

Self-Evident Spiritual Experience and Empirical Psychology: What the West can learn from the East

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In the earlier paper "Self-Evident Spiritual Experience and Empirical Psychology" we made an attempt to link theological consideration and psychological methodology; suggestions were developed which could enable future researchers to apply Popper's critical rationalism to the study of reports of self-evident religious or spiritual experiences. These suggestions were based on criteria of falsifiability which are derived from theological literature. In the present paper intended to extend previous considerations about religious or spiritual self-evident experience in three respects: First, as Yee pointed to an empirical continuum, ranging from "hard" science to merely hermeneutic methods. Quite correctly she criticized an understanding of Popper's Critical Rationalism which would allow applying it only to the natural sciences. The present paper developed Yee's suggestions further by suggesting criteria according to which religious or spiritual self-evident experience can be examined with respect to its falsifiability. Secondly, the present paper intended to adapt Swinburne's and Davis' theological arguments towards the reality of religious experiences to the methodological framework of empirical psychology. Last but not least, we included the cultural dimension: in times of globalization, it has become a common phenomenon for the "East" to learn from the "West". These suggestions are supported by the Indian point of view on self-evident spiritual experiences. In this respect, Western scientific methodology is expected to benefit from Eastern philosophy of science..

Keywords: Spiritual experiences, Self evident experiences, Western and Eastern psychology

Developing Swinburne's Position Further (Davis, 1989)

A Cumulative Argument in Favour of the Seriousness of Religious Experience: Starting from the assumption of "critical realism", Davis (1989, p. 10) makes clear that not only when speaking of religious issues, but also in everyday communication, language has a metaphoric component which cannot easily be dissolved. According to Caroline Franks Davis, religious experience has the special quality of being ineffable and can take "interpretive", "quasi-sensory", "revelatory", "regenerative", "numinous" and "mystical" forms. It can be conveyed to humans by varying experiential qualities, for example as mere analogies, as sensual perceptions, or as an encounter with another person. In her first step, Davis' line of argumentation takes up Swinburne's Principles

of Credulity and Testimony in favour of a cumulative argument for a high probability of God's existence which is conveyed by religious experience of many different kinds and from a wide variety of sources.

A Series of Challenges against the Seriousness of Religious Experience

In a second step, however, Davis (1989) argues, that critics as well might construct a cumulative argument in favour of atheism – a point which was not adequately addressed by Swinburne. Such cumulative critique might be developed from a summary of (a) "description-related", (b) "subject-related", and (c) "object-related challenges".

"Description-related challenges" (p. 115) stem from the fact that religious experiences cannot be readily evoked under laboratory

conditions, are “private” by their nature, and often much time has elapsed between their occurrence and reports about them. Reports may be internally inconsistent, may contradict physical reality, or may be inconsistent with respect to their consequences (e.g. having had a credible vision of Christ would be inconsistent with the vision resulting in an attack on one’s neighbour). Rather, as will be argued later, positive long term consequences are indices of the credibility of a religious experience (“by their fruits ye shall know them”, Matt. 7,20, as Davis, 1989, p. 118, put it). Other description-related challenges may arise from the fact that some reports stem from a notoriously unreliable person, from content-related or linguistic misunderstandings, or hindsight-bias. Apart from the possibility of examining these possible sources of error in detail, Davis’ (1989) central argument against this type of challenge pertains to the fact that most religious experiences are highly ramified at a theoretical level (e.g., the Christian dogma of the Holy Trinity is not based on experience alone, although a multitude of different experiences related to the Holy Trinity have been reported).

With regard to “subject-related challenges” (p. 127), it has been argued by critics, for example that subjects had not been trained in the necessary way to interpret their perception correctly or that the experience has occurred in a state notorious to produce unreliable experiences (e.g., dreams or states induced by drugs or hypnosis). Davis (1989) argues against this objection by reminding the reader of Kekulé’s dream which has led him to detecting the benzene ring. In other words, such states of consciousness, though not conveying reality *per se*, can be conducive of valuable insights not accessible to the waking consciousness.

“Object-related challenges” (Davis, 1989, p. 132) pertain to properties of the perceived alleged reality. A percept’s existence can be impossible for logical reasons (e.g., a round rectangle) or it may be highly improbable (e.g., having been abducted by a UFO). In this respect, an important caveat put forward by the author pertains to cultural differences in religious experience. Whereas apparitions of Holy Mary

may not seem improbable for Roman Catholics, the opposite will be the case for members of other denominations. On the other hand, for Westerners a report about having experienced to be God himself would not sound credible, whereas Asian religions tend to understand a human’s experience of identity with a deity as “losing oneself in God” (Davis, 1989, p. 135).

A further challenge addressed by Caroline Franks Davis pertains to the alleged vicious circle of religious experience. This argument suggests that religious experience only reflects the religious beliefs acquired by the same individual before. First of all, Davis argues, to some extent this argument can be put forward against any kind of experience, also scientific evidence – because all hypothesis testing is done on the basis of foregoing theoretical assumptions. No “pure” perception exists, and all perceptions are interpreted in the light of our “cognitive set” (p. 150), which can be “innate” or “acquired” (p. 152). Finally, many religious experiences were made by people who did not believe in God before, by children who had never received religious education, or whose concepts of God grossly contradicted their religious experience.

The “Conflicting claims challenge” (p.166) stems from the fact that religious experiences vary to a large extent between cultures – rendering each single experience incredible in the light of these contradictions. Davis (1989) answers by a quote from Swinburne: “God may be known under different names to different cultures” (p. 166), emphasizing that the above mentioned “quasi-sensory” nature of religious experience does not imply that, for example religious visions would convey an objective external reality, “but they are nevertheless believed to be ‘pictures’ sent by a divine source and thus to be a reliable source of religious insight, when correctly interpreted”(p.169). As examples, Davis gives Julian of Norwich’s vision of God and his servant, of Shiva, suggesting “that God has fearful and awe-inspiring aspects as well as loving ones” (p. 170), or a vision of Holy Mary. Although contradicting each other by their obvious content, all three experiences may convey the same message. The author

further suggests, that God may unveil the truth to humans' step by step, revelation occurring in a way which fits the addressee's personal way of thinking and feeling.

According to Davis (1989), a universal common core of religious experience exists, which is superimposed by cultural variations. Aspects of this common core are for example the conviction that reality goes beyond the material world that the self transcends everyday experience, and that ultimate reality is characterized by holiness and eternity. This ultimate reality can be experienced by humans in an imperfect way, but typically is felt to be loving, wise, and relating personally to the individual, who often perceives a feeling of unity in numinous or mystical experience. Such encounters often are accompanied by the individual's perception of being redeemed or liberated, of oneness and harmony with "the ultimate reality [which] is the human being's summumbonum" (p. 191).

Finally, Davis (1989) addresses the "Reductionist challenge" (p. 192), according to which all religious experience (as experience in general) can be reduced to neurobiological activity of the brain. One type of this argument qualifies religious experience as pathological and visions or auditions as psychotic or drug-induced hallucinations. This can be easily refuted by the fact that psychopathological symptoms do not "stand alone" but are part of syndromes which have not been found in most individuals with religious experiences. Another important difference pertains to the mostly negative, terrifying, and impairing nature of clinical symptoms, whereas the opposite is the case for religious experience. The second type of the reductionist argument suggests that, according to a "cognitive need" hypothesis, healthy people tend to succumb to the tenants of religion in order to find purpose in life and to deal with the knowledge of life's finiteness. Another version of this second type of argument points to society's expectations fulfilled by the individual when experiencing the divine. In this respect, the author points to the fact that religious experiences related to a "sense of presence" as well as many mystical and numinous encounters

cannot be explained by such "cognitive needs". Moreover, as outlined above, many religious experiences are not in line with the individual's expectations, previous knowledge, or beliefs.

Caroline Frank Davis' Conclusions

Although having dealt in detail with a possible cumulative argument for atheism, Davis (1989) concludes along the lines of Swinburne's argumentation that many phenomena can be better explained in the light of theism than by atheism. This position is not only supported by religious experience as described above but also by less impressive everyday experiences. Most importantly, the author stresses that religious beliefs are not based on experience alone but on highly ramified philosophical systems which are able to explain phenomena like consciousness in humans and animals, the existence of the universe, the interaction of mind and body etc.

A Focus on Contemporary Religious Experience

Wiebe (1997) collected and examined critically thirty contemporary Christic visions. Epistemically, he takes a similar stance as Swinburne (2013), widening the concept of empirical evidence beyond the limited scope of traditional philosophy of science. Going back to Braude (1986), he distinguishes "experimental", "semi-experimental", and "anecdotal" evidence (p.91). Whereas experimental evidence can be replicated under strict laboratory conditions, anecdotal evidence refers to single events like the miracles reported in the New Testament. "Semi-experimental" evidence takes an in-between position, referring to "one class of experiences reported in many circumstances, at many places, by many people, and over a long period of time" (Wiebe, 1997). Contemporary religious experiences, like visions of Christ or Holy Mary, have been reported in a multiplicity of instances of the past two millenniums and thus are examples of semi-experimental evidence. Following Wiebe's (1997) line of argumentation, "semi-experimental" evidence should receive full scientific recognition, provided that the testimonies can be scrutinized with respect to their reliability. For this reason, Wiebe

prefers contemporary evidence to reports from previous times, ascribing to it a higher degree of “epistemic potency” (p. 90).

Though there are also reports from the Middle Ages (Zaleski, 1987), as a consequence of modern medicine, especially in the field of resuscitation of victims of accidents or heart attacks, during the past decades there have been accumulated reports of Near Death Experiences; and Out of Body Experiences associated with them. Wiebe (1997) mentioned NDE as an indication of a soul or spirit existing independently of the physical body and psyche.

The “Database”

Within limited space only an account which is far from complete can be given. Over thousands of years Jewish, Christian and Muslim mystics have reported their encounters with the Divine. The Tora, part of the Holy Scripture of Judaism and of the Old Testament of Christianity reports Yahweh’s command to Abraham to leave his country of birth and to move to the Promised Land of Canaan (Genesis 12,1-3). According to the report of Genesis, Abraham followed this command and thus laid the foundation of the Jewish people’s history. God spoke to the Prophets in visions which substantially influenced Christianity’s belief of Jesus Christ being the son of God and the saviour of humankind (e.g., Isaiah 11, 2-4). It was St. Paul’s visionary and auditory experience at Damascus when Christ instructed him to give up his persecution of Christians and to spread the Gospel all over the world (Acts 9,3-7). Islam’s foundations go back to the archangel Gabriel revealing the Quran to the Prophet Mohammed near Mecca (Quran 53:4-9). In 1273, Thomas of Aquinas, who had started off as a hard-core rationalist, shortly before his death had a vision of God which, anecdotally, caused him to say to a friend: “I can write no more. I have seen things, which make all my writings like straw”¹. Martin Luther’s experience of a lightning during a heavy thunderstorm in 1505 brought him immediately to abandon his plans to become a lawyer, initiated

his decision to live the life of an Augustine friar and thus laid the foundation for Protestantism².

Nelson (2009) summarized many sources of the early Church and pointed to the fact that a “katapatic” or “positive theology approach” must be distinguished from an “apopathic” or “negative” (p. 96) one. Only the positive approach assumes that humans are able to perceive, in part at least, God’s transcendent nature. Whereas Protestants rather focus on prayer as a way of communicating with God in an intellectual way, Orthodox Christians emphasize meditation as a way of experiencing God’s presence in a “mysticism of vision that is spiritual and intuitive, without form or concept” (Nelson, 2009, p. 98).

There are hundreds of Christian mystics who reported God being revealed to them by an “inner experience” (Dulles, 1992) of visions or auditions. One example is St. Francis of Assisi being told by Christ to rebuild his church; after taking this literally at first, St. Francis renovated the chapel of St. Damiano at Assisi, but later founded the Order of the Franciscans, which has been one of the most influential ones over the centuries. Similarly, Ignatius of Loyola, at Montserrat had a vision of Holy Mary and Jesus which initiated his founding of the Society of Jesus, i.e., the order of the Jesuits.

Stemming from the Anglican tradition, Evelyn Underhill and Dean W. R. Inge as well as Lutheran Nathan Söderblom focused on religious experience from visions and auditions as the core of revelation (Dulles, 1992). According to the same source, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschel had initiated “liberal Protestantism” (p. 69) in Germany, which “found revelation primarily in the inner sense of communion with God that is aroused by the image [...] of Jesus in the New Testament” (p. 69). Dulles also pointed to George Tyrell at the beginning of the 20th century, who “equated revelation with an immediate inner presence of God’s redeeming presence” (p. 69).

¹ <http://www.catholic.com/quickquestions/when-st-thomas-aquinas-likened-his-work-to-straw-was-that-a-retraction-of-what-he-wro>

² <http://www.luther.de/legenden/blitz.html>

Wiebe (1997) quoted sources for Marian and Christic apparitions over the centuries, but remained critical with respect to the reliability of many anecdotal reports. As positive exceptions, however, he mentions Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila, whose mystical accounts were accompanied by self-criticism and provided an unusual amount of details. As problematic sources with little detail and lack of scientific credibility, however, Wiebe (1997) mentioned Brewer (1884), Walsh (1906), and Huyssen and Huyssen (1992).

Remaining skeptical towards ancient accounts of religious experiences, including those reported in the gospels, Wiebe (1997), focused on the reliability of contemporary reports, because “more in them can be critically examined than in those ancient accounts that lie beyond our grasp” (p. 9). Though the “evidential force” of ancient accounts may be equal to current ones, “there certainly is a difference in psychological impact” (p. 10).

Wiebe (1997) presented the results of 30 interviews conducted between 1988 and 1993 with respondents recruited by the media in Canada, USA, Great Britain, and Australia and who reported “a ‘direct visual encounter with Jesus Christ’” (p. 40). In an evaluation of these reports, the author recurred to “The Principles of Credulity and Testimony” (p. 98) as put forward by Caroline Frank Davis (1989), the lack of common religious stereotypes in the reports as well as to the immediate, intuitive identification of the apparition as Jesus Christ.

Another contemporary account of religious experience has been provided by Beardsworth (1977). As opposed to Wiebe (1997), this author selected a broader approach, presenting reports of 1,000 visions and other religious experiences in general, not focusing on encounters with Jesus Christ. Their common feature is, as the title of the book suggests, “A Sense of Presence” of a Divine being, which can be encountered either visually, or by auditory, tactile, or somatic sensations.

Van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich (2001) questioned a total of N = 344 cardiac patients who underwent resuscitation. Sixty-two (18%) of them reported NDE. Out

of them, N = 15 (24%) reported OBE, N = 35 (56%) a positive affective state, whereas N = 31 (50%) reported the sensation of being dead. N = 18 (29%) gave reports of a “celestial landscape” (p. 2041), and N = 20 (32%) had met “deceased persons” (p. 2041). Following these exploratory results, on a multi-centre basis, the AWARE (“AWAreness during REsuscitation”) study by Parnia et al. (2014) examined a total of N = 1,730 patients who had survived cardiac arrest in a hospital. Out of them, N = 55 reported “Perceptions of awareness and/or memories” during their time of being purportedly unconscious and N = 7 reported “detailed memories and NDE”. Such cases might be studied in more detail with respect to spiritual or religious elements in them and with respect to the extent, to which they influenced the patient’s consecutive life (thus fulfilling the criteria of “self-evident” experiences as defined in the introductory section of this paper). Only N = 2 of Parnia’s et al. (2014) participants had “detailed memories and NDE, auditory/visual awareness and recall”. In one of these two cases the accuracy of recollections was confirmed (Parnia et al., 2014). Results supported the assumption that some “clinically dead” individuals still perceived their environment correctly; the article remains unclear with respect to the question, however, whether patients were still able to perceive hidden objects in places to which they had no physical access at their time of being “unconscious”. It might be speculated that spiritual awareness depends on the individual, emotional impact of stimuli in question and thus can hardly be examined successfully by employing “a combination of nationalistic and religious symbols, people, animals, and major newspaper headlines” (Parnia et al., p. 1800) which probably remained the same for all the patients in the study.

Over the past few decades there has been increased scientific interest and some research on the spiritual effects of some psychedelic drugs, the so-called entheogens (for a summary see for example Roberts and Hruby, 2002). Whereas some authors (e.g., Nelson, 2009) are skeptical about the possibility of inducing religious experience by psychedelic drugs,

others are enthusiastic about this possibility. The most prominent example may be Pahnke's (1966) (cf., Pahnke & Richards, 1966) "Good Friday Experiment"³, which at the same time may serve as one of the rare examples of applying the methods of empirical psychology to religious or spiritual, self-evident experience. In a randomized controlled study Psilocybin vs. Placebo was administered to N = 20 students of Theology participating in a Good Friday service at a private chapel. The experimental group reported intense spiritual or religious experiences as compared to the control group. Six-months and even 25 years follow-ups showed permanent positive effects on spirituality in the experimental group (Doblin, 1991). Such long lasting effects have been confirmed by numerous later studies using more sophisticated methodology (e.g., Griffiths et al., 2008).

Eastern and Western Approaches

There are evidences in the Eastern approaches for self-evident spiritual experiences. "Visions come under the head of experience, unless they fix themselves and are accompanied by realization of which they are as it were the support." (Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother*: 97). There are two major alternatives to materialism in the world. The wisdom of the East is one aspect and another is through the wisdom of the West that can be esoteric Christianity.

According to the Eastern approach, one can have direct spiritual enlightenment through meditative exercises. Naturally it is not happening in the Western experiences. The Wisdom of the West is to approach the materialism in different way. The materialism has reached its greatest strength in the Western world, whereas in the East the belief experiences has been deep rooted. The rational approach developed in the West created scientific advancement in the West and brought to an end the ignorance and superstition.

Therefore, Western Wisdom does not shy away from scientific discoveries and materiality. Rather, it would use them for spiritual purposes. In other words, whereas the Eastern approach

advocates, explicitly or implicitly, the withdrawal from the material world, the Western Wisdom advocates work in and with the material world for the purpose of spiritualizing it.

In the recent past, the Western culture and tradition gradually accepted several practices such as Yoga, Ayurveda from the Eastern approaches. "Yoga... proceeds by subjective experiment and bases all its findings on experience..." (Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga* 1:189)

Sri Aurobindo explains that the "Vision" is a kind of experience and it may occur on different planes. It is related to different objects and events. It is only one aspect; faculties of hearing, smelling, speech and touch may also contribute to the range of experiences one may have. Some experiences may not relate to any of the sensory organs; they may be metaphysical and meta-sensorial. Not that all experiences are necessarily related to vision.

Sri Aurobindo writes that yogic experiments are similar to that of the experiments that scientists perform in laboratory. They both are subjective in nature and proceed with an assumption, carried out in steps, proceed with trial and error and sometimes bring out startling discoveries. While the scientist works on matter, a yogi works on the spiritual planes.

There are great differences in the type of exercises given for spiritual development. It is important that a distinction be made between the two approaches, because the brain organization is different in Eastern and Western bodies. The Eastern brain is especially adapted for metaphysical thought, because the ethers of the etheric body are as yet loosely interwoven with the physical body and are, therefore, passively receptive to spiritual impacts. However, the lack of tight organization causes difficulty for the individual Easterner in coping with and mastering the external world. On the other hand, the Westerner has a brain organization well-suited for work in the objective, material world. Because the ethers are closely interwoven in the Westerner's brain, the Eastern methods of

³ See the quote preceding the introductory section of the first part of this article

development tend to derange the Westerner's faculties instead of spiritualizing them.

An Integrative Approach to Self-Evident Experience

A Broader Scope of Empiricism

The neglect of self-evident experiences by empirical psychology of the behaviorist tradition may result from the fact that such phenomena

- a. occur spontaneously and rarely can be replicated (e.g. an experience leading to religious conversion),
- b. cannot be easily communicated (e.g. religious visions),
- c. may be prone to self-deception or fraud, and
- d. in some cases (e.g., religious and spiritual experiences, NDE, OBE) are accessible only to some people.

In spite of these limitations, after the end of behaviorism, empirical psychology would not seriously doubt that self-evident phenomena like love, hate, morality, or empathy can be studied empirically, although these phenomena are not instantly replicable (point (a) above), cannot be easily communicated (point (b) above) and are prone to self-deception, if not fraud (point (c) above). When dealing with such phenomena, modern psychology has a less stringent understanding of empiricism and replicability than it was the case in behaviorism (it may be difficult to instruct people to fall in love with each other under laboratory conditions). Haidt's (2001) approach to moral intuitions may serve as an example of this new understanding of psychological empiricism. In fact, in his seminal work on the "logic of scientific discovery" already Popper (2005/1935) had differentiated between various "degrees of testability" (p. 95) of scientific theories (cf., Yee, 1987). In general, psychological theories may be assumed to possess a lower degree of testability as compared to physics or chemistry with respect to the multiplicity of variables involved in psychological processes.

In contrast, phenomena which are accessible only to some people (point (d) above), especially spiritual or religious experiences still are met

with suspicion by modern psychology. In our opinion, this fact does not exclude such phenomena from empirical study, however: one may think of phenomena like creativity, genius, or wisdom which are accessible only to a quite limited number of individuals too, but today are regarded as serious objects of empirical study in empirical psychology. Excluding self-evident religious or spiritual phenomena from empirical enquiry is an arbitrary and prejudiced decision, which is not based on rational grounds but rather stems from the traditional, typically "Western" division of scientific inquiry on the one hand and philosophical or theological thought on the other.

The above mentioned points (a), (b), (c), and (d) do not exclude applying Popper's critical rationalism to self-evident phenomena as long as the central criterion of falsifiability is met. Hypotheses about self-evident experiences, including religious or spiritual ones, if properly formulated, indeed are falsifiable and thus fulfill the central requirement of critical rationalism. For example, a hypothesis predicting that religious experience does not solely reflect the individual's personal belief system, but may include new insights, would be falsified, if no reports about religious conversions following such experiences would exist.

In fact, empirical studies can follow a "scientists' philosophy of science" (cf., 4.1, Yee, 1987) for the study of spiritual or religious phenomena. This has been shown before by summarizing the lines of argument by Yee (1987), Swinburne (2013), Davis (1989) and Wiebe (1997). From our point of view, Yee's (1987) summary is the most useful and precise one, as she gets to the point that an empirical approach can be applied to religious experience, provided

1. the subjective reality of the "agent" as well as
2. "both rational and"
3. "empirical procedures" (p. 348) are involved.

We will refer to the agent's role (point (1)) later. Apart from this, it is important to note that mere empiricism could not be justified as a scientific method. An established rational system (point (2)) which can serve to interpret

and understand personal experience is an important safeguard against a somewhat naive and arbitrary esotericism. At the same time, such a rational system prevents us from the fallacy of constructivism in its strong form, according to which every individual somewhat arbitrarily establishes his or her own reality. In other words: we cannot take seriously the reports of some people who reported having been abducted by UFOs by little grey people (cf., Sharf, 2000): Although such reports may be experienced as “real” by the individuals involved, they lack the rational framework demanded as a criterion of scientific evidence by Yee (1987). For religious experience, the required rational framework has been presented for example by Swinburne (2013) and even more convincingly by Davis (1989) by arguments, which took possible criticism and challenges into account very carefully.

With respect to the necessary empirical basis of religious experience (point (2) above), the impressive “database” has been summarized shortly before.

Self-Evident Experience is Emotional by its Nature

Again, we take religious or spiritual experience as a prominent example of self-evidence. In contrast to the previous reluctance, both in “Western” science and in theology, to accept emotional facts as worth to be examined, we have shown above that since the turn of the millennium a paradigm shift towards emotion and intuition has taken place in psychology. Thus, the time may have come to reconcile psychology and religious belief by studying religion and spirituality on emotional grounds. Emotional aspects of religious experience have been emphasized by almost all the authors whose argumentation we summarized before.

Constructivism is not Entirely Wrong: The Role of Culture and Personality

Quite correctly, among many others, Yee (1987) pointed to the role of the individual in interpreting the experience in question. In line with Shweder’s (2000) Cultural Psychology and his claim of a universal “mind” and culturally dependent “mentalities”, with respect to religious experience, Andresen and Forman (2000)

pointed both to similarities and to differences between cultures:

“...the ... war that was waging between constructivists and perennialists in the study of religion. To summarize each side’s historical position briefly, constructivists (i.e., Katz, Proudfoot) presented religious experience as wholly constructed from the fabric of pre-existing materials. Perennial psychologists (i.e., Forman, Barnard, Rothberg, etc.) claimed that mystical experiential cores, regardless of the tradition involved, share certain common underlying experiential cores, notably the so-called Pure Consciousness Event and several more advanced mystical states.” (p. 8).

Similarly, Sharf (2000) emphasized the cross-cultural similarities in spite of obvious differences of religious experience:

“Obviously, a given individual’s understanding and articulation of such an experience will be conditioned by the tradition to which he or she belongs [...]. But if one is able to see beyond the superficial, culturally determined differences between these accounts one discovers a single unvarying core.” (p. 269f.).

With respect to the nature of the often mentioned “common core” regardless of cultural, social or personal background, James (1902/2014) suggested noetic quality, ineffability, transiency, and passivity as similarities inherent to religious and spiritual experience.

Löffler (2010) pointed to the fact that any scientific observation is not only subject to objective reality but at the same time subject to (1) the theoretical context from which it was developed and (2) the social reality characteristic of the respective culture. Thus it does not come as a surprise and does not put a challenge to the credibility of the respective reports that visions of Holy Mary are only reported by Catholics, of Mohammed by Muslims, and of Jesus Christ by Christians (Wiebe, 1997).

Safeguards against Error and Deception

According to Critical Rationalism, which is the foundation of modern empirical psychology,

scientific “truth” cannot be found, as hypotheses can only be falsified, but not verified. This does not only apply to “hard science” (like physics or molecular genetics) but of course also to “soft science” (like psychology or sociology).

As pointed out above, the most important safeguard against a naive form of empiricism, which would take any reports seriously, is a rational theoretical or philosophical framework which accounts for the report’s plausibility. Secondly, there is Swinburne’s cumulative argument. Religious or spiritual experiences usually occur within the framework of a certain tradition and are supplemented by a multiplicity of similar experiences reported by different individuals at different points of time.

A third point is complimentary to the second one. If new religious experiences would merely repeat other people’s reports, constructivism’s critique could be hardly denied, which maintains that people just would experience what they had expected from their personal belief system. On the contrary, however, spiritual or religious experience often contradicts the individual’s previous belief system (one may think of St. Paul’s conversion as the most prominent example). Moreover, as Wiebe (1997) put it, “Experiences generally considered to have religious significance are those that give intimations of a transcendent dimension to life, awaken the moral sense in a person, or evoke a sense of the Infinite” (p. 5f.). In this respect, in the face of today’s mainstream rationalism especially among highly educated people, they may well put their reputation at risk when reporting spiritual or religious experiences; this fact runs counter to the argument of merely having experienced what was expected and adds credibility to their reports: “The fact that people come forward and report visionary experiences despite a general climate of suspicion also suggests that they are sincere” (Wiebe, 1997, p. 106).

A fourth asset of most religious or spiritual experiences is their teleological perspective – genuine religious experience may be judged by its consequences; often only a singular experience is reported, with lifelong consequences (Swinburne, 2013). These consequences are meaningful in the sense of the

rational framework which renders the self-evident experience plausible. Such meaningfulness of the experience’s consequences clearly contradicts La Barre’s (1975) argument, which denigrated religious experience as nothing but dissociation, hallucination, or trance.

Taking the four points together: Self-evident religious or spiritual experiences would be falsified in terms of Critical Rationalism, if

1. they would not be supported by a philosophical or religious framework,
2. they would not be supported by Swinburne’s “cumulative” argument,
3. they would merely confirm the individual expectations or repeat other people’s reports without adding something “unexpected” to previous knowledge, and/or
4. they would have no impact on the individual’s further spiritual or religious course of life.

Summary and Outlook

The present paper intended to extend previous considerations about religious or spiritual self-evident experience in three respects: First, Yee (1987) pointed to an empirical continuum, ranging from “hard” science to merely hermeneutic methods. Quite correctly she criticized an understanding of Popper’s Critical Rationalism which would allow applying it only to the natural sciences. The present paper developed Yee’s suggestions further by suggesting criteria according to which religious or spiritual self-evident experience can be examined with respect to its falsifiability.

Secondly, the present paper intended to adapt Swinburne’s and Davis’ theological arguments towards the reality of religious experiences to the methodological framework of empirical psychology. Last but not least, we included the cultural dimension: in times of globalization, it has become a common phenomenon for the “East” to learn from the “West”. At present, this development pertains to many aspects of everyday life (e.g., consumption of fast food, technology, clothing, mass media etc.) which hardly can be expected to constitute the “meaning” of human existence. On the

other hand, however, the “West” could seriously benefit from adopting “Eastern” worldviews especially with respect to the importance of religious and spiritual experience as a part of scientific or empirical “reality”.

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