RESEARCH REPORT

The Content of Religious Experience: The Roles of Expectancy and Desirability

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This study assessed the degree to which the contents of religious experiences agree with the expectations and rated desirability of various experiential contents. The respondents were 178 people who reported having had religious experiences, 57 without such encounters comprised an expectation group, and 112 persons who constituted a desirability rating group. Thirty-seven elements reported by those who had religious experiences and five factor scales comprised the test instrument. In sum, the data suggest that those who have religious experiences get what they anticipate, and their expectations emphasize highly desirable components in such experience.

A number of scholars in the psychology of religion claim that people are “prepared” for religious experiences (Malony, 1973). These events do not randomly “come out of the blue,” but instead are frequently activated by aspects of the situation or characteristics of the person. For example, they usually occur in religious settings

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and during religious activities (Greeley, 1974; Hardy, 1979). Well-known antecedents are conditions of great personal distress that are often termed "crises of meaning and control" (Clark, 1929; Lofland & Skonovd, 1981; Spilka, Brown, & Cassidy, 1993). Religious experiences may, however, also be triggered by a wide variety of stimulating circumstances and characteristics that do not relate to personal difficulties or stress. Such preparation may include sensitizing background factors such as the availability of a religious language, an assortment of attitudes and personality influences, manifestations of certain religious orientations, and an appropriately stimulating and receptive social context (Hardy, 1979; Hood, 1970, 1974, 1975, 1985; Hood & Morris, 1981; Spilka & McIntosh, in press; Spilka, Hood, & Gorsuch, 1985).

Cultural considerations also play a significant role in the creation and expression of religious experiences (Tippett, 1973; Wach, 1951). For over two millennia, Western civilization has made institutionalized religion a matter of fundamental significance. Even in modern American society, rare is the individual who was not reared in a home in which faith occupied a central place (McGuire, 1992). In other words, as profound as a religious experience may be for the individual, such an event is steeped in a person's familial and cultural heritage.

This socially embedded notion of a religious or mystical experience per se is likely to arouse prescient images of various occurrences—what causes them and what they are like. Not a few of these ideas pervade pertinent settings. In other words, people expect such encounters to display certain characteristics, and these expectations probably reflect the culturally prevailing beliefs and assumptions.

Research on religious experience has been conducted by psychologists for approximately a century (Starbuck, 1897, 1899), yet despite much agreement among scholars on the content and patterning of these events, little attention has been paid to potential cultural influences (Greeley, 1974; Hardy, 1979). This is not to say that reference has not often been made to Eastern and Western mysticism and historical evidences (De Marquette, 1949; Otto, 1957; Underhill, 1930), but rather that empirical research concerning the implied effects of cultural context is relatively rare. This effort represents one attempt to investigate such influences.

Our approach is premised on the assumption that the self-reported content of religious experiences and the expectations of such content will evidence considerable agreement. Stated differently, the actually perceived content of religious experiences is probably in close harmony with prefigurative expectations of that content. In addition, a major factor affecting both the content of the preconceived expectations and the actual constituent elements of religious experience may be the judged desirability of the experiential components. A desirability response set is thus posited as a strong influence on both experiential content expectations and actual perceptions. In other words, people are expected to experience what they wish to experience. Because of the ubiquity of cultural images detailing religious
experiences, we further hypothesize that the latter findings will hold even among respondents who regard themselves as nonreligious.

In summary, religion as a central institution in Western culture has greatly valued the concept of religious experience, hence these encounters are generally considered highly desirable events. Their contents have been widely publicized through an oral tradition as well as in other media for many centuries. Exposure to such culturally pervasive ideas is theorized to be a major, if not the major factor in the convergence of preexperience expectations, actual experiences, and the desirability of components comprising religious experiences.

METHOD

Sample

In the first phase of this work, respondents who demonstrated at least a moderate interest in religion and attended church minimally three times a year were selected. Two hundred thirty-six participants (142 females and 90 males) were obtained primarily from churches where they were solicited by their pastors. Four respondents did not designate their gender. Mean age was 34.3 years with a range from 15 to 78 years. Of the 26 religious bodies represented in the sample, 19 (67%) were Protestant groups. Twenty percent of the sample were Catholic, and the remaining 13% denoted themselves as Jewish, Muslim, Native American, or utilized more personally chosen religious identities, for example, “eclectic spiritual.” Respondents were also asked to indicate if, by their own definition, they felt that they had ever had a religious experience. One hundred seventy-seven (75%) reported such an encounter. This is more than double the 30% to 40% of British and American adults who claim to have had such an experience (Hay, 1985). The percentage observed here is undoubtedly a function of the method of participant selection that emphasized religious interest and involvement.

In Phase 2, 111 participants (36 men and 75 women) were obtained from churches and college classes to make the desirability ratings described next. The mean age of these participants was 27.9 years with an age range from 17 to 77 years. Twenty Protestant religious bodies were represented in this sample. Eighty-three (75%) of the respondents reported their faith as being moderately to very important in their lives, and 73 (65%) claimed to have had religious experiences. Again, these numbers are well above those reported by Hay (1985).

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1Different criteria have been employed in various studies to designate what constitutes a religious experience (Greeley, 1974; Hood, 1975). Further, the distinction between a religious experience and a mystical experience has never been exactly resolved. In previous work (Moele, 1982; Spilka, Brown, & Cassidy, 1993), self-defined experience appears to have been adequate.
Tests and Measures

On the basis of earlier research (Spilka et al., 1993), 37 components of religious experiences were identified (e.g., presence of an other, a divine force; new knowledge or enlightenment; feelings of joy, sacredness, moral elevation). For Phase 1, these were assembled into a questionnaire utilizing a 4-point Likert format. This permitted designation of the specific responses as 1 (not present), 2 (present, but not strong), 3 (fairly strong), or 4 (very strong). Those who reported having a religious experience assigned one of these values for each experiential component. Those not having undergone a religious experience were asked to “imagine that you have had such an encounter. What do you think you will have experienced?” The same scale format was employed in both groups.

Using the same item layout for Phase 2, the respondents were requested to evaluate the “desirability” of each of the experiential elements. Following the receipt of informed consent forms, all questionnaires were self-administered according to written instructions.

Procedure

The basic analysis of the content, expectation, and desirability data utilized the mean scores for the 37 religious experience items for the three groups. These are most clearly presented in Table 1. In specific, these were scored as content on the previously identified 4-point scales for the 177 persons who reported having religious experiences and are designated in Table 1 as the experience group. The same was done for the 57 persons who did not have religious experiences but offered their expectations of the content of such, where, of course, the same 4-point scale was employed. These participants constituted the expectation group. Finally, the 111 persons who did the desirability ratings provided their assessments on the same 4-point scale. They comprise the desirability group. The intercorrelations among these three groups are labeled omnibus correlations in Table 1.

To determine the significance of religiosity, the experience and expectation groups were divided into those who indicated they were high and low in religiosity. Because of the very high intercorrelation found between these groups and the necessity to maintain sufficient sample size, the high religious participants from both the experience and expectation groups were combined (n = 177) as were also the low religiosity respondents (n = 19). These are respectively labeled high or low religiosity: experience and expectation groups. The desirability group was similarly analyzed into high (n = 61) and low religiosity (n = 29) subgroups.

In a parallel breakdown, 73 of those in the desirability group reported having had religious experiences, and 38 indicated no such occurrences. In Table 1, the former are termed desirability group; those reporting religious experiences, whereas
### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Omnibus correlations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Those rating self-reported religious experience contents (experience group)( ^a )</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.91</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Those rating expectations of religious experience contents (expectation group)( ^b )</td>
<td></td>
<td>.88</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Those rating the desirability of possible elements of religious experiences (desirability group)( ^c )</td>
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**Subdivision 1: High and low religiosity groups\( ^d \)**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. High religiosity: Rating content (experience and expectation groups)( ^a )</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Low religiosity: Rating content (experience and expectation groups)( ^a )</td>
<td></td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. High religiosity: Rating desirability of elements (desirability group)( ^c )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.77</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Low religiosity: Rating desirability of elements (desirability group)( ^c )</td>
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**Subdivision 2: Comparing those reporting religious experiences or no experience**

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<tr>
<td>1. Experience group: Rating content( ^a )</td>
<td>.93( ^f )</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Expectation group: Rating content( ^b )</td>
<td></td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Desirability group: Those reporting religious experiences( ^h )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Desirability group: Those reporting no experience( ^l )</td>
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\( ^a n = 177. \) \( ^b n = 57. \) \( ^c n = 112. \) \( ^d \)For this subset the group rating content based on actual religious experience and the group rating content based on expectations were combined to maintain sufficient sample size. \( ^f n = 19. \) \( ^h n = 61. \) \( ^l n = 29. \) \( ^n n = 73. \) \( ^p n = 38. \) \( ^q \)This is the same correlation previously reported under Omnibus correlations between the experience and expectation groups.

The latter comprise the desirability group: those reporting no religious experiences. The final step was to correlate the mean scores of the 37 items of one group with those of the other groups as also shown in Table 1.

A principal components analysis of the 37 items with varimax and oblimin rotations was undertaken utilizing those who reported having had religious experiences. Ten factors with eigenvalues greater than unity resulted. Because the last two of these factors did not result in useful item composites, solutions extracting five through eight factors were examined. The five-factor solution produced the most meaningful and reliable scales. With some variations, these parallel some of the original scales constructed by Spilka et al. (1993) and appear similar to those reported by Hood and Morris (1981). Followed by their reliabilities, they are designated: Awareness of Deity/Feelings (.87; e.g., “sense of presence of God or an Ultimate Being”), Extreme Sensory Stimulation (.82; e.g., “sense of being lifted out of my physical body”), Spiritual Growth/Experience (.81; e.g., “new knowledge
or enlightenment”), Negative Emotions (.81; e.g., “depression”), and Positive Feelings (.73; e.g., “the feeling of peace”).

RESULTS

To determine the degree to which the content of religious experiences were congruent with expectations of such experience, as noted, the means of the 37 items for both the experience group and nonexperience groups were correlated. The resulting Pearson product–moment coefficient was .93. Strong support for Hypothesis 1 is thus present because the content of actual religious experiences relates strongly to experiential expectations.

Given that the pattern of actual contents and the expectations of such contents are in almost perfect agreement, another aspect of the first hypothesis asks whether significant differences might still exist between the contents and expectations for the various items. For example, do those who have had an experience tend to report more positive emotions in the experience than expected by those who have not had such an experience. Using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) procedure, a significant multivariate test for the items, $p < .030$, necessitated detailed examination of the univariate $F$ tests. Still, only 2 of the 37 items yielded significance at less than the .05 level. One more comparison revealed a difference at the .07 level (see Table 2).

In the main, these items involve one positive and two possibly negative perceptions, respectively “unity within an inner world within myself,” “a sense of being

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Group Means</th>
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<tr>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Had Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of being out of my physical body</td>
<td>0.34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Terror and fear</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity within an inner world within myself</td>
<td>1.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience Scalea</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness of Deity/feelings</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme sensory stimulation</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual growth/experience</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotions</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive feelings</td>
<td>2.68</td>
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</table>

aMultiple analysis of variance only attained significance at .086. bMean desirability ratings for scale showing significant group differences.
out of my physical body," and "terror and fear." In both actual experience and expectations, these elements are treated as relatively rare occurrences. In addition, the expectation means exceeded the actual experiential means.

A MANOVA was also used to compare the experience and expectation groups on the five scales developed in this study, and although this multivariate test only attained the .086 level of significance, for heuristic purposes, Table 2 shows that one of the five scales demonstrated significance beyond the .01 level. Here the experience group scored higher on Awareness of Deity Presence and Positive Feelings.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that the content of both religious experiences and the expectations of such would be a function of the perceived desirability of the various items. To assess this possibility, desirability ratings for the content items were correlated with the actual experience contents and the preexperience expectations. These findings are presented in Table 1, along with the content-expectations result noted earlier, and a number of variations on these themes. It is evident that the hypothesis gains strong support because the correlation of desirability with experience is .91 and with expectations is .88.

Our third hypothesis proposed that similar findings would be observed for both religious and nonreligious individuals in the desirability groups. Table 1 again reveals considerable support for this position. For the highly religious persons in the desirability group, the correlation with actual experience content is .96; the corresponding coefficient with the low religious respondents is .74. Turning to the corresponding desirability-expectations results, the correlations are .88 for the high religious persons and .79 for the less religious participants.

DISCUSSION

There can be little doubt that the actual contents of religious experience and the expectations and desirability of such content are all in almost perfect agreement as far as patterning is concerned. These imply that being prepared for religious experience à la Malony (1973) means that one is generally primed for a very positive, though complex experience. There might, however, still be room for considerable individual variation. In other words, although sets of means may intercorrelate highly, this might not be true for the various evaluators. One way of testing for this is to obtain an average intercorrelation among the raters (Linacre & Wright, 1993). When this is done, for those who had religious experiences, the coefficient is .74, leaving some room for idiosyncrasy. The correlation among those in the expectation group was .26, suggesting much greater variation among those who have not been involved in such events. When content desirability is examined, the average intercorrelation among the respondents is .58. The fact that all three coefficients are positive and statistically significant probably reflects cultural influence regarding the nature and content of religious experiences.
The observation of a particularly high average intercorrelation for those who have had experiences intimates the possibility of a rather significant limiting effect from such encounters that greatly reduces variability among these people. They could, of course, be simply a much more homogenous group to begin with. Apparently, agreement among such persons is far higher than among anticipators or those who assess the desirability of experiential content.

Table 1 reveals a tendency for the expectation and desirability correlations involving religious participants to be consistently higher than for their less religious peers. The same holds true for those in the desirability group as the analyses present findings for both high and low religious subgroups and also for those who have had religious experiences. All of these coefficients are still statistically significant. Needless to say, there is considerable overlap between the religious respondents and those who report having religious experiences, as also between their less religious and nonexperience counterparts. One might infer that the former people are more exposed to a religious subculture. This may increase the likelihood of their being informed about what to expect of a religious experience as well as what is desired in such an encounter. In other words, there is a strong likelihood of religious persons being more acquainted than their less religious fellows with the nature of religious experience via greater familiarity with a literature that presents such in historical and religio-cultural perspective. In addition, a comparable understanding of a language describing these encounters is likely to be present. They may further sense more normative pressure to desire the components of the expected experience.

The very important question may be asked whether the measures in this study may really be different indicators of the same thing. Although there can be conceptual overlap across content, expectation, and desirability as we theorize due to cultural and linguistic factors, the fact that these three referents are assessed by both different terminology and three different groups of respondents makes the issue of measure overlap difficult to claim to the degree observed here. The extremely high correlations noted in Table 1 are not within persons but across persons, suggesting something much more basic than a simple measure effect.

Earlier, it was noted that 65% of those in the desirability sample reported having undergone religious experiences. Further examination of these participants and their nonexperience peers in relation to the actual experience and expectations groups again reveals very little variation among the coefficients as they range from .86 to .95 (see Table 1). Clearly, we are dealing with a robust phenomenon with surprisingly solid grounding in American culture.

Culture per se is a rather broad, vague, and easily verbalized concept that needs further specification. One vehicle that connects the individual to the cultural milieu is language. Bourque and Back (1971) quoted Bernstein to the effect that “Language marks out what is relevant affectively, cognitively, and socially, and experience is transformed by what is made relevant” (p. 3). They pointed to the effects of the “availability of a religiously oriented and circumscribed language” (p. 18). Hood
and Morris (1981) noted that "both experience and language contexts contribute to the report of mystical experience" (p. 76). They contend that this phenomenon has received considerable public notice and discussion; hence, there is a high level of knowledge generally available that can be called on to describe emotional experiences that may be labeled religious. In other words, knowledge can be translated into a commonly accepted vocabulary for religious emotions and experiences. Supporting this position, they show that there are no differences in the linguistic knowledge of the content of these experiences between those who claim such encounters and those who have not had these experiences. This finding is further confirmed here, and we would advance the hypothesis that knowledge as Hood and Morris (1981) denoted it, is, in all likelihood, identical to what we label expectations of experiential content. Their knowledge instructions, of course, differ from our expectation instructions, yet conceptual overlap appears quite evident.

The linguistic bond among the contents of religious experience, expectations, and desirability gains additional support from Nielsen (1994), who recently assessed the affective valence of terms used to describe religious experiences. This is akin to our ratings of desirability. His findings parallel ours in that he observed, "The adjectives rated most descriptive of religious experience were those conveying positive valence, low levels of neuroticism, and high levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness" (p. 12).

Overall, one may conclude that those who have religious experiences get what they anticipate, and their expectations emphasize highly desirable components in such experiences. In relatively rare instances, however, undesirable physical and psychological manifestations put in an appearance. There are data that hint at the association of such elements with psychological aberration and abnormality (Jackson & Spilka, 1980). Nielsen's ratings of adjectives describing neuroticism also fit this picture. In other words, certain kinds of religious experiences may reflect underlying mental disturbance in contrast to the constructive and positive quality of most such events. Further research along these lines is recommended.

CONCLUSION

This work suggests a powerful sociocultural effect on religious experience and its preoccurrence evaluation. The mediating factor here is probably a well-established and often-used religious language. Additional assessment dealing with these events in different cultural contexts is obviously warranted. Individual deviance from those experiential contents that are most present, expected, and/or regarded as desirable may prove to be a sensitive indicator of personal departure from social norms and the possibility of psychopathology. This is obviously a culturally loaded approach to the meaning of deviance. The religious, social, and individual significance of the details of religious experience would seem to merit more attention than has heretofore been afforded it.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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REFERENCES


