

Emotions and/in Religion

Reading Sigmund Freud, Rudolph Otto, and William James

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1. A BRIEF THEORETICAL PREMISE ON AESTHETIC AND RELIGIOUS EMOTIONS

The idea that emotions are harmful to reason, detrimental to both judgment and moral conduct, has been widely held for centuries in the Western mainstream philosophical tradition (particularly by Platonists, the Stoics, Descartes and their followers), and it has also been promoted by Christian theologians of different persuasions. Several contemporary philosophers and cognitive scientists (Robert C. Solomon, Antonio Damasio, Martha Nussbaum, Jenefer Robinson and others)¹ have challenged, and even reversed the traditionally negative view of emotions, and have made the topic culturally respectable and relevant. However, religious emotion has been largely neglected in their work (as opposed, for example, to aesthetic emotion), so that the time seems to have come to explore this aspect in depth. One may start to do so by connecting recent theories on emotions in general to those of three authors whose works have been crucial in the field of the Comparative Study of Religions since the early decades of the twentieth century: i.e. Sigmund Freud, Rudolph Otto and William James. In fact, the issue of emotions in religion plays a prominent part in their research, which is articulated according to obviously different disciplinary methodologies and protocols, but which is similarly cognizant of the central role of emotions in religion. The role of literature, and specifically of its unique contribution in terms of “writing emotions”, has certainly been relevant for both Freud and James, and it must be mentioned here as a premise to the discussion of their

1 Cf. Solomon 1976; Damasio 1999 and 1994; Nussbaum 2001; Robinson 2005.

theories. Freud's deep interest in and fascination with Greek tragedy and Shakespeare is well known, and can be shown to have been instrumental, and even decisive, to the Freudian elaboration of the "Oedipus complex". Freud even applied the literary knowledge of emotions to the understanding of his own "family romance" and personal vicissitudes, while the multifaceted rendering of emotions in the novels of Henry James must have been more than familiar to his brother William. Freud and James build their psychological theories in relation to the articulation of emotions in literature, but, of course, they transpose and transform the literary writing of emotions into their own disciplines and theoretical concerns. They "write emotion" with an obviously different purpose and style from that of the artistic literature to which they often allude.

The following discussion intends to focus on their writings, and will address these points and questions:

- The personal significance and the cultural role of religious emotions.
- Is there an original "religious feeling"?
- Cognition in/and Religious Emotions.
- (How) Do religious emotions differ from secular emotions? Is there a specificity of religious emotions?

Before addressing these issues directly, a few more brief theoretical remarks are necessary. Contemporary literature on the emotions essentially suggests, despite a great variety of approaches, that emotions are intrinsically cognitive,² and that, instead of being blind or capricious forces, they constitute meaningful evaluative strategies. Emotions are increasingly seen as intrinsically cognitive because they are always, *de facto*, acts of appraisal. Moreover, emotions undoubtedly transform our attitude(s) towards the world, towards its meaning and worth, and are also transformative of the self, of our judgments and choices, which means that they are "functionally" intelligent. Martha Nussbaum convincingly argues that emotions enter evaluative thought in relation to the subject's important long-term (as opposed to immediate) goals and projects. She also emphasizes the individual meaning of emotions. One of her main propositions is that emotions are "singular", i.e. highly individualized and "localized": "Emotions contain an ineliminable reference to me, to the fact that it is my scheme of goals and projects. They see the world from my point of view".³ As I have said, Nussbaum focuses mostly on aesthetic emotions and proposes that they are valuable because they help humans to cope with their finitude and help them in the struggle

2 Cf. Lyons 1980; de Sousa 1987; Gordon 1987; Greenspan 1988; Green 1992.

3 Nussbaum 2001: 52.

with ambivalence and helplessness. Jenefer Robinson similarly suggests that we are in need of a renewed “sentimental education”, which the arts can fruitfully provide. I have elsewhere suggested that artistic literature, due to its unique form and intrinsic complexity, can increase our capacity to address the plurality of our world, and foster a meta-ethical attitude of respect through the dynamics of interpretation,⁴ as well as providing a special knowledge of human emotions.

Given these premises, I now wish to address the specific focus of this communication, i.e. religious emotions, by suggesting that religion, like art, but through different means, can contribute to a “sentimental education” and promote compassion, generosity, gratitude and a sense of responsibility (which is the basis of ethics). Of course, and unfortunately, there is more than a mere risk of ideological indoctrination, intolerance and hate speech in both religion and literature, but dealing with complexity (a common experience in literary interpretation and religious exegesis) remains an excellent means of hearing different voices, acknowledging different perspectives, and, as a consequence, of recognizing the importance of creating a respectful dialogue. In the next section of my paper I will argue that religious emotions are endowed with an empowering force that is, in part, similar to the that provided by aesthetic emotions, and that such emotional force had already been attributed to religion by Sigmund Freud, Rudolph Otto and William James.

2. THE PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE AND THE CULTURAL ROLE OF RELIGIOUS EMOTIONS

I have chosen to examine Freud, Otto and James together because in these three authors we find a common interest in the personal and social impact of religion, in which emotion plays a relevant role. Their attention to feelings is not peripheral, but concerns their respective objects and methods of study, and the epistemic import of their theories. Freud, Otto and James write about religion across an overlapping time span, i.e. the first three decades of the twentieth century, and they often display a familiarity with the same texts and with the same cultural issues of their age, to which, of course, each of them contributes in highly original terms. They are all drawn to the relatively new disciplines of ethnology and anthropology, which they appropriate in the interest of their specific concerns (i.e. psychoanalysis, psychology, and the study of religion respectively). They also share a common interest in etymology. This is why it is possible to envisage

4 Cf. Locatelli 2007, 2009, 2015b.

a sort of “dialogue” while reading these authors together, a dialogue which develops precisely around a semantic core that can be called “the religious feeling”.

It is important to remember that William James explicitly declares that his focus is not “the object” of religion (i.e. definitions of the divine, which he leaves to the philosophers and to the theologians), but “the subject of religion”, i.e. the subject having a great “variety of experiences” that may be called “religious”. I would therefore define James’s approach, and the result of his research, as an “experiential phenomenology of religion”.

Attention to the non-rational, or not purely rational, element in religion is also manifest in Rudolph Otto. He takes a less pragmatic, less utilitarian and more theological approach to religious experience than either James or Freud, and indeed he does not limit the study of the religious field to emotions and their social and personal impact. The subtitle of *The Idea of the Holy* is highly indicative: “An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational”. With an important epistemological premise, Otto qualifies his approach as grounded in the twofold aspect of the “supreme Reality” we call “God”: i.e. the “*Ratio aeterna*” and the “*Numen Ineffabile*”. Elements of both the rational (i.e. what is theo-logically predicated of “God”) and the non-rational (i.e. the emotional and experiential element of the divine) are the two complementary halves of Otto’s studies.

Freud consistently views religion as one of the central aspects of civilization, and frequently discusses it in this key, as well as, of course, in relation to the unconscious, human drives, instincts, complexes, neuroses, obsessive behaviour and different pathologies. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913) he writes: “At the bottom, God is nothing more than an exalted father”,⁵ a statement which should not be taken in theological terms, of course, but an eloquent and unequivocal proposition on the powerful emotional grip that religion has for humans. Incidentally, we may recall that mothers or goddesses are essentially absent in Freud’s discussion of religion, and our postmodern cultural sensibility obviously holds several ideological reservations about strictly orthodox Freudian theories. But this is not the main point here. The point here is emotion in religion, and to that I will immediately return. In the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933), Freud speaks of a “religious instinct” in which the emotional component of religion is firmly rooted. He writes: “Religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires.” This statement suggests that Freud sees emotional needs as the true spring (in the double sense of “source” and “driving force”) of religion. In the *New Introductory Lectures on*

5 Freud 1913: 147.

Psychoanalysis (1933), he expands this view into three main points, which can be paraphrased as follows:

If one wishes to form a true estimate of the full grandeur of religion, one must keep in mind what it undertakes to do for men.

- It gives them information about the source and origin of the universe.
- It assures them of protection and final happiness amid the changing vicissitudes of life.
- And it guides their thoughts and motions by means of precepts which are backed by the whole force of its authority.

Between 1927 and 1933, Freud often returns to the human “instinctual” need of “consolation” as a crucial factor in adopting religion. Even in his most anti-religious work, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), he lucidly outlines the psychic results of forsaking religion in terms of a great emotional loss for humankind:

They [humans] can no longer be the center of creation [a narcissistic wound!], no longer the object of tender care on the part of a beneficent Providence. They will be in the same position as a child who has left the parental house where he was so warm and comfortable. But surely infantilism is destined to be surmounted. Men cannot remain children forever.⁶

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud’s thesis was, in fact, that civilization would progressively evolve through three main stages, from animism to religions to scientific thought. He sees these three stages as inevitable, but his wrong prediction on the evolution of cultures can easily be ascribed to a residual neopositivistic attitude, and the concomitant blind faith in the widespread triumph of scientific thought. Freud had assumed that people would choose a scientific “mythology of rational despair” over the comforts of religion, but he had clearly underestimated his own judgments on the human instinct for happiness. He had also, and perhaps more importantly, ignored the compelling force on others of the religious emotions which he was unable to experience in himself (the famous “oceanic feeling” to which I will soon come), and which would definitely contradict his thesis on the acceptance of religion in a sort of bad faith (i.e. preferring a comfortable “illusion” over the cold and hard truth).

In Freud’s opinion, a second relevant emotional factor in adopting religion is cultural (parental) transmission. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), a seminal text whose many implications on Freud’s understanding of religion and civilization

6 Freud 1927: 49.

transcend by far the scope of this text, he suggests that the infant is bound to the parent by powerful ties that make it impossible for him to reject certain prohibitions (on a larger scale this applies to indoctrination and education as such). The force of parental prohibition is made clear in relation to the motiveless veto of the taboo and its irrefutable force. Freud was explicit on this point: desire (to touch) comes up against an external prohibition, which is accepted because of an internal force (the child's gratifying and loving relation to the author of the prohibition). The instinct is then not abolished but repressed. It produces an ambivalent attitude towards the object and the act in connection with that object. The conflict between the instinct and the prohibition is in the subject's mind, and thus they cannot come up against each other. The motives of the prohibition remain unknown. This is always the case with taboos, which concern activities towards which there was an earlier strong inclination. The forbidden impulse leads to the performance of obsessive acts, which are both evidence of remorse and expiation, but also substitutive acts of what has been prohibited. In this sense it is easy to see why Freud would associate obsessive neurosis with religion, and suggest that both result from an introjected veto.

These dynamics come to mind when one considers the blind obedience to the hardest religious prescriptions, and the self-effacing conduct of saints and hermits in different traditions. In order to avoid anachronism or disrespect, let me add that certain behaviours which we tend, after Freud, to consider "pathological", were obviously not deemed such in earlier times, and may still be deemed sane in different regions of the globe. On the contrary, extreme gestures, like self-flagellation, prolonged fasting, walking on burning coals, driving needles through the flesh etc. were/are not only accepted, but receive(d) a full admiring social endorsement in different cultures and times. This demonstrates that religious emotions, just like any others, are time and culture specific.

Moreover, we also need to distinguish the self-torturing behaviour of rigorous saints from the saintly renunciations motivated by compassion and charitable purposes (St. Francis of Assisi comes to mind). While the former are perhaps motivated by a conception of the deity modeled on that of an overpowering and tyrannical father-figure, and by an ensuing desire for submission or expiation, the latter can be seen as grounded in the opposite conception of a benevolent deity or compassionate superior being, inviting a similar attitude of generous self-denial in the believers. In *Upheavals of Thought*, Martha Nussbaum valuably suggests (in a secular, rather than religious context) that "surrendering omnipotence is essential to compassion".⁷ In a religious context, Christ's incarna-

7 Nussbaum 2001: 250.

tion and crucifixion and the Bodhisattva's reincarnation for the sake of humankind are religious expressions of the highest compassion.

An important aspect in Freud's approach to religion is the fact that, in his theory, religious belief seems inextricably bound up with the crucial emotion of happiness (in the various forms of: a sense of security, protection, consolation, gratification). This is also true for William James in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In Lecture II James, like Freud, attributes an intrinsic special power to religion *vis à vis* the human condition of helplessness. He writes:

Religious feeling is thus an absolute addition to the Subject's range of life. It gives him a new sphere of power. When the outer battle is lost, and the outer world disowns him, it redeems and vivifies an interior world which otherwise would be an empty waste.⁸

Given James's strong pragmatism, the emotional significance he attributes to religion can hardly be underestimated, both as a personal and as a sociocultural force. He maintains that assent to a doctrine follows upon an individual positive emotion evoked by it. Such assent is never purely abstract or intellectual: "It is perhaps not surprising that men come to regard the happiness which a religious belief affords as proof of its truth. If a creed makes a man feel happy, he almost inevitably adopts it".⁹ James gives a vivid picture of the emotional impact of religious belief:

We shall see how infinitely passionate a thing religion at its highest flights can be. Like love, like wrath, like hope, ambition, jealousy, like every other instinctive eagerness and impulse, it adds to life an enchantment which is not rationally or logically deducible from anything else. This enchantment, coming as a gift when it does come – a gift of our organism, the physiologists will tell us, a gift of God's grace, the theologians say – is either there or not there for us, and there are persons who can no more be possessed by it than they can fall in love with a given woman by mere word of command.¹⁰

Having suggested above that emotions in general are means of appraisal, and forms of evaluative thought, we can appreciate how, more than once in his Gifford Lectures, James suggests that religious emotion provides a positive appraisal of the world.¹¹ He most clearly illustrates this fact in the pages devoted to the experience of conversion or, as in Tolstoy's well known case, of conver-

8 James 2002: 55.

9 *Ibid.*: 90-91.

10 *Ibid.*: 54-55.

11 *Ibid.*: 54-55, 167-168.

sion as involving the overcoming of a state of personal crisis, or anhedonia: “a passive joylessness and dreariness, discouragement, dejection, lack of taste and zest and spring”.¹²

The gamut of religious emotions is indeed far reaching: for James it includes happiness, gratitude, confidence, piety (empathy), tenderness for others, but also humility and severity towards oneself.¹³ In a different context, Rudolph Otto also connects several emotions to worship, and in particular he mentions “feelings of gratitude, trust, love, reliance, humble submission, and dedication”, but he also hastens to add that “these do not exhaust the content of religious worship”,¹⁴ something which is for him connoted by complex attitudes, both rational and emotional.

From what has been argued so far, we can confirm the thesis that the impact of the emotions on religion is demonstrably pervasive. Guilt and reparation *versus* compassion and gratitude, oppression and fear *versus* a liberating elation are indeed strong emotions in all religious traditions. I would add that religious emotion is often connected to or tinged with a more or less legalistic sense of personal “desert” and of “merit” (which is both an intellectual and *emotional* act of self-appraisal); in this case happiness is often disturbed or even destroyed by a sense of undeserving, of guilt, and even of despair (all of them very strong negative emotions). Such a sense of undeserving may, on the other hand, promote positive emotions, such as a joyful trust and hope in the boundless benevolence of God (Luther comes immediately to mind in this sense).

Not surprisingly, James’s Lectures XVIII and XIX deal with “The primacy of feeling in religion” and “Aesthetic elements in religion”. In lecture XVIII he writes: “I do believe feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations”.¹⁵ The word “translation” is fascinating in this context. If we agree that “poetry” is “what gets lost in translation” we could say that the original religious feeling is what gets lost in the rational religion of theological formula(tion)s. In other words, whatever is predicated in religion is perhaps, always and already, an (inadequate) approximation of the original “religious feeling”. What is it then, this original feeling? Let us once more interrogate our primary texts.

12 Ibid.: 163.

13 Ibid.: 286.

14 Otto 1958 [1917]: 8.

15 James 2002: 470.

3. FREUD'S "OCEANIC FEELING", JAMES'S "COSMIC EMOTION" AND OTTO'S "NUMINOUS STATE OF MIND"

Freud's opinion on the source of religious sentiments is best expounded in *Civilization and its Discontents*, where he recalls sending the French philosopher and novelist Romain Rolland his recent book *The Future of an Illusion* and receiving the following answer from him. Freud writes:

He was sorry I had not properly appreciated the true source of religious sentiments. This, he says, consists in a peculiar feeling, which he himself is never without, which he finds confirmed by many others, and which he may suppose is present in millions of people. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of "eternity", a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded – as it were, "oceanic".

This feeling, he adds, is a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of the religious energy which is seized upon by the various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into particular channels, and doubtless also exhausted by them. One may, he thinks, rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion. [...] I cannot discover this "oceanic" feeling in myself. It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings.¹⁶

Freud seems aware of the inevitable epistemological reduction that is implicit in any general scientific explanation *vis à vis* the particularity and variety of "feelings" and "forms of life",¹⁷ and yet what he does in order "to deal scientifically with feelings" is to provide a "translation", in rigorous psychoanalytic terms, of the poetical terminology of Rolland's concept of "oceanic feeling". He proceeds to trace the source of "the oceanic feeling" in the depths of the psychic life. He finds it in the infant condition of primary narcissism, when the infant's boundaries of the ego are not yet defined, a condition that repeats itself in certain pathologies, and in the climax of erotic passion, when the boundaries between self and other are blurred and suspended.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, several other aspects of religion are reinterpreted by Freud in strictly psychoanalytical terms, including his view of religion itself as a sort of distorted obsessional neurosis, and in the reverse view of obsessional neurosis in terms of a "taboo sickness". Let me

16 Freud 1999: 10-11.

17 Cf. Locatelli 2015a.

18 Freud 1999: 12-13.

briefly digress from the discussion of the “oceanic feeling”, to further develop this point. In *Totem and Taboo* Freud writes:

Anyone approaching the problem of taboo from the angle of psycho-analysis, that is to say, of the investigation of the unconscious portion of the individual mind, will recognize, after a moment’s reflection, that these phenomena are far from unfamiliar to him. He has come across people who have created for themselves individual taboo prohibitions of this very kind and who obey them just as strictly as savages obey the communal taboos of their tribe or society. If he were not already accustomed to describing such people as ‘obsessional’ patients, he would find ‘taboo sickness’ a most appropriate name for their condition.¹⁹

A passage just above this one in *Totem and Taboo* proposes a connection between the apparently divergent emotions of fear and veneration:

According to Wundt, this original characteristic of taboo – the belief in a ‘demonic’ power which lies hidden in an object and which, if the object is touched or used unlawfully, takes its vengeance by casting a spell over the wrong-doer – is still wholly and solely ‘objectified fear’. That fear has not yet split up into the two forms into which it later develops: veneration and horror.

But how did this split take place? Through the transplanting, so Wundt tells us, of the taboo ordinances from the sphere of demons into the sphere of the belief in gods. The contrast between ‘sacred’ and ‘unclean’ coincides with a succession of two stages of mythology.²⁰

Along these lines, an interesting analogy concerning religious awe emerges in Freud and Otto, not surprisingly both of them readers and commentators of Wundt’s work on myth and religion. On this ground, one can make sense of the ambivalent experience of the “*mysterium tremendum*”, a cardinal point in Rudolph Otto’s discussion of “the holy”:

Let us consider the deepest and most fundamental element in all strong and sincerely felt religious emotion. Faith unto salvation, trust, love – all these are there. But over and above these is an element which may also on occasion, quite apart from them profoundly affect us and occupy the mind with a wellnigh bewildering strength. [...] The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. [...] It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depth of the soul with

19 Ibid.: 26.

20 Ibid.: 25.

spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering.²¹

The “panic” in its sense of the terrifying, ecstatic or orgiastic emotions usually connected to the rituals of the Greek god Pan, may be seen as the equivalent of the psychoanalytical “uncanny”, with the unsettling return of the repressed: “Conceptually *mysterium* denotes merely that which is hidden and esoteric, that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar.”²²

Otto discusses the implications of *tremendum* in several languages (Latin, Hebrew, German and English) and finds in them the common “feeling of a peculiar dread”, i.e. of religious awe.

This once more confirms the deep and strong link between veneration and horror, between religion and powerful emotions. One is then tempted to speculate on the pervasive fascination with horror in the most secularized societies, but this is clearly beyond the scope of my discussion.

Let me then return to the above mentioned distinction between the institutional, doctrinal, rational, ideological aspects of religion *versus* the purely subjective experience of the holy in the sense of a “mystical state”. It is a distinction which, perhaps not surprisingly, is relevant for Freud, for Rudolph Otto and for William James. In this respect, James does not entirely ignore the institutional aspect of religion, but rather explores how the “cosmic emotion” is inflected in different traditions. He explicitly refers to “Christian mysticism, transcendental idealism, vedantism, and the modern psychology of the subliminal self” and proposes that a mystical state either happens or it doesn’t, but if it does, it may become the cornerstone of religion, in various subsequent institutionalized forms. In order to describe the mystical experience, and its jubilant mood, James quotes from R.W. Trine (*In Tune with the Infinite*, 1899), a passage that closely recalls the Freudian observations on the oceanic feeling:

The great central fact of human life is the coming into a conscious vital realization of our oneness with this Infinite Life, and the opening of ourselves fully to this divine inflow. [...] We actualize in ourselves the qualities and powers of the Infinite Life, we make ourselves the channels through which the Infinite Intelligence and Power can work.²³

21 Otto 1958 [1917]: 12-13.

22 Ibid.: 13.

23 James 2002: 115.

In this quotation “divine inflow” seems the literal etymological equivalent of “enthusiasm”, a state which is often, in different religious traditions, associated with a sense of inspiration, uplifting, elation, liberation from oppressive moods, limits, and constraints, and above all of participation in, or merging with the divine. With reference to the “Religion of Healthy-mindedness” James writes that cosmic emotion “inevitably takes in them the form of enthusiasm and freedom”.²⁴

For James, a “mystical state of consciousness” has four distinctive features:

- Ineffability: “it defies expression.”²⁵
- Noetic Quality: “Mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge.”²⁶
- Transiency: “Mystical states cannot be sustained for long.”²⁷
- Passivity: “the mystic feels as if he [...] were grasped and held by a superior power.”²⁸

Borrowing Shakespeare’s phrase concerning Cleopatra’s beauty, one could say that “ineffability” means that a mystical state “beggars all description”. “Noetic quality” I understand as the experience of insight, illumination, revelation. This is highly significant, and even compelling, for the subject experiencing it, but this knowledge often remains something inarticulate and incommunicable. “Transiency” means that mystical states do not last forever; but they return, may be recurrent, and, most importantly, they can be recollected through memory (albeit only imperfectly). The “passivity” of the mystical states has clear affinities with the notion of “enthusiasm” discussed above.

James’s “cosmic emotion” is clearly an experience, not an article of faith. A consciously emotional hue tinges the experience, and makes it unique, so much so that it cannot be enforced on those who have not experienced it. James, as we have seen, draws an interesting parallel between this situation and the ineffectual order to fall in love with a specific woman.

Otto suggests that “feeling a Presence” is the *sine qua non* and the very premise of any religious experience, and of all subsequent religious emotions: “the ‘numen’ must be experienced as present, a *numen praesens*, as in the case

24 Ibid.: 91.

25 Ibid.: 414.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.: 415.

28 Ibid.

of Abraham”.²⁹ One is here reminded of a reference in Genesis xviii.27, where Abraham pleads for the people of Sodom and says: “Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes”. Not only does Rudolph Otto build his seminal concept of “creature-feeling” on this reference, but, in this context, he suggests (in a footnote that is relevant for our purposes) that

the feeling of a “numinous” object objectively given, must be posited as a primary immediate datum of consciousness, and the “feeling of dependence” is then a consequence, following very closely upon it, viz. a depreciation of the subject in his own eyes. The latter presupposes the former.³⁰

Rudolph Otto’s concept of the “numinous”, with its closeness to both “the ineffable” and “a sense of presence” clearly recalls aspects of both Rolland’s “oceanic feeling” and James’s “cosmic emotion”. When Otto points out that in Semitic religions “the holy” (Hebrew Qādôsh, the Greek ἅγιος, the Latin sanctus/sacer) is “pre-eminently a living force”,³¹ we may again surmise that what he means resembles James’s “vital realization of the Infinite Life”.

4. COGNITION IN/AND RELIGIOUS EMOTIONS

Are religious emotions cognitive? In a first and basic sense they are, being acts of appraisal, like any and all emotions as such (*sensu* Damasio, De Sousa, Greenspan, Gordon, Lyons, Nussbaum, Robinson, et al.). But I wish to add that the original religious feeling related to mystical states is ‘cognitive’ in a special sense. I will do so by recalling Bertrand Russell’s important epistemological distinction (in Chapter V of *The Problems of Philosophy* 1912)³² between “knowledge by acquaintance” and “knowledge by description”. I propose that some religious emotions, particularly those related to mystical states, constitute a particular case of “knowledge by acquaintance”, in the sense that they imply “a direct awareness [...] without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths”.³³ In this they have a somehow paradoxical affinity

29 Otto 1958 [1917]: 11.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.: 6.

32 Cf. Russell 1996: 243-294.

33 Ibid.: 256.

with sense-data, which, in Russell's words, "make up the appearance" of objects. The mystics' "conscious vital realization" seems a near synonym of "direct awareness" of "the Infinite Life". Other religious emotions, i.e. the ones generated by cultural transmission, can be seen, instead, as forms of 'knowledge by description'.

Russell's distinction can be effectively illustrated in a quotation (cited by W. James) from the eleventh century Persian philosopher and theologian Al-Ghazzali:

I understood all that can be *learned by study and hearsay* [that is clearly 'knowledge by description']. Then I recognized that what pertains most exclusively to their method [the Sufis] is just *what no study can grasp, but only transport, ecstasy, and the transformation of the soul*. How great, for example is the difference between knowing the definitions of health, of satiety, with their causes and conditions and being really healthy or filled.³⁴

Al-Ghazzali provides another example of knowledge by acquaintance: the condition of being drunk as distinct from the medical diagnosis of drunkenness, and he indicates two important forms of religious knowledge by acquaintance "ecstasy and leading a pious life". Freud's "oceanic feeling", but even more clearly "the numinous" in Rudolph Otto and James's "direct awareness" qualify ecstatic emotions as a form of knowledge that is proper and peculiar to the religious realm, something totally irrefutable for the one experiencing the emotional state, and yet radically subjective, verging on solipsism, since the content of the emotional experience remains mostly inarticulate, and no verifiable propositional content can be provided about it. The non-religious (one, like Freud, who has never experienced the "oceanic feeling") would simply dispute this knowledge of the ineffable, and dismiss it as *flatus vocis*, "thin air". S/he might acknowledge the reality of the experience (while still ignoring its cognitive content) purely out of trust towards the person claiming it (as Freud seems to do towards Romain Rolland). A non-believer may certainly be tempted to call the mystic's "vital realization" a case of "mistaken emotion" in Nussbaum's terminology. The American philosopher speaks of "mistaken emotions" mostly with reference to a wrong belief or assumption, and to a false propositional content (for example, experiencing grief for a disgrace that one eventually discovers never to have happened). A mistaken emotion, let me point out, does not make the emotion any less "real" for the subject experiencing it. But, let us notice that it is difficult to conclude that there are mistaken emotions in mystical states, given the paradox of their compelling evidence and unverifiability; in fact, the

34 Ibid.: 439, italics A.L.

emotional experience is real and its content true for the subject experiencing it. The non-religious has to remain in a sceptical position and suspend judgment on the “truth” of the mystical experience, since the propositional content cannot be (fully or adequately) articulated, let alone verified, and cannot therefore be declared either “false” or “true” with certainty.

Nussbaum also acknowledges the possibility of “fraudulent” or “feigned” emotions, but this is not the case if we assume the honesty and good faith of the subject experiencing the religious emotion and articulating it, however imperfectly. It goes without saying that religious charlatans, no less than the mundane, can, of course, be the histrionic purveyors of what Nussbaum calls ‘fraudulent emotions’.

Before I conclude this section let me point out that both the “truth” of religion and the “reality” of the emotions enhanced by it are not exclusively a matter of intellectual apprehension, but of an existential sense of (willing or assenting) participation in a higher realm or ‘reality’. The phenomenology of the religious experience is most fruitfully approached through “the subject”, as William James valuably reminds us, and it is not entirely or solely defined in intellectual terms, as Otto convincingly suggests.

5. IS THERE A SPECIFICITY OF “RELIGIOUS EMOTION”?

Philosophers, theologians, poets and ordinary people have answered the question of the singularity of religious emotion along two main lines, and have argued either that there is no essential difference between religious emotion and any other, or they have maintained that there is a qualitative difference, a uniqueness to religious emotion.

While Freud, Otto and James are, as we have seen, all three in agreement on the fundamental emotional component in religion, on its enormous social and individual meaning, and on its impact on civilization, they clearly differ on the issue of the specificity of religious emotion.

When Freud interprets religion in terms of the emotional dynamics of ordinary family life, he clearly denies a specificity of religious emotions; however, he admits a specifically “religious feeling”, i.e. the “oceanic feeling”, even while stating that he has never experienced it. Freud is prepared to acknowledge this special feeling in others (in Rolland, for example).

William James takes a nuanced and apparently contradictory position on the issue of the uniqueness and qualitative difference of religious emotion. On the one hand, he suggests that religious emotion is not different from any other:

We are willing to treat the term “religious sentiment” as a collective name for the many sentiments which religious objects may arouse in alternation, we see it probably contains nothing whatever of a psychologically specific nature. There is religious fear, religious love, religious awe, religious joy, and so forth. But religious love is only man’s natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; religious fear is only the ordinary fear of commerce, so to speak, the common quaking of the human breast, insofar as the notion of divine retribution may arouse it; religious awe is the same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight, only this time it comes over us at the thought of our supernatural relations [...] but there is no ground for assuming a simple abstract “religious emotion” to exist as a distinct elementary mental affection by itself present in every religious experience without exception.³⁵

But James seems to change his mind on this point more than once throughout his Lectures, so that he makes several disclaimers on his own statement that religious emotion is identical to any other ordinary emotion. It is interesting to see that a pragmatist and pluralist like James suggests that a specific religious attitude or receptivity is a human “faculty”, with which some people are endowed and others are not. In this sense, religious emotion would then be grounded in a particular temperament, so that different individuals experience a variety of quintessentially different religious emotions, or none at all: “So the nature which is spiritually barren may admire and envy faith in others, but can never compass the enthusiasm and peace which those who are *temperamentally qualified for faith enjoy*”.³⁶

Not surprisingly, James’s Lectures IV and V are devoted respectively to “The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness” and Lectures VI and VII to “The Sick Soul”. But James also speaks of a peculiar and intrinsic “happiness” in religion, “parted off from mere animal happiness” by an element of “solemnity”. All of this seems to suggest a specificity of religious emotion. The same applies to his treatment of the “mystical state of consciousness” and its unique “cosmic emotion”. James seems therefore to take up a middle position between Freud and Otto. In fact, Rudolph Otto strongly defends the thesis that religious emotion is highly specific and qualitatively different from any other. He bases his argument on the notion of “a feeling of the numinous”, discussed above, which is proper to religion alone. Otto also defends the *sui generis* nature of religious emotion on the ground of its “intimate personal knowledge”,³⁷ the knowledge provided by mystical states. Moreover, recalling Schleiermacher’s well known notion of

35 James 2002: 32-33.

36 Ibid., 227, italics A.L.

37 Otto 1958 [1917]: 8.

“feeling of dependence” as the basis of a religious attitude and religious devotion, Otto elaborates on it, in order to argue in favour of a quintessentially religious form of dependence, different from other forms, not only in degree (as Schleiermacher himself had already suggested in the distinction between “absolute” and “relative” dependence), but also because of an “intrinsic quality”.³⁸ This religious dependence is different, Otto argues, from that of father and son, or from that of any mundane relationship. As in the case of Abraham already mentioned, there exists a sense of dependence which is specifically “religious”, and Otto calls it the “Creature-Feeling”.

Even if the issue of the unique and specific quality of religious emotion cannot be said to be resolved once and for all, I believe that the three concepts I have dealt with, i.e. the “oceanic feeling” in Freud, “the feeling of the numinous” in Rudolph Otto and the “cosmic emotion” in William James are crucial contributions to the ongoing debate,³⁹ necessary elements to better understand the complexity of the “religious” nature of religious emotions.

As I conclude, I need to propose another thesis: religious emotion differs from others in terms of the individual’s conception of the divine, both as ‘object’ and as ‘addressee’. It does not matter greatly if such conception is learned through cultural transmission, or if it stems from a personal experience. The object of the emotion and its addressee are equally important. But I also wish to suggest that, given the highly individual, localized and situated nature of emotions (*sensu* Nussbaum given above), we can posit a singularity of religious emotion related to the ‘subject of the emotion’. The uniqueness of religious emotion is then determined within a triangular relationship, centred in the feeling and sentient subject, and branching out towards the imagined/posited object and towards the addressee of the emotion. Various conceptions of the object and addressee open up the possibility of different emotions within different religious traditions, through the respective ideas of the deity, and according to the different cultural practices and notions of worship. I wish therefore to emphasize that religious emotions are, like all other emotions, historically and culturally specific.

38 Cf. Schleiermacher 1963.

39 Cf. Lemmens/Van Herck 2008; Roberts 2014.

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