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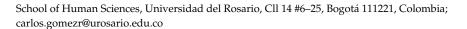
Diversity and Interpretation. Toward a Pluralist Realist Description of Religious Experience

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Abstract: This paper attempts to offer a pluralist realist account of the diversity of religious experience. In the first part, I show that an influential trend in contemporary philosophy of religious experience and religious pluralism is based on the mediational image of knowledge and a problematic notion of interpretation, which generates irresoluble problems. I then attempt a redescription based on an extension of Heidegger's theory of understanding as pre-theorical engagement with the world, which allows for the conciliation of the diversity of religious experience with its claimed epistemic force. To develop this argument, finally, I present the experience of diversity proper of the contemporary world as a type of spiritual experience in which the traits of a pre-theoretical religious understanding can be found. As a result, the paper suggests a move from epistemology to spirituality for a better understanding of religious experience.

Keywords: realism and anti-realism; religious pluralism; transcendence; hermeneutics; spirituality

1. Introduction

The possibility of experientially encountering the divine, supreme reality is integral to many religious traditions. This form of experience is regarded not only as the highest source of knowledge but also as one of the most valued goals of human life. A religious lifestyle strives to be in contact with the divine, to cultivate its presence and ground every other aspect of life in this source. This implies the claim that religious experience has cognitive value, that is, that it provides legitimate knowledge about that which the mystics experience as the supreme reality. It does not matter whether this knowledge can only be communicated indirectly, pointed out by means of symbols, and never fully encapsulated in propositions. Religious traditions nonetheless claim that there is knowledge of the divine which is revealed in religious experience. This experience is then appealed to as a source of support and justification for religious beliefs, doctrines, and practices.

However, the diversity of descriptions of what is discovered in mystical experience seems to challenge this claim. The apparent incompatibility among the mystics' reports generates what has become a classic problem in the philosophy of religion. How to account for the diversity of religious experience in a way that still permits it to maintain its cognitive value? In which cases should conflicting descriptions be taken as an indicator of the falseness of religious belief? Is it possible to evaluate diverse beliefs by assessing the power of religious experience to justify or ground them? There have been many important attempts to answer these kinds of questions (e.g., Alston 1991; Griffiths 2001; Hick 2004). However, the questions themselves are grounded in a series of presuppositions that require careful exploration, for they condition the way in which religious experience is understood.

Clearly, they presuppose that it is possible to determine in which cases diverse accounts are contradictory, incompatible, or mutually exclusive. (See Alston 1991, 256ff). Likewise, the questions assume that the kind of unity and universality that we commonly demand from knowledge in other domains, such as science, must also be valid regarding religious truth-claims. Finally, they take for granted that the apparent incompatibility of descriptions of the divine is somehow scandalous, either raising a challenge to its existence or

diminishing the validity or trustworthiness of religious beliefs (cf. Griffiths 2001, 66ff). All these presuppositions, in turn, are based on a deeper, more fundamental assumption—that which has shaped western epistemology and which, even though combated by different thinkers since the twentieth century, still haunts us. It is the mediational image of knowledge, based on the subject-object dichotomy, as the basic framework for understanding perception, knowledge, and our place in the world (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015).

In this paper, I want to show how an account of religious experience based on this image leads to irresoluble dilemmas regarding the way in which diversity challenges the epistemic validity of religious experience. I will focus primarily on those accounts that explain diversity as a result of interpretation. Given that they typically assume a theory of interpretation based on the mediational image, I will then explore an alternative view, based on Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics in *Being and Time*. My guiding idea will be that a description of religious experience, built on the notion of understanding as pre-theoretical coping with reality, helps to overcome the mediational image and to conciliate its plurality and its noetic quality. This will require finding a type of experience of the transcendent, whose pre-theoretical traits can be described. The experience of religious diversity itself will be explored in this direction.

2. Experience and Interpretation

The very idea that it is possible to have an *experience of* the divine seems to imply a problematic tension. This is so because, since Kant, a very extended philosophical position affirms that all experience is mediated or constituted by the concepts of the experiencer, and thus an immediate experience of the transcendent, that is, of the divine reality that surpasses all concepts and words, would seem impossible. On the contrary, the concepts proper to the mystic's culture would structure her experience generating its particular content. The plurality of experiences would be the result. All experiences, including mystical experiences, would be already forms of interpretation. This line of argument is the heart of influential theories of religious experience. In this section, I want to explore two of them, showing how they rest on a problematic view of interpretation.

In his 1978 extensively discussed paper, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism," Steven Katz claims that "There are NO pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences. [...] all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways" (Katz 1978, p. 26). Thus, contesting those theories that affirm that there is a common, universal core in all religious experiences that would then be interpreted through the different conceptual and linguistic resources of the mystics, Katz claims that "the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience" (p. 26). Diversity would then lie on the experience itself and not only on its descriptions. It would be the product of what he calls "pre-experiential configurative elements" (p. 34), such as the previous beliefs, images, symbols, forms of practice, language, and other cultural conditions of the mystic. Therefore, there is no way to equate the mystical experiences of different traditions for they would be *caused* by preconditioning factors.

Since this sort of position immediately raises the question of the epistemic validity of religious experience, Katz advances an additional thesis, which he calls ontological but does not fully develop. A noted characteristic of most mystical states is what William James called their "noetic quality": "they are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect" (James [1902] 2002, p. 380). Mystics claim to have been in contact with the supreme reality, the source and ground of all other forms of reality, and even if it defies full expression in words, it is experienced in a certain way, having certain characteristics symbolically expressed in terms such as infinite love, compassion, vacuity, blissful consciousness, etc. Thus, Katz must account for the relationship between the conceptual scheme of the mystic and the "object" of her experience. Indeed, either there is nothing divine and concepts simply make up the referent of the experience, or there must be a way in which that which is organized by concepts also determines the content of

the experience (p. 64). Without fully committing to an answer, he seems to be inclined to affirm that different experiences are not only the product of diverse culturally determined conceptual and belief systems but also are experiences of "different phenomena" (p. 52).

However, this polytheistic alternative remains obscured, for he does not offer a way to relate the conceptual system of the mystic with that which is experienced in a way that the content of the experience may be at least partially defined by a transcendent reality which reveals itself in experience. In the end, for Katz, "[t]here seems no other way to get at the issue that would be philosophically satisfactory":

> There is no evidence that there is any 'given' which can be disclosed without the imposition of the mediating conditions of the knower. All 'givens' are also the product of the processes of 'choosing,' 'shaping,' and 'receiving.' That is, the 'given' is appropriated through acts which shape it into forms which we can make intelligible to ourselves given our conceptual constitution, and which structure it in order to respond to the specific contextual needs and mechanisms of consciousness of the receiver. (p. 59)

All the weight of this process lies on the side of the "receiver," making the "given" irrelevant. This, of course, generates an irresoluble dilemma: if religious experience is the product of the previous concepts of the mystic, then it lacks real epistemic value. It cannot disclose any real knowledge of the divine but only reproduce cultural preconceptions that go to configure experience. Where do these preconceptions spring from? They cannot be universal a priori categories because there happen to be different experiences. Neither, however, can they be originated in experience. As a result, all religious experiences would be fiction, and the conceptual schemes of the mystics vacuous. If this is so, then it is not even necessary to look for a way to reconcile the diversity of religious experiences with the claim that they are states of knowledge. Rather than a pluralistic theory or religious experience, Katz's would betray a secret naturalistic stance.

In any case, Katz's way of understanding religious experience is an example of what Terry Godlove calls the framework model in religious studies (Godlove 1997), which extends from Kant through Durkheim to other contemporary thinkers. According to this model, religious concepts would organize certain neutral data or raw material somehow "given" in sensation. This implies a dichotomy between a conceptual scheme (the belief system, culture, language, etc.) of the mystic and that which is given and cannot be directly apprehended. How can we understand that there is something there which does not impinge on, affect, or interpellate us in any sense and then is interpreted? For Godlove, this dichotomy is superfluous because, if there were some uninterpreted content, and it were non-conceptual and non-discursive, then nothing could be said about it ,and it would thus lack any explanatory power. Conversely, if there were something discursive in the "given," it would already be part of the reality that is supposed to be the product of the interpretative process (86ff).

Beyond these sorts of logical difficulties, the scheme/content dichotomy reveals a more fundamental problem. Transcendence is always lost either because it is not possible to establish a significant relationship with "it", or because whatever can be grasped or "received" is always organized, structured, or constituted by the activities of the subject of experience. Indeed, the scheme/content model is only an expression of the subject/object dichotomy proper of modern western philosophy, which from the beginning hinders an appropriate understanding of experience and religious diversity. According to this image of knowledge, the most basic and original human way of being in the world is that of a "disengaged agent," who

> In perceiving the world takes 'bits' of information from his or her surroundings, and then 'processes' them in some fashion, in order to emerge with the 'picture' of the world he or she has; the individual then acts on the basis of this picture to fulfill his or her goals, through a 'calculus' of means and ends. (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, p. 92)

Thus, according to this picture, there would be an inner space (the conscious mind) confronted by the "outer" space of the world with which we always relate through representations. The disengaged agent has no world, is not part of reality, but stands before it as a separate, independent subject. Her task is either to check and secure her belief formation process, making each representation accurately *correspond* to the world, or to turn her attention towards her inner processes to discover that they *constitute* what counts as the world—it being impossible for her to move outside her conceptual apparatus to check whether her beliefs coincide with an independent reality. Both realist and anti-realist positions presuppose the picture (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, p. 58).

In the case of Katz's theory of religious experience, the image holds even if the "object" of experience is not an external element of the world but what the mystics claim to be the supreme reality. The experiencer and that which is experienced are placed apart in a sort of confrontation from which an interpretation emerges. Only thus can it be claimed that something is conceptually structured as the content of experience. Indeed, to use Heidegger's terminology, the divine thus construed as an object of experience becomes a being among others, which in Western thought is then identified as the being who grounds all other beings, the first principle, causa sui, etc. (Heidegger [1957] 1969, 59ff). In non-theistic traditions, even pure consciousness would be the result of the interpretative construction of the mystic rather than its overcoming. Certainly, Katz's typically modern emphasis on the spontaneity and activity of the subject's conceptual apparatus directly contradicts an extended aim of spiritual practice in many traditions, described with the images of forgetting, emptying, quietening, and dissolving oneself in order to let the divine manifest in its transcendence (Forman 1990, 30ff).

The mediational picture of knowledge, as Taylor and Dreyfus called it (2015), implies a distance between subject and object somehow facilitated by representations. They either grasp or constitute the way things are, depending on the realist or anti-realist orientation of the epistemological view in question, but regardless of that orientation, that which is represented becomes available, fixed, and dominated. It is turned into an object. Domesticated and purged from its irreducibility, it can be made present to the mind again and again (re-presented) and used for the different purposes and needs that knowledge serves. If religious experience is thought up based on the mediational model, awareness of the divine presupposes the priority of an acting consciousness in which the divine is apprehended as an intentional object, and interpreted according to certain concepts, thus losing its transcendence (cf. Levinas 1996, p. 135).

How can we move beyond the mediational picture to understand the diversity of religious experience? Clearly, we need to find a way to include and account for the historical, cultural, and situational character of human experience while doing justice to the revelatory, meaning-giving, interpellating character of the divine, in a way that safeguards transcendence. This would imply elaborating on a notion of interpretation able to overcome the subject/object dichotomy and the representational model of thinking.

Let us explore another very influential theory of religious experience, which aims to account for religious diversity while maintaining the fundamental claim of religions of providing knowledge and forms of contact with divine reality. According to John Hick, human experience is the result of a process of interpretation that discovers the "significance" or "meaning" of reality at different levels. "Significance" means to Hick the feature of human consciousness that makes possible the experience of a "world," that is, of an ordered, stable, and intelligible place in which we can purposefully act. It can be defined as "the perceived character of an aspect of our environment which renders a particular type of response appropriate" (Hick 2004, p. 132). Thus, significance is a pragmatic notion that involves judgments about the appropriateness of actions in relation to the environment.

Here we find an interesting alternative both to a radical constructivist and a direct-realist understanding of significance. Finding or attributing the significance of a particular object or situation entails neither arbitrarily projecting or conferring order and meaning on a structureless, raw material, nor copying reality or getting to the way things are in

themselves. Rather, it implies determining the kind of reactions that allow us to deal with them in a way appropriate for our needs and interests. Thus, in the pragmatist fashion, "the significance of a given object or situation for a given individual consists in the practical difference which the existence of that object makes to that individual" (Hick 1988, p. 100). Accordingly, significance is a relational concept. It always implies a consciousness for which something is significant and thus cannot be separated from the particular cognitive constitution, as well as from the interest and situation of the interpreter. Correspondingly, interpretations are modes of action that are verified in our environment. Right interpretations are those that allow us to successfully act in the world, which necessarily has an existence and form independent of our beliefs (cf. James [1907] 2000, 87ff).

In this way, Hick tries to reconcile a basic realist stance with the recognition of conceptual pluralism. Our relationship with reality is mediated by fundamental cognitive freedom derived from its ambiguity (2004, p. 12): it does not impose on us a unique image but can be experienced and represented in different ways. The possibility of producing alternative interpretations, however, varies according to the level at which it occurs. At the level of physical significance, we deal with natural laws to which we must respond in an appropriate manner if we are to survive, and consequently, cognitive freedom is very limited. However, all our perceptions are interpretations and have a tentative, hypothetical character, even if they are constantly, and most of the time unconsciously, tested against experience. All perception, and more broadly all conscious experience, is a form of what Hick calls, following Wittgenstein, "experiencing-as."

"We see it as we interpret it," affirms Wittgenstein in the second part of *Philosophical Investigations,* referring to puzzle pictures, such as those in which a spectator can either see a duck or a rabbit (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 193). Hick enlarges the notion of seeing-as to cover all conscious experience. For him "identifying" or "recognizing" something as a particular kind of object does not mean having a pure act of perception but involves using concepts provided by our culture to determine what kind of thing the perceived object is (Hick 2004, pp. 140–42).

The second level of significance identified by Hick is the moral aesthetic. Here cognitive freedom is larger, to the point that we can refuse to accept a moral obligation to other persons or understand it in very different terms. Finally, there is the religious level of significance where cognitive freedom reaches its maximum degree. Reality is "religiously ambiguous in that it is possible to interpret it, intellectually and experientially, both religiously and naturalistically" (2004, p. 12). The first case implies, for theistic religions, the recognition of the presence of God in the universe:

> The primary religious perception, or basic act of religious interpretation, is not to be described as either a reasoned conclusion or an unreasoned hunch that there is a God. It is, putatively, an apprehension of the divine presence within the believer's human experience. It is not an inference to a general truth, but a "divine-human encounter," a mediated meeting with the living God. (Hick 1988, p. 115)

Now, in what sense can we talk about a "primary perception" or a "basic act" of interpretation at any of the three levels? If having an experience is always finding the significance or meaning of an object or situation, and this, in turn, is a process of identifying that object with a concept, in which sense could an interpretation be more basic than others?

At this point, we find that Hick's theory of experience is unable to lead us beyond the dilemmas typical of the mediational model of knowledge. On one hand, there is a "basic act of interpretation" which "discloses to us the existence of the sphere [of significance] in question, thus providing the ground for our multifarious detailed interpretations within that sphere" (Hick 1988, p. 108), On the other hand, the existence of each realm can only be perceived through concepts, which are previous to experience insofar as they make it possible. Thus, this theory is subject to the same irresolvable conundrum as Katz's: What

is the origin of concepts, and how do they relate to that which they interpret? (Gómez 2020, pp. 131, 170).

At the religious level, from the theistic point of view, it is the existence of God that makes the recognition of the religious realm possible. This realm is not a mere projection of purely human concepts, derived, for example, from the physical or moral spheres, but an ontologically different level of significance. However, the concepts by means of which a theist performs this basic act of interpretation have been made available to her through a particular religious and cultural tradition. If the concept of God were not available in this way, she could not have this experience. For that reason, in *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick introduces the term "the Real" to refer to the transcendental noumenal reality, which is interpreted through different culturally determined concepts to produce the great variety of religious experiences of humankind, both in the theistic and non-theistic traditions (236ff).

Once again, we find the tension between our conceptual schemes, which inform the recognition of significance, and *that* (the Real) which is being experienced through them. How can our concepts be simultaneously inadequate to their object and allow for a pragmatically appropriate organization of experience?

I share the spirit of Katz and Hick's pluralism. However, it seems to me that the way in which it has been here accounted for is unable to escape the dilemmas of the mediational picture of knowledge. Interpretation is understood as a process by means of which something is identified (or constituted, seeing-as, grasped as a certain entity) by means of concepts. Thus, concepts, taken as mental representations, are given the primordial role in the picture and, as "mediators" between two separate realms, generate irresolvable problems. We need a different view of interpretation to move beyond this picture.

3. Understanding as Coping and Religious Experience

As it is well known, in *Being and Time* Heidegger develops a decisive critique of the mediational image and offers an alternative based on our being-in-the-world. Rather than as a mental process by means of which we discover or confer meaning to reality, he views understanding (*Verstehen*) as a way of coping with the world, that is, as being able to do something, to dwell in a pre-theoretical manner (Heidegger [1927] 2001, p. 183). Before any conceptual operation by means of which we make an aspect of reality an object of knowledge, we inhabit a world already meaningful, in which we purposely act and live, a world to which we are committed in our daily practices. Being-in-the-world, as the basic mode of human existence, means to be concerned (according to Macquarrie & Robinson's translation of *Besorgen*), involved, or practically engaged in different activities by means of which we understand ourselves and the world (Heidegger [1927] 2001, p. 83). This form of understanding is that of the knowing-how to interact with particular contexts, situations, and scenarios embodied in our practices and forms of dwelling (Dreyfus 1995, pp. 46, 86, 111, 184).

We find here an interesting similitude with William James's pragmatist theory of truth that we can only point out here. For him, even if the basic definition of truth continues to be the agreement of an idea with reality, this agreement cannot be understood as a metaphysical "inert static relation" (James [1907] 2000, p. 88). On the contrary,

> To 'agree' in the widest sense with a reality can only mean to be guided either straight up to it or its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we disagreed. (93)

True ideas help us to *deal* with and successfully adapt to reality. This capability is not reflected in a sort of external, purely theoretical verification process but in the fact that they work in our activities. That is, they "pay us," helping us to avoid "endless inconsistency and frustration" (93) in our experience. For Heidegger, however, it is not ideas that represent the primordial place of truth and understanding. Before explicit

thematization and formulation of concepts, we already move in a meaningful world. Our understanding of reality is implicit, embodied in our practices and forms of dealing. Only based on this primordial form of understanding, and as a derived mode, are theories and conceptual systems formulated (Heidegger [1927] 2001, p. 88).

Now, for Heidegger, in this primordial understanding proper of our being concerned, involved in-the-world, "the world" cannot be taken as a neutral, "external" collection of objects or states of affairs. The world is already a network of pragmatic significations established in *Dasein's* practices and forms of life. Instead of objects that are there either to be neutrally represented or that, immanent to consciousness, are discovered to have been intentionally constituted, *Dasein* lives by constellations of "equipment" (*Zeuge*), thas is, of the "things" that we use in-order-to something (97). In this sense, what configures the meaning of the world is the pragmatic character of the "entities" with which we deal in our activities, and which are integrated into totalities. Thus is

> Equipment [. . .] always is *in terms of* its belonging to other equipment: ink-stand, pen, ink, paper, blotting pad, table, lamp, furniture, windows, doors, rooms. These 'things' never show themselves proximally as they are from themselves, so as to add up to a sum of *realia* and fill up a room. What we encounter as closest to us (though not as something taken as a theme) is the room; and we encounter it not as something 'between four walls' in a geometrical spatial sense, but as equipment for residing. (98)

We inhabit totalities of meaning from which particular elements emerge as something-for-something. This is the primordial form of understanding: knowing-how to skillful use equipment within the significative network to which it belongs. Representations and concepts, aimed at thematically grasping what an object is, what its properties are, and so forth, come only in a second place and as a modification of this basic involvement with things. The pragmatic character of understanding, however, is not merely utilitarian, for in dealing with the world, we understand ourselves in a certain manner, e.g., as being someone, caring for certain things, belonging to a certain culture or group, etc. Moreover, we *project* possibilities of what we can be and do. In this sense, this primordial form of understanding, whose core is skillful coping with reality, is relational. This means that reality is discovered from a certain perspective, generated by our interests, needs, and forms of life. Thus, in our practical involvement

> The environing Nature [*die Umweltnatur*] is discovered and is accessible to everyone. In roads, streets, bridges, buildings, our concern discovers Nature as having some definite direction. A covered railway platform takes account of bad weather; an installation for public lighting takes account of the darkness . . . (100)

The key point is that "nature is discovered in some definite direction" *before* thematization and conceptualization. The meaning of the world already lies embodied in our ways of coping, in our concrete manners of interaction and forms of life. This meaning includes both the way in which we use things (equipment) and the constraints and possibilities of "nature," which allow for something to be successfully used *for something*. Interpretation, then, does not produce understanding but presupposes it (188). Unlike Hick's theory, it is not a process by means of which we identify concepts with objects, but rather is a way of clarifying, disclosing, and developing what already has been implicitly and pre-thematically understood in our dealings:

> In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a 'signification' over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by the interpretation. (191)

We move from what has been already understood through interpretation to new, and sometimes better and richer, forms of understanding. This is the circular nature of the hermeneutic process. What is important for our discussion is that in this hermeneutic image

of interpretation, both diversity of perspectives and the "way things are" are included because even if we are always situated in a particular horizon of fore-understanding, constituted by elements such as the fore-conceptions and forms of dealing with things proper to the traditions we live in, the "first, last, and constant task" of interpretation is to work out these fore-structures "in terms of the things themselves," not allowing them to be simply "presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions" (195). Thus, interpretation does not only make explicit what we already understand but also serves to revise and, when necessary, correct it. Given the circular nature of interpretation, the hermeneutic process implies permanent change and transformation.

The historical and situated character of all our dealings with the world is therefore not incompatible with discovering it from the perspectives that our interested practices open. A plurality of forms of understanding is compatible with basic realism. The fact that the world is always interpreted does not mean that our interpretations are barriers that keep us apart from the way, forever lost and inaccessible, that things really are. On the contrary, our historically situated practices of understanding and interpretation are forms of being in contact and inhabit a reality to which we belong. In the words of Taylor and Dreyfus, "At the most basic, preconceptual level, the understanding I have of the world is not simply constructed or determined by me. It is a 'coproduction' of me and the world" (2015, p. 93).

Could this alternative image of understanding offer a mode to better account for religious experience in a way that allows both for its phenomenological diversity and its epistemic potentiality?

One may argue that Heidegger's hermeneutic theory would be unable to include the experience of the transcendent, given its emphasis on the finitude and historicity of *Dasein* and its world. The pragmatically oriented network of significations that conforms "the world" is for-the-sake-of *Dasein*, and there is neither world, nor reality, nor truth but *for the Dasein*. Thus, all meaning is immanent to *Dasein's* being-in-the-world. This line of argument can be found in important Christian critics of Heidegger's project. (See Wolfe 2014, 174ff). We cannot explore all of them here, but for our aims, it is important to recall Edith Stein's fundamental insight according to which the priority given to *Dasein* as the only possible way of accessing the question of the meaning of being implies a limitation of meaning to human understanding (Stein 2007, p. 82). As we have pointed out, one of the typically reported characteristics of mystical experience is that it breaks into immanence to challenge and shake all taken-for-granted understanding not only to generate a revision and correction of what we believe but mainly to reveal forms of meaning that do not let themselves be reduced and encapsulated in words and concepts. The transcendence of the divine, which is experienced as ineffable (cf. James [1902] 2002, p. 380), seems to break into the world, bringing a meaning which cannot be accounted for as emerging from *Dasein's* concernment and skillful coping. For this reason, allowing for transcendence implies an effort to open the space for forms of meaning and intelligibility that question and break the priority of immanence, finitude, and *Dasein's* involvement (cf. e.g., Levinas 1996, p. 168; Marion 2012, 41ff).

In this direction, however, it may be possible to use and expand Heidegger's image to account for religious experience. This would imply, first, showing that there are ways of "coping" with the divine which correspond to the pre-theoretical forms of understanding proper of our engaged dealings with the world and, second, that either we can have meaningful experience *beyond* our being-in-the-world (cf. Stein 2007, 76ff), or that we can encounter a transcendent meaning also *there*, in our concernment and involvement with the world.

4. Diversity as a Daily Experience of Transcendence

Religious forms of life and practice may present clear examples of modes of preconceptual "dealing" with the divine. Many spiritual traditions offer testimonies and paths to such direct, unmediated understanding. They, however, will not be the focus of my exploration here. We are trying to find a way to account for the diversity of religious expe-

rience that overcomes the framework model, showing that there is an embodied form of spiritual understanding that takes place before conceptual thematization. Religious forms of life and practice normally belong to traditions in which the meaning of experience and life are already conceptually thematized (including trans-conceptual forms of experience). Assuming that there should be a movement between pure, non-interpreted experience and its conceptual interpretation would be to fall into the framework model. Accordingly, we must look for another kind or dimension of human experience that could also be a place of contact with the divine. There may be many candidates, but here I would like to test a somehow unexpected path proper to the secular, pluralist, and diffuse intellectual and spiritual situation of our epoch.

As we saw before, overcoming the framework model does not require abandoning historical consciousness, that is, the awareness of the situated character of understanding. We live and move in horizons of meaning that do not separate us from an inaccessible, noumenal reality but are forms of relationship with reality (cf. Gadamer [1975] 2004, 269ff, 285). While there is no complete, absolute understanding since it starts from and includes the perspectives allowed by our interests, needs, and historical forms of practice, we could not skillfully cope with reality and successfully do whatever we do if reality were not "discovered as having some definite direction." Our horizons of meaning move, change, and may be bound to dissolve in the future, and yet they are grounded.

Thus, in our historicity already lies a form of contact with transcendence which has not been thematized with religious concepts: *that* which allows and grounds all our ways of skillful coping cannot be exhausted; fully encapsulated; or dominated by any practice, form of coping, or conceptual scheme. *It* both makes possible our diverse interested ways of being in the world and challenges them, motivating their historical transformations. Might this tacit experience of transcendence, proper to our contemporary self-understanding, include a way of encountering the divine?

A particular kind of angst and sense of disorientation usually accompanies our contemporary awareness of historicity. We live and move in culturally configured worlds of meaning among a plurality of alternatives in which we could either have been born or to which we can "convert." Even those who try to recover a strong sense of authority and soteriological exclusivity for their traditions face the challenge of encountering the analogous claims of others who cannot be unthoughtfully dismissed. No belief system or horizon of meaning can take its superiority for granted or unproblematically claim the pre-eminence of its truth claims. However, no spiritual tradition can renounce the idea that there is the truth, the Real, the Supreme good, and so forth and that it manifests itself to or is attainable by human beings.

May it be that these tensions, challenges, and anguish that encountering diversity invite constitute themselves, prior to any conceptual interpretation, religious or philosophical, a place to meet the divine appropriate for our contemporary predicament? What would the traits of the primordial understanding implicit in that experience be? How could we access and explore them? Poetic exploration offers a unique starting point. Let us hear the voice of North American poet Christian (Wiman 2020, p. 18):

> All my friends are finding new beliefs.
> This one converts to Catholicism and this one to trees.
> In a highly literary and hitherto religiously-indifferent Jew
> God whomps on like a genetic generator.
> Paleo, Keto, Zone, South Beach, Bourbon.
> Exercise regimens so extreme she merges with machine.
> One man marries a woman twenty years younger
> and twice in one brunch uses the word *verdant*;
> another's brick-fisted belligerence gentles
> into dementia, and one, after a decade of finical feints and teases
> like a sandpiper at the edge of the sea,
> decides to die.

> Priesthoods and beasthoods, sombers and glees,
> high-styled renunciations and avocations of dirt,
> sobrieties, satieties, pilgrimages to the very bowels of being . . .
> All my friends are finding new beliefs
> and I am finding it harder and harder to keep track
> of the new gods and the new loves,
> and the old gods and the old loves,
> and the days have daggers, and the mirrors motives,
> and the planet's turning faster and faster in the blackness,
> and my nights, and my doubts, and my friends,
> my beautiful, credible friends.

The poem's two main sections, each starting with the reiterated verse ("All my friends
. . . "), present two sides of the experience of diversity in our contemporary world: the
fluidity and leveling homogeneity with which the most dissimilar quests for meaning occur
and the perplexity that arises. They are all *finding* and not only looking for so that these
quests are lived as leading somewhere. It is not the nihilistic state of decades ago, where the
prominent and dramatic experience was that of there being nothing to find, because God is
dead and everything is "Emptier and deeper than you are, O Heaves!" (Baudelaire). Here
everyone's thirst and drive move them to some outcome that, rather than fuzzy uncertainty,
may be presented with the solidity of "new beliefs." However, these outcomes, which
involve decided and extreme commitments, are not only as assorted and publicly available
as commercial products but also cannot be placed in any hierarchical order or appraised
with any sort of evaluative criteria. Types of diet, exercise regimes, dementia, traditional
religion, love, voluntary death—all are leveled as equally valid alternatives in a common
space.

However, the radical seriousness of the most fundamental and definitive commitments
and expectations does not let them be trivialized by the leveling power of the common space.
They keep their personal, authentic character as "pilgrimages to the very bowels of being,"
even though are broadcasted, commercial alternatives. This generates a particular contrast
that constantly emerges throughout the poem. Our deepest longing for deep meaning
can be satisfied, but what there is to be found cannot claim to be universally compelling
or satisfying, as would seem to be expected from our ultimate concerns. Maximum
commitment is not concomitant with ultimacy. Some church or nature, ascetic diets or
bourbon, sobrieties and satieties, "Priesthoods and beasthoods" all are pursued by some
honest, highly committed friend.

How do we cope with this contemporary shape of pluralism? The flow from one
option to the next is so vertiginous and the choices so disparate that it is harder and harder
to grasp them and organize them into a coherent, unifying system or narrative. Velocity
and impermanence cannot be inscribed in a bigger picture. From above, taking distance
to see the planet turning, trying to escape the particularities of each path or choice, there
is only blackness. Doubt about how everything fits together, however, neither disturbs
the significance of the choices and paths nor calls into question what we can find through
them. It is not that the diversity of testimonies counts as an argument against the reality of
the divine, like in Hume's famous disjunctive, according to which "in matters of religion,
whatever is different is contrary" so that every miracle or appeal to experience that is
brought in support of the claims of one religious tradition has "the same force, though
more indirectly, to overthrow every other system" (Hume [1748] 2007, p. 106). Diversity
here, on the contrary, implies that even if there is no way to unify distinct spiritual quests
into a single picture, they are honest and legitimate, requiring no further justification than
the force of personal commitment and the extent to which they lead to *finding something*.

Thus, the contrast and perplexities generated by the experience of diversity do not
end up in total confusion or despair. The final line remits again to friendship and the
beauty and trustworthiness of the seekers. In our contemporary situation, the others, the
different, are not any longer those belonging to alien cultures or religions but the closest

friends. Since their alternatives are also ours, alterity becomes internalized in the life path of everyone. The reliability of the loved ones, who are also the different, testifies in favor of their "beliefs." However, this testimony cannot work for the interests of an epistemologist or apologist, who wants to secure the rationality or truth of their traditions. It is personal testimony in the sense of existential commitment with the adventure of looking for the divine, which cannot any longer be assessed in traditional epistemic terms but for its beauty and trustworthiness. Only these two stand out and endure as the nearest, secure pole around which all things transient revolve.

Just like in the case of Heidegger's primordial understanding, alternative practices and paths are forms of contact with a reality that makes them possible and confers trustworthiness to those who, through their commitments, are finding new beliefs. As none of these beliefs can encapsulate and explain diversity by means of a synthetic unity, their legitimacy becomes their authenticity. It is not simply that everything goes uncritically or that all practices or beliefs are equally valid. Rather, no belief or practice will be definitive. For that reason, it is not they that stand out or can be somehow assessed but the seekers, their beauty and trustworthiness. This allows for a maximum degree of plurality while recognizing that spiritual experiences are grounded in reality. The focus moves from the systems to the searches.

In this description, transcendence remains as a challenge to any attempt to totalization, as the ground that allows something to be found and as the mobilizing force that animates the incessant search. This experience of diversity represents a sui generis form of religious experience. What this basic, primordial understanding tells us about ourselves and the divine remains to be conceptually developed in further interpretations.

5. From Epistemology to Spirituality

The experience of diversity in the contemporary world offers an example of pre-theoretical understanding in which what is experienced is not the content of a particular belief but transcendence itself. This motivates an important move from the consideration of conflicting belief systems to alternative practices and quests for meaning as the appropriate locus for understanding the plurality of religious experience. This move corresponds to what can be regarded as a key transformation taking place in contemporary philosophy of religion, which gives priority to spirituality over the classic issues related to the rationality of belief (e.g., Cottingham 2003, 2005). Can spirituality integrate our extension of Heidegger's hermeneutic theory of understanding into a coherent redescription of the diversity of religious experience? To finish this exploratory paper, I would like to delineate some basic elements of a notion of spirituality that could affirmatively answer that question.

Even if the term spirituality nowadays seems vague and diffuse, it has an important advantage: "it does not seem to provoke, straight off, the kind of immediately polarized reaction one finds in the case of religion" (Cottingham 2005, p. 3). Indeed, it allows us to move beyond the elements commonly associated with religion, such as belief and doctrine, with their concomitant emphasis on justification and rationality, toward what can be regarded as the core of "religious" commitment from the perspective of lived experience, that is, a form of life committed to the search for the meaning of life, a deeper self-understanding, personal and communitarian growth and transformation, and similar concerns and involvements. All of these may be embraced without requiring an explicitly endorsed metaphysical doctrine or alliance to a particular tradition or institution.

Some authors highlight inner transformation as the central element of spirituality. In its religious articulation, it is expressed as the central aim of many traditions: *metanoia*, liberation, enlightenment, etc. (cf. Cottingham 2003, 79ff; Hadot 1999, pp. 21, 132; Hick 2004, pp. 32, 300). In the contemporary scenario of pluralism, this inner transformation is linked to exercises and practices coming from a variety of sources and traditions. These practices are aimed at leading towards a kind of experience characterized by its power to illuminate life, conduce flourishing, and, in important cases, motivate communitarian and social welfare.

Now, even if the term "spirituality" is open enough as to include a wide variety of attitudes, lifestyles, and views regarding what constitutes human flourishing, many of which may be regarded as "non-religious" (cf. Taylor 2007, pp. 508, 539), in the sense that is relevant for us, it does not simply merge with all sorts of stances regarding what constitutes a flourishing life. Its core experience implies the awareness of a transcendent, divine reality irreducible both to other dimensions of life, such as psychological processes, and to the doctrinaire interpretations proper to religious traditions. It is this experience of the divine that has the power to enlighten other forms of experience and mobilize inner transformation.

How can we access and describe this experience? The pragmatic efficacy of primary, pre-theoretical understanding works here as a criterion. The experience of the divine in daily life establishes a center to discern other forms of experience, allowing us to make decisions and to orient action in a way that, as William James would say, "pays." However, unlike James's pragmatist theory of truth, it is not primarily ideas or well-established beliefs that help us to deal with or guide us into reality (James [1907] 2000, 93ff) but pre-theoretical feelings and forms of awareness. These include concrete phenomenological contents such as "awe, mercy, sense of connection with the transcendent and compassionate love" (Underwood 2011, p. 31), as well as other typically reported illuminating experiences such as inner peace, joy, motivation to serve, courage to face difficulties, trust, and clarity to make decisions.

Of course, this implies that spiritual experience does not oppose or exclude the formation of or adherence to religious beliefs, insofar as these beliefs attempt to express what the experience discovers. However, it does not require belief as a precondition. Moreover, the aim of spiritual exercises and practices is not the formation of "right beliefs" but rather the discovery of a deep understanding that helps to live.

How does this deep meaning provided by spiritual experience relate to the meaning immanent to the "world" proper to *Dasein's* practical involvement? We saw before that some critics of Heidegger pointed out that his fundamental thesis, according to which the constellations of pragmatically oriented pre-theoretical meanings that constitute the world are for the sake of *Dasein*, would close the possibility of divine transcendence. This may correspond to Heidegger's stance in *Being and Time*, but in our extension of hermeneutic theory to the experience of diversity, we saw that the fluidity of spiritual quests and the impossibility of offering a unifying narrative appear as signs and irruptions of transcendence. All immanence of meaning is permanently questioned, valued, and mobilized by means of the deep understanding gained in spiritual experience. In other words, the immanent meaning of the world is not self-explicatory or self-sufficient but needs to be enlightened by the deeper meaning coming from the experience of the divine.

6. Conclusions

In looking for a way out of the mediational image for the description of religious experience, we arrived at the experience of diversity in the contemporary milieu. The interpretation of Wiman's poem found that the locus of this experience is not a conflict between doctrines or systems but the fluidity of alternative spiritual quests for meaning in a leveling space and the resistance to totalization in larger unities. This movement from conflicting belief systems to alternative non-synthesizable quests is central to our pluralist realist description of religious experience. The mediational picture of knowledge forces us to focus on representations (beliefs, propositions, concepts, images) as the sole vehicle of interpretation and the core problem of religion. Can conflicting beliefs both be true? How do experience and belief relate? What does grant warrant to beliefs? Has religious experience sufficient evidential force to ground beliefs? These kinds of questions are the direct consequence of the mediational image.

If there is a primordial, pre-theoretical form of understanding implicit in the spiritual search, that is, a way in which we are already in a meaningful relationship with the divine before explicit conceptual interpretation, then, on the one hand, the situational, concrete

character of all forms of relationship allows for diversity; and on the other, the necessarily pragmatically oriented nature of our dealings makes them ways to "discover" or encounter the divine "in a definite direction." It is therefore *in* spiritual quests that the challenges of diversity may be appropriately addressed.

Rather than rationality of belief, the issue has to do with the ability of spiritual practices (which include but cannot be reduced to beliefs) to illuminate life, provide meaning to concrete situations, give orientation for action, and lead towards flourishing. The commitment of the seekers to such practices and the extent to which they show this ability in their lives makes them credible. The impossibility of a definitive practice or a total belief system, given the irreducible transcendence of the divine, makes their efforts beautiful. There is here a territory for philosophical exploration which, intertwined with spirituality, may lead to fruitful results away from epistemology.

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