

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES AMONG CALGARY YOUTH:  
TAXONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with the nature of religious experiences. It involves an analysis of two substantive issues. First, it explores three taxonomic relationships which are based on Rodney Stark's "A Taxonomy of Religious Experience" (Glock and Stark 1965:39). These relationships are: (1) Do religious experiences vary according to the frequency of their occurrence? (2) Are religious experiences progressive in nature, (e.g. will a lower order experience have occurred before a higher order experience will occur?) (3) Can religious experiences be ranked according to their salience for an individual in a specified manner?

The second substantive concern arises from the adoption of the view that religious experiences are not solely an individual phenomenon, but will have social contexts and correlates related to their occurrence. The relationships of eight social variables to the occurrence of religious experiences were examined.

The analysis was based on the responses of a city wide sample of 708 youth, ages 15-24, in Calgary, Alberta, to a questionnaire concerning religious and social attitudes and behaviour in 1971. Percentage, scalogram and correlation analysis were employed in the analysis of the data.

The results of these procedures indicated that religious experiences do vary in the frequency of their occurrence, although not as specifically expected by Stark's taxonomy. They were also found to be, in general, progressive in nature. However, there could be no taxonomic ranking for the saliency of these experiences. But, as a result of the analysis a Guttman scale of five experiences was found which served as the basis for the analysis of the social context of religious experiences. It should be noted that this scale was composed of only positive religious experiences as the negative experiences were found to constitute a separate dimension of religious experiences.

Further, religious experiences were found to have definite social contexts and correlates. In particular, four social variables (religious beliefs, the present importance of religion, the regularity of prayer, and the frequency of attendance at religious services) were found to explain fifty percent of the variation in the occurrence of religious experiences.

The conclusions indicate a need for further and more precise research concerning the nature and the social contexts associated with the occurrence of religious experiences. Additionally, there is an indication for the beginnings of a new model of religiosity which would have ideological commitment at the center. The remainder of an individual's religiosity would then be seen as a manifestation of this basic commitment.

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## CHAPTER I

### OVERVIEW OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

#### Preliminary Statement of Subject and Plan of Study

The empirical study of religious experiences is an area of inquiry in which surprisingly little research has been done. The initial attempts at scientific inquiry into this phenomenon occurred around the turn of the century. The classical approach to this subject was psychological. It is not surprising to find the classical writers considering the occurrence of religious experiences to be an individual phenomenon. Two of the most influential writers of this time were William James and James Leuba. Both approached the study of religious experiences from a qualitative perspective. James (1902) attempted a classification of religious experiences using broad, existing religious categories, e.g. conversion and mysticism. Moreover, in his discussion of the experiences which fell into these categories, he dwelt heavily on in depth descriptions of various individual experiences. The experiences he described were of various magnitudes ranging from an individual feeling the presence of God to raptuous visions.

Leuba (1925), on the other hand, was solely interested in the raptuous experiences and not those of the common man. The bulk of his work was concerned with the experiences

of various saintly types of individuals whose experiences were particularly vivid and out of the ordinary. Leuba, himself, addressed this point when he stated, "These mystics, it may be said, are not the most worthy of admiration. They are rather extravagant instances, all or most of whom suffered from some form of nervous instability, if not hysteria" (Leuba 1925:56). In addition, Leuba also gave some consideration to the physical means of producing some forms of ecstasy or religious experience, e.g. the ingestion of various drugs, isolation, deprivation of food, etc.

In addition to the psychological approach, early sociologists (e.g. Durkheim, 1957; Troeltsch, 1960; and Weber, 1963) were also concerned with religious experiences. However, in their studies religious experiences were treated on a much more general level as a part of a general theory of religion. It was not until the early 1960's that sociologists became concerned with the quantification of religious experiences. This first took the form of Charles Glock's work "On the Study of Religious Commitment" (Glock and Stark 1965:18) in which he proposed that the study of religiosity could be separated into five dimensions. One of the five dimensions he proposed was called the experiential which was described by him as follows:

. . . all of those feelings, perceptions, and sensations which are experienced by an actor or defined by a religious group as involving some communication, however slight, with a divine essence, i.e. with God, with ultimate reality, with transcendental authority. (1965:20)

While many researchers have entered into the discussion as to the multidimensionality of religiosity and thus were tangentially concerned with religious experiences, few researchers have attempted any research dealing precisely with these phenomena. However, one researcher in particular has considered religious experiences to be worthy of scientific inquiry sui generis. This person is Rodney Stark, who has been closely associated with the work of Glock. Stark (Glock and Stark 1965:39) adopted the definition of religious experience set forth above. Then on the basis of this definition he posited a taxonomy, or classification, of religious experience. He suggested four types which were distinguished from each other by differing degrees of communication with the divine .

It should be noted that Stark's adoption of the above definition of religious experience is consistent with the classical writers mentioned above. Both Leuba and James considered some form of contact or communication with the divine as essential for a religious experience to occur. Leuba, for example, defined mystical (a term which can be taken, for the purposes at hand, to be synonymous with religious experience) as ". . . any experience taken by the experiencer to be a contact or union of the self with a larger-than-self, be it called the World-Spirit, God the Absolute or otherwise." (Leuba 1925:1)

However, the commonality of the classical approach and the approach of Stark is basically limited to the

definitional realm. Stark (Glock and Stark 1965:151), in a study subsequent to his taxonomy, drastically deviated from the classical approach. Rather than viewing the occurrence of religious experiences as an individual phenomenon, Stark viewed such experiences as often normative and socially supported types of behaviour. To realize the relevance of such an approach to the study of religious experience, one only has to attend a fundamentalist revival service where there is not only social support for the occurrence of religious experiences, but the expectation that such experiences will occur. From this position, Stark then proceeded to specify some social variables which were found to be associated with the occurrence of religious experiences.

Stark's view concerning the social qualities of religious experiences has been followed by other researchers. Bourque and Back (1968) and Bourque (1969) were interested in the differences between religious and aesthetic experiences. They were concerned with such social variables as differing social backgrounds, differing personality characteristics, differing values and differing situations in which the experiences occurred.

Following from these previous works, Raymond Currie (1973) did a survey of the religious and social attitudes and behaviour of young people (ages 15-24) in Calgary, Alberta. Currie's operationalization of religious experiences was a direct extension of Stark's classification scheme. The data regarding such experiences and other variables

which will be considered have been made available to this author for analysis.

The present study follows from the above mentioned works and will primarily be concerned with two substantive issues. First, attention will be directed to Stark's taxonomy to see if it is a valid representation of the types of experiences and their interrelationships. The second concern is an attempt to specify some meaningful social variables which are related to the occurrence of religious experiences. In doing this, Stark's work will not only be replicated, but extended in several areas. Other variables, which are not discussed by previous researchers will also be considered.

#### Specification of Relevant Literature and Implications for Analysis

##### A. Taxonomy of Religious Experience

Since the present study draws heavily on Stark's work, and Currie's operationalization of the experiential variable was also based on Stark, the logical starting place for a review of the relevant literature is with Stark's taxonomy. As noted previously, Stark stated there are four basic types of religious experiences. He outlined these as follows:

1. The confirming experience--the human actor simply notes (feels, senses, etc.) the existence or presence of the divine actor.
2. The responsive experience--mutual presence is acknowledged, the divine is perceived as noting the presence of the human actor.

3. The ecstatic experience--the awareness of mutual presence is replaced by an affective relationship akin to love or friendship.
4. The revelational experience--the human actor perceives himself as a confidant or a fellow participant in action with the divine actor. (Glock and Stark 1965:43)

In addition, Stark indicated that each of these four types of experiences could be divided into various sub-dimensions. It should be noted that Stark, in his "Social Contexts of Religious Experience" (1965:151), did not attempt to operationalize all types or subdimensions of experiences in this study. He only operationalized the following types; the confirming and the responsive, the latter being subdivided into two items, one dealing with a sense of being saved in Christ and the other concerning being punished by God. He stated his reasons for this as follows:

One reason for these omissions (the ecstatic and revelational types), aside from the fact that a lack of a clear conceptual scheme at the time made the choice somewhat fortuitous, was that it was little imagined how frequently modern Christians would report religious experiences. Items aimed at the more complex and intimate types of religious encounters seemed, then, as too extreme to be credible. (Glock and Stark 1965:157)

However, as will be seen, religious experiences did not appear as esoteric as supposed by Stark. From this perspective, Currie (1973) attempted to operationalize other types of experiences based on Stark's taxonomy. Measures are available for three subdimensions of the responsive type experience and for two subdimensions of the revelational. In addition, the ecstatic experience was also operationalized.

The subdimensions of the responsive and revelational types may be outlined as follows:

The responsive experience

- A. salvational - a feeling that one has been saved.
- B. miraculous - a sense that God has miraculously helped the person.
- C. sanctioning - a feeling of being punished by God for something done.

The revelational experience

- A. enlightenment - a feeling that God has shared some sort of information with the human actor.
- B. commission - a feeling that God has told the human actor to do something for him.

In addition, one other type of religious experience was operationalized by Currie. This was a fear of God. This item was included by Currie partially on the basis of Otto (1966) who indicated that "awe" of the divine played a significant role in the development of most religions. Otto's position was that this sense of "awe" survives along with the benevolent view of the divine. He stated,

Even when the worship of 'daemons' has long since reached the higher level of worship of 'gods,' these gods still retain as numina something of the 'ghost' in the impress they make on the feelings of the worshipper, viz. the peculiar quality of the 'uncanny' and 'aweful,' which survives with the quality of exaltedness and sublimity or is symbolized by means of it. (1966:17)

While not specified in Stark's taxonomy, this item is relevant for this study as it is similar to a category of classification used by Bourque (1969) which was based on Glock's

(Glock and Stark 1965:18) discussion of the experiential dimensions of religiosity. In this author's opinion this item should resemble either a confirming or a responsive experience on the grounds that such an encounter is not likely to entail intimate communication.

In brief, this study will be concerned with measuring the following types and subtypes of religious experiences:

- (1) the confirming
- (2) the revelational
  - a. salvational
  - b. miraculous
  - c. sanctioning
- (3) the fearful
- (4) the ecstatic
- (5) the revelational
  - a. enlightenment
  - b. commission

Now that the types of religious experiences which will be considered in this study have been delineated and realizing that one of the basic concerns of this study is with the validity of Stark's taxonomy, it will be useful to look at two of the specifications made by Stark regarding his taxonomy. First, there should be variations in the relative frequencies of different types of religious experiences. And, second, religious experiences should be a progressive phenomenon, i.e. one would have a lower order religious experience before having a higher order experience.



Stark's ordering of the types of religious experiences was proposed as a continuum analagous to various degrees of personal interaction. For example, he suggests that behaviour may range from simple greetings, to a feeling of affection, to intimate communication. A person will have more friends he will simply greet than he will have friends with whom he shares intimate communication.

Likewise, even among friends with whom he shares intimate communication, most of the interaction will take place at the lower level of intimacy; not at the higher. Further, initial communication should begin at the less intimate and may or may not move to a higher intimacy level. Viewed in this light, one would expect that in regards to frequency, the four basic types could be ordered from most frequent to least frequent in the following manner: confirming, responsive, ecstatic, revelational. Also, if religious experiences are a progressive phenomenon, a person reporting an experience which assumes intimate communication (e.g. an ecstatic experience) should also have had a lower, less intimate, experience (e.g. a confirming experience). Stark's discussion concerning frequency and progression, it should be noted, was limited to the basic types of religious experiences. The possible interrelationships of the subtypes were not specified.

Stark (Glock and Stark 1965:151) attempted to discern if the two above assumptions were verifiable. This was done on the basis of responses to a survey questionnaire admini-

stered to a sample of church members in southern California. He found that the lower order experience, the confirming, had in fact occurred more frequently than the higher types.<sup>1</sup> More respondents were either "sure" or "thought" they had the confirming experience (73% of the Protestants and 66% of the Roman Catholics) than were either "sure" or "thought" they had either subdimension of the responsive experience (salvational: 59% of the Protestants and 49% of the Roman Catholics; sanctioning: 41% of the Protestants and 53% of the Roman Catholics).

However, Stark was not only postulating that the lower order experiences would occur more frequently, but, also that religious experiences were a progressive phenomenon. To test this assumption, Stark crosstabulated the occurrence of the confirming and the responsive salvational types of experiences. Of those respondents who were "sure" they had the responsive salvational experience, i.e. the higher order one, 81 percent were also "sure" they had the confirming experience. An additional 15 percent indicated they "thought" they had the confirming experience. In all 96 percent of those who were "sure" they had the salvational experience reported the confirming experience. Apparently then, Stark's assumption that religious experiences would be

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<sup>1</sup>It should be remembered that Stark only operationalized the confirming, the responsive salvational and the responsive sanctioning types of experiences. This, of course must be considered when looking at this and subsequent findings.

progressive in nature was supported.

Stark's taxonomy also gains support from other research. Bourque (1969) asked her respondents if they had ever had a religious experience and, if so, they were asked to describe their experience(s). It is important to note that 70 percent of the descriptions of various experiences were classifiable under categories contained in Stark's taxonomy. However, at the same time, there is an indication of a possible problem with the proposed frequency ordering of the experiences. More responses were coded into a category of "revelation of some truth" than in a category of "power, presence of supernatural." This, of course, is contrary to Stark's taxonomy where the revelational type of experience should be the least frequent experience. But, since Bourque does not report the specific coding instructions, it would be premature to make any decision concerning the validity of Stark's taxonomy on this basis.

In addition to looking at the two taxonomic relationships regarding frequency and progression, the present study will undertake a logical extension of Stark's taxonomy. This will be to propose a rank-ordering of the major types of experiences in terms of their saliency. While religious experiences requiring a lesser degree of intimacy between the human actor and the divine are likely to be the most frequent, those types which stress more intimate communication (e.g. the ecstatic and revelational) should be the most salient. Utilizing the friendship analogy again, it

is most likely that a person will consider intimate communication or love between himself and the other actor as being more important than simple greetings with the individual. Therefore, one would expect the rank-ordering of the types of religious experiences in terms of saliency to be in the reverse order from that stipulated for frequency. That is, the revelational should be the most salient and the confirming the least salient. The available data allows this assumption to be tested.

The importance of this approach to religious experiences, in this author's opinion, lies in the fact that there is little likelihood that religious experiences would have a substantial impact on the attitudes and behaviour of the respondents who report such experiences if they are not considered to be important.

#### Social Context of Religious Experiences

The present study is not solely concerned with Stark's taxonomy. The second major concern is the identification of social variables associated with the occurrence of religious experiences. The identification of such variables is important since this study adopts Stark's view of religious experiences as not being solely an individual phenomenon, but a phenomenon that also has a social context. From this perspective, a review of the relevant literature would be beneficial in indicating some important variables associated with religious experiences.

Following Stark's analysis of the data relating to his taxonomy, he examined the relationship between denominational affiliation and the occurrence of religious experiences. By forming a simple index from the responses to his three experiential items,<sup>2</sup> he found that wide differences existed among some of the denominations. For example, the Southern Baptists in his sample had 97 percent scoring high on his experience index. This was in contrast to the Presbyterians who had 52 percent scoring high. According to this there does exist some relationship between denominational affiliation and the occurrence of religious experiences.

However, Stark continued by stating:

One important way in which these denominations differ is the degree to which they constitute quasi-primary groups. The more liberal bodies resemble occasional audiences or focused crowds, while the more conservative groups tend to resemble moral communities in the Durkheimian sense of the word. That is, the conservative respondents not only attach great importance to their church membership, as indeed the liberals do too, but their congregation serves as a primary source of informal social relations. (Italics in the original) (Glock and Stark 1965:163).

From this, Stark explored the relationship between informal social ties, denominational affiliation and the incidence of religious experiences. He controlled for the number of one's best friends who were also members of the

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<sup>2</sup>Formed by assigning two points for a "sure" response; one point for a "I think I have" response; and no points for a "No" response.

respondent's local congregation in the previously reported relationship. Analysis of the results of this procedure indicated a reduction of some of the previous differences among the denominations. For example, 100 percent of those Southern Baptists who had four or five of their closest friends in their congregation scored high on the experiential index, while the Presbyterians meeting the same criteria had 78 percent score high. Informal social ties thus reduced some of the initial differences among the denominations.

Stark further noted that perhaps a more significant result of this analysis was the fact that within some of the more liberal churches, (e.g. Methodist, Protestant Episcopal, etc.) there existed social groupings which resembled those found among fundamentalists. They were much more likely to have reported the occurrence of religious experiences than were their fellow members who did not share this primary type of bond with others in their congregation.

However, there still existed considerable variation between many of the denominations. Stark felt that this could be explained, in part, by the differing theological orientations of the various denominations. To test this assumption, he compared the relationship between denominational affiliation and religious experiences controlling for religious beliefs<sup>3</sup> to the zero-order relationship between

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<sup>3</sup>Measured by the Index of Religious Orthodoxy as developed by Glock and Stark. It is based on four questions concerning belief in God, the Devil, the divinity of Jesus and Biblical miracles. (Glock and Stark 1965:166)