

Guest Editorial

The Luminous Experience and the Scientific Method

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ABSTRACT: An encounter with the Light during a state of altered consciousness is a direct experience of God. The question of scientific proof is discussed.

When a person experiences an entity who appears as the source of love, the basis of knowledge, and life itself—whether the experience is the result of a near-death trauma, meditation, or mental exercises—the most important questions that can be asked are whether the person has seen God, and whether can that be proved.

Academic theologians, as represented by Carol Zaleski in this Journal (1985) and in her book *Otherworld Journeys* (1987), seem to believe that both of these questions need to be answered in the negative. The view Zaleski presented rescues the luminous vision from materialistic reductionism, which holds visions to be hallucinations due to bodily dysfunction, and raises it to the category of a useful imagining. By imagining what God or the next world is like, we are, she consoled, better able to deal with life in this world. Religion, according to aca-

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demic theology, does not deal with realities, but with the mythmaking of humankind in its effort to come to grips with life.

This conclusion is based on the interpretation of the luminous experience as being culturally conditioned. Some people in their experience of the Light report an encounter with angels, the Christ, or other divine beings; while others, with different religious upbringing, report no such encounter with these beings. Because these cultural variations exist, the reality itself, so the argument goes, is not being experienced, and therefore the vision is a function of the imagination, albeit a useful imagining.

This, though, is much like saying that the red fruit growing on trees is a function of the imagination because it is called "apple" by Americans and "pomme" by the French.

In every culture, the highest state of being, God, or the first principle of nature, has been described as being beyond the scope of human words and thought. One must transcend thought and go to direct experience in order to have knowledge of this higher state. Similarly, reports of this state will go beyond the small vessels of conceptualization available in the mortal world. People coming back from an experience of this luminous otherworld can explain it only in terms of their culturally conditioned patterns of thinking.

When the South American Indians first saw Spanish soldiers on horses they saw large, four-legged men. In a sense the Indians were wrong, but they were optically receiving images of the horses. It was their cultural conditioning that gave rise to a different interpretation of what they saw. This difference of interpretation, however, did not negate the reality of the horses actually being there.

The cultural variation in reports of the luminous experience does not imply that the thing in itself was not experienced. Rather, it was a new experience for most people, and it was an experience of something recognized for millennia as well beyond the scope of human communication.

It is interesting to note that although the forms of religious expression have varied widely over the years, the thought patterns of academic theology have maintained a high degree of historical consistency over time. Zaleski believes that the interpretation of the religious experience is best left to the professional theologian, not the experiencer, and that the visionary should be quarantined. If these suggestions were followed down through history, the world's supply of religious literature would be much smaller, as neither Moses, the Buddha, the Christ, nor Mohammed held degrees in theology.

The issue of cultural conditioning is used to invalidate internal experiences, but a thorough historian would question whether the same kind of hindrances to factual observation are not also at play in the value system that judges these experiences. In particular, it is taken for granted that science deals with reality in its pure form and is free from unrecognized assumptions, which clearly is not the case.

Modern science rests on a bedrock of an extreme form of materialistic philosophy. It does not recognize spirit, soul, God, or most internal phenomena. And it is a historical fact that Western culture did hold all these entities to be elements, if not the foundations, of reality only a few hundred years ago. If one is to study history objectively, one cannot be a partisan to the values of one's own epoch. Western culture had one set of values and now has another, and its values are as historically conditioned now as they have been in any other period of time. Current values are just harder to see.

The set of values in play today does not allow for the proof of the vision of otherworld entities because those entities are ruled out as experienceable elements. It is a lot like the days when the United States did not recognize China, though it contained one quarter of the world's population.

To be historically impartial it is necessary to say either that science and otherworld voyagers do not experience reality in itself, because both are products of their time and place, and both invent images to explain a reality that cannot be known directly; or that both are dealing with reality as it is experienced. It would seem simpler, and more charitable, to allow that people see what they see.

When the underlying assumptions of science change, as they are in the process of doing, the careful observations made by scientists will not be lost and we will not return to the days of Aristotelian dictatorship, in which facts were deduced from *a priori* theory. What will happen, however, is that observations will be interpreted differently. An eight ounce apple will still weight eight ounces and reveal the same chemical composition in analysis, but the apple will be seen in a larger framework, a part of a larger process of energies and as a part of creation coming from a central source.

To prove that a person has had an encounter with the divine, one must put aside today's value system, with its restrictions on what can and cannot be experienced, and adopt either an older system of measures or look forward to a new paradigm being created by visitors to the otherworld, who know their experience is real. With this new view of reality, when a person reports that he or she has experienced an

entity radiating intelligence, love, and compassion orders of magnitude greater than that found in mortals, and when these reported characteristics correspond to those ascribed to a supreme being over tens of thousands of years, we can say that some people, indeed, have had a direct experience of God. The Christian tradition is quite direct about this, as stated in I John 1:5: "God is light."

While we wait for the paradigm to change, we can use the scientific method to validate anecdotal reports of the deity by repeating observations under similar conditions. Most recently these encounters with higher states of being have come from near-death experiencers, which would suggest that experimental replication would involve some type of bodily trauma.

This need not be the case. Religious literature in all cultures contains methods of achieving the needed state of consciousness through praying, fasting, meditating, chanting, singing, dancing, not singing, not dancing, good works, liturgy, breathing exercises, and solitude. In the 18th and 19th centuries, some of the same types of encounters were experienced by experimenters in what was then called "animal magnetism" (Gregory, 1851). The Christian tradition recognizes one-pointedness of the mind's eye as a path to the luminous experience. Matthew 6:22 instructs that: "The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light."

Replication of the experiment requires no grant applications, but does involve the experimenter directly. The methods are rigorous, and there are no shortcuts, but if a person is to prove or disprove these observations for him- or herself, the experiment must be carried out with the same degree of precision as were the original investigations.

References

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