**INTRODUCTION**

Religion is hard to define and it remains a phenomenon. There are about 4000 religions in the cosmos. Many religions have narratives, symbols, traditions and sacred histories that are intended to give meaning to life, culture and practices or to explain the origin of life or the universe. It tends to derive morality, ethics and taboos, or a preferred lifestyle from their ideas about the cosmos, revelations and human nature. The practices of some religions are sermons, sacrifices, festivals, rituals, rites, worship and revelation. The practices of some religious phenomena are scripture, prayer, sacrifice, revelation, ritual etc.

Here, concerning the issue of phenomenological experiences of African religious traditions Garvie's warns that in trying to discover the origin (of religion) we must recall the distinction between experience and expression of African religious traditions. In the experiment we may assume that there is something universal and permanent, something rooted in, springing out of, human nature, the expression will depends on local and temporary conditions, physical, mental, moral and social. To ignore or to neglect this difference is to lay hold on the accidental instead of the essential, the contingent instead of the necessary (Garvie 3).

One important point in favor of Garvie's warning is that it is a call to appreciate the fact that reality comes before thought, experience comes before expression, and fact before theory. In African religious traditions, phenomenological experience is in the inward thing and belongs to the zone of the *a priori.* It is something which happens within the being of man and generates a response. It is like smoke, finds its own outlet, a way of manifesting the fact that it has occurred.

The issues of what phenomenological experience resulted in African religious traditions have been approached in several ways. Bouquiet views that it is only our experience that can interpret what theologians have called revelation and test its validity. Much as we may wish to, we can no more eliminate phenomenological experience than we can jump out of our skins (Bouquet 29). When considering the question of how man came by his religion in the first instance.

We are realizing now that at the dawn of consciousness, and in living experience, man encountered that which is 'other than' himself or his fellow men, that which is diametrically different from the common place, that which is the 'Wholly Other'. The 'Wholly Other' is not impersonal but real and living, and it is the 'Wholly Other' that reveals himself. According to Otto and Eliade, the sacred manifests itself in, within, and through the created order which can be termed "theophany", the self-disclosure of the Divine Being (Otto & Eliade 17).

**THE CONCEPT OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE IN AFRICAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS**

In religion, a phenomenological experience can be called spiritual experience, sacred experience, or mystical experience. It is a subjective experience which is interpreted within a religious framework (Samy 80). The concept originated in the 19th century, as a defense against the growing rationalism of Western society. Many religious and phenomenological traditions see religious experiences (particularly that knowledge which comes with them) as revelations caused by divine agency rather than ordinary natural processes. They are considered real encounters with God or gods, or real contact with higher-order realities of which humans are not ordinarily aware.

Religious experiences can be characterized generally as experiences that seem to the person having them to be of some objective reality and to have some religious import. That reality can be an individual, a state of affairs, a fact, or even an absence, depending on the religious tradition the experience is a part of. A wide variety of kinds of experience fall under the general rubric of religious experience. The discussions of religious experience in terms of feelings, like Schleiermacher’s (18) “feeling of absolute dependence,” or Otto’s (13) feeling of the numinous, were important early contributions to theorizing about religious experience, but some have since then argued that religious affective states are not all there is to religious experience. To account for the experiences qua experiences, we must go beyond subjective feelings.

Religious experience is also to be distinguished from mystical experience. Although there is obviously a close connection between the two, and mystical experiences are religious experiences, not all religious experiences qualify as mystical. The word ‘mysticism’ has been understood in many different ways. James (02) took mysticism to necessarily involve ineffability, which would rule out many cases commonly understood to be mystical. Alston (11) adopted the term grudgingly as the best of a bad lot and gave it a semi-technical meaning. But in its common, non-technical sense, mysticism is a specific religious system or practice, deliberately undertaken in order to come to some realization or insight, to come to unity with the divine, or to experience the ultimate reality directly. At the very least, religious experiences form a broader category; many religious experiences, like those of Saint Paul, Arjuna, Moses, Muhammad, and many others come unsought, not as the result of some deliberate practice undertaken to produce an experience. With regard to phenomenological experience in African religious traditions, we need to note the following:

1. Whether religious experience centers on special experiences of the Divine or whether any experience could be regarded as religious by virtue of becoming related to the Divine.
2. The kinds of differentials that can serve to distinguish 'religion' or religions from both secular life and other forms of spirituality such as morality and art.
3. Whether religious experience can be comprehended and properly evaluated in terms of its origin and its psychological or sociological conditions.
4. Whether religious experience has cognitive status, involving encounter with a being, beings or a power transcending human consciousness, or is merely subjective and composed entirely of ideas and feelings that have no reference beyond themselves.

**UNIVERSALITY AND DIVERSITY OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

There are different ways to look at religious experiences; we can look at its universality, Diversity and its importance to religion:

1. **Universality**: Its is a universal phenomenon, which is anyone at any point in time could experience, for example in the bible when Moses was out tending to his father-in-law’s sheep, when he suddenly saw a burning bush from which God spoke to him (Exodus 3:1-4), he had his experience while tending to animals, which shows it could happen at any point in time in our everyday lives. From research and studies it’s been proved that spiritual or religious experiences have always been in our society.
2. **Diversity**: There are different types of religious experiences; just the same way there are different types of people and different types of religion, but at the same time they are also some similarities which make religious experiences very unique and rare in our society.

**ARGUMENTS FOR OR AGAINST PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF AFRICAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS**

The prominent twentieth-century scholars of religion already mentioned—Gerardusvan der Leeuw, Joachim Wach, Mircea Eliade, and Ninian Smart—built on this turn-of-the-century emphasis on experience to formulate their understanding of religion and the distinctive phenomenological methods they thought should be used to study it. In the wake of the general linguistic turn within the humanities, however, this entire approach was called into question. Many scholars of religion, eager to deconstruct an essentialist understanding of religion and religious experience, abandoned the focus on religious experience and recast the study of religion in light of critical theories that emphasize the role of language in constituting social reality in the context of relationships of power and inequality.

When people report having seen Mary or Jesus why is it they are not asked how they knew who it was? Why is it that the reports of the appearance of sacred and divine figures vary? Should not the deity appear the same? Why would Mary sometimes look one way and then appear differently? How does anyone know what Jesus or Mary or Ezekiel or Gabriel looked like? Not all who learn of the reports of such religious experiences accept them as conclusive evidence for the existence of a supernatural reality or spiritual beings. Many have attempted to give alternative accounts of such experiences that do not involve acceptance of the existence of any supernatural entities or reality.

Psychological explanations have been offered by several theoreticians, including Sigmund Freud. Sociological explanations have also been developed by several other scientists, such as Emil Durkheim. What they have in common is the refusal to accept religious experiences as being truthful, accurate, or believable in so far as the existence of any supernatural reality. One of the principle reasons for withholding acceptance of the reports is that the experiences cannot be verified and what they report encountering cannot be verified empirically.

Wallace Matson maintains that if the subject of a religious experience is to be believed there are certain requirements to be met. Any perception of an individual should be publicly confirmed. No private experience can establish the existence of God. You would first need to establish the existence of God by other means on order to confirm that what were experienced were both God and True. In relation to religious experiences, consider that:

1. No indescribable experience can be publicly confirmed
2. No individual, isolated and private experience can be publicly confirmed.

Many religious people claiming to have contact with spirits and the deity appear similar to people who are deluded, or mentally ill, not adjusted to reality. Their claims cannot be accepted without evidence. But you cannot have evidence without a prior belief in God. To confirm what any subject is experiencing there must be "checkable" statements. Consider a blind person who hears what sighted persons are reporting is present but the blind person cannot see them. Similar to a blind person confirming what a sighted person sees there should be a method by which those who do not "see" or experience the deity can nevertheless confirm what those who do claim to see the deity are saying is accurate or truthful. The structures of phenomenological experience in African religious traditions according to Adelowo are (Adelowo 112):

1. The personal concerns, attitudes, feelings and ideas of the individual who has the experience.
2. The religious object disclosed in the experience or the reality to which it is said to refer.
3. The social forms that arise formed the fact that the experience in question can be shared.

It is to be noted, at this juncture, that religious experience is always found in connection with a personal concern and quest for the real life, oriented towards the power that makes life holy or a power that constitutes the ground or goal of all existence. A wide variety of individual experience, are thus involved among which are attitudes of seriousness and solemnity in the face of the mysteries of human destiny, feelings of awe, of being unclean, evoked by the encounter with the holy, the sense of a power or a person who both loves and judges man, the experience of being converted or of having the relief stemming from the sense of the divine and abandoning the egocentric self. In all these situations, the experience is realised in the life of the individual who, at the same time, has his attention focused on an "other" or the divine reality, that is, present or encountered. There are different kinds of religious experience which are namely regenerative, charismatic, and mystical:

1. **Regenerative religious**: “is one in which the experiencer undergoes a life transformation – a conversion. Elsewhere this kind of experience is expressed as “experiencing religion,” “experiencing salvation,” or being “delivered from evil.” Through such experiences, individuals often find their lives to be changed, filled with meaning and newness, and full of love, joy, and hope. Along with conversion and salvation, another facet of the regenerative experience is moral transformation. In this case, prior to the experience, the individual may feel a sense of sin, guilt, or the inability to do what he or she knows to be morally appropriate. Upon having the regenerative religious experience, she senses that sin and guilt have been removed and a new vision of goodness is seen and sought after; a new or renewed emphasis on moral duties ensues in one’s life.” Such example of such an experience could be found in the bible when Moses was out tending to his father-in-law’s sheep, when he suddenly saw a burning bush from which God spoke to him (Exodus 3:1-4). This experience of the burning bush (conversation we God) changed his life and made him the man we all know him as.
2. **Charismatic experience**: “This is a type of experience in which special abilities, gifts, or blessings are manifested. Prophecy, divinely inspired revelation or interpretation. Although prophecy is perhaps most commonly associated with Judaism and Christianity, it is found throughout the religions of the world, both ancient and modern. In its narrower sense, the term prophet (Greek: prophutus, “interpreter,” “expounder [of divine will]”) refers to an inspired person who believes that he has been sent by his god with a message to tell. In a broader sense, the word can refer to anybody who utters the will of a deity, often ascertained through visions, dreams, or the casting of lots; the will of the deity also may be spoken in a liturgical setting. The nature of prophecy is twofold: either inspired (by visions or revelatory auditions) or acquired (by learning certain techniques). In many cases both aspects are present. The goal of learning certain prophetic techniques is to reach an ecstatic state in which revelations can be received. That state might be reached through the use of music, dancing, drums, violent bodily movement, and self-laceration. The ecstatic prophet is regarded as being filled with the divine spirit, and in this state the deity speaks through him. Ecstatic oracles, therefore, are generally delivered by the prophet in the first-person singular pronoun and are spoken in a short, rhythmic style.”
3. **Mystical experience**: “which, as described by James, includes four distinct characteristics:
4. **Ineffability**: The experience cannot be adequately described, if at all.
5. **Noetic quality**: The experiencer believes that she has learned something important from the experience.
6. **Transiency**: the experience is temporary and the experiencer soon returns to a “normal” state of mind.
7. **Passivity**: the experience occurs without conscious decision or control and it cannot be brought to happen at will.

Moore and Habel identify two classes of religious experiences: the immediate and the mediated religious experience (Moore and Habel 184).

1. **Mediated**: In the mediated experience, the believer experiences the sacred through mediators such as rituals, special persons, religious groups, totemic objects or the natural world.
2. **Immediate:** The immediate experience comes to the believer without any intervening agency or mediator. The deity or divine is experienced directly.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

A summary of the features of phenomenological experience in African religious traditions are that the awareness of the body which evokes awe and reverence, the feeling of absolute dependence that reveals man's status as a creature, and the sense of being one with the divine. Perception of an unseen order or of equality of permanent rightness in the cosmic scheme, the direct perception of God, and the encountered with a reality referred to, by Bolaji Idowu and some others, as the "Wholly Other”.

In conclusion Religion experience from my point of view and experience is that they are real, they are actually cases where a being has manifested itself to a human being and also there cases where people have lied about these experiences, which has also put doubt the minds of some people that religious experiences do not exist, but because of my belief’s as a practicing Christian I believe that God could communicate with human beings through different mediums.

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