

A SEMIOTIC AND PRAGMATIC PROPOSAL FOR THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Uma proposta semiótica e pragmática para o estudo acadêmico da espiritualidade e da experiência religiosa

Una propuesta semiótica y pragmática para el estudio académico de la espiritualidad y la experiencia religiosa

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Abstract: This paper proposes a semiotic and pragmatic framework for studying spirituality and religious experience, drawing on Peirce, James, Royce, Lonergan, and Tracy. It challenges traditional approaches, advocating for a holistic understanding using a rigorous science of signs. Peirce's semiotics provides a foundation for interpreting religious experience, while James's pragmatism focuses on its transformative potential. Royce's "Beloved Community" highlights the communal dimension, and Lonergan and Tracy offer tools for understanding the transformative and hermeneutical aspects. This approach bridges philosophy, theology, and spirituality for a comprehensive understanding of religious phenomena.

Keywords: Spirituality. Religious Experience. Classical Pragmatism. Peircean Semiotics. Hermeneutics.

Resumo: Este ensaio examina a revolução anti-cartesiana de Peirce na filosofia. Peirce desafiou o dualismo e o fundacionalismo cartesiano, propondo uma abordagem falibilista, comunitária e incorporada ao conhecimento. Ele enfatizou a importância da investigação, da experiência e da comunidade na formação do entendimento. O ensaio explora o conceito de cognição de Peirce como um processo dinâmico de inferência, impulsionado pela dúvida e orientado para a crença. Ele também explora a convergência entre as ideias de Peirce e o enativismo, um movimento contemporâneo na ciência cognitiva que enfatiza a natureza incorporada, embutida e atuada da cognição.

Palavras-chave: Espiritualidade. Experiência religiosa. Pragmatismo clássico. Semiótica de Peirce. Hermenêutica.

Resumen: Este trabajo propone un marco semiótico y pragmático para el estudio de la espiritualidad y la experiencia religiosa, basándose en Peirce, James, Royce, Lonergan y Tracy. Desafía los enfoques tradicionales, abogando por una comprensión holística mediante una ciencia rigurosa de los signos. La semiótica de Peirce proporciona una base para interpretar la experiencia religiosa, mientras que el pragmatismo de James se centra en su potencial transformador. La "Comunidad Amada" de Royce destaca la dimensión comunitaria, y Lonergan y Tracy ofrecen herramientas para comprender los aspectos transformativos y hermenéuticos. Este enfoque vincula la filosofía, la teología y la espiritualidad para una comprensión integral de los fenómenos religiosos.

Palabras-clave: Espiritualidad. Experiencia religiosa. Pragmatismo clásico. Semiótica de Peirce. Hermenéutica.

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The State of the art, the formation of shifting paradigms and the Academic Study of Spirituality

To the question: "What is religious experience?" The study of spirituality addresses the complex nature of "religious experience" and the challenges in understanding and articulating such experiences. With such a study, questions regarding the relationship between religious experience and belief, the interpretative process of religious experiences, and the role of mediation in understanding them are properly engaged. The discipline grapples with intellectual efforts that discuss these issues of philosophical, epistemological, theological, and metaphysical nature. These studies include the work of Jantzen² on religious experience and belief, Gadamer on hermeneutics³, Lonergan on mediation⁴, and Lash's critique of William James' account of religious experience⁵. The work done aims to provide a foundational understanding of the complexities surrounding religious experiences and their interpretation in the study of spirituality. However, this must be considered in connection with the immense tradition of Christian spirituality: Ancient and medieval Christians developed sophisticated methods for interpreting the Christian Scriptures and understanding religious experiences. They read Scripture deeply, using its imagery and language to interpret their experiences. They also drew on philosophical and theological ideas about the human soul to theorize religious experiences as aspects of "interiority."

² Jantzen, Grace M. *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*. (Manchester University Press, 1999).

³ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

⁴ Lonergan, Bernard. *Method in Theology*. (Herder & Herder, 1972).

⁵ Lash, Nicholas. "Experience and the Immediacy of God." In *Theology on Dover Beach*, 1-37. Fortress Press, 1979.

Though pre-medieval spirituality has left a rich heritage, we need to consider that we live in a time of a dialectic between a modern and postmodern age. With the onset of modernity, marked by the Reformation, Enlightenment, and scientific advancements, the Western metaphysical and epistemological framework shifted radically from medieval Christian paradigms and the medieval synthesis. Friedrich Schleiermacher's position in this historical context is examined by considering how Enlightenment rationalism reshaped anthropological perspectives. Thus, reading Schleiermacher's *Speeches on Religion* provides insight into his views on religious experience, its mediation, and its contrast with Enlightenment rationalism. His hermeneutical work, particularly from *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, reveals his resistance to rationalism as well as an approach to understanding religious experience through textual interpretation, influenced by translation challenges and the historical-critical approach.

Pragmatism is a tradition in philosophy that criticizes modern foundationalism and advocates for a departure from the dichotomies of modernity. Pragmatism, as articulated by Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, underscores the continuity and non-discreteness of human experience, challenging traditional modern dichotomies. Peirce and the pragmatists created a "Philosophy of experience". Peirce's semiotics, or "Semeiotics," posits a rigorous science of signs, which he considers a logic of thought. This view implies that our understanding of the world is mediated by signs, aligning with Peirce's classification of experience into three "universes": firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Religious experience, according to Peirce, intersects with these universes, with firstness establishing the possibility of a transcendent relationship, secondness manifesting as individual experiences of the

transcendent, and thirdness exploring the regularities of communal transcendent manifestations, as it will be explained further down in this work.

William James, while sharing a similar emphasis on the continuity of experience, offers a more dynamic and open conception. His approach to religious experience focuses on its transformative value and pragmatic consequences, advocating for belief based on the fruits of religious experience rather than its roots. Below in this work, I will offer a revised Jamesian account of religious experience, highlighting its continuous, radical, pragmatically powerful, ineffable, transcendent, and transformative aspects. Josiah Royce builds on the development of the logical principle of the pragmatic maxim, emphasizing the empirical grounding of religious insight in individual experience. He argues that such insight requires a social dimension, leading individuals towards a wider outlook and salvation through love. Royce's concept aligns with Peirce's notion of thirdness, suggesting that religious insight is not solely an individual experience but one that involves a community of interpretation, thus transcending individual limitations. Pragmatism, hence, as articulated by Peirce, James, and Royce, emphasizes the continuity and transformative nature of human experience in the context of religious experience, which they view as having profound implications for individual and communal life.

Through the hermeneutical tradition, particularly in Gadamer⁶ and Ricoeur⁷, we understand the human person as one who seeks to understand the world through conversation with others, living in a hermeneutical space. However, the anthropological foundations for this understanding need clarification, which leads us to Bernard Lonergan's cognitive theory. Lonergan's theory explains how we come to

⁶ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013)

⁷ Ricoeur, Paul. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Dossiê Semiótica, Cognição e Comunicação

know things through a dynamic structure of consciousness involving experience, understanding, and judgment⁸. Knowledge, for 20th Century Jesuit thinker Bernard Lonergan, is the result of this process, leading to a self-conscious knower who can make informed choices about values and pursue the good. This understanding is crucial for exploring religious experience. Lonergan's insights, such as his analysis of insight and inverse insight, provide a foundation for understanding religious experience and its role in cognition⁹. Reading his work on "Religion" in *Method in Theology*, along with insights from scholars like Fred Lawrence¹⁰ and Robert Doran¹¹, further elucidates Lonergan's approach to religious experience and its cognitive dimensions, particularly in the level of awareness called "mystical consciousness".

Lonergan's approach to history emphasizes the concrete historicity of individuals and communities, distinguishing between historical experience and historical knowledge¹². His cognitional theory enriches the hermeneutical quest by providing a more precise understanding of how knowledge is acquired. Tracy builds on this foundation, developing the idea of the "religious classic" from Gadamer and Ricoeur. Tracy's project in *The Analogical Imagination* addresses the challenge of pluralism, aiming to articulate the genuine claims of religion to truth in a pluralistic world¹³. The notion of the religious classic is central to this, as it involves interpreting religious texts and traditions to determine their truthfulness amid diverse interpretations. Tracy's discussion considers how classics relate to their

⁸ Lonergan, Bernard. *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. (University of Toronto Press, 1992).

⁹ Lonergan, Bernard. *Method in Theology*. Herder & Herder, 1972.

¹⁰ Lawrence, Fred. *Lonergan and the Grammar of Religious Belief*. University of Toronto Press, 2021.

¹¹ Doran, Robert M. "Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal." *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, vol. 11, no.1, 2011, pp. 44–63. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/scs.0.0012.

¹² Lonergan, Bernard. "Theology and History." In *A Second Collection*, edited by William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell, 165-178. Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974.

¹³ Tracy, David. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981.

authors' experiences, understanding, knowledge, and values, and how they disclose truth¹⁴. He also explores the idea of interpretation as involving risk, and the possibility of adjudicating among different interpretations¹⁵. Tracy's work builds on Gadamer's, Ricoeur's, and Lonergan's insights, offering a complex theological strategy for affirming pluralism responsibly.

Considering the reality of religious experience in the absence of God, Constance Fitzgerald introduces the concept of an "impasse" as a moment of crisis, limitation, or darkness in religious experience, drawing upon the insights of John of the Cross¹⁶. This impasse, a state of being stuck or unable to proceed, is often marked by spiritual desolation or a perceived abandonment by God. It is not solely an individual experience but can also manifest communally, affecting entire groups or communities of believers. Navigating an impasse necessitates interpretation, reflection, and potential transformation, leading from crisis to prophetic hope and renewed spiritual understanding¹⁷.

The Nature of Religious Experience and Defining Religious Experience

Though the above state of affairs shows a serious engagement with the question of religious experience, the academic study of spirituality requires a battery of concepts about experience that have been recollected from different traditions: the phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions have had the interest of many of the prominent writers on the topic, and critical theory has also been recruited to

¹⁴ Tracy, *Ibid.*, p. 98

¹⁵ Tracy, *Ibid.*, p. 185-210.

¹⁶ Fitzgerald, Constance. "Impasse and Dark Night in the Tradition of John of the Cross." In *The Way of Silent Love: A Study of the Christian Contemplative Tradition*, 65-86. Shambhala Publications, 1999.

¹⁷ Fitzgerald, *Ibid.*

unveil other aspects of the problem. However, the interest in the study of spiritual experience perhaps has not profited enough from a thorough philosophy of experience¹⁸. Pragmatism is indeed a philosophy of all the radical universes of experience that develops from the adoption of the highly open experiential character of the pragmatic maxim. Thus, in this section, I aim to delineate how religious experience can benefit from a philosophical tradition oriented to future action as well as fallibilistic.

Religious experience is characterized by the recognition of a transcendent presence emanating from an ultimate source of meaning. This awareness can be articulated within Peirce's metaphysics of semiotic realism, which categorizes experiences into three universes: firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Peirce's categories are a metaphysical view not only of reality as we experience it but even of how it *could be* experienced and how it *would be* experienced. In other words, it is not only a *descriptive* but a *prescriptive* account of the structure of reality.

According to the Peircean categorial framework, Firstness, on the one hand, involves the sentiment associated with contemplating the possibility of the absolute, representing an initial awareness or openness to the transcendent¹⁹ that is common to the feeling of absolute dependence (as Schleiermacher emphasizes²⁰), or the numinous (as Otto expresses it²¹). Secondness, on the other hand, pertains to the direct manifestation of the absolute through mystical events, where the transcendent becomes palpably present in an individual's life²², this is what we find in William James' typology of the

¹⁸ The emphasis of European philosophy, however rich, tends to be on the subject and the subjective unfolding of experience.

¹⁹ Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 1, paragraphs 302-303. Edited by Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks. (Harvard University Press, 1931-1958) (CP 1.302-3)

²⁰ Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²¹ Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy*. (Oxford University Press, 1958)

²² Peirce, *Ibid.* vol. 2, paragraphs 254-255. (CP 2.254-5)

*Varieties*²³. Finally, thirdness relates to the communal mediation of the absolute²⁴, where insights about the divine are derived from the collective experience and interpretation within a community, this is what Josiah Royce calls “religious insight”²⁵.

Thus, the religious experience encompasses a spectrum of encounters with the transcendent, ranging from personal contemplation to communal understanding, all of which contribute to a deeper awareness and engagement with the ultimate source of meaning that is transformative to our consciousness and creates a new mode of existence in the world, a mystical consciousness. The theological dimension, therefore, is crucial for comprehending religious experience. Bearing that in mind, I propose that with Lonergan's theory of insight, we can highlight how such experiences can transform one's entire outlook on life. Tracy's concept of religious classics further underscores the significance of certain religious texts and traditions as foundational sources of insight and understanding. In what follows, then, we find a proposed study on the nature of religious experience that is powered, on the one hand, by a philosophy of experience (pragmatism) and on the other hand, theologically articulated as a cognitional theory and plural encounter with the religious dimension.

²³ James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. The Modern Library, 2002.

²⁴ Peirce, vol. 8, paragraphs 332-333. (CP 8.332-3)

²⁵ Royce, Josiah. *The Sources of Religious Insight*. (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912)

The nature of Religious Experience: a philosophy of experience and a theology of religious experience

My proposal for defining religious experience integrates a philosophy of experience to elucidate our awareness of reality in the lived world. This approach considers the philosophical dimension of human consciousness and its relation to lived experiences. Additionally, the theological aspect of religiosity is essential for understanding religious experience. In this regard, I draw upon Lonergan's and Tracy's concepts of insight and religious classics. Lonergan's theory of insight emphasizes the transformative nature of understanding, suggesting that religious experiences can lead to profound shifts in one's perspective and worldview. Tracy's notion of religious classics suggests that certain texts and traditions within religions can serve as foundational sources of religious insight and understanding. By incorporating these philosophical and theological perspectives, my definition of religious experience seeks to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of religious awareness and its significance in human life. A philosophy of experience, notwithstanding, must underpin this inquiry first.

Peirce and Experience: *Phaneroscopy* and the three universes of experience

Peirce's conception of experience is part of a metaphysics that follows from the adoption of a logical principle called the "pragmatic maxim"²⁶, the use of the maxim produces a body of beliefs and doctrines. Peirce's conception of experience relies upon his theory of categories, such categories are

²⁶ Hookway, Christopher. *Peirce*. (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) pp. 169-174.

Dossiê Semiótica, Cognição e Comunicação

ultimate ways of understanding the structure of reality. Peirce formulated the term “Phaneroscopy”²⁷ to name the metaphysical study of the categories as applied to experience. Peirce called the categories in his Phaneroscopy as *coenopytagoric*, meaning they are mathematically general ways of classifying a view of totality. From the use of categories, metaphysics can be constructed scientifically and experimentally²⁸. These categories are: 1stness: possible experience, 2ndness: factual experience, and 3rdness: continuous experience.

The fundamental dichotomy (an anti-foundationalist one!) that Peirce’s philosophy of experience fights is a nominalistic one, in other words, the view that the world is made of discreet elements of fundamental experience. As opposed to this, Peirce upheld that experience is continuous to our perception, experience is not a veil, but our connection with the world of which we are part and parcel:

...everything present to us is a phenomenal manifestation of ourselves... [But this] ...does not prevent its being a phenomenon of something without us, just as a rainbow is at once a manifestation both of the sun and of the rain²⁹

Because of this, Peirce states of the pragmatist:

²⁷ Reyes Cárdenas, Paniel *Scholastic Realism: A Key to Understanding Peirce's Philosophy* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018). p. 117, 126-9.

²⁸ The metaphysical doctrines that emerge from the adoption of the pragmatic maxim and the openness to the universes of experience in their unfolding are, for Peirce, these: 1. Tychism: real chance; 2. Synechism: real continuity (concerning experience and perception is fallibilism objectified); 3. Agapism: real growth of habit-forming behaviour. Cf. Ibid. 135-6

²⁹ Peirce, vol. 5, paragraph 283 (CP 5.283).

That he will have no difficulty with Thirdness is clear enough because he will hold that conformity of action to general intentions is as much given in perception as is the element of action itself, which cannot be mentally torn away from such general purposiveness³⁰

When we come to this point, we need a systematic way to understand thirdness, and this is the origin of Peirce's semiotics. Semiotics, as articulated by Peirce, is a systematic science that rigorously examines signs. It can be understood as a logic of signs, as it provides a framework for understanding how signs function in thought and communication. Since all thoughts are signs, semiotics play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of the world: if thought is mediated only by signs, then the science of sign is prescriptive to thought in general, i.e., to fundamental metaphysical, epistemological, and logical categories. This is because our comprehension of the world is mediated through signs, making the logic of signs foundational to the logic of thought. Religious experience is mediated by what Peirce called the "interpretants," i.e., the meaning that prolongs the experience and deepens its meaning.

As stated above, the application of semiotics to the hermeneutics of religious experience is particularly relevant due to its comprehensive approach to understanding different realms of experience. Peirce's semiotics presuppose an a posteriori metaphysics based on three categories.

Religious experience is illuminated through this framework. Firstly, the possibility of religious experience is rooted in the category of firstness, which establishes the potential for our relationship with the transcendent. Secondly, the actual experiences of individuals, constrained by space and time, constitute the realm of secondness, where people report encounters with the transcendent. Thirdness,

³⁰ Peirce, vol. 5, paragraph 212 (CP 5.212).

the realm of regularities and relationships, explores how communities manifest the transcendent, providing a broader context for religious experience.

While Peirce primarily focused on the scientific aspect of semiotics, Royce recognized its potential for shaping communal identity based on loyalty. Royce's semiotics envisioned a community that embodies the highest form of religious insight, where the relationship between the absolute and the community is expressed through the concept of the beloved community, encompassing both vertical and horizontal dimensions of value. Royce critiqued James for presenting an overly individualistic account of religious experience, suggesting that James limited the scope of religious experience to the category of secondness. What we get from Royce, then, is a "mediating third" an elevation of religious experience to religious insight: the common interpretation of experience reveals the binding power of religious experience.

Pragmatism and dichotomies

It has been acknowledged almost unanimously that one key feature of pragmatism is the overcoming of false dichotomies³¹. There is a significant number of relevant dichotomies to be criticized: mind and body, emotions and reason, subjective and objective, and a key problematic one dichotomy inherited from modernity via Cartesianism is the dichotomy of self and world. In this dichotomy, the self can only know itself, and experience is considered a veil covering "things in themselves". This is an important reason why pragmatism criticizes the "spectator theory of knowledge", i.e., a theory of

³¹ Notable works are: Susan Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), and Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

knowledge that assumes a static nature of knowledge and ascribes an inextricable nature to experience. Similarly, the pragmatist theory of experience is dynamic and continuous: experience is a stream that presents itself in three ways, according to Peirce. The Peircean account of the universes of experience constitutes a proposal of scientific metaphysics, i.e., a metaphysics built with reflective control as well as a fundamental openness to recalcitrant experience. Peirce's Pragmatism excels in the hermeneutics of religious experience due to its rejection of false dichotomies, particularly the Cartesian divide between self and world. This enables a dynamic understanding of religious encounters and experiences as continuous processes rather than a static veil. Peirce's triadic model of experience (possibility, actuality, regularity) offers a framework for interpreting religious experience as an engagement with the transcendent, encompassing both individual encounters and communal interpretations. This integrated approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of religious experience, surpassing the limitations of reductionist frameworks.

Peirce's account of perception: epistemology of experience

Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of perception—comprising the percept, *percipuum*, and perceptual judgment—offers a profound framework for understanding experience and its epistemological implications³². The percept, the raw sensory data, is the uninterpreted firstness of experience. It is the "limiting case of what is perceived," independent of our conceptual frameworks³³. The *percipuum*, representing thirdness, is the conceptual lens through which we interpret the percept. It

³² Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 7, paragraph 634. Edited by Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks. (Harvard University Press, 1958). (Cited as CP, followed by volume and paragraph) CP 7.634.

³³ Peirce, vol. 8, paragraph 148. (CP 8.148)

is shaped by our "habits of anticipation," or dispositionally organized expectations, providing meaning and structure to our perceptions³⁴. Finally, perceptual judgment, as secondness, integrates the percept and *percipuum*, forming a more complete, yet fallible, understanding of reality³⁵. This can be a "prima facie account of what is perceived" (wide sense) or an "abductive hypothetical element" (narrow sense)³⁶.

Peirce's emphasis on the continuity and fallibility of perceptual judgments challenges the notion of a static, objective reality fully graspable by individuals. He proposes a dynamic model where understanding evolves through the interplay of experience and interpretive frameworks, highlighting the limitations (fallibility) of knowledge and the necessity of continuous inquiry. This epistemology aligns with pragmatism's focus on the practical consequences of beliefs and the importance of inquiry in generating meaningful knowledge. It posits that understanding reality is an active process of engagement and interpretation, crucial for both everyday comprehension and a robust epistemological theory of self-controlled inquiry.

James' account of perception and experience

As Owen Flanagan³⁷ explains with regard to the Jamesian view on consciousness, there is a conflicting development in James' psychology that swayed as he developed his thoughts. What applies to consciousness, however, is not exactly the case for his view of experience, which seems to be very

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Peirce, vo. 7, paragraph 634 (CP 7.634)

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Flanagan, Owen. *Consciousness Reconsidered*. (MIT Press, 1997) p. 46.

Dossiê Semiótica, Cognição e Comunicação

consistent throughout his writings. Both James' early work on psychology and perception and his later views are bound by the conviction about the richness of experience. In the *Principles of Psychology* (1890), James defended introspective psychology as a way of searching to validate an experimental shift to psychology.

James explained that Rationalism emphasizes universals and makes wholes prior to parts in logic and being, while Empiricism stresses the part and treats the whole as a collection and the universal as an abstraction. For James, these views have generated an unjustified dichotomy: we must either trust reason alone or trust the sense of data. Classical empiricism, however, as we have seen above, imposes some preconceptions about experience that, in fact, impede it from being radical enough. James wrote:

To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced³⁸.

The problem of classical or ordinary empiricism is that is not sufficiently open to experience, it imposes a philosophical misconception as to what counts as 'an experience'. James was becoming aware of the limited view of experience that empiricism holds, i.e., reduced to a pale report of what we can count as individual sensations and facts. Empiricism inverted the perceptual report of the knower for what is known. The sorry state of empiricism needed a radical reform, Blum comments on this:

³⁸ James, William. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912) p. 22.

Dossiê Semiótica, Cognição e Comunicação

This deceptively simple and reasonable sounding methodological tenet would ultimately lead James to articulate a bold and innovative notion of experience, a notion inspired by various facets of James's research and reflections³⁹.

James starts with the parts and considers the whole of experience as of the second order. This is a philosophy of plural facts, referring them neither to substances nor to absolute mind: but it differs from Hume and others, it is more radical: our consciousness of experience does not include only what we call events and qualities of those events. James writes about this:

The only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience... the fact that the relations between things, conjunctive as well disjunctive, are just as much matters of direct particular experience, neither more or nor less so, than the things themselves...

This entails that:

...the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience." The elements of experience are not connected by us. Experience itself possesses "a concatenated or continuous structure"⁴⁰.

Experience is, then, always continuous: "fringed forever by a more that continuously develops," and "which can therefore never be contained or hemmed in by our predictions and expectations"⁴¹. Radical empiricism only allows elements directly experienced and does not exclude any such elements,

³⁹ Blum, Deborah. *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death*. (Penguin Press, 2015) p. 431.

⁴⁰ James, William. *A Pluralistic Universe*. (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909) pp. 6-7.

⁴¹ James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. (The Modern Library, 2002) pp. 150,327.

even the ones that were not included in a conscious report of what we experienced. The relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations and so be counted as real⁴².

Pragmatism and the religious character of the universes of experience

Both Peirce and James emphasize the continuity of experience. A natural consequence of this is the non-discreteness of perception and the overcoming of dichotomies related to experience. Semiotics (for Peirce, "Semeiotics") is a rigorous science of signs. In other words, semiotics is a logic of sciences. Since all thoughts are signs, this means that the logic of signs is prescriptive for the logic of thought. Our understanding, mediated by signs, is also our understanding of the world.

The study of semiotics as a way to approach the hermeneutics of religious experience is very relevant. Semiotics is a rigorous science that prescribes the universes of experience (what Peirce called "firstness", "secondness" and "thirdness"). Religious experience gains reflective clarity from semiotics because it belongs, to varying extents, to each of these universes of experience. Firstly, the possibility of religious experience is mediated by the category of firstness. This category concerns possible experience, establishing the possibility of our relationship and experience of the transcendent. Secondly, the actual particular experiences lived by individuals are constrained in space and time. This is evident in the fact that people report experiences of the transcendent. Thirdly, the category of thirdness explores the regularities and relationships that constitute experience. For example, it examines how a community can manifest the transcendent. Peirce's focus was on science, but Royce realized the massive potential of Peirce's semiotic in the formation of a community that embodies loyalty as the highest expression of

⁴² Ordinary British empiricism (Bacon, Locke, Berkeley and Hume) tends to do away with connections of things, insisting mostly on disjunctions.

religious insight. Royce envisioned this ideal relation of the absolute and the community in the vertical and horizontal value of the beloved community. Royce criticized James for having a very individualistic account of religious experience, limiting religious experience to the category of secondness.

William James and Religious Experience revisited

Through the exhaustive examination of James' conception of experience, compelling evidence emerges to support the proposition that his perspective is expansive and dynamic. This conceptual framework stands as a testament to its richness, offering an account of experience that circumvents the reductionism evident in alternative theories of religious experience. As elucidated by James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he underscores the imperative of scrutinizing the fruits rather than merely the roots of religious experiences: we must look at the fruits in the way of experience, not at the roots in the way of preconceptions. This pragmatic stance accentuates the transformative potential of religious experience and its assertion to be accorded credence: we have a claim for the right to believe.

In my opinion, a renovated Jamesian elucidation of religious experience, that overcomes the initial reductionisms he is been accused of, is anticipated to encompass the following principal attributes: Religious experience, as posited by James, is a continuous stream of consciousness that deepens an individual's or community's understanding of meaning. It is radical, forging a profound connection that leads to a sense of oneness with all beings. This experience is pragmatically potent, influencing actions and behaviors with practical consequences that permeate all aspects of life with a sense of the transcendent and divine. It possesses an ineffable quality, being inexhaustible and open to boundless interpretations. Additionally, it is transcendent, liberating individuals from the constraints of everyday life

and orienting them toward a future filled with meaning and love. Ultimately, religious experience is transformative, acting as a catalyst for personal growth and the pursuit of a life imbued with purpose and goodness.

Royce and religious insight

Royce's Philosophy of religion has an empirical grounding, he writes in the *Sources of Religious Insight*: "If there is any religious insight whatever accessible, it cannot come to us without our individual experience as its personal foundation."⁴³

Individual experience is a basis, not necessarily the end of experience. Royce's concept of religious insight helps us overcome the individual narrowness and the limitation of experience as is necessary for the acquisition of religious insight. Religious insight implies a social dimension:

...social experience, in its religious aspects, helps the individual to win the wider outlook, helps him also to find his way out of the loneliness of guilt and of failure toward wholeness of life, and promises salvation through love.⁴⁴

What Royce tells us about religious insight is tantamount to experience as thirdness in Peirce's language of categories. I have defended elsewhere that this is indeed a conscious adoption of Royce's conception of religious insight since it necessarily presupposes a community of interpretation understanding the continuity of that experience as lived⁴⁵.

⁴³ Josiah Royce, *The Sources of Religious Insight*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), 24.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 79

⁴⁵ Reyes Cárdenas, Paniel, *A Semiotic Theory of Community: Josiah Royce's Absolute Pragmatism*. (New York: Lexington books, 2023).

The theological aspect of religious experience

Mystical consciousness, according to Lonergan's cognitive theory, involves a deep and transformative experience that transcends ordinary understanding. It begins with an encounter that surpasses normal intelligibility, leading to a search for understanding and insight. This process goes beyond the typical cognitive operations, requiring a profound shift in consciousness. Mystical consciousness moves from experiencing the unknown to a deeper understanding that defies conventional logic. Lonergan's concept of the 'inverse insight' is particularly relevant here, as it involves an understanding of 'unintelligibility,' which is crucial in mystical experiences that often defy conventional understanding. Mystical consciousness, therefore, represents a profound form of knowing that transcends the ordinary cognitive process.

In Bernard Lonergan's cognitional theory, which is centered on the process of human knowing, mystical consciousness can be seen as a form of higher consciousness that transcends the ordinary operations of human cognition. According to Lonergan, human cognition involves a series of interconnected and interdependent operations, including experience, understanding, judgment, and decision. These operations are part of a dynamic process of knowing that unfolds over time and is shaped by the individual's context and experiences.

In the context of Lonergan's cognitional theory, mystical consciousness can be understood as a form of higher knowing that transcends the limitations of ordinary experience and understanding. It involves a direct encounter with ultimate reality or the divine, which transforms the individual's understanding of themselves and the world around them. This transformative experience leads to a

profound sense of union or communion with the divine, characterized by a sense of oneness, unity, and interconnectedness with all of existence.

From Lonergan's perspective, mystical consciousness is not simply a subjective experience or an emotional state but rather a form of knowing that transcends the ordinary boundaries of human cognition. It is a form of knowing that is characterized by a deep sense of insight and understanding that transcends ordinary concepts and categories. As such, mystical consciousness has profound implications for our understanding of the nature of reality and the human experience, as it reveals aspects of reality that are not accessible through ordinary modes of knowing.

Pragmatism, with its focus on practical consequences and experiential validation, offers a powerful framework for understanding religious experience. By examining the tangible outcomes of beliefs and practices, pragmatism allows us to assess the significance of religious phenomena in individual and communal life. This section delves into the intersection of pragmatism, religious classics, and the evolving nature of religious experience, drawing insights from David Tracy and Bernard Lonergan.

Religious Classics: Enduring Sources of Meaning and Transformation

David Tracy's concept of the "religious classic" emphasizes the enduring power of certain texts, events, and symbols within religious traditions to shape human experience⁴⁶. These classics, such as the

⁴⁶ Tracy, David. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981. p. 98.

life and teachings of Jesus Christ in Christianity, "embody limit-experiences of the possibilities of the human spirit, fundamental truths, and possibilities of the human spirit."⁴⁷

From a pragmatic perspective, the value of religious classics lies in their ability to facilitate meaningful and transformative experiences. As Tracy notes, "The classic is a 'word' addressed to us, a disclosure-concealment of a possible world, a truth, a genuine possibility."⁴⁸ These texts provide a framework for understanding the world, offer guidance for ethical living, and foster a sense of connection to something greater than oneself.

The Pragmatic Value of Spiritual Inquiry

Bernard Lonergan's emphasis on self-appropriation and methodical inquiry aligns with the pragmatic focus on experience and validation⁴⁹. He states, "Authenticity is the basic fulfillment of the human person."⁵⁰ Lonergan's call for a "turn to the subject" acknowledges the importance of individual consciousness in shaping religious experience.

Pragmatism complements Lonergan's thought by emphasizing the practical consequences of religious belief. Lonergan writes, "Theology is a matter of raising questions and of pursuing the answers. The questions are about religion and, therefore, they arise in the minds and hearts of religious people."⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Lonergan, Bernard. *Method in Theology*. Herder and Herder, 1972.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 237

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 14

If religious ideas and practices lead to positive outcomes, such as compassion, ethical behavior, and a sense of meaning and purpose, then their value is affirmed from a pragmatic standpoint.

Religious Experience as Dynamic and Evolving

Both Tracy and Lonergan recognize the dynamic nature of religious experience. Tracy's concept of the "excess of meaning" within religious classics suggests that their interpretations and applications can evolve over time. Lonergan's emphasis on self-appropriation underscores the active role that individuals play in shaping their own spiritual journeys. The pragmatic lens further highlights the fluidity of religious experience, as it is constantly tested and refined through individual and communal encounters with the world. Religious experience is not static; it is influenced by cultural shifts, historical events, personal growth, and inter-religious dialogue. A pragmatic perspective encourages openness to new insights, fosters a willingness to revise beliefs in light of new evidence, and promotes respectful dialogue with those who hold differing views⁵².

By embracing a pragmatic approach to religious belief, individuals and communities can navigate the complex landscape of faith in the modern world. Pragmatism encourages openness, critical reflection, and a focus on the lived consequences of religious belief, ensuring the continued relevance of religious traditions in a changing world.

⁵² It is important to acknowledge that pragmatism can sometimes clash with religious dogma and absolute truth claims. Pragmatism's emphasis on practical consequences and experiential validation may challenge traditional understandings of religious authority and doctrine. This tension can be productive, leading to critical reflection and re-examining beliefs that may no longer be relevant or beneficial. The intersection of pragmatism, religious classics, and religious experience offers a rich and multifaceted perspective. Religious classics provide enduring sources of meaning, guidance, and community, while pragmatism encourages a focus on the practical outcomes of religious belief, emphasizing its transformative potential. Lonergan's insights underscore the importance of ongoing inquiry and self-awareness in shaping religious experience.

Interpreting Religious Experience and Texts through a Christian Orthodox Hermeneutical Lens: A Pragmatist Approach

The Challenge of Interpretation

Interpretation, whether of religious experience or sacred texts, is a multifaceted endeavor fraught with challenges⁵³. The subjective nature of experience, the historical and cultural contexts of texts, and the multiplicity of interpretive traditions all contribute to the complexity of this task. The risk of misinterpretation is ever-present, leading to misunderstandings, disagreements, and even conflicts⁵⁴.

Within the Orthodox Christian tradition, hermeneutics—the theory and methodology of interpretation—plays a crucial role in navigating these challenges. It provides a framework for understanding and engaging with religious experience and texts in a way that is faithful to the tradition while remaining open to new insights and perspectives⁵⁵.

Pragmatism and Semiotics as the Suitable Interpretive Tool

Pragmatism, as a philosophical tradition emphasizing practical consequences and lived experience, offers a valuable lens for approaching the hermeneutics of religious experience and texts⁵⁶. Its emphasis on the continuity of experience, the importance of community, and the transformative

⁵³ Lossky, Vladimir. *In the Image and Likeness of God*. St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974.

⁵⁴ Ware, Kallistos. *The Orthodox Way*. St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979.

⁵⁵ Louth, Andrew. *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology*. Oxford University Press, 1983.

⁵⁶ Menzies, Robert P. *Theologizing in Communion: The Significance of Paul's Ecclesial Hermeneutics for Contemporary Systematic Theology*. (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014).

power of inquiry aligns well with Orthodox Christianity's emphasis on *theosis* (divinization) as a process of ongoing spiritual transformation⁵⁷.

Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of experience (firstness, secondness, thirdness) can illuminate the different dimensions of religious experience⁵⁸. Firstness corresponds to the immediate feeling or sense of the divine, secondness to the concrete encounter with the sacred, and thirdness to the communal interpretation and understanding of these experiences. William James' focus on the practical consequences of religious experience also resonates with the Orthodox emphasis on *orthopraxis* (right practice) as a means of spiritual growth⁵⁹. Religious experiences, according to James, should be judged by their fruits, their ability to transform lives, and foster love and compassion⁶⁰. Josiah Royce's concept of the "Beloved Community" highlights the importance of communal interpretation in religious experience⁶¹. He emphasizes the need for a shared understanding of religious symbols and practices within a community of faith.

Orthodox Hermeneutics of Religious Experience and Classic Texts

Orthodox hermeneutics emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the meaning of Scripture and religious experience⁶². It also stresses the importance of tradition, the accumulated

⁵⁷ Staniloae, Dumitru. *Theology and the Church*. (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980).

⁵⁸ Cf. Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 5. Edited by Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks. (Harvard University Press, 1931-1958).

⁵⁹ James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. (Longmans, Green, & Co., 1902).

⁶⁰ James, William. *Pragmatism*. (Dover Publications, 1995).

⁶¹ Royce, Josiah. *The Problem of Christianity*. (Macmillan, 1913).

⁶² Ware, Kallistos. *The Inner Kingdom*. (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000).

wisdom of the Church, in guiding interpretation⁶³. However, this does not preclude individual experience or personal insight. On the contrary, Orthodox spirituality encourages a personal encounter with the divine, often through prayer, fasting, and participation in the sacraments⁶⁴.

The *hesychast* tradition, a form of contemplative prayer practiced in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, exemplifies this approach. Hesychasm involves the repetition of the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner") in conjunction with specific breathing techniques and bodily postures. The goal is to achieve inner stillness and union with God, often described as a vision of the Divine Light. The writings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, early Christian ascetics who lived in solitude and practiced rigorous spiritual disciplines, also offer valuable insights into the interpretation of religious experience⁶⁵. Their emphasis on humility, obedience, and discernment provides a framework for understanding and navigating the challenges of spiritual life.

In interpreting sacred texts, Orthodox hermeneutics draws upon a rich tradition of patristic exegesis, the interpretation of Scripture by the early Church Fathers⁶⁶. This tradition emphasizes the spiritual and allegorical dimensions of the text, while also acknowledging its historical and literal meaning. The *Philokalia*, a collection of texts on prayer and hesychasm compiled in the 18th century, exemplifies this approach⁶⁷. It offers guidance on how to read and interpret Scripture in a way that fosters spiritual growth and transformation. The writings of St. Maximus the Confessor, a 7th-century theologian and

⁶³ Lossky, Vladimir. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976).

⁶⁴ Romanides, John. *Patristic Theology*. (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2008).

⁶⁵ Ward, Benedicta. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. (Cistercian Publications, 1975).

⁶⁶ Meyendorff, John. *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*. (Fordham University Press, 1983).

⁶⁷ Palmer, G.E.H., Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, trans. *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*. (Faber and Faber, 1979-1995).

mystic, also provide valuable insights into the interpretation of Scripture⁶⁸. Maximus emphasized the importance of understanding the text in light of the Incarnation, the union of the divine and human in Christ.

Challenges and Considerations

Interpreting religious experience and texts is not without its challenges. The subjective nature of experience, the limitations of language, and the potential for bias can all hinder accurate interpretation. Additionally, the vastness and diversity of the Orthodox tradition can make it difficult to navigate and understand. To address these challenges, it is crucial to approach interpretation with humility, openness, and a willingness to learn from others⁶⁹. Engaging in dialogue with individuals from different backgrounds and traditions can enrich our understanding and broaden our perspectives. It is also important to be aware of our own biases and assumptions and to strive for objectivity and fairness in our interpretations⁷⁰.

How the Semiotic-Pragmatic paradigm is integrated into research goals: an example from the study of Eastern Orthodox Spirituality

My proposal helps develop a new pragmatist hermeneutics mediated testimonies through the lens of semiotic analysis and a deep understanding of the transcendent dimension: semiotics is a rigorous science of signs that allows us to identify the relevant connections that signs have in implicating

⁶⁸ Thunberg, Lars. *Man and the Cosmos: The Vision of St Maximus the Confessor*. (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

⁶⁹ See the Introduction of Yannaras, Christos. *The Freedom of Morality*. (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984).

⁷⁰ Zizioulas, John. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

each other. Testimonies of the different traditions are powerful symbols mediated through communities that allow the growth and unfolding of the meaning of each symbol, these need to be interpreted in the background of a tradition. To interpret the mystical tradition through these ideas, one could approach it from various angles:

1 Peirce's Semiotic realism: The mystical tradition can be seen as encompassing experiences that align with Peirce's categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Mystical experiences might begin with a sense of openness or contemplation (firstness), leading to direct encounters with the transcendent (secondness), and culminating in communal interpretations and insights (thirdness).

2 Lonergan's Insight: Mystical experiences, as transformative encounters with the transcendent, can be understood as instances of insight. They have the potential to radically shift one's understanding and perspective, leading to a new mode of existence and consciousness that, in turn, helps to identify the biases and oppressions that limit our ability to live the four transcendental precepts.

3 Tracy's Religious Classics: The mystical tradition, with its foundational texts and traditions, can be viewed as a source of religious insight and understanding, akin to Tracy's concept of religious classics. These classics provide a surplus of meaning that will vitalize the lives of the communities that interpret them.

4 Semiotics and Religious Experience: Semiotics can help interpret mystical experiences as signs that point towards the transcendent. The mystical tradition can be seen as a system of signs (in Peirce's classification: symbols) that mediate between the individual and the Divine, with each mystical experience contributing to a broader and converging understanding of the transcendent.

5 Royce's Beloved Community: Royce's idea of the beloved community, where communal identity is shaped by loyalty to shared values, can be applied to the mystical tradition. Mystical experiences can be seen as fostering a sense of community among believers, based on a shared understanding of the transcendent that animates the community in its hopes of being loyal to an ever-greater ideal.

All in all, these combined frameworks (philosophy of experience and renovated sense of consciousness of the transcendent) provide a comprehensive lens through which to interpret the mystical tradition, highlighting its transformative nature, communal significance, and role in shaping religious consciousness.

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