

The Personal Religious Experiences of Cistercian Monks

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Abstract

Nearly seventy-five percent of the monks interviewed at a Cistercian monastery in the southeastern United States reported having had religious experiences. A micro-sociological approach was used to describe the retrospective accounts of their religious experiences, the after-the-fact interpretations they constructed, how they made those experiences meaningful, and the role cultural systems and settings play in structuring people's experiences. Religious experiences played an influential role in the monks' lives and vocation journeys. Their most common religious experiences were of a quasi-sensory nature. The monks rarely, if ever, discussed their religious experiences with others.

Key Words: religious experiences, Cistercian monks, Trappists

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The original purpose of this project was to study the prayer lives of the monks at the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit, a Cistercian monastery in Conyers, Georgia (Smith 2017), but I discovered that the monks had very interesting vocation stories (Smith 2016b) and family and life experiences that influenced their journey to the monastic life (Smith 2016a). Some of them also described fascinating and intriguing religious experiences. The monks are known as Trappists, which is a popular name for their religious order: Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Lekai 1977; Bianco 1991; Hillery 1992; de Waal 1998; Delisi 2003).

There is an extremely large, diverse, and growing cross-disciplinary body of literature on religious experiences. Spickard (1993) lamented that sociologists have generally ignored or paid superficial attention to religious experiences. Taves (2009) noted that psychologists have studied religious experience more than sociologists, although Hood (2005) concluded that neither discipline has paid enough attention to this topic. Wiebe (2004:6) argued “that the future for the academic study of religion...lies in the study of religious experience.” Hollenback (1996) concluded that more general studies of religious experience are needed, because the most cited ones (James 1902; Underhill 1911) are dated. This paper will document, catalogue, and describe the retrospective accounts of the religious experiences of these monks, the after-the-fact interpretations they constructed, and how they made those experiences meaningful. This study will also contribute to the discussion of the role that cultural systems and settings play in structuring people’s experiences and build on the work of Davis (1989), Ehrman (2014), Hardy (1979), Hollenback (1996), Luhrmann (2012), Proudfoot (1985), Spickard (1993), Taves (1999, 2009), and Wiebe (1997, 2004, 2015).

William James (1902), a medical doctor, philosopher, and psychologist, Evelyn Underhill (1911), an English Anglo-Catholic writer, and Augustin Poulain (1910, 1998), a professor and Catholic priest, were among the first scholars to recognize the importance of including religious experience as an aspect of religion in general. Yamane (2000) noted that there is no universally accepted understanding of what is meant by religious experience. Groeschel defined religious experience as “any subjective state suggesting to the individual the presence or action of the divine or transcendent reality” (1993:151). Groeschel also mentioned that “Almost all devout people have religious experiences or times of heightened awareness of God’s presence and power” (1993:125), although Davis (1989:1) stated that “religious experience continues to be regarded as something rare and obscure.”

For purposes of this project, religious experiences will include all those experiences, including dreams and mystical/conversion experiences, deemed religious or interpreted as religiously important by the monks. This paper will not address the truth or veracity of these particular religious experiences, or what are often referred to as private revelations, nor attempt to differentiate between genuine experiences or imagined ones. My primary role is to report what the monks told me. Whether these experiences are credible or not is not the focus of this study. These issues are beyond the scope of this paper and the expertise of the author. I do know, however, that the monks believe in the authenticity and veracity of their personal religious experiences. Scientists (whether religious believers or not), philosophers and theologians, religious adherents, secularists, and others are often skeptical or suspicious of the authenticity of reported religious experiences. Those interested in the rules governing authentic and questionable religious experiences/revelations, or the evaluation of these experiences/revelations, should consult Groeschel (1993), Poulain (1910, 1998), Wiebe (1997), and Davis (1989).

As Davis noted,
 Many philosophers and theologians who are themselves religious see religious experiences as completely non-cognitive and hence useless as evidence for anything beyond the subject's own psychological states. This view is bound up with a radically demythologized or non-realist picture of religious language. In order for an investigation of religious experience as evidence for something beyond purely autobiographical claims to get off the ground, we must defend the presupposition that religious experiences and religious utterances can and ought to be treated as capable of having cognitive content. (1989:27)

The more fundamental issue seems to be whether lack of cognition necessarily disqualifies an experience as specious (plausible, but actually fallacious).

Wach cautioned those interested in the study of religion to "carefully distinguish between religious experience and its expression" (1951:xii). Experiencing religion and explaining experience is often viewed by scholars of religion to be "antithetical" (Taves 1999:6). While experiencing religion might be the antithesis of explaining experience, the interplay between them provides insight into how people create meaning in their lives.

Taves (2009) differentiated between religious experiences and experiences deemed religious. A religious experience is "something more general and abstract" while experiences deemed religious "refers to *experiences* in the plural and thus to discrete experiences" (Taves 2009:57). Wach argued that those engaged in the study of "expressions of religious experience" must "discover the facts...and...formulate and define our reaction to these facts" (1951:7). The question must be whether the "facts" of personal religious experience can be "discovered." This is not to question their actuality, just their discoverability.

Theory

A micro-sociological approach was used to study the monks' lives (Collins 2014). I used the personal narratives and life stories of the monks to understand their lived experiences (Chase 2011). Personal narrative analysis underscores the linkages between individual and social experiences (Riessman 1993; Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008). "Narrativization tells not only about past actions but how individuals understand those actions, that is, meaning" (Riessman 1993:19). I focused very closely on how the monks described their prayer lives, vocation stories, family and life experiences, and religious experiences. As Wuthnow (2011:15) noted, "religion is increasingly understood...as a social practice that interlaces with other aspects of everyday life." "Lived religion is messy" because people re-interpret it and re-think it in the attempt to bring meaning to their lives (Baggett 2009:239). Monks, like people outside of the cloister, live with some degree of messiness in their religious lives. They too struggle, maybe even more than others, with acquiring meaning in their lives.

Scholars have developed a variety of typologies to classify religious experience (Davis 1989; Groeschel 1993; Poulain 1910, 1998; Wiebe 1997). Wiebe identified five types of religious experiences: trance and dreamlike experiences (“experiences that hardly seem to occur in a person’s normal waking consciousness”), experiences in an altered environment (“experiences consist of those in which percipients were aware of a significant change in the physical environment they knew themselves to be in”), private experiences (“although they may have occurred in public, only a selected percipient experienced the apparition”) (an apparition is the inexplicable appearance of a person, usually a deceased person), experiences with observable effects (more than one person has the same experience, “were simultaneously affected”), and Christic vision (some event in the life of Jesus is re-enacted) (1997:41).

Davis (1989) created six categories of religious experiences which are not mutually exclusive: interpretive (uses a framework to make sense of experience), quasi-sensory (visions, dreams, voices, sensations), revelatory (inspirations, insights, conversions), regenerative (the most frequent type of religious experience—renew faith, improve well-being, peace, joy, security, healing), numinous (holiness, awe, even dread and terror), and mystical (ultimate reality, freedom, oneness, burning love and exaltation).

Groeschel divided extraordinary religious experiences (“outside the parameters of our daily experience”) into two groups: paramystical (“origin in some divine or diabolical cause”) and parapsychological (“cause in nature”) (1993:153). Paramystical experiences can be further divided into: locutions or words such as exterior sounds (heard but “no apparent physical origin...miraculous”), imaginative words (“occur in the imaging faculty of the individual”), and intellectual locutions (“concepts and ideas which can easily be put into words by the individual...successive locutions are “intellectual locutions where the individual is conscious of words but does not hear them”); visions such as exterior visions (“object is formed or seems to be formed outside of the mind of the person who experiences it with bodily eyes”), imaginative visions (“occur in the imaging faculty of the mind”), and intellectual visions (“perceived by the mind alone without any interior image”); and apparitions (“seeing and hearing a heavenly visitor, usually the Blessed Virgin Mary”) (Groeschel 1993:154-160).

Poulain (1998) noted various kinds of revelations: supernatural locutions or words such as exterior or auricular locutions, imaginative locutions, and intellectual locutions; and three kinds of visions such as exterior visions, imaginative visions, and intellectual visions.

Methods

I was pleased when 22 of the 38 monks volunteered to be interviewed. The following quotation from one of the monks I interviewed might shed some light on why some of them did not participate. I found it quite revealing and it expresses the sentiments of some of the others that I interviewed: “But it’s just not fashionable in a monastery to talk about prayer... I mean, I

would never talk to any of the monks like I have to you.” Echoing this thought, another brother noted, “Prayer is something we don’t share or discuss in general. And even here, you know, it isn’t something we talk about. It’s a private thing and unfortunately, you know, through the years I’ve never sat down with hardly anybody and talked about prayer.” It is important to note that during a chapter meeting, one of the monks who acted as my gatekeeper, shared with the community an overview of the project. The community discussed it and voted to allow me access to the monastery. I was fortunate that several monks had a very good understanding of social science research and they helped to dissipate, though not completely erase, any fears or qualms that some of the monks had about the project.

The monks I interviewed were representative of those residing at the monastery. My gatekeeper indicated that he thought I had a representative group of interviewees and, of course, he would know better than I would about the representativeness of the sample. There was one monk who was not interviewed who told me that he was not interested in social science research. I assume there were others like him. One monk declined to be interviewed because he was not confident in his ability to speak English. There were several elderly and incapacitated monks who were not able to participate in the project, though with the help of my gatekeeper, I did interview one monk who was 102 years old and resided in the infirmary. Several other monks were absent from the monastery for a variety of reasons and were not available to participate.

I chose participant-observation and intensive interviewing because, as McGuire stated, “these methodological approaches are best suited to trying to grasp the meanings of a situation for the participants themselves” (1982:10). I visited the monastery on two separate occasions during 2013, September 16-20 and September 30-October 4. I resided for four nights each visit in a guest room in the retreat house which is located on the grounds of the monastery adjacent to the church and the monastic cloister. A sign-up sheet was posted on a bulletin board near the monks’ mailboxes in the cloister. Interviews were available from 8:30-10:00 a.m., 10:30 a.m.-noon, 2:00-3:30 p.m., and 3:45-5:15 p.m. Monday through Friday. I interviewed thirteen monks during my first visit and nine during my second visit. The interviews were conducted in a small conference room on the first floor of the retreat house. The first part of the ninety-minute personal interview was devoted to gathering basic demographic and biographic information, while the second part of the interview addressed each monk’s prayer life. I followed the questions on the interview guide, although I was not always able to ask every question due to time limitations. In some cases, I was able to skip questions because the monks’ previous answers had included this information. During some interviews, comments from the interviewee often generated questions from me that were not on the interview guide. The interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed by a former student of mine. I also participated in the Liturgy of the Hours starting with Vigils at 4:00 a.m., Lauds and Mass at 7:00 a.m., Midday Prayer at 12:15 p.m., Vespers at 5:20 p.m., and Compline at 7:30

p.m. On my second visit I did not participate in Vigils. After Compline each night I compiled a set of field notes.

Approximately four years later, I returned to the monastery for three days (July 24-26, 2017). I resided for two nights in a guest room in the retreat house and I participated in the Liturgy of the Hours (except for Vigils). I interviewed six monks—three on July 25 and three on July 26 in the same room I had used on my previous visit. I had interviewed these six monks in 2013 along with another monk who had since died. These seven monks had indicated that they had a religious experience that led them to seek a religious vocation. I decided to write this paper as a result of a suggestion from a reviewer of my article on vocation stories who found the discussion of the monks' religious experiences the most interesting part of the paper, and encouraged further work in this area. Nine other monks I interviewed in 2013 had religious experiences; I did not interview these monks in 2017. Three of them were no longer at the monastery and I did not have the financial resources to interview the remaining six monks.

The format for these personal interviews was similar to the interviews I conducted in 2013. Since I already had gathered background information on the monks, I did not ask for that again. I spent the ninety-minute interview engaging in conversation using an interview guide with questions related to religious experiences. I digitally recorded the interviews and some weeks later I listened to them again and took detailed notes. I also relied heavily on the first set of interviews I conducted in 2013 in writing this paper.

Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit

The Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit is located 35 miles east of Atlanta, Georgia and it was the first Trappist monastery in the United States founded by American Cistercians. It is also the first daughter-house of Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey, which was home to the famous monk Thomas Merton. Twenty-one monks from Gethsemani founded the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit in 1944, and built the original structures including a large church. During September and October of 2013, the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit was home to 38 monks, including three visiting monks and three monks who had died since my first visit. The monastery is supported by a retreat house, a conservation burial ground, a bookstore, a garden supply shop, a stained-glass business, and a bakery which produces fudge, biscotti, and fruitcake.

Family Background and Life Experience

Only one monk was born in the South, but he spent his teenage years in Washington, DC, while another monk was born in the Midwest but spent his teenage and young adult years in the South. The other monks were from the Midwest, Northwest, and mostly the Northeast,

although one monk was from Africa, one from southeast Asia, and another from South America. All of them, except for one who was an orphan, were reared in two parent households. One of the foreign-born monks was adopted by a European couple at an early age.

Almost all of their mothers were homemakers except for several who were teachers, secretaries, or social workers. Few of their parents were college graduates, although several had graduate degrees. Most of their parents were high school graduates, although some parents had only an elementary school education or had not completed high school. Several parents had no formal education. Their fathers were employed in a variety of occupations: county agricultural extension agent, police officer, IT manager, construction, engineer, diplomat, accountant, credit analyst, business executive, upholsterer, musician, machinist, telephone serviceman, post office employee, movie theater owner, farmer, fruit and vegetable wholesaler, grocery store clerk, food technician, and an automobile factory worker. Most of the monks, except for one who was raised Methodist and another who was raised Presbyterian, grew up in Catholic families (including the monk who was an orphan who was raised in three Catholic orphanages and four Catholic foster homes). Other than the monk who was an orphan, one of the monks was an only child. Most of them had between one and six siblings, while two of the monks had ten siblings. Sixteen of the monks were raised in what they considered to be a religious household, while three indicated their homes were not particularly religious, even though they were raised Catholic and went to Mass regularly. Most of them attended Catholic schools for all or for part of their elementary and secondary education.

The monks ranged in age from 29-102: 29, 47, 53, 55, 56, 62, 63(2), 64(2), 65(2), 66, 68, 69, 77, 85(3), 86(2), 102. Their highest level of education attained varied from doctoral degrees to high school diplomas: doctoral degree (2), master's degree (4), master of divinity degree (3), licentiate degree {ecclesiastical degree similar to a master's degree} (2), bachelor's degree (6), high school (5). They had a wide range of work experience prior to joining the monastery: navy (2), army (3), marines (1), college professor (3), teacher (5), priest in a religious order (1), diocesan priest (1), brother in a religious order (2), pastoral assistant (1), travel agent (1), construction trades (2), retail sales (2), manufacturing (1), banking (1), food service (1), flight attendant (1), counselor (1), hospital orderly (2), laboratory (2), hotel clerk (1), electrical utilities (1).

Findings

Types of Religious Experiences

Wiebe (1997) noted the difficulty encountered in classifying a religious experience into a precise type or category, and Davis (1989) acknowledged a religious experience may overlap several types or categories. Sixteen of the twenty-two monks I interviewed revealed to me that they had religious experiences. I classified these experiences using the system (interpretive,

quasi-sensory, revelatory, regenerative, numinous, and mystical) designed by Davis (1989) [see Table 1].

Table 1. Type of Religious Experience

Monk #1 Interpretive* Quasi-Sensory* Revelatory Regenerative*	Monk #2 Quasi-Sensory Revelatory* Regenerative Mystical	Monk #3 Quasi-Sensory* Regenerative*	Monk #4 Interpretive Revelatory*
Monk #5 Revelatory	Monk #6 Quasi-Sensory* Revelatory	Monk #7 Quasi-Sensory	Monk #8 Revelatory*
Monk #9 Quasi-Sensory Revelatory	Monk #10 Revelatory*	Monk #11 Quasi-Sensory Revelatory Numinous Mystical	Monk #12 Quasi-Sensory
Monk #13 Quasi-Sensory* Regenerative	Monk #14 Quasi-Sensory Revelatory Regenerative	Monk #15 Quasi-Sensory Regenerative	Monk #16 Quasi-Sensory

* More than once

Interpretive (2); Quasi-Sensory (12); Revelatory (10); Regenerative (6); Numinous (1); Mystical (2)

Table 1 reveals that each of the 16 monks identified at least one type of experience, three had four of the six types of experiences, one had three of the experiences, five had two of the experiences, and six had only one of the experiences. The most common religious experience was quasi-sensory, contrary to Davis's (1989) finding that regenerative was the most frequent type. Twelve monks had quasi-sensory experiences, and these included hearing voices, seeing a white light, having various types of dreams, seeing various types of images and visions (one monk had a vision of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane—what Wiebe (1997) would classify as a "Christic Vision"), experiencing strong feelings, and hearing a voice in one's heart or mind. The second most common religious experience was revelatory. Ten monks had

these and they included a conversion through the Eucharist, a desert experience, insight from reading Scripture, insight from a book/film, a word was presented, a message was received while praying, a sudden inspiration was triggered by seeing a person of significance from the past, a sudden inspiration to reconnect with the faith, and an insight from God. The third most common religious experience was regenerative. Six monks had these, and these included experiencing a healing in their lives, feeling peace/love, renewing of faith after periods of despair and struggle, and feeling deep happiness/ tremendous joy. Tied for the third and fourth most common religious experiences were interpretive and mystical. Two monks had interpretive experiences, including one monk who saw himself as a wounded healer. He believed that it was through God's will that his suffering benefitted others who were sinful and in need. The other monk's religious experiences made sense to him in light of previous events, and thus he saw his religious vocation as an outcome of God's will. Two monks had mystical experiences, including one monk who sensed the burning love of Christ and the other monk whose combination of various religious experiences revealed to him a sense of the ultimate reality. The least common religious experience was numinous. Only one monk reported that he had a peak experience—a moment of awe and holiness.

Accounts of Religious Experiences

Religious experiences played an influential role in the monks' lives and vocation journeys even though, as one monk recalled, "I never knew there was such a thing as mystical experiences and everything else. I remember the Novice Master used to say some here have had a mystical experience and I didn't know what he was talking about." The following accounts discussed in this section are a representative, but not an exhaustive, collection of the monks' religious experiences listed in Table 1. Due to space limitations, some of the religious experiences from 14 of the 16 monks are presented here in a different order than listed in Table 1. I will note the type(s) of religious experiences described by each of the 14 monks.

About six months into one particular monk's first year in the monastery, he was deeply affected by a passage from one of Merton's books that was read at the midday office, and it forced him to question his vocation. That night he had a dream in which Merton appeared to him and said, "A monk is a man who clings to God when he's in despair." This monk noted, "That dream has never left me; that dream is probably one of the most formative events in my life and it's kept me here." Dreams have played a major role in his life and he dreams frequently—they sustain him. After a particularly painful period in his life, a counselor told him to visualize a chalice and put all of his pain into it and offer it up to Christ. He did so and in a dream he saw a series of hands passing the chalice upwards to heaven. He believes that this dream was even more powerful than the one with Merton. Another time he was on retreat at Gethsemani in their hermitage, struggling with a bout of despair, when he had a powerful dream. An old woman dressed in black appeared to him and wanted him to "step in to the

darkness with her,” but he said “no.” She smiled at him and “when she stepped in there I felt God’s love like it went through me like a sword. I could feel it...I had no idea how much God loved me.” This same monk has heard God’s voice three times in his life—the first while he was in church and God spoke these words to him. “You are cleansed,” referring to the times he had sex during his youth. Another time he was out walking and praying, and he heard a gentle voice say, “How can you be afraid when you’re surrounded by so much beauty?” These are all examples of quasi-sensory experiences, with the addition of a regenerative experience (“struggling with a bout of despair”) overlapping with a quasi-sensory experience.

Another monk had quit attending church and by chance encountered a priest who thirteen years earlier had told him he was going to be a monk. Seeing this priest, although not interacting with him, triggered his memory of what the priest had said. At that moment he experienced a powerful flashback which jolted him. He began to think of nothing else but becoming a monk and eventually, after some reflection and research, made several visits to a monastery. He did become a monk, and lived at several different monasteries before eventually leaving the monastic life for eight years. However, he was drawn back to the monastery by another powerful experience. He had not been to a Catholic church in eight years, and one day passed by one and decided to go in. Mass was being said, and once again he felt the same pull or draw, so he returned to the monastery and has been there ever since. These are examples of revelatory experiences, which could also be considered interpretive experiences.

While in high school, one of the monks joked with his friends about becoming Trappist, never realizing that he would eventually become one. During an Easter break from college, he visited the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit after seeing a photograph in the Washington Post of monks laying bricks, and the monks invited him back. At age nine, while playing hide-and-go-seek with his cousin, this monk had what he labeled a mystical experience in the back of a truck under a tarp, where he encountered voices speaking to him. The voices told him that he would someday become a priest. For whatever reason(s), he forgot about this experience and did not recall it until many years later, decades in fact, after he had become a monk. This is an example of a quasi-sensory experience.

When one of the monks was 17 years old he had what he called “An experience which is still probably the only one of its kind in my life. I think I still feel the reverberations.” He was looking out his bedroom window and, “Suddenly, nothing dramatic, no trumpets, just this sudden sense.” A word was presented to him. “It was a very strong word, there was no voice that said it, the word came ‘manifestation.’ And with that word I understood all that I’m seeing as various as it is, all these trees and houses and all of this, all this variety, it’s all somehow or other a manifestation of an underlying unity.” This was the first of a series of events in his life that led him to a monastic vocation. This is an example of a revelatory experience.

Another monk, a self-described long-haired hippie in his youth who was seeking meaning in his life, described what he called a conversion experience. “I would roll a joint and

smoke it and walk down to a place where there was a good view of the reservoir. And I would sit there and read the New Testament. Strange kind of combination, but God works with everything I think.... And so reading it, it became very clear to me that God was real...and that God was in love with me. And God wanted to be loved back and that was mindboggling to me.... I don't know how else to say it except to say that I fell in love with God." This is an example of a revelatory experience. He had another experience that he called "probably one of the most powerful experiences I've ever had." This started during a session of Lectio while he was reading the story of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar. He was frightened by the question Jesus posed to Bartimaeus, "What is it you want me to do?" Several days later while praying to Jesus he told him that this question frightened him and Jesus responded and said, "Well, just ask it." He shared this with his spiritual director and continued to think and pray about it. He prayed to Jesus, "What I want is to love like You loved. You say, I have one commandment. The commandment says to love one another as I have loved you. I want to know how to love that way. Teach me to love like you love—that's what I want." Life went on with no answer and months later he was overwhelmed by the attractiveness of a young woman who was attending Mass at the monastery and he "started having a raging battle with God.... I'm in a monastery, I'm trying to be celibate, I'm a priest in the middle of Mass, and I'm fantasizing about this young woman.... Out of nowhere, I don't think I heard it with my ears, clear as a bell, what is it you want Me to do for you?.... I was like, what? Where did that come from, and what does that mean?" This is an example of a quasi-sensory experience. His most recent religious experience was during the viewing of the film *The Shack* (based on the book by William P. Young). He was deeply moved by the message of the film that God is three persons (the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in love with one another, in a relationship with one another, and that they are inviting others into a relationship with them. This experience reinforced the message of his first religious experience and expanded his image of the initial person who was in love with him when he realized that God loved him and wanted a relationship with him. This is an example of a revelatory experience. Since this monk's religious experiences focus on love, they would also be considered mystical experiences.

While in the military, another monk had a religious experience that, "Well, it changed my whole life...turned my whole life upside down." He was attending Sunday mass and "Experienced the real presence as real at mass. And it happened at the Consecration. And it happened at the Consecration of all masses that I attended." This experience influenced his decision to join a religious order and he entered the seminary. This is an example of a revelatory experience. This monk has had a number of religious experiences which he often describes as conversion/mystical/prayer experiences during his life. Another key experience occurred in a rather dark period when he was struggling with a lack of discernment. He was involved in a charismatic group during this time, and every week for close to two years the Lord gave him a prophecy to confirm. He heard a voice in his heart/mind saying "I'm marrying you,

warts and all.” This is an example of a quasi-sensory experience. He regularly has what he describes as the mystical experience of the “wounded healer.” He believes others have benefited from his own sins, demons, struggles, and woundedness. His woundedness and prayers act as a healing power for others. This is an example of an interpretive experience, though it can also be considered a regenerative experience since he also has been healed. Years later, after he had been ordained a priest, he had thought possibly he might have a contemplative vocation and started to pray about it. During a prayer session, he had another religious experience: “A white light coming down, a white light, not one I see with my eyes but the eyes of the heart, so to speak. It’s saying I want you to be a Trappist in Conyers, Georgia.” Prior to this experience, he had been subjected to a skin disease and allergies. All of these disappeared once he had this experience. This is an example of a quasi-sensory experience.

While on retreat at a monastery and during mass, this monk had a “very profound experience with the Eucharist.” This experience began when he was starting to drink from a ceramic cup containing the wine (blood of Christ). “I bring it to my face and I fall headfirst into the garden at Gethsemane and I’m watching the whole thing going, and it is vivid, Bill. I can smell the smells, I can smell the sweat, I can smell the fear, I can smell the fat burning on the torches coming up the hill from my left. There’s Jesus and the disciples...They begin to lead Christ away and he looks over His shoulder and I start crying.... Snot, tears, I was a mess.” Several days later he had a similar experience at mass. “Same thing, boom. This time he (Christ) looks over his shoulder and was telepathed to me. He said to me, ‘You know why I have to do this. Don’t be sad.’ So the snot and tears they ran again.” These are examples of quasi-sensory experiences.

Other monks have had a variety of religious experiences. For example, one monk regularly hears God speaking to him, though not audibly, “in Lectio, through scripture...the Psalms.... Even reading the Vatican II documents sometimes I hear God speaking.” This is an example of a revelatory experience. Another monk had a religious experience at age 15. “The word ‘service’ came into my awareness. It was like magic or I was enchanted.” This is an example of a revelatory experience. This same monk had a near-death experience at age 10, when he nearly drowned. In fact, the doctor had told him that he had died. He had a flashback about this experience and “I went into this vast light and then I was told to go back. And I said why am I going back, and they said to serve.... I said ‘what’s going on here? I’ve never felt this way.’” This is an example of a quasi-sensory experience. One monk said that “I get a consistent message in my prayer where God says ‘Trust me, I’ll take care of it. Give it time’. And when I do that, things seem to work out okay.” This is an example of a revelatory experience.

Another monk stated, “I’ve only had maybe two or three mystical experiences, but this one set the course for the next fifteen years. I was savoring the name “I am” in Latin and Greek and Hebrew when God struck.... I can tell you He didn’t say a word to me. It’s a flash of insight, an “aha,” a peak experience.... God said to me... ‘My name is really We; there is a plurality of

us...We am'.... That became my mantra." This is an interesting account because this one experience can be classified as quasi-sensory, revelatory, numinous, and mystical. It is a good example of a particular religious experience that overlaps various categories of distinction (Davis 1989).

While on his way to visit a monastery, another monk drove past the entrance to the monastery and was thinking of heading back to the airport when "I heard a voice say to me, 'Turn around and get back there, will you?' So I take it that was God. So I pulled up and parked the car and I went into the church." This is an example of a quasi-sensory experience. While looking out of his monastery bedroom window, another monk "saw the image of the cross by the moon on a bright night.... That gave me happiness and joy.... I felt that was really God coming." This is another example of a quasi-sensory experience. This same monk noted that he hears God speaking to him in two ways: "Usually for me it's by the gut feeling, in the inner depths of my heart.... And when I feel at peace...just a flood of fire and radiation that goes through me and out of me." These are all examples of quasi-sensory experiences, and also can be classified as regenerative experiences.

Another monk, while on retreat, heard God, a voice in his heart, and the words "Surrender, I love you" came into his mind. He sensed that God was present to him. This experience can be classified as quasi-sensory, revelatory, and regenerative. While working in the monastery orchard, another monk had what he thought was a vision. He realized that he was just a tiny piece of the universe, and it was a humbling experience for him. Shortly after this monk made his solemn profession as a monk, he had an image in his mind of Jesus embracing him. This is an example of a quasi-sensory experience.

Interpretations of Religious Experiences

Not all of the monks gave after-the-fact interpretations of their experiences or attempted to make the experiences meaningful. Some never even wondered why the religious experiences happened to them, and several monks said they did not know why the experiences happened. One of the monks who replied that he did not know why the experiences happened, humorously commented that possibly they happened as a result of his mother offering him up to God.

For those who did reflect on their experiences, they realized something significant had happened. One monk added that "Your life has to have meaning, otherwise it will never come together." Another monk said "It turned my life upside down—changed my whole life." Another monk noted that the experiences "deepened his faith in God" and forced him to make decisions and look at his life. Another monk realized that he would have to live differently if he was to maintain this newly found relationship with God, a relationship based primarily on love. Several mentioned the experiences were a gift from God, while others noted they were moments of grace. One monk acknowledged that his anxiety about the future dissipated and

God's presence reassured him. Another monk shared that he had "more confidence, self-confidence, groundedness. Stable, like I'm on the right track and I'm on my way to heaven." In the same vein, another monk found his religious experiences to be nurturing, affirming, and confirming his direction and why he was at the monastery. Yet another monk discussed the issue of time and how it impacts the meaning of the experience. He said, "The life of the monk allows one to test this reality." Another monk reflected on the reason(s) for religious experiences and concluded, "We get what we need, not what we want." For him, his religious experiences have helped him trust God.

Influence of Cultural Systems and Settings

Culture makes a difference in how we construct, define, and interpret the various social worlds in which we live and must navigate (Luhrmann 2012). It even penetrates our interior worlds. For example, culture influences whether we pray, and if we do, why and how we do it. Likewise, culture influences whether we are open to religious experiences.

As Luhrmann put it,

Knowing God involves training, and it involves interpretation. Each faith—to some extent, each church—forms its own culture, its own way of seeing the world, and as people acquire the knowledge and the practices through which they come to know that God, the most intimate aspects of the way they experience their everyday world change. (2012:226)

Catholic spirituality in its various manifestations (e.g., Jesuit (Ignatian)), including monastic spirituality (e.g., Trappist), informs and shapes one's worldview and practice (Cunningham and Egan 1996; Martin 2010; Cummings 1986). A tradition of Christian mysticism, as evidenced in the lives of the great mystics such as Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, and Teresa of Avila, encourages a union with God (McGinn 2006). While religious experiences can and do occur potentially anywhere, as depicted in the monks' accounts, the monastery itself and the structure of monastic life provide a context conducive to prayer and to experience of the sacred. Also, most of the monks were raised in Catholic families and religious households, and attended Catholic school. Their family's level of religiosity varied from monk to monk, but it is safe to say that most of them grew up in distinctly Catholic milieus.

Wiebe (1997:40) implied that monks are more predisposed to religious experiences than those individuals he had studied who had "a direct visual encounter with Jesus Christ." None of them were monks, but all were believers, some more active and stronger in their faith than others. They viewed themselves as rather ordinary people, and no one claimed to have "deliberately induced the visionary experience(s)" (Wiebe 1997:41). Might the monks be more predisposed to religious experiences? This is an interesting question that begs at least some attention. Several of the monks noted that God is more likely, in their opinion, to make himself present or known to those who are open-minded and sensitive, have active, creative, and vivid

imaginings, are intuitive, and, last but not least, are receptive to Him. Since monks spend a significant amount of time in prayer, especially contemplative prayer (see Merton 1996), it is plausible to assume that they might be more predisposed than others to religious experiences. The same can be said for those Evangelicals and others who are trained to hear God's voice (Luhmann 2012). Luhmann acknowledged that "Someone who perceives an ambiguous noise is more likely to interpret it; someone who needs an answer is more likely to listen for one; and someone who believes that an answer can be heard is more likely to hear one" (2012:219).

Discussion

Almost three-quarters of the monks I interviewed in 2013 at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit told me they had a religious experience. In the 2013 interviews, I did not ask the monks if they had these types of experiences, although I did ask them how they discerned or heard God speaking to them, and what effect this had on them. Some of the monks mentioned their religious experiences when we were discussing their prayer lives and the struggles, challenges, low points, and high points they experienced with prayer—or in their lives overall.

One of the most interesting findings from the 2013 interviews was that the monks rarely if ever talked about prayer, even with other monks, and in the 2017 interviews it was that the monks rarely if ever shared their personal religious experiences. They considered them to be too private, intimate, and sacred to share with others. One monk noted, "These experiences are personal pearls—when given away or shared, something is lost. It is best to keep some things a secret." I felt very privileged that the monks shared not only their prayer lives but their religious experiences with me. One monk was notably fearful of what some might make of his religious experiences. He was worried that their authenticity and veracity would be questioned, and that they would be diluted and devalued. If Groeschel (1993:125) is correct that "Almost all devout people have religious experiences or times of heightened awareness of God's presence or action of the divine or transcendent reality," it is probable that other monks had these experiences but chose not to share them with me.

One monk made an interesting comment worth repeating and discussing briefly. He said, "Even though God is out there—it's not very often that you are aware of Him or that He exists." I assume some, if not many people, will find this comment intriguing, particularly since it was made by a contemplative monk. This comment is even more revealing in the context of a discussion about religious experiences. This monk was implying that religious experiences make an invisible God visible and potentially approachable, thus these experiences serve an important purpose in people's lives. If Davis's (1989:1) claim that "religious experience continues to be regarded as something rare and obscure" is accurate, then religious experiences play an even more important role in the study of religion.

Conclusion

This paper has provided some insights into the lives of the monks at the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit, thus contributing to our understanding of religion by studying religious experience. Sixteen of the twenty-two monks interviewed for this project reported having personal religious experiences which played an influential role in their lives and vocation journeys. The most common religious experience reported by the monks was quasi-sensory, contrary to Davis's (1989) finding that regenerative was the most frequent type of religious experience. The monks rarely if ever discussed their religious experiences with others. Catholic spirituality, including monastic spirituality, along with the structure of monastic life, might make the monks more predisposed or receptive to religious experiences.

Needless to say, more research is needed on religious experience. How people experience God or the supernatural realm is of growing concern and interest for believers and non-believers alike. Further study of religious experiences can begin to provide preliminary answers to questions scholars have asked about religion, such as the following posed by Luhmann (2012). "How does God become real for people? How are sensible people able to believe in an invisible being who has a demonstrable effect on their lives? And how can they sustain that belief in the face of what skeptical observers think must be inevitable disconfirmation" (2012:xi)?

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