

Characteristic Features of the Christian Religious Experience – Reflection

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GŁAZ, S.: Characteristic Features of the Christian Religious Experience – Reflection. *Studia Aloisiana*, 6, 2015, 2, s. 29 – 46.

This paper presents an attempt to discuss in more detail the question of understanding of religious experience in the context of the Christian religion, as well as to show its characteristic extraordinary features. They refer both to a person's internal and external world connected with this experience and include: experience of a feeling of unity with the world and God, a feeling of inner subjectivity of material things, states of losing track of time and space and an ability of transcendence of time and place, a conviction that the experienced states are real, a feeling of inexpressibility of what one experiences, and positive affectivity. Further characteristics also comprise: compliance of the religious input received during religious experience with the Bible, a harmony of internal and external life, a humble attitude, and activeness in a religious community. The paper also presents the role of those characteristics and their contribution to the process of a human being's religious development.

Keywords: religious experience, features, Christianity, process

1. Introduction

People are accompanied by all sorts of existential experiences, such as a sense of meaning in life or satisfaction with the proper way of living one's life.¹ There also occurs a kind of experience which, when properly identified, reveals a relation with religious contents, namely religious experience in personal character.²

1 Cf. GŁAZ, S.: *Doświadczenie religijne (Religious experience)*. Kraków : Wydawnictwo WAM, 1998, pp. 16–27; KROK, D.: The Role of Spirituality in Coping : Examining the Relationships between Spiritual Dimensions and Coping Styles. In: *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 11, 2008, pp. 643–653.

2 Cf. KROK, D.: The Religious Meaning System and Subjective Well-Being. In: *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, 36, 2014, pp. 253–273.

A review of related literature clearly indicates that there have been attempts to analyse religious experience. Researchers were successful in showing its structure as well as its consequences in a person's individual and social life. Studies show that 50% of Polish students declare that it is difficult to describe in words religious experience of God's presence. During the religious experience of God's presence to people accompanied by a feeling of joy, while the absence of God feeling of loneliness. 82% of young students believe that under the influence of the religious experience of God's presence in their lives much has changed for the better. In contrast, 18% of young persons claim that under the influence of the religious experience of God's presence in their lives nothing has changed. 45% of young persons claim that under the influence of the religious experience of God's absence in their lives much has changed for the better. They argue that they pray better, they are more open to others, and more sensitive to others.³ On the one hand, authentic religious experience plays an important function in human life. It encourages being open to oneself, another human being and to God. It also supports the process of holiness. It sometimes performs a therapeutic function,⁴ but, on the other hand, as claimed by Freud⁵ and others, it falsely assures of God's careful providence, which eventually leads to self-deception and neurotic disorders. A question arises whether there is a need to write about the features of religious experience in the light of a visible considerable restraint and mistrust towards this phenomenon amongst certain researchers. It seems that in the period of change in religious and social life of the contemporary man⁶ and a vast interest in religious experience amongst believers, it is advisable to show its function in people's spiritual and mental life as well as its characteristic features which refer to their individual and social life. It was the university students of the Ignatianum Science Club that encouraged me to present the problem of characteristic features related to religious experience. Nowadays it is noticeable that especially young people depart from the dimension of institutional religiosity in favour of an increased interest in personal religiosity. According to some scientists, the characteristic features of religious experience play a positive role,⁷ The other describe negative function in the development of the religious life of the individual. Hence the need of a more detailed analysis of the problem (one must admit, though, that it is sometimes difficult to analyse religious experience with the help of the available study tools). Spiritual theology deals

3 Cf. GŁAZ, S.: *Intensywność doświadczenia religijnego a koncepcja siebie (Intensité de l'expérience religieuse et le concept de soi)*. Kraków : Wydawnictwo WAM, 1996, pp.199-266.

4 Cf. NG, H., SHEK, D.: Religion and Therapy : Religious Conversion and the Mental Health of Chronic Heroin-Addicted Persons. In: *Journal of Religion and Health*, 4, 2001, pp. 399-410.

5 Cf. FREUD, S.: A Religious Experience. In: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London : Hogwart Press, 1961, vol. 21, pp. 167-172.

6 Cf. MARIANŃSKI, J.: *Kryzys moralny czy transformacja wartości? (The moral crisis or the transformation of the value?)* Lublin : TN KUL, 2001, pp. 123-181.

7 Cf. WULFF, D.: Phenomenological Psychology and Religious Experience. In: HOOD, R. (ed.): *Handbook of Religious Experience*. Birmingham : Religious Education Press, 1995, pp. 183-199.

with describing the features of religious experience and their interpretation. It also draws on other scientific fields. By presenting the features of religious experience, which are the result of the process of development of man's religious life, his relations with the person of God, there were also references to psychology. For what is spiritual is revealed in man's mental sphere as well as in his involvement towards God and the surroundings.

The present paper aims at explaining the understanding of religious experience in the context of the Christian religion, as well as showing its characteristic extraordinary features and their contribution to the process of a person's mental-spiritual development. First the concept of religious experience shall be explained, followed by the presentation of its internal and external features.

1.1. The understanding of religious experience

The limitations of a human being and research methods do not allow to formulate a clear, uniform definition of religious experience. It is due to the fact that some researchers, while working on this problem, are interested mainly in phenomenology, whereas others in the transcendental dimension.⁸ The term 'experience' is rather ambiguous and refers to cognitive activities. Perceived from the point of view of religion, it describes a certain process of direct acquisition of information about a religious and spiritual reality. Religious experience is a specific internal experience. It is seen as direct capture of things, as a direct contact with God, a deity. It is perceptual, intuitive capture of the religious reality. Religious experience is connected with the subjective sphere of a person and the whole human being is involved in this process. The experience and the person are closely linked.

A specific kind of religious experience is experience of a mystical character. The term 'mysticism' derives from a Greek adjective *mystikos*, which means a concealed, mysterious reality, often intangible for the human rational cognition. It has been used in literature for a long time. It is a subjective experience of a given person who has a direct perception of a certain cosmic power or force greater than they themselves. With time the term found application in explaining concepts related to religion. Mystical experience is accompanied by a feeling of union with the supernatural, divine reality.⁹

The problem of studies on religious experience comes from applying certain scientific assumptions. There are four possible inadvertences that can be encountered in this context in literature relating to mysticism: a) reductionism (mysticism is one of the effects of personal disorders), b) functionalism

8 Cf. HOOD, R., HILL, P., SPILKA, B.: *The Psychology of Religion : An Empirical Approach*. New York; London : Guilford Press, 2009, pp. 183–223.

9 Cf. SŁOMKA, W.: Pierwotne – zwykłe doświadczenie religijne (Primary – ordinary religious experience). In: SŁOMKA, W. (ed.): *Bóg i człowiek w doświadczeniu religijnym (God and man in religious experiences)*. Lublin : TN KUL, 1986, pp. 79–99.

(a simplified thesis about common accessibility of mysticism, regardless of differences in religious views), c) immanence (questioning the concept of mysticism as a gift), d) apriorism (religious experience as an autonomous and non-reducible phenomenon).¹⁰ In the present article the Christian understanding of religious experience is applied.

Religious experience can appear among people of various religious denominations. It can be experienced by Christians and non-Christians.¹¹ It can be evoked by psychedelic substances (borderline experiences) or by stimulating the brain activity with the help of external tools (neurotheology). Some researchers have been attempting for years to describe the characteristics of that experience, however, their limitations and lack of proper study tools prevent them from drawing up a comprehensive description of this religious phenomenon.

Christian theologians indicate that God is present in human life in many ways (natural and supernatural presence).¹² Regardless of the fact whether one feels God's presence or not, He is always present in human life. The Bible says: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Corinthians 6:19) Also mystics expressed their opinions on this problem (John of the Cross, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Tauler). In their view, God established an inner space in a human being, where he or she can meet with God. They describe it as 'the deepest centre of the soul', 'the inner cell'. The analysis of the mystical lives of the mystics reveals that they experienced God's presence in that space, His departure, His silence, His return.¹³ When undertaking the description of various forms of this experience, researchers ask about what it is, the course of its process and what function it performs in human life. One must admit that religious experience includes a person's state of consciousness and the religious act in which the person's intellectual, volitive and emotional powers partake. What is a religious act? It is a special action of a human being (the soul) which is aimed at God personified. Religious experience is a dynamic process. It begins in the moment of the revelation of the religious object – God personified. A human being, establishing contact with God, acquires new knowledge through which God himself 'speaks' about His intentions towards him or her. The human being replies with their faith and engagement.

In religious experience participates human consciousness and the sphere of feelings, emotional states. During religious experience a cognitive process takes place more by the way of perception than reflection and under-

10 Cf. KRÓL, J.: *Psychologiczne aspekty badania fenomenu religii (Psychological aspects of the study of the phenomenon of religion)*. Opole : RW WT, 1999, pp. 99–107.

11 Cf. GŁAZ, S.: *Doświadczenie religijne (Religious experience)*. Kraków : Wydawnictwo WAM, 1998, pp. 91–210.

12 Cf. RAHNER, K.: *Corso fondamentale sulla fede. Introduzione al concetto di cristianesimo*. Torino : Edizioni Pauline, 1984, pp. 17– 43.

13 Cf. SAINT JEAN DE LA CROIX: *La Montée du Carmel*. Lille : Soc. Saint-Augustin, 1915, pp. 75–120.

standing. What we deal with is characteristic empirical knowledge which is a result of perception (seeing, hearing, feeling) of God's presence, holiness, something supernatural. Religious experience perceived in this way often appears as a phenomenon on the borderland between religious consciousness and emotions, relating to the world of meanings and symbols as well as rituals.

It is the elements brought in both by a human being and God that decide about the kind of religious experience, taking into consideration their uniqueness and independence. Therefore, a human being reveals various kinds of religious experience in life: God's presence and God's absence, His departure and His return. These kinds of experience are something specific, extraordinary. They often provide different and new contents which can be analysed. They cause opposite feelings (joy – sadness, elation – doubt) to occur in human life. The intensity of these feelings, which are set in a human being's personality, is changeable, and their consequences are visible in a person's attitude.¹⁴

1.2. The components of the Christian religious experience

The review of related literature shows that there are various approaches to the understanding of religious experience. In this paper its understanding as a reality related to the Christian religion was adopted.¹⁵ In order for the religious understanding to come into being specific elements are required: theological virtues – love, faith, hope – perceived as means which allow a human being to have contact with God, then a human being who has a reference to himself or herself, to another person and to God, and, finally, God personified. Another requirement is a personal relation between man and God. All of them put together create a basis for religious experience of a personal dimension.

God's intentions towards man were presented in the history of the Chosen People and the whole Salvation History. God with His powers brought everything into being and maintains the existence of His creations. It is God alive, who is the source of all life, and no one can be a threat to His life. It is Holy God, worthy of human adoration. His holiness is touched by no sin. He is revealed in love which is in every creature, also in human beings, and to such an extent that He sent His Son among people. About God's plans towards people, filled with love, writes St Paul in Letter to Corinthians: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived – the things God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:9) God's secret mysterium was revealed in Jesus Christ. It is in Him that God's power

14 Cf. GŁAZ, S.: The Importance of Terminal Values and Religious Experience of God's Presence and God's Absence in the Lives of University Students with Various Levels of Empathy. In: *Journal of Religion and Health*. [Online] <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10943-014-9884-5>

15 Cf. RAHNER, K.: *Corso fondamentale sulla fede. Introduzione al concetto di cristianesimo*, pp. 71–126.

was revealed, powers to heal, to absolve sins, give new life. In Jesus and the Holy Spirit the salvation history found an ultimate fulfilment.

In this context the remark made by Pope John Paul II that it is impossible to understand man without God seems correct.¹⁶ Mankind was redeemed by Jesus Christ. Belief in resurrection and eternal happiness promised by Jesus gives a believer hope that meeting with God initiated by baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity will flourish and will lead him or her to a permanent stay with God face to face forever. According to St John's explanation, "Now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Having this eschatological perspective, we live in hope that all things will be renewed in Jesus Christ. This awareness allows us to experience the divine reality.

The religious relation which takes place between God and man has a personal character. It can be defined as a reference or a kind of bond between man and God personified through which man accomplishes the most important aims of his or her existence – participation in divine life and in holiness.¹⁷ This bond is established while fulfilling religious acts towards God personified. The most important feature of the relation is that it is experienced in a personal way. It has a lively, dynamic character, it encompasses the whole human being. The personal way of experiencing a religious relation is understood as a mutual influence. An important dimension of a personal relation is partnership, which in a religious relation does not have the same character as in interpersonal relations. It is fulfilled in an act of reciprocation, a human being has a feeling of receiving an answer from God, which corresponds with the intention he or she originally addressed Him with. Therefore, a religious act establishes a relation as long as it is connected with a feeling of fulfilment by God the intention of what was directed at him or at least has a content relation with him. God first establishes a dialogue with man and therefore the latter has a feeling that he refers to 'Someone' different, greater and more primeval than man himself. It must be added that a human being's emotional and cognitive areas have a considerable influence on the way man reacts to certain religious contents acquired during religious experience. A human being becomes aware of not so much the objective character of the acquired contents, but their subjective meaning for him or her.

16 Cf. JAN PAWEŁ II: *Redemptor Hominis*. Citta del Vaticano : Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1974, no. 9–10.

17 Cf. JAROSZ, M.: *Interpersonalne uwarunkowania religijności (Interpersonal considerations of religion)*. Lublin : TN KUL, 2003, 13–45.

2. The features of the Christian religious experience

When analysing religious experience of people who were characterised by a rich spiritual life, several important characteristic features of the experience can be outlined. They concern both the external and the internal world of man connected with that experience.

2.1. Internal features of the religious experience

During religious experience people are accompanied by features (phenomena) such as a feeling of losing themselves, a feeling of unity with the world and God, a feeling of internal subjectivity of material things, states of losing track of time and space and an ability of transcendence of time and place, a conviction of the experienced states being real, a feeling of inexpressibility of what one is experiencing, and positive affectivity. They refer to religious experience not considering its character deriving from the theoretical context of a specific religion in which they express themselves. Owing to the fact that one of the features of religious experience is paradoxicalness, it can be deduced that for an analysis of these features the varied elements of religious experience and psychological features of the person undergoing the experience must be taken into consideration in order to be able to define an intensity of the particular features of religious experience or one of its elements. Here is the description of the aforementioned features of religious experience.

– Unification – it is the central point of religious experience, especially the one of mystical character.¹⁸ Mystical unification can be described as a mystical espousal or mystical marriage. A mystic knows that, thanks to grace, he received from God an extraordinary gift of knowledge and love. Unification takes place between man and God, and it is a kind of relation, where each lives their own life, not losing their identity or their own 'I' and where neither can become the other. Unification with God is an existential encounter and is accomplished by two creatures of diverse origin finding each other. During mystical unification God gives Himself directly to the soul in such a way that sometimes man is convinced that he or she is looking at the very God. He is not looking at God Himself, His nature (the way He is), but he sees Him in the mirror (as a reflection) of his own faith. According to John of the Cross unification is a result of being reborn thanks to the Holy Spirit God grants the soul this supernatural grace that everything that God and soul possess

¹⁸ Cf. WOJMAN H.: Zjednoczenie z Bogiem i jego rola w życiu duchowym człowieka według św. Jana od Krzyża (Union with God and his role in the spiritual life of man according to John of the Cross). In : GOGOLA J. (ed.): *Na drodze zjednoczenia z Bogiem (The way of union with God)*. Kraków : Karmelicki Instytut Duchowości. Wydawnictwo Karmelitów Bosych, 2000, pp. 72– 83.

becomes one. The soul then seems to be more God than soul and indeed it is God by partaking, although of course as a natural state it is so different from God's existence as before the unification. God's word and sacramental life are necessary for a human being to be able to achieve the grace of unification with God.¹⁹ During this state a person is accompanied by a feeling of child's innocence (disappearance of a feeling of duty and obligation) and narrowing of consciousness, until, at times, the loss of 'I' and self-awareness. The state of unification of man and God manifests itself in the attitude of thanksgiving and adoration, good-naturedness and humour. A feeling of being strong and brave appears, also acceptance of yourself as well as expressiveness, spontaneity and a feeling of oneness with the surrounding world.

– Loss of feeling yourself while still retaining consciousness – is experienced as being absorbed by 'something' greater than the purely empirical 'I', it is being totally lost in God, enchantment with the goods of the supernatural world, man's dissolving while tasting spiritual goods. The soul, to the best of its abilities, lives on God's presence. It is absorbed by God and experiences His grace. The grace, in turn, by passing on to the soul, makes it more capable of multiplying good. The soul gets to know God better through selfless love, forgetting about itself. During this state the soul plans nothing, does not act or makes any decisions, it remains at God's disposal. It becomes passive and totally surrenders to the situation. At this moment it feels that it has found itself in a state where everything that happens in its life is beyond it, it has been rid of any activity, including the ability to make decisions about itself. The place of its activity is occupied by the feeling of safety, carefreeness, enjoying the spiritual goods. It is a proof of not only contemplative skills, but also mystic ones, or – as mystics define it – of abilities to unify with God: the more often and the greater the extent to which man becomes himself, the more capable he becomes to merge with the world, with God. Monism I – you becomes more real, the Creator identifies himself with the work he is creating. So the greatest achievement of identity, autonomy is at the same time exceeding yourself, going beyond your personality and limitations.²⁰

– Internal subjectivity of experience – the main characteristic of this approach to the supernatural reality is acknowledging God as a cosmic power which is customarily integrated with man, helps him or her in life and continually poses new challenges, and therefore one must reckon with it at all times. Religious experience includes all feelings, observations and experiences gathered by man or defined by a religious group as comprising an element of bond with God, the ultimate reality. The description of the structure of religious experience showed that cognitive and emotional factors in this experience are closely integrated with each other. Emotional acts are a certain form of reply

19 Cf. SAINT JEAN DE LA CROIX: *La Montée du Carmel*, pp. 161–213.

20 Cf. PŁUŻEK, Z.: Bóg i człowiek w doświadczeniu religijnym : Interpretacja psychologiczna (God and man in religious experience : Psychological interpretation). In: SŁOMKA, W. (ed.): *Bóg i człowiek w doświadczeniu religijnym (God and man in religious experience)*. Lublin: TN KUL, 1986, pp. 263–264.

of man experiencing God's presence, when man often loses the feeling of 'I', an objective assessment of the reality.²¹ Treating God and the world as one, though different, can be observed both in a child's imagination and during religious experience. Such an approach can be related to magical thinking and a more-developed religious attitude and faith revealed in man's deeds.

– Being beyond time and space – the features accompanying religious experience have a great power that fascinates a human being. During the experience a human being reveals a feeling of transcendence of space, time, even place. The emotional and positive charge of religious experience (fascinations) is so big that sometimes it suppresses the awareness of God's presence during religious experience.²² A human being reveals a deep feeling of a positive mood towards others and a positive attitude to the world, the feeling of delight and elation. The strength of religious experiences and their contents are known only to those who have experienced them themselves. Religious experiences are often accompanied by visions, enlightments and elation. They are difficult to describe or pass on to other people. Nevertheless, they provide new knowledge which the man has not had before or which has been unclear to him. Such states are accompanied by joy and optimism. Experiences of this kind tend to be transient, temporary, they escape from the brain's control. When they have disappeared it is not always possible to recall their course. Findings of the research into the process of religious experience confirm these suggestions: the intensity of the state accompanying the process of religious experience is so immense that man loses the feeling of consciousness, passing time, hunger and thirst. Such an euphoric state resembles states often evoked by drugs, when fiction intertwines with reality.

– Noetics – this feature refers to experience as a source of non-fictional – although based on an irrational and intuitive insight – knowledge. A human being is aware that in the moment of religious experience he or she acquired knowledge that he or she did not possess before (for example about the secret of the Holy Trinity). This knowledge refers to himself or herself, another person and to God.²³ A human being becomes more sensitive to divine and human matters. He or she changes their opinions about themselves and others. He can assess better what is good for him in his spiritual and mental development. He finds it easier to overcome difficulties that obstruct the proper course of his spiritual development. He is more creative and spontaneous, lives with the passion of achieving something new and more easily crosses the acquired mental structures. God is for him the life-, love- and mercy-giver. He realises himself in

21 Cf. CHMIELEWSKI, M.: Przemiana człowieka w procesie zjednoczenia z Bogiem według św. Jana od Krzyża (The transformation of a man in the process of union with God according to John of the Cross). In: GOGOLA, J. (ed.): *Na drodze zjednoczenia z Bogiem (The way of union with God)*. Kraków : Wydawnictwo Karmelitów Bosych, 2000, pp. 119–126.

22 Cf. SOIŃSKI, B.: *Doświadczenie religijne a postawy studentów w obliczu śmierci Jana Pawła II (Religious experiences and students attitude in the wake of John Paul II's death)*. Poznań : WT UAM, 2006, pp. 35– 47.

23 Cf. PŁUŻEK, Z.: Bóg i człowiek w doświadczeniu religijnym : Interpretacja psychologiczna, pp. 255–259.

a relation with the person of God. Believers have a feeling of gratitude towards everything that is divine, whereas others (non-believers) towards creatures. It manifests itself in worship, prayer, even obligations towards others. On the one hand, man has an awareness of subjectivity of the experience, and on the other hand, the emphasis is on the objectivity of contents and meanings. Such a person is half-way in the real world, respects values and spiritual goods, and half-way in the world of his or her own experiences which practically becomes his or her only reality, a world that is a base for everything. He or she is deeply aware of an existence of nature and the supernatural world.

– Inexpressibility and paradoxicalness – man has difficulty expressing and describing the states felt during religious experience. They are ineffable, indescribable – their force and content are known only to those who have a first-hand experience of them. Mental-spiritual states are difficult to put into words, describe or pass on to others. While analysing and interpreting religious experience certain logical contradictions are easy to notice. On the one hand, a human being feels separated from the object of experience – God, and on the other hand, he or she feels union with Him.²⁴ He experiences loss of individuality, whereas, at the same time, he has a feeling of being an individual, his feelings include both intense experiences resembling fascinans (happiness, joy, peace, love), and also tremendum (awe, fear, fright). Achieving a paradoxical state is connected with religious experience, and a perfect coincidence of opposites (*coincidentio oppositorum*) is possible only with God. This coincidence of opposites is expressed in apophatic thinking or in the logic of paradox: a paradox is the opposite of what a synthesis should be. However, a synthesis keeps slipping away. It is still impossible to sweep our eyes over that wonderful tapestry, in whose weaving all of us participate due to our existence. As for facts, similarly to our minds – we can merely look for a synthesis in them. *Quamdiu vivimus, necesse habemus semper quaerere*. A paradox consists in searching for a synthesis or anticipating it. A makeshift way of expressing the vision which is permanently incomplete, yet aimed at completion. The word paradoxes points first of all to things as they are, and not the way they are talked about.

– Positive affectivity – God differentiates religious feelings as a delightful mystery and God as a mystery that man has fear of. These two feelings can appear in turns, especially in mystical experiences, when in the night of the senses and the night of the spirit the latter are in majority, until the former disappear, and in ecstasy mystics marvel at the reality *mysterium fascinans*. The element of *fascinans* present in religious experience is described in terms of love, grace, mercy, safety and salvation, and it sometimes leads to a total

24 Cf. ZDYBICKA, Z.: Czym jest i dlaczego istnieje religia? (What is it and why is there Religion?) In: ZIMON, H. (ed.): *Religia w świecie współczesnym (Religion in the modern world)*. Lublin : TN KUL, 2000, pp. 57–59.

possession of man, who feels captured by an external force and power.²⁵ It seems that in terms of intensity religious experience resembles an artistic experience in all respects, that is in feeling unity with the world, God, in the feeling of inexpressibility of what one is experiencing, in being convinced of the reality of the experienced states, in the ability of transcendence of time and place as well as in ambivalence of feelings (feeling of lightness, subdued passion, a feeling of power and joy, slowing down physiological functions). Religious experience is of transitory nature. Usually it has long-term consequences, however, the intensity of the experience itself fluctuates and is short-lived. It helps discover vital forces lying in all of us, understand oneself and others, but also it helps discover the illusion of our world existence springing from our ignorance.

2.2. External features of the religious experience

It seems that without discussing the objective criteria and axiological conditions any efforts to evaluate religious experience will be insufficient. The external criteria distinguished at this stage are preliminary, and the conclusions drawn are often not suitable for operationalization, which means empirical verification. Due to the threat of reductionism and subjectivisation of the analyses of religious experience it is necessary to define the external criteria which would complete the internal criteria.

It appears that the only criterion of authenticity of religious experience and distinguishing it from a false one is practice (Tradition), in which the kind of metapsychology – intuitive and postulated – that is ecclesiastical psychology, is revealed. “The maturity of mystics, ecclesiastical ecstasies, their harmony of internal and external life characterised by love of God and man, participation in other people’s lives proves that they cross the norm of mental life in a positive sense; they are characterised by inventiveness, love, they can cry with those who cry and rejoice with those who rejoice, they are unanimous in feelings.” (Cf. Romans 12:15-16)²⁶

It must be admitted that the defence of religious experience against other researchers’ designs to bring this phenomenon to psychopathology, on the Christian researchers’ part sometimes was limited to the criticism of the methods of psychology of religion, which in its analyses made simplifications and reductions of religious experience to other psychological phenomena (apotheosis of non-reducible mystical experiences). Presenting external criteria (compliance with the teachings of Magisterium, evaluation of performing one’s duties, criterion of change and joy, love of a fellow creature and attitude) sometimes could make an impression of avoiding the problem and write

25 Cf. OTTO, R.: *Le sacré : L’élément non-rationnel dans l’idée du divin et sa relation avec le rationnel*. Paris : Payot, 1968, pp. 22–56.

26 Cf. NOWAK, A.: *Homo religiosus*. Lublin : Wydawnictwo KUL, 2003, p. 163.

off the possibility to formulate the criteria of forgery of religious experience suitable for operationalization.²⁷ However, it must be added that the Christian response to the efforts aiming at reduction of religious experience – including mystical experience – to psychopathology of religion was not limited only to criticism. The Christian researchers, on the basis of psychology of religion, sensitive to subtleties and complications of spiritual life which can lead to its disorder as well as difficulties in directing it, undertook numerous positive scientific attempts. Especially noteworthy is the series *Etudes Carmelitanes*. Most publications in this series (by philosophers, theologians, historians of religion, psychologists and specialists in various fields of medicine) are useful for psychologists of religion and devoted to subjects such as stigmata, mysticism, Satan, contemplation, and the role of phenomena in religious experience.²⁸ Here is description of the external criteria which indicate an authenticity of religious experience.

– Compliance of religious contents acquired during religious experience with the Bible, interpreted by appropriate organs within denominations (key role of theology). This characteristic is founded on the assumed truth that Revelation finished on the person of Jesus Christ and no religious experience can bring anything new, at most it can merely deepen the understanding of Revelation. At this point it is worth quoting St John of the Cross. Ever since God gave us His Son, who is His only Word, there remain no other words to be given to us. In that one word He said all at once. Because, what He partly talked about at an earlier time through prophets, has been already fully said by giving us His Son. Hence, should one ask Him or desire some visions or revelations, he would not only be doing the wrong thing, but also he would insult God by not having his eyes set only on Christ and seeking other things or novelties.²⁹ The risk of impoverishing religious experience is connected with neglecting theology in favour of psychology: the adjective mystical is slowly departing from the adjective theological. The concept mystical is in opposition to the concept ordinary and starts to smack of extraordinary. Król rightly pointed out: The moment the word of a mystic separates itself from the word theology, it starts to show a tendency to become an independent literary form.³⁰

– Emphasising the role of one's own religious experience within the framework of the Christian tradition. Jesus Christ, in whom God's whole revelation is completed, ordered the Apostles to spread the Gospel to all as a source of the whole salvational truth and a moral norm, at the same time presenting them with appropriate God's gifts. Today the religious community in its teachings, its life and cult immortalises and passes on to new generations

27 Cf. RUDIN, J.: *Psychotherapie und Religion : Probleme der tiefenpsychologischen Erfahrung mit einem Brief von C.G. Jung an den Verfasser*. Olten; Freiburg im Br. : Walter-Verlag, 1964, pp. 121–242.

28 Cf. GŁAZ, S.: Characteristics of Extraordinary Religious Phenomena Accompanying the Christian Religious Experience – Reflection. In: *Religions*, 2014, 5, pp. 1146–1160 (www.mdpi.com/journal/religions); doi:10.3390/rel5041146

29 Cf. SAINT JEAN DE LA CROIX: *La Montée du Carmel*, pp. 161–213.

30 Cf. KRÓL, J.: *Psychologiczne aspekty badania fenomenu religii*, pp. 183–187.

all that it is and all it believes in. Religious experience should be interpreted within a given confessional denomination, by a believer of the same denomination: Faith is a gift of a new, deeper access to reality, it is a sight inaccessible to non-believers – at least when its actual centre is concerned. Love has eyes, the heart has its rights (Pascal), and these remain closed for the one who does not love. One ought to approach mysticism based on the conviction of one's own faith and with an eagerness of a man who is looking for the experience of God.

– Ability to discern spirits – it consists in developing by specialists in the field of spiritual life a skill of supervision. What is assumed here is above all personal experience in the field of contemplation, being acquainted with various methods of meditation, spirituality and psychology. Over the centuries a theory of recognising spirits has been developed (St John the Evangelist, St Paul). St Ignatius of Loyola is known in the history of spirituality as a master of setting criteria of discernment of spirits and I would link this to cardiognosis. The false spirit is 'an inner force' driving man from God's plan, faith, hope and love. The false spirit is also described as 'the evil spirit' or 'an enemy of the human nature'. They are destructive behaviours and experiences. According to St Ignatius of Loyola, the spirit of truth is 'an inner force' inducing a person to fulfil God's salvation plan, to faith, hope and love; he is described as 'the good spirit'. They are fortunate life circumstances and good in the world. Spirits are always opposite. St Ignatius of Loyola says: "It is an attribute of God and angels to spread in the soul true happiness and joy in moments of commotion, they remove all sadness and confusion that an enemy tries to stir. The trait of an enemy is fighting this joy and spiritual comfort by offering apparent rights, intricacies and continual tricks."³¹ The knowledge about it can be gained, but a true cardiognostic can only be the one who was presented by God with a gift of entering the human heart. Having penetrating eyes or seeing into one's heart are God's gifts for the church community, for a given religious community.

– Harmony of internal and external life – a road to religious experience usually has its source in a special experience of God which influences a given person's future life. A human being achieves a harmonious relation with God and themselves when he or she updates the skills to enter a relation with God personified, to contemplate, to discover and realise the world of values, as well as when he or she realises their skills of moral action, discernment and understanding what is right or wrong. What is also noticeable is the influence of a personality of a mystic on the society in which he or she lives and works. A psychotic is fully preoccupied with their experience, which for them is the only real world and for which they try to bend the whole reality. An ecclesiastical mystic, on the other hand, having all the power of his or her experience, even an ecstatic one, does not feel difficulty in performing his or

³¹ LOYOLA. I.: *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*. St. Louis : The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992, no. 329.

her everyday duties. Also in performing the so-called lay duties he or she does not feel pulled back from God. He is simply 'normal', however, at the same time, each duty he performs has a sacred character to him, work is a grace which he understands as a road to perfection, holiness.³² Prayer shows him even more the value of earthly life, he sees this dimension better than others, he has a much deeper understanding of beauty and the value of caring about the development of one's spiritual life.

- Human humility - it is an indication of an ability to adapt to the surroundings despite the paranormal abilities and a non-conformist attitude. Humility towards God is revealed in the fact that we acknowledge Him as our Father, who is a source of all things, we depend on Him, we cannot exist without Him or grow in good. Being a humble person means recognising before God one's own insufficiency, being small. The humility of Jesus poses a challenge for Christians, it calls for it directly: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23) Acceptance of one's own life with its pains, suffering, overcoming one's own limitations and thus following Jesus is a road to humility for any believer. St Ignatius of Loyola identified three degrees of humility. The first one consists in denying a deadly sin, the second refers to a light sin, in accordance with the words of Jesus. "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Matthew 16:26) The third degree, however, is characterised by being similar to Jesus. St Ignatius expresses it in the words: "I would rather choose poverty with the poor Christ than be rich, I would rather prefer insults with Christ full of insults to worldly admiration."³³ It is about following Christ in an uncompromising way, to the Cross. "Life would become stinking standing water if there were no more geniuses of spirit and grace, mystics or ecclesiastical ecstasies. Their behaviour at times propelled creation of illusions and malicious interpretations. Their signum of sanctity was also characterised by not being overconfident, they had their spiritual leaders and humbly followed their directions. An authentic mystic and ecclesiastical ecstatic does not consider himself saint. He often reaches for God's Mercy in the sacrament of penance. He listens to the holy community. He who expresses negative opinions about saints, authentic ecclesiastical mystics, usually does not allow to be led by others, thinking that he has his own private road to holiness and does not need any directions or a leader in this respect; this kind of knowledge is a proof of certain psychotic inclinations."³⁴

- Being active for the sake of the community - love of fellowmen and engagement, joys and spiritual changes are connected with one another and basically boil down to emphasising the social dimensions of religious experience in order to eliminate autistic attitudes in an individual, visible for example in a psychotic attitude: often psychotics' pseudo-ecstasies - similarly to the

32 Cf. JAWORSKI, R.: *Harmonia i konflikty (Harmony and conflict)*. Warszawa : UKSW, 2006, pp. 38-72.

33 LOYOLA, I.: *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, no. 165-167.

34 NOWAK, A.: *Homo religiosus*, p. 164.

ecstasy of mysticism of the Far East – do not arouse interest in the fruit of the Spirit, at times there is no evidence of love of fellowmen or good of social life. The ecstasies often result in sadness. Ecstatic experiences of mystics are characterised by dynamism of action both in internal and external life. In the life of an ecstatic a clearly visible change occurs, it does not end in sadness or indifference, but joy of action, prayer and deed, love of God and fellowmen.³⁵ We can even say to be dealing with an extremely clear synthesis of internal life with external life, however, both these worlds retain their identities. People with religious experience unauthentic in their experience or ecstasy cut themselves even more from the surrounding world, isolate themselves, negate the value of the world they live in. A person experiencing God's presence lives an eschatological reality and becomes its witness for others, and his love of fellowmen becomes increasingly heroic.

Conclusions

A human being is accompanied by religious experience, which has specific features. The present analysis of the characteristic features of the Christian religious experience leads to several conclusions.

Man's fascination with the perceived world is a sign not only of his or her creative skills, but also of his ability of self-realisation as a person, entering a personal relation with God, as well as of religious experience within the professed religion.

A human being does express an inner readiness for religious experience, however, it cannot be forced or ordered by him or her. It occurs spontaneously and cannot be predicted or directed. Religious experience is not merely an outcome of human efforts and ascetic practice, but a result of spiritual life, a mutual involvement of man and God. It is a gift from God who reveals Himself to man in various ways. This gift is not given automatically, but personally. A person who is open to experience has a disposition to accept this gift.

An important human prerequisite leading to an occurrence of religious experience and its specific features is not rational thinking or an ability for methodological criticism, but being open to experience and its positive evaluation, emotional sensitivity and intentionalism, which means synthetic, heuristic cognition.

During religious experience a certain cognitive process takes place: it is a kind of religious cognition in which a human being acquires new knowledge. It refers to the person involved, another person, and most commonly God's matters. The will accepts the acquired knowledge, it is a call for action for a human being. This knowledge is of practical nature, not informative or theoretical. The character of the cognitive process is complex. It consists of

35 Cf. GŁAZ, S.: *Doświadczenie religijne*, pp. 16–27.

various elements, acts of intuition, experience, feelings; therefore, it is not pure cognition, but related to the man's subjective world.

The features accompanying religious experience sometimes reveal great force, they sometimes suppress human consciousness; one's consciousness of passing time, feeling hunger and thirst disappear. Such a euphoric state resembles the kind of experience evoked by drugs during which visions and associations 'out-of-this-world' appear which mix with reality, causing a person to sometimes lose the feeling of what is real.

There are multiple features of religious experience, they surprise the very person experiencing it and can also arouse admiration. However, they do not bring anything beyond what is included in the Bible and in the Tradition. They perform an important spiritual and mental function in human life and the life of the church community. They direct the human will towards greater spiritual good, encourage to follow the rather difficult footsteps of Christ in the spirit of the Christian faith. They are a source of new light for the human will, which cannot free itself from the habits that restrain it. They also induce to ponder and change one's own life.

The features of religious experience also include human elements incorporated in the entirety of experiences. During an occurrence of religious features one must not assume not to be dealing with God's extraordinary actions. Man's humility and his greater love of God and another person are the criteria which can indicate that, in fact, the states accompanying religious experience have a mystical character; this is when doubts disappear and the probability that the states come from God increases.

Common sense and keeping a certain distance is recommended towards the features of religious experience. One should not attach oneself to them in an improper way, become unnecessarily enthusiastic about them, or place too much importance on them when they appear. One should rather thank God and other people by prayer, adoration and good deeds because they are only a means of drawing the soul closer to God. In this way the soul can benefit to an even greater extent from an invitation to unification offered to it by God and strive for a greater perfection.

People who have had religious experience take on difficult tasks and important missions. Some of the contemporary individuals worth mentioning are Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Saint Faustina. They were chosen as privileged tools of God's doing. They became sacrifices and at the same time tools for accomplishment of God's plans, often in situations when ordinary means fail or seem to bring little effect.

The question of the features of Christian religious experience discussed in this article is vast and important to people's spiritual life and the religious community. What is noticeable – especially amongst young people – is considerable interest in religious experience and the accompanying religious features. Therefore, a further study of this problem is needed. The present analysis can be a base for other thorough detailed research and scientific reflection in this field.

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