

Religious Experience and Desire: Introduction

This special edition draws together papers presented as works-in-progress for the *Religious Experience and Desire* research project directed by Fiona Ellis at Heythrop College and by Clare Carlisle at King's College London during 2016–17. This collaboration contributed to the three-year research initiative *The Experience Project* (based at the University of Notre Dame and UNC Chapel Hill), and was generously funded by the John Templeton Foundation. Its aim was to elucidate the claim that human apprehension of the divine has an essentially desiderative dimension, and to explore how desire for God plays a role in generating and forming religious experience.

One purpose of our collaboration was to challenge the broadly Humean account, commonly accepted within contemporary epistemology, which posits a sharp dichotomy between cognition and appetite. On this account, knowledge and experience are constituted by the passive reception of data or evidence. Desire, construed as a raw, uninformed wanting, has nothing relevant to contribute to the apprehension of reality.

We argue, by contrast, that religious experience can only properly be understood as informed and infused by a desire for God which is irreducibly cognitive. This desire for God is the key to appreciating how we might establish the authenticity of religious experience. We are especially concerned with the *religious* value of religious experience, and this involves a shift away from the epistemic focus which has tended to dominate the philosophy of religion, to a focus on the spiritual, ethical, and practical meanings and effects of religious experience. This shift in focus has yielded some important new tools and questions for philosophy of religion.

Fiona Ellis takes inspiration from Heidegger and Levinas in her defence of the idea that religious experience is a species of desire. Desire in this context involves a kind of experience which is cognitive and unmediated, and Ellis makes explicit its spiritual and moral significance. She ends with a return to more familiar epistemic territory, arguing that the relevant conception of experience is shared by a disjunctivist account of perception, and that we should take seriously the possibility of a disjunctive style response to scepticism about religious experience.

John Cottingham's contribution attends to the restless human desire for the infinite. Cottingham makes clear that the spiritual quest at issue here has nothing to do with obtaining information about God, or testing the hypothesis

that God exists. His emphasis, again, is upon spirituality rather than epistemology. Similarly, David McPherson is concerned with the appeal to ‘deep desires’ as part of an ethical or spiritual life-orientation. He argues that such appeals should be seen as pertaining to our acquired second nature, and the space of meaning this makes possible. The notion of depth in this context tells us something about desire’s normative significance, and McPherson defends Alasdair MacIntyre’s claim – echoing Thomas Aquinas – that ‘the deepest desire of every [human] being, whether they acknowledge it or not, is to be at one with God’.

The focus of Eddie Howell’s paper is the Christian mystical tradition as developed in Augustine and John of the Cross. Augustine’s view, expanded by John, shows that desire not only points humanity towards God, but is to be identified with direct experience of God. Julian Perlmutter examines Thomas Merton’s contemplative teaching that desires for worldly things manifest a deeper desire for God, and aid spiritual openness. On this view, the secular value attested in desire-experiences is deepened and expanded in spiritual directions in a manner potentially appealing to non-believers.

Clare Carlisle’s contribution clarifies the relationship between spiritual desire and religious practice. She shows that desire is one of four cornerstones of a philosophical concept of practice, and within this distinguishes three kinds of practice – art practice, skill practice, and spiritual practice – which are differentiated by their structures of desire. Arguing that “spiritual desire” should be understood as an “infinite desire,” Carlisle suggests that spiritual practices offer determinate, embodied, culturally-specific channels for expressing this infinite desire.¹

Note

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