is substantial research on the qualitative aspect of such self-transformative experience in conversion

54 Ulrike Popp-Baier, "Narrating Embodied Aims: Self-transformation in Conversion Narratives – A Psychological Analysis," *Forum Qualitative Social Research* 2, no. 3 (http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs), 2.

narratives – for example, the change of self-concepts and narrative identity. Here, I would join those who argue that in many cases it is *the conversion narrative itself* that constitutes the self-transformation of the narrator and their subsequent, path-dependent change in self-ascriptions.[55] However, instead of taking the transformative "experience" as *the root of spiritual autobiographies* (and, often, as *real element of biographies*), I will argue below that it is essential to understand the narrative of spiritual autobiographies as an indispensable context for a central plot, the life-changing "religious experience." To repeat again what I see as the core of the "religious experiencer's reference problem": If it is true what Ludwig Wittgenstein and other philosophers have argued for – that there are no direct, accessible ways to compare the essence of one's own inner experiences with inner experiences of others except through verbal or written testimony – a question becomes pertinent: How do individuals proceed in evidencing the authenticity of their own experience(s) deemed "religious"?[56] It seems, I will argue below, that almost always, individuals narrating their life-changing religious experience refer to earlier cognate experiences they made while they were young. These experiences were made in the constitutive phase of religious socialization in childhood and youth, in a phase of emotionally intense imagination of religious worlds. These experiences, internalized, perhaps intermittently forgotten, are now revived and used to identify "*the* experience." Thus, on various levels, these earlier experiences are indispensable, and constitutive for the life-changing religious experience to emerge. Before I will finally try to outline how this understanding can be made fruitful for the understanding of religious experiences, I will turn to the opposite model of "religious experiences" as distinct "experiential events" – as has been advocated more recently.

3 Part Two: "Religious Experience" in Scholarly Use: Experiential Events and Autobiographical Accounts of Experiences

3.1 *The Dominant Focus on a Distinct Experiential Event as "Religious Experience"*

In the more recent study of religious experiences, the dominant focus has been on religious experiences as distinct events – interestingly, also in cases

55 See Popp-Baier, "Narrating Embodied Aims."

56 On the problems of a potential lack of veracity, or inauthenticity, more broadly, cf. Jens Schlieter, *How is it like to be Dead? Near-death Experiences, Christianity, and the Occult* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

in which individuals narrating or reporting their experiences underscored that the "life-changing" quality often consisted of a complex process comprising *not just one event*. Leo Tolstoy, for example, conveys in his autobiography *My Confession* (*Íspoved*, 1882, quoted in part by Moser and Meister in their recent handbook introduction on "religious experience") that he saw a powerful light shining within him.[57] He described this as returning to a "force" that had already guided him in childhood and youth. But neither was he able to say when the "experience" had started, nor, how it was accomplished.[58] Despite of many other such examples, there is still this dominant focus on a distinct, and often singular, event of a transformative religious experience. I will illustrate this paradigm of conceptualizing "religious experience" with just one – though prominent – recent approach, to namely, by Ann Taves.[59]In general, it is Taves' aim to describe the interpretive, attributional processes which come into play when certain experiences are understood as "religious." By which behavior, she asks, do people mark things as "special," and "set (them) apart" from things of the same category? This specialness (namely, the quality of being religious), she holds, can be attributed to virtually everything (things, persons, experiences, etc.).[60] Thus, she argues, the ontological question of whether there is an encounter with the "sacred," "holy" or "God" can remain open if one speaks of "things deemed religious," and, accordingly, of "experiences deemed religious."[61] Taves holds that even if some "might view the experience as (say) a hallucination," it is in many cases "the *feeling* of presence" which will be "attributed to the *actual* presence of an invisible agent"[62] (italics in orig.). Surely, the attributional framework leaves the ontological question open (see

57 See Moser and Meister, Companion to Religious Experience, 2; Leo Tolstoy, My Confession and What I Believe (London: Oxford University Press, 1920 [1882]).

58 See Moser and Meister, *Companion to Religious Experience*, 2–3; see Tolstoy, *My Confession*, 75.

59 Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

60 Taves follows Durkheim in assuming that a religious group may protect the "sacred" against profanation, "with prohibitions against selling, trading, mixing, or comparing it with ordinary things" (Taves, Religious Experience, 34). While this description fits to things, it seems at best metaphorical in the case of experiences. – Indeed, I would side here with Sharf's Wittgensteinian move, discussed above experiences (as objects of ascriptions) do not fall in the same category as things. While things exist without being "deemed special," experiences are only what they are by exactly being "special." In other words, the ascription process and the experiences cannot be disentangled, which becomes even more prominent if one leaves a model of experience governed by "sense perception" of objects or "objectifiable" feelings.

61 Taves, Religious Experience, 14.

62 Taves, Religious Experience, 41.

the abstinence from questions of authenticity),[63] but it seems clear that the cognitive metaphors of "set-apartness," and "special things" will only work if there is an identifiable basis to which qualities can be attributed.[64]

Seemingly, Taves does not consider the biographical setting of experience to be a prominent factor. The uses of the word "experience" listed in her approach, cover, she argues, four respects: "(1) specific experiences of something ('I experienced something' [...], or 'the experience was special'); (2) experience as a cumulative abstraction ('my experience suggests' [...]); and (3) types of experience, some more abstract and some more concrete ('religious experience' [...] or 'life experience')," and, finally, a "synonym for 'consciousness.'"[65] "Life experience," to emphasize, is not meant here in a biographical or autobiographical sense (auto-/biographies are not mentioned in Taves' study). Moreover, explaining that she will only treat the meanings of "experiences of something" and of "consciousness" as relevant, the auto-/biographical setting of experiences seems in those respects unimportant anyway. Already in this work, Taves describes experiences emerging in the context of an "original event," even though she underscores that only emic observers will be able to say if the "sensory experience" of the original event is "real or imagined."[66] Certainly, the ascription model defies any attempt to speak of a "religious experience" *sui generis*, which would be the assumption of Perennialist approaches. However, the concept of an "original event" (in emic discourse) informs also the etic observation: Taves argues for neurological correlatives that can in principle be observed, which rests on the assumption of a meaningful, distinct event. Equally, in her discussion of "anomalous events" and in the ascription classification, in terms of ontology her model is indirectly referential.[67] In general, for psychological theories of experience, this assumption of "events" is not problematic. However, as I argue here, if one assumes that there is a trans-individual class of events that are "religious experiences" (or "experiences deemed religious," for that matter), a referential model becomes a problem – and not, primarily, because it is problematic to account for a "religious" experience-event, but because it seems problematic to focus exclusively on such an "event" if at the same time the biographical and autobiographical frames of such reported experiences are left unconsidered. The decisive framework to construe religious experience "event-like" has again been emphasized in a more recent

63 Cf. Taves, Religious Experience, 158.
64 Taves, Religious Experience, 35.
65 Taves, Religious Experience, 57.
66 Cf. Taves, Religious Experience, 158.
67 Taves, Religious Experience, 39–45, 53–4, 69.

contribution by Taves together with Egil Asprem.[68] A feature of their elaborate model is to distinguish between such a distinct experiential "event" and the "event narrative." The latter implies an attempt to describe the event "publicly" (e.g., noting it down in a diary, or presenting it orally). In the case of reported "religious" experiences, however, one almost always deals with event narratives. This distinction seems helpful only if one argues that in experimental real-time settings there are "religious experiences" without any articulation, if not, untouched by internal inner articulation (the well-known "beyond language" feature of pure and "unmediated" experiences). Yet, of such an experience one may only know from a first-person perspective. This experimental setting, unfortunately, encounters various epistemic problems that shall not be discussed here. To turn to the question of how the "event (narrative)" is conceptualized as being part of a whole narrative autobiographical identity, I may once more state that this model does not offer much in this regard. Asprem and Taves discuss the Perennialist and the Constructivist model before finally adding their own, "Event Cognition," as the golden third option.[69] While the Perennialists presuppose an accessible, "universal core experience" encoded in narratives, the Constructivist will designate them as "experience narratives." Thus, Constructivists, Asprem and Taves argue, deny that there is any access to the experience, or the experiential event, itself – a radical option they consider unconvincing (as a side remark, I may add that the authors portray the Constructivist model as being based on "discourse" and "culture." There are no further subdivisions in "culture." For example, there is no explicit mention of other factors such as socialization and community). "Event Cognition," therefore, builds on experience narratives and "event models." The latter shall allow to construct a "working model" of the experience at hand. References to the "religious" aspect of experiences are astonishingly sparse and follow largely the Cognitive Science of Religion paradigm. Factors, that the event model will consider, include "real-time appraisals" of the unfolding (religious) experience, but also the impact of "prior knowledge." The latter is probably the most salient feature for the question pursued here. Asprem and Taves argue that "various forms of prior knowledge evolved and learned, event-schematic and referent-specific are tightly interwoven in real-time experience"[70] come into play. They invoke the example of 'seeing a ghost,' arguing that referent-specific knowledge that "a house is 'haunted' can trigger a ghost-seeing event schema,

68 Egil Asprem and Ann Taves, "Experience as Event: Event Cognition and the Study of (Religious) Experiences," *Religion, Brain, & Behaviour* 7, no. 1 (2017): 43–62.

69 See Table 2 in Asprem and Taves, "Experience as Event," 6.

70 Asprem and Taves, "Experience as Event," 8.

which will guide one's attention in certain ways. The script draws attention to particular perceptions or sensations [...] and triggers evolved inference systems such as agent detection."[71] Instead of evaluating aspects of biography, socialization, or narrative identity (though mentioned), they point out that narratives of "what had happened" can be delivered much later in life, or may change over time, which may help to distinguish an "initial spontaneous appraisal of the event"[72] from later forms of "reworked," or repetitively "retold" versions. A second, to a certain extent 'biographical' aspect that Asprem and Taves discuss is the effect of continuous, repetitive cultivation practices, or the question of "skill" (cf. 13). In other words, religious experiences as events can be the outcome of specific training. Interestingly, in this context, the authors neither mention asceticism or Asian self-cultivation techniques such as meditation, but refer, in this context, most prominently to Tanya Luhrmann's work on "inner sense cultivation."[73] Luhrmann's example, drawn from field research in Charismatic evangelical congregations, pertains to a less systematic form of inner generation of mental images in prayer. For our context, the systematic training of "religious experiences" (in the way the word is used by Asprem and Taves), is a much more salient feature in Christian Orthodox and Catholic monasticism, in Buddhist traditions, Daoism, Yoga, and various other techniques that include bodily cultivation practices. So, why refer to Luhrmann's study of evangelicals? Because Luhrmann's description of "religious experience," extracted from present-day US charismatic congregations, shares basic features of Asprem's and Taves's approach discussed above.[74]

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71 Asprem and Taves, "Experience as Event," 8.

72 Asprem and Taves, "Experience as Event," 11.

73 Tanya M. Luhrmann, *When God talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012); Tanya M. Luhrmann, "Building on William James: The role of learning in religious experience," in *Mental Culture: Classical Social Theory and the Cognitive Science of Religion*, eds. D. Xygalatas and W.W. McCorkle, Jr (Durham: Acumen, 2013).

74 One may compare, for example, the following conclusions: "'Inner sense cultivation' seems to contribute to intense spiritual experience of God: the near-tangible sense of God's presence, an awareness of profound spiritual knowing [...], and other unusual spiritual experiences. [... U]sing the imagination to know God at least allows people to attend to their minds in a way that makes these experiences more likely [...] the manner we think that unusual sensory experiences are made possible: that potential breaks [... are] corrected below the level of awareness in most daily experience, but that when people attend to their mind with more care and more interest in the divine, the partial perceptions and fleeting thoughts [...] are allowed to flower into meaning" (Tanya M. Luhrmann and R. Morgain, "Prayer as inner sense cultivation: An attentional learning theory of spiritual experience," *Ethos* 40, no. 4 (2012): 359–389).

In sum, this model highlights the narrowing down of "religious experience" as a kind of perception of *something* that may last as long as the "event" takes place. Asprem and Taves devote only few thoughts on how individual biography and models of individual narrative identity will influence if and how a (religious) person will describe certain "experiences" as "religious." But how react theorywise if individuals describe the experience not as religious, but as "aesthetic," "existential," "paranormal," "mystical," "meaningful"? Or, if they speak of a "religious experience" that a certain, protestant-biased scholar would rather name "conventional-ritualist," or the like? An "event cognition" model, thus, does not help in analyzing *what* attributing "religious," and by *whom*, to such an experience may mean – in contrast to, say, attributing a "spiritual," "transformative," or "transcendental" potency.

3.2 *How to Know One's Experience Is "Religious"? Some Perspectives on how to Study Religious Experiences in the Future*

In the following, I will argue that instead of focusing on an isolated experience "deemed religious," it is necessary to bring in the earlier meaning of experience – ***experience***$_{1-3}$, the model of *past experience* as *accumulated knowledge of a doer and observer*: an "experience" that to my knowledge has never been designated as "religious." With this model in mind, I will argue that "religious experience" can only be addressed in the framework of the individuals' *entire autobiography* as "religiously" meaningful episode or event. The remaining pages will be used for explaining this perspective. To start with, I presuppose with certain strands of modern philosophy that there are no direct, accessible ways for individuals to compare the essence of their "experience" ("religious experience" in the meaning of "subjective awareness-cum-feeling," i.e. ***experience***$_4$) with "the experience" of others – except through comparing verbal or written testimony. But in such testimonies, individuals are generally aware of the potential lack of veracity, of inauthenticity, of testimonies by others. Moreover, individuals themselves are in need of criteria in order to secure their descriptions of their "religious experiences." How do they conceive of such criteria, and how do they retrieve the relevant events from their memory? In sum, how do they identify and classify their subjective experiences as "religious," but also – as "experiences"? To me, it seems that individuals who narrate a certain more recent "religious" experience refer almost always to *earlier cognate experiences they have made while they were young*. These earlier experiences are usually part of the constitutive phase of their religious socialization in childhood and youth. In other words, they were made in a phase of emotionally intense imagination of religious worlds. Internalized, and perhaps intermittently forgotten or hidden, they will be revived and used to identify a religious experience – especially,

if it is an extremely meaning, life-changing (or transformative) experience. As such, these earlier experiences are not only constitutive for the primary, deep structure of religious socialization. Of equal importance is their indispensable and constitutive function as the individual's *internal criterion* for how to identify the more recent religious experiences.

To illustrate the hypothesis on how the individual will refer to the pre-experiential life in order to contextualize the more recent life-changing religious experience, I will start with a famous pre-modern case, namely autobiographical narrative of Siddhārtha Gautama, the historical Buddha. Certainly, the term "religious experience" is absent here.[75] However, there is a very prominent concept of transformative experience with emotional and cognitive aspects, namely "awakening" (*bodhi*), from a root which provides the basis for the respective *part. perf. pass.*, Sanskrit *buddha* – the honorific title "Awakened One." It refers in Buddhism first to the historical Buddha, the Buddhas, and subsequently, to Buddhism as a tradition itself. *Bodhi*, "awakening," one could say, denotes the central "experience," in which the Buddha, while meditating under the tree, achieved the knowledge of his own liberation from suffering and from future births. Interestingly, in the autobiographical sources in which the Buddha narrates his spiritual quest, he outlines his search as a linear sequence of attempts that were unsuccessful. First, he left the meditation practices of his two Yogic teachers that did not avail the bliss and awareness of full liberation. Neither were his radical ascetic practices hailed with salvific results. After almost starving himself to death, so the Buddha explains, he finally thought to himself: "'And whatever recluses and brahmins at present experience painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. But by this racking practice of austerities I have not attained any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to awakening? (*Siyā nu kho aññho maggo bodhāyā*)?' I considered: 'I recall that when my father the Sakyan was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first *jhāna* [meditative state]. Could that be the path to awakening?' Then, following on that memory, came the realisation: 'That is

75 There is no concept for "religious experience" in classical Indian languages that covers basic meanings of the term. Simply, there isn't. There are, of course, concepts of experience in the meaning of "sense perception," such as the Sanskrit/Pali term vedanā, but all of them lack the element "religious," because there is no equivalent to the modern Western term "religious" in early India, too, which shall not be discussed here.

the path to awakening.'"[76] In other words, the Buddha, as depicted here, already knows what to find! He knew it all the time. Moreover, it is the memory of this initial state that leads over to the other three meditative states that is invoked in order to serve as an additional criterion for the authenticity of the awakening – the *real* awakening. Sure, it would be overstretching the evidence to argue that the young Gautama did not enter this state of his "first meditation" spontaneously but did so intentionally. One could hypothesize that he was already as a teenager introduced into meditative practices by unnamed Yogic teachers, or that he picked up depictions of such practices and their intended states and goals in respective conversations by expert *virtuosi*.[77] Be this as it may: the take-home message of the Buddha is this: In his autobiographical narrative, the path to "awakening" is much less solitary than it seems. If one would – in some hermeneutic naivety – assume that the Buddha would have called it a "religious experience," he would probably say that he had already "experienced" the first or initial phase of awakening in his youth.

The Buddha's reference to an earlier biographical event is, I assume, not arbitrary. It is necessary for him to identify the track leading to his later experience (awakening), similar to modern Western individuals who aim to identify their transformative experience as "religious." On the one side, it solves specific epistemic problems of otherwise incommunicable events: Only repetition allows to identify something as something – given it is, as is "religious experience," not intersubjectively accessible, as is generally the case with experiences in the modern meaning (***experience***$_4$ and ***experience***$_5$). Only if it is a recurring event will an "experiencer" be able to say it belongs to a category – and "religious experience" is a category of experiences. But how does this problem play out – and I will now come to my second example – if the *category* "religious experience" is broadly in use by practitioners and scholars of religion?

I may now apply these observations to a case discussed by William James. In his *Varieties*, lecture IX, "conversion," he takes the example of Stephen H. Bradley, narrating in 1830 his conversion the year before.[78] Let me shortly outline

76 Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhikkhu Nanamoli, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Kandy: BPS, 1995). *Mahāsaccaka Sutta*, MN 36; M 1.246; Bodhi 1995, 340, with terminological adaptation, https://suttacentral.net/mn36/pli/ms.

77 Imagine, for a moment, the Buddha had failed in his quest for liberating knowledge and would reunite with his family, returning to his hometown. This he did, tradition holds, in his earlier life as the Bodhisattva Vessantara. A narrative of his spiritual travelogue would certainly look quite different.

78 James, Varieties, 150 on this case: "I choose the quaint case of an unlettered man, Stephen H. Bradley, whose experience is related in a scarce American pamphlet" [the footnote refers to: "A Sketch of the Life of Stephen H. Bradley, from the age of five to

his "remarkable experience," as the title has it. Bradly, 24 years old, alone, hears of a "revival of religion" with numerous conversions in his neighborhood. New converts ask him if he has "religion." He is not sure. Bradley narrates that he visits a Methodist preacher, invoking colorful pictures of the final Judgment just the day at which later his conversion happens. And in his unfolding experience, a memory which pertains to his religious socialization appears: He describes the effect of the "Holy Spirit" on his beating heart. His heartbeat increases, and he feels a stream of the Lord's Spirit that takes passion of his heart. He feels an incredible happiness, an inexpressible fullness with God's grace and love. In his words: "all at once [...] my memory became exceedingly clear, and it appeared to me as if the New Testament was placed open before me, eighth chapter of Romans, and as light as if some candle lighted was held for me [...] I read these words: 'The Spirit helpeth our infirmities with groanings which cannot be uttered'" (James 1982, 152). Later, the Bible is used to identify the passage again that played a major role in his conversion experience.

In this account conversion is obviously intimately interwoven with religious circles and contexts, both in his youth and his immediate actual environment. It is not a "solitude" (James) from which the experience emerges. James explains that he selected this case because it "shows how in these inner alterations one may find one unsuspected depth [...] of whose existence we have no premonitory knowledge. Bradley thought that he had been *already fully converted at the age of fourteen*" (James 1982, 150, quoting from Bradley narrating of his first conversion of 1820[italics mine]). This information is crucial. The teenage conversion allows to conclude that Bradly already had a conversion experience that could help him to identify his second conversion which renews or intensifies the first conversion. Finally, a public service in the name of religion follows, which shows the "life-changing quality" of the whole.[79] The case illustrates nicely the major point made here: "*the* experience" is part of a series of experiences that help the reporting individual to identify the most recent, "full" experience.

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twenty-four years, including his remarkable experience of the power of the Holy Spirit on the second evening of November, 1829. Madison, Connecticut, 1830"]. [This source, a 12 page pamphlet, is not available to me]. The case has often been discussed again.

79 "After breakfast I went round to converse with my neighbors on religion, which I could not have been hired to have done before this, and at their request I prayed with them, thought I had never prayed in public before" (quoted in James, Varieties, 153). Bradly speaks in various combinations of an "experience," but not of a "religious experience." In this regard, one should more precisely designate Bradley's experience as conversion (understood as a mass noun).

A third example, this time from the 20th century, shall help to further illustrate the point. This time, it is taken from the autobiography *The Center of the Cyclone. An Autobiography of Inner Space* by the American physician, inventor and 'psychonaut' John C. Lilly.[80] There, he explains of his first LSD experience: "I lay down on the bed between two stereo loudspeakers and went with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The music entered into me and programmed me into a deeply religious experience. The whole experience had first been programmed and stored in my very early youth, when I was a member of the Catholic church serving at Mass and believing, with the intense faith of youth, in everything that I was learning in the church. I moved with the music into Heaven. I saw God on a tall throne as a giant, wise, ancient Man. He was surrounded by angel choruses, cherubim and seraphim, the saints were moving by his throne in a stately procession. I was there in Heaven, worshiping God, worshiping the angels, worshiping the saints in full and complete transport of religious ecstasy."[81] Lilly not only perfectly illustrates the modern meaning of a life-changing and at the same time repeatable "religious experience." He moves on to explain a second experience: "I was able to go back through memory and get to the period of my childhood when I believed in the Catholic church. Suddenly I began to remember that I had had visions very similar to the experience under LSD when I was a little boy preparing for confession in a darkened church."[82] Once again, it is the religious socialization of his youth that is used for identifying the true "religious" nature of the current experience. Once again, "*the* experience" is not only rendered plausible with the former one – it almost incorporates the earlier.[83]

Let me first recapitulate the historical genesis of the concept of "religious experience." It became obvious how a protestant self-understanding of a distinct moment of a spiritual conversion, of a "Call," led to the model of a Christian "religious experience" of grace. In combination with a turn towards experience as sense-perception, as repeatable, etc., and in parallel with the increasing importance of empirical, experimental-experiential techniques in

80 John C. Lilly, *The Center of the Cyclone: An Autobiography of Inner Space* (New York: Julian Press, 1972).

81 Lilly, The Center of the Cyclone, 10.

82 Lilly, The Center of the Cyclone, 15–6.

83 A "generalization from my experiences," says Lilly: "Let me state this as simply as possible. What one believes to be true, either is true or becomes true in one's mind, within limits to be determined experimentally and experientially. These limits are beliefs to be transcended"; and ibid., 16: "Since I was only seven years old and had seen paintings of artistic concepts of God, this is what I saw in the visions. I also saw His love, His caring, and His creation of us" (Lilly, The Center of the Cyclone, 13).

the sciences of nature, "religious experience" became an prominent epistemic strategy for declaring religious truths to be authentic (in contrast to dogma, ritual, sacred objects, holy life, etc.). With the increasing acceptance of a plurality of religions, individuals were able to declare "religious experiences" to be at the heart of religion/s – Schleiermacher and others probably being the first. Thus, to speak of "religious experience" became common in a double meaning. It depicted a kind of solitary transformative experience in autobiographical testimony from a first-person perspective – construed, like sense perceptions, as a subjective awareness-cum-feeling. Secondly, it became a category for declaring – from a third-person perspective, with or without including first-person knowledge – such transformative including more moderate religious experiences to be present in certain or all religious traditions.[84]

It is, however, as argued above, indispensable for the "experiencer" to evaluate their life as a whole for bestowing meaning on the concept of a central "religious experience." If this in turn presupposes that the individual will have to refer to earlier, categorically similar "religious experiences" (usually from the most intense phase of early religious socialization), it will be necessary to consider in the study of "religious experiences" the respective *individual autobiographical frame*. Or, to put it differently, it will be necessary to include the earlier summative meaning of "experience" in the study of religious experience – the mass noun "experience," depicting a biography as a process of summing up earlier experience, if not, as a growth of "experiencedness" (I am referencing here the German "Erfahrenheit"). Instead of declaring "religious experience" to be a distinct experiential event, which has been done for almost 120 years now, studies sensitive for the methodological problems of studying first-person accounts of religious experience, should always ask for the individual system of reference the individual will bring into play if speaking of religious experience.[85]

84 If I am not mistaken, however, in recent scholarship an affirmative use of the category of "religious experience" largely implies an equally affirmative view on religious meaning. The same seems to be the case with the concept of "transformative experience," which does not seem to know a negative mode, but implies only *positive* transformation (see, for example, Laurie A. Paul, *Transformative Experience*. New York: Oxford, 2014).

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