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The Dialogue of Religious Experience: Theory and Practice

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Abstract

For several decades the official teaching office of the Roman Catholic Church has consistently invoked the notion of religious experience as a category for interrelgious dialogue. Moreover, the Church has appealed to the so-called dialogue of religious experience as a means of encouraging its members to constructively engage with persons who are committed to 'other' religious traditions. This essay seeks to develop a systematic understanding of religious experience as well as the dialogue associated with it. Subsequent to summarizing the recent magisterial teaching on the dialogue of religious experience, the essay continues by probing the meaning of religious experience as such, particularly with the assistance of the theological insights of Bernard Lonergan and Louis Roy. The essay concludes by acknowledging some of the limitations that persist in connection with the dialogue of religious experience, namely, those that inevitably arise when considering the particularity of the incarnation and the necessity of the Church for salvation.

Keywords

Bernard Lonergan, Dialogue of Religious Experience, Interreligious Dialogue, Louis Roy, Transcendent Experience

I. Introduction

October 27, 2011 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi. The anniversary was commemorated by a similar gathering in the same city that included, among others, Pope Benedict XVI and heads and representatives of the churches, ecclesial communities, and world religions.[1] On the

[1] The first World Day of Prayer for Peace was held in Assisi on October 27, 1986, and a sequel was held on January 24, 2002. For a comparative analysis of the meetings of 2011 and 1986 see Michael Barnes, "Symbol and Reality: Repetition with a Difference,"

eve of their meeting, and in the context of a general audience, Pope Benedict stressed that the participants were gathered to "search for the truth, in promoting the authentic good of humanity and in building peace.[2] In his public address in Assisi, the Pope emphasized the need for interreligious dialogue, especially as a means of confronting religiously motivated violence and of purifying "lived religion."[3] The actual encounter of so many religious representatives seems to suggest that interreligious dialogue continues to be a worthwhile endeavor. To be sure, one of the tragic lessons of history is that a breakdown of dialogue tends to issue in violence, warfare, and even, mutual self-destruction. At the same time, just how such dialogue is to be practiced remains a question that deserves further reflection. While religious leaders may draw attention to the issue on occasion, dialogue is certainly more complex and problematic than these meetings tend to indicate. How can persons struggling to live out their religious commitment in a religiously diverse context engage in dialogue? What can they talk about?

This essay will address the aforementioned questions by focusing on a specific form of dialogue that has been repeatedly proposed by the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church, namely, the so-called dialogue of religious experience.[4] The reflections will be structured in the following way. First, we will propose an initial understanding of this form of dialogue in light of what has been put forward in three of the recent magisterial documents in which it is mentioned. Second, we will explore the meaning of experience, transcendent experience, and religious experience, respectively. Third, transcendent experience and religious experience will be compared and contrasted with one another. The essay will conclude by suggesting some ways in which the dialogue of religious experience might be practiced in the contemporary context, especially in the light of some particularly Catholic concerns.

available at http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20111101_1.htm (accessed November 9, 2011).

[2] See "Prayer in Preparation of the Meeting in Assisi," available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20111026_en.html (accessed November 9, 2011).

[3] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2011/october/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20111027_assisi_en.html (accessed November 9, 2011).

[4] The other three forms of dialogue, which I will not discuss in this essay are: (i) the dialogue of life, (ii) the dialogue of action, and (iii) the dialogue of theological exchange. Eric J. Sharpe has suggested that this fourfold classification has roots that date as far back as 1967 when Richard W. Taylor proposed the scheme of Socratic, Buberian, Discursive, and Pedagogic Dialogue. Sharpe also notes that he (Sharpe) modified this scheme in 1970 so that the dialogues became labeled as Discursive, Human, Secular, and Interior. See Eric J. Sharpe, 'Mission Between Dialogue and Proclamation', in William R. Burrows, ed., *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation* (New York: Orbis, 1993), pp. 161–72, at p. 170.

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II. The Dialogue of Religious Experience in Recent Magisterial Teaching

The recent magisterial documents that propose the dialogue of religious experience as a means for interreligious dialogue do not provide a significant amount of insight into what such a dialogue actually looks like or how it might be practiced. While we may wish the teaching of the magisterium to be clearer on this matter, we must be fair by recalling that such documents are chiefly doctrinal in character. This is to say that they aim to state 'what is so' rather than explain 'how it is so.'[5] Thus, magisterial documents tend to stop short of explaining the meaning of the categories that they employ in order to make their point. Nonetheless, they do offer us a starting point from which the more explanatory work of the systematic theologian can begin.[6]

The first of the documents that we will consider is *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*.[7] Published in 1984 by the Secretariat for Non-Christians, it is more commonly known as *Dialogue and Mission*. This document describes the dialogue of religious experience as occurring when "persons rooted in their own religious traditions can share their experiences of prayer, contemplation, faith, and duty, as well as their expression and ways of searching for the Absolute."[8] It then adds, "This type of dialogue can be a mutual enrichment and fruitful cooperation for promoting and preserving the highest values and spiritual ideals of man. It leads naturally to each partner communicating to the other the reasons for his own faith."[9] From this brief description we can glean that the dialogue of religious experience involves speaking of one's concrete involvement with a particular religious tradition, including its forms of ethical and devotional praxis.

[5] My understanding of 'doctrine' and 'doctrinal documents' is based on Lonergan's presentation of doctrines as the sixth functional specialty in *Method in Theology*. See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003, pp. 293–333. The distinction that Lonergan draws between doctrines and systematics is well summarized by Charles Hefling in 'Method and Meaning in *Dominus Iesus*,' in Stephen J. Pope and Charles Hefling, eds., *Sic et Non*: *Encountering Dominus Iesus* (New York: Orbis, 2002), pp. 108–110.

[6] These claims are based on Bernard Lonergan's distinction between 'doctrines' and 'systematics' within his theological method that is explicitly structured according to the so-called 'functional specialization.' See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003).

[7] *Bulletin, Secretariatus pro Non-Christianis*, vol. 56, no. 2 (1984), pp. 126–141.

[8] *Dialogue and Mission*, §35, p. 138.

[9] Ibid.

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Six years after the publication of *Dialogue and Mission*, Pope John Paul II published the encyclical *Redemptoris missio*.[10] The encyclical aimed at reaffirming the Church's missionary mandate *ad gentes*.[11] On the one hand, it recognized that, "There is a new awareness that *missionary activity is a matter for all Christians*, for all dioceses and parishes, Church institutions and associations."[12] At the same time, John Paul II sounded a cautionary note by observing that, "Missionary activity specifically directed 'to the nations' (*ad gentes*) appears to be waning, and this tendency is certainly not in line with the directive of the [Second Vatican] Council and of subsequent statements of the Magisterium."[13] It is interesting to note that, according to the former Pope, the theologian has a specific role to play with regard to the promotion of missionary activity, namely, to explore and expound *systematically* on its various aspects [italics mine].[14] One of the 'various aspects' of mission that is explicitly highlighted is interreligious dialogue, which, is proposed as "a part of the Church's evangelizing mission [that] is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes* [but] has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions."[15]

Redemptoris missio elaborates upon the forms and expressions of interreligious dialogue by recalling the four forms that were previously laid out in *Dialogue and Mission*. However, there is one subtle yet notable difference in that *Redemptoris missio* replaces the term 'religion' with 'spiritual.' Thus, rather than speaking of the dialogue of religious experience, it speaks of a sharing of respective spiritual experiences.[16] This change in terminology can, perhaps, be attributed to the encyclical's heavy emphasis on the universal presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. Recalling the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, it reaffirms that while "the Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. . .his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time."[17] Such

[10] See '*Redemptoris Missio*: An Encyclical Letter on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate', in William R. Burrows, ed., *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation*, pp. 1–55. Also available at http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0219/_INDEX.HTM (accessed November 9, 2011).

[11] Marcello Zago authored a commentary that does a fine job of reviewing the main points of *Redemptoris missio*. See Marcello Zago, 'Commentary on *Redemptoris Missio*', in *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation*, pp. 57–90.

[12] *Redemptoris missio* §2.

[13] Ibid., §2. The fact that *Redemptoris missio* explicitly mentions the need for systematic reflection supports the aforementioned point that the document itself is doctrinal in character, and therefore, more concerned with stating 'what is so' than with explaining 'why it is so.'

[14] Ibid.

[15] *Redemptoris missio* §55.

[16] Ibid., §56.

[17] Ibid., §28. *Redemptoris missio* makes special reference to the presence and activity of the Spirit through the "seeds of the Word." This term appeared as *semina Verbi* in the

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universality includes the Spirit's work in the lives of religiously diverse individuals and societies, or, to use a more contemporary term, the religious other(s). More specifically, it is the Spirit who "implants and develops his gifts in all individuals and people and guide[s] the Church to discover, foster, and receive them through dialogue."[18] While *Redemptoris missio* is generous in recognizing the presence of the Spirit beyond the explicit boundaries of the Church, it clearly places the responsibility of discerning this presence entirely and exclusively with the Church.[19] In considering this claim, members of other religions will rightly question the very nature of the dialogue. They are likely to protest that their 'spiritual experience' is being discerned or interpreted for them, which, in fact, forecloses the possibility of authentic dialogue.[20]

The last magisterial document that we will consider is *Dialogue and Proclamation*.[21] Published in 1991, only five months after *Redemptoris missio*, it simply repeats what its predecessors had stated. Thus, it recommends the dialogue of religious experience as one form of dialogue "where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or

Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, see Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils,* vol. 2, (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), §11.

[18] Ibid., §29.

[19] Ibid., §29. This claim is based on the conviction that Christ gave his Spirit to the Church in order to guide her into all the truth (Jn 16:13.) The main point is that the universal activity of the Spirit cannot be separated from his particular activity with the Body of the Christ, which is the Church.

[20] The act of interpreting for the 'other' is one that has come under stringent attack from contemporary (postmodern) philosophers. One such critic is Judith Butler. Butler recognizes that religion continues to function as a "key matrix for the articulation of values" and that most people continue to look to religion to guide their discernment of values (e.g., the respect for the public expression of religious difference such as the wearing of veils in public schools in France). Far from advocating that religion needs to be abolished or overcome, Butler proposes that it be considered as a discursive matrix for subject formation in which values are articulated and disputed. She juxtaposes this view of religion with one that conceives it simply as a set of beliefs or dogmatic views that are imposed on one person(s) by another. On this view of religion, it would seem that the interpretation of 'spiritual experience' is properly done in a discursive context in which the experiencing subject's voice is actually heard and taken seriously. See Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 122.

[21] See '*Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*', in *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation*, pp. 93–118. Also available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html (accessed November 9, 2011). See also Jacque Dupuis' commentary in *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation*, pp. 119–58.

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the Absolute."[22] Once again, a direct and essential link is made between dialogue and the concrete religious practice that is constitutive of our religious experience, and therefore, of ourselves as religious persons.

As I mentioned above, the doctrinal character of magisterial documents limits their engagement in extensive systematic reflection. Because such reflection is helpful in promoting an understanding of doctrine it is a worthwhile endeavor and one that we will now undertake by probing the meaning of experience, transcendent experience, and religious experience, respectively.

III. Experience

Bernard Lonergan (1904–84) is one theologian who reflected extensively on the meaning of experience and indeed, based much of his thought on the normativity of experience for authentic human subjectivity. Following Lonergan, we will approach the rather complex and potentially ambiguous notion of experience by dwelling on the meaning of consciousness.

According to Lonergan, consciousness is a "preliminary unstructured awareness of oneself and one's acts."[23] This understanding must be qualified by noting that not all acts are conscious. To be sure, consciousness is a quality immanent in *acts of certain kinds*, namely, cognitional ones. For example, unconscious acts include biological processes such as the metabolism of one's cells, the maintenance of one's organs, and the growth of hair. While we can learn about these processes through the study of biology, strictly speaking they occur outside the realm of consciousness. Cognitional acts are those by which we become aware of (i) ourselves as subjects and (ii) the discernible features of objects (e.g., size and color). Thus, consciousness, by definition, makes present an acting subject and the contents that are made present to her by the performance of cognitional acts.[24]

While Lonergan claimed that consciousness is a "preliminary unstructured awareness," his desire to elucidate the nature of cognitional

[22] *Dialogue and Proclamation* §42.

[23] Bernard Lonergan, *The Ontological and Psychological Constitution of Christ*, Michael G. Shields, trans., vol. 7 in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2002), p. 165.

[24] Lonergan notes that conscious acts, such as seeing and hearing, "differ radically from such unconscious acts as the metabolism of one's cells, the maintenance of one's organs, the multitudinous biological processes that one learns about through the study of the contemporary medical science." The difference is that conscious acts allow us to become aware of their contents. See Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding,* in Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, eds., vol. 3 in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992), p. 345.

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process led him to develop what he referred to as a cognitional theory. In proposing this theory he meant to respond to the question, 'What am I doing when I am knowing'? Central to Lonergan's cognitional theory is the notion of levels of consciousness. Lonergan maintained that the quality of consciousness differs as one moves from the performance of lower cognitional operations to higher ones. He further posited that metaphorically speaking the operations occur on four different levels, which he labeled as (i) empirical, (ii) intellectual, (iii) rational, and (iv) responsible.[25] In summary, on the level of experience we are aware of data; on the intellectual level we understand what the data are; on the rational level we judge the veracity of our understanding; and on the responsible level we decide what is to be done in light of our knowledge and act in function of it.

In returning to the notion of experience we can distinguish between a general and a specific meaning.[26] The specific meaning refers to "sensate operations of consciousness," that is, seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting.[27] For example, seeing is a response to the stimulus of color and shape (i.e., the contents) by which one becomes aware of the color and shape of what is seen. On the other hand, the general meaning of experience refers to the levels of consciousness as they are dynamically combined with one another. In the measure that we move through the various levels we can speak of the experience of being intelligent, rational and responsible persons. Understanding experience in this general manner points up its transcendental character, for in 'moving through' the levels of consciousness we are involved in a process of transcendence in the sense that we advance from lower levels to higher ones. Let us continue by paying particular attention to the notion of transcendence as a means of setting up the forthcoming discussion on transcendent experience.

[25] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 9. In *Insight*, the levels of consciousness are limited to the first three. The fourth level of consciousness becomes clearly established in *Method in Theology*. See also John D. Dadosky, *The Structure of Religious Knowing: Encountering the Sacred in Eliade and Lonergan* (Albany: State University of New York, 2004), pp. 46–7. The advancement of a fifth-level of consciousness as the experience of being loved unconditionally by God and invited to love God in return, was suggested, but never fully developed by Lonergan. See Bernard Lonergan, 'Lecture 2: The Functional Specialty "Systematics"', in Robert C. Croken and Robert M. Doran, eds., *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965–1980*, vol. 17 in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004), pp. 179–98, at p. 193. The advancement of the 'fifth level' has been a *quaestio disputata* among Lonergan scholars. For a survey of this discussion see Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer, 'Sanctifying Grace in a 'Methodical Theology,'' *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): pp. 52–76.

[26] This distinction was made by Jim Kanaris in his book entitled, *Bernard Lonergan's Philosophy of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York, 2002), pp. 29–38.

[27] Ibid., p. 29.

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IV. Transcendent Experience

In *Insight*, Lonergan defines transcendence, in a general sense, as "going beyond."[28] He then suggests that the dynamism of consciousness is transcendent, saying, "So inquiry, insight, and formulation do not merely reproduce the content of sensible experience but go beyond it."[29] To be sure, the general meaning of experience coheres with Lonergan's understanding of human consciousness as a dynamic, transcendent experience in which lower levels are sublated by higher ones.[30] We are, however, left with the question as to what such 'going beyond' is oriented towards. What, in fact, do we go beyond to? Where does transcendence lead us?

Lonergan answers the aforementioned questions by pointing out that transcendence leads us to answers, which in turn, lead us to ask further questions. He describes this process as follows:

> Reflection, grasp of the unconditioned, and judgment are not content with mere objects of supposing, defining, considering, but go beyond them to the universe of facts, of being, of what truly is affirmed and really is. Moreover, one can rest content with knowing things as related to us, or one can go beyond that to join the scientists in searching for knowledge of things as related to one another. One can go beyond both common sense and present science, to grasp the dynamic structure of our rational knowing and doing, and then formulate a metaphysics and an ethics. Finally, one can ask whether human knowledge is confined to the universe of proportionate being or goes beyond it to the realm of transcendent being; and this transcendent being may be conceived either relatively or absolutely, either as beyond man or as the ultimate in the whole process of going beyond.[31]

Lonergan develops this point in *Method in Theology*, and more specifically, in his discussion of what he describes as the 'Question of God.' There, he affirms that the transcendental dynamism of the

[28] Lonergan, *Insight*, p. 658.

[29] Ibid.

[30] The term 'sublation' was used by Lonergan to denote that, in the transcendental structure of consciousness, the lower level operations are preserved and complemented (not abolished) by the higher ones. He says, "The sublating set [of operations] introduces operations that are quite new and distinct; it finds among them a new basis and ground; but so far from stunting or interfering with the sublated set, it preserves them integrally, it vastly extends their relevance, and it perfects their performance." See Bernard Lonergan, 'Faith and Beliefs', in Robert C. Croken and Robert M. Doran, eds., *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965–1980*, vol. 17 of *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004), pp. 30–48, at p. 36. Though he does not use the word 'sublation', the idea is implicitly present in the essay entitled 'Horizons', *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965–1980*, pp. 21–2. Lonergan attributes his use of the notion 'sublation' to Karl Rahner. See Lonergan, 'Faith and Beliefs', p. 36, and Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 241.

[31] Lonergan, *Insight*, p. 658.

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human spirit that questions without restriction, and, questions the significance of its own questioning, eventually comes to the question of God.[32] Of course, in invoking the term 'God' Lonergan makes a particular claim in light of his own tradition. At the same time, he posits that this question "will be manifested differently in the different stages of man's historical development and in the many varieties of his culture."[33] However, what he deems to be indisputable is the fact that unless their transcendental subjectivity is mutilated or abolished, human beings are oriented to that which is beyond themselves; something that can be generally referred to as ultimate, holy, or divine.[34]

In 2001, the Dominican theologian Louis Roy published a book entitled, *Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique*. Roy describes such experiences in a way that resembles Lonergan's, at least to a certain extent. He summarily suggests that, "A transcendent experience can be characterized as an event in which individuals, by themselves or in a group, have the impression that they are in contact with something boundless and limitless, which they cannot grasp, and which utterly surpasses human capacities."[35] He elaborates upon this saying, "It is the awareness of being in contact with something that lies beyond one's normal control, power, or understanding."[36] Typical of transcendent experience is that the contact with that which is "boundless and limitless" *always* includes an affective recognition.[37] This is to say that, in speaking of transcendence, we are bound to speak of our response (though not exclusively so) in terms of feeling – we shall revisit this point below when we consider the self-transcendent nature of religious experience.

In addition Roy's fuller account of transcendent experience is significantly more nuanced and the scope of this paper limits us to sketching its contours, which we will now do by (i) focusing on his typological classification of transcendent experience and (ii) enumerating the common elements of all transcendent experiences.[38] According to Roy, transcendent experiences can be classified according to four main types: aesthetic, ontological, ethical, and interpersonal.[39]

[32] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 103

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Louis Roy, *Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. xi.

[36] Ibid., p. 3.

[37] Ibid.

[38] In Chapter 1, Roy alerts us to the fact that, in his view, transcendent experience differs in significant ways from religious experience, as well as from mystical experience and praeternatural phenomena. Referring to R.C. Zaehner, he describes praeternatural phenomena as "visions, auditions, locutions, telepathy, [or] telekinesis." See Ibid.

[39] Ibid., p. 9.

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The clarity of Roy's summary of these types renders it worth quoting in its entirety.

> The first type – the aesthetic – occurs in connection with nature, or the cosmos. It may begin in the enjoyment of a harmony within nature, or in the dread of something utterly threatening. What ensues is either the sense of being part of an encompassing whole, or the feeling of safety that derives from taking refuge in the totally reliable. The second type – the ontological – consists in feeling intellectually secure and grounded in a being that lies beyond contingency and nothingness. In this case, what is discovered is linked with questions of meaning. The third type- the ethical or valuational – is an apprehension of a value, such as justice, solidarity, kindness. The absolute truthfulness of the value is reassuring, whereas its absence is painfully felt. The fourth type – the interpersonal – stems from the quest for loving and includes the sense of a special presence. It consists in the certainty that love is validated by the very fabric of the universe, against all appearances to the contrary.[40]

Roy specifies that the types are distinguished from one another on the basis of the main factor that triggers them and "orients the experiencers toward a particular aspect of reality" as well as eliciting "a particular sort of response, or discovery made through feeling."[41] He further posits that the key "trigger" factor of the aesthetic experience may "be an uneasiness regarding one's place in the sensory world; in the ontological type, an intellectual question; in the ethical type, a moral concern; and in the interpersonal type, a longing for communion."[42]

In addition Roy identifies six elements that he believes are common to all transcendent experiences. First, transcendent experiences are prepared for, or conditioned by a cognitive and affective setting, including one's "frame of mind" and "psychological and existential situation."[43] Second, transcendent experiences are occasioned or triggered by someone or something, such as a particular person or a musical piece.[44] Third, drawing upon the thought of the French phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne, Roy describes the type of feeling that lies at the core of transcendent experiences as aesthetic.[45] As such, transcendent experiences (i) call for a response of one's whole being, (ii) are deeply felt (as opposed to theoretically represented in human thought), and (iii) foster contemplation more directly than they inspire

[40] Ibid., pp. 9–10.
[41] Ibid., p. 9.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Roy, p. 5.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., pp. 5–6.

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action.[46] Fourth, transcendent experiences include a discovery of a so-called "cosmic disclosure" whose significance is unrestricted such that "we are aware of something declaring itself to us, confronting, engaging, and challenging us."[47] Fifth, interpretation is common to all transcendent experiences in the sense that they are reflected upon by the experiencer so that she might understand what has happened. Finally, the sixth common element of transcendent experience, and the one that Roy conceives of as its most desirable culmination, is that it produces some sort of fruit or benefit.[48] Roy identifies conversion as one such fruit and in this regard he distinguishes between two types, one that comes more or less immediately after the experience and, one that takes time to ripen and whose benefits might only become apparent after a considerable period of time.[49] In summary of this last point, we might say that all transcendent experiences head towards conversion, which is itself a lengthy process.

As the primary purpose of this discussion of the nature of transcendent experience is to assist us in developing a fuller understanding of the nature of religious experience, we will now turn to an analysis of the latter.

V. Religious Experience

In *Method in Theology,* Lonergan's discussion of religious experience is heavily indebted to his understanding of transcendence. More specifically, it is based on his understanding of self-transcendence as a normative category that is descriptive of human beings who move through the various levels of consciousness. This point has been aptly summarized by Jim Kanaris, who claims that, "Self-transcendence is all about dynamic transitions within the unity of consciousness."[50] Lonergan maintains that the capacity for self-transcendence is actualized when one falls in love.[51] He elaborated on this by saying that the act of falling in love occasions a state of being in love and, borrowing a term from Newman, labeled such a state as a "first principle" that determines one's desires, fears, joys, sorrows, discernment of values, decisions, and deeds.[52] As John Dadosky expresses it, "The dynamic

[46] Ibid., p. 6.
[47] Ibid., pp. 6–7.
[48] Ibid., pp. 8–9, 140.
[49] Ibid., pp. 8–9.
[50] Kanaris, *Bernard Lonergan's Philosophy of Religion*, p. 35.
[51] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 105.
[52] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 5. See also Bernard Lonergan, 'First Lecture: Religious Experience', in Frederick E. Crowe, ed., *A Third Collection: Papers By Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J.* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), pp. 115–28, at p. 123. Newman described first principles as "the propositions with which we start in reasoning on any

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state of being in love in an unrestricted manner functions as a first principle in the sense that that which one is in love with is the most real and significant feature of one's life."[53]

Lonergan acknowledged different kinds of being in love, including spousal love, filial love, fraternal love, and, love of one's nation.[54] At the same time, he (once again) invoked the particularity of his own tradition to designate being in love with God as distinctly religious experience, which he described as "being in love without limits or qualifications or conditions or reservations."[55] He appealed to Saint Paul to describe it as a "conscious dynamic state of love, joy, peace, that manifests itself in acts of kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5, 22)."[56] The distinguishing feature of religious experience as being in love with God is that it constitutes the *fulfillment* of the capacity for self-transcendence.[57] While the fulfillment that is occasioned by being in love with God "brings about a deep-set joy that can remain despite humiliation, failure, privation, pain, betrayal, [and] desertion," it also manifests itself in concrete actions. This point is highly significant for at least two reasons. First, it underscores the conviction that religious experience cannot be properly understood apart from decisions and actions that are manifested externally.[58] Second, it recognizes that religious experience, on the one hand, and experiences of pain and suffering (which can be affective), on the other hand, are not mutually exclusive. This is to say that being in love with God does not close one off from the very real pain that accompanies, and perhaps even defines us as human beings.

A final and extremely important point that must be noted in regard to Lonergan's understanding of religious experience is its close connection to grace. While his proposal of a "methodical theology"

given subject-matter." John Henry Newman, *An Essay in aid of A Grammar of Assent* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1930), p. 60.

[53] Dadosky, *The Structure of Religious Knowing*, p. 113. Dadosky's description is reminiscent of Paul Tillich's understanding of faith as ultimate concern. See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957). Lonergan makes explicit reference to Tillich's notion of ultimate concern as an example of what he means by 'the dynamic state of being in love.' See Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 106.

[54] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 105; Lonergan, 'Religious Experience', pp. 123–24.

[55] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 106.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., pp. 106, 111. The same point is made by Lonergan when he says that being in love with God is the fulfillment of our conscious intentionality. See Ibid, p. 105.

[58] Due to the primacy that Lonergan assigns to decision and action, he is able to easily connect religious experience to the notion of commitment, which, on his view, is the defining characteristic of the religious person who decides for herself how she is going to live. We are committed to the extent that we make reasonable decisions and act responsibly. See Lonergan, 'First Lecture: Religious Experience,' p. 123.

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presented the challenge of effecting a transposition from speaking of grace in metaphysical/theoretical categories (e.g., sanctifying grace), to speaking of it in terms of interiority (e.g., being in love unrestrictedly), he did not advocate that the prior achievements of Scholastic theology were invalid and ought to be ignored by contemporary theologians.[59]

In *Method in Theology*, Lonergan affirms that, while the gift of God's love notionally differs from sanctifying grace, the two are really the same. In his early work on the systematics of grace, specifically his 1947 treatise, *De ente supernaturali*, Lonergan made more explicit and extensive use of the scholastic tradition to equate sanctifying and habitual grace.[60] He posited that it is by virtue of sanctifying or habitual grace that "we are children of God, sharers in the divine nature, righteous, friends of God."[61] Furthermore, as recipients of grace we are elevated so as to be able to perform acts that lie beyond the natural proportion of our human nature.[62] In other words, God's grace in us finds external expression in meritorious works.[63] In his analysis, Roy suggests that the strict correlation between sanctifying or habitual grace, on the one hand, and meritorious works, on the other hand, allows Lonergan to equate religious experience and religious conversion.[64] Indeed, in his discussion of the threefold notion of conversion (i.e., intellectual, moral, and religious conversion), Lonergan says, "It [religious conversion] is other-worldly falling in love. It is total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations. But it is such a surrender, not as an act, but as a dynamic state that is prior to and principle of subsequent acts."[65] The salient point here is that sanctifying or habitual grace is given prior to the achievement of religious conversion and therefore is the condition

[59] This point is captured well by Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer, who stated, "Lonergan did not advise theologians to follow a strict recipe for a contemporary systematics: (1) ignore the midievals, (2) work out theological foundations through solitary advertence to interiority, (3) derive from those foundations the critical metaphysics that theology needs, and then (4) compare it all to the Scholastics to find out how they really fared." Jacobs-Vandegeer, "Sanctifying Grace in a 'Methodical Theology,'" p. 55.

[60] Bernard J.F. Lonergan, 'On the Supernatural Order,' trans. Michael G. Shields (unpublished manuscript, 2001). The original Latin text is available electronically at http://www.bernardlonergan.com/

[61] Ibid., p. 12.

[62] Jacobs-Vandegeer, 'Sanctifying Grace in a 'Methodical Theology,'' p. 58. Jacobs-Vandegeer does a fine job of clearly summarizing the scholastic notion of sanctifying grace as well as Lonergan's use of it in his early theology of grace, see pp. 57–60.

[63] For a most recent study of Lonergan's presentation of habitual grace, especially with respect to how to he sought to develop it in light of his understanding of the conscious dimensions of human nature, which he labeled as "intentionality analysis," see Jeremy D. Wilkens, 'Grace and Growth: Aquinas, Lonergan, and The Problematic of Habitual Grace,' *Theological Studies* 72 (2011): pp. 723–49.

[64] Roy, *Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique*, p. 140.

[65] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 240.

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of possibility of both religious conversion and religious experience. In the following section we will reflect on how the identification of religious experience with religious conversion allows the latter to function as a rather broad category, especially in regard to dialogue.

VI. Self-Transcendence and Religious Experience

In light of the foregoing explanations of the categories of transcendent and religious experience, we can now relate them to one another. We can recall that in Roy's fourfold typology of transcendent experience each type always includes some sort of affective recognition of that which we feel to be beyond ourselves, yet at the same time, are in contact with.[66] In this regard, religious experience and transcendent experience share something significant in common, for religious experience, at least according to Lonergan, always includes affective recognition, which is to say that it is always an experience in the sense that it grasps our attention.

Another important point of relation between religious and transcendent experience comes to the fore when we consider the nature and role of conversion. As we noted above, Lonergan correlates religious experience with religious conversion. Here, we can extend this correlation to include transcendence, and more specifically, self-transcendence, which simply means that there is a subject who goes beyond herself (e.g., performs certain acts that she was previously unable to perform) as a result of her religious experience and religious conversion, understood as the dynamic state of being in love. Lonergan clearly brings these three notions together by affirming that religious conversion is a modality of self-transcendence.[67] The correlation that Lonergan makes differs from Roy's presentation in that he (Roy) identifies conversion as the sixth and last element of transcendent experience. Thus, while for Lonergan religious experience is synonymous with both religious conversion and religious self-transcendence, Roy reserves conversion, understood as personal transformation, as the culminating element of transcendent experience. Thus, on Roy's view, conversion is indeed desirable, but it is not assumed to be immediately present as an element of transcendent experience. In the end, the upshot of Lonergan's correlation renders religious experience an extremely broad category.[68] This would seem

[66] See pp. 7–8. Roy appeals to Karl Rahner's notion of mystery to express the idea of the presence of transcendent reality that is accessible to human experience. See Ibid., pp. 130–32. Lonergan also refers to Rahner when he speaks of religious experience as an experience of mystery. See Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 106.

[67] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 241.

[68] Roy, *Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique*, p. 140.

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to be the case because any reference to conversion as a transformation in one's actual living implies a state of being in love. With respect to interreligious dialogue, Lonergan's view could be appealed to in order to bring religious experience into the discussion as soon as the dialogue partners acknowledge themselves as persons who: (i) have experienced themselves as being in love, and (ii) have experienced the fruits of being in love as a type of conversion that causes them to act in ways that were previously either inconceivable and/or impossible.

The foregoing references to religious experience as an experience of conversion leads us back to the previous discussion on the nature of grace and Lonergan's identification of the grace that effects religious experience as sanctifying or habitual. Roy invites us to adopt an alternative perspective by considering the nature of grace as *actual*.[69] As summarized by Michael Stebbins,

> Traditionally the term [actual grace] has been used to designate both the grace that prepares sinners to receive habitual grace by causing them more or less gradually to relinquish sin and to turn towards the light that shines forth from the Source of all goodness and truth, and the grace that enables the justified to persevere by strengthening their faith, hope, and charity in time of temptation or special need.[70]

Thus, unlike habitual grace, the reception of actual grace does not necessitate human response, rather, it is gratuitously given by God so as to prepare one to eventually respond to the offer of habitual grace so as to be transformed by it. Roy then suggests that if transcendent experience is equated with actual grace then we can properly think of it as a "summons" to religious conversion, and therefore as religious experience in the widest sense of the term. Once again, religious experience becomes the apex of transcendent experience and conceivably, something that remains a real possibility for those who remain open to the transcendental dynamism of the human spirit.

VII. Conclusion: Some Implications for the Catholic Practice of the Dialogue of Religious Experience

We will bring our reflections to a close by bringing together the various strands of thought that we have appealed to in order to develop a more profound understanding of how the dialogue of religious experience might proceed.

[69] Ibid. p. 140.

[70] J. Michael Stebbins, *The Divine Initiative: Grace, World-Order, and Human Freedom in the Early Writings of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 127.

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The first conclusion that we can draw with respect to the practice of the dialogue of religious experience is that the problem of the particular continues to persist, even if it is not immediately present or acknowledged. From a Catholic perspective, the dialogue of religious experience cannot overlook or minimize the person of Christ.[71] If we speak of religious experience in terms of a "being in love" and, as the culmination of transcendent experience, we are then also bound to acknowledge the presence and activity of grace (either habitual or actual) that effects the transcendental process. In broaching the issues of grace we are immediately led to consider its mediation through the Holy Spirit, which then brings us to the question of Jesus Christ. For Christians in general, and Catholics in particular, Jesus Christ is the person to whom we respond in love and to whom we are converted, so to speak. It would seem that a truly honest dialogue of religious experience must eventually (if not initially) address this problematic and potentially divisive issue. Sidestepping the issue opens the door to thinking about religious experience exclusively in terms of some sort of feeling that we might identify as love and, to speak of it in strictly agreeable terms. The theological problem here is that such a simplistic conception of love stands at odds with the example of Christ's self-sacrificing love that includes much pain and suffering. The challenge revealed by Christ is, then, to understand love as principally self-sacrificing rather than self-satisfying.[72]

The second conclusion that issues from these reflections concerns the place of encounter between the lover and the beloved. Where do human beings encounter Christ today? What is the locus of encounter between creature and Creator? Catholic teaching has clearly affirmed that the locus of encounter is the Church.[73] While the

[71] Maintaining the unity between Christ and the Spirit was one of the chief concerns of *Dominus Iesus*. For example, the Declaration affirmed that the Spirit that affects all peoples, societies, cultures, and religions is the same "same Spirit who was at work in the incarnation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and who is at work in the Church. He is therefore not an alternative to Christ nor does he fill a sort of void which is sometimes suggested as existing between Christ and the Logos." See *Dominus Iesus*, in Stephen J. Pope and Charles Hefling, eds., *Sic et Non*: *Encountering Dominus Iesus* (New York: Orbis, 2002), pp. 3–23. Also available electronically at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html.

[72] I am not suggesting that sacrifice and satisfaction are mutually exclusive or that being in love is primarily a morbid affair in which one must constantly suffer without experiencing joy or pleasure. The point is that when understood in reference to the historical person of Christ, love becomes real in the sense that it co-exists with our earthly experience of suffering.

[73] See, for example, *Dominus Iesus* §16, "Indeed, Jesus Christ continues his presence and his work of salvation in the Church and by means of the Church (cf. Col 1:24–27), which is his body (cf. 1 Cor 12:12–13, 27; Col 1:18). And thus, just as the head and members of a living body, though not identical, are inseparable, so to Christ and the Church can be confused nor separated, and constitute a single 'whole Christ.'" See also,

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Church is certainly the place where we personally participate in the sacramental life, this life is not purely private; rather, it is communal. Lonergan emphatically makes this point, by saying, "The Christian Church is the community that results from the outer communication of Christ's message and the inner gift of God's love."[74] If religious experience is indeed an encounter with the person of Christ, and if that encounter occurs in the context of the Church, then the encounter is communal and, as such, one that presumably engenders human fellowship. Hence, it would be odd if one were to engage in the dialogue of religious experience without having some connection to a religious community in which that experience is both nourished and sustained. At the same time, we must acknowledge the fact that, in many parts of the world (e.g., the so-called secularized or detraditionalized west), an increasing number of people have no connection to a religious community. This situation poses problems for the dialogue of religious experience, especially when the dialogue is attempted by religious persons whose lives are heavily influenced by a community and, those who consider themselves to be religious but attempt to live out their commitment on their own.

These conclusions point up the fact that the dialogue of religious experience continues to be a personal and communal challenge. While Catholics can certainly appeal to the transcendental character of religious experience, they must do so with a cautious sense of optimism. As we have seen, the challenges posed by particularity have not been completely overcome. It is only by squarely facing this issue that Catholics can attempt to construct an open, honest, and serious dialogue that acknowledges the specificity of the tradition, while at the same time being receptive and respectful of the specificities of others.

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Dominus Iesus §20, "Above all else, it must be *firmly believed* that "the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church."

[74] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 361.

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