

**"AUREL VLAICU" UNIVERSITY OF ARAD
INTERDISCIPLINARY DOCTORAL SCHOOL
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
DOCTORAL FIELD "THEOLOGY"**

**PhD Thesis
Summary**

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PhD Candidate, FOSZTÓ M. ÁRPÁD

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**A PNEUMATOLOGICAL AND ANTROPOLOGICAL
EXPLORATION OF THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND ITS
EPISTEMICAL MECHANISMS**

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SUMMARY

It is a well-known fact that innovation is not possible without creativity. Creativity, on the other hand, depends on inspiration, and the latter one is supposed to be activated by different means, such as musical auditions, participation at different artistic activities, meditation, the change in the environment etc. The ancients had, however, a different opinion. They needed help from the exterior, and for this reason they invoked the muses, or, if they belonged to the Judeo-Christian tradition, they invoked God. The etymology of the word inspiration comes from an influence on the human spirit by an exterior spirit, blown (from the Latin *in-spire*) from the exterior to the interior of the person. Inspiration is an interior process, during which the human person is feeling inside of him a divine creative energy. It is a durable infusion of this exterior spirit. In the ancient Greek culture they called this *entheos*, suggesting the fulness with the divine spirit.

A seemingly synonymous term, used in the Latin culture, is *afflatus*, coming from the verb *afflare*, to blow on somebody. It denotes the condition of a person who receives at a certain time a creative energy from an exterior muse or divine force. *Afflatus* differs from *inspirare* by the amount of force that is activated on the person. Both mean what the modern person would call inspiration, but the first one is more subtle than the second. The Greek correspondent of it is the *pneuma*, the divine blow.

We have shown during our research, that this condition, whether we call it *afflatus* or inspiration, is common among Christians, those inhabited by the Holy Spirit. In numerous places, Scripture speaks of believers being indwelt by the Holy Spirit or by God. Through our investigation, we have sought to broaden the sphere of religious experience by including the important element of man's salvation through the presence of the Holy Spirit within him. It is the only way for man to achieve the purpose for which he was created, referred to in Greek Orthodox theology as divinization (*theosis*), not in the sense of confusion or merging with God, but of participation in the life with God through His grace, delighting in God, and loving Him. Attaining this condition, towards which we should all strive, cannot be possible without the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Our study reveals that man can serve as a conducive medium for the influence of the Spirit or spirits, that he is a complex entity allowing for a wide variety of "spiritual" manifestations, and that it is necessary to realize that the bridge between this lofty goal and man's fallen spiritual state is formed through various forms of *afflatus*.

Man was created by God "in His own image and likeness" (Genesis 1:26). This means that despite the fall into sin, man has retained, with all the modifications that have occurred in his life and his surrounding environment after the Fall, the longing for the One he resembles. The fulfillment of man is only possible through a realignment with his initial, divine likeness. However, this realignment can only happen with the help of divine grace. Naturally and consciously, man has certain tendencies towards perfection (cultivation), which are evident in all religious traditions of humanity. But under the influence of superbia, the Latin term for pride, the body has taken control over reason and has obscured it. It has also caused reason to no longer identify the true object of its desires, which become disordered (*concupiscentia inordinata*). Therefore, as I have stated, only through divine grace, through the supernatural intervention of God, can man access the Divinity through divine power and guidance. White identifies this driving force, upon which God acts, in the unconscious, while Father Stăniloae prefers to call it the superconscious. The supernatural becomes natural for the one who, through conversion (*semen gloriae*), enters the process of sanctification (supernatural process). And religious experience, in this case, constitutes the "extraordinary supernatural" (de Lubac).

According to the Epistle to the Hebrews 1:1, God "spoke in the past to our ancestors through the prophets in many ways and in various forms (*πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως, polymeros kai polytropos*)." The "speaking" as divine revelation is one of the manifestations of divine grace. Thomas Aquinas paraphrases this, according to White, as the "extraordinary richness and variety of methods" through which God has expressed Himself throughout history. And this variety of methods can be collectively referred to as **religious experiences**.

Consequently, the specialized literature that deals with religious experience - interpreted as an experience of God - is exceptionally vast, just like the various forms of manifestation of religious experience itself. A simplistic approach to this type of experience betrays a lack of understanding of the phenomenon, as old as the world we live in. The title of the collection of lectures given by William James in the early 20th century, "The Varieties of Religious Experience," fails to fully capture the immense typology of religious experience.

An element of our contribution to the research of this impressive edifice consists of analyzing the mechanisms through which religious experience provides cognitive contributions that facilitate the path towards theosis. Most authors mention the epistemic dimension of religious experience, but contemporary literature pays little attention to the

contribution of the Holy Spirit to the development of it. The gap we have observed, and which is the subject of this thesis, is the investigation of how religious experience brings about knowledge of the supernatural through the mediation of the Holy Spirit, considering the various ways in which humans acquire knowledge. Without rejecting or disregarding theoretical knowledge in any way, we have emphasized in our study that the practical aspect of Christian faith, as *praxis*, and not *gnosis*, is the element that confirms and elevates the believer from the subconscious to the superconscious, from an infantile (or weak, according to some authors) state to one of maturity. Praxis seems to be the only way for the believer to demonstrate the authenticity of his own faith. Theoretical knowledge is sufficient up to a certain point. However, it must be followed by other types of knowledge, such as affective and experiential knowledge.

In our endeavor, we started by reviewing the current state of research on religious experience. Evidently, in the European and Anglo-Saxon cultures, there are at least three main categories of authors: those belonging to the major Catholic and Orthodox traditions, the Evangelical authors, and authors who are not affiliated with the Christian religion and do not have Christian theological influence. We have noticed that the taxonomy of religious experience is largely similar among all these categories. They all adhere to almost the same classification criteria, with the observation that researchers not affiliated with the Christian religion tend to approach religious experience in a more limited way, by disregarding the immense literature produced over millennia of Judeo-Christian history. Someone like Alister Hardy, who founded *The Institute for the Study of Spiritual Experience*, seems to have based his research solely on records from recent centuries, ignoring the significant contributions made by the great Christian cultures from which he himself benefited. The similarity in their taxonomies is evidence that religious experience is a "natural," inherent characteristic of humanity, and that God communicates through this means, as well as through any other natural means available to human beings. Interestingly, according to certain authors (such as Victor White), religious experience is given not only to those who are morally impeccable (*bonitas morum*) but also to those with a rich imagination (*bonitas imaginationis*). However, this does not mean that the mortification of sins and the strengthening of virtues do not play an essential role in the ultimate purpose of religious experience, which is union with God. It is important to balance these statements for a more robust understanding of the phenomenon.

We have placed an important emphasis on researching the intervention of the Holy Spirit in religious experience because the role of the Holy Spirit is often neglected in

secular literature. We have reviewed several episodes of *Erlebnis*-type experiences mentioned in Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments, with a particular focus on the activity and perspective of the Apostle Paul in this regard. We have also studied revelatory experiences produced by the Holy Spirit, which explicitly contribute to additional epistemic insight. These experiences are treated differently by the two seemingly "adverse" camps: the secular and the religious. The latter approaches these types of experiences with reservations, considering them authentic only to the extent that they do not contradict official dogma and tradition. The assumption of their authenticity is not done credulously but through a thorough process developed over centuries by individuals involved in the study of religious experience. Revelation holds an important place within religious experience because it represents how God reveals certain truths that cannot be known through other means. Many Christian principles can be found in pre-Christian philosophies such as Stoicism because they were developed because of studying the surrounding environment, human behavior, and so on. This is why someone like Seneca, for example, can be considered pre-Christian by non-religious readers and non-Christian by believers. These principles are based on theoretical, a priori reasoning, limited by the power of the human mind's penetration. Since God is unlimited and infinite, humans cannot fully comprehend Him with their limited rational abilities. It was necessary for Him to reveal certain aspects for the human mind to have access to hidden elements.

We must further emphasize that within this thesis, we have focused on "religious" experience rather than "spiritual" experience, as the former, as we understand it, is much more specific and refers to the Christian faith. The latter represents a much broader spectrum, as we have discussed in highlighting the differences between them. Similarly, we have chosen to explore the Christian dimension of religious experience, not only because it is more familiar to us, but also due to its uniqueness bestowed by divine grace.

So far, we have established that spiritual experience can occur both in Christian subjects and in those belonging to other religious beliefs, as it manifests through channels created for this purpose. For example, the trance states of shamans in various geographic areas where they practice are well-known and recognized as authentic. This type of religious experience is referred to by Hulin as "mystique sauvage" or wild mysticism. From a Christian perspective, however, these religious experiences are generally viewed in a derogatory manner and are not considered significant because they do not serve the ultimate and supreme purpose of bringing individuals into communion with God. These religious experiences do not possess the (lower) quality of arousing the interest of the

person experiencing them in purifying him from passions and entering a process of sanctification with the aim of drawing closer to the Creator. They are merely evidence that religious experience can be either a) "natural" or b) the divine grace is at work wherever humans allow it, and certain individuals have the ability to experience distinct forms of the natural world.

Traditional churches recommend caution and a more restrained approach when encountering such manifestations. Moreover, they "put evil to the test" and examine each case initially at the local level, through spiritual leaders, before it is further discussed in an experienced and expert commission in this field. However, Scripture does not seem to provide specific recommendations in this regard. The messages of prophets were accepted without passing through these filters. In Samuel's youth, the divine source of the voice he heard on multiple occasions was not questioned. Solomon's dreams were accepted as having a divine source without convening a synod. Priest Zechariah was punished with the loss of his ability to speak due to his disbelief in the angelic message, while centuries earlier, Gideon did not receive the same treatment. Yet, even in the early stages of God's journey with the Jewish people, Scripture recommends cautious acceptance of the prophetic status and meticulous verification of messages considered prophetic. In the personal life of a Christian, a message from beyond the natural world, confirmed over time, can be considered supernatural. Even in this case, caution is advised because an inexperienced individual may lack the ability to identify the nature of the received messages. Despite these recommendations, enthusiasm and naivety drive individuals to desire the repetition of supernatural experiences, disregarding their lack of experience, thus placing themselves in a confusing situation.

The reformation of the born-again believer (Garrigou-Lagrange speaks of three conversions) has an important cognitive dimension. The purpose of this new formation involves replacing one's values and the means by which they are obtained. Theoretical knowledge is essential for this new beginning. It represents an obligation for every believer, although unfortunately, very few are aware of this. The ultimate earthly goal of the believer should be to develop a strong relationship with God and to know Him as best as possible, including through the experience of supernatural episodes. The involvement of the believer should not only have an epistemic dimension but also an affective one. The latter is a divine command formulated in the classic "Shema Israel." The responsibility of the individual in the process of reformation emerges from the Parable of the Talents. The master did not empower everyone equally, but he expects all, without exception, to engage

seriously in multiplying the given talents. Theoretical and affective knowledge serve as instruments for emerging from a spiritually weak state and adopting an attitude towards the world and society according to the will of God.

The knowledge of the regenerated person is enriched with a new perception of the surrounding world. They will discover that the invisible world can also have malevolent actors who seek to compromise their eternal destiny. The faithful individual can improve their ability to discern between good and malevolent actors, between the natural world and the others, through knowledge. It is known that there is an impassable distance between our world and the world of God. The former is called the natural world, and the latter the supernatural world, where access is granted only to those whom God permits. Equally important is the knowledge of the preternatural world, an invisible "parallel" world whose "inhabitants" have access to the natural world, and to which humans can have limited access - unlike the supernatural world, where access is granted only by God. The preternatural world, in a broad sense, is a deceptive world because it can create the illusion that a person enters into connection with benevolent agents and that this simple fact can change their destiny favorably, which is contrary to Scripture. Scripture becomes for them just one of the many ways through which a person reaches perfect knowledge, which, from an eternal perspective, is a detrimental option stemming from a fallacy.

We have paid special attention to the way in which the Holy Spirit acts upon the affects. They are one of the means through which the Spirit influences the cognitive elements of the believer, the "just" one. This is why we began by studying the types of knowledge and how implicit knowledge is transmitted. In this regard, we examined "personal knowledge" and "tacit knowledge," as discussed in the twentieth century by Michael Polanyi, as well as Cardinal Newman's concept of the "illative sense" proposed a century earlier.

Knowledge is the process by which humans come to understand to a great extent the essence of something, achieving a closer approximation to its reality. Truth, examining the epistemology of the corresponding Greek word (αλήθεια, *aletheia*), means the revelation of complete reality without hiding or omitting anything.

Knowledge can be classified into several types: [1] theoretical, intellectual, abstract knowledge, elaborated through reason; this type of knowledge is communicable; [2] experiential knowledge, acquired through practical assimilation; and this type of knowledge can be transmitted; [3] tacit knowledge, also experiential, but in this case, the elements that compose knowledge are difficult to communicate and transmit; this type of

knowledge is exemplified, classically, in epistemological literature, by activities such as riding a bicycle or facial recognition (the latter can be accomplished through specific artificial intelligence methods, but not by humans); [4] affective knowledge (*cognitio affectiva*), accumulated through the influence on human emotions.

I also considered the less debated aspect of the role of the direct teacher (in Latin *magister*, in modern Hebrew מורה, *moreh*) that God plays. It is commonly understood, without a solid exegesis, that the means through which epistemic transfer takes place is through Scripture, through His Law. However, I have seen that there are several references, both in the Old and New Testaments, from which it becomes clear, through linguistic analysis of the texts, that God directly teaches the believer.

Cardinal Newman considers that throughout this spiritual journey, man is assisted by a so-called illative sense. This sense helps him always choose the favorable and correct spiritual direction, without relying on syllogisms. Since it is an individual journey and very few are under the "command" of a spiritual leader, the illative sense assumes the role of this spiritual guide and directs the believer in the right spiritual direction. In addition to acquiring religious knowledge, it is the duty of the believer to understand and cultivate this sense. The theory of the illative sense is neither widely recognized nor appreciated. This sense can be confused with the voice of conscience, but according to Newman, that would be a mistake. The illative sense is a middle way that, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, utilizes both the rational and affective aspects of the believer. It appears to be a subjective, personal sense that does not necessarily consider the informed general opinion (but needs to be connected to it) and requires a rich epistemic foundation to avoid reaching erroneous conclusions. However, the illative sense also has a communal character, being the element that determines the differences between various groups of people who essentially share the same faith but differ in certain aspects regarding the perception of truth. The role of the illative sense, as perceived in our research, is primarily that of assisting in evaluating the authenticity of religious experience and extracting information gathered on such occasions. This sense guides the believer in the challenging mission of identifying the source and quality of religious experience.

We have then proceeded to the actual study of affects, preparing the ground for what we have seen the epistemological literature refers to as *cognitio affectiva*. In terms of affects, there has been a resurgence in research, particularly in the United States. While emotions were a common element until Jonathan Edwards, they almost had to be reinvented at the end of the 20th century. Through the few recent studies that have emerged

on this topic, authors have reached a stage where they have managed to define emotions and establish the difference between them and feelings and soul dispositions.

Indeed, the study of emotions in combination with knowledge is considered appropriate because the epistemic contribution of religious experiences is achieved in conjunction with emotions. In other words, explicit knowledge from Scripture is complemented, as observed, by affective elements. Mystics, in particular, have reported that through their religious experiences, they have had synesthezic experiences that have enriched their knowledge.

We have observed the importance of transitioning from appearances, from theoretical, intuitive learning through reason, to facts, to what exists concretely. In other words, we have omitted the category of "mythical knowers" (μυθικως σοφιζομενος, *mythikos sophizomenos*) and focused on those who possess experiential knowledge and are capable of demonstrating their knowledge (αποδείξεως, *apodixeos*). This represents a transition from imaginative, popular, a priori theoretical knowledge (δόξα, *doxa*) to universal and certain knowledge (επιστήμη, *episteme*).

In order to clarify how the Holy Spirit works through religious experience, we considered it essential to establish the framework in which, from a Christian perspective, we can elaborate on this endeavor. For this purpose, we have formulated several fundamental principles:

[1] We have only discussed the Christian faith and not religions in general. According to the Christian religion, the faithful individual is regenerated and, through this fact, possesses a special quality. The theological virtues infused by the Holy Spirit (faith, hope, and love) are foreign to the natural man. The grace that unites us with God is considered superior to prophecy, miracles, or other proofs of divine intervention. It is the supernatural miracle of being born again from a seed that produces true life.

[2] This principle leads to the realization that the life of a Christian believer becomes inherently supernatural. In this context, religious experience can be considered as the "extraordinary of the supernatural." The believer engages in everyday activities that belong to the realm of the supernatural. For example, prayer is a communication with God that belongs to the supernatural domain. The Christian's value orientation also shifts from a focus on the natural world to the supernatural realm. The mortification of vices (putting off the old self) and the striving for the development of virtues are also manifestations of the supernatural nature of the believer's new self (Philippians 3:20).

[3] The purpose of the "supernatural" life of a Christian is *theosis*, the union with God from the Orthodox perspective, or *visio Dei*, the beatific vision, the sight of God, the ultimate happiness experienced by the believer, from the Roman tradition's perspective. Theosis can occur during life (in earthly life), but it will certainly happen in the afterlife (in eternal life), and it is the result of a process considered obligatory to overcome spiritual stagnation. The process of sanctification necessarily involves the possession of the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. These are "infused" virtues, impossible to attain through natural means.

[4] Union with or vision of God, in the ordinary sense or for ordinary individuals, can occur during earthly life episodically, through glimpses, flashes, or in dreams. However, in the case of Christian mystics, it is believed that the contact with God can be constant and uninterrupted.

We have mentioned earlier the concept of *cognitio affectiva*, which refers to the experiential knowledge of truth and of God. Dry, theoretical knowledge without emotional involvement or commitment is characteristic of those individuals who demonstrate intellectual pleasure towards the supernatural. It is important to emphasize that exclusive emotional involvement in religious experiences is equally fallacious without a solid dogmatic foundation. We recall here the three vectors that theoretically ensure the authenticity of a religious experience in the Spirit: orthodoxy, meaning the correct dogmatic foundation; orthopathy, meaning the corresponding affective involvement; and orthopraxy, meaning, from a Christian perspective, obedience to the Word of God or submission to the Will of God. In these conditions, the affects arising from a spirit reborn and reformed according to the pattern of the Spirit can contribute epistemically through the adoption of spiritual aspects of the model of every believer, who is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Through affective knowledge, the believer does not simply acquire theoretical information, but learns practically through experience and sensations about love, kindness, good deeds, wisdom, rejecting sinful inclinations, and so on. This process goes through various stages: imitating God, acquiring the divine nature, harmonizing with Christ, and so forth.

Religious experience and affective knowledge must be placed within the framework of a "supernatural" process of sanctification that surpasses the initial and simplistic boundaries of mortifying passions. The cultivation of holy affections is only

possible through attaining a con-naturality with God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the individual. Con-naturality is also an essential condition for *theosis*, and what guarantees it is the condition of *afflatus*. In other words, the individual enters into an uninterrupted supernatural and epistemological process, which is founded on the condition of *afflatus*, guaranteeing con-naturality for the attainment of the ultimate goal, the *summum bonum*, the highest delight, the condition of *theosis*.

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